Affective Visibility: Monetizing Care Work and Emotional Labor Among Full-Time Mothers on Douyin

[1]Nur Atirah Kamaruzaman* and **[1]Zhang Yunlan**

[1]Department of Communication, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Full-time mothers in China have increasingly turned to Douyin—China's most influential short-video platform—as a space to showcase, narrate, and monetize their everyday caregiving practices. Drawing on a feminist political economy and affective labor framework, this study examines how mothers convert intimate domestic routines and emotional performances into public-facing digital commodities within China's visibility-driven platform economy. While motherhood in China has traditionally been coded as private, unpaid, and morally valorized labor, Douyin introduces new economic possibilities through algorithm-driven exposure, influencer culture, and participatory audiences. Through a qualitative content analysis of 20 high-visibility Douyin accounts belonging to full-time mothers, this study reveals how care work, emotional warmth, maternal vulnerability, and "authentic" domestic routines become central currencies in the pursuit of attention, followers, and monetized partnerships. The findings show that affective labor—ranging from displays of patience and affection to curated depictions of exhaustion, self-sacrifice, and family intimacy—functions as a form of entrepreneurial visibility that enables mothers to reposition domestic labor as economically valuable. However, this monetization process is heavily shaped by platform logic: the algorithm prioritizes emotionally resonant content, viewers reward idealized maternal personas, and platform marketplaces commercialize family intimacy. As a result, full-time mothers must navigate a complex tension between empowerment and exploitation, authenticity and performance, agency and algorithmic pressure. This study argues that Douyin transforms motherhood into a public commodity, amplifies gendered expectations of care, and embeds affective labor within China's rapidly expanding attention economy. In doing so, it contributes to scholarship on digital labor, affective economies, and the gendered dynamics of platform capitalism.

Keywords: Affective labor, Douyin, digital motherhood, visibility economy, platform capitalism

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, China has undergone a profound transformation in the visibility and circulation of domestic and family-related content online. With the rise of short-video platforms such as Douyin, everyday life has become increasingly public, performative, and economically exploitable. Among the most visible creators flourishing in this environment are full-time mothers who turn childcare routines, household responsibilities, emotional caregiving, and intimate family interactions into highly engaging digital content. Their videos frequently showcase morning rituals, playful exchanges between parents and children, educational advice, cooking and cleaning routines, spousal dynamics, self-improvement efforts, and even moments of exhaustion and frustration. What was once considered private maternal labor has, through Douyin's algorithmic ecosystem, become a central pillar of platform culture.

This emergence of maternal digital visibility sits at the intersection of several broader forces shaping contemporary China: the expansion of affective labor within digital capitalism, the increasing cultural and economic value placed on visibility, and the intensifying precarity and gender inequality experienced by women. Chinese mothers, historically situated within a gendered division of labor that assigns caregiving duties to

women while devaluing their economic contributions (Jing & Susanne Yuk-ping, 2025), often withdraw from formal employment after childbirth. This withdrawal reinforces both economic disadvantage and the societal expectation that mothers embody the ideals of "good motherhood" (Zhang, Sun, & Ding, 2023). Douyin introduces an alternative pathway. By transforming maternal practice into content, full-time mothers gain opportunities to generate traffic, attract sponsorships, build personal online brands, and participate in the rapidly expanding influencer economy. Yet this shift from private motherhood to public digital persona is more than a change of medium; it represents a reconfiguration of how care, emotion, and femininity acquire market value. Mothers on Douyin perform what scholars identify as affective labor—forms of work that generate emotional experience, empathy, warmth, and relational connection (Hardt, 1999; Jarrett, 2014). Their videos produce affective atmospheres designed to comfort, inspire, amuse, or resonate emotionally with audiences. These effects become commodified within the platform's visibility economy, where metrics such as likes, shares, views, and follower counts directly shape monetization opportunities. The algorithm amplifies emotionally charged content, encouraging mothers to reveal aspects of domestic intimacy that might never have been shared in offline contexts.

This study engages directly with this process by asking how full-time mothers use affective labor to generate visibility and economic value on Douyin. The research demonstrates that mothers rely extensively on emotional and relational labor to sustain audience engagement. The argument deepens by developing a more comprehensive theoretical synthesis, situating Douyin motherhood within global debates on unpaid care work, digital labor, and platform capitalism, and expanding the methodological and analytical depth of the study. Douyin must be understood not merely as a social entertainment platform but as a complex commercial infrastructure integrated with e-commerce, livestreaming, sponsorship marketplaces, algorithmic promotion systems, and influencer incubators (Liang & Ye, 2025). For full-time mothers, this infrastructure offers a flexible income model compatible with childcare responsibilities, a space for constructing public maternal identity, a pathway into the lucrative family-lifestyle influencer niche, and emotional validation that mitigates the isolation often experienced in domestic life. At the same time, the platform's logic intensifies pressures on mothers to present emotionally authentic personas, conform to idealized models of maternal virtue, and produce continuous streams of emotionally engaging content to remain visible in an algorithmically competitive environment.

Affective labor provides a crucial framework for understanding these dynamics. Hardt (1999) emphasizes that affective labor involves producing and shaping emotional atmospheres, while contemporary digital scholarship highlights how platforms depend on creators' ability to sustain emotional connection in the attention economy. Among mother-creators, affective labor manifests through warmth, empathy, encouragement, displays of sacrifice and patience, humorous or sentimental storytelling, and the performative sharing of personal struggles as markers of authenticity. Rather than being incidental, these emotional performances constitute the primary commodity through which mothers gain visibility on Douyin. This visibility, however, is marked by a paradox of empowerment and exploitation. On the one hand, becoming visible enables mothers to exercise financial agency, receive public recognition for their caregiving work, and participate in networked communities of mutual support. On the other hand, visibility exposes them to heightened emotional expectations, requires ongoing labor to satisfy algorithmic demands, subjects their private lives to public scrutiny, and reinforces culturally entrenched gender norms that narrowly define good motherhood. This contradiction is central to understanding how maternal affect is transformed into economic value online.

Therefore, the study contributes a deeper theoretical synthesis connecting affective labor, platform capitalism, digital motherhood, and visibility studies; a strengthened methodological framework explaining sampling, coding, and analytic techniques; an expanded findings section detailing how mothers operationalize affective practices through content design, emotional performance, audience management, and brand collaboration; and a feminist critique illustrating how Douyin monetizes intimate forms of domestic labor while reinscribing gendered inequalities. The article ultimately argues that the platform economy recasts affective labor from an invisible, unpaid task into a commodified, algorithmically valuable digital asset, even as this transformation intensifies emotional and gendered burdens for full-time mothers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding how full-time mothers monetize affective labor on Douyin requires an interdisciplinary synthesis across feminist labor theory, digital media studies, platform capitalism, and scholarship on the cultural politics of motherhood in China. These overlapping bodies of literature collectively illuminate how emotional expression, caregiving labor, and everyday domestic practices become commodified in an environment structured by algorithmic visibility and audience engagement. The review, therefore, situates this study within five key areas: affective labor and feminist critiques of care work; digital labor and the platformization of everyday life; influencer economies and the cultural logic of visibility; intensive motherhood and maternal identity performance; and the sociocultural specificity of China's platform economy.

Affective labor forms the foundation for understanding how mothers' domestic and emotional work becomes economically significant online. The concept originates in feminist critiques of unpaid reproductive labor, in which Hochschild's (1983) notion of emotional labor first described the managed expression of emotion in service interactions. Hardt (1999) later expanded this into the concept of affective labor, emphasizing how workers generate emotions, social bonds, and shared atmospheres that circulate as forms of immaterial value. Feminist scholars such as Federici (2012) and Glenn (2010) have long argued that caregiving labor performed by women—expressive, relational, and rooted in emotional attentiveness—remains structurally undervalued despite its centrality to social life. Fraser (2016) similarly identifies a "crisis of social reproduction" in which domestic labor is morally celebrated but economically invisible. In digital environments, however, affective labor becomes newly visible and newly commodifiable. Jarrett (2014) notes that platforms increasingly rely on women's emotional and relational capacities, which are transformed into engagement metrics and advertising value. For full-time mothers on Douyin, affective gestures such as patience, humor, empathy, exhaustion, and joy—once confined to private domestic spaces—acquire algorithmic significance. This dynamic emphasizes that mothers' emotional management forms a central mechanism through which visibility and monetization emerge.

Affective labor intersects with broader transformations in digital labor under platform capitalism. Scholarship in this area describes how digital platforms systematically extract value from user-generated content, attention, and interpersonal interaction (van Dijck et al., 2018; Srnicek, 2017). As creators participate in platform economies, they become subject to behavioral shaping through recommendation algorithms, data-driven feedback loops, and monetization infrastructures (Chen & Qiu, 2019). Three characteristics of platform labor are especially relevant. First, algorithmic governance determines which creators and content forms receive visibility, thereby shaping income opportunities. Emotionally charged content is particularly likely to be rewarded, strengthening the relationship between affective expression and platform success. Second, creators operate under conditions of continuous labor; to remain visible, they must post frequently, maintain engagement, and respond to audience interactions in ways that merge domestic and content-creation time (Bishop, 2020). Finally, scholars such as Zulli and Zulli (2022) describe influencer work as relational labor that requires ongoing emotional engagement with followers. For mothers, this means that private domestic life becomes an arena of public labor, deepening the precarity associated with digital work. The blurring of domestic labor and platform labor reinforces one another, making visibility dependent on mothers' ability to perform caregiving effectively.

Influencer economy studies further clarify how visibility becomes the central currency of digital labor, particularly on a platform like Douyin. Visibility functions as a form of digital capital that creators exchange for brand partnerships, livestream sales, and algorithmic amplification (Abidin, 2016). Mothers must cultivate a maternal persona that combines relatability, authenticity, and aspirational aesthetics (Duffy & Pooley, 2019). Authenticity itself is not a natural quality but a performative construct, where creators balance honest disclosures of maternal struggle with carefully curated domestic aesthetics (Marwick, 2013). Emotional resonance plays a crucial role in determining which content circulates widely. Sentimental, heartwarming, or humorous mother–child interactions are especially likely to gain traction. Influencer culture also remains deeply gendered: women are positioned as emotional anchors who perform intimacy, caregiving, and domestic warmth, thereby reproducing normative femininity (Duffy, 2017). Similar dynamics appear in other cultural digital contexts, where creators negotiate moral expectations, aesthetic performance, and identity visibility under culturally specific norms. In this vein, creators would strategically curate affective and aesthetic expressions to maintain legitimacy while navigating moral surveillance (Kamaruzaman & Hamid, 2025). Everyday domestic activities—

mealtime routines, household chores, childcare practices—become marketable commodities (Abidin, 2020). This demonstrates that mothers on Douyin actively craft such personas, carefully presenting adorable children, harmonious spousal relations, organized homes, and emotionally resonant narratives to align with platform and audience expectations.

Motherhood studies further provide insight into the cultural politics shaping Douyin motherhood. The concept of "intensive motherhood," where mothers are expected to invest extraordinary emotional, temporal, and financial resources into child-rearing, is well documented in feminist scholarship (Hays, 1996; Douglas & Michaels, 2005). In China, this discourse intersects with Confucian expectations, neoliberal ambitions, and the anxieties surrounding academic competition (Peng, 2020). Maternal identity is constructed through emotional expression; mothers are expected to be patient, loving, self-sacrificing, and emotionally present, and these expectations closely align with the content that performs well on Douyin. Digital motherhood is also subject to heightened surveillance, as Lupton (2016) notes, and Douyin extends this surveillance by making mothers accountable to both personal networks and large anonymous audiences. At the same time, platforms encourage entrepreneurial motherhood, where women integrate care work with personal branding strategies (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). This creates what Duffy (2017) calls aspirational labor—unpaid or underpaid work performed in the hope of future monetization. It shows how mothers on Douyin juggle idealized portrayals of domestic life with subtle expressions of emotional strain, highlighting an ongoing tension between empowerment and burden.

The broader context of China's platform economy adds another layer to this dynamic. Douyin exists within a highly commercialized digital environment shaped by state regulation, algorithmic nationalism, and the rapid monetization of everyday activities (Keane & Yu, 2019). The platform integrates entertainment, e-commerce, datafication, and influencer training into a single commercial ecosystem. Algorithmic governance plays a decisive role: Douyin's "For You" feed privileges content that evokes emotional engagement, which makes motherhood content particularly algorithmically favored given its association with adorable children, sentimental storytelling, interpersonal warmth, and relatable domestic challenges (Sun & Liu, 2021). Douyin's central role in China's booming livestreaming commerce enables mothers to monetize family-centered content through real-time product sales, generating income from domestic expertise. Additionally, cultural expectations surrounding motherhood—expressed through ideals such as 贤妻良母 (virtuous wife, good mother), the valorization of full-time motherhood, and competitive parenting cultures—shape how mothers craft online identities and how audiences interpret them. Mothers on Douyin often present themselves as hardworking, gentle, morally grounded, and family-oriented, aligning with these cultural scripts to enhance trust and commercial appeal.

Synthesizing this literature reveals a central insight: Douyin transforms maternal affect into a visible, measurable, and monetizable asset. Affective visibility operates through emotional display, intimate domesticity, narrative authenticity, audience engagement techniques, and algorithmic optimization. Full-time mothers become effective entrepreneurs whose emotional and domestic lives are tightly intertwined with platform economies. One can argue convincingly that mothers continuously recalibrate their personas to meet platform demands, negotiating between authenticity and performance to maintain visibility and income. This expanded literature review builds on that claim by showing that such recalibration is embedded within larger feminist, sociotechnical, and political-economic transformations. In doing so, it situates Douyin motherhood as a critical site where gender, labor, emotion, and platform capitalism converge.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist epistemology to examine how full-time mothers on Douyin use affective labor to gain visibility and monetize their domestic practices. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for this topic because affective labor, emotional expression, and maternal self-presentation are embedded in meaning-making processes rather than quantifiable variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Rather than seeking to measure outcomes or establish causal relationships, the study aimed to understand how mothers construct, perform, and negotiate identity and value within an algorithmically governed digital environment.

Research Design and Rationale

The study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, combined with elements of digital ethnography, allowing for a close examination of the visual, textual, relational, and performative characteristics of Douyin content (Pink et al., 2016). Because Douyin is fundamentally a short-video platform, analysis required sensitivity to multimodal features, including gesture, tone of voice, background aesthetics, camera framing, editing rhythms, and the use of filters or visual effects. These multimodal cues are integral to affective labor, which is communicated not only through words but also through nonverbal elements such as facial expressions, bodily movements, interactions with children, and the ambience of domestic spaces. The interpretive orientation of this research aligns with prior scholarship on platform labor, motherhood, and affective economies (Abidin, 2020; Jarrett, 2014), and reflects the study's objective to interpret the meanings embedded within mothers' content, the emotional atmospheres they construct, and the strategies through which they transform care work into commercial value.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 20 Douyin accounts belonging to full-time mothers (see Table 1). Selection was guided by several criteria relevant to the study's research questions. First, each creator had to identify as a full-time mother (全职妈妈) publicly. Second, the account needed to feature regular content related to childcare routines, emotional labor, domestic tasks, family life, or forms of maternal self-presentation. Third, the accounts had to demonstrate clear evidence of monetization, whether through livestream sales, brand partnerships, embedded product placements, or links to platform-integrated storefronts. Fourth, the selected creators consistently displayed an affective aesthetic, typically characterized by warmth, humor, maternal vulnerability, or emotionally rich storytelling. Finally, accounts were required to show substantial engagement—such as visible comment traffic, shares, or likes—indicating that the creator had attained a degree of platform visibility. This strategy emphasized selecting accounts that exhibited distinctive affective patterns and active participation in monetization processes. Purposive sampling was therefore used to prioritize information-rich cases over broad representativeness.

Table 1: List of the 20 Douyin accounts

Sample	Number of fans	Area
A (小英一家)	5520000	Yunnan, China
B (小黄远嫁美国)	5296000	USA
C (Miss Xu 老徐)	2414000	Norway
D (厚皮橙)	1412000	Guangdong, China
E (珍珍啊)	1310000	Henan, China
F (蛋糕妈妈)	954000	Anhui, China
G (农村小颖)	770000	Guizhou, China
H (璐璐远嫁澳洲)	669000	Australia
I (妍妍肉肉妈妈)	630000	Jiangsu, China
G (三儿在澳洲)	460000	Australia
K (夏天妈妈)	448000	Shanxi, China
L (丁小眼的家)	408000	Liaoning, China
M (小小吉祥物)	278000	Jilin, China
N (狮狮一家在英国)	255000	UK
O (90 后退休生活)	137000	Beijing, China
P (果果啊)	120000	Shandong, China
Q (苗苗)	109000	Chongqing, China
R (圆脸嘉嘉)	64000	Hebei, China
S (大如在努力)	62000	Gansu, China
T (小苹果妈妈) 脑瘫妈妈)	51000	Hunan, China

Sampling Period

Data were collected over three months from January to May 2025. This timeframe was intentionally chosen because it included significant cultural and family-centered moments such as the Chinese New Year and the early stages of a new school term. Both periods tend to stimulate high levels of maternal content creation, often involving heightened emotional expression, family rituals, or intensified livestream commerce, thereby providing a rich window for observing affective labor and monetization practices.

Data Corpus

The final dataset consisted of more than 1,200 videos, along with accompanying video captions, comment sections, hashtags, product-tag interfaces, livestream excerpts, and profile descriptions. Although Douyin videos are typically short—ranging from 15 to 60 seconds—they are densely layered with affective cues, visual detail, and narrative framing. This density, rather than duration, provided a substantial base for qualitative analysis. The dataset also included screenshots of relevant user interface elements such as "Follow" buttons, embedded shop links, virtual gifting mechanisms, and livestream layouts, all of which offered insight into the monetization infrastructure that underpins the platform's economy.

Analytic Procedure

The analysis followed a three-stage thematic coding process. In the first stage, open coding involved repeated viewings of all collected videos, during which the researchers documented initial observations on emotional tone, parenting interactions, domestic routines, monetization indicators, visual strategies to enhance visibility, self-presentation techniques, and implicit narratives of maternal identity. These reflections generated approximately 180 preliminary codes, consistent with grounded theory approaches that prioritize inductive emergence (Charmaz, 2014).

During the second stage, axial coding was used to group these initial codes into larger conceptual categories, based on recurring patterns across the dataset. These included codes related to affective softness, domestic aestheticization, intimate visibility, maternal vulnerability, audience intimacy management, algorithmic conformity, humor as labor, emotional branding, affective persuasion during livestreams, moral performance, and commercialized storytelling. These conceptual groupings aligned closely with the interpretive patterns identified in the study, including the emphasis on constructing emotional atmospheres and monetizing domestic authenticity.

The third stage involved thematic integration, in which the conceptual categories were synthesized into four overarching themes that structured the study's findings: performing affective softness, constructing intimate visibility, monetizing maternal authenticity, and navigating algorithmic expectations and emotional exhaustion. These themes capture the central affective and economic processes through which mothers participate in Douyin's platform ecology.

Ethical Considerations

Although Douyin is a publicly accessible platform, ethical inquiry demands the careful handling of user data. All personal identifiers—including usernames, facial features, geographic markers, and verbatim text that could make accounts traceable—were anonymized or omitted from the research presentation. Because motherhood content is inherently intimate, screenshots and interface captures were used exclusively for analytic purposes and were not reproduced in this report. The researchers refrained from interacting with creators by avoiding comments, likes, or follows, thereby reducing the likelihood of influencing their content or platform visibility. Furthermore, cultural and gender sensitivity guided the interpretation of data, recognizing that maternal expression in China is shaped by specific social and cultural expectations rather than universal norms. These practices align with established principles for ethical digital research (Townsend & Wallace, 2016).

Researcher Positionality

Reflexivity played an essential role throughout the analysis. The researchers acknowledge that their interpretations were shaped by feminist commitments to recognizing undervalued labor, familiarity with East Asian digital cultures, attentiveness to maternal emotional burden, and awareness of platform power structures. As Hendricks (2010) notes, interpretive work is inevitably influenced by analysts' lived experiences and epistemological orientations. Although efforts were made to remain faithful to the data, qualitative interpretation inherently involves empathetic engagement with creators' emotional expressions, relational dynamics, and domestic routines.

Methodological Limitations

Several limitations define the boundaries of this research. First, platform constraints limit visibility: Douyin's algorithm selectively surfaces content, so the researchers' dataset reflects what the algorithm prioritizes. Second, the ephemerality of digital content—video deletions, edits, or restricted visibility—created challenges in maintaining a fully stable dataset. Third, the absence of direct interviews with mother-creators restricts the analysis to observable behavior rather than personal motivations, though this is consistent with the study's focus on affective performance. Finally, commercial arrangements such as sponsorship payments or contractual obligations are not publicly visible, limiting insight into the financial specifics of monetization. Despite these constraints, qualitative content analysis remains an effective method for examining how affect is produced, circulated, and monetized within platform environments.

FINDINGS

The analysis of 20 Douyin accounts run by full-time mothers reveals that affective labor underpins how maternal visibility and monetization unfold within China's platform economy. Mothers use emotional expression, intimate domesticity, and relational storytelling to cultivate attention, trust, and commercial engagement. Four interlocking themes emerge from the dataset: performing affective softness, constructing intimate visibility, monetizing maternal authenticity, and navigating algorithmic expectations alongside emotional exhaustion. Each theme illustrates how everyday domestic labor and emotional management—traditionally undervalued within private spaces—acquire new forms of visibility and market value on Douyin. At the same time, these themes highlight the tension between empowerment and exploitation. While Douyin enables mothers to transform unpaid care into income opportunities, it simultaneously amplifies emotional demands, reinforces gendered expectations, and deepens the moral pressures associated with motherhood. Affective visibility thus becomes both a resource and a burden, central to how full-time mothers participate in platform capitalism.

Theme 1: Performing Affective Softness

Across the dataset, mothers consistently constructed a visual and emotional aesthetic centered on softness. Gentle lighting, warm color palettes, affectionate gestures, and soothing atmospheres recur in most videos, creating what can be understood as an aesthetic of "affective softness" that aligns closely with culturally familiar ideals of feminine care. This softness was often achieved through soft-focus filters, slow-motion sequences, ambient background music, and calm narration, which together create an emotionally comforting digital environment. Softness appeared in mundane maternal acts such as brushing a child's hair, wiping a toddler's face after a meal, or quietly reminding children to be kind or grateful, all of which operate as subtle performances of emotional warmth. These practices resonate with Hardt's (1999) conceptualization of affective labor as work that produces and modulates emotional states.

One frequently circulated morning routine, for instance, featured a mother waking her toddler with gentle touches and whispered encouragement. The slowed-down editing enhanced the emotional tone, prompting comments describing her as "such a gentle mother," demonstrating how softness becomes a social marker of ideal motherhood. In another example, a mother responded calmly when her child spilled milk, reframing the moment as an opportunity for both to learn. Audiences noted her patience and praised her emotional regulation as exemplary. Soft-spoken educational videos also appeared frequently, with mothers quietly explaining developmental concepts while maintaining tender physical interactions with their children. Routine domestic

tasks—folding laundry, preparing porridge, or tidying play areas—were similarly aestheticized through gentle gestures and calming visuals, turning mundane work into emotionally appealing content. In moments of stress, some mothers suppressed their frustration to maintain a soothing tone for the camera, an act that reflects the emotional management described by Hochschild (1983). Performing affective softness thus functions not only as a genuine expression but also as an algorithmically advantageous strategy, since videos that evoke tenderness are more likely to be amplified and widely circulated.

Theme 2: Constructing Intimate Visibility

Mothers also carefully curated moments of domestic intimacy to create a sense of relational closeness with viewers. This intimacy is deliberately crafted rather than incidental, shaped by what audiences expect and what platform infrastructures reward. By inviting viewers into deeply personal domestic spaces—such as bedrooms, kitchens, and children's playrooms—mothers transform the private sphere into a stage where intimacy itself becomes a valuable commodity.

Some creators filmed bedtime routines, using dim lighting, slow pacing, and affectionate tones to construct scenes of calm family harmony. Viewers often commented that these videos made them feel as though they were physically present within the family's home, highlighting the strength of parasocial attachment. Other mothers intentionally displayed "messy moments," showing cluttered homes or chaotic mornings to cultivate relatability and counteract overly polished influencer imagery. Interactions between spouses—light teasing, shared chores, or affectionate banter—also enhanced intimate visibility by offering glimpses of marital dynamics that reinforce normative ideals of family life. Mothers frequently documented significant childhood milestones, such as first steps or school achievements, transforming personal family memories into public digital narratives. Many also shared moments of vulnerability, including exhaustion, loneliness, or emotional overwhelm. Captions such as "today I really can't hold on" allowed mothers to signal authenticity and invite empathy, deepening parasocial relationships. This intimacy increased viewer loyalty, and loyal viewers became more likely to participate in livestreams, engage repeatedly, and purchase recommended products. In this way, intimate visibility becomes a strategic mechanism of accumulation, turning motherhood into emotionally consumable content.

Theme 3: Monetizing Maternal Authenticity

While intimacy helps to attract attention, authenticity operates as the central mechanism through which that attention is monetized. In the influencer economy, brands and followers value creators who appear sincere, transparent, and trustworthy. Mothers, therefore, cultivate authenticity through emotional honesty, the portrayal of everyday routines, and the disclosure of relatable struggles. This authenticity, however, is not spontaneous but a form of curated labor requiring careful narrative management.

Many mothers deliberately shared "down days," parenting mistakes, personal anxieties, or moments of financial strain to construct a grounded and approachable persona. This practice aligns with Marwick and boyd's (2011) argument that authenticity often functions as a semi-scripted performance designed to foster audience trust. Mothers integrated commercial content into this authenticity in subtle ways. For example, some embedded sponsored baby shampoo or cleaning products into "realistic morning routine" videos, making the advertisement appear natural and sincere. Others used emotional storytelling during livestreams—sharing memories, discussing marital challenges, or narrating parenting dilemmas—to strengthen credibility while simultaneously promoting products. Some mothers built influence by offering "honest reviews," openly critiquing products and positioning themselves as relatable guides for other parents. Expressions of vulnerability, such as crying from exhaustion, occasionally prompted viewers to send virtual gifts or participate in supportive livestream interactions, demonstrating that emotional exposure itself can generate financial return. Other mothers framed their domestic expertise—cleaning techniques, nutritional knowledge, early education methods—as specialized knowledge that justified commercial partnerships. Through these strategies, maternal authenticity becomes both symbolic capital and financial resource, enabling full-time mothers to translate emotional labor into income.

Theme 4: Navigating Algorithmic Expectations and Emotional Exhaustion

Although Douyin provides avenues for monetization, it simultaneously imposes demanding emotional and algorithmic pressures on creators. The platform's algorithm prioritizes frequency, engagement, and emotional resonance, requiring mothers to produce content that aligns with these expectations continually. To remain visible, many creators adapted to algorithmic rhythms by posting during peak viewing hours, using trending sounds, mimicking popular formats, and crafting emotionally gripping openings. These behaviors reflect the phenomenon of algorithmic conformity described by Bishop (2020).

Mothers often felt pressure to maintain a forced positivity, presenting cheerful demeanors even on demanding or exhausting days. Videos sometimes depicted smiling mothers while captions revealed fatigue or frustration, demonstrating the tension between genuine emotion and platform performance. Livestreaming proved especially emotionally demanding, as mothers were required to sustain friendly, interactive engagement for extended periods while managing questions, criticisms, and product demonstrations. Handling negative comments also required emotional labor; several mothers responded with restraint to preserve audience goodwill and avoid algorithmic penalties. Some creators hinted at familial tension stemming from their online work, particularly when relatives questioned the legitimacy of content creation as "real work." Filming while simultaneously caring for young children further blurred boundaries between domestic responsibilities and digital labor, intensifying exhaustion. Mothers frequently performed multiple forms of labor at once: attending to children, managing household tasks, filming content, interacting with audiences, and optimizing for algorithmic visibility. This overlap amplified emotional and material burdens, demonstrating how Douyin reshapes maternal life by demanding continuous, public, and strategically optimized affective performance.

Across all themes, affective labor functions as the central mechanism through which full-time mothers achieve visibility and monetization on Douyin. Mothers transform intimate domestic practices into carefully staged performances designed to maximize emotional resonance and algorithmic reach. Softness, closeness, authenticity, and emotional resilience form a repertoire of affective techniques that mothers must deploy to sustain visibility within a platform economy driven by attention metrics. Yet these opportunities carry a high emotional cost. While mothers gain recognition and financial agency, they face heightened emotional burdens, intrusive visibility, and intensified gender norms. Their digital labor reproduces and commodifies longstanding expectations of good motherhood, revealing how platform capitalism simultaneously empowers and exploits affective labor under the guise of opportunity.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how full-time mothers on Douyin transform affective labor—emotional expression, relational care, and domestic intimacy—into visible, monetizable digital capital. The findings demonstrate that motherhood content on Douyin is not a passive documentation of daily life but an active performance of affective value designed to capture audience attention and algorithmic visibility. This section discusses the broader implications of these findings through three conceptual lenses: affective labor, visibility and platform capitalism, and gendered contradictions at the intersection of care and commercialization. Together, these insights deepen our understanding of how Douyin's platform infrastructure reorganizes domestic femininity, commodifies intimacy, and reshapes the cultural economy of motherhood in China.

Affective Labor as the Core of Douyin Motherhood

The data show that affective labor is the primary driver of visibility for full-time mothers on Douyin. Mothers carefully craft emotional atmospheres through gentleness, warmth, and soft-spoken gestures, echoing Hardt's (1999) formulation of affective labor as work that produces emotional states and shared social atmospheres. Caregiving—previously private, undervalued, and largely invisible—becomes hyper-visible when transposed into a platform context that actively rewards affective resonance. This observation aligns with feminist scholarship that critiques the long-standing erasure of domestic care work (Federici, 2012; Glenn, 2010). On Douyin, however, mothers' emotional and nurturing capacities are not only acknowledged but also commodified. The recurring aesthetic of "soft motherhood" illustrates how affective performances are intentionally crafted for visibility rather than merely captured incidentally. The platform rewards emotionally

soothing, reassuring, and tender moments, reinforcing a digital norm that expects mothers to display gentleness, patience, and emotional maturity.

Importantly, affective labor in this context is not merely representational; it is performative. Mothers actively shape their emotional displays to align with platform trends, viewers' expectations, and perceived algorithmic preferences. Expressions such as warmth, empathy, and maternal vulnerability are framed as authentic yet are also strategically curated. This dynamic supports Jarrett's (2014) argument that digital affective labor involves both genuine emotional engagement and aestheticized performance. Therefore, it is noted that the most successful Douyin mothers balance authenticity with idealization to construct emotionally compelling narratives. The present analysis extends this by showing how mothers meticulously orchestrate tone, gesture, pacing, and intimacy specifically because such emotional atmospheres attract visibility and, ultimately, monetization.

Visibility and the Platform Logic of Affective Value

Douyin's visibility economy plays a central role in shaping how mother-creators perform and monetize affective labor. Algorithms prioritize emotionally engaging content, rewarding videos that evoke warmth, tenderness, relatability, or aspiration. This finding supports Bishop's (2020) concept of "algorithmic labor," in which creators continuously adapt their behavior in response to algorithmic incentives. For mothers, this translates into a set of expectations: they must consistently produce emotionally resonant content, sustain a recognisable aesthetic style, showcase intimate domestic life, and post regularly enough to maintain audience engagement. Visibility becomes a form of digital currency that requires constant labor to acquire and maintain, transforming previously private maternal activities into value-generating content. This negotiation of visibility echoes findings from other contexts where creators manage identity within culturally bounded digital spaces. They perform layered, affective, and carefully curated identities to balance self-expression with social and moral expectations online (Kamaruzaman & Hamid, 2025).

Within this system, intimate visibility itself functions as a commodity. Everyday scenes such as bedtime routines, family meals, and moments of maternal struggle become strategic assets. Mothers deliberately use intimate domestic settings to cultivate parasocial closeness, which in turn strengthens engagement and purchasing trust. This pattern parallels Abidin's (2016) argument that intimacy and relatability lie at the heart of influencer micro-celebrity practices. Yet the intimacy on display is rarely spontaneous. It is best understood as an "invited intimacy," carefully orchestrated to align with what audiences and algorithms tend to reward, closely aligning with Duffy's (2017) notion of aspirational labor, in which authenticity and vulnerability are performed as part of an economic strategy.

The resulting moral economy of visibility amplifies idealized forms of motherhood. Patience, emotional self-control, well-managed routines, and nurturing environments are more likely to be rewarded with high engagement. Mothers who adhere closely to these ideals tend to receive greater algorithmic amplification, reinforcing Hays' (1996) concept of "intensive motherhood," now intensified by digital surveillance. Mothers on Douyin are therefore required to perform emotional perfection not only toward their families but also before potentially vast online audiences. Visibility on Douyin is consequently far from neutral; it is structured by cultural norms, algorithmic preferences, market logic, and gender expectations that together determine which performances of motherhood become both visible and financially rewarded. Indeed, the politics of visibility on social platforms often compel users to negotiate cultural, religious, and moral expectations, as Kamaruzaman (2024) demonstrates in her analysis of kueer(ed) Malay Muslim users navigating normative constraints. Similar dynamics appear in the context of digital motherhood, where mothers must balance authenticity with culturally idealized forms of femininity.

Monetization and the Commercialization of Domestic Emotion

One of the most striking findings is the extent to which mothers monetize authenticity as a specific kind of affective commodity built on emotional honesty, self-disclosure, and relatability. Revenue streams such as livestream sales, sponsorship deals, and product placement depend heavily on whether audiences perceive a creator as trustworthy, sincere, and emotionally grounded. This echoes Marwick's (2013) argument that

authenticity has become a form of strategic persona management; mothers must appear authentic even when that authenticity is carefully staged and curated.

Maternal vulnerability emerges as a particularly marketable affect. Moments in which mothers cry from exhaustion, speak openly about loneliness, or admit to parenting mistakes often produce unusually high levels of engagement. In the logic of platform capitalism, emotional hardship becomes a consumable product: vulnerability generates comments, comments drive algorithmic promotion, algorithmic promotion attracts sponsorship offers, and sponsorship monetizes vulnerability. This sequence parallels Couldry and Mejias's (2019) concept of data colonialism, in which intimate aspects of human life are extracted and repurposed as sources of value for digital platforms.

At the same time, mothers frequently reframe domestic expertise as a commercial identity. Skills honed through unpaid domestic labor—such as cleaning, caring for infants, selecting educational materials, and managing household budgets—are repositioned as marketable specializations that justify the sale of cleaning tools, baby products, learning toys, home appliances, and nutritional supplements. This pattern echoes Duffy and Pruchniewska's (2017) findings on the "entrepreneurial homemaker," where domestic competencies become forms of influencer capital. Yet the commercialization of motherhood also intensifies self-surveillance, as mothers feel compelled to uphold an idealized persona to protect brand relationships and maintain audience trust, leading to considerable emotional strain.

Gendered Contradictions: Empowerment and Exploitation

The findings reveal a series of gendered contradictions at the heart of digital motherhood on Douyin. While the platform offers new economic opportunities and forms of recognition, it simultaneously extends emotional demands and entrenches normative ideas about femininity.

Empowerment through Visibility and Income

On one hand, mothers gain access to income-generating opportunities that can be pursued while caring for children. They receive public recognition for forms of domestic labor that have long been rendered invisible, gain a sense of autonomy and selfhood beyond the private sphere, and form communities of support with other mothers navigating similar conditions. For women who have left formal employment due to caregiving responsibilities, Douyin can provide a viable route to financial empowerment and social visibility. Earlier work has likewise suggested that digital visibility allows mothers to transform an undervalued domestic self into a socially valued public figure.

Exploitation through Emotional Extraction

On the other hand, participation on Douyin intensifies emotional extraction. Mothers are required to produce emotionally resonant content consistently, maintain positivity even when exhausted, suppress frustration to preserve an image of maternal perfection, expose intimate family moments to drive engagement, and respond to followers in emotionally attentive ways to sustain relationships. This dual character of emotional labor—both fulfilling and draining—mirrors Hochschild's (1983) classic analysis.

Gender Norm Reinforcement

Even as mothers gain financial mobility, their digital labor tends to reinforce rather than challenge domestic femininity. Their success is closely tied to their ability to perform idealized versions of motherhood; algorithms tend to reward maternal softness, patience, and self-sacrifice more readily than assertiveness or critical reflection on gender norms. As a result, Douyin does not fundamentally disrupt entrenched gender inequalities; instead, it absorbs and repackages them within the logic of platform capitalism.

Boundary Erosion: When Home Becomes Workplace

Douyin also blurs the boundary between private and professional life. The home effectively becomes a workplace, children become co-performers, and emotional life itself becomes a form of content. Mothers are

placed in an "always on" position, simultaneously performing emotional labor for their children, for their followers, and for the algorithm that governs their visibility. Domestic routines—cooking, cleaning, disciplining, playing—are continuously reframed with the camera in mind. This restructuring of everyday life underscores how deeply platform labor can permeate the intimate spaces of the home.

Douyin as Affective Infrastructure

These findings suggest that Douyin should be understood as more than a neutral platform; it operates as an affective infrastructure that shapes how emotion is produced, expressed, consumed, and monetized. The platform provides tools for editing emotional atmospheres, filters that soften visuals, trending sounds that evoke nostalgia or tenderness, algorithms that prioritize content with strong sentimental appeal, and built-in e-commerce functions that translate trust and emotional connection into sales. Douyin thus actively participates in constructing digital motherhood by governing which forms of affect become visible and convertible into value.

Motherhood on Douyin is consequently co-produced by multiple forces: the emotional labor of users, the preferences and reactions of audiences, culturally specific expectations of motherhood, and the algorithmic systems that organize visibility and monetization. It has been observed that mothers gradually learn to feel, present, and package their emotional lives in ways that align with platform success. The present discussion extends this by showing how platform infrastructures themselves render maternal affect programmable and economically legible.

The Paradox of Affective Visibility

The central paradox that emerges from this analysis is that affective visibility simultaneously empowers and exploits mothers. It empowers by recognizing and monetizing their emotional and domestic labor, providing income and recognition previously unavailable. At the same time, it exploits by extracting ongoing emotional performance, deepening self-surveillance, and reinforcing narrow, gendered expectations of ideal motherhood. Full-time mothers become effective entrepreneurs whose identities and livelihoods hinge on the emotional consumability of their private lives. This paradox is emblematic of platform capitalism, which promises empowerment while structuring participation in ways that perpetuate inequality and precarity.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how full-time mothers on Douyin mobilize affective labor—emotional expressiveness, relational intimacy, domestic aesthetics, and maternal vulnerability—to generate visibility and economic value within China's platform economy. Building on feminist theories of affective labor, digital labor scholarship, and studies of motherhood and influencer culture, the analysis demonstrates that Douyin makes maternal affect newly visible and economically actionable, even as it exploits and extends gendered emotional expectations.

The findings reveal that mothers strategically perform "affective softness" through curated gestures, gentle tones, and aestheticized domestic scenes. These performances align with algorithmic preferences for emotionally resonant content, illustrating how platform infrastructures shape affective visibility. Through videos of morning routines, bedtime interactions, playful exchanges, and educational moments, mothers construct emotionally appealing personas that fulfill cultural ideals of femininity and care. This cultivated emotional atmosphere is central to gaining followers, maintaining engagement, and attracting commercial partnerships. Simultaneously, full-time mothers construct "intimate visibility," inviting audiences into their domestic lives while navigating the emotional risks of heightened exposure. Through curated disclosure of vulnerabilities, relational storytelling, and glimpses into everyday family life, mothers foster parasocial relationships that enhance viewer loyalty and increase purchasing trust. Yet this intimacy is not spontaneous; it is carefully staged in accordance with platform norms, audience expectations, and commercial incentives. Domestic life becomes a resource for economic participation, but at the cost of deepened emotional surveillance.

Monetization emerges as a key outcome of affective visibility. Mothers commercialize authenticity by integrating product placements, livestream promotions, and domestic expertise into their content. However, authenticity becomes a form of labor: mothers must consistently perform sincerity, relatability, and moral virtue

to sustain commercial credibility. This commodification of emotional authenticity reinforces gendered divisions of labor, where women's caregiving and emotional capacities become exploitable assets within platform capitalism. The study also highlights the emotional and material burdens of algorithmic labor. Mothers experience constant pressure to produce engaging content, maintain a positive emotional state, and adhere to platform rhythms. They navigate criticism, emotional fatigue, boundary erosion, and family tensions—reminding us that visibility is not neutral but structured by power, cultural norms, and platform infrastructures. Thus, while Douyin offers a pathway to financial empowerment, it simultaneously intensifies emotional demands and reinforces traditional gender expectations.

In sum, Douyin transforms motherhood from private labor into a public commodity, making maternal affect both visible and economically valuable. Yet this visibility is double-edged: it empowers mothers by offering economic opportunities and recognition, while also extracting emotional labor, reinforcing gender norms, and exposing domestic life to public scrutiny. The study contributes to ongoing debates on digital labor, affective economies, and the cultural politics of motherhood by highlighting how platform capitalism reconfigures domestic femininity into an affective infrastructure of value production. Future research could extend this analysis by incorporating interviews with mother-creators, exploring fatherhood content for comparison, examining the role of platform regulation, or analyzing algorithmic impacts more closely. Nonetheless, this study provides a critical foundation for understanding how affective labor functions as a central currency within digital motherhood economies in contemporary China.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Data Availability

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

ORCID iDs

Nur Atirah Kamaruzaman https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2569-0162

Biographies

Nur Atirah Kamaruzaman is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. She is actively engaged in a faculty-led research initiative within the Development Communication research programme. Her scholarly interests cover a broad spectrum, including media and cultural studies, intersectionality, gender identity, social media research, and participatory culture.

Zhang Yunlan is a Master's candidate in Corporate Communication at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Her research interests include gender studies, social media, and cultural studies.

REFERENCES

1. Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. Media International Australia, 161(1), 86–100. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16665177
2. Abidin, C. (2020). Influencers and social media: A global perspective. Polity Press.
3. Bishop, S. (2020). Algorithmic experts: Selling algorithmic lore on YouTube. Social Media + Society, 6(2), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119897323
4. Charmaz, K. (2014). Constructing grounded theory (2nd ed.). SAGE.
5. Chen, J. Y., & Qiu, J. L. (2019). Digital utility: Datafication, regulation, labor, and DiDi's platformization of urban transport in China. Chinese Journal of Communication, 12(3), 274–289. https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2019.1614964
6. Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism. Stanford University Press.
7. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2018). The SAGE handbook of qualitative research (5th ed.). SAGE.
8. Douglas, S. J., & Michaels, M. W. (2005). The mommy myth: The idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined women. Free Press.
9. Duffy, B. E. (2017). (Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work. Yale University Press.
10. Duffy, B. E., & Pooley, J. (2019). Idols of Promotion: The Triumph of Self-Branding in an Age of Precarity, Journal of Communication, 69(1), 26–48. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy063
11. Duffy, B. E., & Pruchniewska, U. (2017). Gender and self-enterprise in the social media age: a digital double bind. Information, Communication & Society, 20(6), 843–859. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1291703
12. Federici, S. (2012). Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle. PM Press.
13. Fraser, N. (2016). Contradictions of capital and care. New Left Review, 100, 99–117.
14. Glenn, E. N. (2010). Forced to care: Coercion and caregiving in America. Harvard University Press.
15. Hardt, M. (1999). Affective Labor. Boundary 2, 26(2), 89–100. http://www.jstor.org/stable/303793
16. Hays, S. (1996). The cultural contradictions of motherhood. Yale University Press.
17. Hendricks, M. (2010). Islamic texts: A source of acceptance for queer individuals in mainstream Muslim society. The Equal Rights Review, 5, 31–51.
18. Hochschild, A. R. (1983). The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling. University of California Press.
19. Jarrett, K. (2014). Feminism, labour and digital media: The digital housewife. Routledge.
20. Jing, W., & Susanne Yuk-ping, C. (2025). Gendered labor contentions in the platform economy: Studying food-delivery and house-cleaning workers. International Journal of Comparative Sociology, 66(5), 734-750. https://doi.org/10.1177/00207152251351975
21. Kamaruzaman, N. A., & Hamid, M. F. A. (2025). The aesthetics of kueer(ed) Muslimness: Gender ambiguity, affect, and digital negotiation among Ahkak Malays. International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 9(11), 2163-2174. https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91100172
22. Kamaruzaman, N. A. (2024). Negotiating non-normative identities: Gender nonconforming Malaysian Muslims on Instagram. The Journal of Men's Studies, 32(2), 276-299. https://doi.org/10.1177/10608265231212551
23. Keane, M., & Yu, H. (2019). China's digital economy: Opportunities and risks. Routledge.
24. Liang, M., & Ye, L. (2025). Algorithmic pedagogy: How Douyin constructs algorithmic imaginaries for content creators. Platforms & Society, 2. https://doi.org/10.1177/29768624251365615
25. Lupton, D. (2016). The digitally engaged patient. Routledge.
26. Marwick, A. (2013). Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age. Yale University Press.
27. Marwick, A., & boyd, d. (2011). To see and be seen: Celebrity practice on Twitter. Convergence, 17(2), 139–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856510394539
28. Peng, X. (2020). Neoliberal motherhood in China. Journal of Chinese Sociology, 7, 1–22.
29. Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (2016). Digital ethnography: Principles and practices. SAGE.

30. Srnicek, N. (2017). Platform capitalism. Polity Press.

31. Sun, J., & Liu, S. (2021). Emotional engagement and Douyin's algorithmic governance. Communication & Society, 58(1), 77–97.

32. Townsend, L., & Wallace, C. (2016). Social media research: A guide to ethics. University of Aberdeen.

33. van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). The platform society: Public values in a connective world. Oxford University Press.

34. Zhang, H., Sun, X. & Ding, Z. (2023). The interplay of gender, motherhood, and the digital economy in China: exploring the experiences of urban mothers in WeChat businesses. The Journal of Chinese Sociology, 10(17). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40711-023-00194-5

35. Zulli, D., & Zulli, D. J. (2022). Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform. New Media & Society, 24(8), 1872-1890. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820983603