

# Cultural Analysis of Female Cross-Gender Expression in Social Networks: A Case Study of Image Presentation in Douyin Short Videos

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## ABSTRACT

With the continuous development of the internet and the growing awareness of women's social consciousness, the forms of self-expression by women on digital platforms have become increasingly diverse. Among these, female cross-gender performance has emerged as a key strategy of self-presentation in social networks. This paper analyzes two distinct expression strategies on the Douyin short video platform to explore and critically reflect on current female cross-gender expressions. The explicit expression strategy employs makeup, cross-dressing, and role-playing to simulate male personas, challenging traditional gender stereotypes. The implicit expression strategy, on the other hand, mocks male "bad habits" through the imitation of male behaviors and the use of symbolic metaphors, carrying a satirical undertone. However, these strategies have their limitations: male images are often idealized and trivialized, reinforcing gender norms; and constrained by patriarchal frameworks, they fail to genuinely subvert gender roles and the gender binary. As a result, while female cross-gender expression challenges gender stereotypes, it also faces risks of being disciplined and misinterpreted.

## KEYWORDS

Gender Performance; Self-Presentation; Female-To-Male Cross-Dressing; Short Videos.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of social networks has provided women with new spaces for expression, allowing them to break traditional gender stereotypes and showcase themselves in more diverse ways. On platforms like Douyin, some female influencers choose to perform gender through "female-to-male" cross-dressing, using makeup, cross-dressing, and behavior imitation to explore the integration of gender traits and challenge traditional gender norms. However, this form of expression also faces risks of being disciplined and misinterpreted. This paper uses the case of female cross-gender expression in Douyin short videos to analyze the performance strategies and cultural significance, exploring how women construct new gender identities while challenging gender stereotypes.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Self-Presentation of Women in Digital Networks

Digital media has provided women with opportunities for empowerment, allowing them to express themselves autonomously, shape their image, participate in public discourse, and influence public

opinion [1]. Existing research on the analysis of female self-presentation typically describes it from three perspectives: visual, discursive, and situational. First, the self-images that women present in digital media are diverse, encompassing types such as experience-sharing, attention-seeking, and help-seeking [2]. Through sharing snippets of daily life, shaping an ideal self, expressing emotions, and seeking assistance, they exhibit distinct gender characteristics and social gender awareness. Second, in terms of narrative approaches, women can achieve self-empowerment in short videos through body narratives, relational narratives, and situational narratives, thereby creating more diverse and positive female images [3].

However, women face numerous challenges and dilemmas in self-presentation within digital media. First, the male-centered tendency of digital media still exists, limiting women's discursive power [4]. Second, the content and forms of female self-presentation are often influenced by commercial interests, lacking depth and diversity [3]. Women's bodies are frequently objectified and commodified, subjected to the male gaze [5]. Moreover, issues such as cyber violence and online bullying threaten women's safety and rights in the digital space. The lack of gender awareness among some women also results in self-presentation that is still influenced by traditional cultural norms, lacking independence and criticality, and even catering to male aesthetics, thereby reinforcing gender inequality [1]. While digital media offers new spaces and possibilities for women, it also carries risks of objectification and gender discrimination.

From the perspective of constructing female media discourse power, effective approaches include enhancing social gender equality awareness, improving media literacy, fostering female opinion leaders, and refining media monitoring mechanisms [6]. Lauren Gurrieri & Jenna Drenten (2019) pointed out that body-related hashtags can serve as indicators of group identity, used to reinforce ideal body types or to initiate digital protests [7]. Additionally, under the drive of "performative shame," women resist societal objectification and the discipline of "gender melancholia" by showcasing traits such as confidence and self-acceptance [8].

## **2.2. Gender Performativity**

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity posits that gender is not innate but is constructed through repeated acts and performances. She views gender performativity as a cultural practice where individuals can transcend the boundaries of biological sex by engaging in acts such as cross-dressing, identity practices, and the expression of different gender traits and identities. In this process, women in society are often compelled to internalize the observer's gaze, perceiving themselves as objects to be observed and judged. This internalization leads to a tendency toward self-objectification, where women habitually monitor their own image, resulting in feelings of shame, anxiety, and other negative emotions. This self-objectification also diminishes their awareness of their internal bodily experiences.

The development of media technology has disrupted the spatial and temporal constraints of information dissemination, creating convenient contexts for content creation and reception, which has facilitated the popularity of gender parody [9]. Gender performance takes various forms, including drama, film, television programs, and online short videos. With the advancement of new media technology, online short videos have emerged as a significant arena for gender performance. Existing research shows that theories of gender performance, media scene theory, and dramaturgical theory are most commonly used to study the phenomenon of "male-to-female" cross-dressing on short video platforms. Cross-dressers appropriate social and cultural resources to perform boundary-transgressing acts, which are always conducted under social tension; they challenge traditional gender order while simultaneously being monitored by gender norms [10]. Gender-crossing influencers can be further categorized into "gender role-playing" and "transgender" performers. This categorization reflects a spectacle of performance under binary gender theory, the pursuit of anti-performative gender exploration, and the exhibition of "androgynous" gender awakening [11]. However, current

research tends to focus on the phenomenon of "male-to-female" cross-dressing, with relatively little discussion on "female-to-male" performance.

The social impact of gender performance is complex. On the one hand, gender performance can dismantle stereotypes, achieve reconstruction, and transcend boundaries; on the other hand, it may exacerbate gender differences and even become a tool for entertainment and consumerism. Currently, in the "male-to-female" cross-dressing short videos on the Douyin platform, the portrayal of female images often features idealized, domesticized, and masculinized traits, which instead intensifies societal stereotypes about women, leading to problems such as the alienation of female images and excessive entertainment [12]. Existing research mainly interprets the essential connotations of gender cross-dressing performances as resistance to gender hegemony, a breakthrough of binary gender theory, the fusion of gender temperaments, and the analysis of male gender competition strategies. However, there is limited discussion on female gender resistance and discourse analysis, and current studies often neglect the social attributes of short videos, rarely connecting with the audience.

### 3. PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES OF "FEMALE-TO-MALE" INFLUENCERS

This study analyzes a selection of representative Douyin influencers who engage in "female-to-male" cross-gender performances, focusing on their video content and the diverse texts that emerge from these performances. From this analysis, two primary performance strategies are identified.

**Table 1.** Overview of Selected Female-to-Male Douyin Influencer Accounts

Number	Douyin ID	Follower Count	Likes
1	CaroLaiLai_	4.5 M	150 M
2	Miss Wei Er (Guangxi Couple)	5.37 M	63.97 M
3	Master Tu	5.36 M	26.28 M
4	MAJOONE is A-Man	2.66 M	59.49 M
5	Fangtou Ming	1.53 M	17.74 M
6	Dsanyi	1.51 M	41.16 M

#### 3.1. Explicit Expression

Some female influencers who engage in "female-to-male" cross-dressing use makeup and costuming strategies to visually simulate and perform male roles, thereby achieving a certain degree of gender fluidity. This gender performance not only showcases their skill in makeup and impersonation but also represents an attempt to transcend traditional gender stereotypes. Their visual and performative practices challenge the conventional expectations of female sexual appeal and explore the fusion of gender characteristics. These non-traditional female images do not just confront societal norms regarding gender; they also create a new form of visual and aesthetic appeal in the online space [13]. For instance, the influencer "MAJOONE is A-Man" exemplifies this by portraying dashing ancient-style male characters and male characters from anime and games, exploring the fluidity of gender traits and attracting significant viewership and interaction. This performance introduces audiences to a new form of gender expectation that transcends the simple binary of "masculine" and "tomboyish" qualities. Instead of erasing feminine traits through external appearances, these performances create a "new neutral image" that possesses an appeal to both genders.

Other female influencers adopt narrative-driven performances, often playing multiple roles in a single video to portray different male personas in various relational contexts, aiming to convey personal attitudes and gain audience approval. These videos frequently focus on themes of romance and family. For example, in the videos by "CaroLaiLai\_", a scenario is depicted where a boyfriend, despite lacking funds, goes to great lengths to hide this fact from his girlfriend out of pride. The girlfriend, aware of the situation, subtly supports him by reversing the transaction to preserve his dignity.

These situational, story-driven narratives are straightforward and relatable, often incorporating everyday scenarios that strengthen the connection between the performance and the audience. However, it is important to note that the male characters in these videos are often labeled as "pure love warriors," a term that implies their display of pure and selfless love in romantic relationships. This label subtly entertains and justifies certain behaviors that should be critiqued, thus perpetuating and reinforcing traditional gender role stereotypes. The scenarios and character portrayals in these videos reflect existing gender norms and are further reinforced through audience interactions and comments. For example, male viewers often comment with remarks like "how do you know us so well," while female viewers tend to share similar personal experiences.

### **3.2. Implicit Expression**

This form of expression does not directly showcase male physical characteristics but instead mimics certain "greasy" behaviors often associated with men through body movements, facial expressions, and other subtle cues. The intent is to satirize common male "bad habits," infusing the content with a layer of irony. For example, in the videos of the influencer "Fangtou Ming" common behaviors include suddenly stopping mid-walk to mimic a basketball shot, stroking freshly grown stubble on the chin, and flashing a sly one-sided smile... The influencer "Miss Wei Er (Guangxi Couple)" emphasizes typical male sloppiness by imitating her husband's everyday actions: walking with an exaggerated gait while sporting a beer belly, carelessly tossing socks around the house, and incessantly criticizing his wife.

There are also female-to-male influencers who directly portray the "masculinity" often seen in traditional narratives. For instance, the influencer "Master Tu" with a naturally rugged appearance uses facial expressions and assertive, powerful body movements to depict men's actions within social contexts. Sometimes, she even dubs her videos with male character dialogues to enhance the performative effect. These performances intentionally avoid emotional or private spheres, contrasting with the multi-role scenarios seen in explicit expressions, thereby enriching the ways in which women engage in gender performance.

The videos of female-to-male influencers who employ implicit performance strategies frequently utilize symbolic metaphors. These include clothing styles such as black suits, dress shirts, designer belts, leather shoes or sneakers, sunglasses, and slicked-back hair; props like cigarettes, alcohol, and cars; and typical behaviors like draping arms around the shoulders of male friends, having an entourage, or engaging in "manly" interpersonal interactions characterized by dominance, unapproachability, a tit-for-tat mentality, and reluctance to seek help. These portrayals are constructed using gendered body imagery, language, and ritualized visual elements drawn from everyday life and media experiences. As audiences interpret these representations, they become distinct cultural gender symbols, widely disseminated and popularized within media, sometimes even shaping new media experiences[10].

Thus, the performances of female-to-male influencers require not only the performer's ability to convincingly portray a cross-gender image but also the audience's recognition of that image and society's evaluation of the performance. This interplay between performer and audience is particularly pronounced on short video platforms like Douyin, where the mutual construction and influence between the two are evident.

## **4. THE GENDER TRANSGRESSION OF "FEMALE-TO-MALE" INFLUENCERS**

### **4.1. Self-Practice Against the Gaze**

The "female-to-male" videos humorize the offensive and harassing behaviors that women might encounter in their daily lives from men, thereby mitigating the fear women may feel in such situations by rendering them comical and absurd. These short videos, which mimic uncomfortable male behaviors, serve as a humorous rebellion against societal realities, vividly depicting the harassment and oppression women experience in social interactions. Michel Foucault insightfully analyzed the power mechanism behind the "gaze," explaining that power is exercised through the gaze, with the gazer holding supreme authority, while the gazed-upon becomes the object of disdain, ridicule, and exploitation [14]. Additionally, exaggerated performances further amplify the "counter-gaze" effect. For example, the blogger "Dsanyi" often portrays scenarios of sexual harassment by adopting a disheveled, slovenly persona dressed in pajamas and slippers, delivering a performance that is direct and impactful, with a gender-neutral threat. These videos that parody "oily men," "lazy husbands," and "lecherous men" offer women new avenues to resist gender oppression.

### **4.2. Self-Writing Within the Patriarchal Framework**

Gender performativity theory emphasizes that gender is not an inherent, essential trait but a socially constructed identity formed through a series of repeated behaviors and performances. Judith Butler, in her theory of gender performativity, argues that gender identity is constructed through the continuous repetition and imitation of socially assigned gender behaviors, which are constantly reinforced until they form what is perceived as "natural" gender expression. However, this theory partially fails in the context of the creations by "female-to-male" influencers.

The "body writing" by "female-to-male" influencers does not subvert the authoritative discourse, moral norms, or male-desired female images within male society through a confrontational approach, nor does it break free from the control of male discourse power. To a large extent, these performances remain a form of compliance with existing gender norms rather than a subversion of them. Specifically, most "female-to-male" influencer videos still position men's expectations of women in terms of affection and dependence, adhering to male behavioral standards, and suggesting that women must rely on "male traits" to transcend their own gender discipline. Although the bodily narrative of "female-to-male" influencers presents a certain level of rebellion against the female body, the carnivalesque intervention of bodily expression does not eliminate the oppression of external power. This representation remains deeply embedded within the patriarchal framework, failing to break through the binary opposition of gender roles and established norms.

### **4.3. The Self-Misinterpretation of Female Identity**

Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "the second sex" in feminist discourse refers to women as "the other," existing and defined in relation to men, occupying a derived, subordinate, and determined position [15]. In the video content of "Miss Wei Er (Guangxi Couple)" the concept of "sweet as a couple, bitter as brothers" is reflected. This essentially reproduces traditional gender role divisions, where women are expected to be gentle and submissive during "sweet" times and rely on male support and protection during "bitter" times. This expression unconsciously places women in a secondary position, presuming that under their gender identity, women are fragile and recipients of privileges. Although being "favored" superficially appears to grant women the privilege of avoiding hardship, it actually undermines their agency at a deeper level. In this way, women are deprived of the opportunity to independently face difficulties and challenges, unconsciously reinforcing the dilemma of women as "the second sex." When women accept and reproduce this gender performance, they effectively

relinquish their own agency, becoming "the other" as perceived through the male gaze and societal expectations. This self-misinterpretation of identity not only limits women's development and self-actualization but also hinders the broader realization of gender equality at the societal level.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Female cross-gender expression showcases the integration and diversity of gender traits. Influencers employ explicit (makeup, cross-dressing, role-playing) or implicit (behavior imitation) performance strategies to challenge traditional gender norms, to some extent provoking reflection on gender stereotypes and achieving a counter-gaze effect. However, research reveals that such gender performances are essentially a form of self-writing within the patriarchal framework and involve a misinterpretation of gender traits by the women themselves.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity cannot fully explain the "female-to-male" short videos on Chinese social media. The performances of these influencers tend to lean towards entertainment rather than constructing identity. Moreover, Butler's theory of gender performativity is grounded in broader practices that require continuous repetition until they become default habits. Clearly, in the "female-to-male" short videos, such performances do not constitute a rule but exist as a personal style. Some influencers also intersperse their profiles with videos that align more with traditional female traits, often showcasing their behavior in daily life, detached from the performative realm of short videos.

The emergence and popularity of "female-to-male" short videos have enriched the modes of female self-expression in online spaces. However, this form of expression conflicts significantly with current "gender cognition" and fails to provide a stable sense of binary gender. The path toward gender inclusivity and diversity remains long and challenging.

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