Journal of Women & Aging

ISSN: 0895-2841 (Print) 1540-7322 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/wjwa20

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To cite this article: Yingwen Wang (03 Jun 2026): Calibrated grandmotherhood: how older rural Chinese women content creators navigate digital empowerment on Douyin, Journal of Women & Aging, DOI: 10.1080/08952841.2026.2680877

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2026.2680877

JOURNAL OF WOMEN & AGING
https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2026.2680877

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Calibrated grandmotherhood: how older rural Chinese women content creators navigate digital empowerment on Douyin

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ABSTRACT

Short-video platforms have expanded possibilities for public expression in China, yet older women in rural areas remain among the most digitally marginalised populations due to intersecting age, gender, and rural disparities. This study examines how those who actively create content on Douyin negotiate empowerment within significant structural constraints. The findings reveal that empowerment through platform participation is multidimensional and unevenly realised. Participants achieved recognition, social connection, and enhanced self-regard, outcomes that carry independent significance for women whose decades of care work went largely unacknowledged. Those who sought economic returns, however, faced compounding structural barriers rooted in educational history, platform predation, and normative constraints on feminine self-presentation. To navigate platform visibility while remaining within local moral boundaries, participants practiced the *calibrated grandmotherhood*, strategic self-presentation that aligns with normative expectations of respectable older femininity and algorithmic preferences. This calibration produces an empowerment paradox: the very agency that enables recognition reinforces rather than challenges the gendered age norms constraining these women. The study contributes to empowerment theory by demonstrating how, under conditions of intersecting marginalisation, effective agency and transformative agency may exist in tension, with platform affordances channelling agency into reproductive rather than transformative forms.

KEYWORDS

Digital empowerment; older rural women; Douyin; grandmotherhood; ageing

Introduction

Short-video platforms have transformed everyday media participation across China, bringing new publics and practices into view and reconfiguring who can speak, be seen, and be valued online (Wang & Cao, 2025). Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, has become a central arena for everyday cultural production and sociality within an ecosystem increasingly shaped by platform logics and data extraction (Huang & Ye, 2024). While overall connectivity has grown rapidly, China counted roughly 1.07 billion internet users in 2023, digital opportunities remain deeply stratified by age, gender, and geography (CNNIC, 2023).

Older rural women sit at the intersection of these divides: they are under-represented online, historically constrained by patriarchal norms and the rural–urban policy regime, and disproportionately excluded from meaningful digital gains despite nominal inclusion (Jacka, 2014; Yang &

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Du, 2021). For older rural women, those conditions are structured by intersectional inequalities. An intersectional lens foregrounds how ageing, gender, and rurality interact to shape both the resources available for digital participation and the cultural intelligibility of older women as public actors (Crenshaw, 1989). The enduring crisis of invisibility surrounding older women in media, often reducing them to grandmotherly roles or erasing them from public culture, remains a key barrier to status equality and political voice (Westwood, 2023). In the Chinese context, such symbolic marginality is compounded by cumulative life-course disadvantages. Older rural women's current digital capabilities have been shaped by historical educational exclusion, ongoing caregiving obligations that limit discretionary time, and the geographic dispersal of family support networks through rural-to-urban migration. These intersecting constraints, elaborated in the literature review, suggest that conversion from digital access to valued outcomes may be particularly uneven for this population.

Despite extensive work on digital inequalities and active aging, the specific experiences of older rural women as active content creators, rather than mere technology adopters, remain underexamined within gerontology and Women's Studies, limiting our understanding of how digital platforms are reshaping the landscape of later life. Research on ageing and social media often treats "older adults" as a homogeneous category (Quan-Haase et al., 2018), overlooking gendered expectations of care and local moral economies that condition what counts as "appropriate" visibility for older women (Westwood, 2023). Studies of platform labour typically centre young, urban influencers and monetization pathways (e.g., Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017), leaving unclear how recognition-seeking labour is undertaken when ambitions are oriented toward dignity, connection, and self-worth rather than commercial success. In China-focused work, digital inclusion is well documented, but we know far less about conversion among multiply marginalized older adults—how agency is negotiated within households, villages, and algorithms, and how such negotiations translate (or fail to translate) into outcomes (Qiu, 2009; Yang & Du, 2021).

This article addresses these gaps by examining how older rural Chinese women navigate digital empowerment on Douyin. Anchoring the analysis in empowerment-as-conversion framework, and engaging digital divide and platform scholarship, the study poses two research questions:

1. How do the intersections of gender, age, and rural identity shape older Chinese women's motivations, strategies, and experiences as Douyin content creators?
2. To what extent do older rural women exercise agency through Douyin participation, what outcomes do they achieve, and how do platform and sociocultural constraints mediate these empowerment processes?

Literature review

Digital empowerment as a conversion process

Empowerment refers to processes of change through which people who have been denied meaningful choice expand their capacity to make it (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). Within Kabeer's approach, empowerment is conceptualised through three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. Resources include not only material assets but also human and social resources, distributed through institutions and relationships such as households, communities, and markets. Agency concerns the capacity to define goals and act upon them, including forms of negotiation, bargaining, and everyday resistance. Achievements refer to the outcomes of these efforts and the extent to which potential capabilities are realised.

Crucially, resources constitute only the potential for empowerment; whether this potential is realised depends on the conversion process through which resources are mobilised via agency to produce valued achievements. As Kabeer (1999, p. 443) observes, resources "are at one remove

from choice, a measure of potential rather than actualized choice." Her framework further specifies that empowerment is most clearly signalled by expanded capacity for strategic life choices, those critical for people to live the lives they want, rather than by routine choices that shape the texture of everyday life but do not alter its fundamental conditions (Kabeer, 1999). It is also useful to distinguish between agency that makes women more effective in carrying out existing roles and agency that is transformative in the sense that it challenges the restrictive aspects of those roles (Kabeer, 2005). Platform engagement may bring pleasure or new forms of visibility, yet still leave intact the distribution of authority and obligation within households. As Cao (2025) articulates this pattern as 'superficial empowerment', platform engagement yields emotional satisfaction and social recognition without altering underlying gender constraints. The guiding concern of this study is therefore not simply whether older rural women participate as Douyin creators, but how their digital resources are converted, or fail to be converted, into achievements that carry strategic significance.

A conversion-oriented approach resonates with third-level digital divide scholarship, which demonstrates that access and skills alone do not guarantee comparable outcomes (Helsper, 2021; Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). Digital divide research has evolved to reflect this complexity, moving from studying who has internet access to examining skills differences and, most recently, exploring outcome disparities (Scheerder et al., 2017; Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). Helsper (2021) further illustrates how offline circumstances, such as education, income, social networks, influence online possibilities, with advantages accumulating for those already privileged. Kabeer similarly cautions that meaningful choice is shaped not only by material alternatives but also by cognitive and normative constraints, including the internalisation of what is seen as possible or appropriate (Kabeer, 1999, p. 458).

Existing research on older adults' digital participation offers partial insight into these conversion dynamics. Quan-Haase et al. (2016) document older adults creatively adapting technology to fit their lives and maintain social connections. Research on digital literacy reveals older adults learning through family and friends, developing skills that serve their specific needs (Quan-Haase et al., 2018; Tsai et al., 2017). Studies in the Chinese context likewise show that online participation can support connection and wellbeing. Yang and Du (2021) found that older adults' social media use generated emotional benefits such as reduced loneliness and strengthened social ties. Research on rural women's digital economic participation indicates that gains in one domain do not necessarily translate into greater autonomy. Yu and Cui (2019) documented that even when economic gains occurred through e-commerce, they often failed to enhance household decision-making power. These findings illustrate Kabeer's insight that resources alone do not determine outcomes. What remains less well understood is the specific conversion frictions encountered by older rural women content creators, as existing research documents outcomes but rarely traces the conversion processes through which they are produced.

The intersectional resource constraints of older rural women

Understanding conversion frictions requires examining what resources older rural women can access for digital participation. For older rural women in China, three resource domains shape this conversion potential: human resources, particularly education and literacy; temporal resources, including discretionary time not claimed by care obligations; and social resources in the form of family support and community networks.

The educational trajectories of older rural women have been shaped by historical circumstances that continue to affect their digital capabilities. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), while rural school enrollment at the secondary level nominally expanded, the quality of education was severely compromised (Pepper, 1980, p. 7). As Treiman (2013) demonstrates using literacy test data, individuals who came of age during this period achieved lower functional literacy

relative to their nominal years of schooling. Within this broader context, rural women faced additional, gender-specific barriers. Traditional son preference meant that families prioritised sons' education (Hannum, 2005), rural girls were more likely than boys to drop out of school when family resources were constrained (Brown & Park, 2002), and the gendered division of labour justified limiting girls' education (Hannum et al., 2009). The hukou system further compounded these family-level disadvantages: urban per capita education spending was much greater than rural spending, and the absence of rural pensions reinforced dependence on sons, further skewing investment toward boys (Zeng et al., 2014). Patrilocal marriage meant educating girls was seen as *'fertilized water running into someone else's garden'* (Jacka, 2014, p. 122). Census data confirm the resulting disparity: among cohorts who reached school age before the 1980s, the gender gap in educational attainment was substantially wider in rural than in urban areas (Zeng et al., 2014). These historical patterns now manifest as literacy limitations and reduced digital capabilities.

Beyond educational constraints, older rural women's capacity for sustained digital engagement is limited by caregiving obligations. In contemporary China, grandparental care for grandchildren is an increasingly common feature of family life (Chen et al., 2011; Guo, 2025, p. 61). Existing research links this pattern to intersecting demographic and institutional shifts, including fertility decline, rural–urban migration, and the post-reform retreat from publicly supported care (Chen et al., 2011; Connelly et al., 2018). While both grandmothers and grandfathers participate in caregiving, research indicates that grandmothers tend to provide more intensive grandchild care than grandfathers, with corresponding psychological costs including higher depressive symptoms (Du et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2021).

Rural conditions intensify these gendered caregiving demands. Rural-to-urban labour migration frequently produces split-family arrangements in which daily care is assumed by older family members (Lu, 2012; Ye & Pan, 2011). In this context, "skipped-generation" households, where grandparents co-reside with grandchildren, constitute especially demanding care arrangements (Chen et al., 2011). At the same time, childcare provision has been uneven insufficiently affordable or accessible to substitute for family care, amplifying the care deficit borne by disadvantaged rural families (Connelly et al., 2018; Du et al., 2019). The practical consequence is that time for digital participation is often confined to brief, interrupted intervals between care tasks.

The expectation that grandmothers provide care is embedded within broader norms of intergenerational reciprocity. In the Chinese context, grandparental caregiving is often framed not merely as help to adult children but as part of reciprocal support arrangements, in which older parents' care is closely intertwined with subsequent emotional and financial support from children (Chen et al., 2011; Cong & Silverstein, 2008). For older rural women, this normative framing heightens the felt obligation to prioritise grandchild care and shapes how time devoted to non-family pursuits is evaluated (Guo et al., 2017). The temporal resources available for digital participation are therefore not simply "free time" but time that often must be claimed and negotiated alongside morally salient care responsibilities.

Social resources present an ambivalent picture for older rural women's digital participation. Family members serve as crucial sources of technical assistance, helping older adults set up accounts, navigate platform features, and troubleshoot problems (Hunsaker et al., 2019; Luijkx et al., 2015). However, in rural contexts where adult children have migrated, such technical support becomes episodic. Evidence from urban–rural community surveys indicates that rural older adults face a significantly higher digital divide than their urban counterparts, linked to poorer infrastructure and reduced opportunities for intergenerational support (Zhang et al., 2025). These conditions create an assistance gap that compounds educational and temporal constraints.

Platform dynamics and conversion challenges

When older rural women participate on digital platforms as content creators despite resource constraints, platform structures introduce additional conversion frictions where effort does not

translate smoothly into valued achievements. These frictions operate through the interplay of skill requirements, algorithmic systems, and governance regimes.

Sustained platform participation requires not only basic digital access but also ongoing negotiation to achieve and maintain visibility. Wang and Cao (2025) conceptualise this as dynamic access, arguing that meaningful inclusion for older content creators involves continuous adaptation rather than one-time skill acquisition. Cao and Wang (2024) further identify three participation modes among silver-haired influencers: self-reliance, family workshop, and institutional incubation. High-follower accounts frequently rely on family members for technical support or MCN organisations for professional packaging, while self-reliant creators preserve autonomy but face greater difficulty converting effort into visibility. Wang and Ming (2024) document similar patterns, noting that stable output often requires equipment investment and family assistance.

Algorithmic system makes visibility both essential and precarious. On Douyin, exposure is actively managed through opaque algorithms rather than earned through creative effort alone (Huang & Ye, 2024). Creators develop folk theories of how algorithms operate and adopting tactical routines to secure attention, though such strategies constitute negotiation within platform logics rather than resistance to them (Wang & Cao, 2024; Wang & Lin, 2025). For older creators, algorithms create specific exclusions: they favour high-frequency posting patterns that conflict with older adults' rhythms (Wang & Cao, 2025). These algorithmic frictions compound the skill and support challenges, making sustained visibility difficult even for those who master basic platform use.

Governance and market pressures further constrain digital participation. State-promoted positive energy discourse rewards uplifting narratives and discourages content framed as complaint or hardship (Fung et al., 2022). Older creators strategically deploy positive energy themes to gain algorithmic visibility, framing their participation through collective contribution rather than individual self-promotion (Wang & Lin, 2025). Wu and Jiang (2021) describe this as navigating a liquid discourse of ageing that demands balancing authentic self-representation against platform-rewarded performances of cheerful productivity. Such performances require what Abidin (2017) terms 'calibrated amateurism': the labour of crafting content that appears spontaneous and unfiltered while actually being carefully staged to foster relatability. In rural context, this calibration involves additional dimensions. Rural-themed content must be repackaged for urban audiences seeking therapeutic escape, thus the rural becoming a cybercolony where recognition depends on meeting an external gaze (Li, 2020). In promotional livestreaming, rurality is flattened and romanticised for commodification, with agricultural labour made hyper-visible while the affective and technical work of platform participation remains undervalued (Zhao, 2024).

Existing scholarship focuses predominantly on successful creators who have achieved visibility, while the experiences of ordinary older women who participate without reaching influencer status remain largely unexamined. This study contributes to this area by examining how older rural women navigate Douyin as content creators, the agency they exercise, and how platform and sociocultural constraints mediate the outcomes they achieve.

Methodology

The research design combined in-depth interviews with offline participant observation, recognising that empowerment claims often shift between public presentation and private reality.

Participants and sampling

Recruitment targeted rural Douyin female creators aged 60 and above. While aligning with China's legal definition of "older persons" (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2012), this threshold primarily serves as a generational marker. This cohort reached

school age during the Cultural Revolution, facing severe educational disruption and gendered disparity (Treiman, 2013; Hannum, 2005). Distinct from younger grandmothers, their life course combines limited schooling and minimal tech exposure with intensified caregiving demands for the one-child generation. Thus, the age criterion operates as a boundary capturing this specific history of exclusion rather than a mere administrative rule. I define "rural" as residing in villages or hold a rural hukou, typically engaged in farming or informal work and outside the formal pension system.

Recruitment followed purposive and snowball sampling. Initial attempts to contact high-visibility "Douyin grandmothers" (approximately 10K followers) whose profiles indicated no MCN affiliation through direct messaging yielded little response, likely reflecting low online trust and widespread fear of scams among this demographic. I therefore shifted to recruitment through personal networks and snowball referrals, asking early participants to introduce other older women creators in their circles. This strategy enabled access to creators who are difficult to reach and helped diversify the sample beyond the most visible accounts. At the same time, this is an access-based sample: women reachable through networks may have comparatively stronger family support or greater willingness to discuss their online practices. The analysis is written with this limitation in view. At recruitment, participants' follower counts ranged from approximately 300 to 150,000. All names are pseudonyms (Table 1).

Data collection

Between April and August 2024, I conducted 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 participants. Interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and were conducted online via Douyin/WeChat voice/video calls. These apps were already embedded in participants' everyday media use, reducing barriers associated with unfamiliar software and making it easier to fit conversations into care-heavy routines.

Conducting interviews online shaped what could be discussed and how. Many participants lived in multi-generational households where grandchildren were present, and interviews were occasionally interrupted when a child needed attention, moments that themselves illustrated the temporal fragmentation structuring these women's daily lives. Sensitive topics, particularly family disagreements about filming, were sometimes difficult to discuss when others were nearby. In those moments I relied on concrete, event-based prompts ("walk me through the last time you posted a video") and returned to sensitive themes only when participants themselves reopened them. Following established guidance on qualitative online interviewing (Archibald et al., 2019; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), I approached these adaptations as methodologically generative features of the research situation rather than as deficient substitutes for face-to-face interaction.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Participant's ID	Age	Fan number (thousands)	Province	Number of children
Sister Happy	60	150K	Shanxi	2
Ms. Zhou	62	10K	Yunnan	1
Aunt Ma	61	60K	Zhejiang	2
Ms. Sun	63	10K	Chongqing	0
Ms. Wang	60	2K	Jiangsu	2
Aunt Zheng	65	0.7K	Jiangsu	2
Grandma Wu	67	0.3K	Shanghai	1
Ms. Yang	61	1K	Sichuan	1
Sister Chen	65	5K	Jiangsu	2
Ms. Xu	60	0.3K	Jiangsu	2
Grandma Lin	70	0.8K	Jiangsu	1
Ms. Mei	61	0.4K	Jiangsu	1

I used an interview guide covering: personal background and daily life; introduction to Douyin; current Douyin practices; experiences of recognition or feedback; perceived changes in self-image or life since using Douyin; family and community reactions to their online activities; challenges or negative experiences; and their views on what "empowerment" or change Douyin has brought them. I asked probing questions to elicit concrete examples. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent.

Participant observation provided crucial context that interviews alone would have missed. I spent two weeks each with two participants: Sister Happy (60, 150k followers) and Sister Chen (65, 5k followers). The two were selected to maximize contrast between structured, high-visibility creation and ad hoc, constraint-heavy practice. This comparison grounded the analysis of how similar aspirations operate under different support systems. Both consented to domestic observation, allowing two-week immersion to capture everyday rhythms of their labour. Data collection comprised three streams: (1) 738 minutes of video footage capturing technical and performative dimensions, restricted to production sessions to protect family privacy; (2) detailed fieldnotes (37,973 characters) expanding on daily jottings of activities and interruptions; and (3) a daily observation diary (8970 characters) documenting sensitive interactions unsuitable for filming. This multi-modal approach captured both the visible mechanics of filming and the backstage negotiations that sustained it.

Data analysis

I used a qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) approach. Interview transcripts and field notes were uploaded into NVivo 14 for coding. Initial coding categories were informed by the conceptual framework (e.g. instances of resource use, expressions of agency, outcomes/achievements, visibility strategies, family dynamics) as well as inductive reading to capture unexpected themes. Through iterative coding and memo-writing, I identified recurrent patterns and divergences. The analysis focused on how each woman's narrative reflected elements of empowerment (or disempowerment), and how these related to her social position and platform practices. Key themes that emerged form the basis of the Findings section.

Trustworthiness was addressed through member checking and triangulation. Post-interview summaries were shared with participants via messaging to confirm key factual points and invite corrections. During and after the observational visits, I used debrief conversations with the two focal participants to check my interpretation of observed routines and constraints. I ensured the credibility of my interpretations by triangulating between interview self-reports and the ethnographic observations.

Findings

This study reveals that older rural women's digital empowerment on Douyin is not a linear progression from access to outcome, but a fraught and recursive process of negotiation. The conversion of digital participation into meaningful achievements is constrained at each stage of Kabeer's (1999) empowerment chain. The findings are organised into three themes. First, the conversion of digital resources into agency is limited by structural dependencies and social norms. Second, the agency they exercise is strategically constrained, manifesting as a performative practice I term 'calibrated grandmotherhood'. Finally, the achievements they attain are predominantly symbolic, yielding psychological recognition but failing to catalyse material or social transformations.

Limited conversion: from resources to agency

The ability to convert resources into agency emerges as the initial site where empowerment breaks down. Participants' digital participation is embedded within familial hierarchies, gendered

expectations, and structural constraints tied to their rural backgrounds. This section traces the fractures in this conversion process: the motivations drawing these women to seek visibility on Douyin; their dependence on family members for device access and technical instruction; the patriarchal opposition some encountered; the temporal constraints imposed by caregiving duties and rural-urban migration; and the internalised social surveillance disciplining their creative choices.

Before examining these constraints, it is worth asking what draws these women to short video platforms in the first place. Their motivations are neither trivial nor purely recreational. *Ms. Yang* (61), who spends her days cooking for workers at her husband's construction site in Sichuan, put it simply: *"Most videos on Douyin are of beautiful young people. I'm an old woman now, but I also want to see myself looking beautiful."* Sister Chen (65), a former factory worker who never learned to read, described how the platform's beauty filters affect her during the observation: *"Turning on the beauty filter on Douyin makes us look beautiful, which brightens up our mood."* For women whose daily routines centre on domestic labour, the platform offers something their offline lives rarely provide: a chance to see themselves through an aesthetically affirming lens. Beyond self-presentation, participants sought connection. Grandma Wu (67), who migrated from rural Jiangsu to Shanghai to care for her grandchildren, explained: *"If I didn't play on Douyin, I wouldn't know what's happening in the outside world."* Cut off from her home village and unable to communicate easily with Shanghai locals due to dialect differences, she experiences a profound isolation that Douyin partially addresses. These desires for visibility and connection propel these women toward digital participation, making the constraints they encounter all the more consequential.

Access to a smartphone capable of running Douyin was almost always contingent on adult children. This dependency was often framed in the language of filial piety and care, yet it positioned participants as passive recipients rather than independent actors. Sister Chen recounted, *"I used to have a simple phone that couldn't run Douyin. Then my daughter-in-law, seeing I was bored at home, said, 'Mom, I'll buy you a smartphone so you can play on Douyin.'"* Grandma Wu received similar treatment: her daughter-in-law *"downloaded Douyin for me because what else would I do? She told me to try making Douyin videos."* The rhetorical question frames digital participation as a remedy for boredom rather than an autonomous choice, embedding the older woman's access within an economy of gratitude and obligation.

This dependency extends crucially to technical literacy. Lacking formal education and digital exposure, participants relied almost exclusively on family members for instruction. But the knowledge transmitted was functional rather than strategic, sufficient to operate the app, but not to navigate its complexities independently. Several participants linked their limited competence to their rural backgrounds. Aunt Zheng (65) stated, *"I don't post more [videos] because I'm in the countryside… we people in the countryside don't understand these things."* Sister Chen, who is illiterate, explained: *"I'm a country person and never went to school, so I can't read, my daughter-in-law taught me how to use Douyin. She said, 'Mom, just use Douyin, it's simple.'"* Grandma Wu described the limits of what she learned: *"She [daughter-in-law] taught me some basic operations. I still can't handle the more complex ones; I only know how to perform the very simple ones."* Their learning curve was managed and curtailed, preventing movement from supervised participation to confident, autonomous use.

Not all participants received even grudging family support. Some faced outright opposition. Ms. Mei (61) recounted: *"My husband did' t allow me to play at first… I asked my husband to help me download it, but he wouldn't help me. He told me not to play with these things."* Without assistance, she taught herself: *"Later, I just explored on my own… I had no one to help me; I figured it all out on my own, never had any help."* Her story illustrates a form of everyday resistance, but one that requires constant vigilance, perpetuates a sense of illegitimacy, and consumes significant emotional energy. Her husband's attitude toward successful creators reveals a gendered

moral economy: *"Those who really do well on Douyin and make money are the ones who are shameless."* Female visibility, in this view, is associated with impropriety. Sister Happy (60), who eventually amassed over 150,000 followers, initially kept her aspirations secret due to live in a small village. She explained during the observation:

> At that time, I felt that if I told others I had pressure or if I wanted to share anything about livestreaming with others, it would be a joke, they would laugh at me. I was afraid they would mock me, so I didn't share with them.

The fear of mockery shapes participation even before any content is created.

Once online, their capacity for content creation was curtailed by non-negotiable caregiving responsibilities. Grandma Wu described her daily routine in Shanghai:

> My life revolves around my grandson. I wake up, make breakfast, take him to school… After he goes back to school, I have a couple of hours. That's when I scroll through Douyin or make a video. Then it's time to pick him up again.

Her time belongs to her grandson's schedule. But her isolation extends beyond temporal fragmentation: *"They [family members] don't have time to talk with me, they are not at home all day, only coming back late at night. By the time they return around ten o'clock, my granddaughter and I have already had dinner and gone to bed."* Her displacement from rural Jiangsu compounds this isolation: *"I find it hard to communicate with people here in Shanghai due to the language barrier [dialect differences]… I don't understand the locals here; I don't know them."* She contrasted her situation to life back home: *"If I were in my hometown, I could find some part-time work and probably wouldn't have time to scroll through Douyin. But here in Shanghai, there aren't such job opportunities."* Her digital participation emerges not from leisure but from a particular form of displacement.

Ms. Yang (61) described a similar pattern:

> Since my mother-in-law fell ill last year, I've been at home taking care of her and cooking for the kids… when there's nothing much to do, I enjoy making Douyin videos.

These temporal constraints systematically de-prioritise digital pursuits, preventing engagement in time-intensive activities like regular live-streaming or active community management crucial for building a following and achieving monetization.

Furthermore, participants had absorbed a moral economy of ageing prescribing acceptable visibility. Aunt Zheng extended this logic to family reputation: *"At our age, to be criticized so much for a short video, is it worth it? Isn't it tarnishing your children's reputation?"* The moral stakes are not merely personal; a grandmother's "inappropriate" content reflects on her children and grandchildren.

The conversion efficiency from resources to agency remains remarkably low, consistently disrupted by structural dependencies, gendered duties, and social discipline. This leads not to absence of agency altogether, but to its strategic containment, manifesting as a carefully calibrated performance of grandmotherhood.

Calibrated grandmotherhood: constrained agency

Faced with these formidable constraints, participants navigated limitations through a consistent set of strategic behaviors: strictly curating content to align with rural norms, mastering platform mechanisms, and internalising censorship.

Participants overwhelmingly created videos in several "safe" categories: traditional cooking, folk and patriotic songs, nostalgic rural scenes, and harmonious family life. This convergence was not merely preference but strategic reliance on mimesis. Aunt Zheng, who has posted over 175 videos, described her approach: *"I don't really have any new ideas or creations of my own… I*

just shoot ones that look good and have nice beauty effects." She added: *"Those hundred are just imitations of others' work, not my own creations."* Adhering to established templates kept her within familiar, low-risk territory, minimizing cognitive load and social risk.

Within this repertoire, cooking videos served as a primary vehicle for visibility. Participants filmed themselves preparing labour-intensive traditional dishes, hand-pulled noodles, dumplings, pickled vegetables, often in rustic kitchen settings. Aunt Ma (61) explained the logic: *"I just film what I cook every day. People like seeing real rural home cooking, not those fancy restaurant dishes."* This format required no scripted speech and minimised verbal risk, while showcasing domestic competence that reinforced their status as "good" rural women.

Singing videos constituted another major category, allowing participants to revive practices suppressed by decades of agricultural labour. As Ms. Zhou (62) noted, *"I haven't sung in decades. Now living conditions are better, and there's no farming to do. I used to be busy farming all day, no time for hobbies."* Performing folk songs, revolutionary anthems from the Mao era, or popular oldies allowed self-expression that was structurally safe. These songs, often patriotic, nostalgic, and apolitical, carried inherent legitimacy immunizing performers against criticism.

While participants embraced these safe genres, they actively policed the boundaries of "inappropriate" expression. Grandma Lin (70) was explicit about her limits: *"I can't use those bizarre, flashy effects; that would make me a laughing stock."* Ms. Sun (63) similarly noted: *"I don't use those fancy ones with props."* Playful filters were off-limits not for lack of technical ability, but because using them would violate expectations about how a respectable older woman should present herself. Aunt Zheng articulated this boundary most clearly when criticising other older creators:

> Some elderly people make videos about romance, at their age, even their grandchildren could be dating, and they are still talking about romance … Some people's Douyin videos, I just don't like how they present them.

Her disapproval reveals internalized ageist and gendered norms: cooking and family scenes are acceptable; romance is not. These boundaries were internalized and self-policed to preserve their standing as respectable elders.

Within these constraints, some participants developed sophisticated platform strategies. Sister Happy (60), a former shop owner who amassed over 150,000 followers, approached her content with the precision of a market analyst:

> I took the route of promoting positive energy (zheng nengliang), since Douyin is a platform that loves positive energy. That's why they liked the content I produced, making it easier to trend.

Her use of "positive energy", a phrase actively promoted by the Chinese state and favoured by platform content moderation policies, reveals a sophisticated understanding of the platform's logic (Chen et al., 2021). She also developed detailed knowledge of posting mechanics, keeping notes in a small notebook, she explained in detail during participant observation:

> I usually post three videos a day—one around six in the morning, another after 1 PM, and then one in the evening around seven or eight. This is when people are commuting or resting. You have to feed the algorithm consistently.

Yet, even the most successful participants operated within a "glass ceiling" of respectability. Sister Happy's success remained strictly confined to cooking and inspirational messages. When asked about diversifying her content, she cited the ultimate constraint: the fear of being labelled "shameless."

These findings reveal a distinct form of agency that I term "calibrated grandmotherhood." The observed behaviors: mimicking safe genres like cooking and folk singing, rejecting flashy effects, and aligning with positive energy discourse, constitute a strategic performance. This calibration secures visibility not by challenging norms of rural older womanhood, but by conforming to

expectations about how older rural women should appear publicly. Participants exercised genuine agency, but directed inward, focused on policing their digital presence to remain within safe boundaries.

Uneven empowerment: recognition, aspiration, and structural limits

The achievements arising from calibrated agency were unevenly distributed. Douyin delivered genuine psychological recognition and social connection, forms of empowerment carrying independent significance for women long rendered invisible by unacknowledged domestic labour. Participants who sought economic returns, however, encountered substantial barriers.

On a self-perceived psychological level, Douyin offered a powerful antidote to the "crisis of invisibility" (Westwood, 2023) characterising many older women's lives. Sister Chen, who watched her own videos repeatedly during the observation, described the validation: *"I watch my own videos over and over. I think they're quite good, and they get a lot of likes too."* More significantly, this recognition shifted dynamics within her family: *"My son even says, 'Mum, you're really capable.'"* That such praise came from the same family member who had served as gatekeeper of her digital access marks a meaningful shift in household dynamics. This affirms findings that digital platforms can be crucial spaces for identity work in later life (Ng & Indran, 2023). Aunt Zheng described the profound connections through the platform:

> Through singing, I've met people from Hubei and Guizhou, and now we regularly send each other greetings like 'Good morning'. It feels closer than family.

When one such friend noticed her absence during a family illness and sent 300 Yuan (£32) in support, the gesture materialized digital connection into tangible care. For women whose social worlds have contracted around caregiving, such expanded networks represent meaningful reconfiguration of their relational landscape.

Some participants, however, did express interest in economic returns, and their experiences illuminate the specific barriers older rural women face in pursuing monetisation. Ms. Zhou stated: *"I've seen others on Douyin selling products or streaming live. I aspire to do that too… I still want to make money, even though I'm old."* Ms. Mei was equally direct: *"I wanted to learn short video creation because it could bring income."* For these women, the question is what structural conditions made economic conversion particularly difficult.

Educational disadvantage posed one significant obstacle. Sister Chen's illiteracy, a consequence of gendered educational exclusion in 1960s rural China, rendered monetisation systems largely inaccessible: *"I can't read and I don't know how to do any of that. My son and daughter-in-law don't want me getting involved in these activities that require payment."* Her family's protective stance reflects awareness of her vulnerability but also circumscribes her options. This distinguishes older rural women's relationship to monetisation from younger creators who possess literacy and platform fluency.

Furthermore, the scam encounters documented in this study illuminate these dynamics. Predatory actors targeted participants who had expressed economic interest, not merely a desire for visibility. Sister Chen recounted:

> A man contacted me, said he was an agent. He promised my views would reach tens of thousands, that I could become a real star… He kept calling, telling me to get my son to transfer the money for a 'promotion package'.

Ms. Mei's experience with training schemes charging 2,880 yuan followed a similar pattern. Her subsequent disengagement reflected a calculated response to observed failure rates: *"After attending a trial session and hearing how many people, after learning, still struggled to succeed as internet celebrities for months or even years, I was discouraged."* These encounters exploited the

intersection of visibility aspirations and economic hopes that characterised several participants' orientations toward the platform.

Participants also navigated internalised understandings of what economic success would require of them. Aunt Zheng stated: *"I don't want to be a Wanghong, at my age… I neither have the talent nor the capability."* Ms. Yang offered a similar self-assessment: *"Those influencers know how to speak, sing, and dance; I don't have those skills."* Ms. Mei's husband had characterised successful creators as "shameless", framing economic ambition as incompatible with respectable femininity. The calibrated grandmotherhood that enabled platform visibility thus existed in tension with the self-presentation that participants associated with monetisation.

Domestic arrangements, meanwhile, remained largely continuous with pre-platform patterns, and participants themselves actively maintained this continuity. During fieldwork observation, Sister Happy spoke with evident pride about how her content creation had not disrupted her household responsibilities: she continued preparing three meals daily, her creative work occupying only time carved out after completing domestic duties. Her account reveals not resentment but satisfaction in managing both domains successfully. This internalisation of domestic priority resonates with Yu and Cui (2019) observation that women's digital participation does not automatically redistribute household labour.

What emerges is empowerment as multidimensional and unevenly realised. Participants achieved recognition, connection, and enhanced self-regard, outcomes mattering in their own right. Those seeking economic returns faced compounding barriers rooted in educational history, platform predation, and normative constraints on feminine self-presentation.

Discussion

This study proposes calibrated grandmotherhood to capture a distinct form of constrained agency exercised by older rural women on digital platforms. The term refers not to biological status but to a socially prescribed identity: the expectation that older women embody domestic virtue, caregiving devotion, and cheerful self-effacement. This culturally constructed role, which Westwood (2023) terms "grandmotherization," reduces older women to familial functions and renders other modes of public presence suspect. Calibrated grandmotherhood extends this insight by emphasising strategic performance: participants did not merely suffer such reduction but actively inhabited grandmotherly identities because they perceived this as the only viable path to public presence. The concept also builds on Abidin's (2017) calibrated amateurism, which describes how influencers craft content that appears spontaneous while being carefully designed for platform visiblity. However, the conditions differ substantially. Abidin's influencers are typically young, digitally fluent creators calibrating for market appeal with relative freedom to experiment. The women in this study calibrated under severe resource constraints, orienting toward basic recognition without social sanction rather than commercial optimisation.

The calibration pressures participants faced emerged from the intersection of rurality, age, and gender operating simultaneously rather than as isolated factors. The findings documented how rural surveillance dynamics, life-course disadvantages rooted in educational disruption, and gendered caregiving expectations combined to constrain not only what content participants could produce but what they could imagine producing. Chinese scholarship notes that successful older creators typically require family support or MCN backing (Cao & Wang, 2024; Wang & Ming, 2024). Du and Ma (2023) similarly observe that the emergence of silver-haired influencers, while creating opportunities for social participation, also exposes older adults to new risk factors including online fraud and privacy violations. For older rural women lacking such institutional buffers, self-reliant participation meant direct exposure to both community judgment and platform predation. What the present study adds is attention to how these constraints become internalised:

participants framed structural barriers as personal deficits, describing themselves as lacking talent or capability rather than as facing systemic disadvantage.

These intersecting constraints converged with platform governance in a particular way. The positive energy content preferences documented in prior research (cf. Chen et al., 2021; Wang & Lin, 2025) aligned with local expectations of respectable femininity. Platform algorithms and village moral economies thus jointly rewarded the same grandmother persona: cheerful, domestic, family-devoted. This alignment narrowed the field of viable self-presentation. Participants' content reproduced domestic role expectations not only offline but online, presenting household labour as aspirational content. Prior research has shown that rural women's digital economic participation does not automatically translate into household decision-making power (Yu & Cui, 2019). The present findings suggest an additional dynamic: the platform may aestheticise domestic work in ways that reinforce rather than challenge gendered expectations. For multiply marginalised women, strategic deployment of positive energy themes may function less as choice among options than as the primary path where recognition remains possible.

This pattern illuminates a tension within empowerment frameworks. Kabeer (2005) distinguishes effective agency from transformative agency. The findings suggest these forms may exist in a trade-off relationship under certain structural conditions: when visibility requires performing the good grandmother, success within that frame can deepen investment in that identity and raise the costs of departure. Effective agency may thereby come at the expense of transformative agency, not as absolute opposition, but as a configuration where pursuing one may diminish resources for the other. Participants gained genuine recognition, countering the crisis of invisibility Westwood (2023) documents. Yet the recognition achieved was for conforming to expectations, not challenging them. The modest shifts participants experienced, such as familial respect, online friendships, were meaningful but did not alter fundamental conditions of their lives.

This pattern resonates with Cao's (2025) concept of superficial empowerment, wherein platform engagement yields emotional satisfaction without altering underlying structural constraints. It also contributes to third-level digital divide scholarship. The findings suggest one mechanism through which conversion inequality may operate: not only through differential access to resources and skills, as prior research has emphasised, but through the forms of agency that structural conditions make available. When the primary path to visibility requires performing restrictive identities, empowerment may become self-limiting.

Conclusion

This study identifies conditions under which effective and transformative agency may exist in tension rather than sequence. For digital inclusion research, it suggests caution in equating participation with empowerment when participation conditions channel efforts into forms that may reproduce marginalisation. Practically, these findings point to the need for digital literacy programmes that incorporate critical platform literacy, enabling older rural populations to recognise predatory schemes and navigate algorithmic logics, and for policymakers to attend to how caregiving burdens and insufficient rural childcare provision constrain women's capacity for sustained digital participation. Limitations include a sample likely representing women with supportive family circumstances and a cross-sectional design that precludes analysis of how empowerment processes evolve over time, and a geographic concentration in eastern provinces that limits generalisability. Future research might examine whether institutional protections can expand the range of agency available to marginalised older creators, and whether these dynamics operate differently across platform contexts or evolve as creators accumulate experience.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Dr. Joe Jackson for giving insightful suggestions on the manuscript.

Disclosure statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Funding

This research received no funding from external sources.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the author, [Y.W].

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