



Cooptation, hijacking, or normalization? The discursive concession of body politics on Douyin

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Abstract

The short-video platform TikTok/Douyin becomes a space not only for individuals to express and articulate their interests, but also for the authorities to negotiate with the public on various ideological boundaries. This article specifically examines a Douyin campaign in which the platform attempts to prescribe a standard of body exposure that falls within the tolerance level of the authorities and, meanwhile, favours users' interests to gain support. To conceptualize such discursive negotiations and the relevant tactics, we propose the term 'discursive concession' to describe the process of compromise by temporarily challenging, obscuring, and rearticulating the discursive boundary, eventually legitimizing the subordinated discourse by aligning it with the dominant ideological logic. By analysing discourses of representative short videos and comments, we identified three tactics of discursive concession: cooptation, hijacking, and normalization. They respectively describe how dominant, subordinated, and middle powers leverage each other to push the discursive boundary forward.

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Introduction

The short-video platform TikTok/Douyin is not only a space where individuals express and articulate their interests. As a site of hegemonic formation, it has also been a space for the authorities to negotiate with the public on various ideological boundaries. The authorities, along with some powerful organizations, tended to uphold mainstream ideological discourses, while certain groups of individuals, consciously or unconsciously, exercised resistance to challenge dominant ideology or at least to negotiate limits, which constantly produced new and vibrant tactics for practices of discursive dominance, resistance, and negotiations. These tactics are essential for understanding how individuals challenge the authorities and broaden the ideological boundaries in the digital era.

Over the last decades, digital media scholars have made theoretical advancements and conceptual innovations in understanding the cultural politics of media and digital platforms. In the early Web 2.0 era from the 1990s to the 2000s, several new concepts that celebrate the empowerment of audiences and users were developed, including participatory culture, prosumptions or produsage, user-generated content, grassroots movements (Bruns, 2008; Deuze, 2007; Jenkins, 2012). On the other hand, studies during the last decade reconsidered user agency and platform power, pointing out the contingent nature of cultural production and commodity in relation to the platform affordances and nation-state policies (Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Van Dijck, 2009). Nevertheless, most studies shed light on either the dominance of platforms and the authorities or the resistance and agency of individual users. The research is inadequate in drawing clear and diverse contours of the grey area between the two, that is, the more non-contentious, implicit, and tacit negotiation processes between individuals and platforms, or between individuals and the authorities through the platforms (e.g. Darvin, 2022; Poell et al., 2023; Wu, 2018). How do we describe, understand, and conceptualize the specific texture, mechanism, and tactics of such discursive negotiations? To understand this question, we need to trace back to and hold a dialogue with the more classic and fundamental theoretical works in cultural studies, revisiting the works by Hall, Laclau, and Gramsci.

Beyond this dualism of domination and opposition, hegemony and resistance, resonance and dissonance rooted in the British cultural studies tradition (Smith, 2001), discursive negotiation is often seen as the third or middle status that bridges the two sides (e.g. Stuart Hall's canonical trilogy of dominant, oppositional, and negotiated readings; Hall, 2018). Negotiation is vital for understanding the dynamics of people's coping, struggle, and survival (Du Gay et al., 2013). Hall (2018: 940) explained negotiation by stating that cultural practices of negotiation 'embody neither the prevalence of a dominant set of cultural values and meanings nor a fully oppositional content but a kind of compromise, where certain popular elements are inserted into certain dominant elements'. In this statement, compromise was highlighted as one important means of negotiation, crystallized

through the fusion between popular and dominant elements. We reclaim the vitality of ‘compromise’ in understanding people’s everyday coping and survival (probably even more mundane than ‘everyday resistance’, coined by Scott, 1985), especially for those living in social conditions where social and individual resistances and defiance are less mobilized, explicit, and visible in contentious politics or public spaces. Nevertheless, how can popular elements be inserted into dominant elements? Who inserted these cultural elements? Why can this be allowed to happen? The specific mechanism of compromise in the negotiation process remained largely untheorized. Existing research on cultural appropriation, cooptation, and cultural poaching may make specific contributions, but they are limited in their own conceptualization and theoretical contexts (Baer, 2016; Kleinhans, 1994; Rogers, 2006).

To better map out the grey areas between dominance and resistance, this article aims to advance the theoretical understanding of the complex process of discursive negotiation in the form of compromise by conceptualizing what we call ‘discursive concession’. In line with Stuart Hall, we will sketch and develop our conceptualization based on the theoretical works of Gramsci and Laclau. Their works are vital because Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony and common sense informed the theoretical base for individuals to articulate their interests and challenge the authorities, while Laclau’s concepts particularly explicate how individuals used more complex and dynamic tactics (including both successful and unsuccessful ones) for articulation – the practice of discourses to bring about possible social changes. Besides, in the context of China, common sense plays an important role in the daily norms from a cultural perspective, given that most negotiations take place within the larger socio-political hegemonic order in the country (Caterina, 2021). Thus, it serves as a pertinent case to explore the dynamics of discursive negotiation and develop a new understanding of what can be called discursive concession.

Next, we will explain this concept by applying it to a contemporary case of the body politics struggle on the digital platform. Specifically, we focus on the Chinese short-video platform Douyin’s ‘censorship rule co-creation’ campaign. The platform attempted to prescribe a standard of body exposure that would avoid trespassing on the political standard of the authorities and favour the platform and users’ interests. By analysing discourses of representative short videos and comments, we articulate three tactics of discursive concession: cooptation, normalization, and hijacking. These tactics are used by individuals, organizations, and the authorities to challenge, obscure, and rearticulate existing discursive boundaries temporarily.

Conceptualizing ‘discursive concession’

We propose using the word ‘concession’ instead of ‘compromise’ because the former is more closely associated with contentious political negotiation for the sake of one’s own interests (Eschmann et al., 2021; Rasler, 1996). Concession-making in an argument can be defined as the partial or complete acceptance of the discussant’s claims or positions by one party as the result of ‘a change in one party’s felt beliefs’ or merely ‘the provisional acceptance, or at least suspension of rejection, of a discussant’s argumentative claims’ (Eschmann et al., 2021: 2). The term ‘concession’ has also been used in organizational behaviour studies, persuasion and acceptance studies, and interpersonal communication

studies (Johnson & Cooper, 2009). Nevertheless, in the theoretical context of cultural studies, this study does not see concession only as an argumentative action but also as a discursive practice. Thus, to better describe the phenomenon, we develop the notion of 'discursive concession'. By the term 'discursive concession', we mean a process of compromise by obscuring and rearticulating the discursive boundary, which eventually permits or legitimizes the subordinated discourse by aligning it with the dominant ideological logic.

The purpose of *discursive* concession is specific: reproducing social meanings of discourse (e.g. ideologies) through the redistribution and reinterpretation of certain texts (Fairclough, 1993: 28). From this view, concession can be further understood from the perspective of its second meaning of 'a special right to property' (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2023). This meaning implies the expected outcome of the discursive concession process: a special right to use new discourse could be permitted as temporarily legitimate after a compromise is reached by multiple parties. To explicate the meaning-making tactics of discursive concession, in line with the British cultural studies tradition, we ground our understanding of the phenomenon of concession on the concepts of common sense and discursive articulation derived from Gramsci and Laclau. In the context of body politics on Douyin, we look at how the Douyin platform, together with the public users, negotiates with the authorities for a more liberal discourse on sexuality in relation to body exposure. The relevant common sense was negotiated and discursively rearticulated to achieve a trade-off of their respective political, economic, and cultural interests.

Rearticulation of common sense

Social meanings can be understood through the notion of 'common sense' from the Gramscian perspective, which refers to 'the incoherent set of generally held assumptions and beliefs common to any society' (Gramsci, 1980: 323). By incoherence, Gramsci means the heterogeneity of those beliefs people arrive at not through critical reflection but through accepting existent 'truths', and these beliefs form an ideological construct accepted by the whole society (Crehan, 2016). In this sense, common sense can be viewed as the outcome of the hegemonic power of the ruling class, and through the development of common sense into 'consensus' between the rulers and the ruled, civil society could be established (Smith, 2001). Based on his criticism of reductionist and automatic Marxism, Gramsci acknowledged the agency of individuals in making social changes (Hawley, 1980) through the endlessly unfolding 'war of position' in which the submissive class attempts to 'outmanoeuvre' the hegemonic forces of the dominant class on political and cultural issues (Smith, 2001: 40). Therefore, tactics of negotiating with hegemonic power were highlighted in this process.

To develop the tactics for outmanoeuvring hegemony, the articulation theory from Laclau and Mouffe (2001) was highly pertinent, since they further developed and modernized Gramscian views about possible social changes through the practices of discourses. They defined discourse as 'the structured totality resulting from this articulatory practice' (2001: 105), highlighting the role of meaning articulation and arguing for discourse's hegemonic ambition. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001:

112), 'any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre'. They propose the tactics of discursive replacement by means of articulation and rearticulation to challenge and subvert dominant meaning and strive for the desired new discourses. Thus, rearticulating common sense could be a compelling narrative technique to challenge existing hegemonic social meanings.

Based on the theoretical stance of Gramsci and Laclau, we aim to conceptualize discursive concession by identifying relevant tactics used by each party to renegotiate the discourses. Through the constantly recursive process of inductive case analysis of the body politics struggle on Douyin and deductive theoretical reflection, we explored and constructed a typology of three tactics: cooptation, hijacking, and normalization. Cooptation has had a rich theoretical foundation. Hijacking is a new term we proposed by revising the existing concept of 'poaching'. Cooptation and hijacking are counterparts, while normalization is identified inductively by us as a mix of cooptation and hijacking. Next, we unpack some theoretical reflections concerning the tension between cooptation and hijacking before moving on to the inductive identification of normalization and examinations of these three tactics in the case study of a Douyin campaign related to body politics.

Cooptation or hijacking?

Cooptation (also co-option, coopting) has been a relatively established concept to study negotiation in cultural studies (Baer, 2016; Kleinhans, 1994). Rooted in sociology and political studies, cooptation often refers to how the authorities manage oppositional power by offering them specific formal or informal power (Selznick, 1953). It was often associated with the dominant culture's appropriation of subcultures (Kleinhans, 1994). Nevertheless, cultural appropriation has been widely criticized for misleadingly emphasizing the theft or unauthorized use of cultural elements. Therefore, Rogers (2006) reconceptualized and expanded cultural appropriations by introducing four different subtypes, including not only cultural exploitation and dominance that revealed suppression and asymmetries, but also cultural exchange and transculturation, which highlight either reciprocity or a more complex hybridity of two cultures that may involve the other three subtypes. In most cases, cooptation is associated with cultural exploitation because it highlights the critical role of dominant power in appropriating the subordinated power for its own interests.

On the other hand, Rogers (2006: 477) also attempts to recognize the agency of subordinated peoples by coining the term 'cultural resistance' and locating it under the conditions of cultural dominance. He suggests that cultural resistance can explicate how people 'appropriate dominant cultural elements for resistive ends' through various 'appropriative tactics'. One specific tactic of cultural resistance is 'cultural poaching', a term coined by de Certeau (2014). This evocative metaphor describes how ordinary people may re-use, reappropriate, and even re-invent certain texts through tactics such as wandering and improvisation (e.g. fans' reading of media texts for their own purposes; Jenkins, 2012). Nevertheless, this form of resistance is often unauthorized and secretive, carried on with no expectation of a direct response from the authorities and original texts

(de Certeau, 2014), in the way nomads might poach their way across lands that belong to others (Jenkins, 2012). Nevertheless, moving from the condition of resistance to negotiation, we argue that discursive concessions can be reached whereby the dominant class also participates in and responds to the rearticulation of certain common senses. To forestall misunderstandings, this does not deny the agency of the subordinated peoples. Instead, we regard this as a tactic of subordinated agents to bring the dominant class or authorities to the negotiating table and foster compromise between them.

Therefore, instead of poaching, this study proposes another evocative metaphor – ‘hijacking’ – as one strategy of discursive concession that belongs to ordinary or subordinated people. By hijacking, we aim to describe how the subordinated power outmanoeuvres and leverages the dominant discourse to rearticulate, justify, and legitimize their subordinated discourse in the public realm for their own purpose. Instead of secretly walking across the field of the dominant power without their authorization, hijackers ride on a vehicle that belongs to the dominant power but drive it in another direction. This vehicle will pass the border check if the authorities’ guards can be convinced that the vehicle represents the dominant ideology. Nevertheless, it may also encounter a certain degree of risk of being detected and rejected when the authorities’ guards cannot be convinced. By contrast, in cooptation, the dominant class or authorities often expropriate the ‘private vehicles’ of subordinated discourse for a ‘higher principle’ purpose, which legitimizes the injection of popular elements into dominant elements by the dominant power themselves. In addition, between cooptation and hijacking, a middle-status strategy is later identified as a mix between the two, which we call ‘normalization’. This strategy is often used by groups with more power than ordinary people but less power than the dominant class or authorities, and they can justify their rearticulations through the normalization of discourses. We will situate, examine, and further conceptualize these tactics through the case analysis of body politics struggle on the short-video platform Douyin.

The case of body politics on Douyin

Body politics on social media platforms has been crucial in contemporary cultural studies. The display of bodies and sexuality in the public realm of cyberspace has been articulated controversially as either seductive sexual media content or sacred self-representation of identity (Baer, 2016; Dobson, 2016; Olszanowski, 2014). A famous case is Facebook’s ban on the iconic image of ‘Napalm Girl’, which is a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph that recorded a Vietnamese girl running away naked from an attack during the Vietnamese war, in which ‘Facebook through its “technological gaze” dislodged the Napalm Girl from the sacred and reconfigured her through the corporeal, crudely associating her with the prurient and pornographic’ (Ibrahim, 2017: 1). Through the idea of the technological gaze, Ibrahim revealed the power of platform censorship in shaping public ethics and memories. This incident ended with Facebook’s restoration of the image after a public outcry, which manifested the agency of audiences and users in negotiating the norms of body exposure with social media platforms. Besides the public confrontation in body politics, in many other cases, individuals showed various means of resistance toward the platform. Ritland (2018) studied posts of breastfeeding

on Instagram to exemplify the practice of feminist motherhood promotion. It suggests the exposure of the female nipples in breastfeeding is not related to eroticism for the male gaze, but the pleasure of sharing the beauty of motherhood. Olszanowski (2014) studied some tactics used by feminist Instagram users to circumvent platform censorship, such as creating private accounts, obscuring the body, and timely deletion of posts. Gerrard (2020) summarized six opportunities for feminist intervention on rules for content moderation made and enforced by social media platforms, including policies, community guidelines, flagging, restrictions of partial content, and human/automated content moderation. Such studies revealed the dynamic tensions of negotiating the social meanings of body exposure among multiple parties, such as the authorities, the platform, and users as prosumers. With the fast-changing ecology of user-generated content, from pictures to short videos on social media, short-video platforms like TikTok/Douyin have become the new site of struggle for body politics (Fu et al., 2024). As such, platforms are notable for their algorithm-moderated contents through 'For You' page recommendations, which are key to their business model (Ma & Hu, 2021). With few strong-tie connections compared to Instagram, Facebook and traditional social media, the power of platforms is overwhelmingly significant in shaping discourses through practices such as the shadow banning of contents (Are, 2022) or the threat of invisibility (Bucher, 2012; Tintiangko et al., 2023) based on the opacity of the algorithm.

This article attempts to elucidate a case from the Chinese short-video social media platform Douyin (the sister app of TikTok in China), in which the platform prescribes a new norm of body politics against the background of a tightening moral control on the part of the authorities. From 21 to 27 June 2021, Douyin launched a seven-day campaign named 'a rule co-creation meeting' with the slogan 'exposure of positive energy' (see Figure 1). Rule co-creation here means that the platform invites users to co-create the censorship principle for sexual body exposure content, and positive energy is a state propaganda slogan that emphasizes the alignment between individual attitudes and state ideology and values (Chen et al., 2021). Despite many news reports, this campaign was relatively small-scale as only ten videos related to the campaign were eventually found. Nevertheless, as most videos were posted by influencers who had millions of followers, the number of likes ($N = 681,000$) and comments ($N = 25,000$) these ten videos attracted from audiences remained notable.

A platform opinion?

Giving the public an image of an open and liberal platform, the head of Douyin's security centre, Huang Hai, remarked in June 2021, 'Not all naked body parts or body exposure is forbidden on Douyin. The platform censorship will refer to the circumstances and occasions where a figure is shown, such as art performances, bodybuilding performances, and so forth' (NetEase Technology, 2021). This argument was presented as a 'platform opinion', which laid the foundation for the campaign. In practice, this campaign claimed to collect users' feedback regarding a few promotional videos about body exposure. Through this seemingly democratizing process that invited users' opinions and allowed their participation in constructing the new norm, Douyin expected to form a new consensual agreement with users on the discourse of body and sexuality. In a



Figure 1. The main page of the rule co-creation meeting launched by Douyin (the translation is on the right side)

way, it also set a cultural or moral limit or threshold for users to demonstrate their bodies and sexuality. Users could participate in the campaign as video creators by posting their videos with a hashtag named ‘I want to talk about rules (*wo dui gui ze you hua shuo*)’ and @Douyin Security Centre, or create comments under these videos as viewers. These videos and their comments can be regarded as testing grounds for this ‘platform opinion’ and negotiations among the authorities, platforms, video creators, and audiences.

The dominant discourse and subordinated discourse in the context of this campaign can respectively refer to ‘positive energy’ and ‘vulgarity’ of body exposure. Chen et al. (2021) suggest that Douyin has been questioned about the moral problem of spreading ‘vulgarity’ as the antithesis of ‘positive energy’. ‘Vulgarity’ (*disu*) in Chinese literally means low and mundane content, which can be paralleled with the classic notion of low culture in association with commercial exploitation of sexual attractiveness in media products (Chq & Hunt, 2013), in contrast to high culture, such as elegant high art. Chen et al. (2021) contextualize high culture as ‘positive energy’ (*zhengnengliang*) in China, which was a term promoted by the state in recent years as a grassroots phrase for ideological propaganda. Chen et al. (2021) used the term ‘playful patriotism’ to describe the phenomenon in which Douyin

attempts to pitch this state ideology by facilitating the government's official accounts that propagate contents of 'positive energy' through strategic algorithmic curation and tight content monitoring. In other words, avoiding overt and blunt support of the state, Douyin tends to camouflage its subservience by appealing to the positive energy of society, using a soft approach to synchronizing with state ideology. In other words, being a rising platform used by many young people, Douyin wants to facilitate a more open and liberal environment; at the same time, as a platform under state surveillance, particularly by the Cyberspace Administration of China, it has to comply with national regulation and control (Tang et al., 2021).

In Douyin's campaign for a 'rule co-creation meeting' under the slogan of 'exposure of positive energy', the platform defined 'positive energy' in a broader sense, instead of an explicit articulation of 'playful patriotism'. Given the abstractness of the notion of 'positive energy', its meaning is framed within the political field as well as a broader socio-cultural context. As shown on the platform campaign information page, positive energy is constituted by four traits: bravery, healthiness, artistry, and elegance. These traits can be associated with various activities and occasions such as gym, sports, dancing, and so forth. These four traits link 'positive energy' with wider, more daily, and mundane occasions and circumstances, offering more room for negotiating the social meanings of body exposure.

To reduce the tension between 'positive energy' and 'vulgarity', the platform played an important role in bridging the dominant and subordinated discourse. In the power relations of multiple parties engaged in this negotiation, we see the platform as the power in the middle – between the authorities and individual users from the conceptual perspective of platform contingency. Nieborg and Poell (2018) suggest that users' production of cultural commodities is contingent on the platforms and their constantly changing affordances. Lin and de Kloet (2019) further supplemented that digital platforms are also highly contingent on state–platform relations, especially in a social context like China. In this sense, as the middle power, the platform was coopting and hijacking simultaneously. It hijacked the dominant discourse of positive energy used by the authorities on the one hand; and coopted the popular discourse of body exposure used by the subordinated individual users on the other. To integrate these two discourses, and so they would resonate, Douyin constructed a middle ground by secularizing positive energy and gentrifying sexual body exposure at the same time. Particularly, it aimed to depoliticize the discourse of positive energy by diluting and further dividing it into four more secular but still socially positive scenarios (bravery, healthiness, artistry, and elegance), and, meanwhile, to justify the presence of sexual body exposure by redirecting its purpose from vulgarity towards more socially recognized or at least tolerated values. As such, we identified that the platform was leveraging a third strategy, as the mixer of cooptation and hijacking, namely normalization. By coopting the subordinated discourse and hijacking the dominant discourse simultaneously, the middle power aims to establish a discursive concession with the dominant and subordinated powers by normalizing the discourse in a mundane and socially acceptable sense, pushing for a wider discursive boundary of body politics on the Chinese internet thereafter, thus creating a more liberal discourse for sexuality while surviving the state censorship.

So far, we have sketched a typology of three tactics of discursive concession, namely cooptation, hijacking, and normalization. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how other parties (the authorities and individual users, as both producers and audiences) engage in this negotiation and what tactics (e.g. cooptation, hijacking, or normalization) they may use to rearticulate meanings while making certain concessions. In order to do so, the data of representative video content and users' comments on Douyin must be analysed further.

Method

To study users' negotiations with Douyin on the issue of sexual content regarding body exposure in this campaign, we scrutinized the practices of users incorporating both the short-video creators and viewers. The campaign organizer of the Douyin platform required participants to follow the formats of the hashtag 'I want to talk about rules (*wo dui gui ze you hua shuo*)' and @Douyin Security Centre in video descriptions. There are ten available videos that comply with this standard. Among these ten, we selected five of the most popular videos that participated in this campaign and the most liked comments under each video for discourse analysis from Gramsci and Laclau's theoretical perspectives to examine and further conceptualize 'discursive concessions' and related tactics (see Appendix). The comments reflect audiences' responses to the 'platform opinion' and tactics used by the video creators. In light of the online linguistic context, we also preserved and included the uses of emojis in the representative comments shown in this article, which were shown in square brackets '[]'.

Analysis of campaign videos

In the following analysis, three tactics have been further verified, examined and conceptualized within the specific cases of selected videos and comments. Table 1 summarizes our analysis and final conceptualizations.

Cooptation for the public good

Two videos of half-naked firemen can be used to illustrate the strategy of cooptation adopted by Douyin accounts that represent the authorities. Both were 9-second videos released by the Fire Department in Taiyuan City, about 500 km from the capital city of Beijing. In the first video, a half-naked young fireman with unblemished skin and carrying an axe, suddenly became fully equipped and headed to the fire engine. The scene started with a filter, which simulates camera focus adjustment from a blurred to a clear scene, in which the fireman's muscular body shape, his nipples exposed not covered by his suspenders, came into view. The sound of the alarm was the turning point between the initial slow rhythm and the latter tense rhythm. The video title text literally reads, 'Quick, move with the alarm, without any fear.' Similarly, the second video showed three half-naked firemen sitting on the fire engine, who suddenly become fully

Table 1. Summary of three tactics in discursive concession.

Tactics	Cooptation	Hijacking	Normalization
Power relations	High – authority voice	Low – mundane voice	Middle – professional voice
Cases	Firemen	A female influencer	Sports
Framed Purpose	Public good	Private interests	Normal or professional activities
Explanations	Authority justified body exposure through high principle of public good	Individuals justified body exposure through public interests, but encountered questioning	Organizations or individuals justified body exposure through normal or professional activities
Concession	Sexual cues	Political cues	Sexual cues and political cues

equipped and run ahead, with the same scenario and background music. The video title text reads, ‘Alarm is the command, go!’

In the comments, we found the majority of viewers labelled themselves as young females who expressed their gratification on seeing the sexualized bodies of the firemen. Some representative comments included: ‘this ... abdominal ... baby ... flushed ...’, ‘suspenders ... too sexy [covering face]’, ‘Oh my god, is this a video I can watch for free? [crying]’, and ‘Hello 119 (Fire Service telephone number in China), my heart was on fire [fire], and I need you guys to help me solve it, and also help me get my mind back [crying laughter]’. By the keywords of ‘abdominal’, ‘suspenders’ and the emoji use, we could tell their strong liking for the firemen’s body shapes. Some other comments also implied their wishes to have a relationship or get married to the firemen in the video. In comparison, the number of comments that stressed positive energy was only about half. People expressed their gratitude for the firemen’s work and cared about their safety posting messages such as ‘salute to all people who dedicate themselves to our home country. Thank you for letting us have a peaceful life.’

In these two videos, the producer justified the discourse of body exposure not as low, vulgar content but as both common sense and positive energy. First, in the analysis of the firemen, we have to say that there is a general commonsensical understanding that firemen work in scorching environments and taking off their clothes or being half-naked would not be particularly awkward for viewers. First of all, it is a need for this special job. In a second- or third-tier city, it is also not uncommon for people to witness half-naked labour in hot weather. Second, firemen were framed as the symbol of positive energy by articulating their ‘bravery’, such as their determination and their actions in setting off to combat fire. More importantly, as firemen belong to the bureaucratic system and serve the public good, the purpose framed in these videos indicates the high principle of national ideology and public interests.

As a result, the local Fire Services Department, as part of the state authorities, successfully coopted the sexual discourse of body exposure for its own propaganda. Admittedly, the department conceded on the boundary by relying on sexual cues to attract audiences. In response, more audiences still read the message mainly as sexual discourse. Adding the

popular elements of body exposure helps to achieve the expected outcome of the propaganda to a certain degree, by attaining high visibility and public acceptability compared to traditional propaganda, going along with the trend of increasing ideological propaganda through entertainment content, namely 'ideotainment', on the contemporary Chinese internet (Lagerkvist, 2008; Zou, 2019). Nevertheless, it does not mean that cooptation bears no risk. In fact, as existing literature on cultural appropriation suggests, the cooptation of subordinated culture by the dominant culture can easily be perceived as a form of cultural exploitation (Rogers, 2006). Therefore, to achieve public acceptance and alignment with high principles, such as public interests, was vital for the authorities-related party to justify their cooptation. The authorities could also justify the 'standard' of body exposure as the campaign's overall effect could be seen as a more effective technique to sway the public – a much more powerful way than the top-down propaganda model in public campaigns. At the same time, it temporarily creates a narrow space for private organizations and individuals to negotiate with the authorities for wider ideological boundaries. The latter learn to mimic the same tactics – as in the strategy of hijacking and normalization – in pushing against ideological limits.

Hijacking for private interests?

Ziran was an individual young female influencer with 8 million followers (as at November 2022). On her main page, a large proportion videos entail body exposure with some implicit sexual cues. Belonging to a commercial organization instead of a public institution, she participated in negotiating the social meanings of body exposure through the strategy of hijacking. By hijacking the discourse of the platform campaign, she posted her campaign video to promote a new 'platform opinion'.

In her campaign video, the title text was translated as, 'Let me guess, you like to watch this?' In her video, the camera captured her hip shaped by a crop top and jeans at the beginning, with the same filter of simulated camera focus. When she turns around and sees the camera, she is suddenly irritated and yells, 'Still watching?', then immediately wraps herself in a long coat. Afterwards, she introduces the campaign and 'platform opinion' by saying:

Douyin creators, pay attention. The key point for the platform to judge vulgarity is whether [people] wear the correct and appropriate clothes on the correct occasions and do positive things. For those deliberate exposures for eye-catching and clickbait attention or vulgar and eyesore content,¹ the platform will punish you instead of others. Click the lower left button now and expose positive energy with me!

In comments, 11 of 20 still showed their affection for Ziran's beauty and their focus on her sexual body exposure, while 5 comments denoted their objections or questioning through cynicism: 'Appropriate dressing on appropriate occasions? People's own homes should be appropriate occasions, right? There are so many people doing live streaming from home. Then, in such hot weather, only wearing shorts at home should also be appropriate, right? [doge].' The doge emoji here further extends the sarcasm of this comment. Similarly, another short comment, 'When to bath?', implied that the

appropriate dressing style for the circumstance of bathing should be nude. These comments questioned the ‘platform opinion’ through mockery, by presenting plausible practices that seemingly comply with the new rule but still could incorporate vulgar discourse of the body. Meanwhile, some comments also questioned the creator, Ziran, suggesting that this video also contained vulgar elements, as her body might be deliberately sexualized in the beginning. For example, one ironic comment read, ‘The thief calls for catching the thief?’, implying that this user deemed Ziran to be a rule breaker who is advocating for obeying the rules.

Overall, Ziran conceded by hijacking the political discourse of the platform and state, through her participation in the campaign and her promotion of the platform opinion incorporating the ideological notion of ‘positive energy’. To justify her body exposure in the video, she created a scenario of being a victim of the male gaze. She is irritated by the simulated gaze from the camera and uses the long coat to protect herself from exposing her body. By showing her rejection of vulgar body exposure content, and accusing some video creators of producing deliberate body exposure for eye-catching and clickbait attention, she expressed her strong support for the platform opinion and dominant discourse of positive energy. The hijacking here is twofold. The platform first hijacked the authorities’ vehicle, which goes by the name of ‘positive energy’, while Ziran then hijacked the platform’s vehicle, named ‘platform opinion’. Nevertheless, audiences challenged the platform’s opinion by raising counter-examples, distorting the rules, or ironic contributions. These comments reflected some audience dissonance with the justification by the platform, and Ziran, for hijacking the dominant discourse. Instead of seeing body exposure as a form of positive energy, these audiences insisted on the sexuality of body exposure. Moreover, audiences questioned the genuineness of Ziran’s purpose, since she has often monetized her body exposure in her other videos, which shows the risk of being detected and rejected during the hijacking. They questioned whether the destination of this hijacker was not truly the public interest but still private interests. For private organizations and individuals, how can one’s purpose be justified without the support of public institutions associated with public interests? We may find an insight into the exercise of the third strategy through the case of sports professionals who justify the purpose of body exposure by normalizing such exposure in sports activities.

Normalization for professional activities

A large proportion of videos that participated in the campaign were on the theme of sports or related activities, such as martial arts, dancing competitions, and gym exercises. Sports are associated with several traits of positive energy defined by Douyin – healthiness, bravery, and even artistry. We will present two cases here, a famous martial arts athlete Zhang Weili and a dancing club named Jiacheng.

In the case of Zhang Weili, most comments expressed their affection for Zhang Weili as a great athlete in the martial arts field. Zhang Weili belongs to a non-governmental organization named Black Tiger Fight Club, and she has been the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) Women’s Strawweight World Champion twice, in 2020 and

2022. Given her achievements and fame, this video received the most likes among all the campaign videos, reaching a total of 293,000. Her video showed several photos of her muscles, mixing her training suit and UFC uniform. The video ended when she showed up and said, 'Click the lower left corner (the like button) and join me with Douyin to expose positive energy'. This was followed by a description text translated as 'Together expose positive energy!' The three most liked comments all highlighted Zhang Weili's achievement by remarking, 'You are the best', 'I got to know UFC because of you [crying emoji]' and 'looking forward to your second fight'. Moreover, among her comments, we also noticed a few stressing her contribution to the nation. The fourth most popular comment, which attracted 292 likes, said, 'Win or Lose is a common thing for a warrior! Whether we win or lose, Weili is a true hero in Chinese people's minds forever! [like][like][like] Think of the honour Weili earned for Chinese people on 8 March last year during the pandemic [heart] [heart] [heart] [rose] [rose] [rose] Trollers really need to stop trolling.' As the first Chinese and Asian who had achieved this, she was seen as a new symbol of national pride.

Another example of professional sports came from a video posted by Guangzhou Jiacheng Dancing Centre, a local club that nourishes international standard dancers for 'dancesport competitions'. This video presents a ballroom dance by two professional dancers. In contrast to viewers' perception of bravery in martial arts, viewers of dancesport perceived more elegance and artistry. Some representative comments for this video were 'really like the dancing dress, the dress for the competition is so dazzling', 'Really like the enjoyment on their face during the competition! [crying]', 'Cannot think of any fancy words, just wanna say, really pretty!' Other comments also praised the dancers' elegance, the beauty of the dresses, and appreciation of this sport. While there was some discussion about the brownness of the female dancer's arm and the whiteness of her hands, no viewers paid attention to the sexual elements of their bodies. The only comment mentioning the naked part (i.e., dancer's shoulders, back, and legs) was a defensive explanation that justified the shortness of the dancesport dress.

These two cases illustrate how body exposure can be justified through normalization. Body exposure can be seen as normal here because of the professional sports setting and context. Despite having the support of the authorities, sports experts can differentiate themselves from the mundane voice of ordinary people like Ziran by establishing their professional voice in the field, a roughly medium power in the overall power relations for negotiation. They made their concession through incorporating both the dominant and subordinated discourses. Unlike Ziran's short repetition of the platform opinion, these two producers hijacked the dominant discourse by engaging deeply with the secularized norm of 'positive energy', reinterpreted by the platform into traits of bravery, healthiness, elegance, and artistry. These traits were thereafter reflected in the sport-related content produced by individual video creators. Through this secularization, the political cues seemed less visible, albeit the possible nationalistic interpretation from the audiences is still present if the sport is related to international competition. By the same means, these producers successfully coopted the subordinated discourse of body exposure from merely suggestive sexual cues to more commonly acceptable social norms in the form of the traits of elegance and artistry.

Conclusion: Predictability of tactics for change

This study aims to advance the theorizing of discursive negotiation in the context of social media. The latter is always seen as a site of struggle between the ruled and the ruler (Gramsci, 2021). What we add into this hegemonic conjecture is Gramsci's concept of common sensing – a legitimate and consensual public discourse – used by individuals to temporarily challenge, obscure, and rearticulate existing discursive boundaries via the tactics of discursive articulation from Laclau's perspective. With this commonsensical view, individuals would be able to make claims that the discursive formation they construe is publicly legitimate, non-oppositional, and utterly aligns with the dominant logic of the authorities, which otherwise would see the discourse as inappropriate and incongruous in relation to the state's agenda. In this article, the processes by which individuals actively seek to gain favour with the public to push the authorities to concede to their views is termed 'discursive concession.' On the other hand, the authorities could also employ the same tactics – by siding with popular sentiments – to change their existing discourse and put forth new policies or views. By looking at cases showing how body politics played out in the short-video platform Douyin in the context of China, we identified three concrete tactics of discursive concession: namely, cooptation, hijacking, and normalization. Cooptation refers to how dominant power changes tack on public issues by appealing to commonsensical views. By expropriating the views of private individuals or even subordinated groups, the authorities claim to advance their policy so as to cater to the public. Hijacking refers to how minorities, or subordinated groups, leverage the dominant discourse or the common non-disputable views to formulate their views: by riding on the authorities 'vehicles', they drive public discourses in another direction. In between coopting and hijacking, there is the process of normalization, in which organizations or individuals adopt dual tactics, by hijacking the dominant discourse while, at the same time, coopting the subordinated discourse to push forward the discursive boundary.

In this article, these tactics were illustrated by cases concerned with body politics in the short-video platform Douyin. In the 'censorship rule co-creation' campaign launched by Douyin, the platform attempted to prescribe a standard of body exposure that would avoid trespassing against the political standard of the authorities while claiming to favour the platform's and users' interests and demands. Through tactics of discursive concession, Douyin, together with the public users, negotiated with the authorities for a more liberal discourse on sexuality in relation to body exposure. While working around state censorship, these tactics push for a wider discursive boundary of body politics in the context of the Chinese internet. On the other hand, the state, or the Fire Department concerned, also pitches in with, if not concedes to, the campaign, trying to win the favour of the public with the consequence that the ideological boundaries are moved away from the conservative end of the spectrum. The whole process of negotiation is ad hoc and dynamic. While each party aims for its own goal, there are trade-offs among them for their respective political, economic, and cultural interests.

However, our research by no means suggests that, by employing the appropriate tactics, individuals or minorities are then going to be able to change cultural politics or engage in cultural resistance. In the case of Ziran, we have shown that hijacking


tactics can backfire. We can conclude that the dynamics among the actors in each of these processes of discursive concessions are different, and discursive negotiations and concessions are never complete and robust. In the case of Fire Department we discussed, their first video was later deleted for unknown reasons after the authors' study, while their second video remained accessible. It is possible to speculate that the ideologies of the authorities are also fluid and shifting under different socio-political conditions, and they can also be inconsistent on the same platforms. Needless to say, in the case of both Ziran and the Fire Department, interventions by the platform – from changing the algorithm to complete deletion of the videos – are vital factors affecting the effectiveness of the tactics. At this point, we admit that this article focuses on the discourse of the videos, while the platform algorithms, its stakeholders' interrelationships, and the users' perception of algorithms (e.g. folk theories) have not been investigated. Investigating the algorithmic factors that influence discursive negotiation with the platform and the state could be a research project for the future.

However, the unpredictability of the discursive formation should not undermine the significance of the tactics or the discursive concessions derived from the studies. In retrospect, during the pre-digital era, when the state-owned media dominated public discourse in China, the public was self-educated to develop their very tactful media literacy; they were able to read between the lines to understand contemporary politics, the ideological limits, and the possibility for change (Ma, 2000). Now, with social media that potentially requires new public spaces, certain groups or individual netizens may be capable of equally developing critical literacy over the state-constructed discourse (Burnett & Merchant, 2011). Admittedly, under China's tight censorship and surveillance of social media, it remains challenging for individuals to change or influence state-led social norms, cultural boundaries, or moral standards. But the very fact that the authorities are able to tolerate a wider ideological space, occasionally, for public campaigns, as illustrated in our cases, provides a cultural reference for individuals to potentially devise new tactics and experiment with them. In the eyes of Laclau, successful tactics are never random; they have to be tested, learned, and must always be constantly revised. In the fast-changing space of social media in China, the authorities may constantly draw on common sense, while individuals with critical literacy (e.g. well-educated people, intellectuals, or creative labourers who are good at 'outmanoeuvring' the authorities in a Gramscian sense) may also reconstruct common sense for their own purposes and interests. Both parties understand the implicit rules, internalize them, and deduce their own tactics of what we call cooptation, hijacking, and normalization. The rehearsal, frequent use of organized and unorganized practices, and the resulting tug of war may somehow result in cultural consequences that are believed to be better than during the era without social media and participation. Yet, whether Douyin's campaign or the Fire Department's 'bold' tactics are equally applicable to other social media or broader cultural-political contexts and beyond body politics, is something that must await further examination.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. The Chinese words can be translated as ‘Eye spicy’ (La Yan Jing). This can be roughly translated into ‘eyesore’ in English, but the target was not buildings but people.

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Table A1. Appendix

No.	Link	Post time	Video creator	Creator type	Followers	Likes	Comments	Save
1	https://www.douyin.com/video/6976490232631938336	22 June 2021 13:45	Taiyuan Fire Service	Public service	2,443k	11k	80	88
2	https://www.douyin.com/video/6976487703885974787 (Invalid)	22 June 2021 13:35	Taiyuan Fire Service	Public service	2,443k	4,290	67	23
3	https://www.douyin.com/video/6976453040668740896	22 June 2021 11:20	Ziran	Private	8,224k	112k	2,662	1,339
4	https://www.douyin.com/video/6976456185473928459	22 June 2021 11:33	Zhang Weili – Black Tiger Fight Club	Professional	5,254k	293k	9,464	332
5	https://www.douyin.com/video/6976533873068903720	22 June 2021 16:34	Guangzhou Jiacheng Dancing Centre	Professional	391k	20k	299	136