



Residents' videographic practices on TikTok (Douyin): Enacting and communicating social sustainability during a COVID-19 lockdown

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection between *sustainability* and *social media activity* by studying how user-generated content (UGC) creation enacted and communicated social sustainability in times of restricted social interaction. The context is Wuhan in China, a city that implemented a 76-day lockdown in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on a sample of 187 short videos created and posted by Wuhan residents on Douyin (TikTok) during the lockdown, this paper answers this question – how did UGC creators produce short videos on social media to facilitate social connections with others? UGC creators' video-making practices are conceptualised in the typology of *Evoking*, *Performing*, *Collaborating*, and *Narrating*, and each practice enabled creators to connect and socialise virtually with others, thus contributing to all participants' social sustainability in a pandemic. This study contributes to media management scholarship by adding knowledge to the understanding of two areas: the productive role of media audiences, especially their content production practices and logics; the nature of short videos as media products.

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Introduction

Sustainability work and sustainable practices are continuously mediated through news, corporate marketing communications, online forums and other digital forms, which are created by multiple actors: media, companies, NGOs, and citizens (Gasher, 2017; Osnes et al., 2017). However, while social media are becoming a central channel for civil engagement, research is only beginning to explore how diversified forms of sustainability is manifested through user practices on social media (AI-Youbi et al., 2020; Berglez & Olausson, 2021; La et al., 2020; Laurell et al., 2019). Being a case that contains various

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dimensions of social sustainability (Ranjbari et al., 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic provides a promising opportunity to study the intersection between *social sustainability* and *social media activity* (AI-Youbi et al., 2020; Berglez & Olausson, 2021; La et al., 2020; Laurell et al., 2019), particularly because the pandemic provides a situation for actors to create social sustainability and the raw materials for communicating social sustainability.

First, this study focuses on the social aspect of sustainability or social sustainability¹ (Ranjbari et al., 2021), which serves as the context and the content of a specific subject area to be communicated. Social sustainability mainly concerns the supervision of social capital and human being by integrating human and civil rights, health and safety issues, social responsibility, and community (Cooper et al., 2018). In this study, we define social sustainability as “aspects concerning people’s basic social needs, security, and well-being, citizen engagement and participation, and community functioning” based on the sustainability literature (Berglez et al., 2017; Ranjbari et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected social sustainability by jeopardising individuals’ life quality, human well-being, health and safety, putting people in vulnerable social situations (Ranjbari et al., 2021). A prominent dimension on which the pandemic has impacted social sustainability is the loss of social connections among people. Measures like lockdown, social distancing, self-isolation, or self-quarantining restricted people from social interaction (Bates, 2020; Mishra & Majumdar, 2020; O’Brien, 2020), and people lost physical proximity and social interaction, leading to negative consequences such as isolation and loneliness (Pantell & Shields-Zeeman, 2020; Wiberg, 2020), as well as fear, boredom, stigma, frustration, sadness, worry, and psychological stress (Shah et al., 2020). In this pandemic, social connections and interactions turned out to be more salient and valuable for people than ever before (Bradshaw & Hietanen, 2020; Nowland et al., 2018; Wiberg, 2020) as social relationships constitute a crucial part of what it is to be a human being (Enfield, 2009).

Second, digital technology has led to a new configuration of the audience’s media consumption behaviours, as well as the increase of the legion of non-institutional media actors such as UGC creators engaged in the production of content (Lowe, 2016). “Audience as producer” (Napoli, 2016, p. 270) has received little empirical research and theorising. As pointed out by Rohn (2018), new types of actors (bloggers, freelancers, YouTubers, TikTok users) beyond the rigid structure of media firms and conglomerates deserve more attention from media management scholarship.

Thirdly, we place our specific empirical focus on a particular social media format that is of interest in its own right – short videos. According to Kaye et al. (2020), the term “short video” refers to video content that is shorter than 5 minutes and distributed via digital media platforms. Short video features include low-cost production, highly spreadable content, and blurry boundaries between producers and consumers (Kong, 2018). The usage of short video-sharing apps (e.g. TikTok, Douyin) has skyrocketed during the pandemic (He & Disis, 2021; Ostrovsky & Chen, 2020; Qu, 2020) triggering social media giants such as YouTube and Instagram to launch their own services for the short video format. Different from video-streaming platforms (e.g. Vimeo and YouTube) and platforms hosting still photographs (e.g. Instagram), the nature of short video social media remains new and the potentials of the video medium are under-explored. Video is a media-rich format containing the auditory and the visual in a dynamic form (Belk & Kozinets, 2005; Rokka & Hietanen, 2018). Embedded in the social media platform, the

camera phone video has specific technical affordances providing properties and possibilities (Willett, 2009a). Further research is needed to understand how media consumers use this medium to create contents to maintain, create, and manifest social connections, thus achieving the social sustainability of their lives.

To explore how social media user practices can support and communicate social sustainability, we ask – how do UGC (user-generated content) creators produce short videos on social media to facilitate social connections with others? Such a purpose is formed based on the rationale consisting of two parts: first, videographic practices can enhance social connections due to the affordances of the medium of video – according to the theory of videography (De Valck et al., 2009; Hietanen et al., 2014; Rokka & Hietanen, 2018), video is relational and videography is a media practice embedded in and producing social relations. Second, social connection is a key component of social sustainability according to the sustainability literature (Berglez et al., 2017; Ranjbari et al., 2021).

In order to fulfil this purpose, we collected empirical material from the Chinese city of Wuhan, posted on the short video platform Douyin. Wuhan was the world's first COVID-19 lockdown city that implemented a 76-day lockdown in the early days of the pandemic. While Wuhan residents followed the government's order by staying at home to keep a physical distance, they stayed connected via social media. They created and posted short videos on China's most popular short video app Douyin as a way of alleviating the stress caused by the lockdown and associated social restrictions. Hosting UGC videos, Douyin provides a vehicle for social connections and virtual social interactions (Kaye et al., 2020).

This study analyzes a total of 187 short videos created by Wuhan residents and posted on Douyin with a hermeneutic and cultural approach to infer the intentions and techniques of the creators of the videos by analysing their output. Exploring how social sustainability was enacted and communicated by a specific type of media users (in this case, residents as UGC creators), this study develops a typology of video-making practices for relational purposes. UGC creators' videographic practices reveal how they used the relational, performative, and expressive potentials of the video medium (Hietanen et al., 2014; Rokka & Hietanen, 2018) to interact with others, thus alleviating the pandemic's negative impacts and achieving social sustainability during the COVID-19 outbreak. This study contributes to media management scholarship by adding knowledge to the understanding of two areas: the productive role of media audiences, especially their content production practices and logics, and the nature of short videos as media products.

The context

The COVID-19 lockdown in Wuhan is a compelling context that can provide new and rare avenues to theorise how residents used certain media forms to cope with the crisis to achieve social sustainability and at the same time communicated this outcome. The global pandemic has exerted tremendous effects on the social dimension of sustainability: threatening people's safety, health and wellbeing, thwarting peoples' social connections, and stopping normal community functioning. As an extreme measure, the lockdown restricted people from social interactions (Katila et al., 2020).

Wuhan was the city severely hit by the pandemic in China and it underwent 76 days of lockdown (from January 23 to April 8 in 2020). Situated in central China, the city's strategic location as a transportation hub meant that the government had to impose

a lockdown to prevent the virus from spreading to other regions. The city was sealed off from the rest of the country, residents were confined within their apartments, most people and vehicles were not allowed to move in the city, all retail and leisure activities were suspended, and face masks and social distancing became mandatory. Government officials and state media declared that Wuhan had entered a “state of war” as fear began to spread among the population of more than 10 million of the city (Cui, 2020). Being shocked by this disruption, Wuhan residents experienced mental distress, anxiety, and fear in the initial phase (Zhao, 2020). Residents ordered groceries via e-commerce apps and posted and shared their experiences on Chinese social media such as Douyin, WeChat and Weibo. During this period, Wuhan residents lived in two main *spaces* – the home (physical) and the social media sphere (digital).

Wuhan residents’ lockdown life was relevant to a wider audience – people from other parts of China and the whole world were watching the unfolding of the drama in the city. They obtained news about Wuhan from reports of traditional media, as well as Wuhan residents’ short videos and live-streaming on social media apps such as Douyin. Owned by the Chinese tech giant ByteDance, Douyin is a fast-emerging short video social network, in the form of an app, for users to post and share their self-created short videos. Douyin is the domestic twin of its international counterpart—TikTok (Kaye et al., 2020), and people often use the two names of Douyin and TikTok interchangeably. Hosting 15 to 60 second long videos that are user-generated, Douyin is designed to encourage the production and dissemination of viral videos (Serrano et al., 2020). As a networked UGC social media site, Douyin prevailed as a significant space for Chinese consumers during the pandemic given the vast number of users – in 2020, it had 600 million daily active users (He & Disis, 2021). During the lockdown, the state-owned Wuhan Broadcasting Group organised a short video competition on Douyin with the hashtag #Wuhan folks stay-at-home combating the pandemic to support residents to endure this special period and mitigate potential negative effects. The competition received 13,000 videos from residents, generating 90 million total views on Douyin.

Literature background

UGC, participatory culture, and community

With alternative names of user-generated-media, user-created-content and consumer-generated content, user-generated content (UGC) refers to “all types of content, like pictures, videos, or posts, created by consumers and delivered through online platforms like social media” (Martí-Parreño et al., 2015), and UGC contents do not have to satisfy traditional media or cultural gatekeepers (Yeo, 2013). Related phenomena include amateur media (Hunter et al., 2013), social media prod-usage (Bruns, 2007), prosumers (Toffler, 1980), and citizen journalism (Lewis et al., 2010), all integrating the converged role of producers and consumers. Christodoulides et al. (2011) suggest three conditions for qualifying UGC content: it is made available through publicly accessible transmission media, it reflects some degree of creative effort, and it is created for free outside professional routines and practices.

As amateur video producers, residents’ videographic work can be considered a media production practice (van Dijck, 2009). This view is echoed by Rokka and Hietanen (2018),

who argue that consumers' videographic work can be a praxis, which is a "doing" able to create powerful affective encounters and effects with the audience. The videographic practices contain certain behaviours, understandings, and emotions that are socially constructed and communally understood (Reckwitz, 2002; Schau et al., 2009).

The notion of "participatory culture" provides one way of viewing the social dimension of the UGC phenomenon. "Participation" refers to "citizens and community activists as well as to people who deploy their skills and talents towards a common cause" (van Dijck, 2009). Jenkins (2006) views participatory culture in media as new forms of consumer participation and collaboration to harness the collective capability of participants. The growth in ordinary people's access to video production is considered part of a wider democratisation of media, and the emergence of a participatory media culture (Buckingham, 2009a; Willett, 2009b). In participatory culture, users have a strong tendency of sharing knowledge and culture in communities (van Dijck, 2009). Media and cultural studies concern the levels of participation ("creators," "spectators" and "inactives") (van Dijck, 2009), how ordinary people take charge of the "means of media production" (Buckingham, 2009b), video-making as the construction and performance of users' individual and group identity (Buckingham, 2009b), or user agency expressed in binary oppositions – recipients vs. participants, producers vs. consumers, and amateurs vs. professionals (van Dijck, 2009).

The social dimension of UGC is apparent in media and cultural scholars' previous research about amateur video-making clubs, spoof-makers, and mobile phone video makers (Buckingham, 2009b). Under these various social contexts, video-making serves as a focus and a means of mediating relationships within peer groups and communities. In the case of mobile phone video-makers, the exchange and circulation of short videos is a way of building and consolidating relationships among friends (Buckingham, 2009b). In amateur video-making clubs, the social identities were performed through a video-making interface with other forms of identity constructed within the local community, serving as a means of building certain "social capital" among participants (Buckingham, 2009b).

In marketing literature addressing UGC, the majority of extant studies focus on for-profit or commercially sponsored UGC communities, where firms leverage influencers or opinion leaders to spread marketing messages among consumers (Kozinets et al., 2010; Soylemez, 2021), or how the two sides co-create brand messages (Halliday, 2016; Irimiás & Volo, 2018). There remains a paucity of research into consumer-to-consumer interactions, and how this comes about at the micro-level by examining specific techniques and practices in producing content. Kozinets et al. (2010) find that UGC contents are influenced by the social media context, and their notion of the characteristics of the forum only points to the topical types of online forums (e.g. personal life crisis, relationship, technical, mommy topics, sports, health, fashion). By problematising the affordances of the medium (short videos as audiovisual data), our study furthers such inquiries into the role of the media context in UGC.

UGC, participatory culture, and communities all contain a social dimension, which is intrinsically entangled with the notion of social sustainability. UGC, participatory culture, and communities indicate the interpersonal and communal dynamics of UGC, fulfilling people's basic social needs, citizen engagement and

participation, and community functioning, which fall under the rubrics of social sustainability.

Videography as an expressive medium enabling social connections

While examining consumers' videography on social media, this study is informed by the filmic school of research about consumer behaviour and marketing (Belk & Kozinets, 2005; Belk et al., 2018; Hietanen et al., 2014; Hietanen, 2012; Kozinets & Belk, 2006; Rokka et al., 2018). Discussions in this strand of research provide concepts and terminologies about the medium of video. As a non-linguistic medium, videos contain rich data, offering a multi-sensory experience. Unlike text or still photography, the very ontology of the audiovisual moving image is its incessant movement supported by auditory and visual stimuli (Hietanen et al., 2014).

The expressive videography approach proposed by Hietanen et al. (2014) posits that video is expressive and relational rather than being merely a recording tool. In a similar vein, Belk et al. (2018) consider videography as transcending the function of representing or documenting reality (Schembri & Boyle, 2013). Videos have affective powers, offering an emotional and resonant experience, and sensory encounters (Rokka & Hietanen, 2018). The immanent qualities of video call for actions (evoking) from the viewer and can arouse the viewer to imagine videography's effects. Videos can change actions, having the potential of "action thought" (Deleuze, 1989). As argued by Wood (2015), video has the potential of engaging the audience in ways a text cannot by allowing affective, discursive and lived experiences. Building on the performative turn in research, Seregina (2018) proposes that videography becomes a "performative act" (p. 3) and that video has a performative effect on the object of inquiry and do not simply record it. Based on its artistic roots, videography has the potential for creating interactive engagement with its audience. Being relational, videos have the transformative effect of producing and shaping social relations (Hietanen et al., 2014; Rokka & Hietanen, 2018).

Method

The authors adopt an interpretive and social constructionist approach in marketing scholarship (Belk et al., 2012; Hirschman, 1986; Spiggle, 1994) to read the videos as cultural texts and decode the intentions of their creators. This study applies the expressive mode of videography (Rokka & Hietanen, 2018) to theorise UGC creators' videographic practices.

We did not do the fieldwork, but used short videos filmed by UGC creators. Restriction for interaction with creators or limited access to creators' life world makes such an approach more necessary. A deep understanding of the context was achieved through immersion in the context by the first author, a native of Wuhan living in Europe. He witnessed the unfolding of the pandemic development in Wuhan by viewing feeds on Chinese social media, tracking news on Chinese and global media, and communicating with acquaintances in the city. We used short videos produced by Wuhan residents and published on Douyin. In the competition, hashtagged #Wuhan folks stay-at-home combating the pandemic, out of the 13,000 submitted videos, the organiser (Wuhan Broadcasting Group) compiled a final collection with 177 videos that they deemed

exemplary. This final collection, as posted on Douyin, was used as the main corpus of data as we treated it as a proxy for representative and outstanding works in this competition. To compensate for the potential limitation of the organiser's selection procedure, we obtained additional videos from Douyin by performing a search using the key words "COVID-19+Wuhan+stay-at-home." The search stopped when data reached saturation, meaning that there were no more videos that could provide new conceptual dimensions or evidence. Our sample contains 187 videos, whose time totals 3 hours and 11 minutes.

The authors translated non-linguistic data into textual output by *writing* the visual data to support their knowledge claims. They created an Excel spreadsheet to log each video covering these dimensions: description of the plot, what did people/subtitles say, who, doings, rehearsed or spontaneous, noteworthy objects/signs/symbols, the technical aspect of video (editing, special effects, etc.), sound (music, rhythm, special sound effects), category (emic), and category (etic), and transcribed voiceovers into text. The authors viewed each video individually and all videos holistically to find out conceptual patterns cutting across the sample. They paid attention to sequences/plots, spatial arrangements, and actors' verbal, facial and gestural expressions and bodily movements. Screen captures were generated by "freezing" the movement of videos into stills for marking, categorising, and labelling. After the analysis of 50 videos by the first two authors independently, the tentative categorisations were compared. Despite the fact that the first author is a Chinese native and the second author a Westerner, both yielded similar readings of the videos. Where necessary, disagreements were discussed and coding was further clarified (Campbell et al., 2013).

Following the approach of archaeologists, art historians and visual analysts (Lehmann, 2012)², the authors inferred the intentions and techniques of the producers of the videos by analysing their output – the videos. The intentions and techniques of video creators were labelled as categories of videographic practices. With description and interpretation, the analytical process was iterative as the authors moved back and forth between theory and data (Belk et al., 2012). The analysis is abductive in nature. On one hand, the videos were coded into categories through hermeneutic, inductive, and grounded interpretations. On the other hand, the categories were obtained with inspirations from theories of consumer videography (De Valck et al., 2009; Hietanen et al., 2014; Rokka & Hietanen, 2018), consumer narratives (Shankar et al., 2001), participatory media culture (Buckingham, 2009b; Jenkins, 2006; Willett, 2009b), and collaborative consumption (Belk, 2014). Table 1 summarises our coding and analysis. Our research presentation includes textual interpretations that explain empirical findings and theoretical arguments.

Findings

Our coding of the Douyin short videos sought to establish a typology of how the medium was used to enact social connections between people. Drawing upon our working definition of social sustainability, we were specifically categorising videographic practices



Table 1. Coding and analysis.

Label of videographic practice (etic code)	Description of videographic practice (etic code)	Prior literature that sensitized authors to reach the etic code	Etic codes
Evoking	<p>This type of practice triggers responses from the viewers, summons up bodily actions of the viewers, and establishes interactions between the video creators and the audience.</p> <p>The outcome for social sustainability: enhanced the interactions between video creators and the audience.</p>	<p>Hietanen et al. (2014): video is expressive and relational rather than being merely a recording tool.</p> <p>Rokka and Hietanen (2018): videos have affective powers, offering an emotional and resonant experience, and sensory encounters.</p> <p>Deleuze (1989): videos can change actions, having the potential of action thought.</p> <p>Seregina (2018): videos are kinetic.</p>	<p>Residents were teaching the audience how to do physical exercises to keep fit to counter the virus.</p> <p>Residents shouted "Come on, Wuhan!" and "Wuhan will win!" (forceful human sounds) to the audience.</p> <p>Residents in balconies thanked doctors on buses, and audiences expressed responses.</p> <p>Educational videos, in which residents demonstrated how to live a correct quarantine life at home.</p>
Performing	<p>This type of practice generates artistic performances to entertain the audience and provide problem-solving via novel ways of expression (experiments with cinematographic expressions, spectacles, or humors).</p> <p>The outcome for social sustainability: entertained the audience to alleviate the lockdown's negative impacts, provided problem-solving, and offered spiritual inspiration, leading to sustainable and resilient living.</p>	<p>Hietanen et al. (2014): cinematographic expressions include rhythms, tempo, special effects, speeding up or slowing down the motion pictures.</p> <p>Seregina (2018): videography as performances to engage the audience.</p>	<p>Performances of singing, dancing, dramas, calligraphy writing, musical instrument playing, etc.</p> <p>Various creative experiments with cinematographic expressions such as rhythms, tempo, special effects, speeding up or slowing down themotion pictures, and emoji.</p> <p>Humors in a video - a series of posters repurposing vintage propaganda posters, accompanied by quirky background music.</p>
Collaborating	<p>Multiple creators dispersed at different locations collaborated to produce short videos.</p> <p>The outcome for social sustainability: generated collective feelings of community, and generated collaborative spirit and meanings of residents working together to fight the pandemic.</p>	<p>Buckingham (2009b), Jenkins (2006), and Willett (2009b): participatory media culture; cultures of participation and productive collaboration among UGC creators.</p> <p>Belk (2014): collaborative consumption in the acquisition and usage of goods or services (people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation).</p>	<p>Cloud singing by residents from different locations</p> <p>Cloud dancing by residents from different locations</p> <p>Cloud performances of other arts by residents from different locations</p> <p>Students of an elementary school in Guangzhou city talking with students of an elementary school in Wuhan city</p>

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Label of videographic practice (etic code)	Description of videographic practice (etic code)	Prior literature that sensitized authors to reach the etic code	Emic codes
Narrating	Residents used short videos to narrate what was happening in the sealed city, their daily activities, as well as what they felt, participating in the discourses about COVID-19. The outcome for social sustainability: video narratives made the experience of the abnormal situation comprehensible, bridged the physical distance between the narrators and the viewers; creators became active producers of meanings and value for the community; enhanced social needs, civil engagement, and community building.	Shankar et al. (2001): consumers do narrative acts to make sense of their lives or experience, and the external situation; narratives are interactional in that narrators let the audience see their own lives.	Narrations of Wuhan residents' daily activities during the lockdown; a little boy's narration about quarantine life at home; a little girl narrating about a book entitled "Defeating COVID-19" containing a series of cubic painting works; a little boy's monologue; a mother's video diary about her quarantine life; lyrics performed by a girl while showing calendar and her daily activities

that facilitated social connections, represented the communal aspects of residents' living through the lockdown, and alleviated the negative impacts of the pandemic.

The process resulted in the identification of four main types of Wuhan residents' videographic practices enacting and communicating social sustainability during the lockdown: *Evoking*, *Performing*, *Collaborating*, and *Narrating*. In each of these practices, creators used videography as an expressive tool (Hietanen et al., 2014) to interact with others. Residents became productive by making sense of the lockdown experiences on the video medium. The resulting videos are relational (Rokka & Hietanen, 2018) in that they may orient fellow residents' experiences, deepen the viewers' understanding, and trigger empathy or actions (Kozinets & Belk, 2006).

Evoking

The category of videographic practice "Evoking" triggered responses from the viewers, summoned up bodily actions of the viewers, and established interactions between the video creators and the audience. Such outcomes in turn led to all participants' positive coping with the crisis, diminished the negative effects of the pandemic, and preserved the social sustainability of their lives.

Unlike still images, motion pictures can exert more effects on the viewer, invoking reactions or activating the viewer to engage and respond. In our sample, some videos teach the audience how to do physical exercises to keep fit to counter the virus. In Video 8, an elementary school teacher shows the audience how to do a kind of jump dance. In the 4-minute video, she first uses her own body to demonstrate each step, so that a viewer can learn it step by step. Finally, she performs the dance coherently at normal speed once. This video is kinetic (Seregina, 2018), engaging viewers to act and move, and calling for viewers to learn the bodily exercise.

In Video 180, Wuhan residents on their balconies thanked doctors who were dispatched from other provinces to come to help Wuhan, finished their tasks, and were leaving Wuhan in buses. Residents shouted to doctors "Goodbye ... Thank you ... Thank angels in white gowns. ...". This video was relayed on multiple Chinese social media and went viral. Viewers left comments below it: "So moving!" "I am moved to tears." This powerfully affective video created an emotional encounter for the audience. Being moving and resonant, it evoked tears from fellow residents who watched it.

Video 140 serves as an educational piece, in which a little boy acts in different scenarios to demonstrate how to live a correct quarantine life at home to cope with the virus. He performed behavioural examples in different settings or rooms to illustrate 7 tips: 1) Stay at home and don't go out; 2) Eat vitamin C to counter the virus; 3) Drink enough hot water; 4) Sleep according to a regular schedule and do not stay up late; 5) Eat nutritious food; 6) Do physical exercises; and 7) Study and learn things. The video shows the boy's embodied behaviours and moves the viewer to action – to follow suit.

In many videos, the actors speak or shout "Come on Wuhan!," and "Wuhan will win!". The expressions (the forceful human sounds in the auditory sense and written signs in the visual sense) convey the emotions of hope, positive energy, and the will of winning

the battle. Such expressions targeted directly and forcefully the audience, encouraging them or calling them to participate together in this battle. Such videos communicated a sense of community, signalling that the residents were collectively combating the virus and thereby sustaining their individual and collective well-being, or social sustainability.

Performing

The category of videographic practice “Performing” represents certain dimensions of social sustainability as residents created the videos to entertain the audience to alleviate the lockdown’s negative impacts (e.g. loneliness, isolation), provide problem-solving (how to live a meaningful life in the confined home), offer spiritual inspirations by exploring novel ways of expressions, all of which signal sustainable and resilient living.

The videos contain residents’ artistic performances and entertainment – singing, dancing, painting, calligraphy writing, musical instrument playing, and so on. In producing short videos for Douyin, residents scripted, acted, and shot their performances in front of the cellphone camera, making everybody on Douyin a showman or entertainer. The users practiced their talent in producing visual content, becoming what Ritzer et al.(2012) call the “prosumers.” They are intrinsically or hedonically motivated, trying to produce fun and cool videos to ease anxiety and lift people’s spirits at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak. Consuming such performances, viewers were looking for pleasure, reassurance, inspiration, and a vision for the future during the lockdown. The performer and audience were alert to the other’s role, or in another word, the producer was putting on a show, and the viewer knew it. In Goffman’s (1979) term, their behaviours were mutually monitored. The prosumers were the directors of their performances for the imagined audience, which is the public.

The video medium offers a dramatic space. Some videos were performed acts rather than merely recording naturally occurring events. In Video 120, three family members (father, mother and son) were ostentatiously dancing to music in front of a mobile phone, and their postures were staged and acted. Video 154 is a mini-drama “A different birthday” performed by 4 members (mother, father, son and daughter) of a family with a plot – the family celebrated the simplest birthday of the son during the lockdown; the son did not complain and felt appreciative that the family’s life could still go on due to the service of social workers; he looked forward to a birthday party next year.

Some video producers did various creative experiments with cinematographic expressions such as rhythms, tempo, special effects, and speeding up or slowing down the motion pictures (Hietanen et al., 2014). In Video 119, a youth walked to a snowy place. He threw a snowball into the camera, but the video producer used reversed editing technique to show the movement in the opposite sequence first, followed by the normal sequence. In the end, he hand-wrote the text “Come on, Wuhan!” (in Chinese) on the snowy ground. The whole video has a slow-paced tempo, and the overall visual effect (light, framing, colour tone) is of filmic quality.

The lockdown life unleashed the creativity of residents, who were resourceful and created spectacles or humour in the videos. Video 9 (See more description of Video 9 in [Appendix A](#)) entitled “Hold on, don’t panic” contains a series of posters repurposing vintage propaganda posters circulated in China during the 1960s and 1970s, each offering a sentence as a tip for how to live the lockdown life. The background music is quirky with strong beats, and the overall video is full of humour, nostalgia, and amusement.

Collaborating

The category of videographic practices that we label “Collaborating” showcases collaborative projects in making videos, leading to collective outcomes – feelings of community and shared interests in the process of collectively combating the COVID-19 spread. Community building and social cohesion are key elements of social sustainability.

In the sample of videos, co-creation and collaborations among users abounded. The notion of collaborating here refers to the cooperative production of a short video for Douyin by multiple creators dispersed at different locations. Software technologies of Douyin allow creators at different locations to record a video in sync or via relay by contributing performances from each one’s end. This possibility of technology-facilitated collaboration breaks the spatial constraints imposed on Wuhan residents. Chinese users call such an approach “cloud singing,” “cloud dancing” or “cloud performance.” In addition, such co-production undertakings symbolise the collaborative spirit and meanings of people working together to fight the pandemic, thus falling into the interactional and interpersonal practices of Wuhan residents, who were video producers and contributors for Douyin.

Video 134 features the cloud-dancing of college classmates who were spending their winter break in each other’s homes. Video 152 is the cloud-singing of the song “Wuhan folks” by colleagues from a multinational company in Wuhan. Video 171 is the cloud music instrument performance of the song “I and my motherland” by 10 performers.

Video 139 demonstrates another way in which people can collaborate – students at an elementary school in Guangzhou (a metropolitan city in South China) supported students at an elementary school in Wuhan. The video contains a series of paintings to accompany the voiceover, which says: “Wuhan and Guangzhou are united with friendship. Students from both sides share thoughts about our study. We are in the same boat, caring for each other. We work together to fight against the pandemic.”

The collaborative method of UGC video creation in this pandemic adds an alternative mode to Belk’s (2014) concept of collaborative consumption as the former focuses on UGC creators’ cooperative production of intangible media content on social media rather than the acquisition and usage of goods or services.

Narrating

The category of videographic practice “Narrating” supported and communicated social sustainability as residents participated in the society’s discourses about the pandemic, became active producers of meanings and value for the community, and established connections with the audience. These outcomes correspond to aspects of social needs, civil engagement, community building, and human well-being under social sustainability (Ranjbari et al., 2021).

While the pandemic, as an event, was unfolding, Wuhan residents used short videos to narrate what was happening in the sealed city, their daily activities, as well as what they felt, participating in the discourses about COVID-19. Residents did the narrative acts to make sense of their lives or experience (Shankar et al., 2001), and the external situation. The narrative videos in our sample are diary-like or documentary-type of video logs, with first-person narrations. Some used video footage and some used paintings to illustrate the

narration voiceovers. Due to the limit of length, most of them can be considered as “light” narratives as they lack a fully-fledged plot (start, escalation, climax, resolution, ending) of a typical story.

The narrative videos in our sample are interactional in that the producers let the audience see their own lives. These video narratives serve as Wuhan residents’ first-hand reports from the COVID-19 epicentre as fellow citizens inside and outside of Wuhan were keenly watching the development of the pandemic and the war of conquering it within Wuhan. Fellow citizens can participate in the narratives vicariously given their identical circumstances. Residents’ video narratives can make the experience of the abnormal situation comprehensible and can bridge the physical distance between the narrators and the viewers.

Video 20 contains the narration of a girl recounting her daily activities – a variety of meals and food, making tea, writing Chinese calligraphy, lighting a candle, and reading a Michelle Obama book (See more description of Video 20 in [Appendix A](#)). These momentary scenes were bound together into a flow of happenings in a sequence (Hietanen et al., 2014). The video starts with the calendar showing the date of February 20, and ends with her habit tracker on a calendar, implying the mentality of Wuhan residents that each day was so hard, necessitating counting dates.

Video 181 entitled “Wuhan seen from the window” mused upon the situation of the city, as well as residents’ relationship with it. The narrator did not appear in the images and viewers can hear his voice narrating. The motion pictures consist of footage and still pictures obtained from the Web. In the beginning, the narrator asked the question “What does Wuhan look like when viewed from the window?” Then, he pondered on the current city mood (“I saw empty streets” in voiceover). Next, he saw some signs of encouragement (“Neon lights on the surface of high-rise buildings displaying the slogan ‘Come on, Wuhan’” in voiceover). Next, he sensed the turning point (“On one morning, I heard cars pass by. Our city is waking up gradually” in voiceover). On April 28, the lockdown was lifted. The narrator said “The Yangtze River will flow as usual” and “the city will be bustling again.” In the end, the narrator thanked everyone who had stayed inside the windows.

Discussion and conclusion

Studying the enactment and communication of social sustainability by UGC creators, this paper finds out how residents undertook content production on short videos on UGC sites, specifically Douyin, to indicate how they achieved socially sustainable and resilient ways of living during the COVID-19 lockdown. UGC creators’ video-making practices are conceptualised in the typology of *Evoking*, *Performing*, *Collaborating*, and *Narrating*, which enabled residents to connect and socialise virtually with others. The four categories are videographic ways of supporting and communicating social sustainability, which concern “people’s basic social needs, security, and well-being, citizen engagement and participation, and community functioning” (Berglez et al., 2017; Ranjbari et al., 2021). Social sustainability is the outcome as well as the content of the communicated issue. The videos captured micro-moments and micro fragments of their quarantine life world. Wuhan residents have shown remarkable innovativeness in their video work to fulfil the need of belonging and connecting, indicating residents’ resilience

and well-being in a pandemic. The findings illuminate UGC creators' expressive and productive video work benefiting from the affordances of video as a medium.

To achieve analytical generalisation based on qualitative data, this study makes theorised claims about the patterns of categories of the data. The findings from the specific and concrete data were made more general not because of population representativeness, but because the findings became valid for categories related to social scientific concepts deriving from vocabularies in theories of videography (De Valck et al., 2009; Hietanen et al., 2014; Rokka & Hietanen, 2018), participatory media culture (Buckingham, 2009b; Jenkins, 2006), collaborative consumption (Belk, 2014), and consumer narratives (Shankar et al., 2001). Though based on an extreme and single context, the findings (the typology and each individual practice) can reflect practices typifying ways of doing videographic work, and they are intelligible patterns that may be transferable to other contexts.

This paper contributes to media management scholarship in two areas, namely the media audience as producers and short videos as a new type of media product. The following sections elaborate on them.

Media audiences as producers

This paper adds knowledge to the productive role of media audiences – an important group of stakeholders in the media marketplace (Ots et al., 2015). In the domain of media consumption and audience behaviour (Mierzejewska, 2018; Napoli, 2016), previous research has primarily focused on measuring and monetising audiences (Napoli, 2011) and audiences' satisfaction with media products (Medina et al., 2016). Media audience is however a rapidly evolving construct and technology has expanded the role of the audience (Napoli, 2011) in the media marketplace. Among the three roles of audience in the media marketplace – as product, as consumer, and as producer (Napoli, 2016), this study specifically foregrounds the audience's growing role as producers of media content. Such an interest invites media management research to increasingly shift from studying audiences and their consumption (Rohn, 2018) to examining their productive practices and behaviours. By introducing audiences as co-creators of sustainability discourses on media platforms, this article thereby aligns to a broader conversation on how media industries may contribute to a sustainable society (e.g., Berglez et al., 2017; Olkkonen, 2018).

This study provides an in-depth examination of audiences' productive engagement with media. By conceptualising four videographic practices (*Evoking*, *Performing*, *Collaborating*, and *Narrating*), it captures media audiences' content production strategies and logics. The short videos reflect behaviours, lifestyles, as well as individuals' media production activities and creative skills, thereby enabling the audience to play multiple roles – as viewers of short videos while also being producers, creating and uploading these videos (Lam, 2019). This confirms a move beyond the “publishing – broadcasting approach” as coined by Hess (2014) and media-audience interactions in the forms of replying, commenting, and co-authoring (Arango-Forero & Roncallo-Dow, 2013), to audience-to-audience interaction. Residents' four videographic practices in our findings share one umbrella – how people bonded and collaborated with each other.

Media management research tends to focus on the organisational dimensions of the media (Rohn, 2018), with little empirical research and theorising about “audience as

producer” (Napoli, 2016, p. 270). This paper addresses the need of studying more than media firms (Ots et al., 2015), and examines the content production practices of non-professional and amateur producers rather than their professional counterparts. The four videographic practices reveal production logics different from those that traditionally have dominated professional media production – for instance journalistic objectivity and credibility (Krumsvik, 2013).

Short videos as media products

This paper helps broaden and deepen our understanding of the nature of short videos as media products (Medina et al., 2016). Due to their creative nature and artistic processes of making, media products are different from industrial outputs (Caves, 2000). The media, as forms of communication, have evolved from newspapers, magazines, billboards, radio, television, video cassettes, video games, and computer games, to the current short videos on social media. Contrary to the claim of Buckingham (2009b) that video is becoming a mundane or even banal medium due to the growing accessibility of video technology to the masses, the four practices demonstrate new forms of cultural expression on the video medium, organised on new social media platforms. With low costs of production, distribution, and promotion than other media products (Krebs et al., 2021), short videos reflect the lived experience of the creators and reveal a refreshingly broad range of self-expression, originality, spontaneity, and creativity of the audience, containing values for viewers and the platform.

Our findings shed some light on the essential characteristics of short videos. Residents’ four videographic practices resulted in videos that can communicate information, convey sentiments, exert actions, and create communities rather than being just mirror-like representations of reality. Therefore, our findings substantiate the “expressive videography” proposal of Hietanen et al. (2014) in that video is relational, and videography is a media practice embedded in and able to produce social relations. By studying UGC creators’ videographic techniques, we add knowledge about the affordances and uses of video as a medium in social media platforms, contributing to research about social media (Kaplan & Mazurek, 2018; Picard, 2013). The practices of “performing,” “evoking,” “collaborating,” and “narrating” indicate ways users interact with others as the content is relational, expressive, and performative (Hietanen et al., 2014; Rokka & Hietanen, 2018). Video, as a unique medium format, can create capabilities for social interaction on social media. In the current short video-infused media landscape, UGC short videos can result in new forms of communication and new ways of mediating social connections.

Our findings reify the social and cultural significance of media products (Bates, 1988). Residents, an important force in civil engagement, built social interactions via videography to counter a crisis and achieve social sustainability. This outcome echoes the consequence of media products as argued by propositions that media can impact the nature and experience of social life (Lowe, 2016) and that media have a unique social and cultural role (Rohn, 2018). We see how short videos on social media fulfilled social roles

in helping citizens accomplish social cohesion and social sustainability during a pandemic.

Managerial implications, limitations, and future research

Understanding the media audience is fundamental for managers of media organisations looking to navigate the complexities of the media marketplace. When engaging the audience, legacy media are used to deal with issues of quality, control, and professional norms (Krumsvik, 2013). With the new form of short video social media like TikTok, the audiences become producers who are a source of talent for legacy media to leverage. Audiences can operate alongside traditional media companies as content producers, not just competing with them for audience attention and advertising revenue. For example, in our study, some UGC videos were picked up by the organiser (state-owned media group) to be included in its news coverage.

The audience's behavioural changes may alter how legacy media carry out their professional media production. The question to be asked is – should media practitioners teach consumers how to produce content or vice versa? In China, professional TV hosts run classes to train UGC creators to become more competent live broadcasters on social media. In the face of the booming of short video social media, many media firms have been figuring out their strategy for occupying a presence on short video social media platforms (Meek, 2021; Miller, 2020). The pendulum may swing to the consumer side when legacy media want to innovate their content. Consumers' video-making practices may change the practices of professional media production. Producers in legacy media may be inspired by UGC short video makers, and replicate the techniques and styles of the everyday UGC videographic expressions of the amateurs. Professionals may intentionally produce videos that are amateur-like to be authentic or organic on TikTok.

With their own ways of messaging, UGC contents provide an alternative set of narratives besides the orthodox marketer or legacy media-directed communications, being more credible, spontaneous, and organic than brand-related content. UGC contents portray creators' daily life, convey sentiments, express opinions, and reveal identities. These videos and accompanying user interactive data can provide qualitative insights about audiences' behaviour and life worlds, to be mined by managers of audience insights or media analytics.

Typical of any research, *limitations* can be identified in this study. We used videos as cultural texts by reducing them into words and this approach has its innate flaws as some dimensions of the visuals are indescribable and the interpretation is subjective. Our sample replies largely on a list of the state-owned media organisation that acted as a gatekeeper using unknown selection criteria. A further limitation is a lack of supplementary data collection techniques (e.g. creator diaries) and engagement with UGC creators to gain additional insights into their own reflections and expressed intentions behind their works. We did not record the audience's responses to the videos such as comments or sharing.

Future research about UGC short videos on social media apps can complement videos with extra data gathered from creator diaries or interviews of creators to solicit their memories and reflections on their creative process. If the research context allows (not as restrictive as a lockdown situation), a project can apply the consumer-researcher

collaboration approach to co-create the data and findings. Future projects can include social media analytics and the audiences' viewing behaviours to understand their responses. Qualitative interviews can also be conducted to understand how viewers read and interpret these videos. Future research can compare UGC content with professionally produced content to see the commonalities and differences in terms of production logics, techniques, norms, standards, and expressive languages, as well as how legacy media firms and their producers borrow from short video UGC creators.

Notes

1. Social sustainability is one of the three pillars of sustainability, and the other two pillars are economic sustainability and environmental sustainability (Berglez, Olausson, & Ots, 2017; Ranjbari et al., 2021).
2. Lehmann (2012, p. 12) observed that there are five approaches to studying the making of things: 1) direct observation of the process (anthropology and sociology); 2) scrutinizing objects for traces of making (archaeology, art history, and history of science); 3) analyzing textual descriptions of making; 4) engaging in reconstruction and reenactment; and 5) studying the visual documentation of making in drawings, paintings, photographs, or films. Given the lack of data from interviews with residents who submitted videos, we adopted approach #2 in the argument of Lehmann (2012). Despite the absence of direct communication with creators, we can infer their intention and techniques by analyzing their output—the videos.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Note: For the videos mentioned in the paper, please contact the first author.

Appendix A: Descriptions of some videos

Description of Videos 9. Entitled “Hold on, don’t panic,” this video includes a series of humorous posters in vintage style. Below are the titles for 6 different posters.

- The turn-around point of the pandemic has not arrived. Hold on and don’t panic!
- If you stay at home, the virus will have no way to wield its power.
- Get to bed early and get up early. Talk less and do more physical exercises.
- Online courses at home can also make you an A level student.
- Work hard in the kitchen cooking dishes with all kinds of recipes.
- Posting a video, doing some chats, and drinking some wine. Spending great time.

Description of Videos 20. In this video, a girl was recounting her daily activities, which include these components:

- The date of February 20 on a calendar
- Meals and food
- Making tea
- Writing Chinese calligraphy
- Lighting a candle
- Reading a Michelle Obama book
- Her habit tracker