

## **The *Loofah Soup* Phenomenon: Globalization, Media, and Changing Family Norms in China**

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### **Abstract**

A short video titled *Loofah Soup*, created by blogger @Lei Zi, has garnered 67,000 comments and nearly 1.3 million likes on Douyin (Chinese TikTok), triggering widespread resonance and imitation among Chinese families. Using this video as a case study, this research applies Fei Xiaotong's Differential Mode of Association, integrating perspectives from globalization and cross-cultural psychology to explore the core characteristics of intergenerational communication in contemporary Chinese families, the roots of intergenerational differences, and the formation of new family concepts. The study focuses on the first generation of parents raised after China's reform and opening-up and their Generation Z children, adopting a case study and textual analysis approach. Findings indicate that contemporary Chinese families still retain four core characteristics derived from the differential mode of association. However, the video's popularity has publicly exposed intergenerational conflicts, breaking the traditional norm that "family ugliness should not be publicized." Notably, globalization drives changes in family concepts, which represent cultural adjustments rather than a wholesale rejection of tradition. The study employs mediatization and cross-cultural psychology theories to explain how such videos facilitate modern transformation. This research innovatively combines Fei Xiaotong's classical sociological theory with the new media cultural phenomenon of short videos, transcending the textual limitations of traditional family studies by reflecting real family dynamics through public feedback. It provides a new theoretical perspective for interpreting intergenerational conflicts in contemporary Chinese families and offers practical insights for building modern family communication models based on equality and respect, thereby enriching interdisciplinary research in digital culture and family sociology.

**Keywords:** differential mode of association, globalization, mediatization, Chinese family, communication

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## Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, short videos are far more than mere entertainment tools; they have become mediums that reflect social mentality and spark public discourse. The video *Loofah Soup*, created by blogger @Lei Zi, is a representative example. It depicts a typical family scene in which one performer plays multiple roles: a mother insists her child drink loofah soup, while the child expresses resistance and helplessness. This amplified portrayal of a minor family conflict has gained remarkable traction on Douyin—garnering nearly 1.3 million likes, over 60,000 comments, and countless imitations. This phenomenon indicates that family interaction patterns, once considered private and trivial, are now entering the realm of public discourse through new media.

This study uses the video as an entry point to examine the phenomenon through Fei Xiaotong's classic sociological framework of the Differential Mode of Association. Simultaneously, it incorporates the historical contexts of globalization and mediatization to explore the core traits of intergenerational interaction in contemporary Chinese families, the deep roots of intergenerational differences, and the generative mechanisms of new family concepts in the digital age. The study focuses on the interaction patterns between the first generation of parents raised after China's reform and opening-up and their Generation Z children. By applying classical theory to new media cultural phenomena, this research aims to transcend the limitations of traditional family studies that rely solely on textual analysis. Instead, it utilizes real public feedback to reflect family ecology, offering a new perspective for understanding intergenerational relationships in contemporary China with both theoretical innovation and practical significance.

## Background

As one of China's largest and most influential short-video social media platforms, Douyin has evolved from a simple entertainment tool into a powerful disseminator that connects with society and expresses public sentiment. According to QuestMobile's annual report (2025), Douyin has nearly 600 million daily active users, covering diverse age groups, regions, and social classes. This makes it not only a core space for recording daily life and self-expression but also, through its algorithmic mechanisms, enables the cross-circle dissemination of diverse content with strong social mobilization and cultural shaping capabilities. This nationwide influence renders Douyin's content highly representative of mainstream culture.

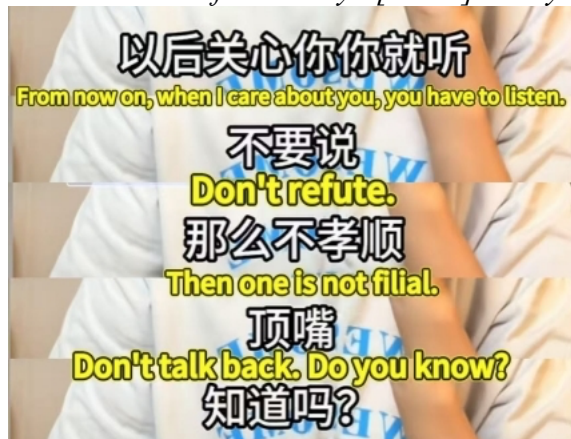
Within Douyin's communication ecology, the sudden virality of amateur original content is one of the most vivid manifestations of its impact. Blogger @Lei Zi is a representative case, known for unique situational creations. @Lei Zi consistently produces one-person, multi-role family skits that restore real contradictions in family communication, forming a stable content style. The most representative video, *Loofah Soup*, went viral by combining Douyin's characteristic daily expression with realistic plot design and distinct character traits—such as a stubborn grandmother, an obstinate grandfather, a domineering mother, a father overly concerned with appearances, and a helpless son.

The dialogue excerpts, captured in Figures 1 through 4 below, serve as concrete textual evidence of the communicative patterns that define @Lei Zi's viral content. Figure 1 exemplifies the authoritative, top-down directive common in traditional family discourse, while Figure 2 illustrates the persistent, one-sided persuasion that characterizes intergenerational negotiations over everyday matters. The conversation in Figure 3 shifts to

pragmatic life planning, highlighting familial pressure on career choices, and Figure 4 extends this to societal expectations surrounding marriage timelines. Collectively, these texts logically demonstrate the core conflicts—over authority, autonomy, care, and life script—that @Lei Zi's skits dramatize. Their viral resonance on Douyin underscores how these specific, scripted interactions authentically mirror widespread tensions, transforming private family dialogues into a platform for public recognition and debate.

**Figure 1**

*The Dialogue Between Mother and Son. From Zeng, R. (2025, August 5). The Loofah Soup series: Home is forever my? [Video]. Douyin.*

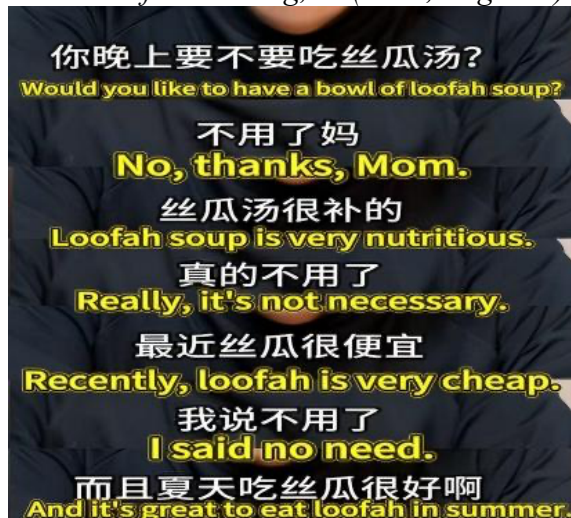


**Dialogue Text 1: Home is forever my? (Figure 1)**

- Mother: From now on, when I show care for you, you should listen. Don't talk back. Isn't that being unfilial? No arguing. Do you understand?

**Figure 2**

*Mom's Self-Talk. Zeng, R. (2025, August 5). The Loofah Soup [Video]. Douyin.*



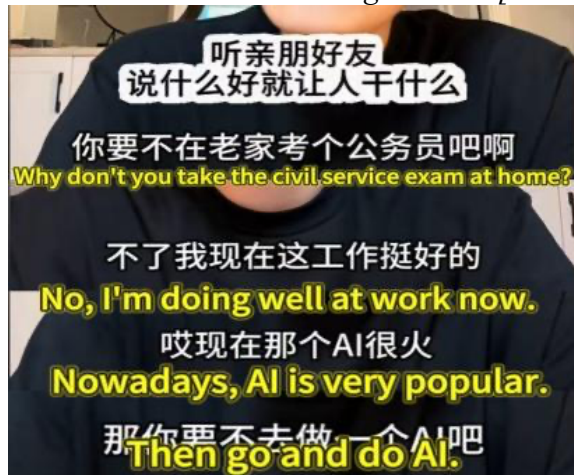
**Dialogue Text 2: The Loofah Soup (Figure 2)**

- Mother: Would you like some loofah soup tonight?
- Child: No, thank you, Mom.
- Mother: Loofah soup is very nourishing.
- Child: Really, it's not necessary.
- Mother: Loofah is quite cheap these days.

- Child: I said I don't want any.
- Mother: Besides, eating loofah in summer is really good for you.

**Figure 3**

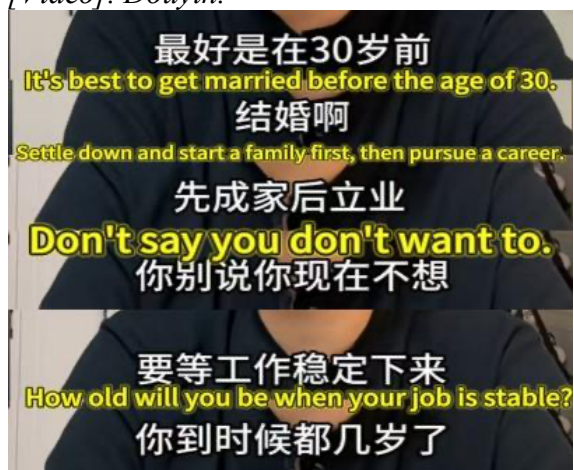
*Casual Work Suggestions From Family Members. Zeng, R. (2025, August 18). Loofah Soup Series: There is an HR living at home [Video]. Douyin.*

**Dialogue Text 3: There is an HR living at home (Figure 3)**

- Mother: Why don't you try taking the civil service exam back in our hometown?
- Child: No, I'm quite satisfied with my current job.
- Mother: Well, we listen to our friends say that AI is really hot right now. Why don't you go into AI?

**Figure 4**

*The Pressure From Parents to Get Married. Zeng, R. (2025, November 6). The Loofah Soup Series: Keeping up with the times- my parents told me to get married by the time I'm thirty. [Video]. Douyin.*

**Dialogue Text 4: Keeping up with the times- my parents told me to get married by the time I'm thirty. (Figure 4)**

- Mother: It's best to get married before you're 30. Start a family first, then build your career. Don't say you don't want to now. If you wait until your job is stable, how old will you be by then?

## Methodology

### Research Approach

This research adopts quantitative analysis to systematically describe and compare aggregated and visualized user portrait data from the short-video platform. The core objective is to reveal the intergenerational communication characteristics of the audience engaging with blogger @Lei Zi's family sitcoms and, based on this, analyze the collision of social values reflected in the discussions triggered by the content. The research field selected is the official creator background of the HuiTun Data application, which provides standardized and de-identified macro fan portrait data, offering a reliable source for objective demographic measurement. Quantitative analysis is chosen because the study aims to accurately quantify the proportion and distribution of different intergenerational groups (e.g., Generation Z and their parents) within the core interactive audience, providing an empirical basis for subsequent discussions on intergenerational differences and modern tensions, rather than delving into individual subjective narratives.

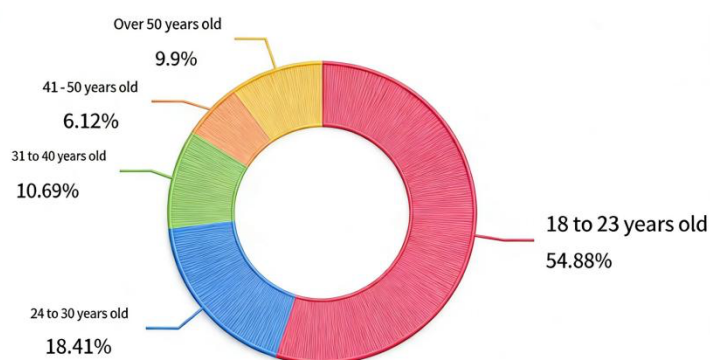
### Research Design

The core analysis focuses on the primary interaction and resonance groups of Douyin blogger @Lei Zi's video content. According to audience portraits provided by the HuiTun Data application, data analysis consciously centers on two generations with distinct historical coordinates in China's modernization process: the first generation of parents raised after reform and opening-up (born approximately between the late 1960s and early 1980s) and their Generation Z children (born approximately between the late 1990s and 2000s). As shown in Figure 5, over 73% of core interaction and resonance feedback comes from Generation Z users aged 18 to 30. These two generations are chosen due to their unique historical positions and value tensions in China's social modernization. Their interactions represent the collision and negotiation of significantly different social experiences and family ethics under the same roof.

**Figure 5**

*Age Distribution of the Videos' Audience*

#### | Age distribution



All data materials used in the research are sourced from the follower analysis module in the official creator background of the HuiTun Data application. These materials consist of public aggregated statistical information generated by the platform and contain no personally

identifiable data. The specific data collected include age segments of the fan group (presented in pie charts and percentages).

Data collection was systematically conducted from September 30, 2025, to January 25, 2026. First, researchers logged into the official data analysis background of the HuiTun Data application via a legally authorized account. They then navigated to the follower analysis section for @Lei Zi. For exportable table data, the “Data Download” function in the background was used to obtain original files. For core indicators presented only in visual charts (e.g., age segment pie charts), system screenshot tools were employed for collection, and the accurate percentage values displayed in the charts were manually recorded. Finally, downloaded data tables were integrated with values extracted from screenshot records to construct a unified, verifiable structured dataset, archived and managed according to data dimensions and collection dates.

This study primarily uses descriptive statistical analysis to process and interpret the collected quantitative data. First, exported tables and screenshot records were integrated into a unified analysis table to ensure data consistency and accuracy. Then, frequencies and percentages for each core dimension were calculated and reported. For example, the proportion of Generation Z users (18–30 years old) in the core interactive group (> 73%) was accurately calculated and presented using charts. The distribution of other intergenerational groups and interest tags was also described. Subsequently, based on statistical results, data were interpreted within a clear intergenerational analysis framework (reform-and-opening-up-era parents vs. Generation Z children). The analysis examined how the audience structure revealed by the data provides a quantitative basis for understanding tensions between traditional inertia and modern adaptation, as well as collisions between authoritative roles and equality concepts.

Finally, the analysis explicitly acknowledges that all data are algorithmically generated representations by the platform. The results reveal audience structure from the platform’s perspective. This limitation is an important aspect of understanding how digital platforms mediate social reality and is further reflected in the discussion section.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The entire research process strictly adheres to ethical norms for digital society research. All analysis data are derived directly from highly aggregated statistical results provided by the platform’s official background. The study does not involve crawling personal privacy information or acquiring non-public data. This operational process fully complies with China’s Internet Information Service Management Measures provisions on data use and the user service agreements of relevant platforms, ensuring the research’s compliance and ethical integrity.

## **Literature Review**

Intergenerational communication in contemporary Chinese families has become a focal point in the era of digitalization and globalization, with short video phenomena like *Loofah Soup* manifesting as contradictions between traditional communication patterns and modern values. This section reviews relevant theories and empirical studies to lay a foundation for subsequent analysis.

The Differential Mode of Association (Fei, 1947) is a key theory from Fei Xiaotong’s *From the Soil*, which systematically explains the unique family pattern in China as a core concept of

intergenerational communication. Fei described this mode as “concentric ripples that spread out when a stone is dropped into the water,” contrasting it with Western family norms, which he likened to “a neatly bundled bundle of firewood.” This theory provides a local framework for interpreting unique communication characteristics specific to Chinese families. Subsequent studies (e.g., Peking University Department of Sociology, 2019) confirmed the theory’s modern adaptability, noting that while the “blood-based core circle” persists, its boundaries have contracted to nuclear families. However, existing research rarely links this traditional framework to digital media contexts.

Friedrich Krotz’s Mediatization Theory (Krotz, 2009) offers a tool to interpret the impact of new media on younger generations’ demands for family communication in China. This theory provides an ideological basis for the media dimensions (technical, aesthetic, institutional) presented in videos. It effectively explains how short videos reshape private family interactions and promote modern transformation, yet few studies have combined it with how media forms facilitate cultural transformation in intergenerational communication.

Existing studies exhibit three gaps: first, over-reliance on single theories, lacking synergy between traditional sociological and new media theories; second, insufficient attention to short video cases as manifestations of changing traditional Chinese family communication modes; third, inadequate analysis of how digital media break the tradition that “family ugliness should not be publicized.” To address these gaps, this study integrates the Differential Mode of Association, Mediatization Theory, and cross-cultural psychology, using the *Loofah Soup* video as a case to explore the transformation of intergenerational communication in contemporary Chinese families.

## Analysis

### The Four Traits of Traditional Chinese Family Communication

The video exhibits a top-down communication mode and one-way authoritative output, rooted in Fei’s (1947) illustration:

Our pattern is not like a neatly bundled bundle of firewood, but rather like the concentric ripples that spread out when a stone is dropped into water. Each individual is at the center of the circle of influence that he exerts on others. Those who are within the circle’s reach are connected.

The most important kinship relationships in Chinese society are characterized by these concentric ripples, leading to a hierarchical order based on ethical norms. Elders occupy the center of family power with greater decision-making authority, while the younger generation is expected to follow obedience as a core behavioral guideline.

“In the differential mode of association, the concepts of public and private are relative. From any position within the circle, looking inward can also be regarded as being public” (Fei, 1947). This excerpt highlights the ambiguity between public and private domains in Chinese families, resulting in a strong coupling of emotional transmission and benefit expression in family communication. Emotions and interests intertwine, making communication a mixed form blending expressive and instrumental ties. The differential mode determines that the Chinese family functions as a community managing matters beyond the individual, encompassing economic, political, and religious roles. In other words, the Chinese “home” is fundamentally

a business organization. Thus, communication frequently involves practical issues such as family responsibilities, resource allocation, and intergenerational assistance—including children’s education, life planning, career choices, marriage, and childbirth.

In this elastic network, the self is always at the center. This is not individualism but egoism. Individualism is a concept that applies to groups, where each member is equal and has certain rights that cannot be violated. Egoism, on the other hand, is centered on the self and extends outward in ever-widening circles of relationships. (Fei, 1947)

Regarding the distinction between individualism and this self-centered essence, a self-centered parental perspective dominates communication. This is not “selfishness” but a natural logic through which parents instill values in children via ethical extension “for the sake of others” and emotional binding through “circular responsibility.”

Confucius most emphasized the word ‘Tui (推)’ (push/extend), likening it to the spreading ripples when a stone is dropped into water. He first acknowledged the existence of the self, the self in ‘Tui Ji Ji Ren (推己及人)’ (extend oneself to others). Following the concentric circles of ethical relationships, one can then extend outward. From the self to the family, from the family to the state, from the state to all under heaven—this is a single path. (Fei, 1992)

Given this traditional pattern, parents might neglect children’s individual needs, essentially treating children as extensions of themselves, believing that children following their values means “being responsible for oneself and the family.”

### **The Theory’s Adaptability and Communication Modes’ Breakthrough**

Fei (1947) stressed the elasticity and flexibility of the differential mode of association. As the sphere around the “self” expands and contracts, social relationships exhibit elasticity. This structural feature sustains vitality during the transition from tradition to modernity and enables boundary adjustments in response to environmental changes.

The formation of this mode is deeply intertwined with rural society’s production methods and cultural traditions. Under the impact of urbanization, modern individualization, and egalitarian values, the younger generation’s demand for “abolishing the outdated and retaining the beneficial” essentially aims to adapt the traditional family model to modern societal demands.

The beneficial aspects of traditional family characteristics are reflected in the family’s role as an emotional and responsibility-based community, as well as a cornerstone of social stability, providing crucial support for family continuity and individual risk resistance (Zhou, 2019). These traits still meet core needs of modern families.

However, the four core communication traits in Chinese families identified in this research are often viewed negatively. Overemphasis on these characteristics has overlooked or even violated children’s individual rights (e.g., personal rights, property rights, decision-making rights), causing emotional repression and psychological issues, becoming a major conflict point in modern individual awakening.

Beyond critiquing the four core traits through video form, the act of turning family conflicts into video content itself breaks traditional Chinese concepts stemming from the differential

mode of association. “Family ugliness should not be publicized” refers to private family affairs that should not be exposed publicly, essentially serving as a mechanism to safeguard family honor and face. Internal family conflicts were traditionally revealed only to core members within the family’s concentric circles.

Due to traditional values, young Chinese often avoid disclosing family matters to non-relatives. This reflects the circular restriction on publicizing family secrets—discussion is permitted only within the core circle of the differential mode. Traditionally, exposing domestic conflicts to others is equated with lack of family discipline and filial impiety. Young people hesitate to complain about family conflicts on social media, confirming the intergenerational transmission of the taboo against revealing family secrets. However, digital media’s rise has challenged this tradition. WeChat, China’s most popular mobile social media app, integrates functions similar to *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *WhatsApp*, allowing users to share images and texts and interact via comments. The younger generation blocks family members on WeChat to selectively expose internal family conflicts externally for emotional release while avoiding family reprimand (Fang, 2019). Promoted by new media, this phenomenon has become a new strategy to challenge traditional family soft rules.

Using scene reenactment to depict conflicts is common in short video production. Many videos employ reenactments to achieve ridicule and satire by imitating conflicting parties. However, the value of content like *Loofah Soup* lies not in satirically consuming family conflicts but in the act of publicizing them, actively breaking the traditional psychological constraint of “family ugliness should not be publicized,” overcoming underlying cultural resistance, and fundamentally representing young people’s courage to break through the differential mode. This attempt at openness is also a micro manifestation of the elastic transformation of the differential mode of association in modern society.

### **Cross-Cultural Psychology of Globalization**

Deep contradictions in contemporary Chinese family intergenerational communication stem from the collision of two heterogeneous cultural and psychological models: one rooted in local Confucian tradition’s authoritative filial piety ethics, centered on differential patterns and ethical principles; the other, introduced through globalization via education, digital media, and transnational mobility, emphasizes personal autonomy, equality, dignity, emotional expression, and de-authoritarianization. The sharp contrast between these models constitutes the psychological basis of current family intergenerational interaction.

Cross-cultural psychology provides a key framework for understanding this collision and individual coping strategies. Berry’s (2005) cultural adaptation theory notes that individuals adopt different strategies when exposed to different cultures. Faced with clashes between Chinese and Western family concepts, China’s younger generation is not simply Westernizing or adhering to tradition but attempting to absorb and practice personal autonomy and equal dialogue (Western values) while maintaining family emotional connections (traditional values). This psychological integration drives changes in intergenerational communication patterns.

At the level of communication practice, Communication Accommodation Theory posits that effective communication requires both parties to adjust language styles to adapt to each other (Giles & Coupland, 1991). Influenced by Western family concepts, China’s younger generation increasingly expects parents to reduce authoritative language (e.g., shifting from “you must...”

to “I suggest...” and demonstrate active listening to achieve bidirectional, mutually adaptable communication.

From family systems and personal development perspectives, Bowen’s (1978) family systems theory suggests that healthy families are emotionally interconnected yet respect individual differentiation. The overly unidirectional and hierarchical communication in traditional Chinese models may inhibit individual differentiation and self-expression among younger generations. Introducing equal dialogue promotes healthier emotional flow and individual growth within the system. Rogers’s (1951) humanistic psychology emphasizes unconditional positive regard for individual mental health. Western family concepts’ emphasis on respecting children’s independent experiences aligns more closely with this, whereas traditional models’ conditional regard—linked to obedience and achievement—may impose psychological pressure on children, affecting their self-worth.

Thus, the widespread resonance of the *Loofah Soup* video is a concentrated embodiment of this cross-cultural psychological conflict in the digital public sphere. It vividly demonstrates that globalization brings not only external concept infusion but also younger generations’ internal psychological expectations for family relationships. They use globally circulating discourse (e.g., personal boundaries, emotional manipulation) to reflect on traditional interaction scripts derived from the differential pattern. Their fundamental appeal is not to dismantle the family but to reconstruct a family framework that retains emotional connections while integrating equality and respect in a new cultural context.

### **Loofah Soup Video as a Method**

Mediatization is a “meta-process” of society concurrent with globalization and individualization. Media logic is not merely a communication tool but also reshapes cultural mechanisms and interaction patterns (Krotz, 2009).

This theory emphasizes historical changes in media content and aesthetic forms. Mediatization fundamentally influences perception conditions, content, and patterns. The *Loofah Soup* video transforms real family conflicts into humorous content through dramatic performance, symbolic simplification, and entertaining visual design. It resonates with younger generations while avoiding direct criticism’s sharpness, making modern demands more acceptable.

@Lei Zi played different family roles using exaggerated expressions and movements. This dramatic approach allows young viewers to intuitively perceive problems in traditional communication traits through amused yet genuine resonance, naturally conveying demands for equal dialogue. Fun designs like sound effect matching, script tags, and montage editing were also used. When children counter parents, background sound shifts to the card-playing sound effect from the game *Joyful Landlord*, comparing intergenerational preaching to game rounds. When elders collectively shift topics to children (e.g., marriage pressure, career choices), *Joyful Landlord*’s “Combo” sound effect combined with montage editing mocks elders’ collective criticism.

Schulz (2004), following mediatization theory, proposed the concept of “accommodation” in mediatization processes. Decentralization is a natural outcome of accommodation, referring to the weakening or reconstruction of traditional centralized authoritative structures. New media’s decentralization has broken traditional elderly dominance over discourse in Chinese families, making younger generations (bloggers, secondary creators, netizens) producers of family

culture, transforming private intergenerational conflicts into public discussion topics. Younger generations' modern demands thus break through family boundaries to gain broad attention.

As the *Loofah Soup* video went viral across platforms, it attracted coverage from mainstream Chinese media like Xinhua Net and Sohu, making younger generations' modern demands visible to wider audiences. Some elders, through watching videos and resonant comments, may reflect on their communication issues and confront children's demands, creating possibilities for desired communication.

The video utilizes the collaborative effect of technological, aesthetic, and institutional innovations to reveal core pathways through which new media redefine intergenerational communication.

### Conclusion

This study selects the viral video *Loofah Soup* as a case to explore what traditional characteristics of Chinese family inter-generational communication it embodies and how it promotes transformation in contemporary family communication models.

It interprets this through applying the Differential Mode of Association Theory in modern contexts, alongside cross-cultural psychology and new media theory. By enriching research on the modern adaptability of Fei Xiaotong's Differential Mode of Association and combining it with short video new media cultural phenomena, the study transcends textual limitations of traditional family research. It employs a cross-disciplinary method integrating digital culture and family sociology. For young people, this study provides a rational perspective for handling family communication conflicts. For families and society, it suggests that respecting young people's demands for emotional expression while inheriting traditional family ethics is crucial for building harmonious intergenerational relationships in the digital age.

This study's limitation is its primary reliance on qualitative analysis of video content and existing literature, without quantitative research (e.g., questionnaires or interviews) to verify young people's and parents' attitudes toward the phenomenon, resulting in insufficient empirical support for some conclusions. Additionally, the study focuses mainly on specific age groups of parents and children, overlooking differences caused by important factors like region and economic status in Chinese family studies.

Future studies can expand research scope while noting diversity among Chinese families. More offline cases could be incorporated, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate attitudes, motivations, and influencing factors across groups, enhancing research comprehensiveness.

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