Surviving or Thriving? Examining the Impact of Digital Connective Politics in Primary-Level Cadres' Live-Streaming E-Commerce in China

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This study aimed to empirically investigate the initiatives led by primary-level cadres to boost local economies in China through live-streaming e-commerce. The study employed semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis to examine how primary-level cadres' live-streaming e-commerce (PCLE) enables primary-level cadres to present a positive political image, improve poverty alleviation efforts and sales, and gain public trust. The findings indicated that virtual gifts, bullet comments, and tipping during live-streaming have emerged as novel forms of connective action. In addition, a new and fragile collective identity was observed among the cadres, viewers, platforms, and enterprises involved. Furthermore, PCLE has been found to aid the survival of local enterprises and promote economic growth, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the monetization of cadres' credibility poses risks to the credibility of governments. The current findings have significant implications for the live-streaming industry and digital governance at the local level.

Keywords: primary-level cadres, connective action, live-streaming, digital governance

In 2022, China witnessed more than 120 million e-commerce-related live-streaming sessions, with an average of more than CNY 320,000 worth of sessions per day. The total number of viewers reached 1.1 trillion, with more than 95 million products available and nearly 1.1 million active live-streamers (XinhuaNet, 2023). The e-commerce market in China reached CNY 1.2 trillion in 2022 and is projected to reach CNY 2.1 trillion by 2025 (iMedia, 2022).

In March 2020, the Cyberspace Administration of China, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Poverty Alleviation and Development (of the state council), and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology jointly issued "The Key Points of Online Poverty Alleviation" (Cyberspace

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Administration of China, 2020a). President Xi Jinping visited Jinmi village[1] in Zhashui County, Shaanxi Province, and actively participated in live-streaming e-commerce, recognizing the local specialty fungus in that area as a "small fungus, big industry" (China National Radio, 2022, p. 1). After President Xi's visit, Zhashui fungus became the most sought-after commodity on the Internet, with 20 million netizens purchasing approximately 20 tons of fungus worth more than CNY 3 million (XinhuaNet, 2020), equivalent to four months' worth of sales of fungus on Taobao in Zhashui County. President Xi's visit also advanced the convergence of live-streaming e-commerce with the targeted poverty alleviation (TPA) program[2] (China National Radio, 2022), mobilizing local government officials to promote local products and industries through primary-level cadres[3] by engaging in live-streaming e-commerce (PCLE). Gradually, PCLE evolved into a political campaign led by cadres, viewers, enterprises, and digital platforms to highlight political awareness and correctness while also embracing digital governance and navigating the economic downturn caused by the pandemic.

By employing the connective action theory, this study aims to examine the emergence of PCLE as a form of political campaign and explore the motivations of key actors, including the government, digital platforms, enterprises, and viewers, by analyzing their cultural traits and ideological understanding of "connectiveness." Additionally, the study investigates the political, economic, and digital factors associated with PCLE to identify the risks and potentials of digital governance.

The following section provides a comprehensive review of the characteristics of live-streaming and e-commerce. Next, we situate our study within the current debate on collective identity and connective action, while considering prior research on PCLE. The third section presents three key findings related to the emergence of a new connective tool, its connective role, and the outcomes of this connective action.

A Striking Convergence: The Fusion of Live-Streaming and E-Commerce

Live-streaming e-commerce refers to the sale of products through instant communication conducted by a live-streamer (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). China, as the world's largest e-commerce market, has witnessed a significant emphasis on live-streaming by platforms such as Alibaba, JD, and Pinduoduo. In 2022, the government introduced the "prospering agriculture through e-

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[1] Located in the depths of the Qinling Mountains, the village has eliminated poverty in recent years by developing its fungus industry.

[2] A grand socioeconomic program led by the Chinese Communist Party since 2014, aiming to lift more than 70 million rural residents above the poverty line by the end of 2020 and complete the building of a "well-off society (xiaokang shehui) in an all-around way" by 2020 (China National Radio, 2022, p. 7).

[3] China's bureaucratic system is divided into five levels: National, provincial, department, county, and village. Therefore, generally speaking, compared with the central government, primary-level cadres refer to the officials of the county (district, city) committee and town/street/village cadres at the fourth and fifth levels.

commerce" project to promote rural e-commerce (Shu Shang Xing Nong)[4] (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, 2022).

The growing popularity of live-streaming e-commerce has led to research on customer motivations to buy products or engage in live-streaming e-commerce (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2017), including the influence of online celebrities (Peng, Cui, Chung, & Zheng, 2020), quasi-social interaction (Sun, Shao, Li, Guo, & Nie, 2019), as well as content atmosphere, novelty, and authenticity (Lu, Xia, & Wigdor, 2018). Meanwhile, empirical studies have also analyzed viewing behavior (Wu, Chen, & Chiang, 2021), purchase intention (Hou, Guan, Li, Hu, & Chong, 2020), and emotional action (Meng, Duan, Zhao, Lü, & Chen, 2021), and factors such as the celebrity effect (Wu et al., 2021), lifestyle fit uncertainty (Cheng, Hu, Lu, & Hong, 2019), perceived ease of use, situational factors, and the herd effect (Yin, 2020).

Live-streamers are central to the ecosystem and strive to become Internet celebrities both entrepreneurially and interdependently (Cunningham, Craig, & Lv, 2019). However, the sustainability of live-streaming varies considerably. While certain live-streamers are renowned for their multimillion-dollar earnings (Daxau Consulting, 2017), the reality for the broader population is more modest. Approximately 5% of people earn more than CNY 5,000 per month, and a small fraction, around 0.56%, earns between CNY 10,000 and CNY 20,000 monthly (Jianyi Finance and Economics, 2020). The ability of live-streamers to become *liuliang* stars (individuals with high traffic flow) depends more on maximizing content monetization through virtual gifts than technological infrastructure, thereby intensifying competition (Hou et al., 2020). Interestingly, virtual gifts have been compared with masks that are used for maintaining relationships and bonds rather than valuing commodities (Zou, 2018), with practices such as "red packets," a traditional culture of gift-giving widely accepted in live-streaming, to obscure the profiteering agenda. While the striking convergence of live-streaming and e-commerce has driven the emergence of PCLE in China, limited research has addressed the cadre, the newest form of Wanghong (Internet celebrity), from the perspective of digital governance. Nonetheless, some scholars have documented the potentials and risks associated with this political campaign (Pan, 2020).

Conceptual Framework: Connective Action Theory

Concurrent with the continued development of Internet-enabled ICTs, the traditional notion of "collective action" has given way to the more contemporary concept of "connective action" (Lundgaard & Razmerita, 2016). Collective action traditionally revolves around organized resources and collective identities, such as social group memberships and shared ideologies, and forms the foundation of advocacy efforts (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005). In contrast, connective action is fluid, lacking defined leaders or structures, and members can easily join or leave these movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Connective action can be understood as "digitally networked action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 743) facilitated by ICTs that enable personalized communication and content sharing by individuals with their networks, often through social media, to fulfill personalized objectives. In this regard, the concept of networks has been used to explain the internal order and coherence of social movements, replacing the need for a unified collective identity (Bennett &

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[4] The goal of Shu Shang Xing Nong is to enhance the use of digital technology and data resources in rural commerce to improve digitalization and networking.

Segerberg, 2012). Consequently, collective identity no longer constitutes a central or necessary factor of protest mobilization. Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) work sparked scholarly debate on the role of collective identity in social movements in the digital age, with some claiming that connective action has major disadvantages (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Spann et al., 2021). For instance, by examining the Mexican #YoSoy132 student movement of 2012, Treré (2015) found that the "digital comfort zones" created by protesters helped lower the costs of activism and reinforce their internal solidarity through "ludic activism," demonstrating the importance of internal communicative dynamics within social media and rediscovering the linkage between collective identity and internal communication (p. 911).

While collective identity has historically explained the coherence observed in mass movements, such as feminist, student, and environmental movements during the 1970s and 1980s (Melucci, 1996), personal networks complement rather than substitute it. As a result, research has attempted to shift the focus from platforms and organizations to the role of specific contexts and individual activists (Bimber et al., 2005). Bakardjieva (2015) argues that various factors, including the nature of demands, the sociopolitical climate, and the collective as well as individual identities of participants, form the basis for an online movement and ensure its sustainability, success, and/or failure. For example, a hashtag indicates the complexity of discourse, systemic influence, and social action. Given the growing significance of digital environments in political engagement, researchers have made considerable efforts to update and refine the connective action theory (Dijck & Poell, 2013). Bimber and colleagues (2005) contributed to this discourse by examining social media as a platform that blurs the boundary between public and private spheres in political engagement, highlighting the need for new theories to analyze the changing landscape of political action. Building on these insights, Dijck and Poell (2013) defined connective action as a form of action driven by the unique logic of social media. By acknowledging the distinct characteristics of digital platforms, this definition enables a more comprehensive analysis of how online interactions influence the development and execution of collective action. Overall, the synthesis of these studies underscores the evolving nature of political engagement in the digital age and the importance of continually updating theoretical frameworks to reflect these changes.

Despite the significant emphasis on digital media, few studies have examined emerging technology-enabled networks associated with virtual gifts (Hou et al., 2020), such as bullet comments and tipping (Lee, Yen, Chiu, King, & Fu, 2018), beyond the realm of comments or retweets, as crucial components for facilitating connective action through brokering and bridging coalitions. Moreover, the logic of connective action has faced criticism for neglecting the specific contextual factors surrounding online campaigns and its limited understanding of how collective identity influences activists and their use of digital media to accomplish their goals (Pond & Lewis, 2017; Postill, 2013). Lastly, live-streaming as a digital tool, platform, or e-service has not been sufficiently examined as a driver of connective action and cultural expressions within specific contexts.

Background, Context, and Case Study of PCLE

With the advent of the "Internet plus" (Hu lian wang jia) era, which has gained national attention, the Chinese government is actively engaged in formulating policies to promote the development of e-commerce and digital villages (see Table 1).

Table 1. Key Policies to Facilitate the Growth of E-Commerce in Rural Areas in China.

	Project Name	Year	Highlights
1	The "Internet Plus" Agricultural Products out of the Village and Into the City Project (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, 2020)	2019	• Nurture county-level agricultural product industrial operation entities; • Establish a high-quality and distinctive agricultural product supply chain;
2	The National Digital Village Pilot Project (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, 2020)	2020	• Cultivate Internet agricultural product brands; • Integrate and gather San Nong (agriculture, rural and farmer) data resources and launch a pilot of the San Nong data platform.
3	The In-Depth Promotion of E-Commerce Into the Villages and Agricultural Products out of the Village and Into the City Project (Renmin Net, 2021)	2021	• Expand the coverage of e-commerce in rural areas. • Improve the rural commercial circulation system;
4	The Digital Village Development Action Plan (2022–2025; Cyberspace Administration of China, 2022)	2022	• Clarify the development goals, key tasks, and safeguarding measures of digital villages in the post-COVID stage, especially in terms of rural information infrastructure; • Develop information terminals, technical products, and application that adapt to the characteristics of San Nong

With increased authority delegated by the central state (Heberer & Schubert, 2012), local governments in China face pressure to generate profits (Duckett, 2001), execute development plans (Wu, 2017), and maximize GDP revenue for career advancement. Zhao (2022) found that more developed provinces issued a greater number of policies and regulations through their subordinate cities and districts, with more detailed policies (e.g., Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Fujian; Qg.gov.cn, 2022). However, most of these policies were launched between the end of March and mid-July 2020 and only lasted two to three years, which is shorter than the typical duration of local policies (e.g., five years). This implies that the impact of COVID-19 on offline physical sales in China made local governments recognize the importance of online e-commerce in alleviating the economic consequences of the pandemic, but there was generally a cautious approach during 2020–2021. Particularly, the "Notice on Further Promoting Charity Live-streaming" issued by Anhui Province regulates and restricts live-streaming e-commerce conducted by cadres (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2020b), who are required to exercise self-censorship and caution in their public discourse, refrain from engaging in noncharitable activities, and not receive any form of remuneration. Moreover, the notice established rules for officials conducting live-streaming e-commerce in terms of process standardization, product admittance, quality control, and communication supervision.

Around 2022, the central state supported the practice of e-commerce live-streaming for rural live-streamers by implementing regulations and guidelines. The Digital Rural Development Plan emphasizes the need to enhance the development of e-commerce for agricultural products, guide e-commerce platforms in establishing standardized and well-organized distribution channels, and leverage new models such as social

e-commerce and live-streaming e-commerce (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2022). Additionally, the 20th National Congress highlighted the government's commitment to prioritizing the real economy, accelerating the development of the digital economy, and promoting its integration with the real economy (The State Council, 2022).

While there are no more specific policies directly related to the PCLE beyond 2020, the government has demonstrated a positive attitude toward it, as evidenced by the favorable comments made by the state media regarding the PCLE and the government's policies on promoting rural e-commerce live-streaming during the last two years (refer to NetEase, 2022; People.cn, 2021, 2023). For instance, He Jiaolong, the deputy director of the Xinjiang Ili Kazak Autonomous Prefecture Bureau of Culture and Tourism, was recognized as one of the "2022 Figures of San Nong"[5] in January 2023, with *Beijing Daily* (2023) stating that "Public officials are not making a show by selling goods through short video or live-streaming . . . It represents a new industry and channel that can drive local economic development under the new economic form" (p. 2). This study, in line with the connective action theory, aims to explore how Chinese primary-level cadres participate in this political campaign-style activity to embrace digital governance through live-streaming e-commerce under a politically stressful environment.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative mixed-method approach using discourse analysis, online observation, and semi-structured interviews. The use of mixed methods was driven by pragmatism as a philosophy (Migiro & Magangi, 2011), employing both inductive and deductive logic to yield well-supported conclusions. Data collection was conducted in two steps. First, online observation was conducted from October 2019 to late December 2019 to identify the most suitable samples, including critically observing individuals during live-streaming e-commerce, capturing background information, message performances, dynamic behaviors, motivative actions, and their preferences for cohosting the show or Lianmai.[6] The discourse analysis was then performed to compare the nature of the discourses delivered to audiences, the permeation of overarching themes of "Helping the farmer" and "Public Benefit Activity" in the live-streams with the nature of interactive functionality, such as bullet comments and tipping, which are genre-defining signifiers. Therefore, to comprehensively document, analyze, and evaluate the phenomenon, this first step generated more than 80,000 words of recorded observations.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather the perspectives of grassroots primary-level cadres and explore their self-perceptions regarding the usage, adaptation, and challenges encountered when employing live-streaming e-commerce. Given the difficulty of gaining access to Chinese political leaders, two approaches were employed to access the interviewees. First, one of the authors, who had previously served as a volunteer in the town of Beichuan (Sichuan), used their connections with local cadres. Additionally, with the networking support from Alibaba, another author was invited to join a WeChat

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[5] Figures of San Nong are under the guidance of the General Office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and the National Rural Revitalization Bureau, among others, to rank excellent primary-level officials in the work of San Nong every year.

[6] Viewers connect with the live streamer through online voice calls during live-streaming.

group named "cadres' live-streaming FOR International Tea Day." Using a snowball sampling approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Chinese primary-level cadres from 12 counties and townships who engaged in live-streaming e-commerce between October 2019 and late December 2020. The inclusion of a broad range of 12 counties and townships, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, expanded the research scope. To elucidate the dynamic live-streaming practices and associated skills and experiences of the cadres, one or two interviewees were selected from each county and town. While the selection criteria focused on individuals who had used live-streaming e-commerce, even to a limited extent, all the samples were critically selected from western China, a region consisting of underdeveloped areas categorized as fourth- and fifth-tier regions with weak infrastructure and minimal reliance on digital technology. The initial adoption of live-streaming e-commerce in rural areas, which aligns with China's TPA program, allows for the implementation of new approaches to digital poverty alleviation.

The interview questions were developed based on the results derived from discourse analysis and online observation. The structure of the interview questions includes the intertwined relationships among connective tool, role, and outcome, using both an inductive approach (e.g., theme collections through online observation and discourse analysis) and a deductive approach (e.g., connective action theory).

Connective tool: How do the cadres initiate their live-streaming activities? Which digital tools or live-streaming settings do they use to connect and interact with the audience? Specifically, what are the digital affordances of live-streaming? How do they collaborate with the management team behind the scenes during live-streaming? How do they relate live-streaming e-commerce to the development of local agriculture or tourism industries?

Connective role: What is the nature of cadres' self-identity and dynamic perceptions regarding audiences/enterprise/platforms when participating in PCLE? In other words, how do the cadres identify themselves/audiences/enterprises/platforms throughout the entire process of live-streaming e-commerce? And what are the underlying reasons for these perceptions? What are their motivations for participating in PCLE?

Connective outcome: What benefits do cadres gain from participating in PCLE, and what difficulties do they encounter? Are there any political security concerns, potential conflicts/disorder, and political interactions between the local and central governments? How do the cadres address these dilemmas?

This combined approach led to an in-depth understanding of PCLE, establishing a connection between the primary-level cadres' aspirations to project a positive political persona, enhance their poverty alleviation records, increase sales, and gain the trust of people. In-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted, with each interview lasting one to two hours, except in two cases where video calls were conducted via WeChat due to COVID-19 safety regulations. All the interviewees were briefed on the ethical guidelines, provided their informed verbal consent, and were guaranteed anonymity when necessary.

Results and Discussion

This study examined and generated three key findings that shed light on the precarity of connective tools, collective identity, and connective outcomes, which penetrate the entire process and various aspects

of PCLE. These findings aim to contribute to an in-depth understanding of "digitally networked action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 743) derived from the contemporary concept of "connective action" (Lundgaard & Razmerita, 2016).

New Connective Tool: Is Live-Streaming E-Commerce a Digital Pandora's Box?

The introduction of this new connective tool revolutionized the digital governance of live-streaming, surpassing the limitations of traditional approaches. As a result, the cadres' attitudes and strategies toward PCLE became fluid and complex, influenced by the local digital infrastructure and varying levels of digital literacy. This gave rise to a wide range of digital possibilities, akin to opening a Pandora's box filled with both opportunities and dangers. The cadres envisioned and implemented these possibilities to achieve their personalized objectives.

First, the institutional digital infrastructure within the e-commerce industry was found to influence the degree of the cadres' political engagement and the PCLE strategies they employed.

Regarding political engagement, it was observed that systematic institutional participation played a crucial role in supporting PCLE, with active participation from departments such as the Publicity Department, Investment Promotion Bureau, Science and Technology Bureau, Water Resources Department, Culture and Tourism Bureau, and Commerce Bureau. However, for underdeveloped counties with limited experience and ossified thinking, conducting PCLE poses more of a burden than an opportunity. In such cases, primary-level cadres often resort to formalistic approaches to live-streaming. Conversely, in counties with a systematic e-commerce institutional foundation, cadres actively participate in live-streaming e-commerce, and the locally adopted PCLE strategies are more organized. The engagement is centered around a deeply engaging self-promotion narrative, often led by the local government through an entrepreneurial plan. County mayor Wang stated that an elaborate plan had been constructed before the live-streaming event:

> The Publicity Department and Investment Promotion Bureau of the county partnered to lead the live-streaming. The Commerce Bureau was in charge of contacting the local suppliers and determining the products that were to be promoted, and the Culture and Tourism Bureau coordinated with the local scenic places that designed a tour to promote through live-streaming.

In terms of PCLE strategies, some cadres viewed live-streaming e-commerce as an opportunity to facilitate their local digital infrastructure for marketing and reconfigure their networking dynamics. Deputy Secretary Ren from C County considered live-streaming as an inspiration for local companies to shift their operations to online sales. He stated,

> In C county, we had no company that achieved growth these years. That's why I did the live-stream. I want them to know there's a better way [live-streaming e-commerce] for enterprises' development. A tea business owner has started to film short videos to sell her tea.

Some cadres used live-streaming e-commerce as a powerful connective tool to promote local tourism, boost tertiary industries, and attract capital investments. A cadre from G County explained that selling agricultural products was not suitable for the development trajectory of his jurisdiction; however, it provided a means of advertising local attractions and selling tickets through live-streaming.

Second, the degree of live-streaming e-commerce experiences and digital literacy of the cadres influenced the digital possibilities of connective tools, thereby impacting the local government's ability to select an appropriate digital platform and take the lead. This involved collaboration between local authorities and digital platforms in terms of labor assignment.

Regarding live-streaming e-commerce experiences, it was observed that counties with rich experience tended to partner with top-tier e-commerce platforms (e.g., Taobao, Kuaishou, and Douyin). This was in stark contrast to their less-experienced counterparts, which could only collaborate with local TV stations. Deputy Mayor Zheng noted that local TV stations were either too traditional or inept at handling live-streaming e-commerce. In contrast, Deputy Mayor Xie from C County stated that his participation in live-streaming e-commerce was a part of the East-West Pairing-Up Program, which is a state-initiated poverty alleviation program. Xie remarked, "Taobao was very professional, it started promoting before the live-streaming and had already warmed up the live-stream room before I entered."

Regarding individual digital literacy, for local cadres already engaged in live-streaming e-commerce, receiving state approval could advance industrial growth at the local level, which sheds light on the extent to which personal connective action is driven by digital technologies. These cadres push the boundaries of what is admissible on the screen for interactive entertainment even as the online space remains tightly governed in China. They claimed that live-streaming theoretically provides an equal opportunity to help farmers and enterprises sell products and increase their income, aligning with the objectives of the poverty alleviation program. Interviewee Chen Canping, deputy mayor of Anhua County, Hunan Province, said: "I sing songs and perform hard because one family can be lifted out of poverty when I sell products via live-streaming for one afternoon."

Comparatively, some counties with a low level of digital literacy failed to recognize the immense potential of live-streaming e-commerce and engaged in PCLE reluctantly. Consequently, they did not encounter the same connective possibilities. With limited knowledge about live-streaming and no prior preparation, some cadres were pushed to the forefront by bureaucracy and formalism (interviewee coordinator B from F County).

New Connective Roles: Precarious Collective Identity

When examining the connective role played by cadres, viewers, platforms, and enterprises, we found a dynamic and precarious collective identity shaped by the networked interactions between individual and collective levels. PCLE enabled viewers to buy products at affordable prices, local enterprises to gain short-term profits, and cadres to promote the economic development of their counties and realize their political objectives. Additionally, the platforms offered logistics and after-sales services, enriched sales

content, expanded the market, and improved their popularity in rural areas. As a result, a collective identity has emerged, forming a novel productive consumption relationship.

However, the collective identity among these actors is precarious and ephemeral because of their complex interests and relationships. At the individual level, being a cadre and a live-streamer represent two polar identities for primary-level cadres. During the interviews, some cadres chose to retain their political identity (e.g., *guan yuan*)[7] and refused to embrace their identity as entertainers. Alternatively, some strategically employed the logic of celebrity fandom to govern the campaigns, a concept referred to as "fandom governance," defined as a fan-logic of fashionable ideotainment (Zou, 2019). Other cadres perceived themselves somewhere in between these two identities. For instance, coordinator A perceived himself as the face of F County and felt no identity transformation. Similarly, Deputy Mayor X stated, "Cadres should act like civil servants and behave themselves; we are neither live-streamers nor sellers, we have to be practical and realistic [*shishi qiushi*]." Interestingly, we observed that these so-called *guan yuan* frequently employ commercial or fandom discourse to connect with the "audience" as "consumers" or "fans," and are transformed from public servants to salesmen. The live-stream conducted by Mayor X exemplifies this point:

> We'll launch a new batch of tea priced at ¥79. Normally I don't sign autographs on tea of this price, but today I am signing some of these randomly and putting them here. If you are lucky, you may buy the one with my autograph, and it will absolutely be a good deal if you buy it now.

Second, cadres who employed the concept of fashionable ideotainment demonstrated a strong awareness of their role as live-streamers and took a flexible approach to expressing their personal views without relying on approved scripts. Deputy Secretary C perceived herself as a saleswoman. She stated, "I was like an assistant to the big star Lijiaqi; I tried my best to help sell out." The most renowned cadres were those who performed a triple role simultaneously—as live-streamers, salespersons, and cadres. For instance, Deputy Mayor Chen Canping mentioned, "Seize the opportunity and buy it now! I'll sing a song for you after your purchase. What do you want to hear? Love songs? *Errenzhuan* songs (the traditional music in northeast China)? How about folk songs?" Moreover, deputy mayor Jin Xuehua stated, "You can get my autograph and customized cartoon card for every ¥88 purchase." Cadre Qiu Xueming used to frequently deploy entertaining discourse and was eager to promote her identity as an Internet celebrity, when she recognized live-streaming e-commerce to be an efficient way to alleviate local poverty. Deputy Mayor Chen said, "I could not keep a low profile, I am a *Wanghong* (Internet celebrity); such a profile actually helps my folks sell." We have observed this cadre type, and their identification as *Wanghong* and strategical employment of marketing strategies precisely align with their logic of fandom governance, which is a salient aspect of the fashionable digital economy and is employed in the process of governing institutional innovation. However, the relationship between cadres and viewers differs significantly from that between traditional idols and fans as they have distinct purposes for participating in live-streaming.

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[7] The local cadres identify themselves as guan yuan or xian zhang, a term that referred to "Lord" in the Qing dynasty. They were literally called cadres during the early foundation of the People's Republic of China but are now called civil servants.

Collective identity plays a critical role in shaping the image of cadres as dedicated public servants with political integrity as they form alliances with various strategic groups, such as fans, enterprises, and digital platforms. Some cadres perceive PCLE as a consensus that benefits both the government and the enterprises. One of them stated, "There is no loss for them [enterprises], they didn't spend money on advertising before. They are willing to cooperate with us for publicity and to rake in influence." While cadres benefit from their credibility to boost sales for enterprises in exchange for economic recovery to meet poverty alleviation targets, companies embrace live-streaming e-commerce to survive the COVID-19-induced economic downturn.

This cooperation between the government and enterprises can be seen as an attempt by local enterprises to develop a new business and advertising model, aligning with the New Close and Clean Government-Business Ties (*qin qing guanxi*) initiative being promoted by the state. However, this collective identity is fragile and ephemeral because of the complex and dynamic relationships among cadres, viewers, enterprises, and the platform.

Live-streaming platforms such as Taobao and Douyin play an important role in boosting the capital-change process between the government and corporations. These platforms conveniently introduce live-streaming schemes to support the government's poverty alleviation goal. However, with a strong user base, such platforms also solicit companies to become suppliers of live-streaming e-commerce. Deputy Secretary Ren commented that Taobao uses algorithms and consumer traffic data to force live-streamers to lower product prices and increase sales, benefiting from the emerging *Wanghong* economy: "If companies don't accept Taobao's algorithm rules and pay for consumer traffic, they will be suppressed by Taobao, thereby lowering their rankings in information flow. It's a vicious cycle for companies."

In addition, cadres' concerns regarding local companies suffering financial losses in the price war contradict their identities as live-streamers responsible for promoting consumption and lowering prices. For companies, being selected for PCLE implies selling products at below-market prices, which is counterproductive to their long-term interests. Deputy Mayor Zheng shared his worries: "We sell tea at a seven-for-five price, Mayor Xie and I were afraid to sell too much [through live-streaming]. Being small size enterprises, indigenous companies are vulnerable to a loss worth tens of thousands."

Regarding the viewers who interactively engage in such political campaign-style live-streaming through new digital "connectives," such as bullet comments, virtual gifts, and voluntary tipping, their responses can be divided into two categories. Some viewers support the embellished image of local cadres and believe in their genuine efforts while others doubt that cadres engage in backroom dealings with enterprises and platforms. The supportive attitudes toward PCLE were cemented by narratives emphasizing "bringing wealth to the people," "hands-on governance," "working for the benefit of farmers," and "solving marketing problems and alleviating rural poverty." These narratives highlight how local cadres are making good use of live-streaming e-commerce to empower the people and fight poverty.

However, cadres' identities were interpreted negatively by some viewers, who self-identified as skeptics, supervisors, or victims, and used bullet comments to term such connective activities as "greedy," "scheming," "publicity tricks," "bluffing," and "unregulated selling." The viewers particularly criticized the

practice of tipping in live-streaming, which has increased exponentially. Even though tipping has been regarded as "a marketing stunt masquerading as spontaneous viewer activity" (Lee et al., 2018, p. 2), themes of dissidence recur frequently through bullet comments, which are incompatible with mainstream political and cultural expectations. The state has responded by establishing clear guidelines on acceptable content, leading to numerous changes. Cadres have become cautious about soliciting tips and are eager to clarify that any received tips would be donated to charity organizations under proper supervision. Moreover, skepticism about kickbacks and bribes from suppliers has caused cadres to self-censor and reflect on PCLE. One interviewee stated,

> I think it is vicious competition for companies. You can't live-streaming for every company. For example, C County sells fungus, why do you choose this company to sell on live-streaming rather than others? Is it unfair? Or is it because you have a better relationship with this company?

To address this situation, one of the counties under consideration in this study registered a unified brand for the entire county, allowing companies that meet quality standards to use the brand and sell on a live-streaming. Nevertheless, these dynamics contribute to the fluctuating nature of collective identity among these actors, indicating the need for a sense of "we" (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) when personalized communication intersects with the importance of collective identity.

New Connective Outcomes: Coexistence of Potentials and Risks

This research highlights the dual nature of digital connectives, encompassing both digital and political logic, and underscores the importance of considering both aspects for a comprehensive coherence of collective actors and their interplay with personal networks. From the perspective of digital logic, the adoption of digital governance promotes the economic development of these counties and helps cadres obtain their political objectives. However, from the perspective of political logic, the monetization of cadres' credibility poses risks to the overall credibility of governments.

First, the prevalence of PCLE has led to administrative malpractices. Striving to achieve the goal of poverty alleviation, some cadres were coerced into engaging in PCLE. Coordinator Li stated, "Every department was informed to watch the live-stream that night. It was said that every county was watching it." In May 2020, Chenggu County in Hanzhong City, Shaanxi Province, issued a document requiring county cadres to invest a minimum of CNY 50 before the live-streaming event (*Guangming Daily,* 2020). Although the local poverty alleviation leading group admitted the malpractice and apologized publicly, the state's implicitly encouraging attitude toward PCLE transformed into an ambiguous and conniving gesture when an article titled "Cadres-Led Live-streaming E-Commerce Calls for Prevention of Formalism" was published by state media Xinhua News Agency, subtly suggesting that PCLE may not be a sustainable solution for alleviating poverty (XinhuaNet, 2020).

Second, viewers of live-streaming e-commerce are considered a part of consumer traffic (Hou et al., 2020), whose potential profitability collides with the government's political mission to serve the people. Viewers can be categorized as consumers, whose purchasing behavior can support indigenous enterprises

in alleviating poverty, and the people (*renmin*), who expect cadres to prioritize their service and selfless dedication. However, this study found that cadres exploit their credibility as a competitive edge to win viewers' trust, drive engagement, and eventually boost consumption. Therefore, they employ a discourse strategy that combines government authority, effectively transforming it into social capital in the competition for consumer traffic. For instance, Deputy President Zhao, a poverty alleviation liaison in A County, referred to the audience in the live-stream room as "comrades"[8] to distinguish himself from other Internet celebrities and encourage more engagement. Highlighting one's political identity is another approach that cadres adopt to capture the attention of viewers.

Cadres also employ pricing strategies to foster interaction with viewers in exchange for higher sales figures. Deputy Secretary Ren mentioned that the host requested him to pretend to call the supplier for a favorable price during the live-streaming even though the price had already been settled:

> For someone like me, who watches live-streams all the time, these sales gimmicks are no surprise. Maybe they [outsourced company] think it's more appealing to do this. However, some cadres have never watched live-streams before, they may find these gimmicks interesting, but for me, it's understandable and normal.

By presenting themselves as selfless public servants and engaging in fake negotiations with suppliers to lower prices, cadres enhance their credibility and conceal the commercial purposes behind the live-streaming events.

Third, PCLE was perceived as a guarantee of product quality. This, however, put cadres' credibility at risk in that the cadre hosting a particular live-stream could be blamed for any inferior product quality. Deputy President Zhao expressed his concerns about this potential risk, stating, "Product quality should definitely be good because it embodies the government's credibility. If we [cadres] sell inferior products, consumers may be fooled for once, but there will be no second chance. The whole PCLE could fail." Deputy Mayor Xie echoed these concerns, stating that viewers naturally expect the products featured in live-streaming e-commerce to embody government credibility, implying that the quality of these products should have been supervised by the government.

Fourth, the act of virtual gift-giving in real time has become a matter of concern for PCLE. Since viewers purchase virtual gifts with real money, there is increased skepticism regarding the allocation of the digital currency received. For instance, a viewer criticized and commented in real time: "Are you [cadres] violating the Eight-Point Frugality Code[9] by taking *Doubi*?"[10](User A, personal communication, February 4, 2020). The actual expenditure of the digital currency received through PCLE has raised questions about the

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[8] In Chinese, the translation of "comrade" is 同志 (tongzhì), literally meaning (people with) the same spirit, goal, ambition, and other attributes.

[9] The Eight-Point Frugality Code was introduced in 2012 to improve the political bureau's role in leading the party to improve work styles.

[10] Doubi is the digital currency purchased with users' real money and can be used to buy virtual gifts for streamers.

rectitude and integrity of the cadres, reflecting the conflict between monetizing the credibility of government officials and treating the public as profitable consumer traffic.

On August 28, 2020, Hong Tianyun, deputy director of The State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development, pointed out in his speech, with ambiguity, "we neither oppose live-streaming e-commerce nor do we advocate it. However, we strongly encourage celebrities to jump on this bandwagon, especially those who can influence consumers" (Renmin Net, 2020, p. 2). Hence, on the one hand, the malpractice and negative responses from viewers have resulted in ambiguous attitudes toward PCLE. On the other hand, well-known cadres such as He Jiaolong and Chen Canping continue to actively participate in the live-streaming events in 2023, demonstrating both the inherent potential and risks associated with PCLE.

Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

The current empirical research on a primary-level cadre-led initiative has yielded several key findings. First, virtual gifts, bullet comments, and tipping during live-streaming have emerged as new forms of connective action, with their accompanying digital "possibilities" varying based on the digital literacy and infrastructure available in different regions. Second, a fragile collective identity has been observed among cadres, viewers, platforms, and enterprises, shaped by networked interactions at both individual and collective levels. Third, PCLE has had a dual effect, aiding local enterprises in surviving and promoting economic growth during the pandemic while also posing risks to government credibility due to the monetization of cadres' credibility. Specifically, three emerging political "strategies" have been examined: digital governance empowered by connective tools, political performance driven by connective roles, and political safety concerns induced by connective outcomes.

Regarding digital governance, live-streaming e-commerce is recognized as a new connective tool for digital governance, offering both opportunities and risks depending on the digital literacy and infrastructure of the participants involved. Even so, it is deemed a crucial form of political engagement for local governments, given the rapid advancements in digital technology and market dynamics. However, the inherent uncertainty and dynamism of this form of digital governance raise concerns regarding its techno-optimistic origins and require a cautious approach. Therefore, to ensure sustainability and meet governance needs, primary-level cadres should be professionally trained in media literacy, or the local government could seek the help of professionals in this field.

The concept of political performance differs in the context of live-streaming events compared with the typical dynamic between idols and fans in traditional fandom, connected by emotions, forming a parasocial relationship (Yan & Yang, 2021). However, fandom governance in PCLE serves as a prominent form of the digital economy and is used for institutional innovation. Primary-level cadres take the lead in these live-streaming events to further their political aspirations and embrace digital governance, while viewers participate for the sake of securing the best deals or simply out of curiosity. Therefore, cadres, as a strategic group, construct an image of themselves as dedicated public servants with political integrity, forming alliances with other strategic groups such as fans, businesses, and digital platforms. Therefore, all

these key actors "perform" for their own interests, explaining why the collective identity among them is precarious and short-lived.

Regarding political safety concerns, measures including regulations, self-censorship, and disciplinary control ensure compliance among primary-level cadres, who are subject to the structures and institutions of China's political system. However, these political aspects of PCLE raise concerns regarding the monetization of content and political credibility. As previously stated, this digital engagement is subjected to subtle forms of monetization, potentially exploiting viewers for political gains. Therefore, caution is necessary when implementing digital governance in PCLE because of its unpredictable outcomes. Digital governance in China is generally launched as pilot projects at the local level before being rolled out nationwide (Mager & Katzenbach, 2021). This aligns with the perspective articulated by Cunningham and colleagues (2019):

> Any examination of cultural politics and precarity on Chinese platforms must take into account distinctly different relations in China between state, market, technological innovation, and society, and that the Chinese state is not a unitary entity, which always acts in unison. (p. 13)

Although the present study reveals important findings, it has several limitations. First, the sample of 20 cadres may not present a complete picture of their personal achievements, political demands, and economic values due to their high political sensitivity and self-censorship during the interviews. Second, this study only includes the opinions of local cadres, which may limit the overall insights into the cadres' views on digital governance and live-streaming e-commerce. Future studies should explore the interactive dialogue from the perspective of digital platforms or participating enterprises. Additionally, the participation of grassroots live-streamers in e-commerce should be further examined to gain a better understanding of the subjects involved in this digital domain.

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