

Identity performance and self-branding in social commerce: A multimodal content analysis of Chinese *wanghong* women's video-sharing practice on TikTok

Yilei Wang^a, Dezheng (William) Feng^{b,*}

^a School of Foreign Studies, Xi'an Jiaotong University, China

^b Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Identity performance

Self-branding

Social commerce

Multimodal content analysis

Wanghong women

ABSTRACT

Social media have facilitated the development of a new *wanghong* profession and the burgeoning social commerce in China, where young women capitalize on their femininity to promote beauty products. Against this background, this study aims to investigate how Chinese *wanghong* women craft their identities in their self-branding videos on the leading social commerce platform of TikTok. A framework is developed to model their projected identities as evaluative attributes and to elucidate how the identities are constructed using verbal and visual resources. A multimodal content analysis of a corpus of 1258 videos posted by 6 top-ranked *wanghong* women on TikTok shows that their identities are defined in terms of three marketable attributes: (1) the celebrity self, in which they highlight their glamorous appearance, aspirational lifestyle, and social responsibility, (2) the entrepreneur self, which includes their accentuation of their professionalism and self-empowerment, and (3) the ordinary woman self, in which they emphasize their intimate relationship with their consumer-audience on the one hand, and construct a cheerful and amiable self-image on the other. The multi-faceted identities shed new light on the evolving Chinese femininity shaped by the entangled forces of the development of the neoliberal social commerce and *wanghong* economy in China on the one hand, and the unique socio-political context on the other hand.

1. Introduction

The global neoliberal movement has increasingly pushed individuals to see themselves as branded commodities on social media. Bloggers, vloggers, and online streamers have created commercially successful forms of digital cultural products and have become micro-celebrities on various social media platforms. These micro-celebrities are called *wanghong* in China (short for wang luo hong ren ‘网络红人’, literally meaning popular people on the internet). Through a process of professionalization and institutionalization, *wanghong* has quickly developed from an online buzzword into a commercially successful form of industry. More than 1 million young women in China have made *wanghong* their profession and around 80% of them are engaged in the beauty-related industry (Han, 2020), which is regarded as the most lucrative industry in the emerging *wanghong* market.

As the boundaries between e-commerce and social networking have become increasingly blurred in China (and elsewhere), giving rise to the

so-called social commerce, a new type of e-commerce *wanghong* women have been growing in popularity on social media (i.e., social commerce *wanghong* women). Different from *wanghong* ‘content creators’, the primary purpose of social commerce *wanghong* women is to conduct ‘suggestive selling’, that is, getting more online watchers involved and convincing them to buy products (Soderlund and Heinonen, 2013). At the same time, their self-branding discourse often centers on themselves, in contrast to the currently popular e-commerce live-streaming discourse where everything revolves around explaining the product and responding to questions from online viewers (cf. Yang and Wang, 2022). Thus, it can be argued that this new type of social commerce *wanghong* women ‘transcend the professional and cultural boundaries’ of *wanghong* ‘content creators’ and e-commerce streamers (Bhatia, 2018, p. 112).

Despite the popularity of social commerce *wanghong* women and their significance in China’s economic development, so far we have little knowledge about how they construct their identities as marketable

* Corresponding author at: Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Room AG408, Hung Hom, Hong Kong, China.
E-mail address: will.feng@polyu.edu.hk (D. (William) Feng).

commodities. Previous research on Chinese *wanghong* women's identity performance has mainly focused on how they build their reputation as 'content creators' and how they craft intimacy with their followers (e.g., Li, 2019; Liao, 2021; Sandel and Wang, 2022). Meanwhile, previous studies on social commerce *wanghong* have mainly adopted a broader frame of cultural studies or ethnographic approaches, without a discourse analytic focus. Consequently, we still lack an explicit understanding of the complexity of social commerce *wanghong*'s identities and how the identities are constructed using multimodal resources.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates social commerce *wanghong* women's multimodal identity performance on TikTok, and aims to shed new light on their multi-faceted identities from a social semiotic perspective. Specifically, we address the following three research questions: (1) What identities do social commerce *wanghong* women project in their videos on TikTok? (2) How are the identities realized through the deployment of verbal and visual resources in the videos? (3) What does this new form of self-branding discourse reflect about femininity and social change in contemporary China?

2. Neoliberalism and *wanghong* women's self-branding in China

Wanghong women's self-branding on TikTok is situated in today's increasingly competitive neoliberal environment (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017). Serving as a guiding ethos in contemporary economic policies, the neoliberal ideology advocates market deregulation and the capitalist faith in 'enterprising, resourceful and self-directed labor' (Khamis et al., 2017, p. 200). In the context of China, although the government has never openly embraced neoliberalist ideologies, scholars agree that neoliberalism has had profound impact on China's governmentality in the post-reform era (see Breslin, 2006; Harvey, 2005; Zhu, 2019). Since the 1990s, China has gone through a structural shift from a centrally planned economy to one underpinned by free market ideology (Harvey, 2005). Harvey (2005, p. 2) has come up with the term 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' and described the outcome of China's neoliberalism as 'the construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control'. Zhu (2019, p. 46) has similarly pointed out that China 'pursues a mutated form of neoliberalism that couples continuity in the political system of governance with discontinuity in the state's promotion of radical marketization and privatization'.

In this context, self-branding can be viewed as the outcome of an unstable labor market, whereby people are expected to be responsible for their own success and failure (Khamis et al., 2017). Gehl (2011) argues that self-branding is 'the metaphorical expansion of the practices of marketing branded goods and services into the realm of individual workers, freelancers, and entrepreneurs'. In this process, the discursively constructed personal identity is viewed as a commodity to be consumed by a target audience. For female social media users, the self-branding discourse emphasizes girly empowerment in the pursuit of self-achievement and enterprising success (Banet-Weiser and Ebrary, 2012). They are conceived as 'entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating' (Gill, 2007a, p. 74) and who are ultimately 'responsible for their own success or failure in the market place' (Khamis et al., 2017, p. 201). A growing body of research has investigated how the entrepreneurial self-concept is developed in the micro-celebrity community (e.g., Guan, 2021; Marwick, 2013). For example, Duffy and Hund's (2015) investigation of how top-ranked female bloggers constructed their entrepreneur personae revealed that these bloggers depicted the ideal of 'having it all' through three interrelated tropes, i.e., 'the destiny of passionate work, staging the glam life, and carefully curated social sharing' (p. 1).

Aside from entrepreneurialism, the neoliberal rhetoric produces 'a specific set of sense-making around femininity and sexuality that coalesces with postfeminism' (Evans and Riley, 2014, p. 4). As noted by Gill (2007b, p. 151), instead of being objectified as passive sex objects to

the male gaze, women are 'portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so'. Through re-appropriating the feminist-informed idea of women's sexual liberation and the neoliberal notion of autonomy, postfeminist media culture is characterized by the normalization of a form of female sexuality whereby women are positioned as 'beautiful but sexy, sexually knowledgeable/ practiced and always "up for it"' (Gill, 2008, p. 35). However, the performance of assertive female sexual agency, according to Gill (2008, p. 40), fails to render women into 'autonomous, freely choosing persons of neo-liberal humanism', but instead functions as a new form of 'compulsory sexual agency'. As the female body remains bound through very specific ideals of visual bodily perfection, women are objected to a 'hitherto unprecedented regulatory gaze' which is marked by the 'intensification, extensification and psychologization of surveillance' (Elias and Gill, 2017, p. 59).

Chinese *wanghong* women's exploitation of their body and pursuit of self-empowerment and material success have caused concerns in society. There have been widespread moral panic and criticisms that see *wanghong* women's video production as individualistic resources to promote materialism, lookism, hedonism, and other 'capitalist' ideologies which contradict the core socialist value system promoted by the Party-state. To address this social problem, the Chinese government has promulgated a series of regulations to enforce the monitoring of *wanghong* women's online practices. For example, the Cyberspace Administration of China has issued regulations for user-generated content, which indicate that social media influencers and micro-celebrities have the moral responsibility to promote the core values of socialism and positive energy on cyberspace. In this context, *wanghong* women's self-branding practice is shaped not only by the ideology of Western neoliberalism, but also the social political need.

3. TikTok and short-video production in China

TikTok is a free video creation application where users can conduct various forms of performances, such as dance routines, zany memes, and hashtag challenges. According to the Business of Apps (2020), TikTok became the most downloaded non-gaming app on the Apple Store in the first quarter of 2020. With the emergence of advertising agencies and professionalized *wanghong* incubators devoted to monetizing TikTok content, the platform has become increasingly commercialized and industrialized (Han, 2020). That is, it has become a social commerce platform. On TikTok, amateurish videos are often interwoven with commercially produced content, especially since the platform officially announced its strategic cooperation plan with the e-commerce titan Taobao in 2018. TikTok has even launched the 'shopping cart function' and expanded its function from a video sharing site to a channel for *wanghong* marketing. According to Mianchao Data (2020), the economic value created by TikTok *wanghong* anchors reached RMB11.9 billion in the first half of 2020.

4. Data and methodology

The data for this study includes all TikTok videos posted by the six most popular *wanghong* women (Starrank Data, 2020) during the period from the day they created their account to 20 February 2020, the date of our data collection, resulting in a dataset of 1258 videos. All these women were in their 20s and 30s, and they self-depicted themselves as professionals, small business owners, or petty entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, we were not able to get their consent to use their photos, despite repeated attempts to get in touch with them via private messaging. To protect their privacy, we anonymized them and blurred out faces in the examples reproduced in this paper.

Our analysis of *wanghong* women's identity performance is premised upon the constructionist understanding of identity (e.g., Giddens, 1991) and Butler's (1990) notion of performativity. Butler (1990) suggests that

identity is self-presented through ‘stylized repetition of acts’ (p. 519). To provide an explicit understanding of the performance of identity in TikTok videos, we adopt a social semiotic analysis approach (e.g., van Leeuwen, 2005), and consider *wanghong* women’s identities as a set of evaluative attributes that are realized by different semiotic resources on the one hand, and are shaped by the broader socio-cultural context on the other hand. While social semiotic studies of multimodal discourse have been predominantly concerned with small datasets, this study analyzes a large quantity of data. This is because our objective is to classify and quantify the distribution of discursive choices, so that we can map out patterns and trends of *wanghong* women’s identity performance. For this purpose, we use the method of qualitative content analysis to analyze our data (e.g., Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012). Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1278) define qualitative content analysis as a research method for ‘the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes’. The method allows us to quantify salient features and identify typical cases which need in-depth qualitative analysis (Schreier, 2012). With the combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, our results will be more generalizable on the one hand, and nuanced on the other hand.

In particular, we adopt what Serafini and Reid (2019) call ‘multimodal content analysis’, which draws upon qualitative content analysis (Bell et al., 2001; Schreier, 2012) and social semiotic theories of multimodality (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), for ‘conceptualizing and analyzing a selected corpus of multimodal phenomena’ (p. 2). As Serafini and Reid (2019, p. 2) argue, this approach allows researchers to ‘move beyond traditional analytical perspectives and procedures of quantitative content analysis to address the complexities inherent in the multimodal nature of contemporary modes of representation and communication’. In this study, we have developed a social semiotics inspired multimodal content analysis method to investigate identity performance, which is operationalized at two levels, namely, what attributes are projected, and how they are realized through multimodal resources. First, identity is considered as a set of evaluative attributes (e.g., beautiful, successful, or weak). It follows that the first step of analysis was to code and classify the attributes *wanghong* women manifest in their TikTok videos. This level of analysis employed inductive content analysis which allows categories to emerge from the data through open coding and categorization. The two authors watched 10% of the videos and identified as many categories as possible. Through iterative and reflexive processes of grouping and discussion between the authors, core categories and their subcategories were identified. However, this is not to suggest that attributes are fixed labels; rather, they are meanings that are constructed by ongoing choices one makes about what one says, does, wears, and so on (Giddens, 1991). For this reason, the identification of evaluative attributes was carried out concurrently with the analysis of how the evaluative attributes are constructed using verbal and nonverbal resources in the videos, which was the second step of analysis.

The second step of analysis was deductive, where a semiotic framework was developed as a coding scheme to deal with the complexity of

multimodal meaning construction (cf. Serafini and Reid, 2019). The classification and quantification of both verbal and visual resources require explicitly and unambiguously defined categories (Bell et al., 2001, p. 15). In order to determine the most relevant ‘variables’ for analysis, we drew upon Feng (2016) and developed a coding framework to map out the verbal and visual realization of *wanghong* women’s attributes, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

The framework first distinguishes between verbal and visual choices. In terms of verbal choices, we look at two main variables, that is, explicit evaluation and implicit evaluation. In explicit evaluations, attitudinal lexical items, such as ‘cute’, ‘professional’, and ‘funny’, are used. Implicit evaluations are realized through recounting facts or events that lead to a certain evaluation, such as what a person has done, and what happened to him/her. For example, rather than stating ‘I am very popular’, a *wanghong* woman may say, ‘I have 18 million followers’.

Evaluative attributes can also be constructed by visual choices, which include the ‘variables’ of character design, setting design, and special visual effects created through visual tools on TikTok. In terms of character design, we distinguish between the actional process and the analytical process (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). The actional process refers to what *wanghong* women do in their videos (e.g., playing basketball, dancing); the analytical process refers to parts that constitute a person as a whole, such as appearance, clothing, and other possessions. Setting design mainly refers to the choice of backgrounds for TikTok videos. For example, a luxurious lifestyle can be invoked by a close-up of a *wanghong* woman drinking a champagne cocktail (actional process) with her designer handbag on the table (analytical process), or a depiction of the setting of a luxury hotel. Special visual effects refer to technological affordances of TikTok which allow users to manipulate their images and videos. For example, users can alter their images by enlarging their eyes and smoothing their skin to make the images dreamlike.

The framework was used to code all the 1258 TikTok videos. In the actual coding process, an instance was recorded each time when a character’s attribute is represented through verbal or visual choice. When one attribute is constructed using more than one mode of communication, only one instance was counted (i.e., at the first level of analysis), but the different ways of realization were noted (i.e., at the second level of analysis). There are also cases where a single utterance or a visual image encodes more than one attribute, which were all recorded. Both intra-coder and inter-coder reliability tests were applied to ensure the accuracy of the coding. The videos were coded twice by one of the authors at an interval of three months; the two authors pilot coded 10% of the videos independently and the inter-coder reliability was above 80%. All inconsistencies and ambiguous cases were discussed and resolved by the two authors.

5. Findings

Based on the analysis of the 1258 TikTok videos, three identity categories have been identified, that is, the celebrity self, the entrepreneur self, and the ordinary woman self. As shown in Table 1, these three

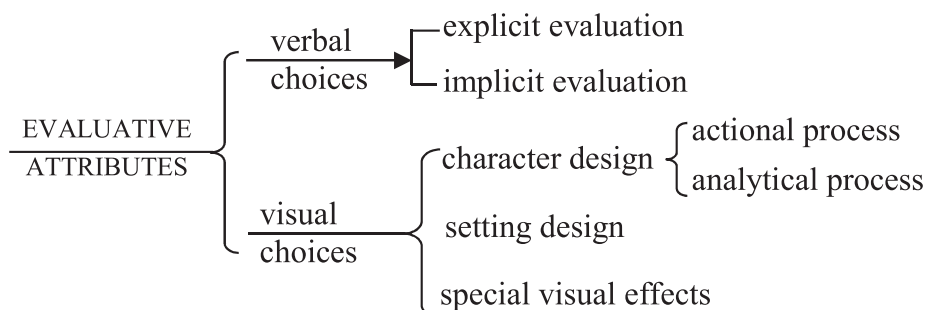


Fig. 1. The verbal and visual realization of evaluative attributes.

Table 1
The distribution of self-branding attributes.

	Video count
Celebrity self	432
Glamorous appearance	146
Aspirational lifestyle	205
Social responsibility	81
Entrepreneur self	390
Professionalism	196
Self-empowerment	194
Ordinary woman self	374
Engagement of viewers	204
Cheerful and fun personality	170

categories are evenly distributed in the videos, manifesting the ‘extraordinary/ordinary paradox’ in *wanghong* women (Usher, 2020, p. 175). In the construction of the celebrity self, *wanghong* women apply long-established techniques in conventional celebrity culture for building prestige, which include highlighting their glamorous appearance, displaying an aspirational lifestyle, and undertaking social responsibility. In terms of the entrepreneur self, *wanghong* women highlight their professionalism and self-empowerment. For the ordinary woman self, they emphasize their intimate relationship with their consumer-audience on the one hand, and construct a cheerful self-image on the other. In what follows, we will analyze salient features in these three types of attributes and how they are discursively constructed using verbal and visual resources.

5.1. The celebrity self

5.1.1. Glamorous appearance

Glamorous appearance refers to *wanghong* women’s pursuit of what Machin and van Leeuwen (2005, p. 134) call ‘the barbie-type stereotypes of female attractiveness’. It is closely related to the notion of ‘glamor labor’ (Wissinger, 2015), which ‘entails on-going commitment to body maintenance’ (p. 21). Our analysis suggests that having a ‘*wanghong* face’ and a highly sexualized body shape are the two most salient features of *wanghong* women’s appearance. In 146 TikTok videos, they are doing nothing but displaying their face or body. First, the online buzzword ‘*wanghong* face’ is widely recognized as an ‘indispensable lure’ for online audiences and a shared physical feature of all *wanghong* women (Li, 2019). The ‘*wanghong* face’ (analytical process) is featured by a sharp chin, a narrow nose with a straight bridge, double eyelids, and white and spotless skin, which is often associated with the docility, naïveté, and sweetness of female characters in Japanese romance manga. Aside from born beauty, *wanghong* women use visual filters on TikTok to digitally edit their image, so as to live up to the appearance norm of the ‘*wanghong* face’. TikTok filters include smoothing characters’ skin, enlarging their eyes, sharpening their chin, and using exposure (to create a hazy effect over their figure). By applying these effects of virtual plastic surgery, *wanghong* women show their facial features with ‘low visual modality’, which is often used to express ideals in advertising (van Leeuwen, 2005).

Second, the way *wanghong* women represent their body reflects the postfeminist highlight on female sexual subjectification. In today’s hyper-sexualized, postfeminist mediascape, the possession of a sexy body has increasingly become a woman’s ‘asset, product, brand and gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy’ (Winch, 2015, p. 234). In the videos, the women are not just being sexy, but *sexualized* in the sense that their self-performance is carefully designed to attract the male gaze. A sexualized body is mainly constructed through the design of clothing and actions (i.e., analytical and actional processes). In 67 TikTok videos, *wanghong* women wear short, tight, figure-revealing clothing, such as swimsuits, halter dresses, short-cropped tops, mini-skirts, and hot pants. This type of clothing often reveals sexual parts of the body (such as the midriff and the cleavage),

rendering the female figure into a site of erotic interest (Gill, 2009). In terms of the actional process, *wanghong* women often employ seductive poses to highlight their body curves, including twisting their body (e.g., to accentuate their buttocks), touching their parted lips/ thighs/ buttocks, and simulating undressing. Such performances of sexualized labor reflect what Gill (2008, p. 54) calls ‘the paradox of postfeminist empowerment’, where *wanghong* women associate sexiness with self-pleasure and agency, but at the same time use their body to ‘recentre men’s desire and interests’. Such a sexualized self-branding strategy works well in the popular influencer marketing frame of ‘sex sells’, where sexual content or nudity is used to shape ‘influence’ on social media sites (Drenten et al., 2020). For instance, in Fig. 2, a *wanghong* woman pops her hips against the door frame to accentuate her round buttocks, slender waist, and large breasts. Such hyper-sexualization is clearly performed for ‘heterosexual male pleasure’ and employed as ‘sexual appeal’ to attract followers (Uhm, 2021, p. 7). The performance is further accentuated by the red ambience, which is often associated with lust and passion.

5.1.2. Aspirational lifestyle

Aspirational lifestyle refers to *wanghong* women’s deliberate position of themselves in a seemingly higher social position than they actually are. It is associated with what Marwick (2013) calls ‘aspirational production’, wherein prestige becomes a vital form of social currency. To highlight their celebrity status, 205 TikTok videos depict *wanghong* women’s extravagant lifestyle. Identity markers of status and prestige are constantly referred to by *wanghong* women through implicit verbal evaluation and visual depictions.

First, in terms of implicit evaluation, rather than using evaluative words, 63 videos rely on the overlexicalization of terms that connote a sense of ‘exclusiveness and distinction’ (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017, p. 543). Fashion vernacular and well-known luxury brand names are often found in captions. Furthermore, *wanghong* women often underscore in captions that their luxury products are ‘PR gifts’ from potential brand collaborators. They also highlight that the purpose of their visits to different fashion shows are seeking business cooperation opportunities.

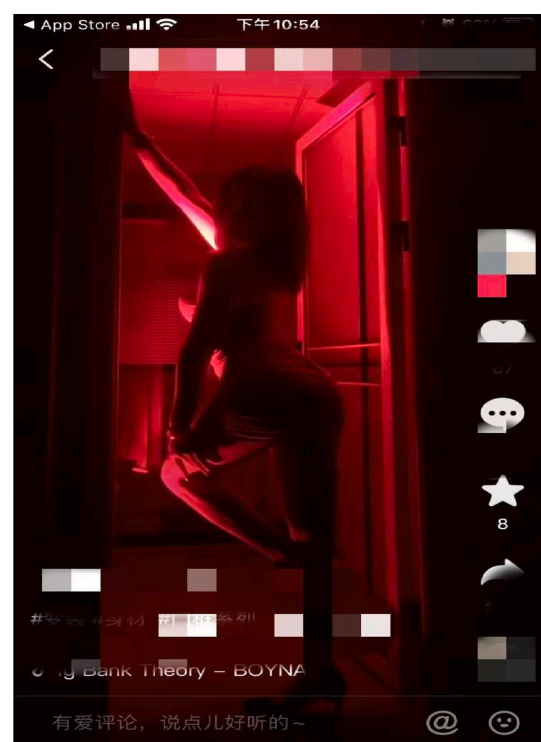
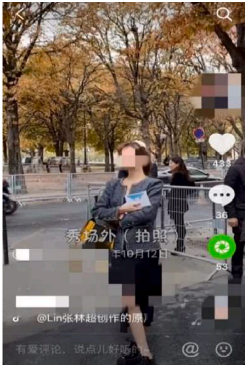


Fig. 2. An example of sexualized actions.

In doing so, they position themselves as celebrities endorsing luxury products (rather than simply consuming them) and frame their global travels as a necessary part of their business.

Apart from verbal expressions, *wanghong* women also use visual resources, more specifically character design and setting design, to show their privileges and wealth. In terms of the analytical process, high status is often signaled by showing extravagant and impractical clothes and accessories, which ‘speak to a life of elaborate social engagements’ (Knowles, 2017, p. 306). Expensive gowns, glittery suits, and high heels with big luxury brand logos are featured in 184 videos. As for the actional process, in many cases, *wanghong* women are represented as engaging in various elite activities, such as rambling along the promenade and working out in a fancy gym. It is interesting to note that when these women are depicted as performing a certain action, the camera angle always frames ‘a spontaneous and dynamic movement of the space-inspecting gaze’ which explores fancy sites and places (e.g., private members’ clubs, luxury hotels, and fashion shows) ‘from shifting viewpoints and at different distances’ (Francesconi, 2017, p. 406). As a result, it allows the audience to experience a more ‘accessible’ perception of the aspirational spaces, which ‘normalizes the very notion of luxury itself’ (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017, p. 548). For example, as shown in Table 2, the *wanghong* woman fluidly narrates her routine of joining a Chanel fashion show, which begins with her ‘receiving an invitation’ in a close shot, to her ‘posing for photos outside the show’ in a

Table 2
The routine of joining a Chanel fashion show.

receiving an invitation		close shot
posing for photos outside the show venue		long shot
being guided to the show		medium shot

long shot, and then to a medium shot of ‘being guided to the show’. In doing so, the videos epitomize the kind of high-end destinations patronized by *wanghong* women, which invokes a sense of superiority to their own social media brand (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017).

5.1.3. Social responsibility

Similar to many mainstream Chinese celebrities who consider social responsibility as an essential component of their ‘public figure’ status (Yu, 2018), in 81 TikTok videos, *wanghong* women attempt to parlay their online impact into promoting positive energy on TikTok. Two salient features are identified, namely, the highlighting of their philanthropic activities and the exploitation of patriotism for product branding.

First, the representation of philanthropic activities mainly relies on implicit verbal evaluation. *Wanghong* women emphasize that they are spokespeople for different charity organizations, recount the voluntary work they have done to help disadvantaged social groups, and enthusiastically call for public participation (46 videos). This type of micro-philanthropic practice is considered by Yu (2018, p. 57) as ‘morally uplifting’ efforts for *wanghong* women, who are ‘eager to secure their legitimate place in the moral economy of charitable activities’. For example, in Extract 1, one *wanghong* woman recounts her team’s donation to Wuhan, the early epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic, and urges the audience to stay at home.

Extract 1

We donated materials worth about RMB1 million to the Hubei area...
I urge everyone to minimize outdoor activities...
(我们向湖北地区捐赠价值约100万的物资...我呼吁大家, 少一次外出...)

Second, *wanghong* women often fuse beauty product promotion with the idea of making patriotic choices (35 videos). Against the backdrop of the rising TikTok trend of ‘taking pride in Chinese brands’, 35 ‘challenge videos’ have been identified, in which *wanghong* women adopt the popular TikTok hashtag ‘#国货之光 (the glory of Chinese goods)’. In those videos, *wanghong* women always highlight China’s competitiveness in the research and development of beauty products, and tell stories of their promoted domestic brands going global. As an online form of spontaneous, grass-root ‘consumer nationalism’, the videos call for consumers to trust the quality of domestic products and participate in the online ‘Buy Chinese’ movement (cf. Chen et al., 2021). As noted by Yang (2016), such promotion of Chinese brands emblemizes the nation’s branding campaign of ‘From Made in China to Created in China’, in which the Chinese government intends to get rid of the national image as a world factory of low-quality products. Here, the use of ‘glory’ in the ‘#国货之光 (the glory of Chinese goods)’ indicates *wanghong* women’s efforts to instill confidence in domestic products and brand their products by appealing to consumers’ patriotism. By attaching national significance to domestic brands, *wanghong* women intend to invoke ‘consumers’ collective identities based on their nationality’ and ‘glorify’ the purchase of their promoted products (Pekkanen and Penttilä, 2020, p. 303).

5.2. The entrepreneur self

Self-entrepreneurship is another important aspect of *wanghong* women’s digital narratives, which is highlighted in 390 TikTok videos. It should be noted that the newly imaged entrepreneurship is not understood in the traditional sense of being a business owner or investor, but rather as an ‘entrepreneur of the feminine self’, drawing upon the contemporary logic of self-branding (Duffy and Hund, 2015, p. 1). It reflects what Gray (2003) terms ‘enterprising femininity’, a subjectivity formed through modes of self-fashioning rooted in the consumer marketplace. *Wanghong* women’s entrepreneur identity entails two aspects, namely, their professionalism as beauty experts and their self-empowerment as independent women.

5.2.1. Professionalism

To demonstrate their expertise in makeup artistry, in 196 TikTok videos, *wanghong* women offer beauty tips in the professional genre of 'how-to-tutorials'. Despite the fact that their makeup skills and knowledge are seldom attained through formal education (Gray, 2003), *wanghong* women draw on a rather conventional pedagogical agenda to convey the knowledge, which includes the speech acts of giving instructions, offering explanations, and referencing research materials. Their professionalism is implicitly realized through the use of beauty-related and technical-sounding terms, such as 'foundation', 'contour', and 'waterline'. These terms allow micro-celebrities to become a 'persuasive authority', and therefore make their 'tips and tricks more valuable and legitimate' (Bhatia, 2018, p. 113). In particular, in 117 'how-to-tutorials' videos, *wanghong* women label themselves as sophisticated 'ingredient addicts' (成分控) who have extreme concerns over the chemical composition of beauty products. They technologize their language by providing a wide array of technical ingredient information. In doing so, beauty products are codified into 'scientific buzzwords' which shape consumers' appreciation of their expertise (Wang et al., 2021). For example, in Extract 2, a *wanghong* woman uses many unfamiliar chemical terms to demonstrate the quality of a beauty product. Here, the chemical jargons are used symbolically to express a sense of 'sophisticated knowledge production' involved in picking out the 'right' product for the consumer-audience (Wang et al., 2021).

Extract 2

Its main ingredient is an antibacterial peptide which can eliminate acne, and propionibacteria. It does not contain alcohol, salicylic acid, or other ingredients that irritate sensitive skin.
(它的主要成分是一种抗菌肽,能消灭痤疮,丙酸杆菌。不含酒精,水杨酸,以及其他对皮肤造成负担的成分也没有。)

5.2.2. Self-empowerment

Another important aspect of *wanghong* women's entrepreneurship is an unabashed celebration of self-empowerment. In 194 videos, their semiotic choices are closely associated with the postfeminist rhetoric of female empowerment, which is underpinned by advanced consumer capitalism (Usher, 2020; Duffy and Hund, 2015; Banet-Weiser and Ebrary, 2012). First, *wanghong* women explicitly emphasize the importance of financial independence by using terms like 'money', 'earning', 'material accumulation', and 'financially independent' in their TikTok captions (appearing in 113 videos). In this way, their entrepreneur identities are closely related to the material belongings they can accumulate. Second, under the influence of the consumerist logic, *wanghong* women deploy 'the unshakable myth that women should work *through* and *for* consumption' (Duffy and Hund, 2015, p. 2). Expressions like 'you must have the ability to buy whatever you want' are found in 57 videos, which associate the feminist idea of self-empowerment with the power of consumption.

5.3. The ordinary woman self

5.3.1. Engagement of viewers

Wanghong women employ a range of verbal and visual resources to engage their potential viewers. 204 TikTok videos include self-reports of day-to-day activities. By 'conferring upon the private realm of daily experience a public audience', they intend to build alignments around 'shared quotidian experiences' (Zappavigna, 2014, p. 211). *Wanghong* women's sharing of personal life covers a wide range of topics, such as what they see on their way to work or to shop, morning routines, and home workout routines (106 videos). The most salient feature lies in the use of visual resources, where *wanghong* women are often represented in what Zappavigna (2014) calls an 'inferred selfie manner'. In 98 videos, they hold the phone camera themselves, which 'invite[s] the audience to imagine a shared position' with them (Page, 2019, p. 191). Their presence can be inferred from their body parts (e.g., face, feet, and legs) or

silhouettes in the video. For example, as shown in Fig. 3, a *wanghong* woman makes a deictic gesture towards the product she is going to purchase. This type of subjective perspective, known as 'the point-of-view shot' in film making, creates an *always-on* mode, inviting the audience to look *with* the *wanghong* woman.

5.3.2. Cheerful and fun personality

170 TikTok videos highlight light-hearted amusement and creative enjoyment. *Wanghong* women attempt to build a cheerful and fun self-image by creating cartoonized and self-denigrating selfie videos. First, they apply a cartoon filter to reconfigure their appearance and use the speed-up function to dramatize their video. In terms of the cartoon filter, the technical affordance of TikTok can add animated effects and transform one's face into a cartoon character. For example, as shown in Fig. 4, a *wanghong* woman applies the cartoon filter and turns herself into a Disney 'runaway princess' in her video, with an angelic face, moist red lips, large blue eyes, and flowing, wavy red hair. By giving themselves a cartoon transformation into fairy-tale characters, *wanghong* women experiment with fantasies of the self and enhance the playfulness of their TikTok videos. In terms of the video speed effect, *wanghong* women's cartoonized videos are often speeded up to create a hyperbolic form of visual aesthetics, further connoting *wanghong* women's playful personality.

Moreover, *wanghong* women also curate a delirious self-image through posting ugly selfie videos. The exaggerated 'ugliness' is constructed through *wanghong* women's facial expressions and special visual filters. In terms of the actional process, *wanghong* women use facial expressions to inject jocularity including crossing eyes, showing their nostril, and showing a down-turned mouth. In addition to facial expressions, *wanghong* women also subvert idealized beauty norms by using the special visual effect of 'distorting mirror' on TikTok, which can narrow their eyes, enlarge their nose, and shorten their neck in an exaggerated manner. An example is shown in Fig. 5, where a *wanghong* woman and her friend have their nose enlarged, lips thickened, and eyes narrowed. Filled with a carnivalesque spirit, these videos are distinct

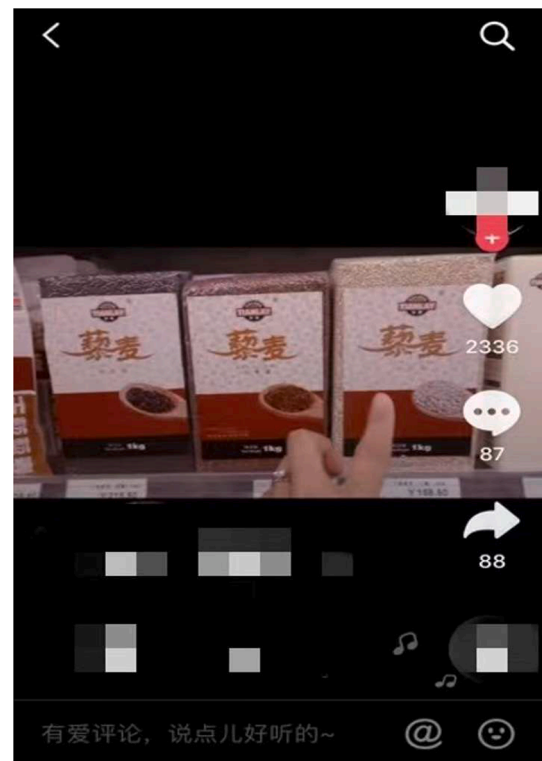


Fig. 3. An example of 'the point-of-view shot'.

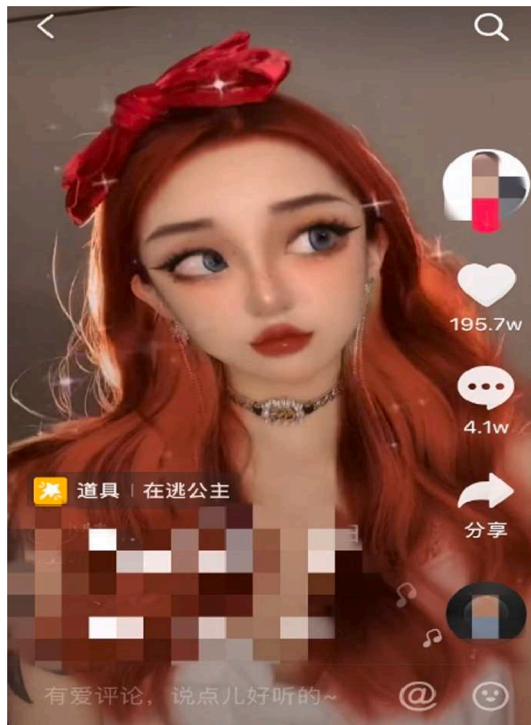


Fig. 4. An example of the cartoon filter on TikTok.

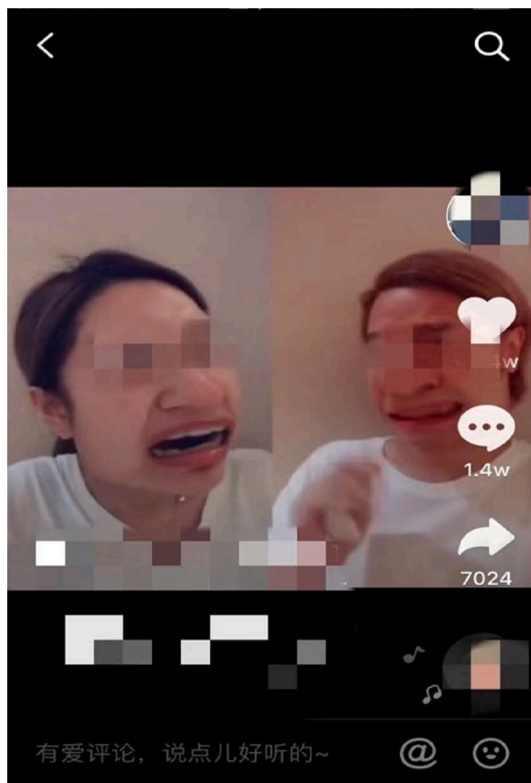


Fig. 5. An example of ugly selfie videos.

from promotional texts usually seen in traditional TV advertising or fashion magazines. The game-like atmosphere—seemingly irrelevant to promotion—adds a sense of authenticity to *wanghong* women's self-media brand.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The above analysis shows that the *wanghong* women define their self-brands in terms of three marketable themes, namely, the celebrity self, the entrepreneur self, and the ordinary woman self. In this section, we will discuss their self-branding as a new form of social media and e-commerce practice (i.e., social commerce) in relation to the current political economy of China. Compared to the traditional representation of femininity in print advertisements and fashion magazines, where women are typically objectified, *wanghong* women's identity performance on TikTok is clearly more agentive and multifaceted. Meanwhile, their identity constructions are more commercialized than those of their Western counterparts: the three aspects of identities all fit into 'a broader concept of brand' on TikTok for commercial success (Caldeira, 2020, p. 89).

Social commerce *wanghong* women on TikTok are engaged in performance of multiple identities, or what Bhatia (2018) refers to as 'interdiscursive performance'. Interdiscursivity in this context can be understood as tactical appropriations of different semiotic resources to create new and hybrid forms of identity that transcend professional boundaries (cf. Bhatia, 2018). Our analysis shows that *wanghong* women's TikTok videos interweave product promotion with activities of lifestyle displaying, scientific explanation, socialization, entertainment, and so on. Specifically, in the construction of the celebrity self, *wanghong* women work as commodity signs and endow a distinctive aura of aspiration and superiority to their self-brands. The representation of luxury goods and global travels creates a sense of knowingness about what and how to consume in order to join the rank of social elites. Furthermore, *wanghong* women's articulation of patriotism may not necessarily reflect their heartfelt beliefs, but suggests that they ascribe to a marketing strategy that exploits nationalist sentiments to increase sales. Such a patriotic marketing strategy 'allows for exploration of the ethnocentric responsabilization' of consumer-citizens, who are asked to believe that 'they have the economic resources to influence the well-being of the whole nation' (Pekkanen and Penttilä, 2020, p. 310).

In terms of the entrepreneur self, *wanghong* women highlight their professionalism for middle-class consumption on the one hand, and use the idea of self-empowerment to promote 'consumerism as if liberation' on the other hand (Usher, 2020, p. 185). These two strategies allow *wanghong* women to become a more 'persuasive authority' to their consumer-audience (Bhatia, 2018). For the ordinary woman self, by creating a sense of humor and an intimate relationship with their consumer-audience, *wanghong* women intend to let their guard down and parlay 'the trust they inspire into myriad commercial arrangements' (Khamis et al., 2017, p. 203). All these roles, 'sometimes contested, often seamless' (Bhatia, 2018, p. 110), work together to render their underlying role as 'sellers' in a more oblivious manner.

The reliance on self-branding in social commerce is situated in the consumer society in contemporary China, where neoliberal consumerism has become a driving force in economic development. Since the 1990s, China has gradually transformed into a consumer society according to Baudrillard's (1998) definition, in which consumption has become a communication system to categorize, control, and alienate people. A direct consequence of consumerism is that brands are trying to transform products into lifestyle signifiers, thus forging emotional linkages between products and potential consumers. In this regard, our analysis provides new understanding of the symbolic systems that are developed for emotional branding in the social media context. Instead of appealing to consumers' aspirations through exploiting symbolic meanings of products, *wanghong* women have 'internalised ideas that were designed for the marketing of commodities' (Khamis et al., 2017, p. 200) and treated their identity-performance as a consumptive product. In other words, emotional connections are not established between the promoted products and consumers, but rather between sellers (*wanghong* women) and their aggregated fan base (consumer-audience).

The development of *wanghong* women's self-branding has propelled

the fast development of the ‘*wanghong* economy’ and the emergence of *wanghong* companies to expand their marketing value chains (Han, 2020). The *wanghong* economy, in which women play a major role, has become the most profitable industry in the Chinese commercial internet (CIA, 2021). Its prosperity is the outcome of the state’s continuous effort to develop its market economy, which includes giving more freedom to private sectors, supporting different forms of small business, and promoting entrepreneurship in society (Zhu, 2019). As shown in the analysis, *wanghong* women embrace the neoliberal logic of ‘entrepreneurial self-fashioning’; they represent a group of new women ‘empowered by the flexibility and openness of new technological formats and expanded markets’ (Banet-Weiser and Ebrary, 2012, p. 272). Through the post-feminist rhetoric of self-empowerment, they strive to gain social recognition in the competency-based meritocratic business model; they challenge the traditional patriarchal ideology by embracing a Westernized career mindset and redefine gender roles by emphasizing independence.

Meanwhile, as noted by Nonini (2008, p. 145), contemporary China has shown rather ‘hybrid governance’ that integrates free-market rules with ‘earlier Maoist socialist, nationalist and developmentalist practices and discourses of the Communist Party’. Our analysis shows a quasi-moral/social obligation involved in *wanghong* women’s branding practice. Rather than fully embracing the Westernized, capitalist outlook, *wanghong* women represent themselves as patriots and model Chinese netizens. Their commitment to philanthropic activities and promotion of Chinese brands are closely aligned with the state’s socio-political interests. As noted by Hansen (2015, p. 180), in contemporary China, ‘the state promotes the vision of a self-reliant and responsible individual who willingly contributes to the neoliberal economy, but ... requires at the same time unquestioned loyalty to a Chinese socialist ideal’. To effectively construct a Chinese techno-nationalist cyberspace, the Party-state has straitened its ideological control through online censorship. It directly demands *wanghong* women to create a ‘healthy cyber environment’ through promoting positive energy and associating individual happiness with societal prosperity in their digital content. As shown in the analysis, *wanghong* women’s articulations of social responsibilities, have to some extent, transformed their TikTok videos from a mobile media entertainment/commercial tool to a patriotic online space (cf. Chen, et al. 2021). Interestingly, the seemingly contradictory market ideology and nationalism are well aligned in the *wanghong* women’s performance, where the latter is completely absorbed and exploited for building self-brands and promoting products.

However, despite the commercial and social benefits of the *wanghong* economy and career possibilities opened up for young Chinese women, *wanghong* women’s digitalized identity performance has contributed to the further spread of a highly gendered consumer discourse into all realms of Chinese social life (cf. Banet-Weiser and Ebrary, 2012). We can argue that *wanghong* women’s self-branding discourse advocates a kind of gender essentialism that defines femininity in a new stereotypical way. The key underlying message of the aspirational, self-empowered, and fun persona is that it is ‘both demonstrated and constituted by the ability to put herself on display’ (Gill and Elias, 2014, p. 183). Furthermore, *wanghong* women’s self-branding discourse projects a strong middle-class normativity, which ‘further constrains non-hegemonic groups’ (Schwarz, 2016, p. 2). As demonstrated in the analysis, the constructed female images are always young, pretty, and affluent, which may make other social groups, in particular, rural and working class women feel unwelcomed or excluded.

To conclude, this study analyzed the video-sharing practice of Chinese social commerce *wanghong* women on TikTok. Adopting a multi-modal content analysis approach, it explicated how *wanghong* women strategically curate multifaceted identities for the branding of commodities. Their interdiscursive self-performance renders their underlying role as ‘sellers’ in a more subtle way, which distinguishes them from traditional e-commerce streamers. By interweaving their ‘suggestive selling’ behaviors with the activities of lifestyle displaying, scientific

explanation, instruction, socialization, and entertainment, these *wanghong* women’s TikTok videos have become a new way of ‘doing femininity’ in the unique socio-economic context in China. The study enriches our understanding of the new development of Chinese femininity and the evolving gender politics in the social commerce context. Methodologically, this study provides an explicit semiotic framework that captures *wanghong* women’s use of verbal and visual resources in their self-branding videos. Integrated with a qualitative content analysis method, the approach enables us to spell out the semiotic complexity of their identity construction on the one hand, and to make tentative generalizations of the patterns and trends on the other hand. As the Internet has been penetrating every fabric of society at an unprecedented rate, new forms of meaning making resources in media discourse and cultural productions are emerging rapidly and require an explicit theoretical account. This study is a step towards such an understanding, and it is hoped that it can inspire further multimodal analysis of other forms of digitalized social and discursive practices in new contexts.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

References

- Banet-Weiser, S., Ebrary, I., 2012. Authentic TM the politics and ambivalence in a brand culture (Critical cultural communication). New York University Press, New York.
- Baudrillard, J., 1998. The consumer society: Myths and structures. SAGE Publications, London.
- Bell, P., 2001. Content analysis of visual images. In: van Leeuwen, T., Jewitt, C. (Eds.), The handbook of visual analysis. SAGE Publications, London, pp. 10–34.
- Bhatia, A., 2018. Interdiscursive performance in digital professions: The case of YouTube tutorials. *Journal of Pragmatics* 124, 106–120.
- Breslin, S., 2006. Serving the market or serving the party: Neo-liberalism in China. In: Robinson, R. (Ed.), The neo-liberal evolution: Forging the market state. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 114–134.
- Business of Apps., 2020. Downloads of TikTok app, Statista, Available at: www.statista.com/statistics/1078692/china-tiktokworldwide-downloads-quarterly.
- Butler, J., 1990. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge, New York.
- Caldeira, S., 2020. “Shop it. Wear it. Gram it”: A qualitative textual analysis of women’s glossy fashion magazines and their intertextual relationship with Instagram. *Feminist Media Studies* 20 (1), 86–103.
- Chen, X., Valdovinos Kaye, D., Zeng, J., 2021. Positive Energy Douyin: Constructing “playful patriotism” in a Chinese short-video application. *Chin. J. Commun.* 14 (1), 97–117.
- CIA, 2021. The 2021 New Wanghong Economy Development Trend in China Report. Available at: https://pdf.dfcfw.com/pdf/H3_AP202108021507528798_1.pdf?1627913715000.pdf (accessed 14 May 2022).
- Drenten, J., Gurrieri, L., Tyler, M., 2020. Sexualized labour in digital culture: Instagram influencers, porn chic and the monetization of attention. *Gender, Work Organization* 27 (1), 41–66.
- Duffy, B.E., Hund, E., 2015. ‘Having it all’ on social media: Entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers. *Social Media+ Society*, 1(2), 2056305115604337.
- Elias, A., Gill, R., 2017. Beauty surveillance: The digital self-monitoring cultures of neoliberalism. *Eur. J. Cult. Stud.* 21 (1), 59–77.
- Evans, A., Riley, S., 2014. Constant regulation, constant repositioning, and finding hope in ‘Othering’. In: Adrienne, E., Sarah, R. (Eds.), *Technologies of Sexiness*. Oxford University Press, pp. 1–14.
- Feng, D., 2016. Promoting moral values through entertainment: A social semiotic analysis of the Spring Festival Gala on China Central Television. *Critical Arts* 30 (1), 87–101.
- Francesconi, S., 2017. Dynamic intersemiosis as a humour-enacting trigger in a tourist video. *Visual Communication* 16 (4), 395–425.
- Gehl, R.W., 2011. Ladders, samurai, and blue collars: Personal branding in Web 2.0. *First Monday* 16 (9).
- Giddens, A., 1991. *Modernity and self identity*. Polity, Cambridge.
- Gill, R., 2007a. Critical respect: The difficulties and dilemmas of agency and ‘choice’ for feminism: A reply to Duits and van Zoonen. *Eur. J. Women’s Stud.* 14 (1), 69–80.
- Gill, R., 2007b. Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *Eur. J. Cult. Stud.* 10 (2), 147–166.
- Gill, R., 2008. Empowerment/sexism: Figuring female sexual agency in contemporary advertising. *Feminism and Psychology* 18 (1), 35–60.
- Gill, R., 2009. Beyond the ‘sexualization of culture’ thesis: An intersectional analysis of ‘Sixpacks’, ‘Midriffs’ and ‘Hot Lesbians’ in advertising. *Sexualities* 12 (2), 137–160.

- Gill, R., Elias, A.S., 2014. 'Awaken your incredible': Love your body discourses and postfeminist contradictions. *Int. J. Media Cult. Polit.* 10 (2), 179–188.
- Gray, A., 2003. Enterprising femininity. *Eur. J. Cultural Studies* 6 (4), 489–506.
- Guan, Z., 2021. Chinese beauty bloggers: Amateurs, entrepreneurs, and platform labour. *Celebrity Studies* 12 (2), 326–332.
- Han, X., 2020. Historicising *wanghong* economy: Connecting platforms through *wanghong* and *wanghong* incubators. *Celebrity Studies* Epub ahead of print 09 March 2020.
- Hansen, M.H., 2015. *Educating the Chinese individual: Life in a rural boarding school*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA; London.
- Harvey, D., 2005. *A Brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hsieh, H., Shannon, S., 2005. Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qual. Health Res.* 15 (9), 1277–1288.
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., Welling, R., 2017. Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies* 8 (2), 191–208.
- Knowles, C., 2017. Walking plutocratic London: Exploring erotic, phantasmagoric Mayfair. *Social Semiotics* 27 (3), 299–309.
- Kress, G., van Leeuwen, T., 2006. *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*, 2nd edition. Routledge, London.
- Li, A.K., 2019. Papi Jiang and microcelebrity in China: A multilevel analysis. *Int. J. Commun.* 13 (19), 3016–3034.
- Liao, S., 2021. *Wanghong* fashion culture and the postfeminist time in China. *Fashion Theory* 25 (5), 663–685.
- Machin, D., van Leeuwen, T., 2005. Computer games as political discourse: The case of *Black Hawk Down*. *J. Language Politics* 4 (1), 119–141.
- Marwick, A., 2013. *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and self-branding in web 2.0*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Mianchao Data., 2020. *Live E-commerce Data Report on Douyin & Kuaishou* available at <http://www.199it.com/archives/1075133.html> (accessed December 14, 2020).
- Nonini, D., 2008. Is China becoming neoliberal? *Critique of Anthropology* 28 (2), 145–176.
- Page, R., 2019. Self-denigration and the mixed messages of 'ugly' selfies in Instagram. *Internet Pragmatics* 2 (2), 173–205.
- Pekkanen, T.L., Penttilä, V., 2020. The responsibility of an ethnocentric consumer—nationalistic, patriotic or environmentally conscientious? *International Marketing Review* 38 (2), 300–320.
- Sandel, T., Wang, Y., 2022. Selling intimacy online: The multi-modal discursive techniques of China's *wanghong*. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 47, Epub ahead of print June 2022.
- Schreier, M., 2012. *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. SAGE Publications, London.
- Schwarz, O., 2016. The symbolic economy of authenticity as a form of symbolic violence: The case of middle-class ethnic minorities. *Distinktion. J. Social Theory* 17 (1), 2–19.
- Serafini, F., Reid, S., 2019. Multimodal content analysis: Expanding analytical approaches to content analysis. *Visual Commun.* 147035721986413.
- Soderlund, M., Heinonen, K., 2013. Positive social behaviors and suggestive selling in the same service encounter. *Manag. Serv. Qual.: Int. J.* 23 (4), 305–320.
- Starrank Data., 2020. *TikTok video shooters Top100*. Available at https://www.starrank.com/rank/douyin_list_mz_202002_1.html (accessed 14 December 2020).
- Thurlow, C., Jaworski, A., 2017. The discursive production and maintenance of class privilege: Permeable geographies, slippery rhetorics. *Discourse & Society* 28 (5), 535–558.
- Uhm, J., 2021. *Does sex sell on Instagram?: Investigating the effect of sexualized images of female influencers on Instagram advertising*. University of Georgia. Doctoral dissertation.
- Usher, B., 2020. Rethinking microcelebrity: Key points in practice, performance and purpose. *Celebrity Studies* 11 (2), 171–188.
- van Leeuwen, T., 2005. *Introducing social semiotics. An introductory textbook*. Routledge, New York.
- Wang, Y., Feng, D., Ho, W., 2021. Identity, lifestyle, and face-mask branding: A social semiotic multimodal discourse analysis. *Multimodality Soc.* 1 (2), 216–237.
- Winch, A., 2015. Brand intimacy, female friendship and digital surveillance networks. *New Formations* 84 (85), 228–245.
- Wissinger, E., 2015. *This year's model: Fashion, media, and the making of glamour*. NYU Press, New York.
- Yang, F., 2016. *Faked in China: Nation branding, counterfeit culture, and globalization*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana.
- Yang, N., Wang, Z., 2022. Addressing as a gender-preferential way for suggestive selling in Chinese e-commerce live streaming discourse: A corpus-based approach. *J. Pragmatics* 197, 43–54.
- Yu, H., 2018. Social media and the experience economy in China's microphilanthropy. *Research Library Sci.* 6, 57–60.
- Zappavigna, M., 2014. Enacting identity in microblogging through ambient affiliation. *Discourse Commun.* 8 (2), 209–228.
- Zhu, X., 2019. *A neoliberalizing Chinese cinema: Political economy of the Chinese film industry in post-WTO China*. The London School of Economics. Phd thesis.

Yilei Wang is Assistant Professor at the School of Foreign Studies, Xi'an Jiaotong University. Her research interests include media and communications research, and multimodal discourse analysis. Her publications appeared in journals such as *Social Semiotics* and *Multimodality and Society*.

Dezheng (William) Feng, PhD, is Associate Professor and Associate Director of the Research Centre for Professional Communication in English at the Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research focuses on the analysis of various media and communication practices from the perspectives of pragmatics, discourse analysis and multimodality. His recent publications appeared in journals such as *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Pragmatics and Society*, *Discourse and Communication*, and *Visual Communication*.