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To cite this article: Jiewen Chen & Hongming Cheng (01 Aug 2023): Achieving postfeminist ideals: a study of Chinese female wanghongs and their self-framing on social media, Feminist Media Studies, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2023.2243547](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2243547)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2243547>



Published online: 01 Aug 2023.



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Achieving postfeminist ideals: a study of Chinese female wanghongs and their self-framing on social media

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Chinese female wanghongs on Douyin self-frame their image and identity, and how interactions between wanghongs and their followers co-frame the image of contemporary female Internet celebrities. We discovered that the four dominant self-frames of wanghongs are beauty, talent, personality traits, and gender expression through a qualitative coding analysis of the selected 30 female wanghongs' posts and media interview narratives, along with viewer comments. Besides, we found that the co-framing of influencers and fans as a collective strategy assists women in breaking the aesthetic framework of traditional patriarchal culture. Furthermore, when conflicts arise between framing actors like wanghongs, fans, media, and political parties, female wanghongs tend to respond with resistance or compromise. We argue that examining the identity framing process of female wanghongs on social media can reflect the dilemma that Chinese feminists face when attempting to highlight women's accomplishments in multiple roles.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 May 2022
Revised 23 July 2023
Accepted 28 July 2023

KEYWORDS

Post-feminism; female wanghong; self-framing

Introduction

This article examines the identity-framing and reframing process of female wanghongs (internet celebrities or influencers) in China to challenge the widely supported perspective that considers mainstream mass media as the only media agent which is capable to frame women's identity within society. The current study explores the following research question: How is the female wanghong identity self-framed and co-framed by both wanghongs themselves and their fans on social media?

This emphasis on media representations of women rather than their self-created frames on social media has been noted by many scholars before. During the times when traditional media overwhelmingly dominated news coverage, women were found to be much less present in many significant categories of news than men (Karen Ross, Karen Boyle, Cynthia Carter and D. Ging 2018). As Karen Ross and Cynthia Carter (2011) point out, "despite women's presence in the labour market across all professions and occupations, and their recruitment to senior positions in significant numbers in both the public and the private sectors, their expertise and contribution to social and economic life

continues to be marginalized as journalists still privilege men's voices as the authoritative expert, businessperson or politician." Even if reported in news, the images of both professional and non-professional women were trivialized, sexualized, and stereotyped in mainstream news media in a similar way, as family-oriented, dependent, ornamental, and sex objects (Cynthia Carter 2019; Margaretha Geertsema 2009; Isabel Molina-Guzman 2019). The media stereotypes of women are also consistent in entertainment and business media (Chelsea P. Butkowski, Travis L. Dixon, Kristopher R. Weeks and M. A. Smith 2020; Erving Goffman 1976). Unexpectedly, researchers found that the traditional media ignorance and stereotyping of women are also significantly prevalent in China, where women are not only culturally but also politically marginalized by the Confucian and Communist Party's ideologies (Yunjuan Luo and Xiaoming Hao 2007; Altman Yuzhu Peng, James Cummings and Li Yang 2020).

Nonetheless, over the past decades, the rapidly growing popularity of social media has notably increased the visibility and display of women from all kinds of backgrounds. After the launch of major digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, women quickly use them as a public space to promote their body and social images (Hannah K. Jarman, Siân A. McLean, S. Griffiths, S. J. Teague, R. F. Rodgers, S. J. Paxton, E. Austen et al. 2022; Razvan Nicolescu, Shriram Venkatraman and Nell Haynes 2022), conduct online businesses (Meriam Braham and Samira Boussema 2022), expose violence against them (Charlotte Nau, Jinman Zhang, Anabel Quan-Haase and K. Mendes 2022), and fight for their rights in general (Ricarda Drüeke and Elke Zobl 2016; Zoe Hurley 2022). Evie Psarras, Krysten Stein and Priya Shah (2021) suggest the term "postfeminist nirvana" to describe the ideal identity the would-be Instagram influencers dreamed to achieve, including goals related to "their interpersonal relations, explicit branding endeavors, gendered forms of insta-labor, Bachelor promotions, and proclamations of self-love." To some degree, women have now become their own journalists to report news and information about themselves, and to brand themselves according to their dreamed goals. Yet, such dreams seem utopian and thus hard to achieve for most potential female Internet celebrities coming from the lower class or racial minorities. Hence, it is important for feminist media researchers to understand the self-framing processes of these ordinary female Internet celebrities who gain their celebrity merely through their own displaying efforts (in contrast to traditional media stars), and how they may resist or compromise with the mainstream gender stereotypes and thus reshape their images and identities.

According to Xiaofei Han (2022), wanghong refers to "a particular stream of vocational Chinese internet celebrities that have acquired their celebrity online and have acute incentives through various models to liquidate such online influence by transforming followers into consumers" mostly through e-commerce and online advertising (Crystal Abidin 2018). The Chinese wanghong is literally translated as "red on the internet:" the color red indicates the high popularity and influence with a massive fan following (Yumin Sun 2021). Nowadays, the lucrative and fame incentives brought about by being a wanghong have led to the rapid expansion of this profession, even becoming a phenomenal culture in the digital era.

Scholars have pointed out that internet celebrities do not emerge on their own, but rather as a result of the empowerment and democratization of digital media and the commercialization of the entertainment industry (Lisa McLaughlin, and Cynthia Carter,

2018; Aim Sinpeng 2020). However, social media does not automatically turn female internet celebrities into powerful news agents, just as social media does not guarantee a radical structural transformation of media that empower oppressed communities (Mia Fischer 2016; Melanie Kennedy 2020; Kishonna L. Gray and Krysten Stein 2021). The contemporary process of female celebrification is arguably a negotiation of newly framed female identity and gender equality, characterized by female wanghongs' constant resistance and compromise. For the successful negotiation, female internet celebrities must modify their ideal image and identity goal to make them correspond to customers' and, more widely, societal expectation (Annika Richterich 2021).

To study our research question, we focus on female wanghongs on the most popular short-video platform in China—Douyin (Tiktok in its overseas version). According to the latest data from 2021 Internet Weekly's Internet Celebrity Economy Top 100, the parent company of Douyin, Byte Dance, is ranked as the top 1 of all wanghong businesses, so using Douyin as a field point for observing wanghongs will have some typicality and representativeness. To analyse the information that female wanghongs and their fans on this platform posted and their narratives through media interviews, we will employ the theoretical lens of media frames (Clarissa C. David, Jenna Mae Atun, Erika Fille and Monterola 2011), discussed through a review of previous studies in the first section of this article. We selected 30 female profiles on Douyin as research participants, chosen primarily for their influence and popularity, with the number of followers serving as an objective selection criterion, as detailed in the method section. We will then proceed by identifying frames of female wanghong images and identities via the posts on Douyin by both female wanghongs and their fans and users. The article will go further to explore the motives and negotiations behind such frames through examining eight interview narratives as reported by mainstream media. In the conclusion, we will critically assess the notion of postfeminist ideal, reflecting on the impacts of social media on female internet celebrities in particular and women in general.

Media frames, social media, and self frames

Media frames have been widely used to understand various forms of media content and discourse for decades (David et al. 2011). While there have been many debates about media framing, Robert M. Entman (1993) has defined it in a most thorough way; that is, framing is "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and make(ing) them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." In the frame building process, issues are brought forth by those who have the power to influence the discourse. Media framing can be carried out through the careful choice and analysis of words, syntax and semantics in dialogues, or through finding contextual information (visual or textual) that will guide the audience's understanding of the issues (Kathy Dobson and Irena Knezevic 2018).

Traditionally, mass media, as the dominant media agent, has consistently framed women as feminine, beauty-oriented or sexualized roles that may not represent a broad range of women's diversity. Researchers in the West have reported that the cultural image of women predominated in mass media is of small, weak, childish, dependent, domestic, ornamental, subordinate objects, whose main functions are to look pretty, please men,

and keep quiet (Butkowski et al. 2020; Goffman 1976). This framing tendency is especially true in China, where the traditional Confucian gender hierarchy, and now the Communist Party controlled patriarchal socialism, dominate the media landscape (Xiaomeng Li 2021). A number of Chinese researchers have revealed that women's image is stereotyped to be soft, fragile, and beauty-oriented (Bohong Liu and Wei Pu 1997; Fei Teng, Junsheng Hu, Zhansheng Chen, Poon and Bai 2020; Dongyi Zhang and Tiebo Wang 2003). For example, Liu and Wei (1997) have found that the female media image has a clear pattern of two poles: one is the traditional good wife and good mother, and the other is the "modern vase" that consumes too much and eats, drinks and entertains herself.

With the popularity of social media, as Thomas Mathiesen (1997) stated in his influential article "The Viewer Society:" "Increasingly, the few have been able to see the many, but also increasingly, the many have been enabled to see the few—to see the VIPs, the reporters, the stars, almost a new class in the public sphere." Thus, social media is where the lines are blurred between media frames and individual frames, and between information givers and information receivers. By commenting on textual posts, pictures, or videos, users "participate in a process of collaborative meaning-making of and around" the content (Maria Schreiber 2017). Therefore, internet influencer-fan interaction is essentially about self-framing and co-framing between influencers and fans, to define and redefine the meaning of desirable appearance and behavior, in a particular way to please others in society (Sarah Devos, Steven Eggermont and Laura Vandenbosch 2022).

Our term "self-framing" is largely based on the concept "self-presentation" that was first articulated by Erving Goffman (1959) in his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Self-presentation refers to how people try to establish a socially desired image or identity through some communication cues. Self-framing can be understood as a strategy to present the best or ideal self, by which social media users present messages about themselves in certain "frames." Social media users rely on the feedback of their audiences to adjust their self-frames (Emily Lowe-Calverley and Rachel Grieve 2018), and also frame some aspects of themselves in a certain way to one type of audiences but their different aspects in a different way to another types of audiences (Erin E. Hollenbaugh 2021). Co-framing is the process of interactions between the user and his/her audiences that collaboratively frame the user's identity. Unlike traditional media frames, self frames and co-frames in social media reflect power inequality in a more complex and dynamic way. On the one hand, each user of social media possesses a bit of the framing power to influence other people's opinions; on the other hand, elite users in the framework seemingly have much more digital capital and capability to set social and cultural agendas. The various forms of systemic discrimination as persistently framed by mass media in the past, including gender, are now resisted and negotiated in the self-framing and co-framing mechanisms.

A number of studies have investigated the potential for social media to democratize, emancipate and empower ordinary citizens and socially marginalized people to self-frame their own identities, challenging hegemonic frames that are constructed by mainstream media (Dobson and Knezevic 2018; Zewdie Mossie and Jenq-Haur Wang 2020; Phillip Schlesinger 2020). Devos, Eggermont, and Vandenbosch (2022) framing analysis of 60 female Instagram influencers' posts reveals that, instead of the solely feminine and beauty-oriented role as framed by mass media, the influencers have demonstrated multiple roles in their self-presentations, focusing on not only the beauty, but also their

professional achievements and expertise. After the framing analysis of the plus-size model Tess Holliday's Instagram posts by herself and her students together, Tao Papaioannou (2021) has found that university students are able to self-frame obesity within their social media communities through creating and sharing online media content about bodies and health.

However, some researchers argue that social media's capability to empower and emancipate oppressed people is rather limited. According to Dobson and Knezevic (2018), while social media has opened up more democratic online dialogues, it can also enhance the construction of harmful stereotypes as complex issues such as race and gender may be oversimplified and distorted by users. Anita Breuer and Jacob Groshek (2014) points out that the democratizing effect of social media is severely limited in non-democratic societies, where both traditional and new media are strictly censored. This study aims to empirically examine the potential of social media to empower female influencers and their fans in self-framing women's image in the Chinese context.

Although much important research has already been done in recent years on the self-framing efforts of influencers and their fans on social media (Devos, Eggermont, and Vandenbosch 2022; Zoe Hurley 2019, Ana Jorge et al. 2022; Pengxiang Li, Hichang Cho, Yuren Qin and A. Chen 2021; Shaofu Wang 2020), there has been relatively little analysis of how such new media self-frames reshape the discourse of women's identities and images from the feminist perspective. We propose a self-framing and co-framing approach, as a relatively new concept in social media framing in general and influencer-fans framing in particular, to interpret influencer-fans interactions in the process of building and rebuilding female identity, such that it aligns with the reality of diverse actors on social media.

Using the framework of self-framing, we would argue that the framed image of the female wanghong needs to be understood in multiple frames according to her multiple identity goals. Unlike traditional media frames that stereotyped women as one type of globally homogeneous being, self-framing in social media involves presentations that may not only reflect female wanghongs' own identity ideals but also satisfy the different needs of various types of fans and customers. To explore female wanghongs' self-frames in social media, we focus on their posts, fans' feedback, as well as female wanghongs' narratives in media interviews.

Method

From a theoretical perspective, this study is guided by the framework of self-framing as extended from framing theory; we also used thematic analysis to identify the main themes related to female wanghongs' identity building. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis tool, was used to analyze the interactions between wanghongs and their fans and the media interview reports as well. Thematic analysis has been employed widely in framing studies to predominant frameworks of traditional and new media content (Valerie Dickel and Giulia Evolvi 2022; Margrit Schreier 2012; Mohammed S. Muhaisen 2020). We describe below the data collection and analysis process.

We employed purposive sampling to select our study sample. According to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2013), purposive sampling involves identifying information-rich cases that have the potential to provide relevant and diverse data that is pertinent to the research questions. In our context, purposive sampling refers to sampling that is

based on well recognized female wanghongs' profiles on Douyin following three criteria. First, they needed to have at least 10 million followers; that is, they are widely considered as top Internet celebrities. Since Douyin does not officially rank and compare short video accounts in any way, nor does it publicly disclose internal account rankings, the selection based on this criterion was referenced from the Douyin KOL data and rankings published by major Chinese short video content data analysis corporations (TooBigData, CAASDATA, FeiGua.cn). It is important to note that the ranking data is constantly changing, so this article refers to the ranking data as of March 20 2022. Second, they needed to identify themselves as female; our definition of "female" wanghong in this study extends beyond the traditional meaning of this term to include individuals who socially identified themselves as female. Third, for the purpose of this study, they needed to have acquired their popularity and celebrity through the Internet, in contrast to traditional celebrities. Applying these criteria, 30 female wanghongs from Douyin have been selected. The numbers of their followers may vary, but they are between 10 million and 50 million. For each of the 30 female wanghongs' accounts, we marked their number of followers, the number of posts and the key domain of each, such as singing, dancing, acting, eating, etc. (Table 1). We created a list of keywords reflecting traditional frames and social media self-frames of women, based on the literature, to sample relevant posts and comments. After a first reading of the sampled posts and comments, we found that the most representative posts were top rated by followers, and that the most representative followers' comments were top rated by female wanghongs. Therefore, we chose the 10 most popular short videos posted by each female wanghong and the 10 top rated pieces of followers' comments for each female wanghong as samples for thematic analysis.

The selected 300 short videos were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis of the transcribed text and the 3000 pieces of followers' comments was conducted using NVivo 12 with emerging themes being assigned codes for categorization. All video transcripts and comments were viewed a second time and classified under each overarching theme/frame. Each theme represents a unique aspect of the content and all data were analyzed until data saturation was achieved.

It is important to acknowledge that Douyin, a social media platform based in mainland China, is subject to the censorship system. As a result, the wanghongs who thrive on Douyin could be those whose content aligns in general with the communist party's ideology and social norms set by the authorities. In the second phase, in order to mitigate the potential survivorship bias and to deeply understand female wanghongs' identity framing process, we gathered media interview data, including texts and videos, of four female wanghongs in our sample through a thorough search of the mainstream media websites, for a total of 8 interview reports. Although these interviews conducted by media may not be as effective as in-depth interviews conducted on the spot by the researchers themselves, they can provide useful information about the participants' perceptions and attitudes toward identity framing. Thematic analysis of media interview reports was conducted using a process similar to the strategy for analyzing the online posts and comments as detailed above. During the first phase, preliminary themes/frames had been produced inductively from the posts and comments. Descriptive codes were generated from the interview data to confirm and/or modify the themes/frames created in the first phase as analysis progressed.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Douyin female wanghong sample.

Account Name On Douyin	Total Number of Subscribers (As of March 20 2022)	Total Number of Posts (As of March 20 2022)	Domains
Li Ziqi (李子柒)	53.6 million	771	Food blogger
Zhu Xiaohan (祝晓晗)	49 million	2283	Funny blogger
Dili Reba (Dear-迪丽热巴)	48.5 million	29	Actress
Sisters of Fengchan (疯产姐妹)	44.3 million	193	Funny bloggers
Deng Ziqi (邓紫棋)	40.5 million	294	Musician, Singer
Zhao Lusi (赵露思)	37.2 million	174	Actress
Angelababy (杨颖)	37.2 million	96	Actress
Lang Weixian (浪胃仙)	34.9 million	220	Food blogger
Tang Yi (唐艺)	34.7 million	547	Singer
Guan Xiaotong (关晓彤)	34.5 million	222	Actress
Peng Shiliu (彭十六elf)	34.3 million	307	Singer
Papi (Papi酱)	32.2 million	350	Funny blogger
Mo Ye (莫邪)	32.2 million	387	Sitcoms performer
Duoyu & Sister Maomao (多余和毛毛姐)	30.7 million	422	Funny bloggers
Ye Gongzi (叶公子)	30 million	375	Sitcoms performer
Pan Laolao (潘姥姥)	28.4 million	327	Rural food blogger
Yang Zi (杨紫)	27.1 million	90	Actress
Hui Zi (惠子ssica)	27 million	544	Dancer
Aunt Seven (七阿姨柒号路人)	26.6 million	366	Movie star interviewer
Pi You (痞幼)	26.2 million	321	Model (Biker girl)
Feng Timo (冯提莫)	25.9 million	303	Singer
Cheng Shian (程十安an)	25.8 million	132	Beauty blogger
Xiao Qi (小阿七)	24.5 million	646	Singer
Dai Gula (代古拉k)	24.1 million	314	Dancer
Xiao Ye (办公室小野)	24.1 million	291	Food blogger
Zhu Rongjun (朱容君-兔子牙)	23.2 million	433	Singer
Brother M (M哥)	22.9 million	252	Singer
Sister Taozi (蜀中桃子姐)	21.6 million	885	Food blogger
Ouyang Nana (欧阳娜娜 Nana)	20.6 million	216	Actress, Musician
Mi Zijun (密子君)	13.7 million	317	Food blogger

Results

The thematic and framing analysis of the qualitative data suggests that the female wanghongs' posts and interview reports focus on similar topics. The analysis revealed that the female wanghongs, whatever their account domains indicate, commonly emphasize four main frames in the self-framing efforts: beauty, talent, personality and gender expression. These frames serve as the focal point for what the female wanghongs attempt to convey in short video posts and the media interviews, and they are most frequently mentioned by fans and users in their comments. Table 2 describes the main self-frames and sub-frames, as well as typical examples and percentages of fans' comments in respect to each sub-frame. The following sections will examine each predominant self-frame found in the data.

Table 2. Self-frames of female wanghongs on Douyin.

Frames	Sub-frames	Typical Examples of Fans' Comments	Percentage of Comments
Beauty	General	"Beautiful, good looking, pretty, cute, fairy, heartthrob, sexy, sweet, charming, little princess"	25.8%
	Face	"Double eyelids, eye shadow, smile, eyelashes, face, nose, pimples, eyes"	7.7%
	Body Parts	"Tall, short/long hair, manicure, bangs, long legs, fair skin, hairstyle, braids"	6.8%
Talent	Body Shape	"Slim, proportionate body, fat/skinny, fleshy, small tummy, fitness"	4.2%
	Singing	"Great sound, healing vocals, excellent singing skills, infectious singing, soft tunes, natural voice"	13.8%
	Dancing	"Particularly cute dance, so magical, beautiful dance moves, can't stop the rhythm"	3.5%
	Acting	"The expressions are spot on, so realistic, wonderful acting skills"	1.9%
	Cooking	"Smell good, craving, so good, too good appetite, hungry, top chef, drooling, good selling, appetite"	9.3%
Personality Traits	Humor	"Hahaha, so funny, laughing my ass off, so funny, well done, great image"	6.6%
	Excellence	"Excellent, competent, the harder you work the luckier you get, creative, strong and hardworking, all-round woman"	3.5%
	Virtuous	"Soft, gentle, virtuous, warm, calm, at ease"	2.3%
Gender Expression	Down-to-Earth	"Grounded, realism, simplicity, vicarious, down to earth, too real, keeping up with current events"	4.7%
	Masculinity	"Cool girl, handsome, imperious, domineering, valiant, dashing, tugging"	5.6%
	Transgender	"Are you a man or a woman? What kind of costume is this? You have throat knot, weird for a boy to look like this"	1.9%
	Cross-dressing	"Speak for women, you know me well, too funny, good sister, feminine"	0.9%
	LGBT	"Are you straight or not? A and B are perfect for each other, successfully bent another girl"	1.5%

Dimensions of wanghongs' identity: four self-frames

In line with previous research (Devos, Eggermont, and Vandenbosch 2022), the frame that appears the most in all posts and comments is the beauty, taking up almost half of the total posts and comments. Then, further coding revealed that the beauty frame could be divided into four sub-themes: a general category and three specific focus points of face, body organs, and body shape. We put the relatively abstract words in the posts and comments like beauty, pretty, cute, fairy, heartwarming, sexy, sweet, charming and so on into the general sub-frame. As can be seen, these comments are almost all adjectives for admiration and do not focus on any specific aspects of a wanghong. The other three sub-frames are concerned with women's facial appearance, body shape and body parts, showing that the traditional objectifying gaze at women's bodies is still an influential determinant in wanghongs' identity framing. Obviously, Chinese female wanghongs' self-frames are influenced by the cultural focus of beauty standards and beauty is also used as a tool to secure their Internet celebrity status.

Second only to the beauty, the female wanghongs posted a substantial number of short videos and texts to demonstrate a variety of talents while viewers also frequently comment on their talents. What the Chinese female wanghongs are aware of is that no one can rely solely on beauty alone to gain long-term success, as "wanghong" is an industry with a high turnover and replacement rates. As a result, each female wanghong possesses at least one core mastery beyond beauty,

ensuring their competence and uniqueness in the industry. Based on their abilities, we divided the talent frame into four main sub-categories: singing, dancing, acting and cooking.

Personality traits of female wanghongs emerged as the third self-frame from the female wanghongs' posts and the 3,000 followers' comments. We use the term "personality traits" to describe the personal characteristics and interpersonal skills that different women possess, such as sense of humor, competence, softness and virtuousness, easy-goingness, and so on. In this frame, we can see that softness and virtuousness, artlessness and calmness have always been considered the merits of traditional Chinese women, whereas competence, creativity and inspiration are valued as the labels of contemporary women in a new culture, which reveals the combination of tradition and modernity of contemporary Chinese women.

The three self-frames discussed above essentially show the highly symbolic and embodied femininity in a heteronormative regime, but in the "gender expression" frame, some female wanghongs tend to focus on their "special traits" that are not in line with the mainstream beauty culture and instead they demonstrate their masculinity and unisex charm. It is also interesting to note that, some social media users have become increasingly curious about the lesbian community, even encouraging relationships between the female wanghongs. This niche frame attracts crowds of viewers who are curious, sensitive, affirmative, and discriminatory about gender issues.

Co-framing as collective strategy

We argue that the framing of female wanghongs is fraught with frame differences, conflicts, and negotiations between various framing actors such as the mainstream media, social media users, and female wanghongs themselves. We hope to reveal how self-frames of women are socially developed and shaped in interaction through a dynamic analysis (Van Eck et al. 2020). Self-frames are built up piece by piece in this interactive way, "consisting of an innumerable number of elements, amalgamated during the ongoing process of interaction" (George Gonos 1977). Our study suggests a co-framing mechanism between the female wanghongs and their fans from the analysis of the media interviews and fans' comments.

Through the collaborative efforts of female wanghongs and their fans, a new image of Chinese women has emerged through co-framing. Sister Taozi's interactions with her fanbase serve as a prime example of this phenomenon. Sister Taozi, a housewife in rural middle China, gained popularity as a food blogger—"I never imagined that over 20 million people would be watching me cook every day." Initially, her videos featured her cooking without showing her face or speaking. However, as her fanbase grew, they praised her for being "natural, grounded, real, warm, lovely and beautiful" and encouraged her to show her face and be more confident on camera. As a result, Sister Taozi gradually transformed and began appearing in her videos to explain her cooking process.

At the beginning, I was hesitant to appear on camera because I didn't consider myself naturally attractive and feared it would be embarrassing. My husband even remarked that I was unattractive and no one would watch my videos. However, thanks to the unwavering

support and encouragement from my fans in the comments section, I found the confidence to embrace my true self. Without their help, I would have remained just an ordinary rural woman. The platform and followers provided me with an opportunity, a career, a sense of self-worth, and a hope for the future.

Sister Taozi has now transcended her humble beginnings in the kitchen and ventured into the wider world. She now operates an online food and produce business with annual sales of \$200 million. Sister Taozi's success has even garnered her attention from national media, highlighting her transformation from an uneducated, faceless rural housewife to a successful female Wanghong with millions of followers. Her journey serves as a beacon of hope for Chinese women, inspiring them to challenge the traditional confines of being a "housewife" and pursue new possibilities in life. This transformational shift is reflected in the increasing number of diverse females using social media to showcase their independence and strengths across China.

To be sure, many married women in China are repressed, worked up and sacrificed for the sake of their families or children. However, Sister Taozi has become a powerful advocate for female empowerment, urging all women to be bold, shed their inhibitions, and pursue their own careers. Her message has challenged the pre-existing societal framework that often limits the potential of women. Women, with the collective strategy of influencer-fan's co-framing, dare to deviate from the strict standards and frames of the traditional notion of "what should be," which demonstrates their full autonomy and a certain liberation.

Among the selected female wanghongs, Lang Weixian is a special case in point, with shoulder-length curly hair, black-framed glasses, heavy make-up and red lipstick, and a thin voice. Lang, who has always appeared in short videos as a woman, is actually a man in the biological sense. During a livestream, she graciously admitted to having had plastic surgery, including a double eyelid cut, nose job, and eyelash inoculation.

I think I'd look better with a facelift, and I like myself the way I am. I don't impose too many rules and regulations on myself, and I simply show everyone the most authentic side. What people see of me in short videos and livestreams is the same as who I am in real life.

However, the brave, fearless, gender-bent self-frame presented by Lang has been met with harsh criticism and online violence. No matter what she posted in her videos, the comments below were always about the gender, such as *"Are you a man or a woman? It's weird for a boy to look like that; you obviously have a throat knot; do your kids call you mum or dad?"* With Lang's popularity as a food blogger grew to over 30 million followers, attention shifted away from her gender to the delicious food and eating show. Meanwhile, Lang's supporters began to fight for her gender choice, defending, explaining, and even yelling at the offensive comments. Because her fans believe that everyone has the right to live their own lives - *"whether male to female or transgender, we support her choice."*

Along with the cases of wanghongs bravely experimenting with hormones and even surgery to change sex, it is expected that more of such people will be encouraged to take a step forward. Moreover, the support of fans will go a long way toward bolstering this previously taboo act. Transgenderism or transvestism is no longer considered shameful in modern society, in contrast to feudal cultural traditions. Internet celebrities like Lang set an example, while their fans' support gives people more courage. As a result of the co-

framing of wanghongs and fans, transgender images and identities are gaining significant attention, which challenges the traditional gender framework to some extent.

Resistance and compromise: self-frame, media frame and social frame

As previously stated, female wanghongs' self-framing and co-framing have functioned to emancipate and redefine women's identity to a certain degree. However, in addition to frame interactions with fans and users, internet celebrities' self frames can be influenced by social, political, and economic factors. In the Chinese context, wanghong can be dominated by both Party logic (being a "role model") and market logic (seeking economic profit) (Jian Xu and Xinyu Zhao 2019). As a result, wanghongs' performances are constantly subject to dynamic changes in Party regulations, the market economy, and audience demand. Certainly, wanghongs may resort to resistance or compromise when there are differences, conflicts, and even confrontations between different frames, which Art Dewulf and René Bouwen (2012) referred to as "framing difference".

When there is a strong conflict between wanghong's self-frame and the media/social frame, resistance occurs. In the case of Feng Timo, a singing blogger with 25.95 million followers, the labels and comments on her focused entirely on appearance and ignored her professional strength. So, she would not like to hear compliments on her beauty anymore, even if they are words like "goddess" or "gorgeous." As she has believed:

People's recognition of me as a singer and my work, not compliments on my beauty, gives me the greatest sense of accomplishment. It doesn't matter if people don't recognize me right now. I'll always do good work and improve my singing. I would like to use my work to communicate with the world.

Feng has repeatedly stressed "speak with my work" and has mentioned her dream of becoming a real singer in the media interviews, showing that talent and capability are the most important self-frame in her mind. However, viewers are more concerned with the beauty frame; no one cares about her dream, and no one appears to believe in it. At this point, there is a gap between the self-frame Feng wishes to construct and the media/social frames, which is difficult to reconcile in a short time. As such, she chooses to constantly reiterate her self-frame in media interviews, which may not be accepted or understood by the mainstream. Actually, for female wanghongs, the most common frame of "beauty" is their original capital and reliance, but it can also overpower their strengths and qualities, and distract the viewer's attention from their talents and dreams. This is why Internet celebrities are rebelling against the media and socially entrenched "vase" framework.

Even though there is a resistance of female wanghongs to the dominant framework, the effectiveness of this resistance is limited under authoritarian regimes. When the difference between frames is not substantial, the strategy that most wanghongs prefer is compromise. Since the wanghong's rise to fame has been internet-based (online), they are eager for recognition from traditional media (offline). In particular, when the state media reports on an internet celebrity, it means that her status is acknowledged by the nation, giving a certain "legitimacy" and an opportunity to become a real superstar (Xu and Zhao 2019). It is worth considering that the preference for compromise among wanghongs may be influenced by the fact that those who resist censorship are less likely

to achieve the status of a wanghong, resulting in a skewed representation of opinions and viewpoints within this group. As the highest level of party media, CCTV and Xinhua Agency interviewed Li Ziqi, one of China's first and most influential food bloggers, with over 50 million followers on Douyin and over 16 million subscribers on YouTube. As is known, different media have different frames of coverage. For the state media, wanghong is just a means of reinforcing the moral and political values of the Party-state (Wanning Sun and Yuezhi Zhao 2009). Unlike the frames presented by other media, Li's interviews with the party media show her as an ambassador for reviving traditional culture, revitalizing the countryside, and guiding the youth:

I approach traditional culture and handicraft with reverence, and I hope that my videos show people in town where the food we eat comes from and how difficult it is to obtain. Many friends from abroad enjoy watching my videos, and I believe one of the main reasons is the food. Food knows no boundaries, and everyone enjoys eating tasty foods, which is not only my personal charm, but also the charm of the brilliant traditional culture.

In the case of Li, what she presented in the state media were not beauty or talent, but instead attributed her own success to Chinese traditional culture. In the spotlight of mainstream media, many wanghongs like Li tend to consciously cooperate, integrate and even cater to the grand social framework because they desire to seek recognition on a broader level. Moreover, for the party media, wanghongs are valued for qualities associated with national frames such as Chinese cuisine, traditional culture, and rural lifestyles. The compromise of wanghongs' self-frame to the media/social frame is what brings wanghong, media, and CCP together to create an ideal version of rural China, which is conducive to the state's external communication and propaganda. Nonetheless, in such a framing process, the meaning of women themselves is largely forgotten.

Conclusion

This study analyzed Chinese female wanghongs' social media posts, their media interview narratives, and viewers' comments to understand how they self-frame and co-frame with their viewers their identity and image. By focusing on the Douyin site, we have revealed instances of the female wanghongs' resistance and compromise to the traditional media frames and cultural expectations of women in shaping and reshaping their new identity. The focus on Chinese female wanghongs allows us to understand women's increasing Internet-based movement in contemporary China. A thematic analysis of wanghongs' posts, users' comments and media interviews suggests that there are some dominant self-frames in the female wanghongs' platforms: beauty, talent, personality traits and gender expression.

Our study confirms some findings of previous research. First, social media does have the capacity to empower ordinary women to resist traditional patriarchal media frames and self-frame their own image and identity (Dobson and Knezevic 2018; Mossie and Wang 2020). In particular, some female wanghongs try to challenge the sexualized women's role and emphasize their professional identity, suggesting that demonstrating entrepreneurial or professional success is part of China's online feminism. Second, many female wanghongs consider themselves to be forced by the culturally defined standard to make up for beauty, challenging previous studies that describe female digital influencers

as freewill agents in framing beauty (Petersson Magdalena McIntyre 2021; Altman Yuzhu Peng 2020). According to this viewpoint, female Internet influencers choose to use feminine beauty to attract consumers of their promoted products, and they have gained large benefits from the traditional sexualized stereotype of women (Xu Duan 2020). As a consequence, female wanghongs' self-framing is equated with "pseudo-feminism" that is simply used by them to manipulate female followers on social media. Third, wanghongs' self-frames seem to be harshly attacked by the deeply rooted patriarchal sexism and misogyny, and the convenience of social media contribute to the cyber hatred against the marginalized types of wanghongs who challenge the mainstream gender values (Dickel and Evolvi 2022). In particular, female wanghongs' success is considered an unacceptable challenge to the patriarchal hierarchy and men's dominant status in society. The female wanghongs in this study have both resisted and compromised with the patriarchal culture.

The theoretical framework of social media frames (Devos, Eggermont, and Vandenbosch 2022) is useful to understand some aspects of the wanghong phenomenon, yet our study also emphasized that it is important to consider the self-framing and co-framing strategies of wanghongs and their followers. Self-frames (and co-frames) help to reshape the discourse of female wanghongs' ideal identity, or postfeminist nirvana (Psarras, Stein, and Shah 2021), although their women-can-do-it-all goals may still be largely restricted by the patriarchal culture, and the political power in China in particular. Hence, our findings show that the ideologies and ambitions of the different actors in social media—wanghongs, followers, ordinary users, mainstream media, political agencies, etc. - often conflict. Beyond the business-consumer relationship, female wanghongs and their followers who share similar viewpoints on gender stand together as an interest group to protect their gender identity-building initiatives. From this perspective, Chinese female wanghongs seem to mirror the dilemma Chinese feminists face in trying to highlight women's achievements in multiple roles. Hence, we would suggest that it is important to examine wanghongs' self-framing process within a complex social media sphere where different actors contribute, in different ways, to the building of the new female identity in China. Our study is limited to the thematic analysis of 30 female wanghongs' posts and media interview narratives, yet future research may further examine female wanghongs identity building more deeply by conducting in-depth interviews with them on more topics related to gender.

As the research on the self-frames of female wanghongs on social media platforms in China is still in its nascent stage, the available data may have limitations that could potentially impact the applicability of the study's findings. Like other social media platforms in China, Douyin has community guidelines that outline what kind of content is prohibited, and it may remove any content and/or suspend user accounts that are found to be in violation of the party ideology or social norms set by the authorities. The presence of survivorship bias in this context cannot be resolved using publicly available information on social media platforms in China. To remedy the issue, we supplemented the Douyin data with media interview reports with four of our sampled female wanghongs. However, the findings can only be safely interpreted within the context of the surviving sample. This is an issue in all empirical studies using online data collected in China. A potential solution for addressing this issue in future studies is to take regular snapshots of the available data at fixed time intervals, such as daily, to maintain a record of the information that has been

deleted by social media platforms. This could enable the researchers to retrieve the missing data and backfill it from publicly available social media records, thus reducing the potential impact of survivorship bias on the findings.

Acknowledgements

The authors are co-first authors and contributed equally to this manuscript's production. The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedbacks on this manuscript.

Disclosure statement

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

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