Selling intimacy online: The multi-modal discursive techniques of China’s wanghong

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1. Introduction

In recent decades China’s digital economy has grown to become the largest in the world, facilitated by the proliferation and widespread adoption of smart phones, the development of China’s mobile phone apps, and online marketplaces (Guan, 2021). An important and rapidly growing segment of this digital economy is China’s ‘wanghong’, a polysemic term that refers to thousands of online content-producers, influencers, and internet celebrities (Han, 2021; Zhang and de Seta, 2019) and a broader ‘wanghong’ economy, that in 2020 was estimated to be worth up to USD 50 billion (Craig et al., 2021). Mostly young and female (Xu and Zhao, 2019), China’s popular wanghong can attract millions of followers and generate substantial sales; they upload content across multiple platforms, such as ‘how-to’ makeup videos, personal video-logs (vlogs), direct sales pitches, or live-stream broadcasts. Their aim is to ‘convert internet viewer traffic to money’, enticing followers to spend time on their sites and purchase the clothes, beauty, fashion products, and items that they promote (Han, 2021, p. 317). They accomplish this by taking ‘sociality to a new level’, using the multimodal affordances of China’s interoperable social media platforms to reframe their lives as profit-generating and state-affirming, social creators (Craig et al., 2021, pp. 17-18).

China’s wanghong are similar to the ‘influencers’, or ‘beauty vloggers’, who promote beauty and fashion products on such platforms as Instagram or YouTube. Recent studies have shown how such online influencers can create perceived authenticity and intimacy, using a range of discursive and multimodal techniques (Abidin, 2016; Berryman and Kavka, 2017; Cunningham and Craig, 2017; Hurley, 2019). For example, they perform ‘mediated intimacy’ by creating videos – filmed at a low resolution – in intimate settings, such as a bedroom, while appearing as a ‘real person’, who is dressed casually and without makeup (Berryman and Kavka, 2017). Another technique is to create a distinguishing self-narrative, such as a ‘Cinderella narrative’, relating a past and difficult childhood that was overcome through pursuing their ‘inner beauty’ (Cunningham and Craig, 2017). Likewise, gay and lesbian YouTubers may make a ‘coming out video’: by showing their ‘real’ selves, in their endeavor to be accepted as role models to young gay and lesbian youth (Lovelock, 2017). Finally, Instagram influencers may use multimodal techniques, such as personal address, gaze, pose, and props, to generate a range of affordances:

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material (how posts are viewed), conceptual (beauty rituals and ideals that increase feminine worth), and imaginary (an imagined ‘community' of followers who aspire to the image presented by the influencers that they follow) (Hurley, 2019). These and other studies demonstrate a growing interest in the discourses, multimodal techniques, and platform affordances of fashion and beauty vloggers, with implications for understanding how social presence is created on digital media.

While the techniques and practices of internet celebrities are similar in many ways, there are particularities that distinguish these practices across different contexts: ‘how internet celebrity has come to emerge in various parts of the world varies, depending on the cultural norms of the people, the social practices around media devices and personalities’ (emphasis added) (Abidin, 2018, p. 2). This applies to China, the world’s largest and fastest growing social media market (Craig et al., 2021). Operating in a media environment that bans such international platforms as YouTube and Instagram, China’s developers and content creators operate a distinct suite of social media platforms, creating an innovative and diverse technological environment which incorporates new technological affordances embedded within cultural resources and practices; these create a distinct technological and cultural environment. This is the context in which wanghong compete for audience attention.

The aim of this paper is to examine the discursive, multimodal strategies used by China’s wanghong to create and maintain a personal and even intimate connection with a remote audience. In our analysis, we examine the practices of three wanghong who monetize their fame by advertising and promoting beauty products on three of China’s most popular digital platforms: Weibo, Douyin (TikTok) and Bilibili. We focus our analysis on how they construct an online persona through their own ‘back story’, before exploring how each draws upon and embeds this online persona into their online performance and interaction with fans. Through this we aim to further our understanding of the techniques and practices of Chinese wanghong through highlighting multimodal analysis as a way to examine multiple forms of meaning making within China’s social media environment.

2. Literature review

2.1. The rise of wanghong

The term wanghong (网红) first appeared in 2009 as a shortened form of an earlier phrase, wangluo hongren (网络红人), referring to anyone who became famous (红人) on the internet (wangluo) (Han, 2021). China’s wanghong began as a bottom-up phenomenon, afforded by the emergence of new digital technologies that allowed creative individuals to become famous while breaking through the constraints of China’s dominant and drab state-run media (Ju et al., 2019; Yang, 2009). Wanghong as a type, are similar to Japan’s celebrity-manufactured ‘idols’, who are famous not because of any ‘demonstrable talent, but for their specific ability to attract attention on the internet’ (Abidin 2018, p. 3). The phenomenon is a profit-driven enterprise, driven by ‘the acute ability to convert internet viewer traffic to money’ (Abidin, 2018, p. 3).

Therefore, the term wanghong encompasses understandings of the broader, ‘wanghong economy’ (Craig et al., 2021), comprised of China’s internet infrastructure (e.g., mobile phones, broadband), platforms (e.g., Sina Weibo, Youku, Bilibili), performativity (e.g., humorous satire, spoof videos) (Zhang and de Seta, 2019), and the ‘incubator’ companies where aspiring wanghong are trained to have the face, clothing and appearance (often through plastic surgery) that is deemed beautiful in China’s competitive market (Han, 2021). Hence, wanghong implicates a growth industry afforded by China’s rapidly rising economy and digital platforms (Lv and Craig, 2021).

Wanghong must also be understood in the context of the activities of the Chinese state; this includes both state-driven economic policies, and content monitoring (Ju et al., 2019). In 2015 China’s Premier Li Keqiang announced China’s ‘Internet + agenda’, with the goal of replacing China’s ‘export-driven’ economy with a ‘consumption-based’ and ‘innovation-driven’ model (Craig et al., 2021, p. 36). The digital economy was placed at the heart of this agenda (Hong, 2017), as the state claimed that ‘digital creative industries’ were strategic ‘emerging industries’ to be promoted at the same level as such industries as biotech and next generation information (Craig et al., 2021, p. 34). That is, wanghong activities are driven at multiple levels, including bottom-up creators, large and small technology businesses, and top-down government policies. All media, including social media platforms, should promote the state-promoted values of ‘positive energy’, patriotism, and a state-sanctioned aesthetic (Chen et al., 2021a). Therefore, China’s wanghong creators face the challenge of navigating the line between producing content that is innovative, creative, and revenue-producing, while not transgressing the boundaries of state-sanctioned content and censorship (Xu and Yang, 2021).

Another feature of China’s wanghong is the cultivation of ‘perceived interconnectedness,’ describing how ‘influencers interact with followers to give the impression of intimacy’ (Abidin, 2015), which is co-cultivated in relationships between fans (jensi in Chinese) and the ‘idols’ that they follow (Yan and Yang, 2021). Similar with how cultivated ‘idols’ are constructed in Japan (Galbraith and Karlin, 2012), enthusiastic Chinese fans may engage in a ‘parakin relationship’ with their idols: this is marked by ‘highly self-organized’ promotional activities such as fund raising (e.g., purchasing sponsored products), posting ‘glowing reviews, designing promotional posters, galvanizing online traffic’ and posting birthday wishes (Yan and Yang, 2021, p. 2594). This parakin relationship is marked linguistically by the Chinese cultural practice of kinship address (Sandel, 2002), as fans address each other and the wanghong that they follow as ‘mothers, sisters, brothers, and so on’ (Yan and Yang, 2021, p. 2594). Like a Chinese parent who monitors their child’s romantic relationships, the Chinese variety of fan-celebrity interaction exhibits a parakin relationship whereby fans desire to ‘protect’ their idols/wanghong ‘as if they were to protect and support family members’ (p. 2609). This can give followers a sense of agency, community, and companionship that is beyond the control of Chinese state, and thus may be seen by the state as a potential challenger that needs to be controlled (Xu and Yang, 2021).

China’s wanghong, and the ‘incubator’ companies that develop and sponsor their activities, pair up creators with different platforms (Craig et al., 2021). Online streaming platforms (e.g., Lang Live, Douyu) are monetized through gifts from followers; short video platforms (e.g., Douyin, Kuaishou) pay creators based upon the number of followers and views; and Weibo (described below) is used for bond building with followers and ‘brand-making posts’ (p. 153). Platforms can also be used to target different demographics and audiences. For instance, a number of successful wanghong have used their working class or farming background as content (discussed below), in his livestreaming broadcasts of beauty products uses an ‘exaggerative, assertive, and authoritative tone’ of voice to demonstrate his knowledge of the products; his ‘impeccably crafted voice to demonstrate his knowledge of the products; his ‘impeccably crafted appearance (skin care, hairstyle, dress)’ give him credibility with his mostly female audience (p. 155). Each platform affords wanghong with multiple modes of verbal, physical and technologically mediated forms of engagement.
Studies of China’s wanghong have attracted increasing research interest. They include investigations of the wanghong economy (e.g., Craig et al., 2021; Han, 2021), censorship and the role of the state (e.g., Lv and Craig, 2021; Xu and Zhang, 2021), the qualities and performative labor of wanghong (e.g., Abidin, 2018; Xu and Zhao, 2019), how ‘ordinariness’ is turned into instant fame (Craig et al., 2021; Zhang, 2021), how followers interact with and perceive wanghong (e.g., Duan, 2020; Yan and Yang, 2021), platform affordances (e.g., Kaye, Chen, and Zeng, 2021; Lin and de Kloet, 2019), and multimodal techniques (e.g., Cao, 2021; Huang et al., 2020). While this research highlights a growing interest in wanghong as a particular form of social media activity, much has tended to come from a broader cultural studies frame rather than a discourse analytic focus. Furthermore, studies that focus on discursive practices tend to examine a single platform rather than cross-platform engagement and use.

A distinguishing feature of Chinese social media is its ‘interplatformization’, meaning that Chinese platforms have greater interoperability of features, services, and affordances than western ones (Craig et al., 2021). Therefore, there is a need for studies that examine how users and producers are able to move between and across platforms, as they take advantage of different technological affordances across platforms, and address the aims and interests of different groups of users (Huang et al., 2020; Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021). This study builds upon this line of research by investigating the online activities of three wanghong who use different platforms to engage with their audience in particular ways, and within each employ a range of multimodal resources and interactional practices to address and engage with their audience for particular purposes.

2.2. The multiple modes of wanghong

Within the growing interest in studying practices of wanghong there are a few that use a multimodal analysis to closely investigate the embodied and technical practices of China’s wanghong. Two recent studies show how this kind of analysis may be done. In the first, Cao (2021) examined the technical format of the streaming platform YY.com, focusing on how ‘danmu’ or ‘bullet screen comments’ (see Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021), are both a multimodal medium and object. The technology affords an experience of ‘indeterminacy’, as users may select and watch video broadcast from livestreaming performers and engage with the performance through posting danmu comments that move across the screen. Cao’s analysis suggests that users experience a sense of ‘going astray’, as the viewing experience does not follow a singular narrative, but rather is part of an interactive, nondiscursive experience, with icons, texts, sounds, and other signs appearing on the screen at unpredictable moments. For viewers the experience is not chaotic as the ongoing requests for ‘virtual gifts’ that are signaled by ‘money-laden icons’, are signs and modes that tie the elements together. Although focused on a single platform Cao’s (2021) study shows how the affordance of the digital platform (danmu comments) can be used to create an interactive effect and becomes a site where users participate in and/or watch the ‘spectacle’ of virtual gifting that ‘becomes the entertainment itself’ (p. 43).

In another study, (Huang et al., 2020) examined the livestreaming activities of one of China’s most successful wanghong, Austin Li. Working in an industry that caters mostly to female followers, Austin uses his gender as a strategic resource. When he puts on lipstick, ‘a counterintuitive product’ for a male, he can heighten attention in the product and raise his credibility by criticising the product. This is done by constructing an alignment with the audience against the displayed product through such strategies as verbal criticism (e.g., ‘The leather for this [Hermes bag] is probably useless material!’), and nonverbal eyerolls and negative facial expressions. He also employs a range of discursive strategies that delimit time in order to persuade his viewers to make purchases. These include exclamations (‘OH MY GOD!’), imperatives, celebrity endorsements, personalization or direct address (‘This is a must buy. . . . you have to buy this one’), and off-camera spoken interaction with his team members. The analysis demonstrates how Austin uses the multimodalities of a digital platform to build trust and persuade his followers to purchase beauty products. In this way (Huang et al’s 2020) analysis highlights a range of multimodal techniques used to create alignments with his audience across platforms.

In the analysis below we further examine the discursive work of wanghong by focusing on the multimodal strategies they use to create and maintain a personal and intimate connection with a remote audience and across platforms. Our analysis focuses on three popular wanghong: MOMO, BbeiBabbit and Benny. Each monetises their fame by advertising and promoting beauty products on three of China’s most popular digital platforms: Weibo, Douyin (TikTok) and Bilibili. We examine each in turn, by interrogating how they construct and narrate an online persona through their own ‘back story’, and then exploring how each draws upon and embeds their ‘renshe’, or distinguishing online persona (Craig et al., 2021), into their performance and interaction with fans. Through this we aim to further our understanding of the techniques and practices of Chinese wanghong, by conducting multimodal analysis across platforms that show multiple forms of meaning making on Chinese social media.

3. Data and methods

Data collection began in August 2020 by examining the cross-platform posting activities of twenty of the most popular wanghong in the categories of beauty and fashion (Forbes China, 2019). We searched across multiple platforms—within and outside of China—noting their active accounts on these platforms, and recorded the ages and genders of each wanghong: Most were young, with approximately half in their 20 s (9), an average age of 34, and fourteen of the top 20 were female and six were male.

Next, we selected three wanghong: MOMO (Zhang Mofan, female), BbeiBabbit (Beibei Tu, female), and Benny (Dong Zichu, male). Each presents a distinct persona, albeit within the recognizable genre of the wanghong as the ‘grassroots’ or ‘ordinary’ individual (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). Furthermore, while each has an active presence on Weibo, they are more popular on other apps with different affordances: MOMO, with nearly 13 million followers on Weibo, is well known for the short videos and range of content that she posts; BbeiBabbit is most active on the platform, with 10 million followers on TikTok (owned by the same company), features short-videos; Benny is most active on Bilibili (1.4 million followers), an interactive video platform whereby viewers can post comments that float across the screen (Teng and Chan, 2022). We examined the content of their posts, including their background story videos, product promotion videos, and the text, images and multimodal features of the apps that lead users to make purchases on E-commerce platforms.

In examining the data we also included posts across other platforms, finding that they often post the same video on multiple platforms, identifying the types of videos they post. For instance, most videos are sales pitches for beauty and cosmetic products; others are autobiographical in nature, such as answering fans’ questions about their lives and interests, or their most recent activities and travels. We examined such features as filming techniques, settings, clothing, objects, performative vocal and narrative qualities, fan-based comments and interactions, and narrative constructions. Then we conducted a search to find earlier, ‘autobiographical’
videos on a range of apps and online sites, seeing how these videos narrated a version of the developing background story of each wanghong. From these data (approximately 60 videos and 200 screenshots), we used screenshots of apps, video captures, text, and images, that demonstrate each wanghong’s online persona and the cross-platform affordances that allow fans to respond and/or make purchases.

The analysis draws on multimodal analysis underpinned through social semiotics to focus on the range of relevant resources that are articulated in situated, social contexts (van Leeuwen, 2005). This form of analysis is well suited to China’s digital environment, where wanghong use a variety of communicative modes, including language (spoken and textual), images, gaze, facial expressions, movement, and spatial composition (Huang et al., 2020, Cao, 2021). Multimodal analysis focuses attention not only on the modes used by wanghong, but also on how these ‘multiple modes interact with one another to make meanings’ (p. 308). Such resources are not limited to text or static images, but include actions, such as how someone walks or moves, or the color of the skin (Vannini, 2007), such that any and all resources have ‘semiotic potential’ that can index a range of social meanings. Modality, points to the ‘reality value’ of a semiotic resource (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001) which has implications for the technological affordances of social media, as perceptions of meaning and what is ‘true’ are impacted by a range of modalities (e.g., language, visual imagery, clothing, set design, sound, music) (O’Halloran et al., 2011). In this way a social semiotic multimodal approach provides a way to interrogate the meaning-making mechanisms of social media technology and their uses as semiotic resources within the broader, Chinese discursive sociocultural context.

4. Analysis

Each of the three wanghong examined below communicates the message that anyone, even those without a high education (none claim to have a university degree) or wealthy family (one claims that she grew up poor), can become successful. In constructing this narrative, each has a distinct background story and discursive type that fits within a broader cultural context. MOMO and Beierabbit both present themselves as independent and strong women who enjoy a consumerist lifestyle (Duan, 2020). They are also happily unmarried women, which may be seen as counter to China’s ‘left-over woman’ discourse (Fincher, 2014); that a woman needs to be married to be happy and filial. Benny, who is openly gay, appeals to a different cultural discourse—the playful satire that is popular among China’s post 90s generation (Gong and Yang, 2010). He is sassy, funny, fashionable, and not afraid to express himself as a ‘different’ individual. Like the wanghong Austin Li (Huang et al., 2020), his appeal is that he is the person whom many (mostly women) can trust to show them how to be beautiful individuals. We now discuss each in turn.

4.1. MOMO: Constructing ‘ordinariness’ on Weibo

In a video released on Taobao in 2014, MOMO (born in 1991), tells the story of her path to success. At 16 she convinced her parents to let her go to Australia for study (implying a privileged background). But she was not interested in studying, and instead spent most of her time in daigou (cross-border) trade (Xie, 2018), selling cosmetics and beauty products. She returned to China and convinced her father to let her discontinue her studies and instead pursue her business interests. In 2010 she launched the company, MoAmour (the name is a combination of her name, Mo, with amour, or love), and became a successful and independent women entrepreneur, as she exclaims in the Taobao video, ‘Every person can live a splendid self’.

MOMO’s image and story of success is the ‘front door’ image that she projects across social media platforms. We can see this when looking at the ‘personal details’ of her Weibo homepage (Fig. 1). The top of the page is a picture of MOMO in profile, showing her large eyes, shapely nose (after plastic surgery in 2021), and fashionable hair. Below this appear three fields of text: (1) a list of figures, (2) accomplishments, and (3) personal details.

The first field, in white text and immediately below her name, shows such information as the number of followers (12,956 million), and that she has received more than 53 million likes or comments. The next field (in red) lists awards and accomplishments on Weibo: ‘popular and trending fashion vlogger’, ‘top 10 influencer in the category of fashion’, and ‘Weibo story popular (red) person’—someone who has released eight or more stories/videos in the past month, has more than 100,000 fans, and actively publishes columns on Weibo Stories. The bottom field shows her personal details: founder and CEO of the cosmetics company, ‘Moamour’, a business address/code (moamour-cw) that can be used to contact her across platforms (e.g., WeChat, Douyin), and another cross-platform code (2m199111229) for fans and fan groups. Below is listed her date of birth and astrological sign, home residence, name of her company, and information about some that she is following. Semiotically this page is a sign of Momo as the successful woman, who has achieved female empowerment (Duan, 2020) through hard work (founding a company) and feminine consumption (beauty products). But then after entering the front door, MOMO takes her followers inside, showing them that she has ‘ordinary’ problems that must be overcome on the path to success.

In a six-minute video posted to Weibo in 2020, MOMO shows how the ‘ordinary’ self is transformed. It opens with MOMO in a backstage, pre-makeup shot, wearing light makeup, casual clothes, and tied-up hair. She addresses her fans by saying, ‘I am your husband [laogong] Zhang Mofan’ (Fig. 2). The address term, husband, indexes her role as one who takes care of her fans, whom she addresses as ‘wife’ (xifu), fostering a parakin relationship with her followers (Yan and Yang, 2021). She speaks at a fast pace, that is accelerated by the techniques of deleting pauses and speeding up the audio, similar to Austin Li’s videos (Huang et al., 2020). Her head, arms, and body are in constant motion as she manipulates her hair. A steady drumbeat plays in the background, interspersed with jump cuts to images, or video clips of a few seconds or less. She changes clothes four times, signaling a movement through time, from morning to night to the next day—a temporal frame of reference that highlights the ordinary.

Flowing across these rapid movements, however, is one continuous action, the application of skincare products. After greeting her customers as their ‘husband’, the video jump cuts to a private bathroom, featuring towels hanging in the background, and makeup/skincare products displayed to her left (Fig. 3).

The text above the video explains that these products were sent to her in the city of Chengdu, from where she is broadcasting—the kind of personal detail that she shares with her ‘close friends’. She has been working ‘day and night’ for her fans; yet this could harm her facial complexion. The answer to this problem? It is ‘Amiro’ (highlighted in green)飞 across the screen. She speaks at a fast pace, that is accelerated by the techniques of deleting pauses and speeding up the audio, similar to Austin Li’s videos (Huang et al., 2020). Her head, arms, and body are in constant motion as she manipulates her hair. A steady drumbeat plays in the background, interspersed with jump cuts to images, or video clips of a few seconds or less. She changes clothes four times, signaling a movement through time, from morning to night to the next day—a temporal frame of reference that highlights the ordinary.

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takes on the role of beauty ‘expert’, a technique used by other vloggers (García-Rapp, 2019).

After praising the virtues of the product, a problem arises: MOMO has a pimple! There is a quick jump cut to later that evening, marked by dimmed room lighting, speaking at a slower pace, wearing a towel on her head, a gray-colored sweatshirt, and saying that she is very tired. That is, a narrative device is created to show that MOMO has an ‘ordinary’ skin problem to be solved in a limited amount of time. She takes out the applicator and uses it on her face. Time passes, marked by the text, ‘The Next Day’; this is followed by MOMO appearing in a blue dress robe, moving slowly, speaking slowly, and sounding tired—communicating ‘mediated intimacy’ (Berryman and Kavka, 2017). She shows her face up-close and begins applying the skincare product again. A ‘before and after’ picture is displayed, where the ‘after’ skin looks smoother than the ‘before’ (Fig. 4).

The video concludes with a jump cut back in time, signaled by the clothing that she wore earlier, a frilly white blouse with light pink, sweater vest, and space—the brightly-lit bathroom—as she exhorts her viewers to buy the product. At the end of this video (and others), you see a close-up shot of MOMO’s face, demonstrating the beautiful, white, and blemish-free skin that is desirable to Chinese women (Jung, 2018).

MOMO’s appeal in this video is built upon two techniques. The first is the narrative urgency that is communicated by this video, that in the course of everyday life, anyone can have a skincare ‘emergency’ that requires a solution (i.e., pimple), which MOMO provides. The second is the display of MOMO’s backstage ‘ordinariness’, showing how she ‘works’ in the privacy of the bedroom, just like everyone else, to apply the beauty products that transform her into the splendid and successful woman that is displayed at the front door of her Weibo homepage.

4.2. Bbeirabbit: Promoting a ‘guimi’ female friendship on Douyin

Bbeirabbit (born in 1989), like MOMO, is a successful and independent woman who promotes beauty products. But her background story is different. She constructs a story of someone who struggled to overcome growing up poor, going through a divorce, raising a daughter as a single-mother, and at the ‘old’ age of over-thirty, confronting the label of a ‘leftover woman’ in China (Fincher, 2014). She connects with her audience through friend-
ship, displaying online her own, ‘real-life’ girlfriend relationship, called guimi (闺蜜), a term of sister-like closeness that has emerged in China’s one-child society (Chen et al., 2021b)—and addressing her followers (i.e., ‘leftover women’) as though they are her guimi.

One example can be seen in a 90-second video on Douyin in the form of an autobiographical montage titled, ‘A normal girl’s 10 years’. The montage begins with images and text set to dark colors (black) and pensive music. It then cuts to a picture of a young Bbeirabbit in 2010, posing in a frilly pink dress, with her hair up, smiling directly at the camera (Fig. 5, left). It is a picture of innocence and naivety. Then, the video shows her journey through time: her first job, taking care of a baby, and a picture of her in a blurred photo, smiling slightly, positioned next to ‘Tu little 6’, Bbeirabbit’s guimi (close girlfriend) who appears in many of her videos.

A change occurs around the midpoint. The photo in the frame is reduced, the year 2016 appears on a black background, with accompanying text explaining that this is the year she divorced. The music changes to a slow rap. Bbeirabbit then appears with stylishly dyed hair, skin that is light in complexion, free of blemishes, eyes wide open (after plastic surgery), wearing comfortable, but fashionable clothing, and looking past the camera. The text reads:
‘Dress well, have your own social circle, have a career, and live beautifully’ (Fig. 5, right). The video moves through a rapid montage sequence (Dovey and Rose, 2012) that is set to ‘happy’ music, documenting her climb to fame, a picture with her working-class parents—showing her filial love, her first live-broadcasts on Douyin in 2019, and awards as a top sales performer.

Translation:
2010
My first photo shoot was 199 RMB, because I did not want to add any more cost for extras. It was a really bad shoot and there were a lot of disdainful looks.

Translation:
2016
Dress well, have your own social circle, have a career, and live beautifully.

This video demonstrates the multi-modal techniques that Bbeirabbit uses to construct an image that links her ‘normal’ life with her audience of (mostly) female, guimi followers. The text, images, and music of the first half show a woman coming of age, without the advantages of family wealth, and access to higher education. She began her life on the path to a very ‘normal’ life, interspersed with moments of fun and female, guimi friendship. But when she became a divorced, single mother, her life diverged. She turned this setback into an opportunity to pursue a new path, a dream of success, wealth, and beauty, that she shows her fans what they can achieve—when they follow her on Douyin, as her guimi, and buy her products.

Confronting the ‘leftover woman’ label is woven into many of Bbeirabbit’s sales videos. One example is a 60-second video titled, ‘Are you ashamed that you are not married by the age of 30?’, with surrounding, bracketed texts (red-colored frame): ‘Older leftover women??’ and ‘Listen [to advice from Bbeirabbit]’ (Fig. 6, left). This video is similar to MOMO’s sales pitch above: (1) it is shot in a private place—a makeup room, (2) Bbeirabbit speaks at a rapid pace, with pauses edited out; (3) graphic images pop up to emphasize key points; (4) there is a background sound track (slow and pedestrian), interspersed with sound effects, such as the sound of breaking glass (signifying how a woman can break barriers), and a variety of high pitched, pop-up sounds; (5) the text is highlighted in multiple colors, and (6), most importantly, she speaks while manipulating her hair and applying beauty products. That is, she uses the verbal techniques of storytelling and advice giving to attract viewers, while demonstrating how to apply the products (Fig. 6, right). But unlike MOMO who directly ‘hawks’ her products, Bbeirabbit never speaks the name of the products that she uses. (In other videos she names and shows product prices.).

Translation:
Older leftover women?? (upper left, red)
Listen [to advice] (upper right, yellow)
Are you married? (yellow)
Are you ashamed that you are not married by the age of 30? (center, yellow and blue text)

This ‘advice story’ is directed at women in their 30s. She begins with the claim that there is a lot of pressure on women from ‘society, the family and social theory’ to marry and give birth to a child, and that women who do not fulfill these duties to ‘carry on the family line’ (Sandel, 2015) are laughed at. The situation is most intense during family gatherings and holidays when a woman is asked, ‘Are you married?’ (Fig. 6, right). Thus, many feel pressured to marry ‘whoever’ is available. She links this to her own experience of getting married at age 25, giving birth, and then realizing ‘how cruel the reality’ of the situation. Her advice is not to listen to what others say, but instead respect yourself and the voice of your own heart.

The discourse of being a strong and unafraid woman appears in interactions with Bbeirabbit’s fans on the comments section of Douyin. For instance, under the ‘advice story’ video, we see the following (Fig. 7, left): (1) ‘In addition, as long as you lower your standards, and don’t mind how old a man is, you can get married before the age of 50’; (2) ‘Liquid foundation’; (3) ‘Are you divorced? And also have a child?’; and (4) ‘I am most afraid of going home during the holidays. … But now is [the time] to work hard’. Comment 2, ‘Liquid foundation’, is a bid for information about the product. Others respond to the narrative content of the video: any woman can get married if she lowers her standards; amazement or incredulity that Bbeirabbit is a divorced woman with a child; and a personal comment from a woman who agrees that the holidays are most difficult. We see here the construction of a mediated guimi relationship (Chen et al., 2021b)—female solidarity with Bbeirabbit in the face of an oppressive, male-dominated Chinese society.

Bbeirabbit interacts by responding to some fans as shown in the comments section (Fig. 7, right): replies are marked in a red box next to her name, ‘author’. The first question is if she has done any live broadcasting recently, to which Bbeirabbit replies: ‘Precious, today there will be [a broadcast] emoji’. The second is about the product: ‘Share a bit about the eyelashes’. Bbeirabbit replies: ‘Scarecrow’—referring to the brand name of a product line available on Taobao and JD. Users may then search for this on other purchasing apps such as Taobao or JD. Or, they may make purchases by selecting the ‘Merchandise Window’ page (not shown), that is linked to Bbeirabbit’s Douyin homepage. That is, we can see cross-platform activities, as she posts content and interacts with her followers on one platform, Douyin, while directing them to make product purchases on another.

In sum, through various intersecting modes Bbeirabbit constructs a narrative of the guimi sister who comes from a ‘normal’ background, who has overcome difficulties in life that many...
women can identify with—and is relatable. This is anchored in a background story, a path to feminine empowerment, that underpins her products and is reinforced through her addresses to and interaction with fans. Yet, she is more selective than MOMO in which parts of her life she reveals, perhaps holding back so that her fans will want to know more. We now turn our attention to a different type of wanghong.

4.3. Benny: Flirting in public on Bilibili

Benny, born in 1996, is a popular beauty-selling wanghong on Bilibili, with more than 1.4 million followers (in 2021), who in 2017 launched his own beauty brand, Croxx. While most female and male wanghong are heterosexual, or are private about their sexual orientation, Benny is openly gay. In several of his videos he tells a story of a difficult childhood, struggling with his sexual identity, and feeling pain and rejection from peers and family, that he has overcome. Yet unlike MOMO and Bbeirabbit, whose videos take their followers into the privacy of the bedroom, the private and unmade side of Benny is never shown. Instead, he always appears smartly dressed, in makeup, fully frontal and facing the camera directly. His appeal is that of an extended flirt: through his voice, gestures, clothes, makeup, and stories he entices his followers to see what is behind the public face, and peak into his private life; he performs the role of the sassy gay friend, who uses feminine cosmetics to make himself look and feel good.

For a closer look at Benny’s sales techniques and fan interaction, we examine two videos on Bilibili, an interactive platform that appeals to a younger audience (Zhang, 2020). Bilibili’s distinguishing feature is the ‘bullet curtain’ (danmu 弹幕) that is populated by the user-generated comments that flow across the video screen (Teng and Chan, 2022; Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021). The first video, posted in 2018 (Fig. 8, left), takes the form of a 15-minute ‘interview’ with Benny talking about his personal life; the second, posted in 2020 (Fig. 8, right), is a 21-minute sales pitch.

Facing the camera, Benny begins with his signature opener, ‘I’m Benny bitch aha’. Then he asks his fans to do the following: ‘Please post more bullet screen [comments], [write] more comments, follow more, collect more, and send more [virtual] coins’. Here Benny instructs his followers to use the affordances of the platform, as a way to interact with him and increase his profile and monetary value. Next we hear a female voice off-camera, asking Benny a question about his personal life: ‘I want to know the wild chicken’s love history’. ‘Wild chicken’ is a play on Benny’s nickname, ‘Chicken queen’ 鸡王, from a Cantonese slang term for prostitute (Bolton and Hutton, 1995), that references his ‘wild and untamed’ sexuality. Looking directly at the camera, Benny replies:

Well, there are actually quite a lot of people, … [laugh] If you are a person in the circle, I have talked about many people you know. But I can’t say it, for everyone’s good. [laugh]

Here we see Benny flirting with his followers, revealing some information about his personal life, ‘I have talked about many people you know’. But much is left unsaid: ‘But I can’t say it, for everyone’s good’. He teases when revealing only parts of his private life, while inviting them to ‘give more coins’ and buy his products—implying that intimacy is available for sale.

The danmu comments show responses. Some comment on Benny’s appearance: ‘Eyebrows! So good looking!’ ‘Teeth are so white’. ‘The shirt [he’s] wearing is the same as the last video’. Others comment on the topic in general: ‘Benny confesses’. ‘[I] like this episode’. ‘The love history is a good topic’. And others guess the identity of his lovers: ‘Wait, wait, we know???’ ‘So! Zhang Defu [name] is someone you talk about a lot!’ ‘Xiao Qiao [nickname] you have talked about’. Finally, some write comments to each other: ‘So are they boyfriends or girlfriends?’ Another responds: ‘Of course boyfriends!!! [He’s] already come out. Everyone press like’.

Bilibili affords a kind of interaction that is different from Douyin (Bbeirabbit) and Weibo (MOMO): danmu comments can be written to address other users, and not to Benny as the potential addressee. Thus, Benny is treated as an object of interest, whose appearance, gestures, performance, and personal life, can be commented on, playfully and affectionately evaluated, and even ventriloquated (Cooren and Sandler, 2014). Questions about Benny’s life can be
answered by other users, affording them perceived agency in constructing his persona.

The second, sales-pitch video (Fig. 8, right) is titled: ‘For 1,000 yuan, I bought a cleansing cream that is extremely difficult to use. As someone who is diligent and thrifty ... of course it is with many tears that I use this space’. The title connotes a confession, that Benny spent too much money on an inferior product. But in this video he will reveal to his followers a better product at a better price.

The pitch begins at about the one-minute mark. Benny says with dramatic effect: ‘The first product that I want to share ... the fastest [working] fortifying lotion is Guerlain [Paris]’. He explains that this is available for an ‘unbelievable price’, shows the product, and then gives different pricing options. He lifts the lotion, shakes it gently to show how it flows inside the bottle. With his voice rising in intensity, he closes by saying with great satisfaction: ‘The next day my skin is just like it has been soaked in honey. Do you know what? This baby-like skin gives me a different experience, that I feel alive in the moment’. The pitch ends at the 3:38 mark—lasting about two and a half minutes.

After Benny’s ‘soaked in honey’ statement, users post playful comments. Some post long strings of 哈 (ha), the character for laughing, or similarly playful expressions: ‘killing me with laughter’ and ‘let me touch’. Many write the phrase, ‘蜜汁鸡’ (honey-soaked chicken), playing on both Benny’s nickname (Chicken queen) and the claim that he felt like his skin was ‘soaked in honey’. We then see danmu comments exploding across the screen, creating the ‘curtain’ effect that signals intense interest (Teng and Chan, 2022). That is, users ‘soak’ Benny’s Bilibili video with ‘honey-soaked chicken’ comments. The ‘indeterminacy’ of the technolog (Cao, 2021) affords novel and unpredictable ways of re/constructing the original video.

In sum, Bilibili affords a style of interaction that is fan-centered, where fans can talk about Benny between themselves and without addressing him directly. He becomes a figure who is ventriloquated (Cooren and Sandler, 2014) and playfully recontextualized by users who construct him as an imagined ‘honey-soaked chicken’, using not only the textual mode, but also the visual mode of the danmu that literally cover Benny’s visage on the screen. This platform affordance arguably is well-suited to China’s post-90s generation of youth who construct and participate in a satirical discourse (Gong and Yang, 2010) that playfully challenges traditional Chinese values and beliefs, and discourses of gender identity.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study adds to our understanding of China’s social media by analysing how wanghong perform, sell products, and fans respond, on three platforms—Weibo, Douyin and Bilibili. The analysis shows how wanghong create intimacies through three moves: (1) construct a distinguishing personal background story, (2) appeal to and invoke this story in sales pitches, and (3) interact with fans/followers, using the affordances of the platform. Each of these three successful wanghong —as measured by the number of followers and sales earnings—construct a distinguishing personality that is linked to the discourses of: feminine empowerment (Duan, 2020), ‘leftover woman’ (Fincher, 2014), and satirical parody (Gong and Yang, 2010). They also highlight a part of their lives that they present as ‘ordinary’, or a struggle in their lives to overcome some past personal challenge (divorce, failing academically, sexual identity), which can be seen as moves to create perceived authenticity and intimacy (e.g., Abidin, 2016; Cunningham and Craig, 2017). Multimodal semiotic analysis shows how wanghong creatively and playfully use multiple modes, including language, vocal qualities, sound, music, set design, props, actions, and such online affordances as text, images, and icons. This study points to the importance of looking at more than just linguistic resources when analysing online performance.

In sum, China’s wanghong operate in an interactive digital environment whereby they strive to creatively construct distinguishing personalities. The background narratives that they construct, which are then linked to broader discourses, ‘realness’, ‘feminine empowerment’, and ‘gender identity’, afford opportunities for myriad creative performances, and interactive and re/constructive fan-based interactions, using whatever resources are at hand (Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021). These moves may explain the popularity of China’s wanghong, and how and why some achieve success. Yet they also point to the potential ‘indeterminacies’ (Cao, 2021) of not only the digital platforms, but also the abilities of wanghong as performers to maintain their success in a constantly shifting political, economic, and social environment.

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.
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