The postfeminist entrepreneurial self and the platformisation of labour: A case study of yesheng female lifestyle bloggers on Xiaohongshu

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Abstract
Yesheng (野生), which literally translates to ‘wild growing’, is a Chinese internet term to describe social media creators who do not have contracts with multichannel network companies and operate their accounts independently. Drawing from in-depth interviews with eight current and former yesheng female lifestyle bloggers on the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu (小红书), this article examines gendered entrepreneurial labour in relation to the platformisation of Chinese digital networks through the case study. On the one hand, taking gender and class formation into account, I propose that yesheng female lifestyle bloggers showcase a kind of postfeminist entrepreneurialism with Chinese specificities, which is encouraged by the development of Chinese social media platforms and the wanghong economy. On the other hand, yesheng bloggers’ entrepreneurial labour is governed, regulated and commercialised by powerful social media platforms. Situated in a broader context of gender politics in contemporary China, this article demonstrates the complexities of gendered entrepreneurialism and the platformisation of labour from the perspective of feminist media studies.

Keywords
Chinese social media, entrepreneurial labour, platformisation, postfeminism, wanghong economy

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Introduction

In recent years, the Chinese internet celebrity industry has been going through a professionalised and institutionalised process with the fast development of multichannel network (hereafter MCN) companies, including microcelebrity incubators and management agencies (Abidin, 2018; Craig et al., 2021; Han, 2021). However, many aspirant creators active on Chinese social media platforms do not have contracts with MCN companies and develop their social media careers independently. In Chinese internet jargon, yesheng (野生), which literally translates to ‘wild growing’, is used to describe this type of social media creator. It is common that yesheng bloggers have full-time work or study in addition to operating their social media accounts, but full-time creators who do not sign with MCN companies can also be called yesheng. A yesheng blogger can be at the beginning stage of attracting online attention and accumulating followers, but can also be a microcelebrity with a considerable number of fans. Although there are differences among so-called yesheng bloggers, they are all entrepreneurial individuals aspiring to online fame, monetary profits and promising careers from social media.

The category of yesheng blogger emerged from the platformised process of Chinese social media and the wanghong economy. The Chinese internet celebrity industry has been etched by the platform economy from the birth of the wanghong economy (Han, 2021). Fast-developing MCN companies, besides working as brokers between creators and brands, have more importantly become a critical intermediary that progressively fills the space between creators and platforms, as well as between different types of dominant platforms. Major social media and e-commerce platforms in China, such as Weibo, Alibaba and Douyin, cooperate with MCN companies at different levels and invest their own MCNs (see Liu, 2020; Zhou & Yang, 2021). These platforms have ‘expanded control’ over wanghong value chains facilitated by MCN companies (Han, 2021, p. 324). However, owing to self-branding culture and the reconfiguration of the relationship between producers and consumers, social media always invites ‘ordinary’ people to contribute to digital economic and cultural production. In the Chinese wanghong industry, where MCN companies play an important role in the platformised process, yesheng bloggers choose to participate in the Chinese wanghong economy through their entrepreneurial labour without working with/for institutions directly. Thus, yesheng bloggers serve as an example through which to study entrepreneurial labour in Chinese digital networks, and also to highlight the complicated interactions between individual agency and the platformisation of the Chinese wanghong economy.

Among various Chinese social media platforms and different types of yesheng blogger, I focus on Xiaohongshu (小红书, also known as ‘Little Red Book’), a female-focused social media and e-commerce platform, and yesheng female lifestyle bloggers on the platform to conduct a case study. According to a report from a Chinese media industrial research institution – Qian-Gua Database, in 2020, 90.41% of Xiaohongshu’s active users are female, and 83.31% of the active users are between the ages of 18 and 34. The report also states that ‘urban white-collar and career elite women’ are the main user group (Qian-Gua Database 2021). Combining user-generated content (UGC) mode with e-commerce, Xiaohongshu now introduces itself as ‘a lifestyle platform’ that ‘integrates the authentic content shared by its community with commerce’. In the context of the booming Chinese wanghong economy, Xiaohongshu has attracted a range of social media creators, especially young women, who aspire for increased online viewership numbers by sharing their everyday life and consumption. Xiaohongshu’s success was forged from its UGC mode. However, since 2019, the platform has been seeking further commercialisation by imposing regulations and restrictions on small-scale MCN companies and creators, especially yesheng bloggers. Taking the gender-class formation of the consumer culture and entrepreneurialism circulating on Chinese social media into
consideration, the study, located in feminist media studies, aims to examine the complexities of gendered entrepreneurial labour and the platformisation of the Chinese wanghong economy through the example of yesheng female lifestyle bloggers on Xiaohongshu.

In this article, I begin by introducing the framework of postfeminism applied to yesheng female lifestyle bloggers’ entrepreneurial labour, and the contextualised background of the Chinese wanghong industry. Then, after a brief summary of the method by which the interview data was collected, I turn to the analysis, wherein I unpack interviewees’ aspirations and experiences of being yesheng lifestyle bloggers on Xiaohongshu, and their choices in navigating the governance that the platform imposes on yesheng bloggers. I stress the paradox between postfeminist entrepreneurialism and the platformed entrepreneurial labour exhibited by the interviewees’ discourses, and showcase that such a paradox is rooted in the platformisation of economic and cultural production with Chinese features. Finally, I conclude by discussing the complexities in understanding the postfeminist entrepreneurial self in relation to the platformisation of the wanghong economy in a broader context of Chinese digital networks.

Postfeminist culture in lifestyle blogging, gendered entrepreneurial labour and Chinese wanghong phenomenon

Postfeminism, as a kind of ‘gendered neoliberalism’ (Gill, 2017, p. 611), proclaims that women are ‘empowered’ and ‘free’ to embrace normatively feminine pursuits and the neoliberal entrepreneurial self (see Gill, 2007, 2017; Henderson & Taylor, 2019). Although much of the research on postfeminism concerns Anglo-American societies, postfeminism has been examined as a transnational culture that generates from the globalised media, commodity and consumer connectivities (Dosekun, 2015). In the Chinese post-socialist scene, a new type of female subject, who finds liberation in the rediscovery of femininity, material success and consumption, has risen from the national projects of undoing the socialist past and also the globalisation of neoliberal commodity culture (see Evans, 2008; Rofel, 2007; Yang, 2011). Such subject is reminiscent of postfeminist culture which celebrates women’s assertive individualism and power as consumerist agency, and also taps into the unique social context of ‘non/neo-liberal China’ (Wallis & Shen, 2018). The Chinese wanghong culture, featuring with beauty economy, consumerism and neoliberal entrepreneurialism, embodies the shifts in gender politics established by the state’s post-socialist projects and the global circulations of neoliberal rationality.

Some previous research has applied the framework of postfeminism to the Chinese wanghong industry. Sara Liao (2021, p. 2) demonstrates that female Chinese fashion influencers exhibit a certain type of femininity that is ‘aesthetic and entrepreneurial in the lexicon of freedom and empowerment’, and further argues postfeminism can take root in Chinese wanghong culture through the transnationality of the consumerism, entrepreneurialism and neoliberalism. Anett Dippner (2018) also recognises the discourse of postfeminist self-enhancement and neoliberal entrepreneurialism in the beauty rhetoric of Chinese wanghong culture. In a similar vein, I apply the ‘unsettling’ framework of postfeminism (Henderson & Taylor, 2019) to the examination of yesheng female lifestyle bloggers’ individual aspirations and entrepreneurialism in their discursive social media labour practices. Here, I do not intend to argue whether Chinese young female social media creators (or a group of them) are ‘postfeminists’, rather, I employ the framework of postfeminism to emphasise the gendered features of entrepreneurial labour in Chinese social media, and the contextualised gender-class structures of consumer culture and neoliberal entrepreneurialism implied by the case study.
Lifestyle blogging, as a social media genre, usually revolves around the creator’s daily activities, the mundane and the vignettes of personal experiences, and the practice, pleasure, and postures of consumption (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017; Hopkins, 2019; Sinanan et al., 2014). Successful lifestyle bloggers, dominantly young females, are celebrated for ‘their beauty, their lines of cosmetics, their consumption, their opinions, their personal experiences, and their entrepreneurship’ (Petersson McIntyre, 2021, p. 1066). Lifestyle blogging exemplifies the postfeminist subjectivity in today’s social media culture by showing how consumption is essential to the cultivation of normative femininity and how ‘feminine corporeality’ (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017, p. 394) is central to the formation of the entrepreneurial self.

Similar to elsewhere, lifestyle blogging is popular in China among young women, especially those with class privilege to consume. On Xiaohongshu, many successful influencers, aspirant creators and ordinary users share daily experiences which are filled with product reviews and shopping recommendations related to beauty, fashion, fitness, etc. Lifestyle blogging turns personal life experiences into assets that can be commodified by enabling the construction of ‘a consuming self’ (Williams & Connell, 2012). The popularity of lifestyle blogging on Xiaohongshu, intertwining with consumer culture circulated in social media spaces, is deeply rooted in gender politics of contemporary Chinese society. In the post-socialist era, the socialist project of gender egalitarianism was replaced by the quest of femininity, which has been linked with consumerism and middle-class imagination (Meng and Huang, 2017). In such a context, the celebration of consumption-based femininity in Chinese lifestyle blogging is configured under the hegemonic gender-class order.

Besides consumer culture, the entrepreneurial labour in lifestyle blogging is as well intertwined with postfeminist culture. The notion of entrepreneurial labour is used to describe the proliferation of flexible and risk-taking labour practices enabled by the Web 2.0 revolution, and such forms of labour are usually involved in IT-related industries and culture industries (Neff et al., 2005). The rise of the microcelebrity has proven social media as a site of self-branding to interpellant people, especially girls and young women, to consider themselves as entrepreneurial subjects (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Dobson, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015). Such contagious self-branding and self-improvement logic is widely instrumented by postfeminist discourses. As Magdalena Petersson McIntyre (2021, p. 1066) argues, postfeminist techniques of self-branding and self-enhancement are ‘intensified’, as well as ‘diversified’ by using social media in lifestyle blogging. Entrepreneurial labour has been profoundly embedded in the global liberalisation of work since the 1970s, and in the context of China, it synchronised with the retreat of the state in the economic sector and the increase of unemployment after the reform (Zhang, 2017). Social media influencers and aspirant influencers are subjects of entrepreneurial labour featuring the normalisation and even romanticisation of flexibility, self-investment and self-responsibility in work.

To discuss entrepreneurial labour in Chinese lifestyle blogging, a given social context of wanghong phenomenon is crucial to consider. In China, the phenomenon of wanghong has been explored as a booming profession, a cultural form, and an economic model (Craig et al., 2021; Han, 2021; Liao, 2021; Zhang & de Seta, 2018). While the popularity of the wanghong phenomenon attracts more and more young Chinese people to devote themselves to the career path (Cui, 2017), individual endeavours are not the only driving force in the growth of the Chinese internet celebrity industry. One contextualised feature of the wanghong phenomenon is its media eco-system, where infrastructures and platforms ‘intra-act’ in China’s technological and economic context (Zhang & de Seta, 2018, p. 66). With sponsorship and interference from the state, Chinese digital networks have witnessed the rise of ‘platform capitalism’ in the last decade (Smicke, 2017). In the realm of the internet celebrity industry, platformisation of the digital economy has fostered wanghong entrepreneurial labour. As Zexu Guan (2021, p. 330) argues, for Chinese internet celebrities, the
seemingly contradictory roles of entrepreneur and platform labour are, in fact, ‘closely connected to each other’. In the following analysis, I focus on the interactions between yesheng bloggers’ entrepreneurial labour and the platformisation of the Chinese wanghong industry through the interviewees’ blogging experiences, and also how the interviewees, as entrepreneurial subjects, navigate the changes, opportunities and challenges brought by social media platforms – especially the platform Xiaohongshu, with which they deeply engage.

**Method**

The analysis draws on the material collected from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with self-identified female lifestyle bloggers who were recruited on a basis of 6 months online ethnographic observation on Xiaohongshu. I followed female bloggers by searching the tag ‘yesheng blogger’ and also those who were promoted to me by the platform algorithm. I sent personal messages with the recruitment letter to bloggers whose posts meet the definition of lifestyle blogging. The recruitment ended with eight participants on agreement with the interviews. The interviews took place between June and September 2020, in the middle of the global Covid-19 pandemic. All interviews were conducted over WeChat calls, and each interview was approximately 1 hour long.

When the interviews were conducted, the eight interviewees ranged in age from 22 to 30 years, and were located in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou and Wenzhou. Five of the interviewees had daytime jobs or studied full-time in addition to blogging. One interviewee used to work as an internet-based Japanese cosmetics reselling agent (daigou), but Covid-19 impacted heavily upon her business. One interviewee self-identified as a stay-home mother, and one interviewee was a full-time blogger. Interviewees held diverse levels of ‘influence’ on Xiaohongshu. Their follower sizes ranged from 2.5 K to 400K. One interviewee signed with an MCN company after being a yesheng blogger for 3 years, and two interviewees were planning to sign with one in the near future (Table 1).

Guided by the advice about in-depth interviews as a ‘paradigmatic feminist method’ to capture ‘women’s experience and everyday life’ (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p. 329–330), I focused on how everyday experiences in the interviewees’ discourses can be intertwined with and informed by larger social, political and cultural processes (Stewart, 2007), instead of searching for grand narratives of entrepreneurship and platformisation. In the interviews, the interviewees narrated their blogging biographies and their experiences as yesheng bloggers on Xiaohongshu. The analysis comprises two parts: the first part examines the interviewees’ aspirations in posting lifestyle content on Xiaohongshu, and the connectivities among such entrepreneurship, postfeminist sensibility and the fast-developing platform economy in China. The second part examines the

| Pseudonym | Age | Location | Primary Profession | Followers on Xiaohongshu |
|-----------|-----|----------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Anna      | 30  | Wenzhou  | Stay-home mother  | 400 K                   |
| Bonnie    | 24  | Shanghai | New media editor  | 2.5 K                   |
| Chen      | 29  | Hangzhou | Internet-based reselling agent | 89 K |
| Lily      | 26  | Beijing  | Translator        | 200 K                   |
| Miranda   | 27  | Beijing  | Marketing officer | 45 K                    |
| Xiaohe    | 26  | Hangzhou | Blogger           | 340 K                   |
| Xixi      | 22  | Beijing  | Master’s student  | 51 K                    |
| Yang      | 25  | Beijing  | Auditor           | 8 K                     |
interviewees’ narrations of opportunities, challenges and difficulties that the Xiaohongshu platform presented them with, and further investigates how platformisation was tangibly involved in the interviewees’ discursive experiences as yesheng bloggers.

‘Share my life’ on Xiaohongshu: gendered aspirations and the postfeminist entrepreneurialism with Chinese features

With the slogan ‘Inspire Lives’, Xiaohongshu claims that its platform ‘is built for creators to easily share their experiences’. Compared to its counterpart genre of beauty and fashion tutorials, lifestyle blogging is usually more personalised, more accessible to aspirant creators, and can turn many different respects of life into commodifiable products and services. The entanglements of lifestyle blogging with postfeminist sensibility have many layers, such as the logic of self-branding, the (re)affirmation of bodily beauty, the makeover paradigm, etc. In this study, the aspirational labour involved in lifestyle blogging is specially discussed.

‘I am interested in’ was a recurring discourse during the interviews. Brooke Erin Duffy (2016, p. 433) uses the term ‘aspirational labour’ to conceptualise ‘a highly gendered, forward-looking and entrepreneurial enactment of creativity’ in the digital industries. The interviewees stated that they started posting on Xiaohongshu to share their personal thoughts and passions because they were interested in fashion and beauty products and brands, or they wanted to share information about consumption, as well as their study or work, personal romantic life, travel and other personal aspects of life. It is noticeable that gendered consumer subjectivity underpinned lifestyle blogging – although the interviewees spoke as ‘producers’, their aspirations came from and remained inscribed in feminised sites of commodity capitalism (e.g. fashion and beauty), which still perpetuates ‘the traditional binary of male producers/female consumers’ (Duffy, 2016, p. 453).

In the interviewees’ narratives, their interests stood out as the very first reason that they would like to invest in blogging, but at the same time, ‘getting paid doing what they love’ was, of course, expected as the return from the different forms of investment. In new media cultural industries, entrepreneurial labour exacts its own costs (Neff et al., 2005). All the interviewees were willing to put time, money and personal effort into blogging. For instance, Yang recently bought a new mirrorless camera as her DSLR camera ‘is too heavy and not suitable for filming weekend vlogs’; When Xixi started blogging, she self-taught video editing software from watching online tutorials; It was common for the interviewees to stay up until midnight editing a video, or spending money at popular fancy restaurants to get photos for Xiaohongshu. Although the interviewees described the expenditures of time and money as something for which they enjoyed, they meanwhile expected monetary profit from the investments. ‘Do What You Love’ is salient to aspirational labour where ‘pleasure, autonomy and income seemingly coexist’ (Duffy, 2016, p. 442).

There were two ways in which the interviewees directly got paid or expected to get paid from blogging: cooperating with advertisers, and attracting customers for the blogger’s online retail business. Except for Chen, who owned a cosmetics retail shop on WeChat and aimed at the second way of making profits, another five of the interviewees had more or less received payments from advertising in their Xiaohongshu posts, and the other two interviewees hoped that they would have a chance to advertise soon. The interviewees were aware that it would be difficult for them to be self-sufficient solely by advertising. In fact, the interviewees tended to take blogging as a supplement or a pathway to their bigger aspirations. Behind the simple ‘getting paid’ goal, I found two different kinds of motivations in the interviewees’ aspirational labour of blogging.

The first common kind of aspirations for some interviewees was to balance family life and career. Popular discourses about the merits of the platform economy in economically empowering women
are ascribed to assumptions about the flexible and individualised work conditions with which women are able to combine promising careers and domestic responsibilities. Bonnie, who worked in a media company, expressed her wish to become a full-time blogger: ‘My work is quite busy, not 9969 but close. If I can become a professional blogger, I think it can make my life easier, like when I have a family and children.’ She considered several of her favourite lifestyle bloggers as role models: ‘They can balance career and family, and they are doing what they love. It is like… no sacrifice between yourself and your family’. While the image of the ‘new woman’ capable of ‘having it all’ (Genz, 2010) is being widely represented through lifestyle blogging, what behind such postfeminist inspiration is the structural inequality that Chinese women face in traditional workplaces and the domestic sphere. Historically, gender inequality in domestic labour remained untouched in socialist China, and marketisation opened up new space for women’s return to a traditional role of domestic labour (Ding et al., 2009). Today, the younger generation of career women are faced with a rather difficult work-family dilemma.

Anna, an interviewee was perhaps the kind of blogger who represents ‘having it all’ on social media. As an early user on Xiaohongshu posting beauty product reviews, she now focused on sharing childcare products, parenting experiences and daily life of her and the children. One of the reasons that she took blogging as her career was that she ‘could not’ go back to the workplace:

I quit my job when I was pregnant with my twins. My body reactions made it really hard to keep working, even during the early months of pregnancy. My company didn’t want to keep me at my position of course. So, I quit. I thought about going back to work after the twins go to kindergarten. But you know how competitive the employment market is. I could not do it.

Anna thought it was lucky that she had accumulated 400K followers on Xiaohongshu: ‘The money I earn isn’t much, but it makes me feel I have a career and my own life’. Another interviewee, Miranda, who was a marketing officer in a famous Chinese internet company, shared her future plan, in which blogging played a complementary part:

Before I have children, I will change to a less stressful job. I know I would earn lots of money if I stayed, but it is even impossible to ask for a half-day leave in this company. Think what if the child is ill…A relaxing job pays less, but my XiaoHongShu account can bring extra income.

The aspiration of balancing work and family life seemsly has more potential with the growth of the gig economy, of which the wanghong economy is a major variety in China. In many of the interviewees’ discourses, they were aware of the discrimination at workplace that they were and might be faced when they became a mother. Blogging as career seemingly gave them options for ‘heading home’ while keeping the aspiration of ‘doing what I love and making money’. However, the underlying gender inequality both in public and domestic spheres and the insufficient social support in childcare are easily veiled by the ‘illusion’ of choices and the ‘glamour’ of aspirational labour (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

The second kind of motivation was to achieve high-level individual success and financial income, where blogging lends itself as a pathway. Lily, a translator in a foreign trading company, accumulated 200K followers on Xiaohongshu over the course of 2 years by posting her photos and selfies. Although her achievement as a yeshehng blogger was impressive, becoming an influencer was not Lily’s ultimate goal in her social media career: instead of being a wanghong, she wanted to start an MCN company and become ‘a boss of wanghong’. Lily believed that her experience as a yeshehng blogger taught her ‘bigger things, such as how the industry works, to small things, such as
how to communicate well with brands’ PRs10. Another interviewee, Xiaohe, who left her job in a bank during the pandemic and became a full-time blogger, aimed to turn her online visibility into an offline business:

I chose Xiaohongshu as my primary platform because it is easy to establish your personal IP11. The value of personal IP can be transformed from online to offline. For example, a top wanghong can open a hotpot restaurant and attract customers by using their online personal IP. I locate myself as a travel blogger, but not the hard-core kind of travel. It is more like travel as an exquisite lifestyle. For example, now I advertise for luxury hotels, and in the future, I can start my own accommodation business. My followers are my potential customers.

For Lily and Xiaohe, their entrepreneurship does not only come from individual aspirations but also rises from the boost of social media platforms and the diversity of related business modes. Compared to the dominant mode of wanghong as e-commerce entrepreneurs in the 2010s (Guan, 2021; Liao, 2021), the expanding platform economy is also expanding the means by which Chinese internet celebrities wish to achieve their entrepreneurial goals. In the case of lifestyle blogging, feminine beauty and gender-class-based consumption are all converted into resources and capital to gain individual achievements. After all, for today’s young Chinese women, the equation between women’s empowerment and the individual capacity to participate in consumption and in the private market has been established (Meng & Huang, 2017).

Entrepreneurial labourers expect to gain high-level personal success, but meanwhile, they also need to undertake consequent risks and uncertainties (Neff et al., 2005; Zhang, 2017). The interviews were conducted in the middle of the global Covid-19 pandemic, during which Chen’s business was completely shut down because of the strict international travel restrictions. Chen used to post on Xiaohongshu to recommend beauty products that were sold in her online retail store. With the store having run out of stock during the lockdown, Chen had not decided what to do for her business and her Xiaohongshu account. In the interview, Chen said she had accepted the lockdown as a vacation, and meanwhile she prepared to get pregnant to ‘accomplish the change of identity’. Discussions about (lost) work flexibility, uncertainty and gender during and post-Covid-19 are emerging worldwide (see Dunn et al., 2021), and the crossing-border reselling business model is one of many contextualised examples in the Chinese platform economy.

The aspirations of young women in new media and cultural industries, as Angela McRobbie (2010) argues, are spurred by postfeminist ideologies of free choice and individual empowerment. The interviewees’ aspirations, based on the flexibility and the potential high-end rewards of entrepreneurial labour, are intertwined with postfeminist ideologies of ‘having it all’ and women’s high-level individual success, which associates with middle-class gender politics in today’s China, and also connects to the globalised consumer culture and neoliberal rationality. At the same time, the emergence of such a postfeminist entrepreneurial self cannot be taken from its context – the fast development of platforms in the Chinese internet celebrity industry. In the next section, I focus on the interviewees’ experiences as yesheng bloggers on Xiaohongshu to further examine the relations between entrepreneurial labour and the platformisation in the context of the Chinese wanghong economy.

Being yesheng on Xiaohongshu: the paradox between entrepreneurial labour and platformisation

Undoubtedly, Xiaohongshu’s UGC mode encouraged the interviewees’ aspirations of blogging. Meanwhile, to achieve further commercialisation, Xiaohongshu has been imposing a rage of
regulations on creators’ advertising activities and control on the viewer traffic of user-generated content. In the interviewees’ experiences as yesheeng bloggers, they constantly negotiated with the UCG mode dominated by the platform and its collaborative MCN companies, as well as the platform’s strong algorithm which works in personalised recommendations and content moderation.

The concept of KOC, short for key opinion consumer, is important to understand Xiaohongshu’s UGC mode: creators at the same time are consumers, and they can influence their followers’ consumption decisions, even if the scale of followers is small. Lily believed that, compared with other main Chinese social media platforms, Xiaohongshu was ‘the fastest and easiest’ platform on which to get advertising opportunities. Lily’s first commercial promotion was for a famous Chinese domestic makeup brand:

I was surprised that the brand contacted me. At that time, I did not have many followers, but I had great interactions with them. I thought that was why I was chosen. Then I found that they actually contacted many ‘small’ bloggers. I was nothing special. It was the brand strategy on Xiaohongshu: to get small bloggers to recommend their products more vertically.

The word ‘vertically’ is precise: KOCs, as both creators and consumers, connect their audience and brands into the same line. Through KOCs, brands can directly reach potential consumers. Such a vertical model is only possible when it works with the platform’s accurate algorithmic recommendations in its users’ feeds.

The KOC model seemingly helps creators more easily attract audience who share the same interests and further bring advertising opportunities, but at the same time it exploits the commercial value of social media content by further blurring the boundary between consumer and producer. For bloggers, especially yesheeng bloggers, keeping themselves visible to viewers and advertisers is the foundation of getting advertising opportunities, which is conceptualised as ‘visibility labour’ by Crystal Abidin (2016). For example, Anna, an experienced blogger, in her five posts, usually only one was sponsored and brought her income. In such a case, the labour that she paid in income-free posts, including creating ideas, producing photo media, and affectively connecting with her followers, did not bring her any material benefit, but still positively contributed to the traffic for her platform. As Abidin (2016, p.86) argues, an attention economy is ‘quietly creative’ but ‘insidiously exploitative’, especially with the deepened platformed economy.

It is fair to say that creators’ aspirational labour and Xiaohongshu’s UGC mode mutually support each other. The platform’s popularity depends on creators’ content contribution, and creators, no matter whether they have MCN companies or not, rely on the platform to be seen by audience and advertisers. MCN companies are supposed to only function as brokers between creators and brands in this vertical line. However, to fulfill higher commercial values, Xiaohongshu has gradually participated in the business between creators and brands facilitated by MCN companies. In fact, the difficulties that interviewees faced as yesheeng bloggers mostly came from the platform rather than advertisers.

In January 2019, Xiaohongshu launched a new web platform named ‘Brand Collaboration Platform’ (品牌合作平台) to regulate creators’ advertising activities. 12 MCN companies and individual creators need to make deals with brands on this official web platform, and Xiaohongshu charges commission fees. Yesheeng bloggers must meet certain requirements of follower numbers and post views to use the platform. If a post that includes commercial promotion content does not register on the web platform, the post is likely to be detected by the algorithm and then deleted, and the account also faces the risk of suspension. By launching the ‘Brand Collaboration Platform’ and
using the algorithmic monitoring, Xiaohongshu officially put *yesheng* bloggers under the platform’s governance.

It should be noticed that Xiaohongshu’s regulations on creators’ advertising activities are all framed by Xiaohongshu to take social responsibilities, adhere to laws, and intervene to create a ‘healthy and moral’ community.\(^\text{13}\) In May 2019,\(^\text{14}\) to respond to the public criticism of tobacco advertisements on the platform, Xiaohongshu deactivated 13,000 creators from using the ‘Brand Collaboration Platform’ by increasing the requirement on creators’ viewer traffic, many of whom were *yesheng* bloggers. Meanwhile, *yesheng* bloggers who were qualified to keep using the web platform received an official message on the ‘Brand Collaboration Platform’ to invite them to sign online contracts with the Hongwen (鸿文) company, an MCN agency belonging to the Xiao-hongshu company. Xiaohongshu gave these *yesheng* bloggers 1 month to decide. Should they fail to sign with the Hongwen MCN company, or any of the other ten large-scale management agencies recognised by Xiaohongshu, then the *yesheng* bloggers would also be disqualified from using the ‘Brand Collaboration Platform’. Although this rule was loosened up a few months later, it shows that the platform determines to incorporate with big-scaled MCN companies to complete its commercial goals.

After Xiaohongshu’s subsequent reforms, attracting consumers to the bloggers’ own business – one of the two ways that the interviewees received revenue – became nearly impossible. Xiaohe found that if she mentioned her WeChat store in a post, this post would be determined as ‘violating the advertising rule’ and would therefore be unseen by her followers. As Xiaohongshu has its own e-commerce function, Xiaohe understood that ‘Xiaohongshu does not want to let its users spend money somewhere else’. Xiaohe, like many other Xiaohongshu creators, tried to use homophones and emojis to refer to WeChat shops or Taobao shops. However, Xiaohe did not feel it to be efficient: ‘I think the bonus period for me on Xiaohongshu has already gone. In 2019, I already relied on the old customers. And Covid happened. It was too difficult anyway’. In August 2021, Xiaohongshu published a new strategy: ‘one account, one shop’.\(^\text{15}\) By encouraging creators to open their own online shops on Xiaohongshu, the platform is seeking to establish its closed commercial loop, which displays the ‘hyperplatformisation’ process in the Chinese *wanghong* economy (Craig et al., 2021).

Xiaohongshu’s regulations on *yesheng* bloggers reveal that the platform wants to make profits directly from its UGC mode. Miranda, who received the invitation to join the Hongwen MCN company in May 2019, shared her thoughts:

> Before, when a blogger wanted to earn money from advertising, no matter with or without an MCN company, it was nothing to do with Xiaohongshu. The platform could not get money from this process. Now, Xiaohongshu can monitor all these deals. Compared to individuals, it is easier to manage MCN companies. *Yesheng* bloggers are not welcomed by Xiaohongshu, because you don’t have an MCN company who splits the profits with Xiaohongshu. And the Hongwen company, Xiaohongshu owns it! It is like you move the money from your right pocket to the left.

Miranda did not join the Hongwen MCN company in the end; instead, she signed an official contract with another large-scale MCN company through her personal network. The work pattern with the MCN company for Miranda was more fixed and disciplined compared when she was a *yesheng* blogger:

> The contract has all the requirements, how many posts should be made in a month, how many viewing numbers should be attained, and I need to create the satisfying content for the advertisements that the agent assigns to me. I cannot say no to advertisements.
When Miranda succeeded in getting an advertising opportunity, Xiaohongshu would get 10% commission first, then Miranda would get 40% of the remaining money, and another 60% would go to the MCN company. Such a commercial mode is a more radical and straight way to platformise social media creators’ labour: Xiaohongshu’s creators directly work for the platform without any employment contract, while MCN companies play intermediary between creators and the platform. Besides monitoring and regulating creators’ advertising activities, Xiaohongshu has also been using the algorithm to govern yeshe bloggers by restricting online traffic on their posts and offering paid view promotions. Quantitative numbers, such as the number of followers, the average view number of posts, the number of likes and comments, are important criteria that decide the price of a creator’s advertising activities. In social media brand culture and economy, platforms have engineered the data-processing power of digital media into the creative narration of UGC participation (Carah & Angus, 2018). The interviewees fully understood the importance of the platform’s algorithm to the viewer traffic. Xixi, who were one of the disqualified yeshe bloggers from the web platform in May 2019, thought the algorithmic rules on Xiaohongshu were unfair:

I couldn’t use the ‘Brand Collaboration Platform’ because I didn’t have enough views, which sounds fair. But it is Xiaohongshu’s algorithm that decides our view numbers. It is like Xiaohongshu is a player but, at the same time the referee. Xiaohongshu apparently restricted the traffic of some of my posts. I have more than 50,000 followers. Usually, the view number would be 5,000 and more, but some of my posts only had 1,000 or hundreds.

Being supported by postgraduate scholarships and her parents, Xixi did not care too much about the revenue that she got from blogging. However, for Xiaohe, the full-time blogger among the interviewees, the quantitative numbers were rather important. She frankly admitted that she bought ‘view promotions’ for most of her posts, through which the platform would promote the posts to more viewers and enhance the posts’ searchability.

Xiaohe was planning to join an MCN company in the near future. Before the interview, she had talked with agents from two different MCN companies. Xiaohe understood that one of the biggest advantages of joining with an MCN company was that the platform would give her ‘algorithmic support’. As a full-time yeshe blogger, Xiaohe found it was difficult to only count on herself:

I am ok to travel around to take photos, edit photos and make posts, all by myself. I am also ok with contacting and communicating with brands. I have been doing all these for half a year, but what I really need is algorithmic support, Of course I can pay myself, or the brands pay, to buy view promotions. But compared to what Xiaohongshu gives to those signed creators, the algorithmic preference that an individual can buy is nothing.

By offering an algorithmic allowance to MCN companies, the platform takes more control of creators’ commercial values. Bonnie, who was at the stage of accumulating followers, said: ‘There are only two types of bloggers who can keep yeshe: bloggers who do not want to make money from blogging and bloggers who are the top and can bring traffic to a platform’. Bonnie’s plan was to accumulate 5,000 followers and contact the MCN company which her friend worked for. For the interviewees, if they would like to pursue more online fame and monetary profits from blogging, signing with an MCN company seemed to be unavoidable. In this way, yeshe bloggers’ entrepreneurial labour, which is supposed to be flexible and individualised, is placed to go through an institutionalised process.
Powerful platforms like Xiaohongshu, incorporate with large-scale MCN companies and use algorithmic tools to platformise creators’ entrepreneurial labour. Platforms are not neutral, but instead they represent particular political-economic configurations (Gillespie, 2010). On Xiaohongshu, creators’ aspirational labour practices are encouraged and shaped by the ‘affordances’ of the platform, namely, the platform-specific modes of UGC and KOC facilitated by strong algorithm (Scolere et al., 2018). Meanwhile, Xiaohongshu constantly imposes regulations, restrictions and even exploitations on yesheng bloggers in order to commercialise their labour, which is legitimated and justified as a necessary and moral intervention under the state’s polices on platforms and wanghong industry (see Craig et al., 2021).

Conclusion and Discussion

In the case study on yesheng female lifestyle bloggers on Xiaohongshu, I have examined the interviewees’ discursive blogging experiences to demonstrate paradoxical relations between postfeminist entrepreneurial labour and the platformisation of the Chinese wanghong economy. On the one hand, to achieve aspirations with postfeminist sensibility, young female creators perceptively take the advantage of fast-developing Chinese social media and the wanghong economy. On the other hand, their entrepreneurial labour is both encouraged and restricted by platforms. Powerful platforms constantly impose regulations on creators to control their commercial value, and incorporate with MCN companies to institutionalise entrepreneurial labour to fully achieve commercialisation.

At a time when digital networks and platforms are changing our ways of living, it is imperative to tease out the complicated relations in which labour and entrepreneurism are ‘mutually transformative’ (Zhang, 2017, p. 6). Especially for the new generation of women, postfeminist rhetoric is dissociating young women from ideas of labour – no matter whether public or domestic – and exploitation, though economic inequalities among gender and class are deepening (McRobbie, 2009). In the Chinese context, postfeminist entrepreneurialism taps into both global circulation of neoliberalism and shifted gender politics in post-socialist China. The Chinese wanghong industry appeals to young women by its glamorous and flexible work patterns, which forges the postfeminist entrepreneurial self. At the same time, such gendered entrepreneurial labour is paradoxically entangled with the platformisation of economic and cultural production.

This research hopes to enrich critical conversations about entrepreneurial labour and platformisation in Chinese digital networks from the perspective of feminist media studies. First, the study showcases that postfeminism as a kind of cultural sensibility offers a theoretical framework to examine Chinese young women’s entrepreneurial pursuits ‘within structures of history and power and gender subjugation’ (Wen, 2013, p. 26). Second, the applicability of postfeminism to Chinese society needs to be placed in its own context. In Chinese digital networks, postfeminist features of entrepreneurial labour are embedded in the platformisation of the wanghong economy and culture. Gendered entrepreneurial labour in relation to platformisation in China requires further academic discussion.

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Notes

1. In China, the word ‘blogger’ (鸿主) is used broadly to indicate social media creators no matter whether they produce texts and pictures or make different types of videos. In this article, blogger equates to social media creator.

2. Wanghong (网红), literally meaning ‘internet red’, is a Chinese vernacular term to refer to microcelebrities and social media influencers. Wanghong are increasingly defined by their capacity to convert social media traffic to money with various economic models (Abidin, 2018). The most common models of wanghong economy are social media marketing and online retailing (Guan, 2021).

3. See Xiaohongshu’s English website https://www.xiaohongshu.com/en, retrieved on 1 November 2021.

4. Xiaohongshu’s web platform, which regulates bloggers’ advertising activities, was first put into use in January 2019, and Xiaohongshu’s first major regulating action on yesheng bloggers happened on 10 May 2019. For more details and analysis, please see the latter part of the article.

5. The names of interviewees have been changed to protect their anonymity.

6. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and I translated the material into English in the transcription process.

7. Daigou (代购) refers to Chinese expatriates and travellers purchasing products from overseas and shipping them back to consumers in China.

8. See Xiaohongshu’s English website https://www.xiaohongshu.com/en, retrieved on 1 November 2021.

9. The 996 working hour system (996工作制) is a work schedule used in some Chinese companies, especially companies in the IT, media, and financial industries. It takes its name from a work schedule, in which employees work from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm, 6 days per week.

10. By PRs, Lily meant public relations/advertising officers of brand companies.

11. IP, short for ‘intellectual property’, is a buzzword in China to describe franchised cultural products. Personal IP can be understood as ‘personal brand’.

12. In January 2021, Xiaohongshu changed the name of the web platform from ‘Brand Collaboration Platform’ to ‘Dandelion Platform’ (蒲公英平台). The web platform can be accessed at http://pgy.xiaohongshu.com.

13. See Xiaohongshu’s community rules https://www.xiaohongshu.com/protocols/community-rule, retrieved on 29 March 2022.

14. Information regarding the regulating action can be learned from 36Kr’s articles ‘Xiaohongshu is Cleaning Up KOLs: Fan Numbers and Views Become Necessary Requirements’, published on 13 May 2019, accessed at https://www.36kr.com/p/1723660238849 and ‘Xiaohongshu is Out of Control’, published on 17 May 2019, accessed at https://www.36kr.com/p/1723685158913. 36Kr is well-known online technology media in China.

15. Related news can be read in 36Kr’s report ‘0 barrier to open a shop, who gets opportunities from Xiaohongshu’s “one account, one shop”?’, published on 13 September 2021, accessed at https://www.36kr.com/p/1382066852330888.
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