Persona: How Professional Women in China Negotiate Gender Performance Online

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Abstract
With the shift of social interaction to online venues, do women still conform to existing gender norms? This article examines the online performance of professional women in urban China and their interactions with workplace colleagues on WeChat, a popular Chinese social media app that is an important venue for workplace interaction. As interviews showed, workplace interactions on WeChat perpetuated traditional gender norms of hegemonic masculinity, and professional women accommodated to those existing gender norms by using particular “personas.” Three major personas were identified: one that emphasized professional identity and downplayed gender identity; another that accentuated femininity and downplayed professional identity; and a third that performed femininity to please male workplace supervisors by confirming their masculinity. Persona is used as an analytical term to capture the WeChat activities of these professional women because, compared to online self-presentation, the persona represented a strategic conformity to existing norms and the women distanced themselves from their assumed personas. The use of social media, therefore, reproduced and reinforced conformity to existing gender norms because the online gendered persona constituted a comprehensive and enduring constraint.

Keywords
persona, workplace, social media, professional women, gender inequality, symbolic interaction

Introduction
Tracey, who was dubbed by her friends as a “three-high” woman (highly educated, high income, and high work level), received her doctoral degree from an Ivy League University in the United States. She then entered a top Chinese research institution as a lab associate director. While confident in her career, Tracey repeatedly expressed concern that she needs a persona on WeChat, that is, how to come across as a professional female scientist on personal social media in the workplace. Tracey’s concern was echoed by many other interviewees during our research on workplace social media. This pressure to subscribe to an online persona thus raises some intriguing yet often overlooked questions: Why do highly educated professional women care so much about persona on social media at the workplace? What does persona mean to them and their work? And what role does social media play in the performance of persona and the gender power structure?

“Persona” is defined as the public image that an individual presents to their audience. While the term gradually emerged from obscurity during early 20th-century literature and psychology (Marshall et al., 2015), the performative nature of persona was perfectly echoed in Goffman’s (1959) analogies of dramaturgy, such as impression management and front stage, and his works extended persona to social interaction in everyday practice (Goffman, 1959). Persona is usually associated with celebrities and influencers, but has become more relevant to the general public in the digital age (boyd, 2014; Marshall, 2016). With advances in the Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) field, people have multiple ways to construct, revise, present, and publicize online identities that facilitate building and “playing” with multiple personas (Turkle, 1999).
In our research, the case of Tracey reflects the intersection between the widespread use of social media in the workplace and the accompanying gender performance. With a total of 1.268 billion monthly active accounts at the end of 2021 (Tencent, 2022), WeChat is the most popular social media in China, accounting for 81.6% of the population’s online activities (Chen et al., 2017). While initially designed for social interaction with family and friends, WeChat is closely intertwined with daily interactions in the office (Tian, 2021; Zhu & Miao, 2021). According to WeChat’s User Report, over 80% of users are using the app for work-related purposes (WeChat, 2017). In short, WeChat is “taking over workplaces in China” (Wang, 2016).

The prevalence of WeChat makes the workplace digital persona (renshe) a widely discussed topic in China. Often compared to personal brands and business and ID cards, online personas are now an important way for companies to quickly understand and position employees and for individuals to gain attention, resources, and promotions. Lin (2022) noted: “Everyone in the workplace needs an online persona” because “[it] determines your income, and promotion opportunities.” More importantly, women, an often overlooked group in the workplace, have been thrust into the spotlight of public discussions about online persona in China, which reflect the long-held prejudice of the incompatibility of female identity with professional work.

Based on in-depth interviews, we found that many women feel pressured to adopt an online persona for gender performances on WeChat, and many sought advice on how to appear as a professional woman. This reference to “professional woman” highlighted the gender issues related to workplace social media. Although sociology, management, and organizational studies have extensively investigated workplace gender discrimination and inequality, most have focused on offline settings. Yet scholars of Communications and Media Studies continue to find operative gender norms on social media, such as in online representations (M. Li & Luo, 2020), personal interactions (Comunello et al., 2021), and public engagement (Lilleker et al., 2021). The experience of women in online work interactions, especially daily social media interactions, has largely been neglected. As such, critical questions are emerging: what kind of gender relations are being (re)produced through workplace social media? Does social media reduce or reinforce workplace gender inequality, and if so, why and how?

We aim to answer the above questions and contribute to the existing literature by introducing persona as an important analytical concept. This concept is employed for three considerations. First, it is most frequently mentioned by our respondents when asked to describe their use of WeChat for work. This compelled us to honor the interpretive voice of our interviewees in conceptualizing the data. We further elaborate on the conceptualization process of persona from everyday terms to the academic concept in the methods section. Second, persona suitably describes social media use in the workplace because it captures aspects of online performance that are not emphasized by other concepts, such as online self-presentation. Rather than specific behaviors, such as uploading a profile picture, persona performance is a comprehensive repertoire of expressions, behaviors, and interactions. It is deliberately used to cope with power relations and gender expectations. Also, unlike celebrity personas in traditional media that appear for a specific period of time, this real-time performance in the workplace is an ongoing interaction with co-workers, and thus the persona is constantly subject to their surveillance through online and offline interactions. Third, self-presentation studies mostly focus on non-work scenarios such as dating, whereas persona emphasizes the conscious or deliberate performance of an identity that is distant from one’s true self. Therefore, persona as an analytical term is more suitable to describe what’s going on in social domains, such as the workplace, which is a highly normative setting with considerable consequences.

Building on the literature of “doing gender” and the symbolic interactionist perspective, we argue that the WeChat persona of professional women is a gender performance that is perceived, negotiated, and practiced through a series of dynamic social interactions. Interviews with 48 urban professionals who use WeChat as their main work social media platform show that Chinese professional women develop an “online persona” to conform with traditional gender norms. From this, we argue that social media personas reflect how people position themselves in the workplace and shed light on the main micro-mechanism in the relationship between public/work and private/gender.

**Doing Gender and Hegemonic Masculinity**

“Doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) understood gender as a routine that is embedded in daily interactions while “gender performativity” (Butler, 1990) likened gender to a public performance (Lloyd, 1999). Consensus is growing that gender is not simply an identity or a role, but an institutionalized system of social interactions (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). In the workplace, gender greatly impedes working women from attaining authority (Smith, 2002). Men are more frequently in dominant and leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 1991). Female leaders are evaluated more strictly and negatively (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Moreover, women typically participate less, which is especially exacerbated in male-dominated occupations (Fana et al., 2021), where men can build working relationships and a sense of belonging more easily (Faulkner, 2009). Indeed, male-centered norms are still performed in female-dominated industries. For example, female journalists face blatant gender discrimination; they receive fewer promotion opportunities, must tolerate the suggestive emphasis on clothing and appearance, and even with female leaders in newsrooms, news reports on female issues are given low priority (Jenkins & Finneman, 2018; Nilsson, 2010; Ross, 2001).
In these daily gendered practices, cultural beliefs are produced around expected behaviors, and how these beliefs or attitudes are tied to appropriate roles and activities is defined as gender beliefs or gender ideologies (S. N. Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Among these, hegemonic cultural beliefs are key to “social relational” contexts and gender systems, especially hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), which “was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832).

Hegemonic masculinity also exists in the digital realm. One key concern in Gender and Media Studies is how the media reflects, engages, and influences existing gender power structures and reduces gender inequality. The advent of the internet ignited optimism about the liberating potential of new media for women, but we should be mindful of the risk of equating access to social media with empowerment (Bailur et al., 2018; Zelezny-Green, 2014). Many other studies focus on various social media platforms and elucidate how hegemonic masculinity is reperformed. Rose et al. (2012) showed that men and women use different digital image management strategies to present themselves and reinforce gender stereotypes on Facebook with independent and dominant traits being more prevalently used by men and dependent and submissive traits by women. Rodriguez and Hernandez (2018) found that some Instagram accounts depict scantily clad women in sexual poses, which reinforce and legitimize hegemonic masculinity by developing online fraternities through misogyny and objectification while facilitating virtual connections among fraternity members. Trott (2022) examined the large backlash after Gillette released a video on YouTube opposing toxic masculinity, which revealed the complicity of digital companies like YouTube in the institutionalization of hegemonic masculinity and how a masculine public used digital tactics to achieve hegemony online. Unlike previous studies that mostly focus on non-work scenarios, this study aims to advance the understanding of mediated gender performance of professional women in the workplace in China.

While the concept of hegemonic masculinity was developed in Western contexts, it is also applicable to the Chinese context (see, for example, Tian & Deng, 2017). Indeed, although the Chinese state has made efforts to dramatically transform gender ideologies and feminine ideals (Huang, 2006; Liu, 2014), gender inequality persists. The 2021 Global Gender Gap Report ranked China at 107 out of 156 countries for its distance to gender parity and showed that China is lagging behind in closing the gender gap (World Economic Forum, 2021). Despite the high labor force participation rate of women, that rate has been decreasing over the past years (Dong, 2021). Even though women have been receiving a better education, structural and cultural obstacles prevent the transfer of their qualifications to higher positions in the labor market (Ji & Wu, 2018), with only 16.7% of senior managers being women (World Economic Forum, 2021). In the private sphere, the gendered division of labor in the family persists (Dong, 2021). In 1978, China launched its economic reform to transform from a central planned to a market economy. During the process, the state retreated from providing child care services for urban residents through their work unit (“danwei”) and shifted child care to families. While women were encouraged to join the work force during the socialist era and many continued to participate in the labor force in the reform era, they faced a double burden of work and family (Cook & Dong, 2011; Song & Ji, 2020).

In a study of social media use in Chinese middle-class workplaces, Tian (2021) found that WeChat intensifies the power inequality between workplace subordinates and superordinates. Here, we focus on female workers, and examine how the use of social media has influenced gender inequality at the workplace.

**Persona as Daily Online Practice**

Most persona studies have focused on celebrity persona As a parasocial personality and the various strategies and practices celebrities and online influencers use to construct their persona (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Strauss, 1957; Valentinsson, 2018). However, as the social domain moves online, persona shifts accordingly. Virtual interactions are prevalent and social media use in the workplace is a widely discussed topic, which allows us to explore persona, which have become normalized and naturalized as a daily online practice of ordinary people (boyd, 2014; Marshall, 2016).

Digital interfaces allow for selective self-presentations on the internet, such as concealing less desirable information and self-presentation in more idealized ways (J. Davis, 2010; Walther, 2011). Persona, however, does not equate to just self-presentation. Self-presentation refers to how individuals act to control others’ impression of them (Goffman, 1959).

Persona reveals a more comprehensive, complex, and dynamic mechanism of social interaction, especially when it happens online. Persona includes: the understanding of the situation and the appropriate interaction script; the positioning of the self; the selection, expression, and articulation of relevant discourse, behavior, and even emotions; and how to put it all together to form a natural, impressive, and coherent character. Moreover, in the shift of social interaction to online venues, the persona becomes an open, continuous, and real-time performance, which is constantly subject to surveillance.

The overlap between online and offline social networks compels performative consistency in both online and offline interactions to maintain a persona’s perceived authenticity. In social media, lapses in performative consistency can cause exposure from overlapped networks and insults for being “inauthentic.” A persona’s performative consistency online
requires daily maintenance and strategic responses to different audiences made up of individuals from various networks in one place. When a particular post intended for one audience finds its way to another, the phenomenon is called “context collapse” (boyd, 2008; J. L. Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). However, what we are discussing here is quite different from context collapse. The workers interviewed for this study are fully aware that their colleagues, including supervisors, are among their WeChat audience, so they intentionally construct an online persona that conforms to the expected gender norms. People may selectively self-divulge in front of their imagined audience from life and social domains, such as the teenagers in Boyd (2014) and internet commenters in Tian and Menchik (2016). But how social media users present themselves in a workplace, a social domain saturated with power relations, strong norms, and behavioral expectations, has yet to be explored.

In China, the indigenous expression for persona, *renwu sheding*, is often shortened as *renshe*, and it is widely used in daily life to describe the behavior of ordinary people, especially in the workplace. The workplace is a theater, and we are professional actors who perform a persona according to a script (Tan, 2021). “Persona” rather than self-presentation or performance is used because the term captures some perspectives or dimensions of the complex reality that other concepts do not, and thus resonates with lived experiences.

In short, related to but different from self-presentation, persona emerges as a new form of online daily practice in the digital age. In the workplace, social media is at the forefront of persona-making due to the exponential growth in online interactions. It is now both timely and important to investigate the role of social media in online persona practices since many workers regard that doing online persona is essential for work, yet little is known about this phenomenon.

**Data and Methods**

This study investigates the relationship between social media and gender interaction in the workplace. Our sample is professional women in Chinese metropolises because they are university educated, financially self-sufficient, and more exposed to gender equality discourses. Female professionals are the focus since they frequently allude to online persona and traditional gender norms more than their male counterparts. Open recruitment was implemented on social media, such as WeChat and Weibo, and snowball sampling was used to optimize recruitment. Three criteria were required: (1) residency in first-tier cities, such as Beijing; (2) formal employment in the past six months before the interview, excluding self-employment and freelancing; and (3) use of WeChat in the workplace. We understand that online gender interaction is two-way, thus we included men in the workplace to gain multiple perspectives.

Although this is a convenience sample, we deliberately recruited people from different organizations and job positions, and interviewed 48 mostly urban, middle-class, university-educated individuals, and knowledge workers within a period of 3 years (see Table 1). Five face-to-face interviews, and 43 telephone and WeChat call interviews were conducted. On average, each interview lasted 50 min. We informed the interviewees of the research purpose, obtained verbal consent, and anonymized them. We asked general, explorative questions, such as, “How do you use WeChat at work?” and “What challenges do you encounter when using WeChat at work?” We focused on their feelings and narratives, and mainly inquired about their gender-related experiences with the use of WeChat in the workplace. We encouraged them to explain and analyze related issues through their own perspectives and to recall whether their colleagues experienced similar incidents.

We used the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with no theoretical preconceptions walking into the interview, thus prioritizing the voice of the interviewees, and

| Table 1. Respondent Profiles. |
|-----------------------------|
| **Sample (n=48)**           |
| **Gender and Relationship status** |
| Male 15                     |
| Single —9                  |
| Married —6                 |
| Female 33                  |
| Single —18                 |
| Married —15                |
| **Residence**              |
| Beijing 14                 |
| Shanghai 11                |
| Guangzhou 12               |
| Shenzhen 11                |
| **Education level**         |
| Bachelor’s degree 26       |
| Postgraduate degree 16     |
| Doctorate 6                |
| **Age (years old)**        |
| 21–30 20                   |
| 31–40 22                   |
| 41–50 4                    |
| 51 and older 2             |
| **Income (RMB)**            |
| 10,000–20,000 33           |
| 8,000–10,000 10            |
| 5,000–8,000 5              |
| **Position**                |
| Intern 3                   |
| Junior staff 25            |
| Mid-manager 16             |
| Senior manager 4           |
| **Organization**           |
| State owned enterprise 28  |
| Private enterprise 20      |

1 RMB = 0.1573 USD.
the main conceptual framework of this article, the “online persona,” emerged. We then moved back and forth between the empirical data and related conceptual discussion to ensure the fit of the concept. On one hand, we delved into the data to understand why and how this specific term describes and explains social behavior; on the other hand, we used abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) to constantly compare the empirical data with the existing literature. Current theoretical ideas on online activities, such as “online presentation of self,” “context collapse” (Boyd, 2008), and “n-adic interaction” (Tian & Menchik, 2016) were used as tentative analytic frameworks. Subsequently, we found that “online presentation of self” and “context collapse” are not adequate to account for the narratives of our respondents who are fully aware that their colleagues (including bosses and supervisors) are included in their WeChat audience, so they intentionally construct an online persona that conforms to expected gender norms. Instead, we found the use of persona is consistent with related academic discussion, since persona represents “a compromise with society” (Jung, 1966, p. 518) and “is designed... to make a definite impression upon others and... to conceal the true nature of the individual” (p. 305).

After closely reading the manuscript multiple times, open coding was conducted to establish the initial codes. The two authors did the coding separately and then compared notes and engaged in constant discussion. The linkage between different codes was noted and related codes grouped to themes. The various scenarios and strategies described by our interviewees revealed the relationship between private gender identity and public performed identity as the most discussed logic, with three major personas identified: Persona A—emphasizing professional identity and downplaying gender identity (5 women); Persona B—accentuating femininity and downplaying professional identity (16 women); and Persona C—performing femininity to please a male supervisor by confirming his masculinity (7 women). As a qualitative and explorative study, our aim was to unpack the detailed and dynamic processes and mechanisms of mediated gender politics in the workplace.

Findings

In this section, we detail the performance of the three personas. In each part, we start with how interviewees understand the relationship between work and themselves as female professionals, paying special attention to how they evaluate the role played by WeChat. Then we elaborate the continuous and dynamic process, showing that this is a comprehensive and systematic gender practice in a subtle, nuanced, and even invisible way. We also include the unintended consequences to emphasize the risk and uncertainty of each persona. At the end of this section, we acknowledge the overlap and transformation of personas in different contexts, and briefly discuss the need to maintain consistency of a specific persona in a given scenario and the potential risks when a persona is changed.

Emphasizing Professional Identity

Female managers or career-minded respondents who have exceptional credentials or capabilities adopt Persona A: emphasizing professional identity and downplaying gender identity. Persona A often described their workplaces as “formal,” which means there are established and strong rules to follow, and this showed they understood the public nature of their workplace. These respondents also emphasized a professional discourse that separates the public from the private: “The company hires you to do things, not to be yourself. So put your personal matters aside whether you are a man or woman, because only professionals are respected” (S25, female, 30s, single, team manager). The professionalism reflected in this discourse thus becomes a disciplinary force that influences how the relationships among gender, sexuality, and work are understood, in line with previous studies (Miao & Chan, 2021).

Persona A view their female gender identity as a liability. Thus, a desexualization strategy is used to dissociate the female identity from work, a practice also identified among women in traditionally male-dominated workplaces (Archbold & Schulz, 2012). S37 (female, 20s, single, liaison officer) stated that since more work, communication, and relationship-building are taking place on WeChat, WeChat is an “interface” between herself and work. Others used “stage” as a metaphor to describe their performance with colleagues on WeChat. S37 further elaborated, “Everyone is very busy at work. So you need to create a simple and intuitive persona to help others understand you quickly.” This persona must also be actively presented:

What matters is that your leaders and colleagues know what you do, rather than what you are actually doing. Most important is how to present yourself and your work to others.

According to some Persona A interviewees, the professional persona (zhichang zhuanye renshi) is the most useful; however, there is no ready-made script. Performing gender in the digital space thus becomes an exploratory and dynamic process similar to real life, where clothing and appearance are used as transformative elements. S19 (female, 30s, married, scientist), who has a doctoral degree from the US, changed her WeChat profile picture from a young, smiling student to a confident and professional woman in a suit after she joined a university as a junior scholar. She believes this new profile picture can help build her online persona as a professional. This is similar to Kanai (2015)’s finding that “control” over one’s image is not simply power yielded via an algorithmic media. Rather, the social and cultural imperative to produce and “control” images functions as a key form of surveillance and discipline used in neoliberal, postfeminist digital cultures.
Nevertheless, doing gender online in the workplace is more than that. A genderless persona involves a comprehensive repertoire of expressions, behaviors, and interactions. Among online spaces, one of the most important spaces where boundaries are made between gender and professional identities is WeChat Moments, where users post updates, videos, and photos. S18 (female, 20s, single, consultant) explained, “If women are already disadvantaged in the workplace, why keep reminding others of your femininity?” Thus, self-censoring and even removing female-related content is commonly done. Some female interviewees avoided making posts that allude to their female identity. An unfortunate post could have repercussions. S5 (female, 20s, single, intern) posted some images of nature, which led her male colleagues to perceive that she had nothing else better to do and thus that she was not career-oriented.

Besides gender-neutral profiles and posts on Moments, some interviewees even tried to replicate dominant masculinity to legitimize their professional identity. Emphasizing a professional identity not only included de-gendering or even suppressing the female gender identity, but also re-gendering through association with masculine traits. A number of respondents used the term “a manly woman” (nv hanzi) to refer to women who act like men (with positive connotations). S10 (female, 40s, married, manager) stated the need to perform masculinity to receive a promotion, such as sharing dirty jokes with male colleagues. This is not groundless, as the “manly woman” persona in the workplace is widely praised in public media discourse. Y. Li (2013) stated that manly women are popular with supervisors and are more likely to be promoted. This persona is also used to combat another form of gender discrimination, which assumes that women in management, especially beautiful women, must have slept their way up. Many women show that their success is based on job performance rather than their female identity, because they are also “men.” Nevertheless, male colleagues often allude to gender identity to reinforce the incompatibility of a female identity and professionalism. A male interviewee (20s, single, clerk) said, “women who are capable at work are not cute, and no men dare to marry these women.”

Manly women show a different understanding of and practices around work, gender, social media, and persona, which are rooted in strong utilitarianism and masculine ideologies. Similar to Tannen’s (1994) findings that women appropriate metaphors modeled by men in the workplace, some of our interviewees use military discourse to describe “the workplace as a battlefield” (S18) and their relationship with colleagues “as comrades-in-arms” (S18), thus reproducing masculinity by emphasizing common characteristics. WeChat is “a war trench” with brothers (S10), and the persona is like a “uniform” or “armor” (S1) to fight for a better future.

If you aspire to get promoted, you should . . . be a career-focused, capable, and potential leader who is not affected by family. Your persona is like your uniform. The captain’s uniform is different from the flight attendant’s uniform. If you want to be the captain, you should act or dress like a captain. (S10, female, 40s, married, manager)

The importance of being seen as career-oriented for work promotions can be more readily facilitated by adopting Persona A. However, other aspects of one’s identity need to be sacrificed. S1 (female, 30s, married, associate director) indicated that a higher position translates to less control and less personal space to be yourself. The online persona on WeChat both protects and limits. S22 (female, 20s, single, clerk) shared that, “there are times when I can be very sad, but I can’t show my vulnerability on WeChat since I am supposed to be strong.” S44 (female, 30s, single, editor) feels socially isolated since the boundaries between the private and public not only inhibit communication with colleagues, but are also interpreted as deliberate distancing.

In short, Persona As cannot change or resist gender inequality on workplace WeChat. Gender issues are constantly compromised or even sacrificed for work, which Persona As exacerbate when they adopt a set of systematic behavioral requirements that (re)produce the gender order online by aligning with dominant masculinity.

**Accentuating Femininity**

Many female respondents accentuated their femininity on WeChat. These Persona Bs are often young female workers new to the workforce or married female workers in non-senior managerial positions. Persona B concurs with expectations that women are docile, quiet, friendly, and most important, non-confrontational and non-threatening. These expectations are not imagined, as the gaze from men in the workplace is real and universal. As S41 (male, 40s, married, HR) said, “We are inclined to recruit young women who are obedient. Those who are confident and independent are usually difficult . . . ”

Persona Bs often refer to the workplace as hougong, or a hierarchy of consorts in imperial China. A concubine can only succeed with the support of the emperor, which also echoes a popular mentality in China that connections, especially with powerful figures, take precedence over work skills. Women who do not have the ability to resist a structure of inequality nor strong career aspirations to engage in office politics prefer to perform a relationship-oriented persona that conforms to traditional gender norms.

While a feminine persona is a conceptualized social metaphor, the persona is very context- and people-specific. We identified two types of Persona Bs. The first are older women who cannot convincingly carry off a cute and harmless persona and thus play the motherly figure: dama. Although they
are mature, most of them are not in a leadership or management position. S14 (female, 40s, married, nurse), for example, mostly posted on WeChat Moments about parenting or entertainment. The second type of Persona Bs are younger women who adopt the persona of a silly, and sweet non-threatening beauty: shabaitian. Shabaitian is also the product of idol dramas and perfectly reflects the male fantasy of the ideal female colleague in China. However, it is a comprehensive and systematic means of idealizing feminine gender stereotypes and mobilizing them for work.

Both dama and shabaitian prove to others (and themselves) that they subscribe to gender expectations, thereby gaining recognition. Thus, this performance is also a form of self-discipline that echoes the “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 2003), that is, the techniques and technologies that govern conduct. This persona has become the social mechanism through which digital forms of the gendered self are regulated.

Performing Persona B demands familiarity with online elements and resources and creatively forging a natural and consistent digital self. Persona Bs actively post information that shows they are harmless or even naive. S26 (female, 30s, single, data analyst), who holds a PhD, recalled her early days of employment when she intentionally created “fluff” posts, such as baking cakes, to come across as caring and able to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships.

Unfortunately, performing a Persona B is done in real time and subject to different reactions. S17 (female, 30s, married, teacher) once reposted a well-known Chinese quote: “Some people think the fragrance of gardenias is too strong and not elegant. It’s my right to be like this and it’s none of your business.” Afterwards, her male supervisor called her because he interpreted the post as a challenge to his leadership and authority. Older women who share selfies on Moments invite the ire of male respondents, such as S40 (male, 30s, single, designer): “Why do older women post selfies? Are they hoping to show that they are still attractive to men?”

To maintain a gentle persona during WeChat group chats, Persona Bs often use special words and tones. For example, rather than communicating affirmation using the standard and straightforward “hao de,” they use more approachable modal particles such as “hao ne” and “hao ya.” Emojis, which have gendered usage patterns, are perhaps the most used cues to reframe the female image in our study. S38 (male, 30s, married, engineer) noticed that his young female colleagues often used cute emojis in the group chats. S21 (female, 20s, single, clerk) added emojis in almost every WeChat conversation with colleagues. S39 (female, 20s, single, intern) used kittens as memes because they come across as more feminine.

This is similar to the finding that female entrepreneurs adopted conventional feminine personas online structured through soft self-promotion, interactive intimacy, and compulsory visibility (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). The difference from their research is that in our study, Persona Bs usually occupy the lower corporate rungs, which constrains their online gender performance. Although some believe Persona B protects them, some of the interviewees admitted that Persona B is a double-edged sword. Femininity is widely considered incompatible with leadership, which is characterized by hetero-masculinity. So Persona Bs are often considered incapable and not career-oriented, which in the long run inhibits career advancement.

**Performing Sexuality to Please Masculinity**

An interesting phenomenon emerged during the interviews, especially among male respondents: some females would flirt with their supervisors on WeChat, although female respondents rarely admitted doing so themselves. Instead, female respondents frequently reported other women workers who flirted with male colleagues on WeChat, which is semi-public because it takes place in group chat or Moments. Thus, whether the people involved intended to be flirtatious or not, some interviewees felt others’ behavior was flirting and interpreted it as such, which highlights the assumption that normative sexualities affect the way that online interactions are framed (Kiesling, 2013). In our analysis, Persona Cs usually have low mobility and high “walk-away” costs in the job market, and thus they are incentivized to perform in a way that validates the masculinity of their supervisor to please them and receive favorable treatment in return.

Persona Cs proactively mobilize sexuality to please the masculinity of male colleagues, especially supervisors. S34 (female, 20s, single, sales) noted that: “Every man wants to be acknowledged by women, making him feel like an attractive man.” Accordingly, performing personas on WeChat can be interpreted as relationship management/work. The aim is to build a specific type of relationship where the masculinity of supervisors is acknowledged, so the communications operate like rituals that maintain a symbolic reality (Carey, 2008). S45 (male, 30s, married, project leader) confirmed that male leaders want female subordinates to stroke their ego. S45 added that, sometimes, his female colleagues would immediately post emojis like a thumbs up along with “You are the best!” in response to the posts of male supervisors, especially those who boast of achievements. This digital interaction, where men show off their achievements while women cheer them on, has become an institutionalized behavior where gender ideology is “inscribed in ritual practices” (Althusser, 2006). This is confirmed by S19 (female, 30s, married, scientist):

> Chinese male leaders always want to show that they are superior . . . Some . . . really enjoy being acknowledged by . . . young and beautiful women [on WeChat].

Thus, women are digital gender laborers who help male leaders build their hegemonic masculinity. This is consistent
with existing research findings that feminized subjects tend to undertake gender labor (Ward, 2010), such as female servers flirting with their clients in a Tokyo hostess club (Allison, 1994).

Online hegemonic masculinity is also co-constructed, partly due to the differences between online and physical interactions. Less emotional energy is needed to send dramatic/cute reactions, and flirting can be disguised as playfulness. S27 (female, 20s, single, IT) stated that her male colleagues talked about her profile picture being very beautiful, to which a female colleague added, “Not only do the men covet your beauty, women also drool after seeing your picture.” S3 (female, 30s, single, advertising) stated, “It’s not uncommon to work overtime, but one of our female co-workers knows how to manipulate this to her favour. She sent a picture of us working overtime to our male supervisor and asked him to acknowledge our hard work by pouting and being cute.” They were rewarded with coffee and tea, and their male supervisor received “love you” emojis in return.

Considering that the performance of online persona is a whole set of expectations and therefore needs more effort to maintain the persona both online and offline, this emotional work can be draining. Tian (2021) found that workplace subordinates are compelled to constantly show deference to their supervisors on WeChat, despite demeaning effects. Data from our research confirm the persistence of traditional gender norms on WeChat, and we also found that this trend of increasing emotional labor is especially true for female subordinates.

Persona Cs also face challenges, the biggest being online sexual harassment. Since sexuality is exchanged as a resource, the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate behavior blur. Female interviewees chose to ignore the implicit or explicit sexual overtures made by male colleagues and supervisors. As passive coping mechanisms, they deleted or blocked sexually infused messages or pictures and did not confront harassers to ask them to cease. This is because the women have calculated the costs and benefits of resistance, and a number of intertwined reasons have led to their collective silence. First, the Chinese workplace is dominated by masculine culture. Men often tell sexual jokes to create a sense of intimacy: “It’s not a big deal. We’re all adults” (S43, male, 40s, manager). Thus, the women are worried about being shamed as victims. The second reason involves the power structure in the workplace and the unequal status of professional women. Gender equality is not fully valued, with few policies and related institutions to help women deal with sexual harassment; thus, there is little precedence to draw on for resistance. Moreover, many people, including women themselves, downplay the severity of the harassment. Some separate their digital selves from their real selves for self-preservation: “I can stand it as long as it is only online and does not involve any physical contact” (S29, female, 30s, single, accounting).

Despite the different types and strategies of the personas discussed, all face similar challenges. The personas have to resonate with real life for natural and authentic interactions. WeChat has further complicated this process because the performance is real-time and, because WeChat has blurred work-life boundaries, this performance must persist even after work hours. Furthermore, a specific persona is maintained by performing in a similar way each time (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and respondents are under pressure to maintain that same persona in a given scenario in attempts to construct a coherent and unified self (Giddens, 1991). Nevertheless, the persona may change when circumstances and audiences change, and women need to be flexible as “we have to be like a chameleon, constantly changing to blend into our environment” (S26, female, 30s, single, data analyst). One female interviewee (S9, 20s, single) who is an account manager told us that she has to act as a manly woman to her male supervisor, yet she accentuates femininity to please the clients.

However, maintaining consistency and flexibility at the same time is not an easy job for women in the workplace, especially since the two-way interaction afforded by social media forces constant interpersonal surveillance and monitoring, and it is challenging to maintain a consistent persona. In fact, one of the most popular interview buzzwords is renshe bengta, or literally “the collapse of one’s persona,” which invites insults such as “scheming bitch” to describe those who adopted an innocent and harmless persona. A male interviewee (S40, 30s, single, designer) described the different performance of his female colleague in two chat groups on WeChat: a professional persona in a chat group full of low-level employees and a feminine persona in another chat group with company leaders. This interviewee used renshe bengta to describe the professional persona created by his female co-worker as purposeful and even fake. Since personas can and often do overlap and transform, why does the audience have such intense or negative reactions? Echoing Ellison et al. (2012) on online dating profiles as a promise made to the audience, online personas in the workplace are a promise made to co-workers that “future face-to-face interaction will take place with someone who does not differ fundamentally from the person represented” (p. 56). As S28 (female, 30s, single, finance staff) argued, “doing persona is managing other people’s expectations of you . . . although [the persona] may not be the real you, people still feel uncomfortable and even cheated when they find large discrepancies between the performed persona and the real you.”

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In this article, we describe the detailed, dynamic, and nuanced ways that gender is performed on WeChat and how those online performances are related to the way women understand their position in the workplace. We also highlight the challenges that the performance creates, especially the unintended consequences. While much has been written
about workplace gender issues, few studies have examined how social media disrupts or reinforces established gender norms for professional women. We show the reality of the reproduction and reinforcement of pre-existing gender relations through WeChat. As work now involves both online and offline venues, the “online persona” manages the increasing demand for emotional labor and conforming to existing gender norms. The pressure to do the latter is heightened on social media, and in this study, three personas are used to manage this pressure.

Persona As an analytic lens can capture the gender power relations embedded in social interaction. Professional women living in Chinese metropolises care so much about their persona because online performance represented by persona has substantial consequences. Supervisors have the power to determine promotions or career prospects, which increases pressure to conform to existing gender norms. Also, they live within the parameters of hegemonic masculinity with no alternatives, so the precarious state of modern work pushes women to hold on to their jobs, even at the expense of their dignity. Thus, our study also highlights that mediated gender interactions should not be viewed as merely as an interpersonal issue, but it is important to understand them within the specific social-political context. The power relations and traditional gender norms in the offline world are being replicated, performed, and even reinforced in online interactions through the performance of online personas with the shift of WeChat to the public realm of work. WeChat is used to adapt to the existing system rather than a means of liberation. Therefore, social media has been absorbed into the existing social system to continue the reinforcement and reproduction of gender inequality (Zhu & Miao, 2021). In fact, the gender discipline that social media demands is comprehensive, systemic, and invisible to the women in this study who use it in their workplace.

We also show the difference between online and offline personas. At first glance, online personas may be convenient, easy to manipulate and maintain, with a lower emotional cost. Yet they are not easily maintained because the performance needs to continue over time. Others would notice the inconsistencies (see also Tian, 2017). This is consistent with existing findings that performance in social media spaces are often marked by more persistence. Therefore, they may carry more weight than the fleeting performances of face-to-face interaction (Hollenbaugh, 2021). Maintaining an online persona is highly demanding in real-time with only a few templates suitable for the workplace, which all conform to existing gender norms in different ways. Therefore, workplace online personas as a strategy constrains professional women more than ever before.

These online personas differ from “self-presentation” in that the respondents feel more distanced from their personas, which do not reflect their idealized or future selves, sharing that, “[the] persona is not the real me” (S19) or “it’s just a role for work” (S10). They are a coping strategy to deal with the workplace power hierarchy and traditional gender norms. Thus, personas change according to the level of dependency in the workplace. When personal circumstances change, the online personas follow. It is common to re-assess and re-position the persona when getting a promotion or moving to another department. This means that there is both consistency and flexibility in the personas, and our study also points to the risk when shifting or changing between different personas. Although the overlapping and transformation of personas is not our focus, we think this deserves to be further explored in future studies.

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