

# PERFORMANCE IN A DIGITAL WORLD: NAVIGATING COMMERCIAL DRAMA IN WECHAT BLOGS



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**This dissertation is submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**March 2025**

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## Declaration

This thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated. Many of the ideas in this thesis were the product of discussion with my supervisor Hayley Cocker and Xin Zhao.

Excerpts of this thesis have been published in the following conference manuscripts and academic publications.

Bai, Y., Zhao, X. & Cocker, H., 2018. *Blogger and Audience Engagement: a Performance Theory Perspective*. s.l., E - European Advances in Consumer Research, pp. 205-206.

Bai, Y., Zhao, X. & Cocker, H., 2018. *Dancing With Commercialism: Emphasizing Dramatism to Persuade*. Duluth, Advances in Consumer Research, pp. 465-466.

Bai, Y., Zhao, X. & Cocker, H., 2019. *Playing With Tensions: How Bloggers Sustain Consumers' Engagement for Commercial Purposes*. Duluth, NA - Advances in Consumer Research, pp. 442-443.

Bai, Y., Zhao, X. & Cocker, H. L., 2017. *WeChat Brands: Communal Interaction and Brand Publicity in Chinese Social Media*. Duluth, NA - Advances in Consumer Research, pp. 511-522

## Abstract

Drawing upon performance theory, this study investigates the dynamics of commercially driven blogs created by WeChat influencers. It examines three of the most critical yet still unanswered questions in our understandings of influencer marketing: How WeChat influencers captivate both readers and advertisers, generating commercially driven digital performance that meet the expectations of both sides? How marketers analyse criteria when selecting influencers and assess their cooperation to acquire valuable information that may enhance their digital performance? What challenges and negative aspects of influencer marketing manifest as dark side of performance and what barriers and hazards to the sector? In this study, the WeChat official account platform is conceptualized as a stage, where influencers assume the roles of both playwrights and directors, while brands act as sponsors and readers as the audience.

In addressing these important issues, I first explore the strategies used by WeChat influencers in their digital performances. Then, I investigate the processes used by marketers in their selection of WeChat influencers. Lastly, I examine the dark side of the process that may arise from the performance and the strategies used in sustaining commercial success. Moving beyond one-sided narratives, I focus on the intricate interplay of influencers, brands, and audiences on the WeChat official account platform. Employing a netnographic approach, this dissertation reveals that celebrity influencers enhance persuasiveness, excitement, and reader engagement through different techniques of digital performance. They adopt the strategies of role-playing, emotional expression, and interactions with audience to create successful digital performance with commercial purposes. They use digital impression management to sustain an audience as well as attract marketers. The findings have important implications for marketers when selecting influencers and highlight three evaluation criteria: engagement metrics (reading rate; conversion rate; fan growth rate); AISAS model (attention-interest-search-action-sharing); and the subjective approach (such as anecdotal feedback, qualitative impressions, or subjective assessments). Lastly, it uncovers the negative repercussions of marketing on WeChat official accounts, shedding light on the dark side's impact on influencers, brands, audiences, and broader society. The dark side of influencer marketing stems from the numerous pressures on influencers, including mental, physical, and financial strains. Negative impacts extend to brands, facing risks from setbacks and financial losses

due to lack of transparency in fees and other detrimental practices. Heightened competition among brands may lead to increased marketing expenses, with brands essentially operating as conduits for influencers. Additionally, adverse effects on readers and society such as economic losses, misleading erroneous values, fostering negative social norms, and giving rise to unhealthy psychological issues which can lead to societal anxiety and conflicts. In addition, this research extends performance theory to the online realm and explores theoretical issues beyond self-presentation within a commercial context. It offers practical insights for researchers exploring marketing-related fields within the Chinese market, providing a comprehensive understanding of WeChat commercial blogs and the integration of performance theory.

**KEYWORDS:** Performance theory, WeChat official accounts, influencer marketing, dark side of social media marketing

## Acknowledgements

I owe my deepest gratitude to both of my supervisors, Dr. Xin Zhao and Dr. Hayley Cocker, for their unwavering intellectual guidance. Their insights have been a constant source of inspiration. As the saying goes, “Reading ten thousand books is not as valuable as traveling ten thousand miles and traveling ten thousand miles is not as enlightening as having a sage guide the way.”

My heartfelt thanks also go to my family, whose support and trust in me have never faltered.

To my fellow Ph.D. candidates and myself, the lyrics of *This Is the Moment* resonate deeply: “For all these years, I’ve faced the world alone, and now the time has come to prove to them I’ve made it on my own. This is the moment when all the dreaming, scheming, and striving become one.”

We will all eventually have our moment.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Personal background and relevance to my research

Since the 1990s, China has experienced remarkable economic growth, accompanied by a shift towards individualism and a neoliberal economic model, departing from traditional Confucian and Communist collectivist ideologies (Bloom & Finlay, 2009). Concurrently, there has been a substantial increase in Internet usage, with social media platforms becoming ubiquitous since the early 2000s (Hong, 2012). The advent of platforms such as QQ, Weibo, and WeChat between 2004 and 2013 transformed Chinese societal behaviours in various ways such as communication, social interaction, information dissemination, commerce, and even entertainment domains. This period also saw the rise of Chinese Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs). KOLs are a type of influencer who have a significant impact on social media platforms such as WeChat official accounts and Weibo. They have the ability to shape the opinions and buying choices of their followers. The proliferation of social media platforms and the significant amount of time spent by Chinese consumers on these platforms have fuelled the ascendancy of KOLs in China. Brands have increasingly turned to KOLs to leverage their large and engaged audience for product and service promotion (Moriuchi, 2021). Social media marketing has evolved from its nascent stages to its present innovative and diverse model, transitioning through phases of inception, dormancy, and explosive growth from the traditional advertising model of the early days (Cheung et al., 2020). This study aims to elucidate the strategies and tactics employed by WeChat influencers (KOLs) in their commercially oriented blogs, while also providing insights into the relationships between WeChat influencers, their audience, and brand marketers in contemporary China.

Since I began my own WeChat official account in 2014 as a food blogger, I have not only watched the emergence of WeChat influencers and their impact on brands and social conventions, but also the evolution of social media marketing, particularly in the context of China. I have accumulated a considerable number of followers (more than 69000 followers by 2024) during my time as a blogger, and consequently many brand marketers have asked me to work with them in commercially oriented blogs. In 2018, I also launched my own digital marketing company in London, which has increased my opportunities to collaborate with influential influencers. In this regard, I also have relevant experience as a marketer. The significant investment made by numerous businesses in WeChat blog advertising, amounting to hundreds of thousands of pounds per month, underscores the platform's importance in enhancing brand visibility. This phenomenon is indicative of readers' affinity towards

WeChat influencers and their commercially oriented blogs. Motivated by this trend, I am compelled to delve deeper into understanding how WeChat influencers effectively develop, present, and communicate commercially oriented blogs that resonate with and are embraced by readers and marketers on the WeChat social media platform in China.

## 1.2 Research Context

With over 846 million monthly active users, WeChat has firmly established itself as a dominant force in the Chinese social media landscape since its launch on January 21, 2011 (Zou & Peng, 2019). The app has successfully integrated a wide array of functions that, in Western countries / other markets, are typically provided by separate platforms. These include core features of apps like WhatsApp (instant messaging), Facebook (social networking), Twitter (microblogging), Instagram (photo sharing), PayPal (online payments), Uber (ride-hailing), TripAdvisor (travel recommendations), Skype (video calls), and Kayak (travel booking). In fact, many of these platforms are either unavailable in China or face severe restrictions, giving WeChat an exclusive edge in consolidating multiple services into one platform for the Chinese consumer.

What sets WeChat apart is its multifunctionality, which offers users the ability to send messages, make video calls, share their experiences through posts, pay bills, play games, shop online, read articles, blog, book hotels and flights, and even call a taxi—all within a single app. This extensive integration of services in one platform creates a seamless user experience, making WeChat not just a social media app but a lifestyle tool. The convenience and versatility it offers have deeply entrenched it in the daily lives of its users, who rely on it for both personal and business activities. It has become a digital ecosystem where users can manage their social, professional, and financial interactions.

This integration provides a unique case study for understanding how technology influences consumer behavior. As Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman (2016) observed, the hybrid nature of platforms like WeChat allows for a comprehensive analysis of how various forms of digital engagement—social sharing, e-commerce, content creation, and more—coalesce to shape modern consumption habits. The convergence of these functions within one platform offers insights into the new ways consumers interact with technology and brands.

WeChat is regarded as an indispensable tool in the daily lives of Chinese people, with nearly every mobile phone user in China relying on the platform. My focus is on a specific function of blogs on WeChat, commonly referred to as WeChat Blogs or WeChat Public/Official Accounts. This platform has been selected as the context for our study for several compelling reasons.

First, WeChat, as the most essential messaging app and the dominant social media platform in China, has attracted many of the country's top bloggers. One reason for this concentration of talent is China's censorship policies, which restrict access to various Western social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This unique digital landscape means that WeChat serves as an all-in-one hub for social interaction, business, and content creation. As of Tencent's Q3 financial report in 2017, there were approximately 3.5 million active WeChat official accounts, with over 797 million monthly active subscribers. Every year, more than 2 million new accounts are created. Additionally, more than half of Chinese mobile users (52.3%) obtain their latest information through WeChat blogs, underscoring the platform's influence. However, the competition among WeChat official account is fierce. Despite the platform's immense user base, only about 10% of these accounts are actively followed and consistently engaged with by users. This intensifies the pressure on bloggers and businesses alike, pushing them to deliver highly compelling content. Yet, for brands, collaborating with top WeChat bloggers has become a highly effective marketing strategy. As Holt (2016) points out, it has become increasingly difficult to attract consumer interest using traditional branded content. Consumers are no longer as receptive to direct brand messages, preferring instead to engage with content that resonates on a personal or emotional level. This shift in consumer behavior has created a greater demand for bloggers who can skillfully transform marketing messages into engaging, relevant stories that captivate their audience.

Second, the phenomenon of large audiences enthusiastically embracing brand-sponsored blog posts is quite rare in Western societies (Kozinets et al., 2010). In China, however, WeChat bloggers have successfully cultivated devoted followings by producing diverse content across various subjects, including food, health, fashion, travel, entertainment, art, film, and personal relationships. The format of WeChat blogs allows bloggers to publish one post per day, which could take the form of a voice message, image, or article. Although all users can leave comments on these posts, only the comments that are selected by the blogger will be publicly displayed. Importantly, bloggers are limited to selecting just 100 comments per article. This



curation process turns the selected comments into an integral part of the reading experience, blending the blog post with the filtered audience interactions to create a richer, more dynamic piece of content.

The significance of my study lies in its examination of how WeChat bloggers adeptly convert marketing messages into compelling and authentic narratives through the integration of brand sponsorships and user-generated content. By incorporating reader feedback and comments, these bloggers create a participatory environment that fosters a sense of community and strengthens the emotional bond between followers and the brands they promote. This personalized, collaborative approach not only enhances audience engagement but also plays a pivotal role in shaping brand narratives, making it a key strategy in the evolving landscape of digital marketing.

### **1.3 Gap in the literature**

It requires a theoretical framework to explain the phenomenon of WeChat Official Accounts because they represent a unique intersection of digital communication, consumer engagement, and brand-building that cannot be fully understood through traditional media theories alone. WeChat Official Accounts operate as a hybrid platform where users both produce and consume content, blurring the lines between traditional roles of audience and creator. This dynamic interaction between bloggers, brands, and readers necessitates a theory that can account for the performative and participatory aspects of digital media. Moreover, the success of WeChat blogs hinges on bloggers' ability to craft compelling narratives and engage their audience in ways that traditional marketing and communication strategies do not fully address.

A theory is needed to explore how bloggers strategically manage their online personas, how they incorporate user-generated content to enhance relatability, and how these interactions shape brand identity and audience loyalty in a highly competitive digital landscape.

Performance theory is the one offers valuable insights into the micro-level interactions between bloggers and their readers, while also shedding light on the broader, macro-level implications for digital marketing, social influence, and cultural trends.

Performance theory has typically been applied to research offline settings, such as in theatre studies (Schechner, 1988) where performances take place in front of a live audience, focusing on body language or facial expressions. Performance theory is also commonly used in sociology, anthropology and psychology to examine a range of social, anthropological and psychological phenomena (Goffman, 1959; Turner, 1986; Sonnentag & Frese, 2002). It is used to analyse and interpret individual behaviour in social interactions (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998) cultural and media representations (Papacharissi, 2012), communication patterns (Cascio, et al., 2023), social roles and identities (Moore, 2017) In addition, several marketing studies have utilised Goffman's theoretical framework on self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) to examine online presentations (Schau & Gilly, 2023; Chen, 2010), specifically looking at aspects like self-images, narratives (McQuarrie et al. 2013; Cascio, et al., 2023), and the prevalence of selfies (Ozansoy Çadırcı & Sağkaya Güngör, 2019) with the aim of showcasing authentic self-states and life experiences, rather than serving strong commercial intent. However, there is a noticeable gap in the research when it comes to the effective digital performance of commercially focused blogs, especially those that primarily focus on written content: how to understand the complex roles played by influencers, marketers, and audiences in the digital world, as well as the strategic tactics used to create a successful "performance" under the frame of performance theory.

Moreover, the existing body of influencer marketing research frequently adopts a narrow lens on particular industries, platforms, or geographic regions, with a predominant focus on the Western market. Platforms such as Instagram (Chung, et al., 2023) and TikTok (Barta, et al., 2023) known for their visually driven content, have garnered significant attention in this regard. However, there exists a notable gap in the literature regarding the exploration of commercially oriented blogs on WeChat. These blogs, characterized by their long-form written content, present a different context where influencers often refrain from featuring personal information. Instead, they rely on textual engagement, prompting readers to construct their own perceptions of the influencers' personas. This presents an intriguing departure from the more visually oriented platforms commonly studied in influencer marketing research. Consequently, this paper endeavours to delve into the strategies employed in the textual digital performance of these popular commercial blogs, offering insights into a less explored aspect of influencer marketing in the digital sphere.

Research on the dark side of digital performance has expanded in recent years, highlighting various negative aspects, particularly in the context of social media and online platforms. For example, previous research has been dedicated to how to gain attention from the audience (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Smith & Eileen, 2021), blogger strategies to maintain an audience (Hookway, 2008; Hughes, et al., 2019; Cascio, et al., 2023), and influencer marketing effectiveness (Gräve, 2019; Ye, et al., 2021; Wies, et al., 2023).

There is a notable gap in the literature when it comes to comprehensively examining the intricate micro-to-macro dynamics within the social media ecosystem, particularly in relation to the interactions between influencers, brands, readers, and their broader societal connections. Social media is a complex network where these groups interact in ways that are deeply interconnected, yet much of the existing research tends to treat them in isolation. For example, studies often focus on influencers as individual entities or audiences as passive consumers, without delving into how these groups influence and shape each other's behaviors and how these interactions are embedded within larger cultural, economic, and social frameworks.

In contrast, while significant attention has been given to understanding how to gain and maintain audience attention, the strategies used by influencers and bloggers to cultivate a loyal following, and the overall effectiveness of influencer marketing, there has been limited inquiry into the potentially harmful effects of these strategies. Influencers are frequently driven by metrics such as views, likes, and shares, which encourage a results-driven approach. This relentless focus on efficiency and outcomes can lead to the exploitation of both influencers and their audiences, fostering the development of the “dark side” of influencer marketing. This includes issues such as burnout, mental health challenges for influencers, and the manipulation of audiences through exaggerated or misleading content.

Moreover, little research has explored how brands, influencers, and their followers are all interconnected within a larger social and cultural context. Influencers often act as intermediaries between brands and consumers, shaping not only purchasing decisions but also broader cultural trends and societal values. The lack of comprehensive studies that account for these relationships limits our understanding of how the influencer economy operates at a macro level and how it might contribute to broader societal concerns such as consumerism, privacy, and mental health. Without more holistic research, we risk overlooking the

unintended consequences that arise from the ever-increasing commercialization of social media, leaving the “dark side” of influencer marketing and digital performance largely unaddressed.

My research seeks to address the gaps in existing literature by applying performance theory to analyze the commercialized digital performances of WeChat influencers, thus broadening the conventional use of performance theory within the context of digital media. The study delves into the intricate dynamics of commercially-driven blogs—long-form content specifically crafted by influencers to engage audiences on WeChat’s official accounts. In doing so, it provides a critical perspective on both the positive and negative outcomes of influencer marketing, going beyond superficial success metrics to explore the deeper implications of these digital performances.

Incorporating performance theory allows for a nuanced analysis of how influencers construct their online personas and manage audience engagement through narrative-building and interaction. This approach not only highlights the performative aspects of influencer marketing but also exposes the pressures, constraints, and ethical challenges that come with this form of commercialized content creation. By examining the darker side of these digital performances—such as emotional labor, brand overexposure, and potential alienation of audiences—the research seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how these dynamics affect influencers, brands, consumers, and society as a whole.

Furthermore, this study aims to provide insights into the evolving relationship between digital media, marketing strategies, and consumer behavior. In an era where traditional marketing methods are becoming less effective, the research explores how performance theory can explain the ways influencers adapt to changing market demands and audience expectations. By illuminating the broader societal and cultural impacts of influencer marketing on WeChat, the research aspires to contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of how digital platforms shape not only individual consumption patterns but also collective social and cultural practices. Ultimately, this analysis will enhance our knowledge of the complexities involved in the intersection of digital performance, marketing, and social influence, offering valuable contributions to both academic discourse and practical applications in the field of digital marketing.

## 1.4 Purpose statement and research questions

This qualitative study aimed to investigate the influencer marketing tactics employed by WeChat influencers to sustain an audience and attract marketers in terms of commercially oriented blogs. Targeted influencers are those who have successfully used strategies and tactics to increase customer engagement for commercial purposes. At the same time, I examine the participating marketers, how they choose influencers, and how they collaborate with influencers. In this process, particular attention will also be focused on examining the dark sides of WeChat influencer marketing.

The findings of this study will have practical implications for those working in the influencer marketing industry, including influencers as well as marketers and brands. The findings of this study shed light on the strategies and techniques that can be used to better engage consumers, helping marketers to understand more about Chinese social media marketing.

More specifically, I examine how popular influencers construct brands on WeChat blogs in a commercial way, how they present brand stories, how they interact with the audience and how they collaborate with marketers. The study also looks at commercially oriented blogs from the perspective of the marketer, as well as the negative aspects of the phenomenon.

This research investigates the strategies employed by WeChat influencers to maintain their popularity through the creation of promotional blogs that function as distinct performances, drawing upon performance theory as proposed by Goffman (1959), Turner (1986) and Schechner (1988). This study seeks to elucidate the dynamics of influencer-brand collaboration in the creation of commercial blogs that get acceptance and positive reception from their audience.

My overarching research question is as follows: *how do influencers use digital performances to link brands, marketers, and audiences together to obtain commercial goals?* I examine this question through twenty-eight in-depth interviews with 16 popular influencers and 13 marketers who used WeChat official account for promotions in China. In this qualitative, netnographic study, the final dataset holds a large quantity of textual data: field notes (66 single-spaced pages), blogs and reader comments (150 blogs and close to 10000 reader

comments), public media reports (97 single-space pages), and interview transcripts (297 single-spaced pages).

Drawing on performance theory, this study aims to address three main critical questions in our understanding of influencer marketing:

1. How do WeChat influencers attract not only readers but also marketers to their blogs, and how do they develop commercially oriented content that satisfies the expectations of both readers and marketers?
2. What factors do marketers consider when selecting influencers to collaborate with, and how do they evaluate the collaboration? Additionally, what insights can be offered into the process of working with an influencer?
3. What challenges or “dark sides” exist in influencer marketing, and how can they be illuminated?

## **1.5 Outline of the thesis**

This thesis is structured into eight chapters, each contributing to a comprehensive exploration of influencer marketing on WeChat official accounts.

Chapter 1, the introduction, begins with a personal background that inspired my involvement in this research area. It delineates the study’s objectives, identifies gaps in the literature, formulates research questions, and discusses the significance and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2 delves into a thorough review of the existing literature in the field. This chapter introduces the theoretical lens of performance theory and mentions the different areas of the literature that is reviewed in influencer marketing. It also offers insights into the background and context of brands, consumers, and consumption in previous studies. Special emphasis is placed on performance theory, providing a foundation for the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 details the methodological approach adopted for this study, encompassing participant recruitment, data collection, analysis procedures, and acknowledging the study’s limitations.

In Chapter 4, a comprehensive introduction to the research context is presented, focusing on economic / socio-cultural / regulatory environment in China; classified Internet personalities;

describing characteristics of the research subject and platform, as well as the forms of advertising and visual examples in commercially oriented blogs, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of influencer marketing on WeChat official accounts.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to presenting the findings derived from qualitative interviews and the analysis of social media content from WeChat official accounts. The analytical lenses of performance theory (Schechner, 2004), Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy, and the concept of impression management are applied to interpret the data, focusing on bloggers' strategies to build the audience and attract brand collaborations in their digital performance.

Chapter 6 shifts its focus to examine influencer marketing on WeChat official accounts from the perspective of marketers, exploring how they select influencers and evaluate marketing campaigns. This sheds light on the collaborative process involved in influencer collaborations.

Chapter 7 delves into the dark side of influencer marketing, examining the challenges and negative implications for influencers, brands, and society. Through a thorough examination of the viewpoints of three key stakeholders - influencers, brands, and audiences, as well as society as a whole - the research brings attention to ethical considerations and promotes the importance of responsible practices. The emphasis on increased awareness and regulation highlights the importance of addressing the potential adverse effects linked to influencer marketing.

The concluding Chapter 8 consolidates the empirical findings, providing a platform for discussion and reflection. Additionally, it outlines suggestions for future research based on the insights gained, contributing to the broader field of influencer marketing and its implications.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW



## 2.1 Introduction

The literature review chapter establishes the theoretical framework that underlies this thesis, laying a solid foundation for the subsequent discussions on the unique dynamics of communal consumption in the digital landscape.

The chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the consumer research and marketing literature on communal consumption including subcultures of consumption, brand communities, consumer tribes, brand publics, consumer collectives, networks of desire, and the consumer's role in stimulating such communal consumption in existing research.

Next, this chapter reviews and summarizes the literature on influencer marketing, analyzing the research trends and questions that scholars in this field have investigated, from defining influencer marketing to examining various issues and research trends.

Recognising the constraints inherent in the current classifications for understanding communal consumption and influencer marketing on WeChat blogs, the latter portion of the chapter presents an alternative theoretical framework aimed at comprehending the influence of consumers in fostering interests related to communal consumption.

Performance theory provides a distinct perspective for understanding community consumption on contemporary WeChat blogs and other comparable social media platforms. This alternate viewpoint offers a unique opportunity to examine how technology influences consumption, particularly in the setting where producing conventional branded content encounters growing difficulties in attracting customers' attention on the internet.

This study employs a performance perspective to advance our understanding of consumer behaviour in a digital world, particularly among expert consumers, and their role in fostering communal consumption. This entails an examination of various facets such as strategies employed in digital performance, the collaborative processes entailed therein, and the dynamics of engaged audiences. By adopting this approach, the research endeavours to offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between performance theory and communal consumption within the realm of influencer marketing.

## 2.2 Hybrid economy and communal consumption

The term “hybrid economy” refers to an economic phenomenon that integrates several overlapping logics of market-based commodity exchange, gift-giving, sharing, or other forms of interaction (Scaraboto, 2015; Jenkins, et al. 2013). With the progress of the Internet and digital technologies, the occurrence of the “hybrid economy” has become increasingly common, especially in relation to online activities associated to networks. Recent studies in consumer research and marketing have investigated the hybrid economy in various contexts including the sharing of downloaded music files (Giesler, 2008), a diverse running community (Thomas, et al., 2013), the cooperative network of geocaching (Scaraboto, 2015), and the communal consumption of cosplay (Seregina & Weijs, 2017). These studies commonly employ a market-level approach to investigate the development of a nascent market. Within the framework of this doctoral research, prominent influencers consistently generate commercially focused blogs on WeChat, combining market-based/ commercial logics and logics of gift-giving, sharing, reciprocity etc., thus establishing a hybrid economy.

Firstly, collaboration between influencers and brand marketers (sponsors) can be seen as a pure market-based exchange, a gift-giving relationship, or something in between. Typically, influencers accept an advertising fee from the brand marketer and offer brand-related blogs as a “commodity.” Compared to common market commodity exchange, the significant difference is that the buyers (brand marketers) need to take a certain risk to buy this “intangible” product since no one can guarantee the same (good) effect even if they paid the same money as the other buyers. According to Cocker et al. (2021), a gift-giving logic is also quite often visible in some brand sponsored activities while the marketers give free branded goods as gifts to the influential influencers and the influencers give some positive feedbacks in their blogs as a “return” gift for the sponsored brand. However, in some instances the influencer may accept the free gift but decide not to feature or recommend the brand in their blog content (Kozinets, et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the motivation of most brand marketers in sending “gifts” to the influencers follows the logic of mutuality and reciprocity (Mauss, 1950/1990).

Furthermore, the act of publicly sharing personal content (blogs) also entails certain principles of sharing and gift-giving between influencers and their audience. According to Benkler (2004) and Belk (2010), non-exchange-based sharing may be differentiated from

gift-giving and commodity exchange due to its nature as engaging in pro-social behaviour that is not reciprocated. In a communal manner, influencers willingly disseminated their articles online to others, establishing a connection between the influencer and their audience (Belk, 2010). This act does not necessitate a strict expectation of reciprocity, although a small number of readers may choose to provide monetary compensation to the influencer through the cash reward feature on WeChat. Based on the extend-self model proposed by Arnould and Rose (2016), the act of sharing consumers' everyday life experiences, particularly their purchasing habits, on blogs can be interpreted as a manifestation of the concept of extended-self as proposed by Belk (1988). When blogging is solely a means of expressing one's self-identity, it becomes challenging to categorise it as a form of mutuality or generalised exchange, as suggested by Arnould and Rose (2016). However, when blogging incorporates commercial aspects, influencers may view their blog as a "product" to attract more buyers, such as brand marketers, by amassing a larger audience to leverage their online influence. In this scenario, commercially oriented blogging shifts from being a mere "sharing" activity to adhering to the principles of reciprocity, which are fundamental arguments in the gift theory (Mauss 1950/1990).

Moreover, brand marketers that employ WeChat blogs as a means to advertise products or services also establish a non-direct reciprocal association inside their campaigns. Marketers remunerate influencers with monetary compensation or complimentary items (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), while the influencers provide captivating material pertaining to the advertised brands for their audience. Consequently, the audience undergoes a conversion process, becoming prospective purchasers who then purchase the branded goods shown on the influencers' blogs. This process ultimately generates profits for the marketers. Within the context of gift-giving, when marketers provide money or free products to influencers as a gift, the influencers repurpose the initial gift as blogs to transmit the essence of the blog as a secondary gift to their audience. Some of the audience may also embrace the spirit of the blog and be influenced by its content to purchase branded goods, thereby increasing the marketers' profits. This process creates a cyclical loop where the spirit of the gift is passed back to the original giver (brand marketers), resulting in the entire circle embracing the essence of the gift (Mauss 1950/1990). Influencers or the blogs serve as intermediaries, facilitating the connection between companies and their prospective clients. However, it is important to note that the entirety of this phenomena cannot be only understood as a process of gift-giving. This is because there is also a market-based exchange that can be observed in the interactions

between marketers and influencers, as well as between marketers and the audience, which may be considered a non-direct commodity transaction (Mardon, et al., 2023). Another prevalent scenario is influencers running giveaways, typically from marketers to readers who meet specific criteria set by the influencers. Each party involved in this process might potentially benefit from their own interests or financial gains. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge the involvement of brand marketers, influencers, and readers in supporting the circular economy. Furthermore, it is important to note that limited existing theory can fully elucidate the underlying logic in this scenario.

Several other considerations regarding the aforementioned hybrid economy also warrant further discussion. If all gifts are focusing on the interest of social but not utilitarian, what are their implications or consequences? According to Arnould and Rose (2016), free products offered by the brand to the influencer cannot be interpreted as gifts if the brand side wants to exchange something with the influencer. However, it is also not a pure market-based exchange since both the brand and the influencer try to create a kind of connection, even a social bond, with each other in many cases (McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips 2013; Arsel and Bean 2013). Another common strategy for collaborating with brands consists of the influencer delivering the branded products as gifts to the readers who fulfil the influencers' requirement (e.g., share the blog post and reach a certain number of likes) and most influencers try to use the opportunity to stimulate readers' engagement, further creating feelings of solidarity and bonding in the "imagined community" (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2008). While the "free gift" activity may resemble a gift-giving approach, it failed to generate mutual benefits within the community. This is primarily due to the fact that most readers are unable to connect with each other's accounts, as enforced by WeChat blogs. Additionally, influencers prioritise audience growth over community engagement, as highlighted by McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips (2013). Furthermore, only a limited number of selected members are able to receive the "gifts".

In addition, a notable point is both gift theory and the concept of sharing are related to a certain level of communal consumption. Considerable marketing research (e.g., Carrier 1991; Giesler 2006; Weinberger & Wallendorf 2012) conceptualized Mauss' (1950) original thinking of gift to a social system rather than as a dyadic process and Belk (2010) also pointed out that sharing is a communal act. Communal consumption is employed to explain diverse situations of consumers who share common consumption interests to construct

“distinctive, fragmentary, self-selected, and sometimes transient cultural world” (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 871). Extant research on communal consumption has previously focused on how brands facilitate communal interaction and the expression of collective identity (Cova, et al., 2007; Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001; Schau, et al., 2009; Thomas, et al., 2013). More recent research has emphasized how brands also enhance publicity, visibility, and other forms of sociality (e.g., Arvidsson & Caliandro 2016; Bardhi & Eckhardt 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt 2017; Kozinets et al. 2010; McQuarrie, et al., 2013). This stream of work suggests a changing focus from a brand’s “linking value” (Cova & Barès, 2024) to its “publicity value” (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) and argues that consumer assemblies are motivated not only by the desire for interaction but also by the desire for visibility and other forms of sociality. Also, different types of communal consumption do not necessarily contain the logic of gift-giving or sharing such as access-based consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012).

The above analysis of the hybrid economy and its relation to communal consumption on WeChat blogs or other similar social media platforms triggers some questions unanswered by previous research: How does brand-related communal consumption come about and continue to thrive in the hybrid economy, where various modes of exchange exist simultaneously? what is the role of influential consumers (e.g., popular influencers) in shaping and sustaining brand-related communal consumption in hybrid economies; how can we best understand the complicated relationship among brands, influencers, and the audience in brand-related communal consumption?

As a result, the sequence of the discussion of the different types of communal consumption in this section will be as follows: I will first discuss subcultures of consumption and brand community; consumer tribes and brand publics; consumer collectives and networks of desire. This then leads into a discussion of the limitations of existing research in understanding brand-related communal consumption forms.

### **2.2.1 Subcultures of consumption and brand community**

Schouten and McAlexander (1995) defined a subculture of consumption as a distinctive subgroup identified with certain objects or consumption activities based on a shared ethos, or a set of common values. From lesbians (Weston, 1993), gays (Kates, 2002) to Harley Davidson riders (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), mountain men (Belk & Costa, 1998) and

many others, subcultures of consumption are often related to marginality, outside the dominant mainstream culture. The rise of social media has expanded and democratized subculture (Douglas, 2016), and a good example is China's dominant social media WeChat where considerable influencers themselves are the members of certain subgroups and write blogs related to their own subcultural consumption experience. This is a unique opportunity to examine how technology shapes consumption (Kozinets, et al., 2016). However, subcultures of consumption can not explain the phenomenon that WeChat bloggers do not operate within one subculture but instead operate in multiple domains.

Subcultures of consumption resemble consumption constellations found within specific social categories (outside of the mainstream culture). While brand communities often emphasize that subcultures of consumption do not typically revolve around a brand, a brand may be part of the constellation that constitutes a subculture. In contrast, a brand community primarily centers around the brand itself. Muñiz Jr. and O'Guinn (2001) found that a brand community is based on a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility and a shared understanding of identity without the limitation of geography. Members of this community are all the admirers of one focal brand (Muñiz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001). Further research began to focus on how brand community could create value for firms both online (De Vries, et al., 2012) and offline (McAlexander, et al., 2002, Schau, et al., 2009). Prior research has found that consumption in brand communities is sustained and characterized by high levels of brand loyalty, attachment, and identification with the brand (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Studies of marketplace cultures (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) focus on the significant roles of brand managers or firms in subcultures and brand communities to enhance the benefits of communal consumption. Clearly, brand community cannot explain consumption communities that are not based on singular brands while the consumer-brand relationship is more ephemeral and looser without the control of cultural capital (Goulding, et al., 2013).

McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) analysed three types of key relationships of brand community as highlighted in Figure 1. The first type is the traditional customer-brand community, the second type is a customer–customer–brand triad as Muñiz Jr. and O'Guinn (2001) conceptualized for a brand community. McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) highlight the third type of brand community as a customer-centric model in the relationship and argue that meaning and value are derived from customer experience rather than in the

brand around which that experience revolves.

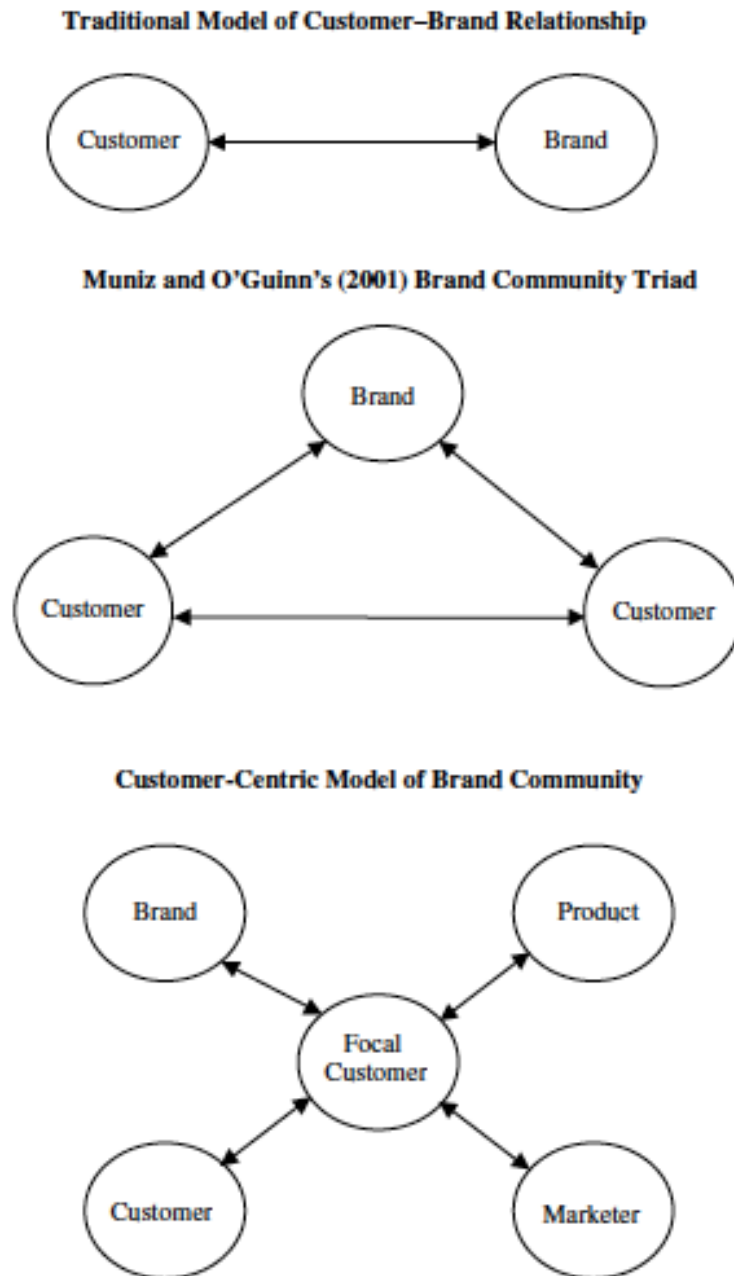


Figure 1 Key relationships of brand community (McAlexander, et al., 2002)

The viewpoint presented by McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) in the customer-centric model of brand community is connected to another area of study aimed at comprehending consumer behaviour across extended social networks, known as online word-of-mouth marketing (eWOMM) (Kannan, 2017). Studies on online word-of-mouth marketing have created theoretical frameworks to comprehend how various communication methods

influence collective consumption and spark interests associated to consumption. Kozinets et al. (2010) categorized three co-existing WOM models with each model corresponding to different circumstances. WOM in the Organic Interconsumer Influence Model occurs naturally among consumers to consumers for the desire to help or to warn each other towards market products or services they have experienced online or offline. The Linear Marketer Influence Model focuses on the important role of particularly influential consumers in the WOM process, and these “opinion leaders” were assumed to transmit marketing messages to other consumers in a more credible and convincing way. The Network Coproduction Model is developed in the digital age, and focuses on the role of consumer networks, groups, and communities to coproduce communications, the key difference with the above two models is that communications are exchanged among members in a network as opposed to in a unidirectional way (Kozinets, et al., 2010).

Kozinets et al. (2010) found that when commercial material on blogs adheres to the influencer’s communication style and effectively balances the commercial and communal sides of spreading marketing messages, it can lead to positive responses from community members towards the marketing message. It is of paramount importance to ensure that the commercial content showcased on blogs is in accordance with the subject matter of the site and complies with communal norms and expectations.

The conventionalization and formation of communal norms on the WeChat blog are significantly influenced by the presenting style or genre that each WeChat influencer has developed over time. In contrast to the blogs investigated in the study conducted by Kozinets et al., (2010), which are available to the public, WeChat blogs function on a semi-public model, where influencers closely observe the comments posted by subscribers. According to Riegner (2007), blogs function as a medium for interpersonal communication, facilitating clients in improving their purchase choices. The architectural design of WeChat poses obstacles to the facilitation of interaction among influencers and readers, as well as among readers themselves. However, our comprehension of the impact of this partially contained system on communal consumption remains constrained.

### **2.2.2 Consumer tribes and brand public**

Given the evolving market, it is imperative for marketing theory to adapt accordingly. In the



digital era, particularly with the rise of various social media platforms, consumers now have more access to mobile networks. As a result, marketing theory has increasingly started to emphasise non-community types of connecting value. One such concept is the concept of consumer tribes. The concept of Consumer Tribes has a lesser degree of rigidity compared to the anthropological definition of “tribes”, and it is closely intertwined with culture and consumerism. According to Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar (2007), they not only generate tangible products but also foster a participatory culture that has the potential to provide brand owners with valuable information. Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar (2007) find consumer tribes may be characterised as distinct groups of consumers that exhibit a tendency to consume goods and services in a manner that deviates from standard consumer behaviour. These tribes include their own lifestyles and even modify the products and services to align with their own circumstances. Consumers can be part of numerous tiny tribes and have the ability to transition between these tribes in order to assume various roles and uphold multiple identities in different situations (Cova, et al., 2007). A notable distinction between consumer tribes and subcultures of consumption and brand communities lies in the fact that tribes seldom exert a dominant influence on consumers’ lives and frequently lack commercial connotations (Cova, 1997; Cova & Cova, 2002; Cova, et al., 2007; Goulding, et al., 2013). Therefore, individuals inside consumer tribes possess greater autonomy and exhibit a wide range of identities. They have a role in shaping the rules to some extent, rather than just adhering to shared norms or a collective identity.

One further distinction lies in the fact that consumer tribes are founded upon a collective passion or emotion (Cova & Cova, 2002), rendering them frequently characterised by instability and variability. Membership in certain subcultures or brand communities tends to be more enduring and focused on either shared activities or brand-related activities. On the other hand, consumer tribes prioritise the ecological contact and the value it brings, rather than economic behaviours, in order to attain self-realization (Maffesoli, 2002). The concept of customer tribes has the potential to comprehend various forms of influencer marketing on social media platforms. For instance, on the YouTube platform, various individuals can get pleasure from and subscribe to their preferred channels based on their own passions and interests, akin to several distinct consumer communities in the digital realm. WeChat attracts subscribers and brands/ marketers by allowing influencers to generate diverse content across numerous categories including food, health, fashion, travel, entertainment, art, movies, and

personal relationships. Nevertheless, there has been limited investigation into the relationship between consumer tribes and brands.

A contemporary and innovative notion of communal consumption is the concept of brand public. Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) employed the notion of brand public to delineate a structured media environment characterised by the utilisation of hashtags or other mediation mechanisms to disseminate or feign a shared emphasis among several disparate expressions, with the aim of enhancing visibility and generating publicity. Consumer-brand connections on social media platforms, particularly Twitter, are less organised and more open to conversation. The concept of brand public highlights the transition from a brand's "linking value" to its "publicity value" (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Brand public enhances brand visibility and does not necessitate cohesive communication to express an identity. The brand community is a response to a consumer culture that is fragmented, whereas the brand public plays a crucial role in the consumer society that is focused on publicity. Furthermore, the concept of brand public is a novel form of Word-of-Mouth Marketing, because the focal point is not a specific customer, but rather a brand. According to Weiner (1976), when we perceive each phrase or picture that is shared as a gift for the brand, it may be inferred that the brand public is also engaging in a reciprocal process of gift-giving and sharing. Another term used to describe groups of consumers who share common interests related to certain products, brands, or lifestyles is consumer collectives.

### **2.2.3 Consumer collectives**

Different from consumer tribes, consumer collectives can encompass broader segments of the population that have similar preferences or behaviours. Arnould, Arvidsson and Eckhardt (2021) characterize consumer collectives as "social relationship networks that emerge in connection with consumer goods, brands, various commercial symbols, and digital platforms" (2021, 415).

Consumer collectives refer to communities or collections of persons who are brought together by shared interests, preferences, behaviours or activities related to consumption. These collectives are evident in both virtual and physical environments, fostering a strong sense of community and collective identity among its participants. In many instances, consumer collectives actively participate in conversations, exchange information, and collaborate towards shared interests. The range of interests might encompass different brands, products,

and lifestyles, as well as specific consumption patterns, leading to a dynamic environment characterized by collective engagement and interaction. Consumer groups may take on several forms, ranging from online fan communities centred on a certain brand to local assemblies centred around a particular way of life. The proliferation of online consumer collectives has been facilitated by the emergence of social media and digital platforms. These collectives have gained substantial traction and exert significant influence in shaping consumer behaviour, forecasting trends, and providing a platform for individuals to express their preferences and opinions within a community of individuals who share similar interests (Arnould, et al., 2021; Mardon, et al., 2023).

Current scholarly investigations have delved into the intricate dynamics of roles within consumer collectives, placing particular focus on the concept of embedded entrepreneurship. Embedded entrepreneurship refers to the practice of entrepreneurial activities within existing organizations or contexts, rather than initiating completely new ventures (Mardon, et al., 2023). The examination of how individuals, namely social media influencers, handle and harmonise their obligations within these communities has garnered significant attention (Mardon, et al., 2023). The study conducted by Mardon, Cocker, and Daunt in 2023 enhances our comprehension of the opposition to embedded entrepreneurship in consumer collectives, elucidating its potential to reduce advantages for those who are not involved in entrepreneurship. This research examines the dynamics of embeddedness negotiation and disempowerment, demonstrating a two-fold process wherein efforts to disembed are met with a defensive re-embedding through the negotiation of roles. The process of role negotiation, which is driven by the affordances of social media platforms, demonstrates how these platforms create power relations and limit the voice-based power of individuals who are not entrepreneurial in nature. Additionally, Mardon, Cocker, and Daunt (2023) emphasise the impact of embedded entrepreneurship on the development of consumer collectives. This demonstrates the manner in which the acts of embedded entrepreneurs have the ability to alter the collective's attention, patterns of communication, and the formation of brand communities that are interconnected. Motivations for departing from consumer collectives and the emergence of oppositional collectives are influenced by dysfunctional role dynamics. This study closes by highlighting the implications for social media influencers (SMIs) as embedded entrepreneurs, providing a comprehensive understanding of the constraints and

adverse outcomes associated with the embeddedness of social media influencers for both the influencers themselves and their followers.

In summary, research on consumer collectives has made substantial advancements, including several subjects like the formation of virtual communities, their impact on offline conduct, and the intricate dynamics of roles and power hierarchies within these influential social groups. In contrast to brand communities, brand publics, and brand tribes, consumer collectives possess unique characteristics. A brand community refers to a distinct form of consumer collective that centres around a specific brand, whereas consumer collectives comprise a wider range of social groupings associated with other facets of consumption. The concept of brand public focuses on the connection between individuals and a particular brand, whereas consumer collectives have a wider range of behaviours associated with consuming activities that extend beyond individual brand associations. Consumer tribes place significant emphasis on universal ideals and lifestyles that transcend just consumer preferences, therefore cultivating a profound feeling of cultural identity. In contrast, consumer collectives exhibit a more expansive scope, incorporating diverse groupings that are established based on common consumer interests, without necessarily assuming a shared lifestyle or identity beyond consuming activities.

#### **2.2.4 Networks of desire**

The concept of networks of desire is a contemporary synthesis of the aforementioned phenomenon pertaining to community consumption (Kozinets, et al., 2017). The idea of consumer wants and desires holds significant importance in the field of marketing research, as it helps to comprehend consuming behaviour across various historical periods and cultural contexts (Lyotard, 1974; Belk, et al., 2000, 2003; Kozinets, et al., 2017). Prior studies on desire have used an individual-centric viewpoint, highlighting desire as a goal-driven and feasible endeavour aimed at addressing personal deficiencies (Belk, et al., 2003; Knott & Molesworth, 2013). Recent studies have brought attention to the concept of networked desire in the context of the digital era. This phenomenon is characterised by interest-driven behaviour that aims to enhance consumers' capacity for productivity, creativity, publicity, and consumption (Kozinets, et al., 2017; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). This body of research indicates a shift in emphasis from the utilitarian worth of want to its potential value, as well as a transition from perceiving desire as an individual consumer's physical cognition

to perceiving it as a communal manifestation of intangible cognition. Kozinets, Patterson and Ashman (2017, p667) defined “networks of desire” as intricate and interconnected systems consisting of technologies, consumers, fervent passion, and virtual and physical objects. These networks function as a desiring-machine, generating interest in consumption within the broader social system and among the interconnected actors. Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman (2017) refer to this comprehensive system of assemblage as a “desiring-machine”, which serves as a mechanism for amplifying consumer desires within a network. The concept of networked desire underscores the influence of technology on consumer desires and the role of diverse communication forms, including visual-based communication, in shaping communication content and communal practices (Kozinets, 2010; Kozinets, et al., 2010). While “networks of desire” have the potential to enhance existing research on online consumption, it is important to note that this idea is comprehensive and requires more investigation into more specific and diverse phenomena (Kozinets, et al., 2017). For instance, the concept of networks of desire is grounded in assemblage theory, which aims to elucidate the interconnectedness between desiring machines and communal consumption interests. However, this perspective fails to consider the significance and values associated with networks of desire within the context of an exchange process, particularly in relation to the role of online communication in facilitating the connection between desire and consumption.

In essence, the notion of a network of desire pertains to a theoretical construct that explores the interrelatedness of human desires, sometimes situated within a wider social or cultural framework. In contrast, consumer collectives refer to tangible aggregates of persons who possess similar interests in certain consumer-related activities, hence emphasising the communal aspects of shared preferences in consuming. The notion of a network of desire in the realm of WeChat influencer marketing refers to the interconnectedness of consumers’ desires and preferences inside the platform’s ecological framework. On the WeChat platform, influencers frequently assume a crucial role in defining and exerting influence on these desires through the promotion of products and services to their followers. As influencers share content and recommendations, they contribute to the formation of a network where individual desires are intertwined and influenced by the collective preferences of the community.

## 2.3 Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing represents a dynamic facet of social media marketing, wherein companies engage individuals to promote their products and services through personalized endorsements on various social media platforms, essentially leveraging word-of-mouth (WOM) strategies (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). The evolution of influencer marketing into a predominant strategy in contemporary marketing is evident in its substantial market growth. From a relatively modest valuation of \$1.7 billion in 2016, the influencer marketing sector has witnessed a remarkable surge, reaching a market size of \$9.7 billion in 2020 (Vrontis, et al., 2021). This growth trajectory underscores the increasing recognition of influencers as key opinion leaders who wield significant influence over consumer perceptions and purchasing behaviour in the digital age (Smith & Smith 2019). Moreover, the rise of influencer marketing reflects broader shifts in consumer behaviour, characterized by a growing reliance on peer recommendations and social validation in making purchasing decisions (Lin, et al., 2019). As such, influencer marketing has emerged as a strategic imperative for companies seeking to enhance brand visibility, engage target audiences authentically, and drive conversion rates in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

This section of the literature review endeavours to offer a comprehensive examination of existing scholarship and research relating to influencer marketing, with a focus on its conceptualization, evolution, mechanisms, and impacts (including its dark side). By delving into the current body of literature, this review seeks to pinpoint potential gaps in the current understanding of influencer marketing. This exploration encompasses a wide array of facets, including the definition and emergence of influencers, various influencer strategies, the efficacy of influencer marketing, the influencers' role in brand promotion, and the evolving dynamics among influencers, brands, and their audience. Through the analysis of these aspects, this review aims to contribute to a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in the influencer marketing landscape.

### 2.3.1 The definition, rise and category of Influencer

In order to have a thorough understanding of influencer marketing, it is crucial to explore the fundamental concept of "influencer". An influencer is a person who has the ability to influence the ideas, actions, and buying choices of a certain group of people, typically having a significant number of followers on social media platforms (Kozinets, et al., 2023). The

emergence and growth of influencers may be ascribed to their capacity to foster a devoted and actively involved audience, therefore establishing themselves as authoritative and influential figures within their specific field.

An influencer here refers to a person who posts information regarding certain products and services to social media in exchange for compensation from brands (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Influencers share content on social media platforms, which vary depending on the country context. For instance, Instagram, Tik Tok and Facebook are the most popular platforms in western developed countries (Geysler, 2023) and Tencent's WeChat, Douyin (Chinese Tik Tok), Xiaohongshu (Red) are the most widely used platforms in China (Statista 2023). Companies normally compensate influencers with money or with free sample products and services.

The rise of influencers is closely linked to shifts in consumer behaviour and shape our consumption (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Initially, individuals allocate a greater amount of time to social media platforms and progressively transition their media consumption from print to online media. Furthermore, consumers exhibit varying responses to internet advertising and exhibit a preference for advertising strategies that are more subtle, less conspicuous, and more genuine (Kozinets, et al., 2023). Social media platforms serve as communal spaces where users may freely create material connected to products and receive immediate feedback. Through iterative testing of audience preferences, several social media users have emerged as talented individuals capable of producing more captivating material than the advertising efforts of companies. These many factors compel companies to engage in collaborations with talented social media users in order to capitalise on their word-of-mouth (WOM) talents and establish strong connections with the target audience.

Due to the nature of social media, every social media user could potentially become an influencer. Thus, the number of influencers is rapidly expanding across different product categories and any topics as long as there is a consumer audience. Campbell and Farrell (2020) categorize influencers into five types which are celebrity influencers, mega influencers, macro influencers, micro influencers, and nano influencers, as the Figure below shows. However, as the Figure highlights, as an influencer's number of followers increases, (moving from nano-influencer to celebrity influencer), the perceived accessibility and

authenticity of the influencer decreases. On the other hand, the perceived expertise and cultural capital of the influencer increases.

Nano-influencers refer to persons who are in the nascent phases of their influencer trajectories, with their following base mostly comprising of friends and members of the local community. Nano-influencers frequently provide their followers with more personal involvement and a perceived feeling of genuineness. Additionally, they claim to have a better rate of engagement with their audience. Nano-influencers provide promising prospects for brand collaborations, offering a cost-effective and efficient method (i.e., through unpaid partnerships) to effectively engage with specific target demographics and cultivate brand allegiance. Conversely, celebrity influencers, enjoying widespread public recognition and a substantial follower base (i.e., exceeding 1 million followers), often exhibit lower levels of personal accessibility and perceived authenticity. However, companies can leverage their elevated cultural capital and perceived expertise to appeal to consumers. These factors contribute significantly to why celebrity influencers typically command higher compensation.

**Types of social media influencers**

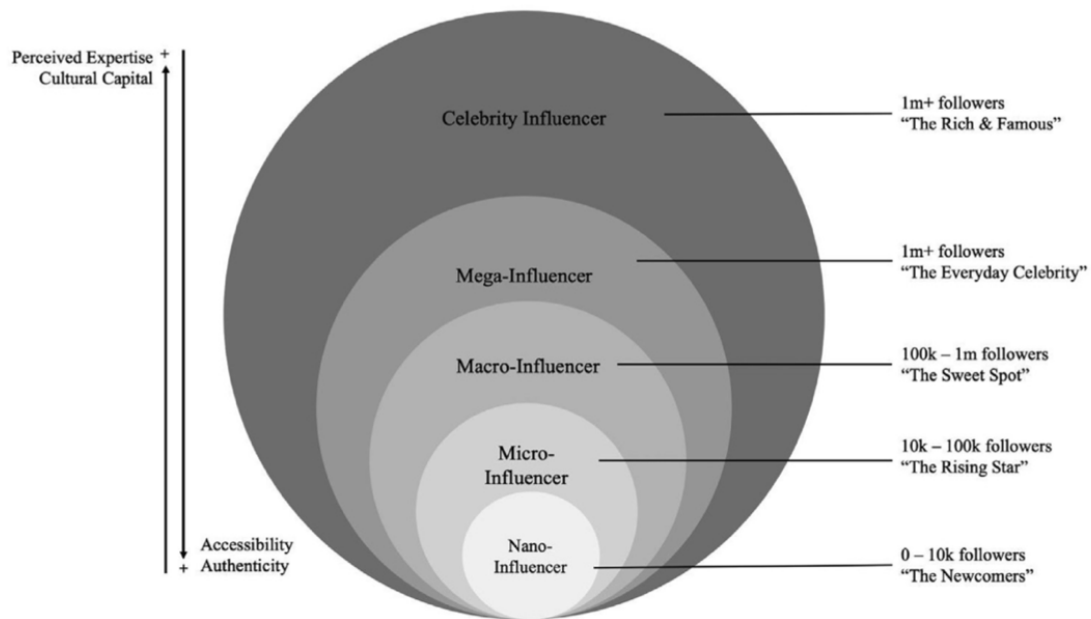


Figure 2 Types of social media influencers (Source: Campbell & Farrell, 2020)



## **2.3.2 Current literature on influencer marketing**

### **2.3.2.1 Influencer marketing development**

In recent years, influencer marketing has emerged as a prominent area within the field of marketing, leading to a surge in research interest and scholarly contributions only over the past decade. Within the realm of consumer culture theory (CCT), influencer marketing is frequently examined and elucidated through theories stemming from sociology, cultural studies, and communication studies, including word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, feminism, and cultural capital. The subsequent section will offer a detailed analysis of several notable CCT studies on influencer marketing. Furthermore, this review will identify the limitations and gaps present in the current literature, providing avenues for future research and scholarly inquiry.

The work by Kozinets et al. (2010) represents an early contribution to consumer culture theory (CCT) research on influencer marketing. Expanding upon existing Word-of-Mouth (WOM) and eWOM theories, the study investigates how WOM marketing operates within online communities. Through an analysis of a social media marketing campaign involving the introduction of new camera-equipped mobile phones (“MobiTech3839”) seeded with influential bloggers, the researchers track 83 blogs over six months to discern social media communication strategies. The study identifies four primary social media strategies—evaluation, embracing, endorsement, and explanation—categorized based on interpersonal orientation (individualistic vs. communal) and commercial cultural tensions (implicit vs. explicit disclosure of WOM marketing campaigns). Each strategy is shaped by character narratives, communication forums, communal norms, and the nature of marketing promotion. By examining reader comments and responses, Kozinets et al. (2010) suggest that successful WOM marketing messages in a networked world should align with the communicator’s character narratives, media context, and community norms, while effectively addressing commercial-communal tensions or offering compelling reasons for individualistic orientation. This research offers valuable pragmatic implications for marketers and influencers seeking to leverage WOM, as well as scholars seeking to understand WOM dynamics in online communities.

### **2.3.2.2 The intersection of performance theory and influencer marketing research**

Goffman’s theories of self-presentation and impression management are also frequently utilized in the study of online marketing (Levesque, et al., 2023). Schau and Gilly (2003)

investigate the process by which consumers shape their identities through personal websites, utilising theories of self-presentation and possessions within computer-mediated environments (CMEs). This study examines the reasons for consumers' creation of websites, the messages they intend to communicate, and the variations in their digital self-presentation methods compared to real-life ones. It provides insights into the formation of digital identities and the restructuring of narrative frameworks. However, this study primarily focuses on the identity presentation of individuals who create their own websites, without the commercial factors involved in digital performance, such as collaborations with brands. Chen (2010) employs Goffman's (1959) theoretical framework and operationalized impression management tactics to analyse the most popular blogs authored by Taiwanese and American bloggers. The study reveals that Taiwanese bloggers tended to emphasize social relations, whereas American bloggers exhibited greater openness about themselves, reflecting cultural differences between the two groups. While this study also applies performance theory, it does not elaborate on the digital performance of bloggers in collaboration with brands in commercial contexts. The study by Audrezet et al. (2020) indicates that influencers often employ two authenticity strategies, passionate and transparent, when engaging in self-presentation for commercial purposes. Depending on how the influencer utilizes passion and transparency, four paths can emerge: absolute authenticity (being completely genuine, truthful, and sincere without any form of deception or manipulation), fairytale authenticity (a form of authenticity that is idealized or romanticized, resembling the authenticity found in fairytales or fictional narratives), disembodied authenticity (the authenticity of digital or virtual experiences, where the sense of presence or embodiment may be lacking), and fake authenticity (the authenticity that is simulated or artificially constructed, often for the purpose of deception or manipulation). The study also suggests exploring different social media platforms to validate their research findings further. Pounders, Kowalczyk and Stowers (2016) investigate the motivations driving selfie-posting behaviour among female millennials on social media, revealing impression management as a key factor in projecting a positive self-image. Findings suggest a desire for validation through likes and comments, influencing both self-esteem and selfie-posting behaviour, while highlighting the potential risks of negative self-appraisal in the absence of positive feedback.

McQuarrie et al. (2012) creatively apply sociological theory to introduce the "megaphone effect": it refers to the amplification and dissemination of messages or content through influential individuals or channels, often resulting in a broader reach and increased visibility

in marketing. Focusing on the strategies employed by fashion bloggers to attract and retain audiences, the article employs theories of taste judgments, cultural capital (informed by Bourdieu), and the dramaturgical metaphor (drawing from Goffman). The study illustrates how fashion bloggers cultivate audience engagement by publicly displaying their tastes and maintain audience loyalty through strategic self-deprecation and the portrayal of relatable characteristics. By presenting themselves as ordinary individuals with flaws and imperfections, bloggers enhance their cultural capital, subsequently translating this into economic gains. Although McQuarrie et al. (2012) mentioned some strategies of digital impression management for economic accumulation, these strategies are somewhat one-sided and not systematic enough. Moreover, in different contexts such as WeChat blogs, WeChat influencers even employ opposite strategies to achieve economic gains. Therefore, my research will further verify and explore from different perspectives to understand why influencers engage in impression management in digital performance and delve into their various strategies from multiple angles.

In the realm of social media marketing research, connections can also be drawn between the performance of sympathy and concepts such as emotional labor or affective labor (Hochschild, 1983). According to Diefendorff and Gosserand (2003), emotional labour is the active observation and self-control of emotions that are authentically experienced rather than merely exhibited. Hence, emotional labour encompasses more than simply handling emotions to meet client demands, but rather entails the control and authentic encounter of emotions for the purpose of financial profit (Mardon, et al., 2018). Raun (2018) finds micro-celebrities are tasked with undertaking diverse forms of labor, many of which demand significant time and energy investment without necessarily yielding economic returns. Signaling accessibility, availability, presence, and connectedness, alongside authenticity, is crucial for micro-celebrities, all of which presume and hinge on some level of intimacy. This research aims to delve into the distinction between WeChat influencer marketing and the concepts mentioned, particularly focusing on emotional labor, authenticity, and sympathy within the realm of social media marketing research. Through the lens of performance theory, this study seeks to elucidate how these elements shape WeChat influencer marketing strategies and distinguish them from other marketing practices in the digital sphere.

### 2.3.2.3 Brand-influencer collaborations in influencer marketing

Scholars are increasingly focusing their attention on investigating brand collaborations within the realm of social media platforms. In the process of collaboration between influencers and brands, many studies focus on the strategies employed by influencers and marketers to make marketing efforts more successful. Cascio et al (2023) examine the influence of sensory language on consumer reactions to influencer-endorsed content using a comprehensive methodology that integrates experimental techniques and automated analysis of sponsored social media postings. The research demonstrates that these effects are influenced by the perception of perceived authenticity. Although this study does not directly apply or draw from performance theory, it contributes to the strategies employed in digital performance through text, which can later be compared with the textual strategies in WeChat blogs.

Nascimento and Suarez (2020) conducted a five-year netnography, to explore the evolving forms of endorsement connecting digital influencers and brands, outlining three relationship forms—experimenting, partnering, and bonding—across influencers’ career cycles. The paper contends that brands serve various roles, such as providers, partners, and hirers, supporting and rewarding influencers’ entrepreneurial journeys. The findings of this study will also be juxtaposed with diverse forms of brand collaborations analysed during partnerships between WeChat influencers and marketers. This comparison carries notable practical implications for the precise execution of influencer marketing strategies.

Qian and Park (2021) indicate that when consumers perceive a lack of compatibility between an influencer and a luxury brand being endorsed, it results in dissatisfaction with the endorsement and a weakening of the brand. Consequently, this has a negative impact on consumers’ intentions to purchase the brand and their willingness to engage in word-of-mouth activities associated with the endorsement.

Through the integration of secondary data pertaining to influencer marketing initiatives on Instagram and an online poll conducted among marketers, Thomas and Taheran (2024) show that influencers collaborating with lower-status influencers are perceived as less self-serving and more altruistic, while those collaborating with lower-status brands are perceived as less self-serving, indicating that engaging in collaborations with either lower-status influencers or brands can improve how influencers are perceived by consumers, highlighting the potential for influencers to influence consumer perceptions through engagement with non-followers

such as other influencers and traditional brands. Tian, Dew and Iyengar (2023) indicate that midtier (typically ranging from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of followers) influencers may be optimal partners for many campaigns, influenced by campaign content. However, this study includes a focus solely on influencer popularity and single-influencer collaborations, with challenges in accessing content and interpreting representations. While the above study focuses on collaborations between influencers and brands on image-based platform Instagram or video-based platform Tiktok, the collaborations between WeChat influencers and brands on the text-based platform WeChat official account, I will explore similar questions in collaborations on WeChat as well.

#### **2.3.2.4 Influencer marketing effectiveness / evaluation**

One of the key concerns among scholars has been how to better utilize influencer marketing or assess its effectiveness, which represents one of the most meaningful areas of research for practical guidance.

The findings of the Leung et al. (2022)'s study indicate that the efficacy of influencers is favourably influenced by factors such as their creativity, following number, and sponsor salience. Conversely, postings that announce new product releases have a negative impact. This study reveals that factors such as influencer activity, follower-brand fit, and post positivity have a moderating effect on effectiveness, following an inverted U-shaped pattern. The results of this study suggest that achieving success in this context requires a balanced approach across various dimensions. Janssen, Schouten and Croes (2022) further revealed that the impact of influencer endorsements is determined by the fit between the influencer and the product, as well as the number of followers. Endorsements from influencers with a large number of followers lead to more favourable attitudes and intentions to make a purchase. However, this effect is dependent on the alignment with the influencer's personal brand image and is influenced by the perceived credibility and identification of the endorsement. One of the questions we are investigating is whether brands also seek such a "fit" when collaborating with WeChat influencers.

Excessive activity seems to result in an overwhelming amount of information. Park and his colleagues (2021) challenge the conventional marketing view by showing the effectiveness of product endorsements by micro-influencers over mega-influencers, highlighting the need to consider distinct strategic purposes for each influencer type. They reveal the mediating role

of brand authenticity, demonstrating how perceptions of influencer authenticity can influence brand perceptions through endorsements, supporting the cultural meaning transfer model. However, Wies and Edeling (2023) find higher influencer follower counts initially boost engagement but eventually diminish it due to weakened relationships, with content customization and lower brand familiarity moderating this effect by signalling influencers' emphasis on follower relationships. Gräve (2019) reveals that professionals predominantly depend on the reach and quantity of interactions as key indicators of success for social media influencers (SMIs). When faced with the need to make trade-offs among several indicators, these professionals mostly depend on comment sentiment, suggesting their tacit recognition of the insufficiency of regularly employed metrics. Chapter six of this dissertation also delves into how marketers select influencers and evaluate WeChat campaign effectiveness. It aims to contribute insights and recommendations to real-world marketing practices for marketers by joining these discussions.

### **2.3.3 The dark side of influencer marketing**

Over the past few years, influencer marketing has experienced rapid and significant expansion, establishing itself as a prominent and influential factor in contemporary marketing (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). More recently, studies have begun to consider the dark side of influencer. This section of the literature review provides a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of study findings related to the adverse consequences linked to influencer marketing. It encompasses a wide range of dimensions, problems, and ethical considerations.

#### **2.3.3.1 The challenges of being an influencer**

##### **2.3.3.1.1 Facing negative comments or anti-fans**

Research on dealing with critical/ negative comments from followers or anti-fans (trolling, abusive messages) and how influencers cope or deal with such criticism and hostility has also emerged.

Liew (2019) delves into the phenomenon of anti-fandom surrounding Xiaxue, a Singaporean social media influencer, revealing insights into contemporary social dynamics driven by moral considerations related to her self-presentation and celebrity status. Meanwhile, Abidin (2019) explores influencers' intricate roles in cyberbullying, highlighting their active engagement with followers and navigation of cyberbullying experiences through various narratives. Mardon, Cocker and Daunt (2023) showed anti-fan behaviours in separate online

forums significantly impact SMIs' reputation and commercial success, potentially causing reputational damage and revenue loss. Duffy, Miltner, and Wahlstedt (2022) delve into the Get Off My Internets (GOMI) online and find participants are frustrated with influencers profiting from unrealistic depictions of femininity, arguing they perpetuate unattainable standards and repressiveness. However, finding nuanced solutions in the complex social media landscape faces challenges due to entrenched perspectives.

WeChat influencers also encounter similar situations such as cyber bullying, online abuse or being attacked by anti-fans. However, WeChat official account platform is semi-closed. All reader comments on WeChat blogs are only displayed publicly if selected by the author. We have limited understanding of the negative attacks on semi-closed social platforms like WeChat official account where authors have complete and absolute control.

#### 2.3.4.1.2 The pressure and constraints of platform algorithms

The existing research on influencer marketing extensively covers the various challenges faced by influencers, including the impacts of platform changes, algorithmic adjustments, and strategies employed to navigate these obstacles.

Ashman, Patterson, and Brown (2018) identify the interplay of competition dynamics, creativity mechanisms, and self-technologies leading to a "cruel optimism" among influencers, the traffic push mechanism encourages bloggers to try various methods to engage readers and encourage them to share their posts, negatively affecting their well-being. Glatt (2021) argues that platform-based creative workers epitomize heightened neoliberal labor subjects, confronting increased precarity. Content creators grapple with stress, uncertainty, and burnout amid rapid industry evolution, managing precarity by continuously producing content across platforms to mitigate failure risks. That is why Goode et al. (2023) investigate "Finstagramming" as a resistance tactic against Instagrams restrictive algorithms. In another research, O'Meara (2019) finds influencers vulnerable to algorithmic management, impacting their visibility and work conditions. Despite entrepreneurial goals, engagement pods foster solidarity among precarious workers, contributing to alternative economies in cultural production. Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) analysed Chilean content creators' interpretative narratives, highlighting their roles as cultural producers driven by both internal and external commercial motives. The economic pressure exhausts the bloggers. However, these studies indicate that the pressures on influencers are largely caused by platforms, representing

external pressures. We have limited understanding of the internal pressures and dark side experienced by influencers. My research aims to bridge the gap between internal and external pressures, examining how influencers experience breakdowns and frustrations in their work process, and even how they may contemplate giving up their blogging careers.

Duffy and Meisner (2023) critique the idealized portrayal of the creator economy on social media, emphasizing systemic inequalities and exploitation. They examine how platform visibility, regulation, and governance shape creators' experiences and creative processes, with marginalized creators facing inconsistent visibility and unfair punitive measures. Duffy et al. (2021) explore the unpredictability and precarity inherent in the platformized creative economy, revealing power imbalances within systems of platform capitalism. Bishop (2018) asserts that YouTube's algorithmic practices contribute to class and gender stratification on the platform, penalizing YouTubers outside popular genres and reinforcing gender-segregated content. The platform algorithms mentioned above primarily focus on image or video-based Western social media platforms. These social media platforms, such as Instagram, are banned in China. As a result, we know very little about the impact of platform algorithms on influencers in China, especially on the unique social media platform WeChat.

#### **2.3.4.2 Negative implications in consumer and society**

The key negatives identified by Hudders and Lou (2023) in influencer marketing can be categorized into two main areas: audience perspective, which includes negative effects on consumer health and psychological wellbeing, and influencer perspective, encompassing concerns related to influencers' privacy, psychological wellbeing, and the involvement of child influencers. Additionally, several academics have examined the possible adverse consequences of influencer marketing on consumers and society.

The study conducted by Rodner, Goode and Burns (2022) explores the concept of aesthetic labour, with a specific emphasis on its complex and transforming characteristics that are shaped by evolving beauty norms and the cosmetics sector. The research underscores the significance of female influencers in moulding beauty norms, with a specific focus on the normalisation of cosmetic operations, notably on the social media platform Instagram. This statement highlights the need of recognising the possible adverse effects on consumer welfare, emphasising the substantial influence of Instagram on beauty standards and the rise of influencers who transcend conventional human norms.



Glatt (2023) illustrates how marginalized creators, despite depending on audience support, confront increased risks associated with exposure to large audiences. The demands of intimacy in content creation can be overwhelming, prompting many marginalized creators to retreat from confrontation, virality, or public visibility altogether.

The dark side of influencer marketing discussed in the above literature primarily focuses on the pressures brought upon influencers by platform algorithms and the harm inflicted on influencers by negative comments or behaviours from readers. While these studies mention the negative impacts on society or readers, they do not delve into the detailed reasons behind the formation of these negative effects. For instance, they do not explore how the content created by influencers contributes to negative impacts on society or readers. In addressing these negative performances, how should they be explained within the framework of performance theory?

## **2.4 The limitation of current literature review**

Numerous studies in consumer culture theory have classified consumption communities into several types, such as subcultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), brand communities (Muñiz Jr. & O'Guinn, 2001), consumer tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002), brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), consumer collectives (Arnould et al., 2021; Mardon et al., 2023), and desire networks (Kozinets et al., 2017). Chalmers, Price, and Schau (2013) offer an alternative framework, identifying dimensions of communal consumption communities, which include focus (on brands, activities, or ideologies), duration (ranging from short-lived to enduring), appeal (from niche to broad), ease of access, dispersion (whether local, online, or hybrid), marketplace orientation (level of collaboration), resource dependency (simple or complex structures), collective identity (degree of solidarity), and heterogeneity (from homogeneous to diverse). Prior research has analyzed various types of communities, the collective role of consumers, and producers' involvement in shaping communities. The dynamic interplay of multiple heterogeneous actors, like brands and participants, has been shown to enhance reciprocity through shared resources. However, limited attention has been paid to the varied roles of individual consumers (such as influencers) and their strategies for managing multiple communal relationships between brand communities and brand publics within hybrid economies, including the logic behind these approaches.

In influencer marketing, researchers have investigated various issues related to the phenomenon from different perspectives and angles, such as the factors which related to influencers' persuasion in terms of influencers' characteristics (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018; Pöyry, et al., 2019; Breves, et al. 2019), self-presentation or communication strategies (Audrezet, et al., 2020; Chen, 2010; Pounders, et al., 2016; Delbaere, et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Cascio, et al. 2023 ), influencer marketing effectiveness (Gräve, 2019; Park, et al., 2021; Leung, et al., 2022 ; Janssen, et al., 2022), sponsorship disclosure (Boerman, 2019) and the dark side of influencer marketing (Ashman, et al., 2018; Rodner, et al., 2022; Mardon, et al., 2023). Those studies adopt a range of qualitative methods (i.e., in-depth interviews, ethnographic research and discourse analysis) and quantitative methods (i.e., survey and experiments) (Hudders, et al., 2021). However, despite the extensive research conducted on various aspects of influencer marketing, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the nuanced interplay between influencers' strategies, marketing effectiveness and the dark side of influencer marketing under the frame of performance theory and there is still a need for comprehensive investigations that integrate these diverse perspectives to provide a holistic understanding of influencer marketing dynamics.

## **2.5 The need for a new perspective**

### **2.5.1 Performance theory**

Performance theory is not confined to a singular framework. It draws from a multitude of disciplines, with notable contributions from scholars such as Goffman (1959), Schechner (1988), and Turner (1986). The emergence of performance theory occurred at the intersection of theatre and ethnography. In 1988, Schechner classified performance into two distinct categories: artistic performance and cultural performance. Artistic performances encompass many forms of creative expression, such as dramatic storytelling, plays, and poetry. On the other hand, cultural performances encompass activities that hold cultural significance in everyday life, including rites, ceremonies, and the enactment of social and professional duties. Turner (1986) observed that social drama exhibits several phases, including breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration, which have been employed to elucidate the dynamics of cultural transformation. Goffman (1959) has employed social drama as a means to comprehend self-presentation. According to Goffman (1959), social contact has a significant role in shaping individuals' behaviour, since he observed that ordinary activities might bear resemblance to theatrical performances. From this particular standpoint, every type of

communication that carries the responsibility of exerting influence on others may be characterised as performative. Schechner (1985) posits that performance behaviour is a deliberate practice that is guided by pre-established norms that dictate the desired outcomes. From these viewpoints, blogging may be seen as a deliberate and controlled act rather than an organic and spontaneous one. In contrast to the utilisation of Facebook updates for the purpose of constructing a digital identity (Kerrigan & Hart, 2016; Belk, 2013), my attention is directed towards commercial blogs that are strategically negotiated by influencers and marketers with the intention of achieving commercial objectives, rather than solely focusing on the development of a desired self on social media platforms. The use of performance theory offers a valuable theoretical framework for examining the dramatic performance exhibited by bloggers.

For most research papers framed within performance theory, they often focus on individual areas, such as applying Schechner's theory in theater studies or Goffman's theory in studies of social identities. However, this study will draw inspiration from multiple authors of theories of performance to investigate the digital performance of WeChat influencers with commercial purposes. Integrating the theories of performance by Goffman (1959), Richard Schechner (1985), and Victor Turner (1988) into online performance in influencer marketing represents a bold innovation. Besides filling academic gaps, it also holds practical implications for guiding marketing practices. In the following parts, I will delve into a series of terms found within performance theory to examine whether these terms, commonly associated with real-life or theatrical performances, correspond to online performance.

#### 2.5.1.1 Symbolic meaning of time, objects, and space

Schechner (1988) analyzed performance activities, focusing on time, object value, productivity, and space regulations. Different performance forms, including play, games, sports, theater, and rituals, have unique temporal structures. Blogs on platforms like WeChat resemble theater, where influencers follow scheduled posts but with flexible timing. Blogging, like ritualistic events, involves a sequence, with certain blogs incorporating symbolic time, akin to dramatic works.

Objects in performances often hold symbolic value, appearing more expensive than they are. In blogs, branded items might also have symbolic significance when interpreted by influencers, similar to objects in a play.

Performance spaces, from every day to special events, allow for varying degrees of structure. According to Goffman (1959), spaces for play and ritual are either highly flexible or rigid, governed by rules. Blogging, like play, focuses on enjoyment and internal rules, while rituals adhere to external norms. Commercial blogs, however, aim for a balance between entertainment and truth, reflecting both performance and productive work.

While commercial blogs may generate economic value, they do not follow traditional productivity. Influencers often rehearse or preview their content, aligning with performance theories. Blogging involves self-presentation but, for influencers working with brands, extends to creating a balanced and compelling performance. In this sense, the blog structure can be viewed as a performance space where marketers collaborate, offering influencers flexibility to maintain their unique style while balancing market realities.

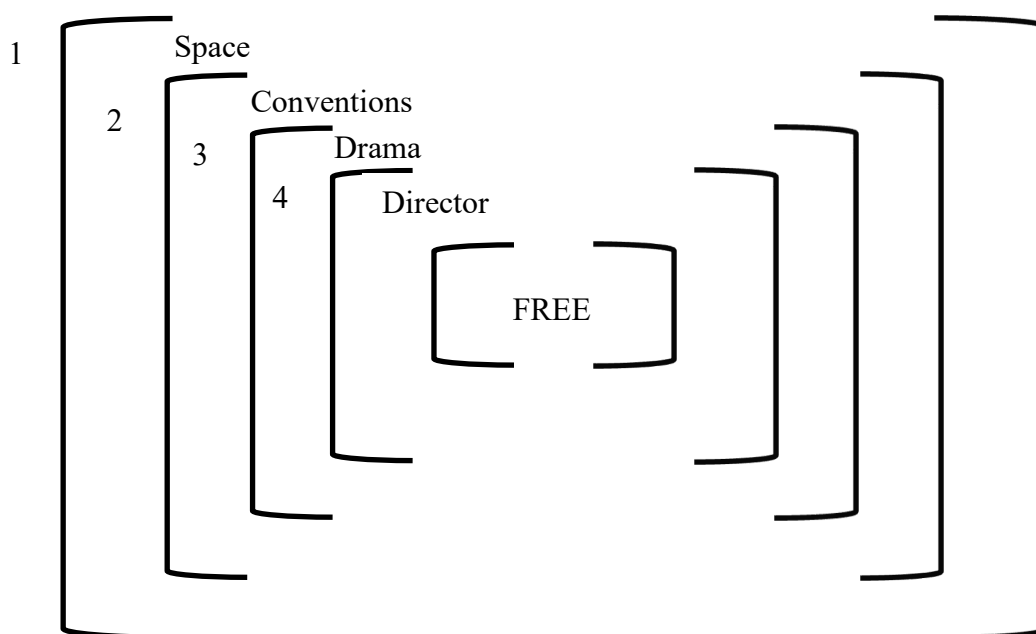


Figure 3 The frame of theatre performance (Source: Schechner, 1988, p. 17)

The symbolism of time, objects, and space plays a significant role in connecting the domains of blogging and theatrical performance. This connection underscores their mutual capacity to captivate audiences, stimulate intellectual contemplation, and elicit emotional reactions by manipulating these fundamental components. By delving into these interconnections, researchers have a more profound understanding of the complex dynamics of digital narrative and performative expression in contemporary culture.

### 2.5.1.2 Conflicts and transformation

Turner (1974) introduced a dramatic framework for examining “social drama” through the use of theatrical vocabulary. He proposes that social drama may be analysed using a four-step structure. The first stage involves the violation of established norms, such as instances of

illness or misfortune. The second stage pertains to a crisis that cannot be disregarded. The third stage involves the implementation of redressive or remedial measures. Ultimately, the social drama unfolds as either the reintegration of the disrupted social group or a transformation into an entirely new state. This transformation can occur through either the resolution of the breach or the exacerbation of the situation, akin to the dynamics of comedy and tragedy. Individuals within a certain group often engage in communication using both spoken and non-spoken symbols. They possess common values and are interconnected through economic and social systems. Additionally, they frequently share a religious foundational framework. “The truth of one culture may be considered a fantasy by another culture” (Turner 1988, p41). Social drama serves as the foundational material for theatrical drama, just as it does for blogging. According to Turner (1988), individuals engage in the production of social drama as a means to cultivate their collective identity, shape their understanding of the world, and express their own beliefs. In consumer research and marketing, Giesler (2008) utilised Turner’s concept of “social drama” to examine the progression of the online music file sharing industry. The author emphasised the presence of conflict and the subsequent compromise of drama along the evolutionary journey.

Aesthetic drama is another conventional interpretation of drama. Social drama and aesthetic drama have a reciprocal relationship, and the theatre is specifically crafted to present aesthetic drama in order to elicit a response from the audience towards the social drama of the actual world using innovative theatrical approaches (Schechner, 1988). According to the data shown in Figure 4, there exists a reciprocal and oscillating link between social drama and artistic drama, as indicated by the arrows.

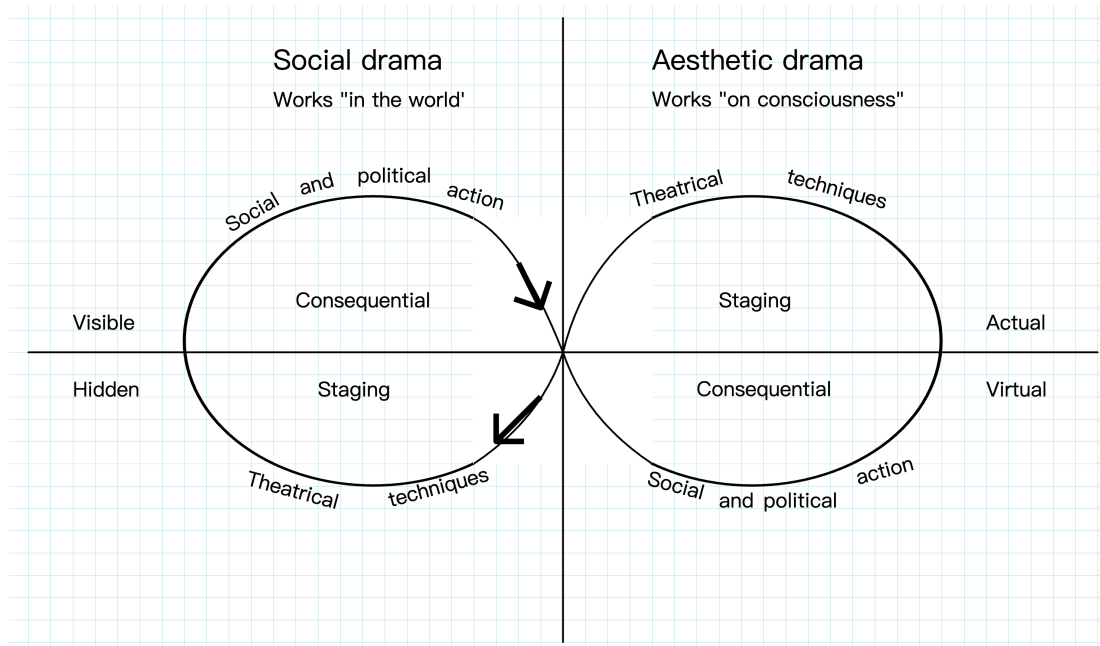


Figure 4 A comparison of social drama and aesthetic drama (Source: Schechner, 1988, p.215)

The majority of blog content closely mirrors real-life experiences, with influencers often showcasing their daily lives online. On WeChat, influencers may associate their personal experiences or lifestyle with a promoted brand to create unique content. It is difficult to classify such commercial blogs as purely “social drama” or “aesthetic drama,” highlighting the limitations of solely using “social drama” to analyze the techniques influencers employ to maintain success.

Turner (1974) and Goffman (1959) suggest that tensions are inherent in social dramas and everyday life, often manifesting as performances. Goffman viewed the world as a stage, where individuals assume various roles to manage impressions. Turner (1988) uses theatrical language to describe crisis situations, seeing human actions as intrinsically dramatic. Social dramas begin when a crisis emerges, revealing a tension between linguistic and anthropological views of performance. Turner emphasizes that performances in daily life, theatre, and societal dramas help individuals understand themselves, while Schechner (1988) argues that drama fosters unity rather than conflict. This unity contributes to the equilibrium of the entire system, underscoring the role of vital drama in building solidarity and driving change.

Schechner (1985) introduced “transformation” in performance, where actors and audience members undergo cognitive and emotional shifts. This transformation, critical in both aesthetic and social dramas, moves people to a new realm of awareness. Goffman (1959) noted that performance can oscillate between sincerity and cynicism, a concept applicable to commercial blogs where tension transforms brands into engaging content. Despite knowing the promotional nature of blogs, readers remain captivated, highlighting the similarities between social media and theatre, both involving transformative performances of influencers and engaging content.

This study examines the strategies influencers use on WeChat to transform commercial blogs into captivating content, aiming to attract larger audiences and enhance engagement with brands.

### **2.5.1.3 Audience**

Schechner (1988) distinguishes between two types of audiences: accidental and integral. Accidental audiences consist of voluntary participants, such as the general public, who consciously invest time and money to attend an event. Integral audiences are those who are aware of and actively participate in the performance, often serving as a support system. Deighton (1992) applies this framework to consumer research, noting that customers either passively attend (accidental audience) or actively engage (integral audience) in the experience. Accidental audiences tend to pay more attention because they choose to participate and do not engage in crowd rituals. Integral audiences, on the other hand, are often involved in ritualistic and prolonged performances.

Social media users can be classified similarly. Schechner (1988) argues that integral audiences play a crucial role in theatrical performances, particularly during premieres, and consist of individuals with a vested interest, including friends and family. However, accidental audiences can sometimes transform into integral ones, especially through active engagement, such as commenting on blogs. Comments, particularly meaningful ones, can turn accidental viewers into integral participants, suggesting that this transformation is possible on platforms like WeChat.

#### 2.5.4.4 Magnitudes of performance

Defining performance may be challenging, as events may be referred to as performance in various cultures or seen as performances by scholars (Schechner, 1988). According to Goffman (1959), individuals engage in the framing and performance of everyday life, often exhibiting behaviours that beyond their conscious awareness. However, Schechner (1988) argued that the term “professional performer” specifically pertains to those who possess advanced skills and technical abilities, such as film actors. This distinction sets it apart from Goffman’s (1959) concept of daily performance, which often occurs without conscious awareness. Goffman (1959) delineated two distinct categories of performers in everyday life. The first category comprises individuals who engage in concealment, while the second category encompasses those who perform without conscious awareness. The latter category can be further subdivided into two types: ordinary individuals who assume their life roles as waitresses, doctors, and teachers, and those whose actions are portrayed as performers, as exemplified in documentary films where they present their everyday lives to the public. The performance’s theatricality and narrativity were the primary areas of concentration for Schechner (1988). WeChat influencers align with Schechner’s (1988) concept of performance as they actively promote each post with their own knowledge and intentions, and they should be conscious that everything they share online is intended for public consumption rather than private use. According to Schechner’s (1988) performance theory, WeChat blogs are founded upon this framework.

The following is a table of terms relating to performance theory:

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Performance Theory	A field of study that explores the nature, function, and impact of performances in various contexts.
Theatrical Performance	Live presentations of plays, dramas, or other scripted works by actors on a stage.
Performer	An individual or group actively engaged in presenting a performance.
Professional performer	“Professional performer” specifically pertains to those who possess advanced skills and technical abilities, such as film actors.



<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Accidental audience	Individuals or small groups of voluntary viewers, such as the general audience who invest their time and money to attend the event.
Integral audience	An integral audience refers to a supporting audience that is aware of the performance in advance and actively participates in the event.
Front	The front region pertains to the observable performance in the frontstage presentation of performers.
Back	The back region encompasses the activities taking place in the backstage area.
Outside	The region outside the stage represents the area that cannot be distinguished by the front or back regions and is inaccessible to those who are not part of the performance.
Role	The character or identity assumed by a performer during a specific performance.
Ritual Performance	Performances that involve symbolic actions and gestures often associated with religious or cultural ceremonies.
Sincere performance	The individuals believe their performances are taken by themselves and represent their “sincere self”.
Cynical performance	The person does not believe in their own performance but acting the role for satisfying society norms.
Performativity	The concept that certain acts or utterances have the power to perform or bring about the things they represent.
Dramaturgy	The art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation, including the study of scriptwriting.
Spectacle	The visual elements and dramatic features of a performance, often emphasizing grandeur and visual impact.
Interactivity	The degree to which a performance allows for direct engagement or participation from the audience.
Postmodern Performance	Performances that challenge traditional norms, often characterized by a blurring of boundaries between art and life.

Term	Definition
Performance Art	Artistic practices that emphasize the live, temporal, and interactive aspects of performance as the primary medium.
Performance Studies	An interdisciplinary field that examines performance as a cultural, social, and communicative phenomenon.

Table 1 Table of terms related to performance theory

**2.5.4.5 Regions and region behaviour**

Goffman (1959) provided a conceptualization of the “region” that exists between team performance and the audience. This region was further categorised into distinct regions, namely “front,” “back,” and “outside” the stage. The front region pertains to the observable performance in the frontstage presentation of performers. The back region encompasses the activities taking place in the backstage area, typically characterised by a laid-back atmosphere and the presence of familiar individuals. The region outside the stage represents the area that cannot be distinguished by the front or back regions and is inaccessible to those who are not part of the performance. Audience segregation may be achieved by the use of front region or working staff, who can effectively separate distinct audiences or utilise barriers to do this. This facilitates the preservation of appropriate connections in interaction among the team, individual performers, and audience, as well as the establishments to which these interactions pertain.

The conceptual framework developed by Goffman (1959), first intended for the analysis of physical performance, may be expanded to include the phenomenon of WeChat blogging. The primary functions of the front regions of WeChat are to provide users with access to pushed blogs and selected reader comments. In contrast, the back regions serve as the secondary platform for WeChat blogs, enabling influencers to make updates to incomplete pieces and engage with reader comments and messages. The phenomenon of exclusivity can manifest when individuals who are perceived as “outsiders” express opinions that are not selected by the influencer or receive an adverse reaction from the influencer.

**2.5.4.6 The Arts of impression management**

The expressiveness of the individual has two kinds of communication, expressions given, and expressions given off (Goffman, 1959). On WeChat blogs, some influencers may receive

“unfriendly” reader comments and in some instances the influencer may even select the negative comments to present to the public. However, in my point of view, this conflict behaviour can make the blog more dramatic like a drama. There are two types of body language, the first is “the natural language” and the second is “the artificial language,” human body could be “exaggerated, distorted, transformed, masked, and abstracted” (Schechner, 1988, p. 262) in art. Lying and pretending are the most important difference between human and non-human performance. In contrast to traditional performances and face-to-face interactions, where non-verbal communication is of considerable importance, online platforms predominantly depend on written or visual content to communicate ideas and captivate viewers. This transition requires the implementation of alternative approaches in order to communicate effectively and engage audiences when body language cues are absent. Little is known about the strategies employed by WeChat influencers in creating compelling commercial performances without the aid of gestures or facial expressions.

According to Goffman (1959), “inopportune intrusions” in a performance refer to unforeseen events or occurrences. As an illustration, a projected audience disrupted the performance or gained access to the backstage area. Goffman (1959) proposed a set of defensive strategies—loyalty, discipline, and circumspection—that teams can employ in such circumstances. Unlike other public social media platforms, comments on WeChat official accounts must be selected by the author to be made public, providing a unique opportunity to examine the criteria influencers use to select comments for publication and their underlying motivations.

Nevertheless, while Goffman’s (1959) notion of impression management mostly pertains to in-person interactions, there is limited understanding of its use to social media platforms (O’Leary & Murphy, 2018). Face-to-face performances typically occur in real-time, facilitating potential interaction between artists and the audience during the duration of the performance. The occurrence of “inopportune intrusions” on WeChat blogs is notably infrequent, despite the fact that the WeChat blog platform might be perceived as a social establishment. On one side, it is uncommon for influencers to encounter interruptions from their audience during the writing process, as it is primarily the influencer who promotes the blog for public consumption. Conversely, influencers take the lead in engaging with their audience by actively choosing to read or respond to reader messages and comments, as well as making reader remarks public. WeChat influencers still require “impression management,”

however the methods employed may differ from those suggested by Goffman's (1959) research.

The main purpose of this study is to explore how these WeChat influencers engage their audience and attract marketers when creating commercial blogs. Unlike image-centric social platforms where managing one's actual image for impression management, they focus more on shaping an imagined self to achieve their goals via words: advertising that satisfies businesses while also attracting readers to read.

#### **2.5.4.7 Inside / outside and private / public**

Schechner (1988) highlights that much of the research on performance systems is conducted by individuals with external knowledge of theatre, whereas he draws on his experience as a theatre director. Similarly, as a food influencer, I offer an insider's perspective. Performances aim to entertain, and even taboos can serve to amuse audiences. During rehearsals, performers navigate the boundary between private and public spaces to determine what is acceptable. Unlike traditional performances, WeChat blogs do not face the challenge of real-time audience interaction, as influencers pre-approve reader comments. Typically, readers respond after consuming the content, not during its creation. Frequent demonstrations of violence in performances can foster solidarity and create a sense of community for the audience. Each drama tells a story that reflects the audience's perception of the characters. Schechner defines drama as material produced by an author, often associated with artistic professionals, such as filmmakers, and situated in the central circle of his model. Drama is usually premeditated, serving as an introduction to a particular work, and often linked to practical professions like teaching. It is a distinct expression of a script. Theatre, mostly occupied by actors, shapes its meaning through performances, which involve not only the actors but also the audience and the space of the theatre. Performance, in this sense,

encompasses the entire event, with theatre representing a unique artistic medium.

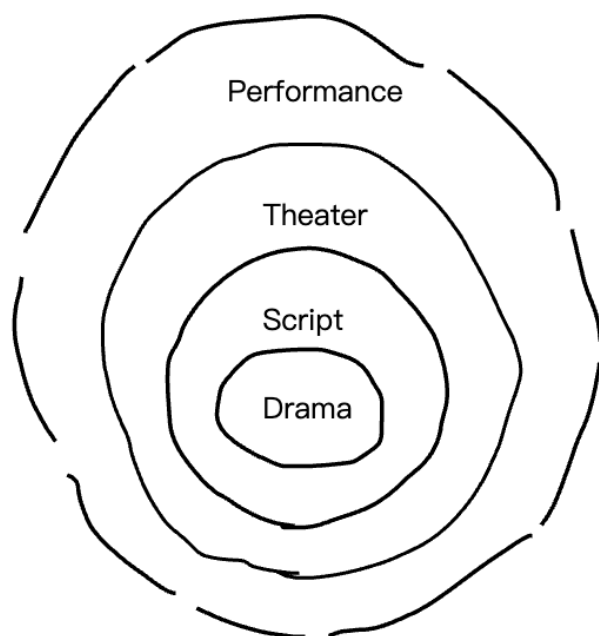


Figure 5 The relationship among drama, script, theatre and performance (Source: Schechner, 1988, p.71)

In the context of social media, as depicted in Figure 5, drama can be viewed as a digital performance, while the script represents the strategy used to share personal narratives and post content online. The theatre corresponds to social media platforms, with each platform acting as a different “theatre” for performance. For instance, Instagram is image-driven, where visual content dominates, whereas Blogosphere is story-driven, where influencers engage in narrative-style blogging. Thus, various platforms foster distinct types of performances.

Schechner (1988) pointed out that the common factor linking performance, hunting, ritual, and play is crisis. Play, though seemingly free, is bound by “rules of the game.” Papacharissi (2012) argues that most posting behavior on Twitter is playful and focused on self-storytelling without commercial motives. However, blogging for commercial purposes diverges from pure play, even when it involves self-disclosure.

Figure 6 illustrates the human display and performance process. Schechner (1988) describes fantasy as a private dream or translated exhibition, whereas performance involves the imagination being made public through accepted channels. He contends that “performing is a public dreaming” while “dreaming is an interior drama.” Hence, socially acceptable performances require a balance between the public, private, and hidden spheres. The ultimate

performance integrates internal drama and external display, combining both private and public dimensions.

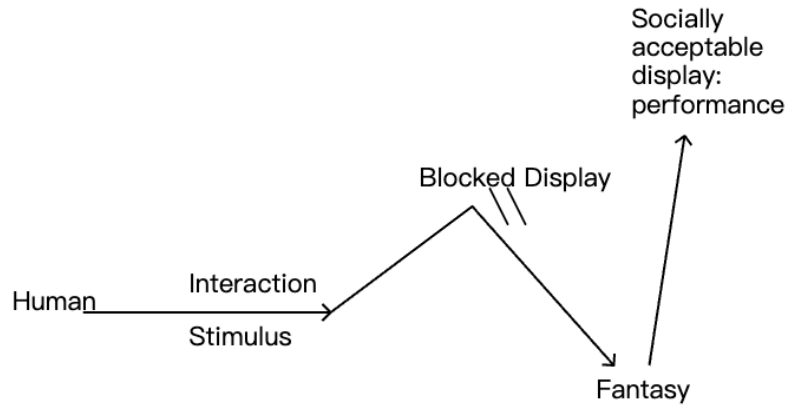


Figure 6 Human display by showing private staff to public (Source: Schechner, 1988, p.265)

The term “drama” pertains to a written composition that is designed for theatrical performance, depicting an envisioned, imaginative, and aspired event, yet devoid of the real manifestation of this event. The essential tension within drama is in the contrast between individual yearning and the framework of society, with the ultimate objective of eliciting amusement or sadness from the audience and helping the process of transformation. Schechner (1988) recognised two main objectives of jokes, drawing from Freud’s seminal work in 1963 as Figure 7. The first objective is to question authority and release pressure, while the second objective is to get pleasure from the act of celebrating the obscene (p. 282). The act of joking can be viewed as a way to release energy or occupy time, akin to the chest-beating rhythm identified in gorillas (Freud, 1963). The comparison between human drama and the production of dream-work or joke-work might be drawn. Both the utilisation of

dreams and comedy has been found to be beneficial in helping the process of change.

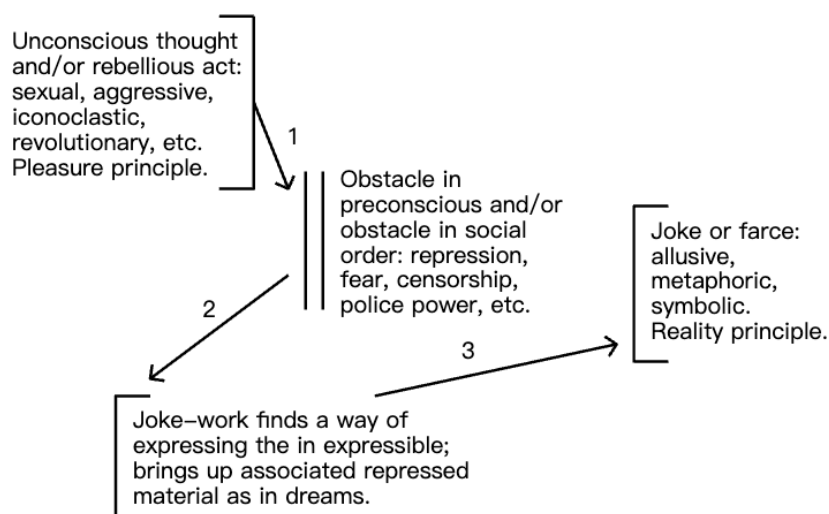


Figure 7 The relationship of dream and jokes (Source: Schechner, 1988, p. 281)

### 2.5.2 Performance theory in consumer research

Numerous studies have employed performance theory to examine diverse consumption phenomena (Deighton, 1992; Grove & Fisk, 1992; Grove & John, 2000). Service interactions have always been understood as a collaborative collaboration between customers and providers, such as evidenced by the works of Sherry and McGrath (1989), McAlexander and Schouten (1998), Kozinets et al. (2002), Tucker (2007), and Tumbat and Belk (2013). This particular line of inquiry embraced the dramaturgical framework (Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1967; Turner, 1986) and centred its attention on the involvement of consumers in the collaborative building of performance. Giesler (2008) examines market development as a dramatic phenomenon. In the field of consumer research, the idea of performance has been defined as an observed occurrence that is seen by the audience in connection to a certain responsibility and is held to a predetermined standard (Deighton, 1992, p.363). According to Tumbat and Belk (2013), the execution of a piece involves a certain arrangement of elements like as tempo, tension, evocation, emphasis, and ways of involvement. Space and audience (real or imagined) are two essential components of a performance. According to Papacharissi (2012), social media serves as a platform for the observation of consumer performances and self-presentation (Arsel & Zhao, 2010; Zhao & Belk, 2007). The question of how influencers

maintain their appeal amidst extensive collaborations with many firms to convey distinct brand narratives has yet to be thoroughly investigated.

Deighton (1992) classified consumption performances into four categories. First, consumers may attend a performance, such as paying for a theatrical show. Second, consumers may actively engage in a performance, like attending a wedding and participating in its rituals. Third, consumers may engage in symbolic consumption, such as purchasing luxury items to display social status. Finally, consumption as a performance occurs when consumers, like investors, anticipate financial returns from their purchases. Deighton's framework is evident in social media, where blog performances fall between passive and active engagement. Audiences seek entertainment but also interact by commenting, actively participating in the influencer's content.

Deighton (1992) also introduced different types of performance. A "mere occurrence" happens without intent or human intervention, such as falling leaves. A "contracted performance" involves obligations without a human agent's direct responsibility for its effects, like a TV ad where viewers passively watch without shaping the ad's outcome. "Enacted performance" involves human agents with roles but lacks clear expectations for outcomes, such as a brand hosting an event for customer interaction without immediate sales objectives. "Dramatic performance" involves deliberate roles, where both actors and audiences are aware of their roles, as seen in theatre, with emotional or communicative aims.

Furthermore, Deighton (1992) identified strategies to mask dramatism for optimal consumption performance: objectifying, professionalizing, personalizing, and depersonalizing. Each approach shapes how consumers interact with a performance, such as focusing on products or performers. The strategies for emphasizing dramatism include skill, show, thrill, and festival performances. WeChat blogs blend these types, with influencers' performances encompassing both realism and fantasy. Audiences engage not passively but through comments or messages, similar to participants in thrill performances.

Deighton emphasized the importance of narrative in making a performance meaningful to the audience, whether real or fictional. Influencers on WeChat curate diverse promotional narratives to captivate their audience. The satisfaction derived from such performances relies on factors beyond product quality, including the performer's expertise, interaction with the



audience, and the element of surprise. Failed performances lack dramatism or fall short of audience expectations. Successful influencers on platforms like WeChat manage to surprise their audiences and effectively curate comments to engage the audience and sustain interest.

### **2.5.3 Limitation in current studies**

Traditional performance theory (Goffman, 1959; Schechner, 1988; Turner, 1986), rooted in disciplines such as theater studies and sociology, has long served as a valuable framework for analyzing ethnographic research or theatre studies in various societies and contexts. These authors emphasised the fundamental role that performances play in fostering human comprehension. However, when it comes to studying influencers' digital performances with commercial objectives, applying traditional performance theory reveals notable limitations that warrant further investigation.

To begin with, traditional performance theory frequently places considerable importance on the dynamics of performance as being influenced by physical presence, embodiment, and live interaction. The aforementioned focus on in-person interaction and physical manifestation might not comprehensively encompass the intricacies of digital performances, in which engagements transpire asynchronously via mediated platforms. Within the domain of digital media, influencers employ written or visual content as a means to captivate their audience, thereby causing a transformation in the performance dynamics that conventional theories might not sufficiently account for.

Moreover, traditional performance theory might fail to account for the strategic considerations and commercial incentives that are intrinsic to the digital performances of influencers. In contrast to conventional theatrical presentations that may prioritise social commentary or artistic expression, influencers frequently participate in digital performances with the overt intention of endorsing particular products, services, or brands. The inclusion of this commercial element presents intricacies pertaining to credibility, audience confidence, and genuineness, which might not be comprehensively examined through the lenses of conventional performance theory.

In addition, the dynamics of influencer performances are complicated by the interactive nature of digital platforms, in which audiences actively shape the discourse and content. Due

to the reciprocal nature of digital communication—where influencers and audiences co-create meaning via likes, comments, shares, and other forms of engagement—traditional performance theory may find it difficult to account for this dynamic.

Furthermore, prior research in social media and online contexts often relied heavily on Goffman's theories (Goffman, 1959), with a primary focus on identity construction (such as Schau & Gilly, 2003) and impression management techniques (McQuarrie, et al., 2013) aimed at enhancing one's cultural capital. However, as social media platforms have evolved, the strategies and methods of these performances have undoubtedly undergone changes. Despite these transformations, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the integration of multiple performance theories (Goffman, 1959; Schechner, 1988; Turner, 1986), with a specific focus on guiding digital performances. Moreover, existing studies predominantly center on non-commercialized digital performances, overlooking the broader spectrum of digital performance practices in a commercial way. As a result, there is a need for research that not only acknowledges the evolving nature of digital performances but also explores how various performance theories intersect and influence these contemporary practices with commercial purposes.

Overall, conducting longitudinal studies of commercially oriented digital performances with the integration of multiple performance theories may provide a holistic and dynamic perspective on the ever-evolving landscape of influencer marketing.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

In synthesizing the literature on communal consumption in a hybrid economy, influencer marketing and performance theory, it becomes evident that these fields intersect in illuminating ways, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of consumption practices. While previous studies have explored the individual components of consumption communities, performance theory, and influencer marketing, there is a lack of research that systematically integrates these perspectives to examine the nuanced dynamics of digital consumption practices. Specifically, there is a requirement for research to delve into how influencers strategically utilize performance techniques within consumption communities to attain commercial objectives guided by performance theory, and to examine how these

performances shape consumer behaviour, including potential negative consequences, over time.

The literature review presents theoretical insights that play a crucial role in influencing the methodological and paradigmatic choices that form the foundation of the empirical research elaborated upon in the subsequent chapter.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the epistemological, ontological and methodological choices to collect empirical data for this research. Due to the nature and practicalities of the inquiry, this qualitative study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, drawing netnographic methods to collect empirical data including in-depth interviews (online or offline), blog content, reader comments and participant observation. The chapter also describes how to collect data, how to analyse / interpret data and how to present data, as well as methodological limitations.

## 3.2 Research philosophy

### 3.2.1 Research paradigm

The term research “paradigm” pertains to the perspective through which researchers perceive and interpret the world, encompassing certain philosophical assumptions that shape and steer their thinking and behaviour (Milliken, 2001). The identification of the research paradigm is generally recognised as a method to assist researchers in determining and constructing a suitable framework. Therefore, it is important to ascertain the appropriate research technique and procedures based on the study paradigm (Staller, 2013). Methodology encompasses the discussion of a set of practical theories that are utilised to conduct research in order to achieve the objectives of the study (Saunders, et al., 2018).

Methodology refers to the theoretical, systematic, and philosophical analysis and assumptions that are applied to the study. It encompasses the conclusions and implications of the techniques used (Saunders, et al., 2018). Methodology encompasses a comprehensive philosophical and theoretical framework that encompasses the corresponding procedures for data gathering and procedural guidelines. It is important to note that different data collecting approaches produce diverse types of data. The examination of the approach to research methodologies within a wider methodological framework has been referred to as the philosophy of social research (Hughes & Sharrock, 2016).

The objective of this study is to investigate WeChat influencers from diverse backgrounds, with the intention of constructing the concept of digital performance, drawing upon established performance theory such as Goffman (1959), Schechner (1988), and Turner (1986). This study provides a theoretical framework that can elucidate and evaluate digital consuming habits, as well as the conceptualization of digital performance. Inductive

methodologies are employed, as opposed to only evaluating the pre-existing theory of digital consumption. This section will present the researcher's paradigm from both epistemological and ontological standpoints.

Epistemology refers to the determination of what constitutes valid knowledge and encompasses the fundamental characteristics of knowing (Cunliffe, 2011). According to Bryman (2008), epistemological examination often encompasses two distinct viewpoints, namely positivism and interpretivism. The present study adopts an interpretivist paradigm as it posits that knowledge and meaning are seen as intersubjective, socially produced, and diverse (Weber, 2004). The positivist perspective on knowing diverges from the interpretivism paradigm by emphasising objectivity, relying on the methodologies of natural science (Weber, 2004; Bryman, 2008). The use of an interpretivist viewpoint in this research is acceptable due to the purposeful formation and shaping of human phenomena, such as the complex meaning of digital performance, online consumption, and its derived behaviours, by cultures, aims, and experiences. Therefore, the study seeks to achieve comprehension rather than causation, with the aim of understanding the dynamic significance of communication and actions as seen by the individuals involved.

Ontology refers to "assumptions about how the world is" (Easton, 2002, p.108) and seeks to answer the question whether social entities should be regarded as possessing an objective reality, which is external to social actors (objectivism), or as social constructions determined by the perceptions and actions of social actors (constructionism). Bartels (1951) and Palmer and Ponsonby (2002) agree that marketing should be considered as a social construction, since marketing in an academic context is likely to be involved with the understanding of human phenomena. Drawing from consumer culture theory, this study adopts the view that the meanings of good digital performance are negotiated socially, culturally and historically. Accordingly, the constructionist paradigm is appropriate for this research. The study does not separate the subjects of enquiry (individuals) from their social and cultural context, so the research relies as much as possible on the participants' views of situations (Prasad, 2005).

In general, the researcher adopts the view that reality encompasses several constructs, and that understanding the significance of digital performance is dynamic in nature. It is well acknowledged that information, particularly in relation to the significance of digital performance, cannot be acquired without interpretation. Therefore, it is necessary to attempt

to comprehend the respondents' understanding of the universe. Based on the study aims and direction, interpretivism and the constructionist paradigm are the most suitable approaches.

### **3.2.2 Writing interpretivist consumer research**

This qualitative research aligns more closely with interpretivist-oriented fields, as previously mentioned (Solomon, 1983). Interpretivism is one of the qualitative approaches within consumer research, the others are also including hermeneutics (Arnold & Fischer 1994), phenomenology (Thompson, et al., 1989), feminism (Bristor & Fischer 1993), critical inquiry (Murray & Ozanne, 1991), post-structuralism (Holt, 1997), post-modernism (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Based on CCT interpretivists' campaign of a "viable disciplinary brand" for the interpretivist tradition about qualitative research in marketing (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and a variety of qualitative-based studies from the JCR, Hogg and Maclaran (2008) suggest that interpretivist-oriented research findings are the same worth paying attention to of the qualitative approaches. According to Hogg and Maclaran (2008), this research is in three parts to convince readers for its validation. Firstly, convincing readers by authenticity. Two strategies can ensure the authenticity from data: immersing into the study field; being genuine to the field experience.

For over 7 years, I have actively engaged in reading WeChat blogs on a daily basis. As a WeChat influencer, I have developed a deep understanding of the language used in WeChat blog writing. Additionally, I am well-versed in the activities of both influencers and readers on the platform. I am a food influencer with over 65,000 followers at 2023, examined the distinct perspectives of both readers and content creators about WeChat blogs. In order to effectively handle the matter of authenticity in the field experience, it is imperative for me to portray a methodical approach to data collection and analysis, along by a rational elucidation of any potential personal biases that may arise (Hogg & Maclaran, 2008). The data for this study was gathered from 2016 onwards, encompassing both interview data and internet data. The researcher determined a necessary distance to facilitate the analysis of the acquired data. The fascination with WeChat influencers originated not from a personal inclination to familiarise oneself with more influencers, nor from any genuine aspiration to align with business objectives. The primary objective of the study was to examine the

disparities in online performance and to advance the theory of performance in a viable manner.

Furthermore, persuading readers through believability. The primary objective of qualitative research is not to examine every individual piece of evidence. Rather, the focus is on capturing a comprehensive understanding of the topics under investigation. The objective of this study is to illustrate the tactics employed by prominent WeChat influencers in order to sustain the connection between their audience and sponsors, therefore addressing the existing gaps in the literature on performance theory within the context of the digital realm.

Furthermore, persuading individuals through critical analysis. The primary objective of this study is to stimulate a critical reassessment of performance theory among its readers. The researcher endeavoured to stimulate the acknowledgment and analysis of disparities in performance between the physical world and the digital realm via the lens of performance theory, with the aim of generating novel prospects for readers. The validity of this qualitative research is not just constrained by the aforementioned three components. The development of interpretivist consumer research is still in its early stages.

### **3.3 Netnography**

According to Kozinets (2015), netnography is alternatively referred to as online ethnography. The emergence of ethnography as a prevalent qualitative research approach may be traced back to its origins in the area of anthropology. Ethnography is a research method used to examine a group of individuals in their natural environment or “field.” It involves using various techniques to collect ethnographic data, which helps to capture their everyday activities and social significance. This includes studying patterns of values, behaviour, beliefs, and language that are shared within a particular culture (Brewer, 2000). In the fields of anthropology and sociology, extensive ethnographic research has been conducted to examine marginalised social groups and weaker segments of society. However, the focus has now expanded to include a wider range of topics, including the study of elites and well-educated individuals in certain areas of marketing research (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). An ethnographic method is characterised by the use of intense participant observation in a natural context, the collection of data from numerous sources, and the use of descriptive and interpretative data coding (Brewer, 2000).



Netnography primarily focuses on cyber cultures and virtual communities as a methodological approach or instrument (Kozinets, 1998). Netnography shares several similarities with ethnography in terms of its qualities.

Example	Methodology	Online fieldwork (Participant observation)		Interviews	Others
Kozinets (2001)	Netnography Ethnography	Blogs, other online contents	Devoted viewer, discussioner	67 interviews (65 Email interviews)	Offline participant activates
Schau & Gilly (2003)	Grounded theory	Web space contents	Electronic exchanges	16 long interviews	
Füller et al. (2007)	Netnography	240,000 posts in 5 online communities	Participant discussions	Informal interviews	
Kozinets et al.(2010)	Netnography	Blogs and comments, visual data	Participant discussions	Informal interviews/ conversations	
Heinonen (2011)	Netnography	One online community	128 online questionnaires	No interviews	
McQuarrie et al.(2013)	Discourse Analysis	Blogs and comments, visual data	No	No	
Scaraboto & Fischer, (2013)	Netnography	Blogs and comments, archival	Participant online postings	Informal interviews	Offline participant activates
Scaraboto (2015)	Market- oriented ethnography; Netnography	Online contents, visual data, archival	Email exchanges	11 in-depth interviews; some informal ones	Offline participant events

Dolbec & Fischer (2015)	Netnography	Archival, websites, blogs	Participant online postings	19 interviews
Cocker & Cronin (2017)	Netnography	7 YouTubers' channel videos, comments, 518 related media reports	Non-participant Observation	No interviews

*Table 2 The use of methodology in similar research*

Based on the above-mentioned analysis, netnography is a prevalent and widely utilised tool for investigating online phenomena. Netnographic methodologies are very suitable for this research as it aims to investigate the online phenomena pertaining to a specific set of individuals, namely WeChat influencers, readers, and advertisers in the “WeChat official account market.” In this study, the researcher categorised netnography into three distinct procedures: (1) identification and selection of influencer marketing on WeChat blogs, encompassing the characteristics of the group of people, (2) online observation involving both participants and non-participants, and data collection, (3) analysis and interpretation of the data to derive meaningful findings.

### 3.4 Data collection

The identification of meanings in empirical research is contingent upon interpretation, as neither qualitative nor quantitative research can inherently convey meaning (Thompson, 1997). Data may be conceptualized as dependable units of information, entities that are either known or presumed to be factual, reliable, and serving as evidence (Kozinets, 2020). In the realm of research, carefully chosen data serves the purpose of providing primary evidence to substantiate the viewpoints of researchers. In the field of netnography, researchers often engage with digital data, encompassing online material, communications, conversations, observations, visual pictures, and videos. Additionally, they collaborate with data creators to generate data using methods such as interviews, investigations, instigations, and insights (Kozinets, 2015). It is important to note that netnographic data should not be confused with

pure anthropological data or used as a general word for any research including material created in networked settings. In his latest study of netnography, Kozinets (2015) emphasized the need for emotional engagement, participation, and social personalization in netnographic data, rather than relying solely on unengaged content analysis (p.96).

This study utilises the fundamental principles of netnography for data collection and employs three main methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews (for interactive data), participant observation (for both interactive and immersive data), and field notes (for media-related experiences with notes and reflections).

### **3.4.1 Semi-structured in-depth interviews**

This section provides a rationale for the choice to carry out semi-structured in-depth interviews (Arsel, 2017) and outlines the difficulties faced and the solutions employed in this study. The research collected interview data through 28 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 16 prominent WeChat bloggers and 12 marketers in China from 2016 to 2017. The interviews were conducted either through WeChat videos or in person, with participants located in Beijing and Shanghai.

Interviews are a prevalent method in qualitative research; however, their approach may vary somewhat depending on the methodology employed. In netnography, interviews are not restricted to face-to-face interactions since several methodologies have been developed. According to Kozinets (2015), the use of netnographic data did not exclude the possibility of conducting interviews through various mediums such as email, social media platforms (e.g., synchronous video conferencing programmes like Skype, Google Hangouts, FaceTime, or WeChat Video), in-person interactions, or other formats. In several instances, it has been seen that online data may not adequately satisfy the goals of researchers. However, it has been determined that interviews are a valuable component of the netnographic inquiry process (Kozinets, 2020).

For the purpose of this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed within the framework of netnography technique.

First, the interested data is limited online. This research is focusing on studying the strategies of popular WeChat influencers to create commercially oriented content and their encountered tensions, however, reading blog contents and selected reader comments cannot understand the inner reasons of the influencers' choice such as why they select the certain comments and how to create commercial content while facing potential tensions. Moreover, it is difficult to discover the insights of multiple successful collaborations from marketers' side such as how the marketers choose suitable influencers for brand promotions. Thus, conducting qualitative interviews can understand more of the related consumers' inner world as well as their fuller social and cultural context for exploration of emerging themes.

Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews can suffice to inform the focus of this research. Different from long interviews (McCracken, 1988) which are focusing more on consumers' personal life experience with many open-ended questions, semi-structured in-depth interviews are more effective to get focused informational needs. Semi-structured interview questions are from the insight of the initial observation of online data, and all the questions are related to the narrowed questions in this research. However, this research is also applied some strategies and skills from long interviews, and it will be presented in the following part of interview strategies and encountered challenges.

Third, netnographic semi-structured in-depth interviews are flexible in terms of the requirement of time and format. Salmons (2011) defined e-interviews as computer-mediated communications. Though online interviews are quite similar with interviewing in general (Kozinets, 2015), the best advantage of netnographic interviews is to collect data by its multiple technical means in an intensive time. This research is focusing on studying WeChat influencers and marketers in China, and it is difficult to interview every interview participant based on their different locations for practical considerations. Thus, half of the interview participants are interviewed by WeChat videos / calls while the others based in Beijing and Shanghai are interviewed in person.

This research applied following procedures to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews:

First, identify and contact appropriate informants. As a self-netnographer (being a food influencer on WeChat official account since 2014, the researcher naturally accumulated considerable potential informants such as influencer friends and brand marketers especially

who have collaborated with the researcher), initial contacts of WeChat influencers and brand marketers are from researcher' friends or acquaintances. Participants are also asked to recommend other possible informants who meet the research criteria. In addition, some other popular influencers are recruited from social media platform of WeChat official account through public contact information by sending emails, SMS or leaving the message through WeChat public account platform to the potential participants depending on the type of their public contract information as well as convenience. All interview participants are recruited based on their relevance to research questions and theoretical positioning as well as convenience.

Second, get informed consent. All the participants are voluntary to take part in the study and signed informed consent forms before the interview. The researcher disclosed the purpose of the research and achieved informants' trust such as iterating researcher's credentials. More details of ethical concerns of the interview are discussed or explained in the part of "ethical issues" of the research.

Third, conduct the interview following the frame of qualitative depth-interviews. At the beginning, the researcher has explained the focus and the purpose of the study and established the procedures. Usually, the researcher gave a simple and effective opening conversation to create a comfortable atmosphere and let the informant could take off the defense (McCracken, 1988). In some cases, the researcher spent a few minutes of idle chatter with the friend informant before the formal interview then leading the informant to the focused topic. The primary role of the researcher oversees asking semi-structured questions and narrowed the topic to the point of the research through the conversation (Gubrium & Holstein 2002; McCracken, 1988).

The interview involves two groups of people, aged between 20 and 55, both male and female, from China as Table 3. The first group consists of WeChat official account bloggers, who have typically been running their accounts for over a year, with followers ranging from 10,000 to 1 million. The second group includes brand PR managers and other professionals on the client side who frequently collaborate with WeChat official account bloggers.

Each type of interviewee will consist of approximately 10-15 people. In total, there will be around 25-30 participants. The following are the interview questions tailored for the three types, respectively.

ID and names	Role	Current Career	Interview Mode/Date
1 Mr.Fan	Food Influencer	PR Manager	Video Interview/ February 2017
2 Ms.Wan	Art Influencer	Art Director	Video Interview/ February 2017
3 Mr.Kai	Food Influencer	Trader	Video Interview/ February 2017
4 Mr.Tei	Comment Influencer	Full-time Influencer	Video Interview/ February 2017
5 Mr.Nan	Comment Influencer	Entrepreneur	Phone Interview/ February 2017
6 Ms.Wen	Travel Influencer	Seller of mother and baby products	Video Interview/ March 2017
7 Mr.Yang	Comment Influencer	Content Manager	Video Interview/ April 2017
8 Mr.Dan	Food Influencer	Architect	Video Interview/ March 2017
9 Ms Chen	App Marketer	Brand marketer	Video Interview/ April 2017
10 Mr Lee	Marketer	Brand marketer	Face to face Interview/ June 2017
11 Mr Xi	Marketer	Brand marketer	Face to face Interview/ June 2017
12 Ms.Hun	Wedding Influencer	Full-time Influencer	Face to face Interview/ June 2017
13 Mr.Fox	Photography Influencer	Photographer	Face to face Interview/ June 2017
14 Mr.Gin	Food Influencer	Restaurant manager	Face to face Interview/ June 2017
15 Mr.Sun	Geography Influencer	Full-time Influencer	Face to face Interview/ July 2017
16Mr. Zhuang	Food Influencer	Food writer	Video Interview/ July 2017
17 Mr.Lee	Food Influencer	Full-time Influencer	Face to face Interview/ July 2017
18 Ms.Wang	Food influencer	CEO of the food account	Face to face Interview/ July 2017

19 Mr.Yao	Working with different brands based in Beijing	Agency Director	Video Interview/ February 2017
20 Ms.Duo	Working with different brands based in Shanghai	Agency Director	Video Interview/ February 2017
21 Ms.Xia	Working in film / video area	Marketing manager in an online company	Video Interview/ March 2017
22 Mr.Xian	Working with different brands based in Guangzhou	PR manager in an agency	Video Interview/ March 2017
23 Ms.Mai	Working for an earphone brand	Marketing manager in an earphone company	Video Interview/ April 2017
24 Ms.Tian	Working in an online English learning company	Marketing manager in a company	Video Interview/ April 2017
25 Ms.Bee	Working for promoting the website	Marketing manager in an online company	Video Interview/ April 2017
26 Ms.Qi	Working for different brands	PR manager in an agency	Face to face Interview/ July 2017
27 Ms.Guo	Working for promoting the food part of the website	Marketing manager in an online company	Face to face Interview/ July 2017
28 Ms.Xiao	Working for promoting the travel service	Marketing manager in a travelling agency	Face to face Interview/ July 2017
29 Ms. Zou	Working for promoting the online service	Marketing manager in an online company	Face to face Interview/ July 2017

Table 3 Interview participants

The online profiles of research participants are crucial in netnography, as interviews are closely tied to participants' online behavior and self-presentation (Kozinets, 2015). In this study, it was essential for the researcher to be familiar with the blog content of the influencers. The researcher first reviewed the participants' online information, which then informed the development of interview questions. This transparency allowed for more effective questioning and improved interaction, which was consistently applied throughout the interviews. Despite technological advancements enabling netnographic interviews through digital platforms, the core interview techniques—requiring patience, time, and expertise—remain fundamental for capturing high-quality data.

### **3.4.2 Participant observation**

Participant observation in ethnography can introduce obtrusiveness and disrupt natural settings, as informants may alter their behavior when aware of being observed. However, netnography, as Kozinets (2002) highlights, offers advantages such as reduced obtrusiveness, greater efficiency, simplified procedures, and lower costs. This is achieved through the researcher's "invisible" presence online. In this study, participant observation was employed to collect additional data from influencers and readers in a naturalistic context from December 2015 to December 2023.

The research process began with broad observation, monitoring over 50 active WeChat blogs, analyzing content and user comments. Data was gathered from an aggregate news feed site (<http://www.newrank.cn/>) that tracks over 10 million WeChat blogs, providing daily rankings. Additional blogs were identified using ranking websites like <http://top.aiweibang.com/> and <http://top.wxb.com/>. After one year of broad observation, the researcher narrowed the focus to the top 10 WeChat influencers based on creativity, popularity, and commercial blogging activity, following Morrison et al. (2004) who define such individuals as "lead" members in the market.

The study then focused on 10 widely read WeChat blogs, selected based on reading rates and blog ratings between December 2015 and December 2023. The chosen influencers represented diverse writing styles, all relying heavily on commercial collaboration, including WOMM (word-of-mouth marketing) messaging in their blogs.



Blog name	Code for citation	Active audience*	Average reading rate*
反裤衩阵地	FK	1422953	100000+
咪蒙	MM	1432132	100000+ (The account has been written off at Feb 2019)
六神磊磊读金庸	LS	1409283	100000+
毒舌电影	DS	1415126	100000+
黎贝卡的异想世界	LB	1305435	100000+ (top line article)
顾爷	GY	1342976	100000+
连岳	LY	968032	74101
槽边往事	CB	960329	75705
王左中右	WZ	973698	87594
社长从来不假装	SZ	309662	30455
(* The data of active audience and average reading rate are based on online news feeds at the end of December 2016: <a href="http://www.newrank.cn/">http://www.newrank.cn/</a> and <a href="http://top.aiweibang.com/">http://top.aiweibang.com/</a> ), active audience is only a small part of the overall subscribe audience.			

Table 4 10 widely read WeChat blogs

This study employs auto-netnography, drawing on the researcher's active participation as a food blogger on WeChat over a span of seven years. The researcher initially engaged as a reader, then launched a personal WeChat account in 2014, gaining a following of over 65,000 by 2023. Through collaborations with companies in various industries, the researcher documented interactions with readers in commercially focused content. Netnography, traditionally criticized for its passive non-participatory approach (Costello et al., 2017), is here complemented by auto-ethnography, as outlined by Hayano (1979), to explore the researcher's own culture and interactions within the online environment.

Data collection is divided into three categories: pre-existing data from WeChat blogs and brand collaborations, communicatively co-created data from interactions with readers, and produced data from researcher-generated content. This approach aligns with Kozinets' (2015) notion of participant observation, emphasizing the researcher's involvement in online spaces to shape social narratives. Despite critiques of limiting online engagement for data collection (Costello et al., 2017), the researcher mitigates such risks by using diverse data sources, including in-depth interviews, ensuring a comprehensive, scientifically rigorous study.

### 3.4.3 Netnographic fieldnotes

Fieldnotes are a crucial data collection method in ethnography, capturing the researcher's lived experience through systematic, regular documentation of observed interactions (Emerson et al., 2001). In the context of online environments, Kozinets (2015) proposes the term "netnographic fieldnotes" to distinguish data collected from online interactions, arguing that traditional fieldnotes may be ambiguous in digital spaces. Netnographic fieldnotes, unlike traditional ethnographic fieldnotes, often stem from downloading online communication archives rather than direct observation, and are written with more time and reflection, focusing on the researcher's interpretations rather than emergent details of lived experience (Kozinets, 2015).

Netnographic fieldnotes are distinguished by their flexibility in connecting online and offline data. For example, Scaraboto (2015) integrated offline participation and interactions, comparing offline experiences with online data to provide a more comprehensive analysis of geocachers. This dual approach highlights the broader potential of netnographic fieldnotes in bridging digital and physical worlds, contributing to a deeper understanding of online communities.

In this study, the researcher followed the above notes of netnographic fieldnotes and put it into practice. First, the researcher directly downloaded postings or reader comments of the influencers into her fieldnotes and then comment upon them in the text.

However, in the field of netnography, it is imperative to integrate the online observations with the researchers' personal encounters with them (Kozinets, 2015). Therefore, the aforementioned instance of a netnographic fieldnote is enhanced by incorporating the researcher's subjective observations as a reader. In addition to gathering reflective data through the observation of existing blogs and comments, the researcher also drew upon her personal experience as a WeChat influencer to provide reflective notes pertaining to the process of producing collaborative blogs and engaging with readers, among other aspects.

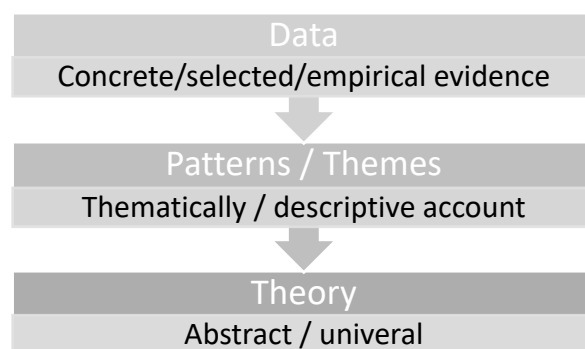
To summarise, the act of producing a netnographic fieldnote involves establishing a connection between one's inner and exterior worlds through self-awareness. The researcher's own reflections on the study and their interpretations contribute significantly to the analysis of the

data (Kozinets, 2020).

### 3.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis is the process of deconstructing a specific occurrence into smaller constituent elements, whereas interpretation entails the preservation or recognition of the whole within these individual elements (Kozinets, 2020). The objective of this part is to present a systematic description of the conducted data analysis and interpretation, following a set of established qualitative data analysis methodologies in this intricate procedure.

Netnography encompasses the process of coding online material, which includes the study and interpretation of chosen postings (Spiggle, 1994; Kozinets, 2015). The primary obstacle in comprehending qualitative data lies in the contentious issue of how reality is represented. Sherry (1991) introduced the concept of the “interpretive turn” in the field of epistemology. The focal point of the dispute revolves upon the methods employed to effectively communicate practical conclusions, deductions, and findings to the audience. Hence, it is imperative to elucidate the methodology employed by researchers in identifying or unveiling their data for the purpose of emerging interpretation. This can be achieved through the utilisation of subcategories, perspectives, themes, or other qualitative data analysis techniques. Insufficient description of this procedure may compromise the research’s reliability (Spiggle, 1994). Spiggle (1994) proposed an interpretive framework aimed at facilitating the connection between empirical and conceptual domains for researchers. In the field of netnography, this is not an anomaly. The coding process in this research follows the guidelines of qualitative data analysis in netnography (Kozinets, 2020). It involves three main steps: selecting specific data, organising themes, and abstracting the findings to the theory level. However, it is important to note that the entire data analysis process in this research is more recursive, iterative, progressive, and holographic. Figure 8 shows the general coding process.



*Figure 8 General coding process*

Both netnographic data analysis and hermeneutic interpretation share similarities with other qualitative data analysis methods, yet they possess distinct characteristics. One key aspect is the selective and focused nature of data collection, as online data can be virtually limitless. In this study, the researcher began by identifying the top 100 influencers via a news feed platform, ultimately narrowing the selection to 10 individuals after discarding those irrelevant to the research focus. The researcher documented the influencers' writing styles, classifications, interpretations, and conceptualizations to explain the rationale behind selecting these specific data points.

Data analysis in netnography focuses on examining online interactions, where the emphasis is on the behavior and actions of individuals rather than on the individuals themselves (Mead, 2018). In the context of netnography, online interactions, including textual content, videos, tags, and images, are considered forms of social activity. The primary aim of netnographic data analysis is to contextualize the social interaction experience (Kozinets, 2015). In this study, the data specifically addresses how influencers interacted with readers to enhance their popularity, aligning with the overarching research objective.

Spiggle (1994) outlines seven classic data analytic operations for consumer research, which were also considered in this study. These include categorization, which involves labeling data units and organizing them systematically; in this research, categorization was based on interview data to identify phenomena such as maintaining popularity amid tensions. Abstraction follows categorization, where data sharing common characteristics are identified. Comparison involves comparing similarities and differences in the collected data to inform future data collection, which was done by observing common points in the interview data and collecting additional online data from those perspectives. Dimensionalization involves examining emerging dimensions from categorized data and defining relationships between categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Integration uses grounded theory techniques like axial

and selective coding to integrate and analyze data. Iteration is the process of moving back and forth between analysis stages to refine categories, constructs, and conceptual connections, particularly during second-round interviews. Finally, refutation involves empirical scrutiny, such as using negative case analysis, to test emerging inferences and ensure the trustworthiness of findings. Spiggle (1994) emphasizes that categorization, abstraction, comparison, and integration are essential, while iteration and refutation are optional techniques in the inductive process.

The process of interpretation follows data analytic activities and should not be seen as a mere series of processes (Spiggle, 1994). There exist various methods for facilitating the interpretation of data, such as identifying patterns in meanings or decoding cultural codes. However, there is a lack of established guidelines for their practical application. This is due to the fact that interpretive insights often arise from serendipitous mental processes, and intriguing theories are often derived from the cognitive processes of the audience who perceive them as such (Davis, 1971). The job of addressing the intersection of data and theory has great importance. One approach involves utilising existing theory to support and analyse data within research contexts. Another approach entails generating new theories based on newly acquired data (Arnould, et al., 2006).

### **3.6 Ethical issues**

The area of research ethics encompasses both moral guidelines and principles within the realm of scientific inquiry. Ethics pertains to the choices of the manner in which to engage with interviewees, gather and retain data, and display findings (Kozinets, 2015). The ethical considerations surrounding netnography are of significant importance. Additionally, the absence of established protocols or ethical principles in the realm of online ethnography further exacerbates these problems. The primary focus of the intricate ethical dilemmas in netnography pertains to the tensions between the challenges encountered in conventional ethnography and the realm of social media research, as illustrated in Figure 9 (Kozinets, 2020).

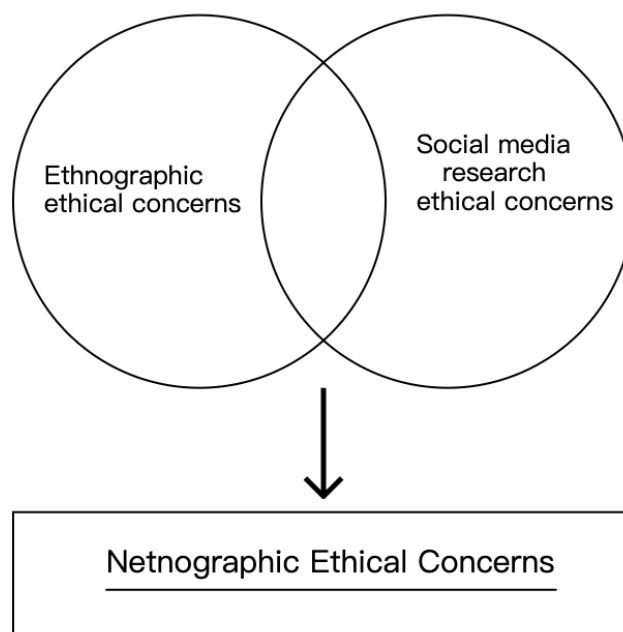


Figure 9 Netnographic ethical concerns based on Kozinets (2020)

The similar concern in ethnography and netnography is the character of incursion in human-level research. When conducting “observation” and “field work” as most important ways to collect data in ethnography, researchers are usually visible and it may contain uncertain risks including challenging, offending, or even hurting the people in the studying communities during the process of research or after presenting the research. Netnography is also similar human-level research as a kind of online ethnography equivalent though the “visible” level may differ from case to case (the same above ethical risks and including misunderstanding / misleading / misrepresenting when interacting with people online as attending to human feeling).

The difference between ethnography and netnography in ethics is that conducting netnography has more uncertain issues in dealing with the complex relationship of Internet public data and private people (Kozinets, 2015). According to Internet researcher pioneer Walther (2002), individuals who upload content onto a communication system that is accessible to the general public on the Internet should be aware that it is considered public information, and not intended to be private or secret. However, the fact that people agree their public posts for public viewing cannot automatically lead to the conclusion that they wish their posts can be used as data for research purposes (Kozinets, 2020). Through 544 online

survey, Williams et. al (2012) found that 62% people expressed their concerns of using their public social media data in varying levels. Kozinets (2020) also named the phenomenon of using social media data unlimitedly as “the consent gap” in social media related research. In the past, some researchers treat netnography as a form of covert content analysis for some sensitive topics or vulnerable populations which is not permitted in netnography’s guideline up to date (Kozinets, 2020). To avoid bringing harm or embarrassment to people, it is necessary to seek the approval if we want to cite people’s texts related to their privacy directly.

To fully support the ethics in this research is up to academic standard, the following table 5 summarises how the present research addresses pertinent ethical considerations detailed according to the latest guideline of Netnography (Kozinets, 2015; 2020).

The selection of nineteen guidelines considers three main areas of concern to the present research: obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of collected data, and managing incentives. Table 5 is the research ethics based on Morris (2016) and Kozinets (2020).

Guideline	Implemented measures
<b>Autonomy</b>	
1. Research participation is based on informed consent.	All interviewers received a signed electronic version of the letter of intent before the interview.
2. Research participant should be informed the purpose of the research.	The purpose of the research is to study the strategies of Chinese influential influencers to create commercially oriented articles on WeChat and this is well explained to all the participants before the interview.
3. Research participant should have the right to accept or decline the interview; or to withdraw anytime	All the related requirements are clearly listed in the informed consent.

without coercion, threat, or penalty.	
4. Follow-up contact with participants must be agreed in the previous contact.	All have been asked permissions via phone, e-mail or WeChat for further clarification or follow-up interviews.
<p>Ps: permission is usually not necessary when dealing with publicly available data in netnography; informed consent is for the interview participant or the participant who has direct interaction with the. In this research, the collected public blogs and reader comments are be seen as publicly available data.</p>	
<p><b>Data Confidentiality and Security</b></p>	
5. Anonymizing data. Providing pseudonymous new names for identity concerns.	All the interview participants in this research have been provided pseudonymous new names unless informed consent is obtained to reveal identification details. Quoted public online data has be considered by its traceable level and sensitivity.
6. All platform and web application users have right of research use of data according to national law.	All the data is collected from public site under conditions that do not require special ethical procedures for netnographic study.
7. All the data must be stored, transferred and processed securely in accordance with relevant data protection policies.	All the data is protected by password protection and encryption. Anonymising data for transcription, translation and analysis processes.
8. Researchers should keep other participants' details regarding identity or contact information	This concern was addressed by researcher's general description of the purpose and possible value of the research but not mention the concrete people as some participants may have interest to know who else participated in the research.



9. Researchers should disclose their identities and the purpose of the research.	This concern was addressed by researcher’s own disclosure before any interaction with participants for research purposes.
<b>Incentives</b>	
10. Researcher could offer a brief report summary as an encouragement for participation and inform participants of potential research risks/limitations.	The researcher promised to offer participants an abridged version of key findings from this research if they want. The information of potential research risks/limitations have been delivered to the participants.

Table 5 Research ethics based on Morris, 2016; Kozinets, 2020

In this research, the netnography project is studying commercially oriented blogs and influential WeChat influencers; it is not to study sensitive topic or vulnerable people. The focus is on a group of people rather than a traditional community. Although the research explores advertising strategies of these blogs within the context of marketing, and advertising is inherently public, this study remains mindful of ethical considerations. It carefully assesses each case during data collection to avoid any potential harm to human subjects and address ethical concerns (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

### 3.7 Limitations

This section discusses some issues which arose as a result of collecting data, including the translation of English from Chinese interviewers, reflections on the method employed, and the evaluation of the research.

The factors that restrict the implications of the study findings are known as research limitations (Yin & Quazi, 2018). This research had a few limitations. The dynamic and evolving nature of online communities poses challenges for researchers, as user behavior, platform features, and content trends constantly shift, affecting interactions, content engagement, and influencer strategies. This fluidity requires me to stay adaptable and continuously update their understanding, making it difficult to generalize findings. Additionally, integrating diverse data sources—such as interviews, social media content, and observational data—presents interpretive challenges. Combining these sources requires

careful attention to context, tone, and meaning, as discrepancies between online and offline data and varying participant perspectives can introduce biases. I must employ rigorous methods to synthesize and interpret data coherently, accounting for potential subjectivity.

## CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH CONTEXT

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides context for the empirical research conducted within the field. The main emphasis of the empirical research is to uncover the strategies utilized by WeChat influencers in their commercially driven WeChat blogs, while also examining the approaches adopted by brand marketers in the domain of WeChat influencer marketing. Situated within the social media industry, this study acknowledges the intricate interplay of economic, socio-cultural, and regulatory dynamics that both shape and are shaped by various elements extending beyond the confines of the Chinese market. The chapter is structured as follows: first, I offer an overview of the economic, socio-cultural, and regulatory milieu; second, I provide an in-depth examination of pertinent industry stakeholders (influencers and marketers) and the evolution of placement ads on WeChat blogs. This contextual background establishes the foundation for the study's subsequent empirical analysis.

## 4.2 Influencer marketing environment in China

### 4.2.1 Economic situation:

As of June 2021, the number of Internet users in China reached 1.011 billion, showing a growth of 0.22 billion compared to the end of December 2020 (Cui & Kertész, 2023). With the rise of the mobile Internet, the advertising industry is constantly adjusting its strategies to stay relevant. It closely examines media development trends and consumer media consumption habits to explore and create new advertising models and communication channels. The Chinese mobile advertising sector is currently experiencing a positive phase, characterised by increasing revenues and steady growth in scale. With the exponential increase in the number of Internet users, the online advertising industry has been presented with a vast and expansive market.

In the 21st century, online advertising has emerged as the dominant profit model in the field, as the focus of advertising activities has shifted from traditional media to new media. The rise and evolution of online advertising has completely transformed the advertising industry. It had a significant impact on people's perception of media consumption, leveraging its unique strengths to stand out in the advertising industry. Online advertising has experienced remarkable growth in the past decade, surpassing traditional media advertising in driving the overall expansion of the advertising industry.

The main profit point of WeChat platform, similar to traditional media, is advertising, the most common form of which is to embed advertisements within promoted articles, so that the presentation of advertisements is closer to the content, which can, to some extent, reduce the audience's aversion to advertisements and thus reap better advertising effects. An increasing number of advertisers want to utilise this kind of advertising to promote their brands and fulfil their marketing objectives.

Reader incentives, placement advertisements, and e-commerce are the three primary monetization strategies for WeChat influencers. For popular influencers, the payment for one placement advertisement can reach tens of thousands RMB, if even hundreds of thousands RMB while the average annual salary is about 10 thousand RMB in China cities (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021).

Soft / placement ads on WeChat blogs are persuasive writings as a type of paid advertising. "Soft" or "placement" ads on WeChat blogs refer to advertising content that is integrated seamlessly into the overall context of a WeChat blog post. Unlike traditional banner ads or pop-up advertisements, soft/placement ads are designed to blend in with the surrounding content and appear as natural or organic recommendations or endorsements from the blogger. The specific collaboration model is as follows: both parties sign a contract, Party A, i.e., PR company or brand, proposes the demand of writing advertising content, Party B, i.e., self-publishing company, develops exclusive graphic content for Party A, integrates the advertising ideas, slogans, and product features that Party A needs to convey into the media content, and generates public discussion afterward. In the influencer/ KOL industry, the market price of advertising graphics is about 2 RMB per click, and this price will be slightly adjusted according to the number of fans, average daily activity data, reading and opening rate of the specific account, etc. The revenue for 100,000+ click rate advertising graphics starts from 200,000 RMB, 200,000+ click rate advertising graphics starts from 400,000 RMB, and so on (Ye, et al., 2023), which makes WeChat an attractive market for promoting the brand.

Influencers' primary goal is to increase traffic to their own WeChat official accounts since the reading rate is positively associated with its economic value. Driven by financial interests,

commercially oriented WeChat blogs have always maintained a user mindset in content generation and operation in line with Internet user habit. Users connect with the subscribing blogs based on the needs they create, and the blogs meets and responds to those needs.

#### **4.2.2 Socio-cultural environment:**

Unlike the emphasis on individualism and democracy in Western culture, Chinese cultural tradition places a strong emphasis on collectivism and authoritarianism (Zhao & Belk, 2008). This can sometimes lead to the oppression of Chinese citizens, who tend to prioritise obedience to authorities and institutions. In China, traditional media often serve as the official government voice. However, due to the rise of social media, Chinese media users have shifted their focus towards particularly WeChat blogs.

In 2003, the rise in popularity of BBS (Bulletin Board Systems), forums, and blogs in China paved the way for the emergence of self-media, enabling users to participate in discussions, post messages, and engage with one another in new ways. A group of knowledgeable individuals began expressing their thoughts online. This caught the attention of many Internet users and resulted in the emergence of numerous reputable early influencers (such as 木子美 or 芙蓉姐姐). Sina Weibo is considered one of the most influential social media platforms.

Sina Weibo was launched in August 2009 and quickly gained over 50 million users in just one year. In the fourth quarter of 2018, Sina Weibo boasted over 462 million monthly active users, experiencing consistent growth for three consecutive years, emerging as a crucial platform for content entrepreneurship (Zhao, et al.,2013.).

In 2011, Tencent launched the communication app WeChat. According to official data from Tencent Company, as of June 2023, WeChat stands as one of the world's most popular instant messaging applications, boasting over one billion users. WeChat official accounts also rank among China's largest content platforms, with millions of registered accounts and hundreds of millions of active users, firmly holding the title of "China's top social app". It is difficult for individuals to part ways with WeChat, a social tool that has become deeply ingrained in their lives. WeChat launched official accounts in 2012. With its widespread popularity and a large user base, WeChat official accounts have attracted numerous authors and caused a significant buzz in the industry. WeChat now offers a dedicated space for influencers and their followers to connect and participate in various multimedia activities.

WeChat official accounts are widely used to share ideas, thoughts, and information while also building brand awareness.

### **4.2.3 An overview of WeChat official accounts**

Currently, the WeChat official account is split into domestic and international versions that are not linked. If people want to use the domestic version, users must go through the domestic registration process, which means the user must meet three conditions: a Chinese ID, Chinese mobile phone, and a domestic bank card associated with the personal WeChat account. There are four types of WeChat official accounts. This study focuses on the subscription account.

#### **(1) Service account**

The main objective of the service account is to provide exceptional service to targeted user groups, including managing phone inquiries and delivering banking services to cardholders. The main goal is to improve service quality and user management for businesses. The service account provides not just information, but also practical features like card vouchers and a WeChat mini-store, along with other business-centric services. In addition, service numbers are divided into two types: certified and uncertified. Having an enterprise certification is essential for guaranteeing top-notch and reliable services. On the other hand, service numbers without certification may have limited functionality and may not be as effective in promoting businesses. This particular account falls outside the scope of this research.

#### **(2) Enterprise account**

The enterprise account is commonly used by businesses, as well as governments, institutions, and other organizations. Its main goal is to optimise internal management processes and improve office efficiency for businesses or groups. It enables businesses and employees to establish a connection, allowing for effective communication with supply chains upstream and downstream. This account is designed to be tailored to meet the unique needs of businesses. It offers the most essential and hands-on functional services. This particular account is not covered in this study.

#### **(3) Subscription account**

This particular account is highly coveted by both individuals and companies because of its immense popularity and high demand. Individuals and organizations have the option to establish an official account dedicated to providing information to users, akin to a newspaper

or magazine. It resembles a newspaper or magazine and incorporates the most up-to-date methods of disseminating information. Similar to a certified management accountant (CMA), the process of self-publishing encompasses several steps, including content development, data analysis, promotion, and ultimately connecting with the audience. By following this series of activities, you can establish a powerful brand image, increase awareness, and embody valuable concepts for individuals and businesses. This particular type of official account is the primary area of concentration for this study.

#### (4) Mini program

It refers to a type of lightweight application that operates within the WeChat ecosystem. Mini programs are essentially small, standalone apps that users can access and use without the need for downloading or installing them separately from the WeChat app. These mini programs offer various functionalities and services, ranging from e-commerce and gaming to transportation and utilities. Users can access mini programs directly within the WeChat app by searching for them or scanning QR codes, making them convenient and easily accessible.

WeChat is intentionally designed to maintain a semi-closed and private nature, serving as a social platform. Many people discover WeChat official accounts through recommendations from friends and family or by searching for topics that interest them. In simple terms, the less acknowledged the official accounts, the quicker they will be overshadowed by the more popular ones that receive greater attention.

WeChat official accounts are created on the WeChat platform with the aim of cultivating a semi-closed social circle of acquaintances. We can only access each other's information if we are connected as friends. WeChat influencers distribute their content solely through official accounts, delivering it directly to their subscribers. There are two ways to interact. At first, people can leave comments on the accounts, but only the account influencer has the power to respond. The user is unable to communicate with any other users. In addition, users often share content with their friends or social circles, which enables discussions, chats, and interactions through the comment feature in the WeChat moment (like a semi-closed Twitter).

WeChat may appear to have limitations when it comes to communication and sharing, but its semi-closed social circle of acquaintances provides a more focused audience. These



individuals' emotional perspectives are often shaped by the information they receive from their acquaintances. WeChat offers a versatile platform for users to openly share their thoughts and emotions.

### **4.3 The classification of Internet personalities**

Understanding the classification of internet personalities enables marketers, content creators, and brands to create more targeted and effective strategies for engaging with online audiences.

#### **Celebrities**

A celebrity has a large degree of public recognition (Thomson, 2006). Famous actors, singer and TV personalities are all included in this category. Celebrities typically have well-established follower bases. It is a common practice for many firms to use celebrity endorsers as a marketing strategy for grabbing the audiences' attention (Choi & Rifon, 2007) and creating or enhancing corporate/ brand identity through the process of meaning transfer (McCracken, 1989). To collaborate with celebrities will occur significantly higher cost than collaborating with smaller-scale influencers. However, using celebrities as endorsers can be risky, and sometimes the celebrity's qualities could be inappropriate, irrelevant and undesirable to the company or the product (Erdogan, 1999).

#### **Wanghong (网红)**

"Wanghong" is a Chinese term for internet celebrities. The first wave, "Wanghong 1.0," emerged in the late 1990s with online writers gaining popularity through their blogs and published books (Yang & Chen, 2012; Zheng, et al., 2020). In 2005, the "Wanghong 2.0" generation rose through "pictures + words" shared online. By 2008, "Wanghong 3.0" appeared, leveraging social media platforms like Weibo and WeChat with content in "video + picture + text + live broadcast" formats, monetizing faster and more extensively (Feng, et al., 2020).

The Wanghong Economy refers to the monetization of public influence by Wanghong and their managers (Zhao & Zhang, 2016). Key drivers include the rise of mobile social platforms, increased personal spending power, and the growing appeal of individualized consumption in China (Sun & Wang, 2020).

However, brands are often cautioned against relying on this type of internet celebrity. Wanghong typically gain followers through appearance and personality rather than expertise, and their influence on specific topics is limited. Their popularity tends to be short-lived, with viral content leading to fleeting fame. While collaborating with Wanghong may boost visibility, it rarely results in meaningful or trustworthy brand content.

### **Influencer**

The term ‘Influencer’ refers to an individual who can inspire or guide the actions of others through posting content on social media (Merriam-Webster dictionary 2021). Kozinets et al. (2023, p.20) propose a more comprehensive definition of influencer and state the following: “an Influencer builds meaningful relationships with an audience through consistently providing social media content with a distinctive voice and image, all reflecting and contributing to their personal brand.” In the definition, they summarize three important features of an influencer which are 1). creating content on social media such as Instagram, and Facebook 2). building relationships with people or audiences, and 3). expressing themselves with a consistent and distinctive voice and image. Specifically, they mention personal branding in the definition. Personal branding is “a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery” (Gorbatov, et al., 2018, p.6). Personal branding is thus a strategy for influencers to use to market themselves and attract consumers.

### **KOL (Key Opinion Leader)**

A Key Opinion leader (KOL) refers to the most trusted and well-respected person who expresses his or her views publicly and is able to influence the thoughts and behaviour of other people (Zou & Peng, 2019). A KOL has a strong focus on their content style and strategy to influence their target audiences. As an acknowledged information source, they often propose unique insights and have great interpersonal skills (Carpenter & Sherbino, 2010).

With the rapid development of streaming media, the popularity of KOL has been sped up. These KOLs often post information (e.g., videos photos, articles) online to attract followers. To leverage the value of KOL’s follower base, companies begin to distribute more advertising budget onto the KOLs who can help promote their products. Compared to

Wanghong, KOL uses social media to establish his or her own personal brand, share their expertise or knowledge with their followers, and establish a sense of community as opposed to simply growing their follower count to improve their income like Wanghong.

However, as for the context of Chinese social media, “key opinion leader” (KOL) is interchangeable to the term, influencer. With larger audiences and a greater commercial focus, the KOLs in China are more influential than the typical influencers outside of China (Kozinets, et al., 2023). The accounts of the KOLs in China normally need to be verified to prove authenticity and obtain trust among audiences. WeChat influencers equals Key opinion leaders on WeChat, and as such the term WeChat influencers is adopted throughout this study.

### **Blogger**

A blog is an online journal or information website which people could share their opinions and knowledge on different topics (Minaev, 2023). A blogger is the person who runs and manages a blog. Bloggers now take the similar roles as traditional opinions leaders whose opinions are influential and valued among social contacts. They take the roles as “potentially powerful makers and breakers of brands, political candidates, and news stories” (Hansen, et al., 2011, p.23). Bloggers play important roles in business marketing. They possess “higher levels of enduring involvement, innovativeness, exploratory behaviour, self-perceived knowledge, and more expertise with the product category” (Lyons & Henderson 2005, p. 319). Some of the bloggers could provide current and even advanced information to consumers (Hsu & Tsou, 2011). The authors of WeChat official accounts are bloggers.

### **Content Creators**

A content creator generates professional content with high quality, uniqueness, aesthetics, and styles (Kozinets, et al. 2023). The contents are posted on social media channels and normally other users could use it for free. Content creators are recognized for their skills of creating distinctive content. Many of them are professional such as photographers, writers, and videographers. Compared to influencers, content creators focused more on the production of stylish content rather than relationships with audiences (Kozinets, et al. 2023). However, due to the high-quality of their content, the loyalty of their following is often strong. Their fans are more likely to consume for entertainment purposes rather than for taking advice or learning new knowledge. Since there is no particular area of expertise, to work with them can

be difficult to generate sales and influence niche target. However, their content generates high viewership, making it an effective way to increase broad brand awareness.

In this study, we focus on the popular bloggers on WeChat, they are also known as WeChat key opinion leaders, in another words, Chinese influencers on WeChat.

#### **4.4 WeChat influencers and WeChat blog context**

According to public data of Xinbang (<https://www.newrank.cn/>), 1.3% of the 900,000 WeChat official accounts monitored on a daily basis by Xinbang (mobile data service provider Xinbang is the only one that can give statistics on content across all platforms, and the Xinbang Index has become the benchmark for mobile Internet content value in China) have less than 100,000 followers, and the accounts themselves have almost no commercial value and the ability to generate traffic. Among the WeChat official accounts with more than 100,000 followers, 21.14% are operated by individuals, and these WeChat official accounts mainly share personal opinions. Most of the 100,000+ follower official accounts are controlled by content startups of various sizes. Only 8.78% of the WeChat market is made up of significant numbers with more than one million followers, which can be separated into numerous segments: emotion, fashion, video, vehicle, sports, campus, workplace, current affairs, etc (Hong, 2017).

In this study, “WeChat influencers” refers to UGC (user-created content) and OGC (occupationally generated content) content creators that operate alone or in small teams, and who are private, civilian, and independent. Not included in this list are PGC content creators, including new government media and traditional media WeChat official accounts. Since the content produced by these platforms is widely disseminated through multiple layers of supervision and auditing, it is less likely to be promoted commercially than private, civilian, and autonomous communication subjects; therefore, it is not currently within the scope of this thesis.

Excluding emotional accounts, all these above-listed accounts necessitate extensive knowledge and experience in all areas of content production, which requires a high level of operational ability and integration with resources in the PR media industry. Oftentimes, the traditional media practitioners transition into the ranks of independent publishers, bringing

with them the professional content production process and traffic resources from traditional media. This has led to a high level of competition. An experienced media expert is needed to compete in this industry.

## 4.5 Commercially oriented WeChat blogs

Commercially oriented WeChat blogs are akin to product placement in blogs. Product placement has over two decades history in the advertising industry (Tessitore & Geuens, 2013). Before the emergence of new media, TV dramas, movies, newspapers and publications, variety shows, etc. were the main carriers of product placement, while the booming development of WeChat official account has provided a new carrier for product placement. It should be clarified that, in this study, product placement on WeChat official accounts refer to those forms of advertisements that incorporate brand and product information into WeChat articles, which are often presented strategically in the form of text, pictures, videos, etc. Advertisers use such forms of advertisements to enhance the reach of product or brand information to WeChat audiences, thus strengthening their awareness of the brand or product and deepening the impression of the brand at the subconscious level. The more important and direct purpose of product placement is to promote sales of the product (Gould, et al., 2000; Tessitore & Geuens, 2013). This form of advertising is also considered by some scholars as soft copy advertising or native advertising (Tessitore & Geuens, 2013), but in its essence, it is still a kind of product placement, only with a different communication vehicle.

In the past, traditional advertising formats predominantly relied on textual and pictorial elements in magazine advertisements, while television shows and movies primarily utilized video-based content (Audrezet, et al., 2020). However, the emergence of social media platforms like WeChat has afforded influencers greater creative autonomy, allowing them to deliver diverse experiences and entertainment to their audience. Within the scope of this study, placement ads refer to advertisements strategically integrated within articles published on WeChat. The following figure is a typical commercially oriented WeChat blog, with over 100K+ reads and approximately 5K words in content. Due to the settings of the WeChat official account, the author can only select 200 reader comments. The 200 reader comments for this blog amount to over 10,000 words, bringing the total word count to 16K. Figure 10 offers a detailed visual representation of a WeChat long-form advertisement, showcasing not

only the layout and design of the promotional content but also the interactive element of reader engagement through comments. This figure highlights how brands utilize WeChat's article format to convey in-depth messages, while also illustrating the platform's capacity for consumer interaction through public feedback, which provides insight into consumer perceptions and reactions to the advertisement. This dynamic is crucial in understanding the role of user-generated content in digital marketing.

"我在上海，干了一件事，别人都说我太敢了"

Original 反裤衩阵地 反裤衩阵地 2022-09-07 03:00 3 listened

多年前我曾听过一个八卦，某个大牌男星家的玄关专门设了一个更衣间，所有去他家的人，无论是谁，都麻烦先换衣服，以确保没有携带任何偷拍设备，手机必须留在门口。当时听着还觉得荒唐，但对比如今越来越密集的名人公开互锤来看，这倒是未雨绸缪的先驱。

不仅明星、网红们纷纷在微博公审渣男，越来越多的普通人在遭遇背叛后也开始依葫芦画瓢，结合对话截图、往来记录，制作成内容完整、物料翔实的文档发到社交媒体上，供所有人窥"渣"。

"你说现在谁还想结婚呢？"我22岁的小侄女和我闲聊时吐槽，"遍地渣男，人间不值得。"

我笑了笑，确实也不想劝她不要因噎废食。

作为一个成年人，我选择单身的原因，显然不是因为怕遇人不淑——说句玩笑话，到了一定岁数，什么烂桃花？什么渣不渣？来的都是客。

成年人在乎过程中有快乐，至于结局如何。

反裤衩阵地



那段时间女朋友确实不怎么在她，她每天大部分时间都在看书，一开始和男友写邮件也只是日常问候：今天抢到菜了吗？你们小区还好吗？

而男友给她的回信，除了分享他所了解到的各种最新情况，还会附一张他当日站在阳台上拍的风光照：有时细雨迷离、有时阳光普照、有时霞光旖旎。而结尾总是一句，"这世界还是很美的。"

反裤衩阵地

成年人不在乎过程中有快乐，至于结局如何，都可以接受。一起看过当时的月亮，各自还有明天的太阳。

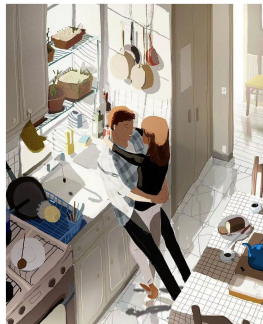
真正令我们这些经济独立、生活自治的成年人，在婚姻面前频频打退堂鼓的原因，是这些年变幻莫测的大环境。

尤其是今年，看过身边各种已婚有娃人士的狼狈，更是心有余悸——

两口子居家办公，屏幕里连线开会的是给钱的老板，屏幕外是上网课不专心的老板（还是自己生的）；食物短缺的阶段，偏偏巧妇要面对无米之炊，每天扒着手机起早贪黑给一家子老小抢吃抢喝；年中一批大厂裁员，人人听在耳朵里都是心惊胆战，当爹当妈的更加倍夹起尾巴做人。自己可以不吃不喝从此不消费，孩子的钢琴课英语课断了可怎么办？

如果还是单身，非常时期窝在家看看剧刷手机，凉凉地吃泡面也能活下去，暂时失业甚至不会短暂感到一种解脱，反正一人吃饱全家不愁。

是啊，现在谁还想结婚？我们为什么要结婚？



所以，这也是我最近接到上海闺蜜的电话之后，震惊到无以复加的原因。

"我要结婚了"，她在电话里宣布。

若是旁人，祝福就完了。可偏偏是她，我必须问个究竟。

她是我整个二个头青春的最佳损友，我俩每周至少得见三次，相约在三里屯的脏街酒吧，从第一家喝到最后一家。她是那种"拼命工作拼命"

反裤衩阵地

第一家喝到最后一家。她是那种"拼命工作拼命玩"的女生，在公关公司工作，除了上班，就是约朋友喝大酒，没有时间给男友。她也零零散散地谈过恋爱，曾经有一个对她很长情的男生，最终还是被她赶跑了——约会三年，她始终不肯同居，甚至不肯让那个男生在她家过夜。分手那天，我俩在蝴蝶酒吧（时代的眼泪）豪饮50杯霸王（伏特加兑红牛），"不是难过，是庆祝"，她说。

后来她换工作，去了甲方，因此搬去了上海。两年后又交往了一个男友，虽然现在年纪大了，喝酒再也没有以前凶，但对男朋友的态度始终如一：不要继续、不要占有、保持独立。

今年开春，上海疫情变得严重，他们各自居家，被迫开启了隔江而望的"异地恋"。有一段时间，打开手机每天都是闹心的消息，女朋友对所有人包括我都说了：最近不闲聊，不想上网，有事打电话。

没想到，她男朋友说：那我们写邮件吧。每天一封，互通有无。



反裤衩阵地

她忽然发现，他们像久未练习的舞伴。一个人试探跳跃一小步，另一个人可能略有生疏，仍会意跟上。

她开始在邮件里畅谈一些只是偶尔在脑子里跳出来、却从未有过听说的事情。比如《山海经》里有个妖怪特别好笑之类，那是约会时男人们从来不想搭茬的内容，但在这个很闲散又心里没底的时代，她再也不想讨好谁，只是特别想倾诉。

没想到那边的回复洋洋洒洒，居然说起了他小时候一直喜欢鬼太郎漫画，最记得里面有一个化身整面墙壁的妖怪。

这种感觉竟然很踏实。她踏入社会之后的每一段恋爱都像半浮在空中，虽然在刚开始时也有电击感，约会甜蜜身体合拍，节日从来不少礼物，但也仅此而已。从最初的自我介绍开始，工作上的琐碎，共同朋友的新闻，哪家餐厅不错一起去吃……话题永远如此，多谈几个便觉得所有恋爱都只是跟不同的人做同样的事，于是意兴阑珊。

而在今年这个对人对事最消极的时刻，她却在电子邮件里，找到了一个朋友。



反裤衩阵地



关系发生关键性变化，是源于她某日的一封信件——

"今天取菜，对门的老太太听见动静，开门怯生生地问我，能不能从我这里买一点。子女都在国外，她不会用手机抢菜，而家里只剩下米和咸菜了，她是可以喝粥，但老头子顶不住了。"

我难极了，把当天的菜包全给她了，她硬要给我钱，我没有收。

这个老太太平时不大理人的，为了老公，居然出来讨菜，女人真的太不容易了。"

反裤衩阵地

邮件发出后，第二天下午，他收到了志愿者送上门的两份物资——果然是她男友百舸夫人给弄来的。打开邮箱，男友的邮件也到了——

"作为一个没啥大本事的男人，我力所能及弄来一些东西，希望能让两位女士今天稍微容易一点。"

那一刻的感动，当然是巨大的，女朋友说甚至有一种"倾城之恋"之感，但这还不算完。

当天晚上，有人敲门，她开门，发现是对面的老先生。提着一只食盒，要请她尝尝手艺。"我们家都是我做饭的"，老头儿自豪地说。

她关上门，打开食盒，里面是四只炸得金黄酥脆的菜饭糕、一碗浓油赤酱的红烧肉、一碟切得细细的清炒空心菜丝、还有一份清得清爽爽的苹果块。用的是她送去的材料，而她自己绝对无法把菜做到这种精致的程度。

这几只小菜，让她一时半刻回不了神，仿佛周遭世界在刹那之间恢复了秩序，而生活也重新变得有滋有味。

那天晚上的邮件，她是这么写的——

"我依然确信我一个人也能过得很好，但多一个伴，又会看到生活的另一面。"(随信附上我今天晚餐，对门老爷子做的，他邀请你之后来一起吃的。)

反裤衩阵地 > ...

后来，上海逐步解封。能见面那一天，女朋友竟然还有些激动，就像学生时代要去见笔友一样。她买了酒，坐在路边，远远看见男友奋力骑着自行车朝她这边赶来，突然福至心灵。

“很高兴见到你”，男友傻呵呵的，也是和她玩“网友见面”梗。

而她对他说，“要不我们结婚吧。”



反裤衩阵地 > ...

这大概是最近十年，我听过的最甜求婚故事。

当然，我一边感叹，一边责怪她终于弃我不顾，在结婚人数和新生儿数频频跌破冰点的当下，居然跑去跟人结婚生孩子。

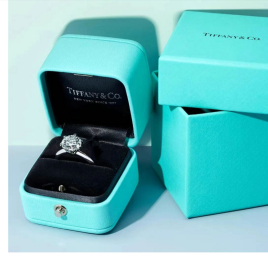
“如果你的爱人也是你最好的朋友，那就勇敢试试吧。”女朋友笑嘻嘻地说，“万一将来有一天你们走到岔岔路上，他也会是那个支持你离开的人。”

打电话除了分享喜讯，女朋友还让我帮她挑订婚戒指。她知道我最喜欢这些，尤其是你要足够了解一个人，才知道她这一路走来，值得一份什么样的寄托。

我帮她选了蒂芙尼的经典六爪镶嵌钻戒。

“想一想你为什么决定结婚？不是被父母逼的，不是为了省房租，不是为了找一个人共同养车养房，不是到了年纪生育焦虑，不是热恋上头决定闪婚，甚至不是因为害怕孤独终老，那么，当所有的理由都退下去，只有一个最重要的理由浮上来，那就是，因了解而爱。”

反裤衩阵地 > ...



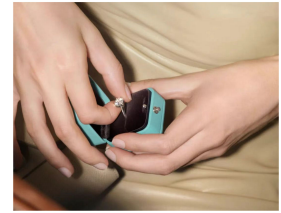
这样的笃定与纯粹，就像装在小小蓝色礼盒里举世闻名的蒂芙尼六爪镶嵌订婚钻戒，没有多余装饰，六个精致镶爪将钻石高举，爱有千面，却皆是唯一。

一个冷知识是，这枚诞生于1886年的六爪镶嵌钻戒，是蒂芙尼专利首创（因此行业内管六爪镶嵌也叫The Tiffany Setting），也是世界上第一枚真正意义上的订婚戒指。

在那之前的戒指，钻石通常被镶成一个平面，被灰灰暗暗地包裹在金属底座之中，同时还装饰有繁复的维多利亚时期纹饰。恰如许多现实中的婚姻：掺杂了太多别的东西，爱反而是最隐晦的那一个。

反裤衩阵地 > ...

直到蒂芙尼六爪钻戒的诞生，人们才发现，原来可以以一种直接、赤诚、令人瞩目的方式，对另一个人表达“你是唯一”。



以及，若你看过《欲望都市》、《新娘大作战》（安妮·海瑟薇版本）、《情归阿拉巴马》这些经典爱情影视剧，那些女主角之所以看到这只小蓝盒子会尖叫，以及打开盒面的瞬间会热泪盈眶，皆是因为，蒂芙尼订婚钻戒上的钻石，实在格外闪烁，美得令人心脏停跳一拍。

作为举世闻名的钻石权威，蒂芙尼率先采用了“钻石溯源体系”，并以远超行业标准的严苛原则进行甄选。因此，全世界仅有0.04%的钻石能被冠以“蒂芙尼钻石”之名。

反裤衩阵地 > ...

所以，哪怕只是一枚不到1克拉的蒂芙尼钻石同样拥有举世无双的耀眼火光，戴在指上，如炽烈燃烧的小小太阳，堪称“完美钻石”。

就像我对即将结婚的女友所说：虽然现在绝大多数人都不相信会有完美的婚姻，但既然要开始，那不妨以蒂芙尼婚戒创造一个完美的开始。



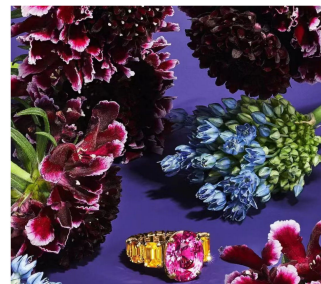
除了品质上精挑细选，蒂芙尼订婚钻戒的耀眼夺目，更是因为经历了独一无二的切割打磨。没有一颗钻石原石是相同的，它们采购回来之后会被蒂芙尼工匠详细记录重量、颜色、净度等等，再根据这些特点设计专属的镶嵌造型。

反裤衩阵地 > ...

所以除了经典的六爪镶嵌钻戒，你还可以选择采用方形混合切割工艺的Tiffany True系列订婚钻戒。因着钻石不同的打磨方式、色彩与造型，它们被镶嵌在线条隽朗的T形戒托上，更贴切简约、真实的现代爱情。

作为一个珠宝爱好者，我必须额外再多说一句：蒂芙尼除了经典款式珠宝，还有一个令所有珠宝爱好者及藏家都垂涎三尺的系列，Blue Book高级珠宝。

这个系列一年发布一次，完全是集世间最华美的宝石，以最奇思妙想的设计，制作巧夺天工的珠宝。每年的Blue Book高级珠宝系列之中，也会有不同款式的戒指，价格也并非完全高不可攀。



反裤衩阵地 > ...

如果你也是一个珠宝爱好者，那么在你大婚之际，从Blue Book里挑一枚独一无二的高级珠宝作为婚戒，可謂是最梦幻的通往婚纱之路。

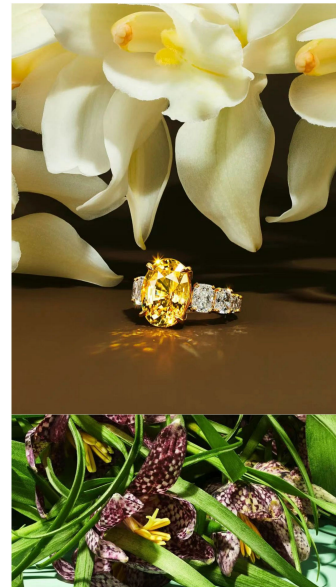




Figure 10 Screenshot of the commercially oriented WeChat blog

In summary, influencer marketing can be viewed as a variant of product placement, as it entails deliberately incorporating brand messages into editorial media content (Russell & Belch, 2005; Schneider & Cornwell, 2005). In product placements in films and television shows, the responsibility for creating fictional content typically lies with both the brand and



the scriptwriter or director, while actors perform according to the script (Russell & Belch, 2005). Here, in the case of advertising placements on WeChat official accounts, influencers actually take on the role of the director/scriptwriter, with the difference being that while most films and television shows are fictional, product placements in blogs often reflect the influencer's real product experiences or personal narratives. This study examines how influencers perform product placements as digital performances on the WeChat official accounts platform.

## 4.6 Conclusion

For non-Chinese-speaking researchers, both WeChat official accounts and influencer marketing on WeChat official accounts may be strange terms. This chapter provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of the context of my research. It includes an overview of the national conditions in China, the categorization of WeChat official accounts, and the specific categories of official accounts that are the focus of my study. Additionally, it classifies different persona pictures found on social media, with a focus on the specific categories of influencers examined in my research. In addition, screenshots are included as illustrations to demonstrate the precise layouts of commercially focused blogs that were examined. Overall, understanding the research context is essential for framing research questions, designing methodologies, interpreting findings, and drawing conclusions. It helps researchers situate their work within relevant frameworks and contributes to the broader body of knowledge in their field.

The upcoming chapters will unveil the veil of influencer marketing on WeChat official accounts. The main show is about to begin.

## **CHAPTER 5. DIGITAL PERFORMANCE ON WECHAT OFFICIAL ACCOUNT**

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the intricate process through which top influencers craft engaging advertisements for businesses and sustain readers' interest in commercially oriented blogs within their digital performances on WeChat official accounts. Drawing on performance theory, comparable to professional actors, prominent WeChat influencers operate within the digital realm, employing various strategies to curate appealing ad placements. The investigation unfolds in a structured manner, beginning with an analysis of how top influencers strategically present content on their blogs. Subsequently, the study delves into how influencers cultivate an audience and attract attention to their blog content, elucidating how these influencers not only draw readers but also capture the interest of marketers. Finally, the chapter explores the inherent tensions influencers encounter when balancing the commercial objectives of their blogs, shedding light on how participants effectively navigate and transform these tensions into opportunities for positive impact.

## 5.2 Crafting a digital performance

### 5.2.1 Role-playing in performance

Role-playing in marketing consumption performance pervades various facets of the real world. WeChat influencers engage in role-playing in their performance by adopting various personas, attitudes, and behaviours to appeal to their audience and promote products or brands effectively. The assertion of professional status represents a prevalent strategy in the presentation of personal services, as noted by Deighton (1992). This phenomenon extends beyond traditional professions to encompass various domains, including the financial sector. A notable example is observed in "Boiler room" investment brokers, who employ theatrical techniques to market dubious investments through high-pressure sales tactics over the phone, as documented by Tanouye (1992). In these scenarios, salespersons strategically adopt professional roles and employ theatrical elements to enhance their credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of consumers. For instance, when a promising prospect is identified, salespeople often gather around the phone to create background noise, simulating the bustling atmosphere of a legitimate brokerage office.

This phenomenon is not confined to the financial industry; it is also prevalent in other sectors, such as cosmetics. For instance, the cosmetics brand Kiehl's mandates that its sales personnel wear doctor's overalls, a visual cue intended to convey the impression to customers that they

are interacting with experienced and competent professionals akin to pharmacists. Such performative strategies underscore the significance of professional status and expertise as persuasive tools in modern consumer interactions, where the portrayal of credibility and competence plays a crucial role in influencing consumer perceptions and behaviours.

WeChat influencers participate in role-playing by assuming different personalities and identities in order to connect with their audience and deliver certain messages or narratives, therefore altering their digital performances to coincide with the intended aims and preferences.

In the digital world, WeChat influencers who craft clearly indicating or identifying sponsored content typically possess professional expertise in a specific domain. This form of advertising involves the influencer composing a succinct promotional blog for a particular brand, product, or service, with the primary intention of driving commercial engagement. Typically, such articles commence with a related topic as an introduction before segueing into the promotion of the product or service. There are two prevalent modes of expression employed by influencers: firstly, the utilization of clickbait to entice readers into engaging with the article. For instance, a commercially oriented blog from the WeChat official account “Dr. Dingxiang” may feature a title such as “How to deal with yellow teeth? Let the dentist tell you what to do”, ostensibly offering health advice but ultimately promoting a Home Blue LED Light Teeth Whitening Kit. The second approach involves directly labeling the article as a “promotion” in its title. For example, influencer Rebecca maintains a dedicated channel for recommending quality goods to her readers, with articles such as “Promotion | Seven sets of summer outfits for Asian girls with links.” While all of Rebecca’s commercial collaborations are explicitly marked as advertisements, they consistently garner high engagement, with nearly every article amassing over 100,000 views. This phenomenon can be attributed to readers’ trust in Rebecca’s impeccable style, genuine demeanor, and notable professional skills. Clearly indicating or identifying sponsored content helps mitigate potential conflicts and ensures transparency in influencer-brand collaborations (Evans, et al., 2017).

拿什么拯救这口「黄牙」？牙医来支招

Original | 何剑亮 丁香医生 2020-09-23 02:01



牙黄是一种什么样的体验？

不敢在约会时侃侃而谈，怕一口黄牙让约会泡汤。  
不敢放肆地开口笑，怕一口黄牙坦露无疑，影响颜值。  
不敢和牙齿白的人站在一起，怕对比太过明显，场面尴尬。  
.....

甚至在一些重大场合，还会因为一口牙黄而缺乏自信，下意识地挡嘴藏牙和人说话。

真牙黄毁所有，不信你左滑看看



而这款蓝光美白牙仪，最具性价比的地方就在于它可以重复使用。也就是说，你只需要单独购买美白精华笔，就可以进行多次美白。比起每半年到一年去医院做一次美白，真的是省了一大笔开销。

这次开团，我们还为大家争取到史上最低的价格——实付 797 元！

要知道它的日销价怎么都要 1100+，就算做活动也没有这么低过的。我们办公室的不少同事听到后，都纷纷准备等开团抢购，说是怕到时候抢不到呢。

点击小程序，立即购买



如果你还想了解更多关于口腔溃疡、牙齿敏感、牙齿美白等口腔小问题的知识，购买更多与之相关的好物的话，

Reads 100k+

Share Favorite 129 90

Top Comments Comment

- Louie 66  
美牙仪可以每天使用吗
- 丁香医生(Author) 92  
美牙仪的使用方式是连续使用10天，然后停用，如果要使用第二个疗程，最好隔一个月，一年最多用三个疗程哟
- 丹儿 45  
牙不齐导致个别牙齿刷不到，而引起的黄牙该怎么解决呢？
- 丁香医生(Author) 85  
可能要先做正畸会比较好吧
- Becoming 44  
牙齿美白仪带的牙齿美白精华液大概可以用几次？用完之后仪器就不能用了吗？有没有额外卖那个精华液啊？
- 丁香医生(Author) 13  
两支大概能用15次左右，而且用完可以单买精华的，会场里有单卖的精华哟
- Chelsea 44  
精华够用多久呀？
- 丁香医生(Author) 20  
两支精华大概能用15次左右

推广 | 7套适合亚洲女孩的夏日法式穿搭，链接都交出来了！

黎贝卡的异想世界 2022-04-26 16:07  
Posted on 广东

晚上好呀~

前天我在微博发了一条“绿色系”的plog，很多小伙伴都喜欢这张“假装在森林”的照片，说有和春天约会的感觉~▼



黎贝卡的异想世界 >

单品链接



libeky's fantasy

LOOK 2：可通勤可休闲的绿色好心情

粗花呢也是法式风必不可少的单品，法国女人日常穿喜欢搭配牛仔裤，增添一些随性。

这一身得体又没有束缚感，日常通勤、周末看展、姐妹下午茶都可以穿。▼

Reads 100k+

Share Favorite 114 56

Top Comments Comment

- 木棉 Pinned 2  
想买的时候发现优惠券过期了。。卡卡能不能再安排一次优惠。。。呜呜
- 黎贝卡的异想世界(Author) 4  
卡卡粉丝专属优惠券：满599减30、满899减45，可叠加商城即日-5.5的满300-30活动使用。兑换码：libeika01
- 黎贝卡的异想世界(Author) 4  
很多小伙伴来说优惠券过期了，我跟品牌要到了优惠券延期。大家抓紧下单~
- nn. Pinned 6  
可以买不是这个季节穿的小香风外套，用优惠券吗
- 黎贝卡的异想世界(Author) 4  
优惠券是全平台通用的，看中的都可以下单~
- Julia Song 60  
好白真的好又贤惠，我一个女的都想要她
- 黎贝卡的异想世界(Author) 12

Figure 11 Screenshot of advertisements integrate sponsored content with organic content

To engage the audience, many advertisements integrate sponsored content with organic content. While this approach effectively captures the audience’s attention, it can also disrupt their reading experience, contributing to the perception of advertisements as intrusive. In response, numerous WeChat influencers now tailor their advertising material to seamlessly

blend with the content they produce, often presenting advertisements as valuable information. For instance, “Rebecca’s Bizarre World” (黎贝卡的异想世界) and “The Pomegranate Woman Report” (石榴婆报告) both enter commercial agreements to promote various products on behalf of brands, receiving compensation for featuring advertisements that generate income. Functioning as shopping experts, these influencers endorse a wide range of items, including luxury goods, apparel, skincare products, footwear, handbags, and even automobiles.

To distinguish between organic content and paid endorsements, influencers employ diverse strategies. While some posts feature exclusively organic content without any commercial advertisements, others explicitly designate advertisements using the term “promotion” in the title. Furthermore, each paid endorsement is carefully curated to cater to the reading preferences and interests of their audience. Themes such as celebrity fashion, entertainment gossip, and trending news serve as guiding principles for crafting engaging promotional articles with narrative techniques, emphasizing a dramatic tension to captivate readers (Schechner, 1988).

Professionalizing is a common strategy employed in the personal service industry to mitigate dramatism and enhance the quality of performances. This is achieved by asserting a professional status or identity (Deighton, 1992). Similarly, influencers seek to claim their status as an expert in certain taste fields (Arsel & Bean, 2012):

*“I bought a new watch at the beginning of each year as a kind of ritual to me. Clothes may get old, lovers may gather or leave, only time is a moving eternity. An annual wristwatch is a ring for the wrist both as a memory for last year and also an expectation of the following year...This is my sixth watch of Reverso... I won’t convince you to buy it for investment consideration, because...why I buy Reverso is quite simple, first, the budget can be in good value...second, I have bought a lot of watches, but Reveso is the best brand to elaborate the beauty of Asian people. It has low-key style...Third, if you also like a sense of ritual, the design of the watch...I love travelling, the watch has some practical functions...” (FK 13/01/2017)*

In the above, the influencer endeavours to portray themselves as an experienced watch buyer, providing valuable information to readers who share a similar interest. Reader comments on the blog confirm the influencer's success in establishing themselves as an expert in watch brands. This portrayal as a professional demonstrates a strong educational aspect, where quality is the result of a dynamic interaction between consumers and producers, with both parties working together to fulfil their obligations (Deighton, 1992, p.370). This framing allows the audience to view the influencer as a genuine, knowledgeable, and capable figure, much like a teacher or guru (Mardon, et al., 2023). The valuable and educational nature of their content helps address the conflict between commercial intent and influencer integrity (Kozinets, et al., 2010; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Just like any other performances, consumers may not necessarily object to or be offended by the professional performance (Deighton, 1992).

Influencers on WeChat perform as experts to enhance the informational value of ads while delivering excellent content to ensure audience engagement. Informational value plays a critical role in determining the influential power of influencer marketing (Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021). Influencers are required to deliver substantive, precise, and instructive content to their followers, thereby bolstering their perception as authoritative figures in their respective domains. This information can be disseminated through various formats, including well-researched articles, professional videos, visually appealing images, and thought-provoking captions, serving analogous functions to props for performers on stage to enhance storytelling and create a realistic environment (Schechner, 1988).

The flexibility in adopting various perspectives is contingent upon the tone and nature of the account. According to performance theory, performance is not merely a display but a meaningful behaviour involving role-playing, emotional expression, and social interaction. In the context of bloggers, they present themselves in different roles through their articles, constituting a form of performance. This performance helps bloggers earn the trust and respect of their readers, thereby enhancing their influence and expert image.

The role-playing of bloggers goes beyond assuming the identity of an expert; it can also involve portraying roles such as mentor, friend, colleague, or even imagined fictional characters (Mardon, et al., 2023). Roles are not fixed and may change or overlap depending on various circumstances. As Ms. Wan expressed in the interview:

*“When collaborating with different brands, we employ various strategies. For example, when promoting a summer camp, we adopt the perspective of parents in our writing; when endorsing a small home appliance brand, we adopt the viewpoint of a homemaker. Of course, this is also related to the tone of the account. If the account has a fixed persona, it may not be as flexible as ours. Some accounts are closely associated with the individual blogger, so when you think of the account, you clearly envision a real persona of the blogger.”*

The interview illustrates how influencers engage in role-playing strategies when collaborating with different brands. It suggests that individuals adopt specific roles or personas to navigate social situations effectively. In this context, influencers assume different perspectives or personas to align with the target audience and brand identity, thus enhancing the effectiveness of their promotional efforts.

In the following section, I will explore the manifestations of emotional expression and social interaction within digital performance.

### **5.2.2 Emotional expression in performance**

Emotional expression in performance serves to humanize the brand and establish a deeper emotional connection with the audience by tapping into their emotions and eliciting empathetic responses (Kay, et al., 2023). In theatrical performances, actors convey the emotional states of characters through facial expressions, gestures, intonation, and other means to evoke resonance and emotional connection with the audience (Kay, et al., 2023). In the realm of digital performance, influencers employ emotional expression in a manner akin to theatrical performers, utilizing their writing to achieve similar effects.

Unlike many western influencers who disclose the commercial collaboration in their blogs to manage their authenticity (Audrezet, et al., 2020), WeChat influencers focus more on gaining empathy from the readers through character setting. Influencer WZ wrote his own story in one article to explain why he began to conduct commercial campaigns:

*“That day, I arrived home late as usual due to work. In front of the mirror, my wife was enthusiastically donning a new outfit. She enthusiastically went*



*to me and stated, 'Guess how much I paid for this dress?' Before I could say anything, she yelled: 45 yuan (around \$6). It's a great deal!... After all these years of education, I can only afford to live in a little 20-square-foot house with her, buy the cheapest clothes, eat on sale, and have no money left over to go for the holidays... I've taken the most crucial choice of my life: to resign and establish my own business... Give up the 'face' and enjoy life; it is not just about being honest with others, but also about being honest with yourself. True enthusiasm is preferable than the exhibition of artificial affluence."*

WeChat influencer WZ received considerable support despite the commercial nature of the blog post. Many readers left supportive comments such as “I am so happy for the collaboration, you won’t suffer for foods this week at least” or “please do more similar commercial blogs, you can create more amazing content when you have a good living environment”. WeChat influencers offer a transparent explanation as a justification for why they collaborate with brands, gaining empathy from their readers.

WZ’s blog is so popular that readers eagerly request more ads in the comment section when there is no branded content. Similar to a certified management accountant (CMA), WeChat influencers can leverage the tension as an opportunity to connect with their readers and gain their support. Readers are drawn to the blogs not just for the content, but also to support their subscribed influencers in resolving any tension. When it comes to collaboration between bloggers and brand promotion, using emotional expression in their performance is a complex strategy that aims to enhance audience engagement and connection.

Prior research has found that a consumer’s assumptions about the success of the advertisement on social media, such as emotional appeal, influence the user’s attitude toward the ad (Lee & Hong, 2016). The theory suggests that when audiences view emotionally appealing advertisements, they will stimulate their own emotional mechanisms and elicit corresponding emotional responses. These responses will establish complex emotional connections with the product and brand messages in emotionally appealing advertisements, causing audiences to develop more favourable brand attitudes (Geuens, et al., 2011). Typically, commercials are carefully and deftly introduced into various media, and such methods and dexterity are sometimes employed to elicit a range of emotional responses from

the viewer in response to various advertising promises. In the context of ad placement in WeChat blogs, the audience not only transfers their feelings about the love to the influencer but also to the branded product. As Schechner (1988) indicates in theater plays, performers often adopt various techniques, such as music, lighting, and dialogues to arouse specific emotions in the audience. This emotional arousal could enhance the overall experience and impact of the performance, which could make audiences emotionally invested in the scene. Here, in the context of WeChat blogs, by telling personal tragic stories and using touching language as emotional appealing techniques, the specific performance of the influencers works as one type of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) i.e., specific performance skills, which could transform the economic capital (i.e., revenue from audiences' consumption).

Influencers also strategically leverage anthropomorphism, imbuing products or brands with human-like qualities, to evoke emotional connections and resonance with their audience in performances. Aaker (1997) delved into the study of anthropomorphism by exploring the personalities of brands. Aaker argued that brands possess unique human-like traits, identities, and personalities. Originally, anthropomorphism was a literary technique that gave events or things human characteristics, making the text more vivid and lifelike. Later, anthropomorphism became a popular marketing strategy, leading to the emergence of anthropomorphic marketing. In their study, Kim and McGill (2018) examined various consumers' perspectives on anthropomorphic marketing. This approach helps to establish a stronger emotional bond between users and the brand, while also deepening their understanding of it. This enhances the emotional connection with users and their perception of the company's brand. Currently, there is a significant amount of interest in anthropomorphic marketing among businesses and operators. Some influential individuals are striving to boost user engagement and brand influence by integrating anthropomorphic elements like physical attributes, unique names, human communication, and distinct characteristics.

Some WeChat influencers apply anthropomorphism by describing a brand as having human-like qualities, thus different brands are like different people with diverse personalities in the placement ads. The following blog entry offers an example of this technique:

*“Therefore, dating is analogous to designing a house; what you initially believed to be the most significant may not function at all, and it is only after*

*living in the house that you discover what counts. So, in the actual world, is there a brand that, like the article's heroine, "Xiaoshuang," can assist us with so much housework? Yes, it's named "iRobert" and it's an American-made domestic robot that focuses on transforming our lives via housework. ...it will first sweep the dust and then wipe the floor, much like "Xiaoshuang," who is careful, compassionate, and never bothers you... Choose an iRobert from the online store "iRobert" on Taobao like you would a thoughtful girlfriend "Xiaoshuang." (LS 07/11/201).*

Anthropomorphism plays an important role in giving a brand personality (Parker, 2009; Aggarwal & McGill, 2011) and thus, it plays a crucial role in brand building and communication (Rauschnabel & Ahuvia 2014). In this blog entry, the influencer helps to contextualize iRobot within the stage of a Chinese counterpart novel of the Lord of Rings and presents it as one of the characters that loyally performs with the hero in his adventure. The Xiaoshuang character in the novel is an understanding and loving female companion to the hero, who always takes care of him and stands beside him. The iRobot brand is constructed as a companion for the audience, who can co-perform with them and help with household cleaning. Deighton (1992) found that consumers may perform with the product whereas in this case, the brand is anthropomorphized and presented as a co-performer for the audience. Anthropomorphism is often seen in fantasy shows where the influencers used the technique to create a relevant brand story, in the manner of a show performance (Deighton, 1992). While prior studies have suggested that bloggers use strategies such as maintain a communication style consistent the usual tone when advertising to reduce commercial and communal tensions (Kozinets, et al., 2010), the findings here suggest that dramatism also helps to reduce the tensions between commercial content and the communal ideals of the blogosphere.

The use of anthropomorphism in influencer marketing can be observed in the example provided. For example, the viewership of account "Rebecca's bizarre world" is substantially larger than that of publications like the accounts of "Bazaar" and "VOGUE" since it is operated by individuals. This is because "Rebecca's bizarre world" is more individualised and has a more human connection with its audience. Readers of "Bazaar" seldom use "Bazaar" as a pronoun, but fans of "Rebecca's Bizarre World" are more likely to use "Kaka." This is because "Kaka" is a significant tag of the WeChat official account. Personality-based

operation removes the communication barrier between the influencer and the readers, and thus achieves direct communication with the users and so receives their input via the “rounded” operating approach. Even though visitors are aware that the WeChat official account is run by a multi-person team, this form of operation can bring them closer together and improve their experience. They design a WeChat official account that is vibrant, trendy, witty, and welcoming, rather than a cold selling machine. As a result, even if it is pushing trendy information into the cloud, the individualised operating approach will provide consumers with a nice communication and experience.

Stern (1995) discussed the value of irony in consumption texts including the excitement and surprise that it brings to consumers. Additionally, irony could enrich the meaning-makings of the ads. For example, by studying Swedish sports betting advertising, Geodecke (2021) suggests the use of irony could be regarded as postfeminist humor, which explicitly and implicitly makes fun of normative masculinity, thus leveraging feminist critique as a commercial strategy. Sometimes, the irony can bring humour effect in advertising (Stern, 1995), and disclosure is the core part in comic’s performance (Schechner, 1988).

*“As we approach the end of 2017, may I ask you if you have found your mate or are you still single? What? No? Okay, fine... Don't be offended; I'm in the same boat as you. When people asked me how long I'd been single, I always assumed they were asking my age. Then they'll introduce me to someone, and their enthusiasm made me believe that they must get rewarded if I had a successful date... You can propose that they read my site and tell them that a single influencer is 32 years old and has been without a great job for so many years, but he is still extremely happy... Many parents may develop writing hair if they were very concerned about your marriage; what could you do in such situation? You should, of course, colour their hair, or do you wish to hire a lover online? I have learned about a fantastic Japanese hair colour company called "Likaokunbu." I strongly advise you to get these for your parents.” (SZ 09/11/2017).*

In this blog, the influencer kept a sarcastic but fun style with his self-deprecating narratives regarding the pressure from parents to get married. The stories of matchmaking based on his own experience resonate with the audience who are likely pressured to find a partner as well, although the influencer suddenly endorsed a brand beyond expectations at the end of the

article, the audience tend to embrace his advertising because when the audience found the performance was contrived, the performance is dramatic (Deighton, 1992). In addition, this irony also invokes audiences' thinking about the social issues in China, i.e. in this case the left-over single woman (Liu & Kozinets, 2021), which inspires audiences' self-reflection and enhances the relationships between influencers and audiences.

By infusing emotional elements into their narratives and interactions, influencers can establish deeper connections with their audience, fostering a sense of emotional resonance that enhances the overall effectiveness of brand messaging. This approach not only captivates the audience's attention but also cultivates a stronger sense of trust and affinity towards the brand, leading to increased engagement and receptivity to the promotional message.

Furthermore, emotional expression in performance allows for the portrayal of nuanced sentiments and experiences, enabling brands to connect with their target audience on a more profound and meaningful level.

In summary, emotional expression can be achieved through various means, including the use of emotionally appealing language, anthropomorphic, ironic techniques etc. in digital performance. Successful influencers can use emotional expression in digital writing to evoke emotions such as joy, excitement, nostalgia, empathy, or wisdom resonating with the audience on a more personal level.

### **5.2.3 Interactions in performance**

Within the sphere of brand collaborations, interaction assumes diverse manifestations within the performance framework. These interactions transpire between the influencer and the brand, as well as between the influencer and their audience. The character of these interactions holds considerable sway over the efficacy and genuineness of the collaborative endeavor.

Gift-giving represents a prevalent form of interaction within the context of performance collaborations. Brands often provide gifts or free products to influencers as part of their collaboration agreements (Cocker, et al., 2021). This gesture not only fosters a positive relationship between the brand and the influencer but also serves as a form of compensation

for the influencer's promotional efforts. Additionally, gift-giving can enhance the influencer's perception of the brand and its products, potentially leading to more favorable reviews and endorsements (Kozinets, et al., 2023).

Gift-giving in the interaction between influencers and their audience can take various forms. This may include giveaways, contests, rewards, or exclusive offers extended to the audience by the influencer as a gesture of appreciation or engagement.

In promoting the footwear brand "UGG," one influencer first analysed a latest TV drama of a love story, and then he wrote:

*"Connecting gifts with love is not to materialize love. You need to understand: an affectionate man really likes gift-giving, because they prefer giving...I also like gift-giving, if you are my friends in reality, I will mark whatever you like secretly, and buy them one by one for you as gifts in proper occasions...I like giving rather than receiving and it made me happier. For example, I will choose many warm UGG shoes for my friends as Christmas or Thanksgiving presents...So this time, I would like to give you some gifts from UGG...the rules are...when you meet this standard, I will send you a selected woolen scarf or cap of UGG" (FK 22/11/2017).*

Gift-giving is a multifaceted phenomenon that serves as an expression of sentiments and feelings (Sherry, 1983). However, in the context described and similar instances, influencers leverage gift-giving as a strategic tool to promote sponsored brands and encourage their audience to engage in promotional activities. By instructing their followers to share the sponsored brand with others, influencers effectively position themselves as providers, aligning with the social role concept elucidated by Otnes, Lowrey and Kim (1993). In this scenario, the influencer extends their role beyond traditional gift-giving to cater to an audience of over 100,000 readers, thus demonstrating the scalability and reach of their influence.

Moreover, the influencer's ability to sustain audience engagement until the conclusion of the blog entry, where the commercial message is explicitly conveyed, underscores the adept use of dramatism, as discussed by Deighton (1992). By portraying themselves as gift-givers

rather than recipients, influencers elevate their social status to that of trusted and authoritative actors, in line with Maus's (1925/1990) concept of the gift as a symbol of social hierarchy and prestige.

Furthermore, the act of gift-giving by influencers can evoke reciprocal intimacies, as proposed by Abidin (2015), wherein bloggers reciprocate the attention and engagement of their audience by providing them with commercial "gifts." These reciprocal intimacies serve to construct a sense of intimacy, particularly commercial intimacy, thereby mitigating the tension between commercial and communal interests and ultimately enhancing the commercial success of the influencers.

Another way of interacting with readers is to collaborate with them in creating the digital performance. Using reader comments/ recommendations for interaction also serves as a strategic approach to enhance digital performance. Mr. Yang said in the interview:

*"For most readers of WeChat official accounts, including myself, we always scroll to the end to read the reader comments after finishing an article. If an article is excellent but there are no comments when we scroll down, it gives a sense of loneliness or makes us wonder why nobody resonates with us. Although comments need to be manually selected by the influencer, many of them are really wonderful, and it feels like the entire article becomes more complete after reading them."*

Many successful WeChat influencers have taken advantage of the ability to further interact with their audience beyond the comments section of their blogs. The first way is to add the readers to an individual WeChat account and organize a WeChat reader group. Food influencer Mr. Fan described creating a WeChat group in order to communicate with his readers:

*"I have included my personal WeChat account in the blog so that many people can add me. If the queries are not extremely bothersome, I will address them as well. Because the WeChat official account lacks an*

*equivalent to other platforms' communities, some influencers may create a WeChat group for conversations."*

Wedding blogger Ms. Hun also established a WeChat group which her assistant managed on her behalf:

*"In addition to the comments section, I also establish various WeChat groups for interaction with readers. In these groups, members can engage in discussions. Typically, my assistant manages these WeChat groups, addressing reader inquiries and sometimes gathering feedback to create themed articles or organize offline reader meet-up events. Since WeChat official accounts do not facilitate direct communication with readers, redirecting them to these WeChat groups provides ample opportunities for monetization. For instance, we can directly recommend them to a partnered photography studio for wedding photoshoots, offering readers special discounts and incentives."*

Similarly, Ms. Wan, an art-related blogger formed a separate WeChat group as a space where she could gain feedback from her fans and collaborate on new blog posts:

*"Before we got original creative icon at WeChat official account, we already had fan groups. We also have a WeChat personal account that serves as an administrative account; when fans add this account, they no longer need to read our blogs through a subscription list; instead, they can view our articles through WeChat moment, like real friends. We published not only words (characters) but also other original and creative stuff. We only create new WeChat groups if the new subjects are significantly different from those of the prior group. In the group, we discuss anything; typically, my assistant would converse with the fans, for instance by posting fresh blog entries or fascinating anecdotes. We had collaborated with fans to develop a new post about the lard oil, and everyone offered their recollection and experience cooking with lard oil; we then published a blog based on that conversation and included group screenshots."*



The preceding quotes offer insight into the interactions between influencers and their audience. Influencers not only leverage reader comments to augment the depth and appeal of their articles, fostering resonance among their audience members, but they also establish WeChat groups to facilitate ongoing dialogue with their readership, deriving inspiration and incorporating audience feedback to tailor content to their interests. In addition, influencers transition from virtual interaction to physical engagement by organizing offline activities, the outcomes of which are documented and repurposed into online content to extend their reach and impact.

Influencers engage in interaction with their audience in order to co-create their “digital performance.” A well-known blogger Mr. Tei said:

*“User generate contents is a big strategy on social media marketing. I write many articles based on my readers’ answers, and this kind of articles will be forwarded more, and it also saves a lot of time of mine. A few days ago, I asked a question and let my readers to answer it, for example I did a very early one on Valentine's Day and I said, why are you still single when you are so old? The advantage of this is that on one hand I may not be in a good state that day, I cannot accomplish the article, but I sent this question to 100,000 readers, and those readers are not as stupid as me, for example, if you use one sentence to describe why you are still single, then I get a lot of messages, because this topic is easy to say right? Many people say that I am ugly, ambitious, not practical. Or his wife has not divorced. How am I going to marry her? As you see, their comments are particularly funny, so I will pick out these wonderful responses, and then I sort it out for an article, you will find that this is a good article, because they have very classic comments, and those people who saw their answers at the article would like to share it more.”*

Through reader engagement and the integration of their experiences, influencers enhance narrative depth, authenticity, and community cohesion. This interactive process strengthens the blogger-audience bond while enriching content relevance and substance. Additionally, leveraging reader experiences facilitates exploration of diverse viewpoints, expanding topic coverage and content quality.

For some other examples, during the operation, the account of “Rebecca’s Bizarre World” and “The Pomegranate Report” place a premium on communication and interaction with their audiences, with “Reader Sharing” and “Reader Contribution” sections added to the menu bar of the dialogue page between readers and the WeChat official account platform, respectively. Furthermore, they frequently post various subjects. Readers from all around the world may send their own stories to the WeChat subscription account, then “Rebecca” and “Pomegranate” will collect them as an issue. For instance, in “Their houses are really stunning,” “Rebecca” collected photos of readers’ home decorating styles in an issue; “Pomegranate” gathered her fans’ most worthwhile spending at the end of 2018 and write it in an article titled “Readers’ Contributions| In 2018, This Is My Most Worthwhile Investment.” This strategy was widely praised for efficiently boosting communication between the influencer and the audience, as well as meeting the influencer’s goals and strengthening the link between the two parties.

This type of user generated content or user co-created content is further facilitated by the social media platform due to its feature of timelessness and distance-lessness. This diversity of inputs often leads to richer and more well-rounded content which reflects the distinctive advantage of the sharing economy. Particularly, this user co-created content and shared ownership foster a sense of community and collective responsibility which enhance the essence of communal consumption (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Additionally, Furthermore, this user generated content also involves “working consumers” (Cova & Dalli, 2009) and performance of the audiences, as audiences need to carefully figure out how to produce attractive contents to stand out amongst other audience responses and to be selected by the influencer. In this way, the roles of influencer and audiences are changing, with the influencer judging the “performance” of the audiences. Here the changing roles extend the performance theory by suggesting the fluidity and exchangeability of the performance, which the traditional un-digitalized offline marketing does not indicate. In addition, this could potentially lead to the online labor abuse (Gosse, et al., 2021), such as in this context influencers’ unethical or exploitative use of the audiences’ generated content for performance.

In summary, the use of role-playing, emotional expression, and social interaction in performance can contribute to bloggers garnering the trust and admiration of their audience, consequently amplifying their influence, and establishing an authoritative image.

### 5.3 Impression management in digital performance

Employing the metaphorical framework of a theatrical production, Goffman (1959) coined the term “actor” to describe an individual engaged in self-presentation management. This actor assumes a role on the stage, controlling the portrayal of themselves visible to the audience.

In performance theory (Schechner, 1988), the concept of “front stage” refers to the public or observable aspects of a person’s performance—the behaviours, actions, and expressions they present to an audience or the wider world. This term is often associated with the dramaturgical perspective developed by sociologist Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1959).

In the front stage, individuals are engaged in “impression management” (Goffman, 1959). People carefully craft and present a particular image, persona, or role to convey a specific impression to their audience. This is the area where performers are aware of being watched, and their actions are influenced by the desire to create a favorable impression or fulfill societal expectations. In contrast to the front stage, the concept of the “backstage” which represents the private, unobserved aspects of an individual’s life where they can be more relaxed and authentic (Goffman, 1959). The front stage/backstage framework is a metaphorical way to understand how individuals navigate social interactions by strategically managing the impressions they convey to others.

The preceding section delves into the influencers’ performance strategies on the “front stage,” primarily concentrating on content production. However, in the realm of web 2.0’s two-way communication, audiences are active contributors who can provide comments below the blog’s main content. Thus, the comment area becomes a crucial component shaping the overall presentation of the blog. Consequently, influencers must meticulously manage the comment section to ensure the blog’s comprehensive presentation is compelling, appealing to both audiences and marketers.

In alignment with performance theory (Goffman, 1959), the identity-as-performance dilemma unfolds with several intriguing facets. The concept of “performance with the audience” explores a pivotal aspect of performances—the frontstage and backstage. Expanding upon the theatrical analogy, the frontstage represents the observable space where explicit performances

occur, roles are played, and actions are showcased. Interaction reveals signs and patterns, and there's an acknowledgment that the performance is under the spotlight. However, the actor is not constantly in the spotlight and can retreat to the "backstage" where more private, behind-the-scenes activities take place. Papacharissi (2002) further elaborated on this concept by asserting that web pages provide a platform for individuals to "stage an online performance," revealing aspects of their personality to the audience. Conversely, the backstage, although less articulated, serves as a more intimate setting where familiarity and closeness relax the constraints of the performance (Filmer, 2006).

### **5.3.1 Digital impression management in self-presentation**

Goffman (1959) proposed self-presentation as a fundamental sociological concept involving individuals intentionally utilizing behaviours and techniques to shape and manage the impressions others form of them. Self-presentation is essential in shaping social identity formation, as people adjust their behaviour, appearance, and communication to match the norms of their social circles or cultural heritage. Self-presentation includes impression management and face work, when individuals seek to influence how others see them in order to preserve or improve their social position and reputation. This idea is crucial for comprehending social interactions, communication patterns, and power dynamics, as individuals manoeuvre through different social positions, expectations, and settings by portraying themselves in certain manners.

Self-presentation is a concept often used to analyse how individuals develop and manage their identities in social settings. The following section introduces the reasons behind the bloggers establishing WeChat official accounts and their management of digital performance impressions.

#### **5.3.1.1 Motivations for creating a WeChat official account**

Schau and Gilly (2023) proposed the motivations for creating personal websites are likely as diverse as the individuals who create them but the common goal among all creators is communication. Although communication is an important function of WeChat official accounts too, it is not the primary reason why everyone creates such accounts in a semi-closed platform. Through my offline interview data, online research, and personal experiences, I have identified three main motivations for establishing WeChat official

accounts: 1) sharing; 2) establishing a commercial self; 3) entrepreneurship for profit. I discuss each of these in turn.

*Sharing.* There are three common scenarios of sharing. The first one is what we usually understand as sharing our life experiences or knowledge and skills to help others. When I interviewed travel blogger Ms. Wen, she mentioned that she started writing travel journals because her friends knew she was a seasoned traveler, one of the first among them to travel abroad. Consequently, her friends asked if she could share her travel journals with them for reference. Ms. Wen's profession involved planning, and she had excellent writing skills, so her travel journals were both informative and enjoyable to read. Initially, she didn't share these journals on a public platform, but one day, a friend who read her journals suggested that she could monetize them as they were highly valuable. Encouraged by this feedback, she decided to find a public platform to share her travel journals, hoping that readers could find some useful tips to enhance their travel experiences. Furthermore, at that time, both she and her husband had resigned from their jobs in preparation for a trip around China, and they also needed a place to record and share their experiences.

The above case is also overlapped with the second type of sharing: entertainment and hobbies, sharing joy and fun with readers by sharing life stories, emotional experiences, movies, music, etc. The informant Mr. Kai is famous as a food blogger. However, he initially started his WeChat official account because of his love for watching dramas and writing reviews to share. Besides his hobby of watching dramas, he is also a food enthusiast. Therefore, he created a second WeChat official account dedicated to food. Initially, both accounts were regularly updated. However, later on, due to the greater response to the account that introduces Hong Kong and global cuisine, updates on the drama account slowed down. Now, he focuses more of his energy on the food review account.

The third type of sharing is for information dissemination and promotion, conveying important information, policies, regulations, event notifications, etc., to the public, achieving the purpose of publicity and information dissemination. Such WeChat official accounts typically include government departments, official institutions, media organizations, businesses, or social organizations. Mr. Yao, who founded a marketing agency, stated that with the changing reading habits of users, many print media now have their own WeChat official accounts. The content they publish is similar to offline magazines, but the readership

is definitely higher online. Although this form of “sharing” seems to have transitioned from paid reading to unpaid reading, sharing content online also allows for monetization through advertising. They publish content related to important information, policies, regulations, event notifications, etc., to achieve the purpose of publicity and information dissemination (for example, a theater’s official account regularly sends out information about upcoming shows, or a government office's official account disseminates convenient announcements or reform policies).

*Establishing a commercial self.* The principal aim of establishing a commercial identity is to leverage WeChat official accounts as a platform for presenting one’s professional persona, akin to employing a business card to attract prospective business prospects. Two types of WeChat official accounts are created for establishing a commercial self. One category resembles a customized business portfolio, which highlights an individual’s professional expertise. Mr. Fox, a professional photographer, established his public account initially based on recommendations from friends who believed he should showcase his photography portfolio and provide photography tutorials to attract more clients. Mr. Fox has successfully leveraged his WeChat official account as a medium to exhibit his photographic skills, resulting in the acquisition of various business prospects, such as clients seeking his photography services and enrolling in his online photography courses. Similarly, considerable influencers or celebrities who have already gained popularity on other social media platforms will also create a new WeChat official account as their business card on WeChat. These bloggers primarily employ WeChat official accounts for social interaction and communication, with the objective of fostering closer connections with their readership, comprehending their requirements and feedback, and delivering more tailored content.

Another type involves established brands creating their own WeChat official accounts to engage in brand marketing or explore additional business opportunities. Ms. Duo once received an invitation from a corporate entity to manage various WeChat official accounts for a selection of branded restaurants under its umbrella. Ms. Duo noted that the corporation was seeking to go public, hence their primary objective in establishing these WeChat official accounts was not revenue generation through advertising, but rather to enhance the overall value of the corporation. These accounts were intended to serve as intangible assets for the purpose of corporate valuation. Ms. Duo had a notable achievement wherein she effectively packaged a WeChat official account to assist a client in attracting investment. Within less

than six months, this account received several awards. Although the company was not originally focused on managing WeChat official accounts, the success of this particular account led to its valuation and attractiveness in the public account domain even surpassing their core business, attracting significant investor interest.

*Entrepreneurship for profit.* Some individuals also establish WeChat official accounts with an entrepreneurial mindset. The objective is entrepreneurship and commercial operations, utilizing the public account for product or service promotion, marketing campaigns, brand publicity, and other activities to achieve business goals; earning revenue through commercialized operations of the public account, such as advertising, paid content, membership systems, etc., to attain economic gains.

After graduating from university, Mr. Sun has been persistently striving to be a successful entrepreneur. Given his background in design and his interest in humanities and history, he has embarked on several entrepreneurial endeavours over the years since graduation. Following the failure of ventures such as an electronic mapping startup and an informational platform focusing on national museums, he also attempted to launch a peer-to-peer lending platform with friends, which similarly faltered. The successive failures in entrepreneurship left him despondent, until he serendipitously realized that the then-popular WeChat official platform might offer a viable direction. With an entrepreneurial mindset and leveraging his abilities and interests, he established an account centred around human geography. Within seven months, the account amassed 170,000 followers, evolving from non-existence to a platform that even hired full-time employees.

After graduating from Peking University, Mr. Lee has been engaged in the financial industry. He views the establishment of a WeChat official account as a venture related to investment. With the theme of introducing Japanese cuisine, he attracts various stakeholders in the Japanese cuisine industry, especially in the Beijing market, including Japanese chefs, restaurant owners, and affluent diners. Through continuous exploration, he has developed a unique business model through his WeChat official account: crowdfunding for restaurant openings. Initially, he identifies Japanese chefs interested in opening restaurants, assists them in finding commercial spaces and suppliers, and prepares for the restaurant's launch. When the timing is right, he publishes crowdfunding articles to call on interested readers to invest in the restaurant. All investors receive various benefits, such as dining vouchers and the

opportunity for complimentary meals each month. At the time of my interview, he had successfully opened two Japanese cuisine-related restaurants offline. One of them specializes in grilled chicken dishes, and due to the large number of crowdfunding investors, the restaurants have thrived with enthusiastic patronage from those who have invested in them.

The entrepreneurial aspect of creating a WeChat official account lies in the strategic planning, resource allocation, risk-taking, and innovation involved in leveraging the WeChat platform to achieve profitable outcomes and business success.

In summary, the primary reasons for creating a WeChat official account are sharing, establishing a commercial self, and entrepreneurship for profit. Sharing is about ‘intrinsic motives’ (sharing passion, interests with others), commercial self is more about extrinsic motives (making money etc) (Audrezet, et al., 2020). Establishing a commercial self involves using WeChat official accounts as a form of self-promotion, particularly for those who have achieved success in certain areas and aim to attract more business resources.

Entrepreneurship for profit entails viewing the creation of a WeChat official account as a business venture, often with its own business model, sought after by entrepreneurs among numerous projects.

### **5.3.1.2 Self-presentation strategies to attract marketers and boost commercial success**

The self-presentation strategies employed by WeChat influencers diverge from those associated with establishing personal websites (Schau & Gilly, 2003; Chen, 2010). Unlike the latter, which prioritize the portrayal of an authentic digital persona, WeChat official account influencers are primarily focused on showcasing the overall tone of their account to attract increased business opportunities. In essence, their objective is to attract more brands to advertise on their platform. The subsequent discussion outlines three self-presentation strategies used by influencers to attract the attention of marketers and boost their commercial success.

*Creating a unique yet versatile self.* Creating a versatile self primarily refers to imbuing one’s WeChat official account with a strong sense of adaptability and malleability, particularly when collaborating with brands. When the account possesses distinct personal or thematic attributes, the content of the articles can vary significantly, allowing for the generation of



content that aligns with one's unique style when collaborating with different brands. Agency director Mr. Yao expressed:

*“In fact, many commercialized influencers are more like upgraded versions of copywriters. Everyone has their own unique style, and no matter which brand they collaborate with, their personal style remains strong. Take Liu Shen, for example; he primarily focuses on Jin Yong's novels, constantly interpreting and creating his own narratives. When brands collaborate with him, they are seamlessly integrated into different stories inspired by Jin Yong, which is quite clever. In summary, each article can achieve a sense of diversity while still maintaining a consistent and unique essence.”*

Here, “self” refers more to an extended self (Belk, 2016), meaning that this account represents the impression the influencer gives to the audience. These impressions are not portrayed through selfies or showcasing one's lifestyle, as seen with Instagram influencers, but rather through the influencer's writing style and content creation when collaborating with brands. For many WeChat official accounts, we may have no idea what the author looks like, but each reader forms a unique impression based on the series of articles they read. In other words, regardless of the brand collaboration, the author can adapt and integrate various styles while still maintaining a consistent essence.

*Amplifying the self.* Once a WeChat official account is assigned a certain persona or theme, creators employ various means to amplify the account's characteristics, strengths, or values in order to attract the attention and interest of readers. The bloggers interviewed often have various professions and play various roles in real life, such as wives, husbands, children, or employers and so on. However, the most popular or influential bloggers on WeChat are rarely known for showcasing trivial matters; instead, they often magnify their persona or theme in their articles. Mr. Fox is a photography blogger whose articles mainly focus on sharing photography techniques and practical knowledge. In order to enrich his topics, he delves deep into every aspect of photography, magnifying each detail infinitely and providing in-depth discussions. He also offers professional critiques on readers' photography works. He says,

*“Many times, I imagine myself as a judge on ‘The Voice of China,’ giving professional critiques on each contestant's singing skills and performance.”*

*When I adopt this mindset, I find that I become a credible spokesperson when evaluating readers' photography works, feeling a strong sense of empathy."*

Another renowned blogger, Liu Shen, gained fame for reviewing works by Jin Yong, a prominent Chinese novelist. Many of his articles focus on selecting overlooked details from Jin Yong's novels for analysis and extension, sometimes establishing strong connections with advertising brands. However, Liu Shen's personal life is almost entirely obscured from view, leaving many readers unclear about his real-life activities. Influencers of considerable stature, such as Liu, often conceal certain aspects of themselves while revealing, amplifying, or emphasizing others, akin to Goffman's (1959) concept of team performance.

WeChat influencers often collaborate with bloggers who are at the same level or even higher levels than themselves. On one hand, this allows them to leverage each other's popularity to expand their circles and increase exposure. On the other hand, it also demonstrates the attributes of their own accounts, indicating that they are on par with or slightly socially elevated compared to those admired influencers at a certain level. Food blogger Mr. Zhuang said in the interview:

*"You asked me about strategies, but as a food blogger yourself, you're probably well aware of the importance of mutual promotion among bloggers for increasing followers. You've reposted my articles on your WeChat official account, and I've done the same for yours. You know very well whether this mutual promotion has been effective or not; you must have gained around 2,000 followers in one go. However, I definitely have my principles when it comes to mutual promotion. I only repost articles from bloggers I admire on my own account, or those that I believe my followers would be interested in. Even if a blogger has a large following but their content doesn't resonate with me, I wouldn't necessarily repost their articles. Because what I showcase on my account must align with my aesthetic preferences."*

The underlying academic concept behind this data lies in the phenomenon of reciprocal promotion among bloggers within a specific niche, such as food blogging, and its

implications for follower growth. This practice reflects the dynamics of social influence and network effects in online communities, where individuals leverage their connections and endorsements to expand their reach and audience engagement. The observed pattern highlights the role of social capital and reputation management in digital content creation, as bloggers strategically collaborate to enhance their visibility and credibility within the community.

Furthermore, the data illustrates the intersection of personal preferences and strategic considerations in content curation and promotion. The blogger articulates a selective approach to mutual promotion, guided by aesthetic preferences and audience interests. This highlights the nuanced interplay between individual agency and community dynamics in shaping online discourse and content dissemination. Ultimately, the blogger's adherence to principled promotion underscores the importance of authenticity and alignment with personal values in navigating the complexities of digital influencer culture.

### **5.3.2 Digital impression management in enrolling readers in the performance**

In the realm of influencer digital performance on WeChat, impression management encompasses both front-end and back-end strategies through interactive engagement with reader comments.

A marked difference from conventional blogs is that WeChat blogs discourage interaction among users and attention is carefully directed toward the communication content (Bai, et al., 2017). Consumers on WeChat blogs cannot reach out to each other, and even the influencer cannot reach their readers who leave a favorite message after 48 hours. Information is not searchable by key words as on Twitter or similar social media platforms. The contents are designed to read on mobile devices but not on computers. Another important difference from the brand public as theorized by Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) is that participants' comments are not immediately displayed but are carefully filtered by influencers. Consumers cannot easily use the WeChat blogs as a means of expressing unrelated issues as they do with Twitter hashtags in the cases of brand public. The design limits this social media platform's capacity as a vehicle of pure visibility and publicity. WeChat blogs are made up not only by the original blog entries but also by comments left by readers. Followers are often attracted

by the comments of other readers and avidly read not only the blog entries but also other people's comments. The influencer can only select a maximum of 100 comments for each blog entry, and most selected comments will not be replied to. Every comment is an interpretation of the original article from a different reader, and influencers strategically use these interpretations to achieve their commercial objectives. Mr. Yao explained in the interview:

*“Because WeChat must filter the comments, so we only see reasonably comments, Weibo may suddenly have a comment like today's cup of water is safe to drink, which is from a robot, and some fake comments are purchased. I believe WeChat and Weibo are rather distinct. You must subscribe to a WeChat official account before you may remark on it, but Weibo is a display platform.”*

In WeChat, users must subscribe to an official account before being able to comment, indicating a more controlled and interactive environment for influencers. In contrast, Weibo is described as primarily a display platform, implying a more open and potentially less regulated space where comments may not undergo rigorous moderation before publication. Different influencers may select different types of comments to showcase to the public based on their objectives.

In most cases, selecting reader comments is a marketing approach for influencers, allowing them to use reader comment to manage impression. The marketing is often an iterative process, in which the influencer generates a blog entry, elicit comments, then select and use the comments to construe new meanings that are consistent with the blog. Favorable comments are often highlighted to emphasize influencers' agreement with the audience. Such coproduction makes the marketing become an iterative process between the influencer and the blog reader.

*Reader: I read every article twice, first time is for you, and then after some time I will read it again for the comments, sometimes the comments are even better than the original article (LS 06/11/2016).*

*Reader: After I read all the comments, I can't stand to give you a second-round cash reward, and I gave you a full-price movie ticket money because the comments were super funny, I haven't laughed like that for so many years,*

*I also read it loudly to my 60 plus years old mother and she laughed so much. Almost all of your replies to the comments were so funny and I can imagine a classical epic battle picture that you take a Thompson machine gun across the comment area. I am so curious what makes your talents gush out? Ps: I searched for the meaning of “Keqi” on the internet, I am scared to ask you that because you could “kill me” (pull readers to blacklist).*

*The influencer replied: Because there are so many people who want to die in one hundred ways in comments area (CB 28/11/2016).*

The above explanation showed the unique nature of the WeChat platform. Most comments are much more friendly. Mr. Kai also said:

*“I will read reader comments and usually I will choose all of them to public, but I only reply to the comments if they want to discuss something with you, if they just show their own emotions, then I won’t reply to them. “There are little negative comments here because I think the speed of increasing fans of mine is relatively slow, most of them subscribed me because they like my style. If you use some marketing ways to generate readers, they may not your target readers who really match your style. These readers may ask some strange questions, but I don’t have that kind of problem.”*

WeChat influencers strategically use the comment settings as a means of impression management to achieve various ends.

### **5.3.2.1 Managing impressions via displays of loyalty**

**Loyalty/Devotion:** Loyalty is a core moral foundation (Haidt, 2012), especially within consumption communities (Muniz & O’Quinn, 2001). Comments that show loyalty or admiration for the influencer have the most potential to be selected by the influencer. They also seem to choose comments from loyal readers/ those who give them cash rewards (those they have developed a sense of intimacy with) - they obviously want to maintain these cash rewards.

*Reader: DuDu (pet name of the influencer), you are the only influencer that I will read all your posts not only the topline article but also the second and third one. If I didn’t see your new posts at night, then in the morning, the first*

*thing for me was not to browse “WeChat moment” but to read your new pushes. Although you didn’t select my comment for a single time, I still love you.*

*The influencer replied: Good, do not let me go (DS 27/12/2016)!*

*Reader: When I started to read this article, there were 3000+ reading rate, 2 likes, but after I finished reading the article, it already had 10000+ reading rate, 60 likes, you really deserve me to list you to the top subscription account (FK 13/10/2016).*

Key influencers choose these comments to shape their image and convey a favourable persona to the public, and especially potential subscribers. Selecting compliments from readers is important for developing credibility and authenticity. In addition, some readers would show their creativity by writing witty or humorous comments:

*Reader: Finally got your new push after a long waiting, and one day apart seems like three years! Every time I also need to rack my brain to write the comment outwitting with a group of high-taste readers in order to be chosen by you, I must say, it is so hard even to say love you (LS 15/12/2016)!*

Readers may leave very long comments about their own stories and sometimes seek influencers’ advice. The following comment is from a reader’s personal story that has close to 1000 words. The reader described her miserable marriage in detail and sought help from the influencer, the influencer replied to her and suggested her to work back in society again. Such long comments show high involvement of consumers and the effectiveness of blogs. Many readers share their secrets or self-stories in public because others can’t access this reader’s account, only the influencer can reply to the reader but even they cannot see readers’ WeChat ID.



Figure 12 Long reader comment

WeChat influencer Mr. Tei expressed:

*“Now Tencent has disabled certain liking functions, resulting in a noticeable decrease in likes, particularly on reader comments. While I used to receive thousands of likes, now the top reader comment may only garner several hundred or even fewer than one hundred likes. Consequently, I’ve adjusted my approach and no longer select 100 comments for public display; instead, I curate just a few dozen comments, believing they provide sufficient content for readers.*

*When selecting reader comments, I adhere to several principles. Firstly, I assess whether the commenter is a loyal reader by checking their subscription duration, comment frequency, and history of cash rewards. I prioritize those who frequently engage or contribute financially. Secondly, I evaluate the quality of the comment, favoring those related to interaction topics or blog content, while disregarding meaningless remarks like ‘I am taking first reply.’*

*Additionally, I prioritize responding to unique individuals, particularly those who offer significant monetary rewards or pose important inquiries. However, I refrain from engaging in futile debates with certain individuals to uphold my public image and brand integrity as a transnational, cross-*

*cultural entity. Therefore, I choose to remain silent and focus on maintaining a positive online presence.”*

In the interview above, the blogger Mr. Tei clearly stated that the primary criterion for selecting reader comments is to choose loyal readers, such as those who frequently reward or pay for their articles. Following this, the quality of the comment content is considered.

The influencer employs a strategic approach by utilising carefully selected comments from dedicated readers in order to participate in impression control techniques. The influencer strives to project an impression of authenticity, popularity, and community support by including comments from dedicated readers. The purpose of this carefully chosen assortment of comments is to augment the view of the writer’s material as meaningful and influential, while simultaneously cultivating a feeling of inclusion and active involvement among the audience. In addition, the inclusion of comments from dedicated readers may provide a constructive feedback loop, fostering increased audience engagement and interaction. In summary, this strategy allows the blogger to cultivate and uphold a positive perception of their online identity and material, therefore strengthening their impact and credibility among their online audience.

### **5.3.2.2 Curating empathetic comments to manage impressions**

Empathetic understandings serve as a conduit for establishing rapport between the influencer and readers, fostering a sense of connection and mutual understanding. Leveraging reader comments that express empathy allows influencers to articulate perspectives that may be challenging to convey through other means, thereby enriching the discourse and deepening engagement for the whole digital performance.

*Reader: The censors have removed all related articles on this topic. You could write an article that indirectly addresses the subject matter to prolong its existence for the readers. Sometimes, I sense that you may feel exhausted from doing this, and we all understand that feeling of fatigue.*

*The influencer replied: It is such good feeling that someone really understands me (LS 11/05/2016).*

The comments showed that blog readers understand that the fictional blog entries reflect sensitive political issues and have implied meanings even though the articles were written in



a commercial-oriented style. These political blogs could be deleted by WeChat censors any time. In this way, the influencers' articles become more precious. During the interview, Ms. Wen stated:

*In the early stages, I made it a priority to respond to every message. I valued each interaction greatly, as it felt like people were accompanying me on my journey. During that time, I spent most of my time traveling around China, and I made an effort to reply to every message. I selected comments that we found interesting or useful. I avoided choosing repetitive or meaningless comments like "so beautiful." Additionally, I refrained from selecting comments that misunderstood us, such as those assuming we were wealthy due to our parents' support, or comments with dull or short-sighted descriptions.*

The travel blogger Ms. Wan mentioned that she would not select any ambiguous comments from readers who did not understand them. They did not want the meaning of their travels to be misconstrued as activities carried out by wealthy heirs. In reality, their travels were the realization of a dream funded by savings accumulated from several years of work.

Food blogger Ms. Xia in the interview explained:

*"I won't select too negative comments like they did not think this restaurant works. Because this is not a public review on Dazhong Dianping, you can write public comments, no one cares about you, right? At the restaurant review website everyone can comment, say good or bad and then public comment is not what mechanism, is it? You don't have to spend any penny and you have no needs to defame people, I think you defame, but I always see not every restaurant is perfect every day, and I still write about the positive side. I think because I get to know the restaurant and the person, it always means something. In fact, I rarely introduce eating and drinking itself. It is not very advantageous to describe what is eating and eating in words. What I focus on is that the owner himself is what kind of person, what is his chance to open this store, why do such a restaurant. Informant 23 said: "We will choose some interesting and related comments. Because we may receive*

*around 200-300 comments, but we can only choose 100 comments. We will not choose wrong views of life and value especially something about regional discrimination. We will interact with users regularly, we will not post articles every Monday, but I will send text to ask users what you would like to read, and then it means that we can do some summary of what we did last week, and we will also do some previews for the later stuff, and then I will also ask users to feedback over some content, that is what kind of things you would like to see, then we send something they would like to see in the future.”*

Technological advancements, such as the implementation of features like “holding comments for approval,” introduce novel mechanisms of emotional regulation for influencers (Mardon, et al., 2018). This capability empowers influencers to suppress the dissemination of negative emotions like anger and contempt within their online communities. Consequently, influencers are relieved from the obligation to engage in traditional forms of emotional labor, such as employing specialized techniques to manage their public image (Hochschild, 1983).

### **5.3.3.3 Cultivating favourable impressions and robust relationships**

WeChat influencers may transform comments into promotion, an effective way to attract potential marketers. More recent research investigated the link between consumers’ desire and communication technologies. Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman (2016) found that the sharing of online food images increases people’s passion to consume, and the networks of desire are energetic, connective, systemic, and innovative. WeChat influencers integrate reader comments to sustain networked desire and to stimulate audience’s passion to read and share commercial content.

*Reader: After reading your promotion, I will grab some time to go shopping in Sephora as soon as possible and get my birthday gift, thanks for your article just in time, I need the liquid foundation now, and I originally prepared to buy the brand of CPB, but now I would like to buy Sephora because of your recommendation. By the way, the lipsticks of Sephora are also very useful and even can compare with many big brands (LB 08/12/2016).*

Influencers tend to select reader comments related to the brand, showcasing their articles to readers successfully. In this way, the brand will perceive the promotional cooperation as

highly effective, as many readers are eager to purchase. This positive impression will lead the brand to be willing to collaborate with the blogger repeatedly.

*Reader: FK, is the brand of SKII useful?*

*The influencer replies: It is useful, or I won't cooperate with this brand for so many times. My principle to choose advertizing is that I must admit it and agree with their products (FK 15/11/2016).*

In the sphere of digital influence, when an influencer boasting millions of followers chooses a reader's comment for acknowledgment, it is perceived as a prestigious accolade. The added acknowledgment of receiving a response from the influencer further elevates this sense of validation. Notably, influencers actively engage with reader inquiries regarding brands, offering personal responses and direct endorsements, thereby bolstering the perceived credibility of the endorsed products. Such proactive engagement by influencers is met with satisfaction from brands as well.

Some influencers never let the comment go public for commercial purposes. Ms. Wan said:

*"We will do interactions with the readers on the background platform, and it is not necessary to make the comments public, because sometimes the interaction is not frequent, and it will expose the number of active audiences. For example, one article may have 30000 reading rate and 300 likes, but the likes of the comments are not high will give people the impression that your active audience are not enough. That was bad for future potential market advertising opportunities. We don't close the comment function, we just don't choose comments for public." Informant 5 did not choose any reader comments for another reason: "I fell it is too trouble to do that, that is a burden for me. I think readers and I are very independent; we don't need too much interaction. The article I wrote may be you will leave a good comment, then I think I can read it, or I do not read it, I feel that it does not matter, Because this between you and me is a mutually independent relationship, I have no obligation to respond to your point of view, in fact, you are not obligated to read my article, this is a relatively free relationship."*

The above provided can be linked to Goffman's concept of mystification (Goffman, 1959), which refers to the intentional concealment or obscuring of certain aspects of a performance to create a particular impression or maintain control over the audience's perception. The underlying meaning of the passage is that some influencers choose not to make reader comments public due to commercial considerations and concerns about audience engagement metrics. By conducting interactions with readers privately, they avoid exposing potentially low levels of engagement, which could negatively impact their perceived audience activity and future advertising opportunities. Additionally, some influencers perceive managing public comments as burdensome and unnecessary, preferring to maintain a more independent relationship with their readers. They believe that readers have the freedom to engage with their content as they choose, and there is no obligation for reciprocal interaction between the influencer and the audience.

Considering Goffman's impression management techniques, selecting certain comments is a form of "impression management" - the influencers are being strategic in deciding which comments to reveal/ show on their blogs in order to give the best possible impression both to the marketers and readers and then benefit from potential opportunities such as commercial collaborations or readers' cash rewards. They are managing the impression they give off to brands/ marketers to appear more favorable (e.g., having an active and favorable audience). Informant Ms. Hun expressed:

*"Two criteria when choosing reader comments, one is from readers' angle that the comments should be shown we were welcomed by the readers, the second is from marketers' angle that the comments need to be shown our readers have good style, taste, and have ability to buy products. If a girl left a comment saying she was from countryside and poor, cannot afford the wedding dress, the influencer will never choose this kind of comments. The influencer may choose some negative or different opinions, but she will reply to it with her own world of value."*

They also use the reader comments to give a good impression of their blog more generally (e.g., ones that are rich, interactive, meaningful etc.) and complement their blog content/article. Some also choose reader comments that are negative so they can respond to them and "set the record straight" - again, this could be seen as a form of impression management. It is a point of departure from prior work e.g., Mardon, Cocker and Daunt (2023) discuss how

influencers delete critical or negative comments - in this study I find a different approach is adopted - that they choose some of these comments to respond to expressing one's position or articulating one's values.

For commercial considerations, the influencer will not pick or reduce public comments of a certain sort to prevent the exposure of insufficient data." Art influencer Ms. Wan preferred interactions at the back (Goffman, 1959):

*"We will communicate with readers on a platform in the background, and it is not required to make the comments public, as interaction is not always frequent and doing so would reveal the number of active viewers. For instance, one post may have a 30000-reading rate and 300 likes, but if the number of likes on the comments is low, it may create the impression that your active audience is insufficient. That was detrimental to future prospective advertising market chances. We do not disable the comment feature; we just do not select comments for public display."*

Mr. Tei also mentioned he selected less comments because of the policy on WeChat:

*"Now the Tencent corporation has eliminated certain likes functions, you will notice that there are fewer and fewer likes, namely the likes of reader comments. Previously, I had thousands of likes, but today the top1 reader comment has only a few hundred or perhaps fewer than one hundred likes. Then, I will not choose 100 reader comments for publication, but rather dozens, as I believe there are plenty for readers to read."*

From the two interviews above, it can be observed that, due to commercial considerations and platform policy restrictions, influencers may reduce the visibility of reader comments to conceal potential inadequacies in audience engagement similar to mystification (Goffman, 1959). This practice also aims to build an audience and attract more commercial collaborations.

Another form is selecting the comment to build a good brand impression or based on the marketer's perception of the business opportunities. Mr. Zhuang has her own way to select reader comments:

*“When selecting reader comments, there are two criteria to consider: first, from the perspective of the readers, the comments must demonstrate that we are welcomed, and second, from the perspective of the marketers, the comments must demonstrate that our readers have good style, taste, and purchasing power. If a girl said that she is from the countryside and cannot afford a wedding dress because she is impoverished, we would never select such comments.”*

Here through the careful selection of reader comments, influencers can keep some interactions and comments in the backstage region. In this way, those comments will not reveal to the audience and marketers in the front stage, instead concealing them at the backstage. In essence, digital performance has the potential to expand upon traditional performance theory by introducing the strategic management of both front- and back-stage elements, a concept that is not typically observed in traditional theater settings. By strategically managing both front- and back-stage elements, digital performers can exert greater control over their impression management, audience engagement, and brand collaborations. This strategic approach to digital performance extends traditional performance theory by incorporating elements of digital media and online interaction, thereby enriching our understanding of contemporary forms of performance in the digital age.

#### **5.3.3.4 Employing defensive practices to manage impressions**

The strategy can be linked to Goffman’s defensive practices (Goffman, 1959), which involve strategies used by individuals to protect or defend their self-presentation and maintain a favorable impression in social interactions.

In this context, influencers selectively choose negative comments and publicly address them as a defensive practice. By doing so, influencers aim to assert their positions and shape the perception of their digital persona or brand identity in response to criticism or negative feedback. This proactive approach allows influencers to maintain control over their online image and reputation, effectively defending against potential threats to their credibility or reputation.

Furthermore, by addressing criticism publicly, influencers demonstrate transparency and a willingness to engage with their audience, thereby enhancing their perceived authenticity and

trustworthiness. Additionally, by asserting their expertise or opinions and addressing any misconceptions or concerns raised by their audience, influencers can mitigate the impact of negative feedback and maintain a positive perception among their followers.

Influencer Mr.Zhuang said:

*“I may select people who said negative comment and then I will reply to them mine. Because now our Internet environment is malicious, and then in fact, the competition is particularly fierce, some of the means are also particularly vulgar. Like those competitors to buy water army to malicious attack us, and then send spies ah, this kind of thing is really a lot.”*

Mr. Zhuang stated that in a competitive field, he responds to negative or ambiguous comments with a counter-reply. This enables him to address readers’ questions more effectively and extend the discussion meaningfully.

Some influencers even revenge by putting these readers into their blacklist that prohibited their future engagement. In general, influencers use oppositions to communicate rules and norms for building his narrative brand. It is an approach to use conflicts to create authentic and attractive narrative.

*Reader: Can you just do not use cash reward function?*

*The influencer replied: This person is in my blacklist now. Any reader who objects me to open cash reward function or accept advertising please cancel the subscription of mine yourself, or I will put you in my blacklist if I find you (LY 04/12/2016).*

*Reader: Either migrating to another country or standing the bad air, even if there is no air pollution at home, how can you make sure there is no air pollution on the way to work and at working place? It is better to exercise more for a stronger capability of lungs, by the way, I really despise people who use others’ fear to earn money.*

*The influencer replied: Now you could exercise your capability of understanding the meaning of pulling readers to blacklist (CB 22/12/2016).*

*Reader: CB, I just want to know whether you have “fake patriots” readers leaving messages querying why you write travelling to Japan. I created a WeChat public account for knowing Korea’s information, many readers left the messages to ask “Korea sticks” to go out, but we don’t have Korean sticks.*

*The influencer replied: You need to pull these readers to blacklist time to time, readers like good rice, you need to select them one by one (CB 25/12/2016).*

These quotes are from two influencers, and they demonstrate how the influencer selects comment as a “lesson” to others, or even use it as an example to teach the reader to choose “good readers”. It shows that WeChat blogs are carefully guarded. Anything that may threaten its credibility or profitability is removed by influencers. This expands the theory of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). The original theory indicates that the business providers should monitor and regulate the emotion to maintain happy consumers and thus gain profit. However, in this case, when facing unhappy consumers, the influencers do not try to comfort the consumers, instead they defend their positions back, even if it will make consumers unhappier. However, their defence does not necessary lead to the decrease of the profit. It could strengthen its loyal consumers. For example, the “tribal defence” could occur where followers help the influencers defend their positions. The tribal defense could manage the emotion in a more enduring way, which the criticism is discouraged, and tribal bonding is enhanced (Mardon, et al., 2018).

However, most readers who left comments are more positive regarding commercial contents, as seen in the following quotes.

*“I really like to see your advertising. The real advertising. That means very sincerely kinds of advertising. Because we are living in a commercial society, and good things should be shared. However, sometimes even we spend money, we still just get poor-quality commodities. Time is the most valuable thing for us, after filtrating the bad ones from you, I believe your recommendations must be the best. Marketers really have good taste to find you to do advertising (FK 06/01/2017).” “OMG, I cannot believe advertising could be written in this way, nobody but you! How much payment can*



*deserve to your such emotionally involvement? Xiaobo Wu (a famous Chinese writer) said, it is a shame if you read a lot of books but cannot exchange your knowledge to money. Indeed, it is worthless for the deepest emotions (FK 15/11/2016).*

Despite consumers' dislike of commercial messages on social media (Pashkevich, et al., 2012) and the commercial-communal tensions described in previous studies (e.g., Kozinets, et al., 2010), Chinese users appear more receptive toward commercial content. Although consumers may not necessarily reject or disdain commercial messages on blogs (McQuarrie, et al., 2013), motivations for positive responses are culturally embedded and may go beyond the notions of authenticity that has been offered as an explanation in extant research.

Additionally, responding to negative comments can enhance the influencer's credibility and authenticity, as it showcases their willingness to engage in constructive dialogue and address issues openly. Overall, the practice of selectively addressing negative comments aligns with Goffman's defensive strategies (Goffman, 1959), as it allows influencers to manage their online reputation and maintain a favorable image within their digital community.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter, drawing on performance theory, delves into the nuanced dynamics of how influencers and their audience collaboratively co-create performances that navigate the inherent tension between commercial imperatives and communal norms. The assessment of these performances involves consideration of various, at times ambiguous or imprecise, characteristics, including hierarchical connections and societal values held by participants in the exchange. Consequently, certain components of a performance may subtly undercut or even contradict more explicit or overt interactions. This exploration aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between digital performance and commercially driven blogging activities.

In the intricate landscape of the blogosphere, successful influencers employ a set of sophisticated dramatic strategies to navigate and mitigate the inherent tensions between their commercial objectives and the communal ideals of the online community. These strategies include managing impressions via loyalty display, crafting empathetic comments to manage impressions, cultivating favourable impressions and robust relationships and employing defensive practices to manage impressions.

In the forthcoming chapter, we delve into the realm of WeChat influencer marketing from the perspective of marketers.

**CHAPTER 6. WECHAT INFLUENCER  
MARKETING IN MARKETERS' PERSPECTIVE**

## 6.1 Introduction

The influencer ecosystem, as depicted by Kozinets, Gretzel and Gambetti (2023), forms a multifaceted network comprising diverse stakeholders such as audiences, marketers, platforms, and regulators. Within this intricate web, marketers and brands function as pivotal “monetary engines,” exerting a substantial influence on the dynamics of the influencer landscape. Drawing inspiration from performance theory (Schechner, 2008), which explores how individuals construct roles and engage in expressive acts, this chapter embarks on an exploration of the intricate processes through which marketers select and engage with WeChat influencers to amplify their products and brands.

While extant literature has predominantly concentrated on the perspectives of influencers and audiences, scrutinizing marketing methods and content value across social media platforms (Childers et al., 2019), a noteworthy gap exists in comprehending the considerations and procedures that marketers must navigate when choosing influencers for collaborative endeavours. The primary research objective is to bridge this gap by scrutinizing the key factors that marketers must deliberate when selecting WeChat influencers for marketing and brand promotion, unravelling the intricacies of the collaborative procedures.

This perspective enriches our understanding of the dynamics inherent in influencer-marketer interactions and the strategic decision-making processes within this ecosystem. By elucidating the criteria employed by marketers in selecting influencers and unravelling the collaborative procedures, this research contributes to a comprehensive grasp of the influencer marketing landscape. Additionally, it illuminates the reciprocal relationships between influencers and marketers, delineating the distinct roles each plays in steering the influencer ecosystem. Through this investigative lens, the study aspires to furnish a comprehensive overview that advances our comprehension of the nuanced dynamics characterizing the influencer marketing realm on semi-closed platform: WeChat.

## 6.2 Key elements when selecting influencers

In the realm of influencer marketing on the official WeChat platform, two distinct categories of marketers have emerged, as evident from both interview data and the author’s personal experience: in-house marketers and agency marketers. In-house marketing generally denotes promotional activities conducted by employees within a firm, as highlighted by Kozinets,

Gretzel and Gambetti (2023). In-house marketers, employed by the brand or company, shoulder the responsibility of orchestrating influencer marketing campaigns. Their role involves representing the company and engaging directly with influencers to craft promotional content and oversee campaigns. This can be executed either autonomously or in collaboration with a Multi-Channel Network (MCN) agency.

An MCN agency is an entity that collaborates with influencers, offering a spectrum of services and support to facilitate channel growth and optimize revenue opportunities. In the influencer marketing landscape, MCN agencies often lend their expertise to in-house marketers, serving as valuable partners in campaign management.

On the other hand, agency marketers specialize in influencer marketing and maintain close affiliations with influencers, sometimes operating within the same organizational structure. Their dedicated focus on influencer marketing positions them as experts in the field, allowing them to forge robust connections with influencers and navigate the intricacies of collaborative ventures. This distinction between in-house and agency marketers underscores the diverse approaches and expertise that shape the multifaceted landscape of influencer marketing on the WeChat platform.

Agency marketers have their own network of influencers and influencer companies. Instead of reaching out to the influencers themselves, brand or company may choose to collaborate with the agency and pass the influencers' campaigns to them at some expense. In-house marketers are marketers who work for the brand or company that is running the influencer marketing campaign and may work directly with influencers to develop content and manage campaigns, or they may work with an agency to facilitate the campaign. Agency marketers may specialize in influencer marketing and work with brands to develop and execute campaigns. They may have their own network of influencers or work with various influencer marketing platforms to identify and manage influencers. Both have some key elements when selecting blogger influencers. The primary distinction between an agency and an in-house marketing team is that an agency specializes in a wide range of disciplines, whereas an in-house marketing team only specializes in a few (Hao & Neely, 2019).

In the Internet era, characterized by technological innovation and seamless information exchange channels, the evolution of mass media has reached unprecedented heights (Mallick,

et al., 2023). Distinct from traditional marketing methodologies, mass media plays a pivotal role in steering consumer behaviour and shaping the landscape of social consumption culture. The emergence of internet celebrities, particularly on new media platforms like WeChat, has become a prevalent phenomenon, marking a significant paradigm shift in marketing strategies (Mallick, et al., 2023). The rapid growth of the Internet celebrity economy has propelled influencer collaborations to the forefront of brands' implicit marketing approaches, leading to explosive product launches and substantial sales growth (Glenister, 2021).

Marketers navigate the landscape of WeChat influencers through two primary avenues. The first approach involves marketers directly establishing connections with influencers who align with their promotional objectives. Marketers meticulously evaluate potential influencers and initiate direct communication channels by sending private messages, adding them on WeChat, or leveraging email communications through their WeChat platforms. This proactive strategy fosters personal interactions and cultivates close relationships, laying the groundwork for future collaborations (Glenister, 2021). The second approach encompasses marketers opting for an indirect route by engaging with third-party entities. Certain WeChat blogger influencers own Micro Celebrity Social Network (MCSN) businesses, acting as intermediaries in the influencer-marketer collaboration process. These organizations provide marketers with access to a well-vetted pool of influencers, streamlining the interaction process with influencers who align with the brand's objectives. Collaborating with MCSN firms offers specific platforms for managing and coordinating cooperative efforts (Glenister 2021).

Based on the findings of empirical research, the prevalent trend among brands is to seek individual influencers who manage their own WeChat official accounts. This inclination is rooted in the observation that such influencers typically exhibit a higher level of commitment to their fan base and the content shared on their WeChat official accounts. The rationale behind this preference is the belief that these individual influencers are more personally invested in curating content that resonates with their audience and maintaining an authentic connection with their followers.

In scenarios where brands opt to identify suitable WeChat influencers through agencies, marketers tend to impose more stringent data requirements on the influencers recommended by these agencies (Haenlein, et al., 2020). This shift in data expectations stems from the

assumption that agency-recommended influencers should meet elevated criteria to ensure the effectiveness of collaborations and align with the brand's strategic objectives.

Regardless of the approach marketers choose to select influencers for collaboration, it is imperative to elucidate the criteria that, in the eyes of marketers, define a qualified WeChat influencer. This entails a comprehensive understanding of the attributes and characteristics deemed essential for influencers to possess in order to meet the expectations and goals set by the brand. The nuanced criteria may encompass factors such as audience engagement, content quality, authenticity, and alignment with the brand's values and image. Unravelling the intricacies of what constitutes a qualified WeChat influencer is vital for marketers in crafting successful and impactful influencer marketing campaigns.

### **6.2.1 More than the number of fans**

Marketers leverage WeChat influencers as a strategic tool with the primary objective of acquiring and subsequently converting users into consumers (Shan, et al. 2020). In the evaluation of suitable WeChat influencers, marketers must initially grasp the significance of the influencers' fan base in terms of influence value. The number of followers plays a pivotal role in gauging the popularity and influence level of influencers or their accounts (Veirman, et al., 2017). This parameter, indicative of network size and popularity, is frequently employed to identify influential nodes within the network.

Despite WeChat's origin as a platform not inherently associated with media, the service function of the official account imbues it with media attributes. However, a distinctive characteristic of WeChat, in contrast to other platforms, lies in its unique enclosed network structure, boasting 900 million users. Notably, the number of followers for an official account is not visibly displayed on the screen, distinguishing it from other social network platforms. This enclosed nature like a back door to the performance place poses a challenge for marketers, as they cannot directly observe the estimated number of users but instead rely on alternative metrics, such as the number of fans.

For marketers, assessing the number of fans involves examining various aspects, including the reading rate, the number of fans who engage by giving likes and comments, among other factors. These metrics serve as indicators of user engagement and are instrumental in

obtaining comprehensive statistics on the account's performance. Such statistics shed light on how users interact with WeChat in general within this relatively enclosed network platform. According to informant Mr. Yang, WeChat influencers maintain their sense of mystery through the relatively closed platform. Their personal information is scarce, and the number of their followers is also untransparent. So, the agency looks to the increasing fans of the influencer and the daily reading rate to judge the quality of the blogger influencer's fans. Agency marketer Mr. Yang said:

*“We analyse the increasing fans of the influencer and the daily reading rate to judge the quality of the influencer's fans. Branding on the internet also follows traditional marketing. First you need to do customer surveys and then you need to study their competitors, branding integrated the two. We can infer the characteristics of the fans by influencers' style at first, then we can know their fans' preference by background observation. Many influencers have very strong personal style, they may reject an advertising without reasons, because it doesn't align with their public character which counts to their attraction of followers. P2P, health care products, and medicine are the three types of advertising tend to be rejected by the influencers most. Some influencers will never push their self-profiles or attend public activities; they want to keep the mystery. (Mr. Yang)”*

Since the number of followers cannot be directly seen on the WeChat platform, the reading rate and the number of likes of each article become the side dimension to judge the number of fans. Compared with the simple and direct number of followers, the reading rate and the likes can better reflect the real fan data of WeChat influencers. The process to evaluate account value is normally to look at the attributes' changes of the account after the punishment of an article, for example the number of reviews, and the proportion between it and the total number of fans, the general rate should be from 10% to 15% is normal. The total amount of reading is the sum of the number of readers who push messages during the sampling period of the WeChat official platform. It can roughly reflect the number of fans on WeChat official account (She, et al., 2021).

Secondly, look at the background data of the WeChat official account platform, there is a frequently read user number, analyse frequently read which we could use to identify the



approximate number of active fans. The increase of fan number is also an important attribute to summarize the figure across years to see if the curve is normal. If a WeChat official account has no fan growth, to a large extent it has entered a traffic dead pool and the content creativity has no bright spot. Some influencers' reading rate fluctuates greatly, sometimes hundreds of reading numbers per article, sometimes tens of thousands of reading rates per article. When the articles with hundreds of reading rates are too much, marketers may not choose the influencer. It is because this influencer has many possibilities to have fake fans numbers (Backaler & Shankman, 2018). If a certain period of time, or a day suddenly increased (excluding doing special promotion activities), the marketers must consider the authenticity of fans. The best way is to look at the number of average reading rate, click rate, and comments on a blogger influencer's top dozen posts. If the average meets the brand's expectations, the influencer can be included in the consideration list. While marketers should also keep an eye on the numbers of average reading rate: if the gap between the popularity of the blogger influencer's viral articles and other articles is too large, then the viral articles may have much fake fans. The informant noted the importance of the number of fans for marketers to select the influencers to cooperate with and took into account the closed nature of WeChat platform, so the number of fans is not easily and intuitively known. In terms of the observation of the number of fans, marketers also observe whether the number of fans is flooded from the final number of charges and the amount of reading. It is true that some influencers market their official accounts to the illusion of large numbers of followers. In general, brands like to look for influencers who have a highly engaged audience, with a high number of followers, comments, and shares.

A WeChat official account whose fans are high-end people with tens of millions of dollars social status, even if it has only a few thousand fans, its valuation is much higher than that of an account with millions of zombie fans with extremely diverse social identities. As posited by Kay and Parkinson (2020), bloggers with the highest follower count may not necessarily yield optimal commercial outcomes.

### **6.2.2 The tonality of the influencers**

In the realm of brand collaborations, the emphasis on the tonality of influencers holds significance due to its pivotal role in shaping the brand image and influencing consumer perceptions. The tonality, encompassing the linguistic style, messaging, and overall demeanor

of influencers, acts as a crucial factor in aligning the brand with its desired values, ethos, and target audience. It serves as a mechanism through which brands can establish a coherent and harmonious narrative that resonates with their overarching marketing strategy.

The careful consideration of influencer tonality is grounded in the understanding that influencers serve as conduits of brand messaging, wielding the power to either enhance or detract from the brand's identity. By aligning the tonality of influencers with the brand's voice and positioning, marketers seek to create a unified and authentic communication channel. This strategic alignment fosters a sense of trust and relatability among the audience, contributing to increased engagement and a more positive brand perception. Informant Mr. Lee said:

*“The core is that how to get users’ human nature. Your thinking model is not what you want to express but what the users would like to read. Good contents do not need channels. Information is the most important thing; operating is just a means to success. You need to have both wide and depth knowledge. I like some individual influencers who have strong characteristics.”*

The core aspect is understanding users' human nature, aligning with the fundamental tenets of performance theory, which emphasizes the performer-audience relationship. In this context, Mr. Lee suggested the marketers should shift from personal preferences to catering to what users would find appealing. This aligns with the performative nature of content creation, where influencers act out roles that resonate with their audience. Expressing a preference for “individual influencers who have strong characteristics” reflects an appreciation for performers who embody distinct and memorable traits. In performance theory (Schechner, 2003), this resonates with the idea that performers with unique characteristics often capture audience attention and leave a lasting impression.

Fan quality is another important indicator, similar to the concept of user portrait, the more unified the characteristics of fans, the higher the tonality of the group, the higher the quality of fans. Marketer Mr. Lee said in the interview:

*“Two accounts with the same number of followers may yield different conversion outcomes for different brands. For instance, if your account’s followers are predominantly migrant workers—here, I’m using an example,*

*not implying any judgment about migrant workers—the purchasing power within your audience might be limited. On the other hand, consider an account dedicated to sharing jokes; the audience, comprising people of all genders, ages, and financial backgrounds, is diverse and substantial. Meanwhile, another account might be more specialized, such as one focused on artificial intelligence analysis, with an audience consisting mainly of scientists, researchers, or investors in that field. In this scenario, the value of these two accounts differs. Even if one account has a hundred thousand followers and the other has only ten thousand, the smaller account may have greater value in terms of conversions for certain brands, given its alignment with the specific interests and demographics of its audience.”*

The disparity in value between these accounts is evident, emphasizing that follower quantity alone does not determine conversion efficacy. Rather, the alignment of an account’s audience with the target demographics and interests of a specific brand plays a crucial role. Thus, a smaller account with ten thousand followers may possess greater conversion value for certain brands compared to a larger account with a hundred thousand followers, provided that the smaller account resonates more closely with the desired consumer profile.

High-tier influencers with a strong and distinctive tone usually have a more engaged fan base, which can exert a powerful influence on the brands they collaborate with. Therefore, when brands partner with these top-tier influencers, repeated collaborations often yield positive results. On the other hand, mid-tier and lower-tier influencers may have limited impact on their followers. Brands might find that collaborating with them once a year is sufficient, as their influence on the audience is more constrained.

According to the law of diminishing marginal utility theory (Alvino, et al., 2018), users have both the right to choose content and the right to refuse to receive it. The wedding influencer Ms.Hun said:

*“Because like the middle accounts which have not so strong personality attributes, you may use them at most 3 times and you can see the cost of equal share has been significantly increased, and basically after three times we will not re-use them.”*

In the context of influencer marketing, the insights from wedding influencer Ms. Hun emphasizes that for accounts with less distinct personality attributes, typically classified as mid-tier influencers, the law of diminishing marginal utility becomes evident. Specifically, Ms. Hun suggests that the effectiveness of using these influencers diminishes after approximately three collaborations. Beyond this point, the cost of equal share increases significantly, leading to a decision not to reuse them. This observation aligns with diminishing marginal utility theory (Alvino, et al., 2018), as users' interest and engagement tend to wane after repeated exposure to similar content, necessitating a strategic approach to influencer collaboration to maintain cost-effectiveness and audience engagement.

Thus, middle-tier influencers are typically not the first choice for marketers. Mr. Fox said:

*“Top influencers have a very clear tonality with very loyal fans over more than one million. Like “shi dian du shu”, if I remembered correctly, there should be more than ten million fans, these are the accounts what we call top head. They are very good at using their own words to control the minds of fans, especially like Mimeng, a very popular one in the past two years. No matter what she said in an article, her fans really believe her, and then the advertising conversion rate is very high.”*

The informant Mr. Fox explained tonality in terms of both the influencer's output and the influencer himself/herself. Firstly, with regards to content creation, Mr. Fox emphasized the necessity for influencers to generate authentic and valuable content that provides genuine suggestions or helpful information to their audience. This underscores the importance of substance and utility in the content produced by influencers. Secondly, examining tonality from the influencer's perspective, Mr. Fox highlighted the significance of an influencer's reputation, particularly the impact of having a substantial number of followers within the industry. In essence, an influencer's standing becomes synonymous with a reputable brand.

Conde and Casais (2023) advise social media influencers to shift focus from audience development to strengthening existing relationships through parasocial connections, enhancing their appeal to brands targeting specific market segments. For WeChat influencers, marketers seek individuals with distinct writing styles, adept photography skills, and the

ability to craft engaging content. This aligns with the principles of the halo effect in psychology (Leuthesser, et al., 1995), which posits that excellence in one or more aspects leads people to perceive an individual as excellent across the board. In the context of influencer marketing, this implies that when an influencer is recognized for their personal characteristics, fans are more inclined to believe that all content endorsed by the influencer is worth following (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015).

### 6.2.3 Fit between brand and the influencer

Each brand has its own personalities (Aaker, 1997) and its own target audience. When choosing a blogger, it is necessary to understand who is the target group of the brand promotion party and what are their demand, according to the target audience to find a blogger with a large fan content of this group, when choosing WeChat influencers to cooperate with, marketers usually carefully analyse the target users of the enterprise brand and the core needs of users, to this analysis is important at improving the accuracy of account matching (Kozinets, et al., 2023). Marketing agency director Ms.Duo said:

*“For example, a gaming influencer who typically focuses on game-related content suddenly incorporates an advertisement promoting a specific product, such as a male masturbator, during their content presentation. Fans may find it challenging to accept this abrupt change and may even develop anti-fan sentiments. Each collaboration has mutual impacts on both parties. It’s analogous to a well-known vegetable garden that, while capable of cultivating different crops like cabbage this month and radishes the next, planting different crops each time affects the garden’s soil. Whether it’s cabbage or radishes that people remember, they collectively recognize them as products of that brand’s vegetable garden. Therefore, the choice of which crops to cultivate is essentially an extension of the brand itself.”*

According to Belk (1988), individuals consider objects as extensions of themselves, intimately linked to their identity, experiences, and relationships. In the context of influencers, collaboration with brands can be seen as an extension of their self, as such partnerships directly influence the personal image and values that influencers convey. When influencers engage in collaborations with different brands, the brands, products, or services they choose become an extension of their self (Belk, 2013). This collaboration is not merely a

commercial transaction; it is a strategic choice made in the construction of the influencers' personal brand. This choice may be based on the brand's values, alignment with the influencer's personal image, and traits that resonate with audience expectations.

Collaborations between influencers and brands can also have a profound impact on their image and identity on social media. Engaging with high-end brands may portray influencers as fashionable individuals with unique tastes, while collaborations with mass-market brands may render them more relatable and approachable. This co-constructed image is closely linked to the influencer's Extended Self, reflecting their personal lifestyle, preferences, and societal standing.

The compatibility between a brand and a blogger is not about a specific brand necessarily needing to collaborate with a certain type of blogger; rather, this compatibility varies depending on specific circumstances. This is also a unique aspect of WeChat official account advertising, as different bloggers will integrate brand promotion into their performances according to their own style. The wedding blogger Ms.Hun said:

*“Brand managers must choose the bloggers can present some style they like. For example, for the same brand of Audi, if the marketers collaborated with “Mimeng”, then Mimeng may write an article like making love in Audi car. If the blogger is “Ximen Aunt”, then she may write her imagined family story like using the car to pick up her children and give people a feeling that family life is warm. While if I collaborate with “Audi”, as a wedding blogger, I may write how to use the car in a wedding ceremony or maybe the bride can use “Audi” as a dowry. Also, I think one brand may have different collections, for example, Swarovski brand found us for promotions of their wedding crystal collections while they may find fashion blogger “LB” to promote their fashion collections or some products for everyday wearing”.*

Using different bloggers to promote a brand can ensure that the brand's exposure is reflected across various circles, especially as promotions by different bloggers over a period of time can deepen potential customers' recognition of the brand. Therefore, when considering

collaboration with bloggers, as long as the general direction aligns with the brand's approval, bloggers can be given the freedom to creatively engage in this digital performance.

The synchronization between the core theme of a brand's personality and the content featured on the corresponding WeChat official account (blogger's thematic content) plays a pivotal role in eliciting significant fan engagement. In accordance with the insights from Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Fernández and Lopez-Lopez (2020), this harmonious alignment has the potential to not only attract a substantial fan base but also to incite active participation, with followers sharing and recommending the content to their social circles. This ripple effect leads to a cascade of further shares, potentially multiplying the brand's visibility two-fold or more. Consequently, the brand impression is magnified, as outlined in the research by Martínez-López and colleagues (2020). The study emphasizes the strategic importance of aligning brand personality with WeChat official account content for cultivating a viral marketing dynamic within the WeChat platform.

For example, if the marketers are targeted at Internet practitioners in first - and second-tier cities, then he/she should choose WeChat official accounts where a large number of Internet practitioners' fans, such as the well-known Internet WeChat official account "san jie ke". But if marketers are working on women's e-commerce for the whole country, they may choose to advertise on the city's official WeChat account, the target user region and the advertising account chosen are not the same. The target user location and the chosen advertising account may not be the same in this instance, but it enables for reaching a larger audience across the country. The informer Mr.Xi said:

"Influencers can accept many different advertisings based on the quality of the products. The core is that they can match and agree with each other. It is very difficult for operators in the agency, they want to find more individual accounts, because the individual influencers really care about their fans and the quality of the contents. But the brand clients sometimes want to get very high reading rate, the operator in the agency must find marketing accounts to get the expectation or using other means like buying reading rate."

In the context of influencers, their ability to accept various advertisements is contingent upon the perceived quality of the promoted products and the alignment of values and preferences.

From a performance theory perspective (Schechner, 1988), influencers act as individual performers, and their success depends on their capacity to resonate with their audience and effectively endorse products that align with their personal brand.

On the agency side, the challenges mentioned highlight the complexities of managing influencer relationships. The preference for individual accounts by agency operators is rooted in the belief that individual influencers are more personally invested in their content and audience. This preference implied individual performers often have a more direct and authentic connection with their audience compared to larger entities.

#### **6.2.4 Harmony in collaboration**

When choosing to cooperate with an influencer, in addition to considering the number of fans, the tonality of the influencer and the tonality of the article, as well as the fit between the influencer and the product, the marketers also need to check whether the cooperation with the influencer is pleasant from the subjective level. The Internet platform has created a large number of online celebrity influencers, who have a large number of fans on the Internet, and these fan reserves make them become the stars of the Internet (Cocker & Daunt, 2021). When marketers come to them for cooperation opportunities, different influencers have different attitudes towards cooperation. Most of the influencers have a very high attitude and cooperation. If there is a problem, they will timely feedback and communicate with the marketers. There is also a small number of influencers who have arrogant attitudes. In fact, influencers and marketers are also interdependent, and long-term good communication can make the cooperation between the two sides smoother. Mr. Yao said in the interview:

*“Before collaborating with an influencer, if possible, I would inquire about the experiences of brands that have previously partnered with the influencer. If the feedback suggests a lack of commitment or difficulty in maintaining regular contact with the influencer, I will reconsider collaborating with them. Since our collaborations involve financial transactions, we are genuinely concerned about encountering influencers who may not fulfill their responsibilities after payment. I believe assessing the influencer’s sense of responsibility is also a crucial factor in the decision-making process.”*



Marketers will want to consider an influencer's reputation, including their past collaborations and any controversies they may have been involved in. Selecting influencers with a positive reputation can help to enhance the brand's image and credibility. When the influencers are reliable, professional, and easy to work with, they have more chances to be recommended to the brands. Choosing professional influencers will help ensure that the partnership runs smoothly, and the promoted brand is represented in a positive light. When marketers assess an influencers' reputation, they must delve into their past collaborations and any controversies they may have been embroiled in. These controversies hold considerable weight as they can significantly impact an influencer's credibility and the success of marketing campaigns. It is vital for marketers to be aware of these controversies and consider their implications. Ms. Duo explained her views in the interview:

*“When collaborating with an influencer, I always assess their professionalism, including their personal integrity, the likelihood of engaging in plagiarism, and whether their personality tends towards extremes. Additionally, I consider how they might react in the face of online public opinion and whether they may exhibit extreme behaviour in such situations. Simultaneously, we avoid collaborating on content or with influencers who express overly politicized viewpoints. This is primarily to prevent potential restrictions on the visibility of our collaboration or the suspension of the influencer's account due to political sensitivities.”*

One type of controversy that marketers should consider is ethical or legal issues. Some influencers have found themselves entangled in matters relating to plagiarism, copyright infringement, or engaging in deceptive practices to promote products. Such controversies cast doubt on an influencer's trustworthiness and can erode their reputation among their audience. Offensive or insensitive behaviour is another category of controversy that warrants attention. In today's social media landscape, influencers face intense scrutiny, and any instances of offensive remarks, sharing inappropriate content, or engaging in cyberbullying can quickly ignite public outrage. These controversies tarnish an influencer's image and can lead to a significant loss of followers and brand trust. The misleading advertising practices of influencers also presents a noteworthy concern. Influencers are expected to disclose any sponsored content or partnerships transparently. Controversies arise when influencers fail to meet these expectations or employ deceptive advertising tactics, leaving their audience feeling deceived or manipulated. Such controversies damage an influencer's credibility and

jeopardize their relationship with their followers. Personal scandals are yet another facet of controversies that marketers should carefully consider. Influencers, like any public figures, can find themselves embroiled in scandals that attract media attention. These scandals may involve substance abuse, controversial relationships, or even criminal activities. They have the potential to stain an influencer's reputation and can negatively impact the brands associated with them. Conflicts between influencers themselves or with brands also warrant attention. Public arguments, allegations of dishonesty or unethical behaviour, or fallout from failed collaborations can generate controversies. Marketers should assess the implications of such conflicts on an influencer's reputation and evaluate whether they align with their brand values. By thoroughly examining an influencer's past collaborations and controversies, marketers can make informed decisions about potential partnerships. This assessment allows them to evaluate the associated risks and benefits, ensuring a positive brand association and the preservation of their target audience's trust.

### 6.2.5 Budget

Budgeting in influencer collaborations plays a critical role in shaping the outcomes of the collaboration. A higher budget allows for greater flexibility in engaging influencers with larger followings or enhancing the production quality of content. It also enables the possibility of collaborating with influencers across various tiers, such as micro, macro, or mega-influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). It is a foundational element that contributes to the success and sustainability of influencer marketing initiatives.

Simply put, the budget mainly refers to how much the marketers plan to pay in order to promote the brand. Ms.Mai said during the interview:

*“Because many times the marketing department of the brand, PR agencies, and the influencer of the three parties play the game which means not all the people in the brand company are so care of the interests of their employers, so that is also a KPI. All the media buyer and the agency have a list of the price of the influencers, and they will spend the budget till a number. For example, if the company allocated me a budget of 2 million RMB last month for influencer collaborations, it becomes my task to continually search for influencers with available slots and suitable budgets to spend this amount. Spending the money becomes a task in itself.”*

The above highlights the dynamic interplay among the marketing department of the brand, PR agencies, and influencers, suggesting that their interactions may not always align with the best interests of the employers of the brand. It is suggested that media buyers and agencies possess a predetermined budget for influencer collaborations and operate within this financial framework. In essence, the effective allocation and utilization of funds earmarked for influencer collaborations become a distinct operational objective.

The influencer with the highest traffic and the lowest cost per click is the one most valued by marketers (Piercy, 1987). However, the reality is that the more traffic an influencer can attract, the higher his/her price is likely to be, and sometimes the price is not proportional to his/her traffic. Ms.Bee said:

*“Our strategy is to see how much money in hand, then to think the strategy, generally we will consider the budget, know the budget will probably cover how many, what level kind of influencers. I will generally give different levels of influencers; the most important kind is the ones who have best effect. And then the influencers in the middle, I know the data is OK. The last ones are just for spending all the budget. Generally, we don’t restrict the style of influencers. Because only the influencer knows what the readers want to see on WeChat, we offer some content, such as QR codes and information of revealing discounts. There will be briefs, but the influencers will do the content. If one reading is more than 1 RMB, I will certainly not use it. But if one reading is less than fifty cents (like they have 20000 reading rates but they only charge 2K RMB), it must be a false account. ”*

Ms.Bee described the role of budget in the selection of influencers to work with. As a rule, the higher the traffic, the higher the price is likely to be. But business budgets are always limited. Therefore, for the marketers, within the limited budget to select the right influencer is the need to consider other factors (Maskin & Xu, 2001). In other words, the budget is probably the last threshold compared to other factors. Marketers need to understand the authenticity of the number of fans from the same type of influencer as well as some characteristics of the influencer itself, such as cooperation attitude, the tonality of the

influencer himself and his articles. Marketers should combine all these factors to select the right influencer within the budget.

However, while marketers have their own budgets, there is no limit to how much quotation the influencers can offer. There are currently no laws regulating the fees. Therefore, for marketers, when considering the budget, it is necessary to understand the “unspoken rules” of the whole market. “No rule” of influencer marketing fee on WeChat is the pain point for many marketers in China. Informant Mr.Fox said:

*“Marketing must be more or less will have a trial and error, because we are also like a funnel project in a process. A large funnel caliber comes in, and then we select good one’s layer by layer of screening, and finally will retain some long-term projects, long-term will have an input. Those above the funnel mouth is relatively large, scattered points are we trial and error points, that in general trial and errors is a relatively small cost, as long as the overall cost is a healthy state, it is fine.”*

Within the budget, some marketers expressed they had to try different influencers to find out the results and pay for the mistakes as “education cost”. The analogy of a funnel project implies that marketing activities start with a broad array of potential initiatives, akin to a wide funnel mouth where numerous possibilities enter. This represents the initial exploration phase, characterized by diverse trial and error points. The reference to long-term projects highlights the importance of sustained performance improvement efforts over time, with ongoing input and refinement.

### **6.3 The typology of brand-influencer co-operation styles**

The typology of brand-influencer cooperation styles refers to the categorization or classification of the various ways in which brands and influencers collaborate or work together. This typology delineates different approaches, strategies, or modes of engagement adopted by brands and influencers in their cooperative endeavours. Influencer-brand partnership is collaborations between influencers and marketers, which takes many forms, from one sponsored post to social media account takeovers (Kozinets, et al., 2023). Different collaboration signals different involvement type between marketers and influencers.

Based on years of experience in reading articles on WeChat official accounts and interviews with practitioners, the author summarizes the types and characteristics of cooperation mode between marketers and WeChat influencers. It can be divided into four categories: dominant type, cooperative type, strategic type and relationship-oriented type.

Dominant influencers stand out with their strong personal branding and assertive style. They have amassed a large following and possess significant sway over their audience. These influencers are known for promoting their own opinions, ideas, and recommendations. With confidence and authority, they shape trends and consumer behaviour, leveraging their influence to drive engagement and interest. Such bloggers typically wield significant control over the collaborative content to be posted, preferring to convey advertisements in their own style. On the contrary, dominant brand partners are typically those with high brand recognition. During collaboration, they often require complete compliance from the collaborating bloggers, sometimes even expecting bloggers to directly modify their submissions within the brand's guidelines.

Cooperative influencers prioritize collaboration and partnerships with brands and fellow influencers. They actively seek out collaborations to create sponsored content, demonstrating a balanced approach between personal opinions and brand promotions. Skilfully integrating brand messages into their content, cooperative influencers forge mutually beneficial partnerships and contribute to the success of both the brand and their own influence. Similarly, cooperative brands are those that actively engage with influencers to promote their products or services. They value collaboration and seek to align their brand messaging with the content and values of the influencers they work with.

Strategic type marketers and influencers are individuals or entities who approach marketing activities with a strategic mindset. Unlike tactical marketers who focus on short-term, reactive initiatives, strategic marketers take a long-term view and aim to align marketing efforts with overarching business goals and objectives. Unlike typical influencers who may focus solely on promoting products or services, strategic influencers are integrated into broader marketing strategies to achieve specific outcomes such as brand awareness, reputation management, or driving consumer behaviour. These influencers often possess expertise, credibility, or a strong presence within a particular industry or niche, making them valuable partners in achieving strategic marketing objectives.

The relationship-oriented type of marketers and influencers prioritize building and nurturing long-term relationships based on mutual trust, respect, and collaboration. These individuals focus on developing meaningful connections with their audience or partners rather than solely focusing on transactional interactions. However, in many cases, interpersonal relationships also play a significant role.

### 6.3.1 Dominant type

This form of cooperation is led by the marketers or influencers. From the topic selection to the outline of the advertisement to the final draft, which all need the consent of the marketers or influencers. Mr. Yao said in the interview:

*“As a marketing company, we have encountered both dominant brand partners and influential bloggers, which are relatively unique scenarios. Dominant brand partners may provide bloggers with a pre-written article for direct publication or impose strict requirements on the topic, demanding meticulous modifications until they are satisfied. However, this mode of collaboration is rarely embraced by individual bloggers unless the brand is highly renowned or offers substantial compensation. Nevertheless, marketing accounts may engage in such partnerships for monetary gains. Dominant bloggers, akin to celebrities, prioritize alignment of their personal style with the brand's image during promotion and are less receptive to excessive interference from the brand. Nonetheless, many brands are willing to experiment with this approach to assess the effectiveness of blogger collaborations.”*

The encounter between marketing companies, dominant brand partners, and influential bloggers represents a complex interplay of agency and influence. The interaction between these stakeholders embodies a performance of negotiation and adaptation, where in each party seeks to optimize their outcomes within the constraints of the collaboration.

In some cases, the marketers work as the directors and producers of the performance who are in charge of everything involved in the performance. While the blogger influencer's skills

and creation basically have no room to play. Obviously, such a cooperative approach is hard to get the approval of most influencers. Informant Ms Wan suggests:

*“Marketers may also consider tailoring their advertising approach to better align with the blogger influencer’s style and preferences. This can not only make the collaboration more appealing for the influencer, but it may also result in a more effective advertising campaign overall. By striking a balance between the needs of the marketer and the preferences of the influencer, both parties can benefit from the collaboration. Most WeChat official marketing accounts may accept the dominant type of marketing style while individual influencers will less accept it.”*

In sum, influencers in dominant type of collaborations may face constraints on their creative expression and may experience challenges in maintaining their individual brand identity amidst the brand’s directives. This collaboration model also poses limitations for brands, as the number of bloggers willing to cooperate may be relatively limited. Generally, marketing accounts or less influential influencers who are more controllable may exhibit higher acceptance rates, while individual bloggers with distinct styles are less likely to accept such collaborations.

### **6.3.2 Cooperative type**

This partnership is like bringing the influencer into the marketing team. The whole team members come up with ideas and draft the outline of the advertisement. After the marketers confirm the outline, the influencer will fill and refine the content. In this sense, the marketers work as performance co-producers. This peaceful and friendly way of cooperation enables marketers to fully express their demands for brand promotion while leaving some space for the creation of influencers. The ideas of both sides can be fully expressed (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014). Informant Mr.Fox said:

*“It is like the same way working with an agency of a creative team, the influencer (六神磊磊, a famous influencer with over 10K reading rates per article) said that he will give me an outline according to the requirement, after we confirm the outline, he will make a first draft to our side and wait for confirmation. We were already satisfied with the first draft, because at*

*that time there was a hot issue in society that a man of the startups got punked, and then there was the reverse rip-off force thing. Then the influencer was particularly clever, he just took advantage of the situation and then combined it with one of our themes. The results were very good, and then the quality of the article is also very good, the transmission rate is very good, and conversion is also good.”*

The cooperative mode, where both parties collaborate with each other, is a common model in brand-blogger collaborations nowadays. Typically, both parties will assess whose collaborative ideas are more effective, and the other party will then provide cooperation. All matters will be primarily decided through consultation. The key emphasis lies in the mutual friendliness and cooperation between both sides. Although this approach is readily accepted by both parties, it cannot be asserted that the outcomes derived from this form are always optimal.

### **6.3.3 Strategic type**

Brand or influencer partners of the strategic type will adapt their strategies according to the situation. For instance, if a brand encounters a dominant influencer and trusts their judgment, the brand may be willing to adjust its approach based on the influencer’s suggestions, even if it means subtly incorporating promotional content.

For example, consumers and fans hate direct advertising. For WeChat influencers, in order to protect the number of their fans and achieve the expected publicity effect, they must hide the purpose of promotion and make their output more interesting and informative (Audrezet, et al., 2020). Informant Mr. Fox stated:

*“Marketing to business and customers is very different. To customers, they don’t care the technique or scientific means, they care what you can bring to them and how to offer them extraordinary customer experience, they focus the value of your product. To business, the contents need more professional and set up the status in this area, they focus on the value of your company. For the same account, the price is not fixed, it depends on manager’s communication skills. Marketers and influencers, both want to spread the article more. Because the readers hate the hard adverting, thus the influencers need to write the content very attractive*



*and soft, the marketers should not intervene it. Nowadays, the customers are very discursive, we cannot find a platform like all the people will watch the spring festival program of CCTV like before. There are more and more channels and increasingly sophisticated. Nowadays, the article must have its style and be benefitted to be spread.”*

Though the trend is to encourage the soft advertising, many sub-segments exist. In general, for the WeChat official accounts operated by individual influencers, he/she will be more concerned about the fans’ experience of advertorials, and the high frequency of advertorials advertising may lead to the risk of decreasing the number of fans. Therefore, when marketers cooperate with these kinds of individual influencers, most of them adopt the free mode, that is, they are only responsible for mailing samples, and other advertising topics and advertising outline and the content are designed by the influencer, so as to better fit the tonality of the WeChat official accounts he/she operates (Audrezet, et al., 2020). Mr. Xi in the interview expressed:

*“There are two types of cooperation. One is to send a sample to an influencer, he/she can write the article based on his/her style with their free choices, and we will give a certain profit based on the selling. The other one is that we give them the contents, they push the contents and get the profit based on the selling. Usually, the former one is suitable for individual influencers and the second one is for marketing accounts.”*

Strategic-type brand partners adapt their marketing strategies and collaboration approaches based on market conditions and feedback from their partners, aiming to maximize the effectiveness of their collaborations. Informant Ms. Wang believes that less interference in influencers’ content creation will lead to better performance:

*“We will say what we want to promote, but some influencers may be particularly good at photography, some influencers may be especially good at writing, some prefer to experience your other services. The only thing we need to do is that there are no errors in flight information in his article, common sense information, we do little interference in content. There may be tough partners, but we’re not.”*

Marketers here take little role in the performance, and work as performance initiators and outside supporters. This collaborative approach can also stimulate the skills of the influencer.

For example, some influencers may be good at photography, while others may be particularly good at writing. Businesses let them independently decide the content and way of promotion, can promote the cooperative relationship between businesses and influencers, make full use of the skills influencers are good at, better product promotion (Zhou, et al., 2021).

Some brands wish to conceal the advertising element when collaborating as strategy. Informant Mr. Tei is an influencer, and the collaborated brand even asked him to mention less of the brand name:

*“I just pushed one advertisement about Momo yesterday. The marketer asked me to delete some obvious words of momo, they want the advertising to be a very soft one. I will talk and discuss the topic with the marketers before I write the article, only when they make sure of the topic then I will write the article.”*

Compared to the vague portrayal of brands without interfering with the storyline in digital performance, informant Mr. Dan expressed in the interview a preference for brands to appear in articles as Easter eggs or in unexpected ways to enhance the plot. This surprising or drama effect on the audience is more appealing than the direct and abrupt insertion of endorsed brands for the digital performance:

*“People may feel interested when they read to the end and found it was an advertisement. Sometimes companies don’t want people to know they are doing advertising on WeChat official accounts because they want celebrity influencers’ endorsement.”*

As seen, brands might believe that if their collaboration is perceived as an advertisement, it could be seen as inauthentic and insincere. Brands may establish a more natural and real cooperation that resonates with their audience by disguising the advertising element. By disguising the advertising element, brands may have more creative freedom to produce content that matches with their brand’s values and messaging without feeling bound by conventional advertising rules. Certain audiences may be less receptive to the content if they believe the partnership to be an advertisement.

In general, strategic brand partners and influencers develop customized content and promotional strategies based on the principles of performance theory, such as focusing on

dramatization (Schechner, 1988; Turner, 1986) to make the plot more natural and logical, thereby increasing the audience's acceptance and enhancing the appeal and effectiveness of the digital performance.

### 6.3.4 Relationship-oriented type

Relationship-oriented collaborations between brands and influencers are characterized by a focus on building trust, fostering authenticity, and nurturing mutually beneficial relationships that extend beyond transactional exchanges. These partnerships are built on a foundation of shared values, open communication, and a commitment to achieving common goals, ultimately driving greater brand awareness, engagement, and loyalty.

For example, marketers often prefer to approach influencers with whom they have pre-existing personal connections or strong relationships. After the influencer completes the promotion, they may provide kickbacks or incentives to the marketer, as both parties stand to benefit. Consequently, marketers are inclined to recommend influencers who offer such incentives to the brand, leading to the establishment of long-term collaborative relationships. However, in many cases, interpersonal relationships also play a significant role. For example, marketers often prefer to approach influencers with whom they have pre-existing personal connections or strong relationships. After the influencer completes the promotion, they may provide kickbacks or incentives to the marketer, as both parties stand to benefit. Consequently, marketers are inclined to recommend influencers who offer such incentives to the brand, leading to the establishment of long-term collaborative relationships. Mr.Xian said:

*“The waters run deep in this line of work. Some of my colleagues keep detailed Excel spreadsheets recording how much money successful collaborating bloggers are expected to rebate to them. Typically, it's around 10%. These individuals then seek to collaborate with bloggers who are willing to provide rebates and demonstrate high levels of cooperation.”*

The excerpt highlights a practice within the industry where marketers meticulously track rebates from successful collaborations with bloggers, typically around 10%. These marketers then seek out bloggers who are willing to offer rebates and exhibit high levels of cooperation

for future collaborations. This type of collaboration exhibits strong subjectivity, primarily driven by personal preferences, with its drawbacks being quite evident.

### **6.3.5 The role of marketers in the performance metaphor**

This section will offer a thorough examination of the influence of marketers on the effectiveness of influencers.

Building upon the preceding discussion, marketers play a multifaceted role in influencing performance outcomes. Their involvement extends beyond mere evaluation of influencer performances; indeed, some marketers actively participate in shaping and executing these performances. This involvement may encompass tasks such as co-creating performance scripts tailored to influencers, designing the digital stage setting to enhance performance impact, and conducting comprehensive evaluations of the overall performance prior to its public debut. Within the metaphor of performance, marketers assume roles akin to directors and producers, orchestrating the various elements to optimize performance outcomes.

The predominant role of marketers in the performance typically involves initiating the specific performance. The term “initiate” denotes that marketers create the demand for performance and subsequently select influencers, inviting them to participate (Deighton, 1992). In practical terms, many marketers send product samples to influencers and request them to share their user experiences as performance scripts. Influencers such as Zhang Xiaohui and Rebecca have acknowledged receiving product samples (e.g., lipsticks, robotic vacuum cleaners) from marketers and have been asked to craft blogs detailing their experiences with these specific products.

Furthermore, marketers often possess comprehensive knowledge of their products and a deep understanding of their target consumers. Consequently, they frequently assume roles akin to special advisors or directors within the performance realm. For instance, some marketers facilitate performance production by inviting influencers to participate in product exhibitions or trade shows. Additionally, marketers may arrange visits for influencers to their production sites. These activities serve to equip influencers with a deeper understanding of the products, enabling them to conduct more effective performances. Moreover, such engagements furnish influencers with materials for their performances. Notably, many influencers document their

visits to trade shows or production sites in their WeChat blogs, leveraging their experiences to craft engaging posts. For example, influencer LIUXIAO-BAMBOO shared her experience at an LV jewelry show in a blog post, introducing special products showcased at the event and elucidating the stories behind the brands to her audience. Similarly, influencer Rebecca collaborated with the brand Mini Cooper to launch a joint brand initiative, “Rebecca X Mini Cooper,” and promoted sales events through WeChat blog posts. In interviews, both Rebecca and Liuxiao reflected on the role of marketers in providing product knowledge to enhance the performance process. Influencer Ms. Hun said:

*“To tell you the truth, I knew the brand, but I did not know the detail such as the history very well. The jewellery show did enhance my understanding and let me realize the colourful culture behind it”.*

For some influencers, they are willing to accept guidance from marketers on the performance and cooperate accordingly, assuming the role of actors. Here, they operate within an open-ended script provided by marketers, allowing them to freely interpret and perform within a defined framework.

Marketers also share the same viewpoints, and they acknowledge their un-substituted roles to influence the promotions of influencers. Brand Marketer Mr.Xi said:

*“Many influencers do not know the products and histories very well thus it will be hard for them to make sounded promotions. We need train them and educate them. Until they have good knowledge of the products and know the strengths of the products, they can make good promotions.”*

Marketers often anticipate usage occasions and try to ensure that performance features will be noticed (Hoch & Deighton, 1989).

In addition, some marketers participate in the review process of the influencers’ performances. For example, when influencers finish the drafts of their WeChat blogs, they will send the drafts to marketers, and marketers will double check whether the contents in the blog are accurate and attractive. This has been proved by some of my informants. Ms.Wen expressed :

*“I am a home and lifestyle blogger; I am not very knowledgeable about technology and electronics such as Robot Vacuum cleaner. So, to ensure the accuracy of my blogs each time, I sent the initial drafts to the marketers for them to review and provide feedback on specific technical details. After all, the marketer is more specialized in these aspects.”*

Some marketers also acknowledge their roles as final reviewers. Brand marketer Ms.Chen said:

*“Sometimes, we know our products and target consumers way better than influencers. Although we have educated influencers, you know there are always perception gaps. Thus, we need to double check the draft blog to make sure the blog posts involved the ideas we want the influencers to disseminate.”*

From the discussion above, it could be concluded that many marketers play active roles in the digital performances of the influencers. Marketers could be regarded as performance initiator, performance reviewer, and script writers. They do play important parts in each stage of the performance, i.e., before-, during- and after- performance.

## **6.4 How marketers evaluate the advertising effect**

Assessing the efficacy of brand promotion holds paramount importance for marketers, providing crucial insights into the effectiveness of their collaborative strategies (Kozinets, et al., 2023). Data performance serves as a primary mode of evaluation, furnishing quantifiable outcomes that afford marketers a more profound comprehension of the brand’s impact. Within the realm of new media platforms, assessment typically hinges on metrics encompassing page views, fan counts, likes, and broadcasts (Wayne, 2019). While these metrics contribute to the evaluation process, they predominantly capture the quantitative dimensions of engagement. However, the intrinsic value of daily output lies in its consistent delivery of brand value to the same audience demographic, rendering it challenging to ascertain the individual reception of each fan towards brand publicity. Moreover, relying solely on page views may inadequately reflect the degree of trust and interest garnered by the brand. Furthermore, data procured from WeChat official accounts may be subject to limitations, as elucidated by informant Ms. Bee:

*“As long as the data is beautiful. For example, the amount of reading, the number of comments, the rate of likes, which are not artificial uncontrollable. So, for employee as the junior executive level, there is no impact to us. I know this doesn’t work well, but the boss doesn’t know, Because the total sales is so large, one influencer’s impact is hard to judge, so as long as its data is beautiful enough, there is no problem as long as the PPT is beautiful of the data.”*

At the same time, the amount of exposure on the Internet is used to measure the effectiveness of the brand promotion. The more exposure, the greater the chance of being seen by anyone. In terms of probability, it has a certain positive effect. However, it is undeniable that such data is also difficult to quantify, and indicators are difficult to be measured by specific numbers. The exposure seen does not necessarily gain potential customers, and it is highly likely that it will be seen by more irrelevant people.

Marketers may employ various methods such as surveys, questionnaires, or interviews to conduct brand analyses aimed at understanding consumer satisfaction and popularity. However, such approaches are time-consuming, resource-intensive, and prone to biases, including survivor bias, rendering small-scale data inadequate for meaningful analysis (Koslow, et al., 2006). Although marketers have at their disposal a plethora of methods to measure the impact of brand promotion, none can comprehensively capture and quantify its effects. This does not imply the absence of effective measurement methods but rather underscores the necessity for brand marketers to continually assess the efficacy of their promotional strategies through market observation, sales evaluation, and future development analysis. Presented below are common evaluation methods employed by marketers to assess the effectiveness of influencer marketing.

#### **6.4.1 Different methods for evaluation**

Marketing effect is the key to evaluate marketing activities. Marketers also continuously improve their marketing strategies through marketing effects.

Online marketing has experienced three stages, the first stage is the web marketing stage. This stage is that the user obtains information through the personal desktop or laptop

computer. Network traffic naturally becomes the effect evaluation index of this stage, the address in the advertising system and page views are usually regarded as the source of data.

Therefore, cost per thousand people and cost per click become a common index to evaluate the effect of online advertising. The measurement index of the marketing effect of online advertising includes the number of times of advertising, the click-through rate of advertising, the reach rate of advertising, the two-hop rate of advertising, the conversion rate of advertising and so on (Flores, 2013).

The second stage is the personal and enterprise blog as the main marketing means of marketing. The interactive characteristic of the network is constantly enhanced, and the role of interpersonal word-of-mouth communication has gradually emerged. The way to judge the effect of blog communication or value of the number of blog visits, comments and query website ranking or value is also commonly used methods.

The third stage is when social media marketing began to prevail. Communication no longer exists only on the computer, but from various channels. Relationships offline are copied to the Internet and sharing and communication become the mainstream at this stage.

WeChat official account platform has the function of data statistics, which can more intuitively understand the information and needs of customers and help enterprises to establish a complete set of effect evaluation standards. Through the background data of WeChat official account platform, marketers can obtain the analysis of user, graphic analysis and message analysis. User analysis includes the increased number of users, unfollow number, net increased number; graphic analysis includes the number of readers of the article, the original page, the conversion rate of the text, the number of shares, etc. Marketers can judge the quality of the content bloggerinfluencers push. Message analysis is to count the interaction of customers within the platform, including the number of messages sending, the number of messages sent, and the number of messages sent per capita. The interaction between the public platform and subscribers can be analysed and evaluated.

Screenshot of WeChat official analytics platform :



content analysis

Mass analysis multimedia an...

All group | Single article

Yesterday's Key Indicators

Read (times)

10

day ↑ 25%

week ↓ 66.67%

moon ↓ 88.37%

Share (times) ?

3

day--\_

week ↑ 50%

moon ↓ 0%

Finish reading (times) ?

1

day--\_

week ↓ 80%

moon ↓ 94.74%

Data indic

read

share

Jump to read the original text

WeChat collection

Group articles

ators

data time

2023-03-30 to 2023-04-29

Download data details

communic

all

Official account news

chat session

Circle of friends

friends watching

ation chan

take a look at the selection

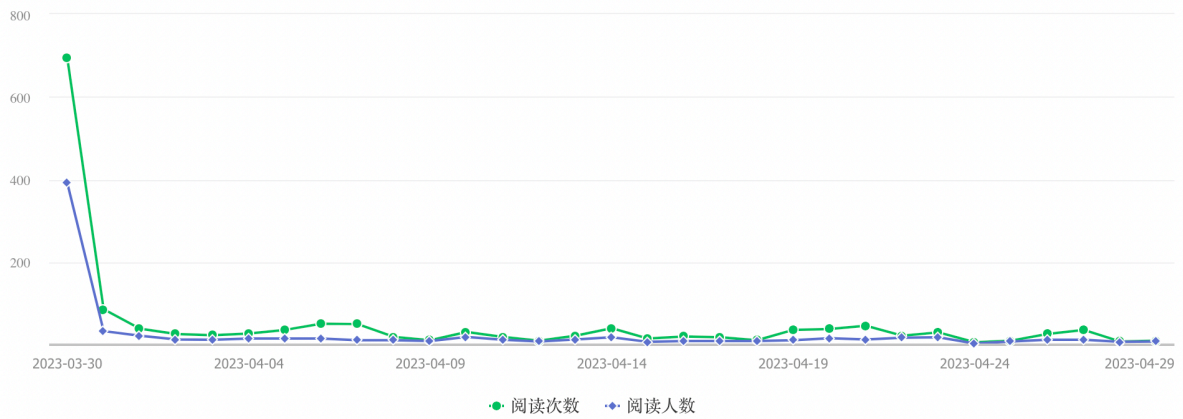
search

Public account homepage

other

nel

data trends



Channel composition

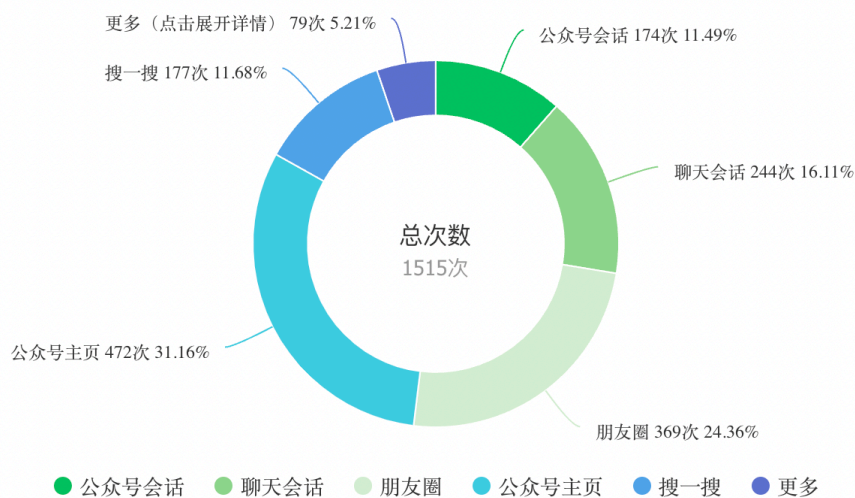


Figure 13 Content analysis and channel composition

### 6.4.2 The profit model of WeChat official account

Before discussing how marketers evaluate the effect of WeChat advertising, it needs to understand the profitability of WeChat official accounts. The data or index implicit in these monetization methods may become an important indicator to judge the effectiveness of advertising (Pavlou & Stewart, 2000).

The theory of secondary sale exists in traditional media, that is, the media provides information to the audience, satisfies the audience’s demand for information, and “sells” the information to the audience in the form of free, that is, the first sale. The media then sells the audience and their time as a “commodity” to the marketers, which is the second sale. In network communication, there is still the theory of secondary sale, in which the endless “attention” of users becomes a commodity. The “free lunch (which means the free information)” provided to users is not only limited to quality content, but also consists of brand resources, media value and other factors (Picard, 2001). So far, the main source of profits from the WeChat official account is advertising, and the market has recognized the advertising value of the WeChat official account as a whole. In addition, the WeChat official accounts are also actively explored for its spread in the form of profitable way, the existing three modes are as follows:

**1. Advertising traffic.** The main function of advertising traffic is the most basic way to cash out the WeChat official account. Eligible official accounts can open the function, and operators can voluntarily share the designated position in the small program of the official account to marketers for advertising display. After becoming the main advertising traffic of WeChat official accounts, monthly advertising income will be obtained. The official determines whether the traffic master exists by cheating marketing behaviour by monitoring the number of clicks. Once the official account or small program appears malicious violations, it will stop the identity of the advertising traffic master.

**2. “Like the author” feature and payment for content.** In August 2018, the official account was upgraded to “like the author” and the author of the original article can directly receive the reader’s appreciation. When the official account declares the original article, it can be opened after selecting the appreciation account. When the official accounts open the appreciation of the article, the reader’s like will be in full 7 days after the like of the account corresponding to the WeChat account. Like and content payment are one of the means of WeChat's profit. As early as 2016, knowledge payment entered the initial development stage. As WeChat itself is a social communication software, the content is mainly transmitted through the social relationship chain, and the official account does not introduce the functions related to paid content. At the beginning of 2020, WeChat's official account platform started the test subscription number payment function, that is, the remaining part of reading articles needs to pay the fee. After the formation of paid reading, the content transmission of public accounts will become more closed than before, but it reflects the advantages in maintaining user stickiness. “WeChat paid reading” will affect the communication ecology of the whole WeChat content.

**3. WeChat applet.** Before the appearance of WeChat applet, the combination of official account and e-commerce was external linked in the custom menu implant ecommerce platform. Fans as market target users are stimulated by the purchase with the information transmission. The introduction of WeChat applet further improved WeChat APP service centering on social networking and payment, showing excellent marketing ability. More and more marketers will directly introduce applets into the public account articles, which makes the one-stop marketing service system for users saving close cost, promoting the purchase behaviour of target users.

Overall, the income of top-tier influencers primarily relies on brand collaborations, while the aforementioned methods of profitability mentioned tend to yield relatively modest returns for ordinary accounts.

### **6.4.3 Engagement metrics for evaluation**

The communication mode of WeChat marketing is basically through WeChat moment (WeChat Moment, often referred to as “WeChat Friends Circle” or simply “Moments,” is a feature within the WeChat messaging app that allows users to share updates, photos, videos, and WeChat blogs with their contacts. It functions similar to a social media feed, where users can post content that is visible to their friends and contacts within the WeChat network. Friends can interact with these posts by liking, commenting, or sharing them, creating a dynamic and interactive social experience within the app), WeChat official account platform, WeChat group and other channels. The basic function of WeChat is the communication between users through the function. Therefore, marketers can judge the effect of WeChat marketing through the frequency of interaction between influencers and users (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). For example, marketers can judge the user’s interest in the product through the message of the WeChat official account platform. If they are interested in the product or brand, they will generally carry out relevant consultation. Marketers can see user participation through micro activities to understand the effect of WeChat marketing (Chetiou, et al., 2020).

Second is the conversion rate. A potential customer may need to complete several transformations on the WeChat official account before becoming a real customer. For example, marketers can calculate the click-through rate of product links on WeChat official accounts to understand the conversion rate. Or the number of online registrations or orders submitted through links within a week after the publication of the articles promoted by influencers are also representative.

And then there’s the fan growth rate. Through the information push function of WeChat official platform, users can push the content they are interested in, combined with product information, so that users can pay attention to the WeChat official account platform. Therefore, whether WeChat marketing has an effect, one of the main evaluation ways is to

see the increase in the number of fans in the WeChat official account platform, the higher the number of fans, the conversion rate of enterprises through WeChat marketing is relatively high.

It is often overlooked the value of fans and their influence on decision-making. When discussing influencers, it refers to how figures, whether individuals or enterprises, shape the choices of their fans. To illustrate this, considering the case of a gossip entertainment WeChat official account with a substantial fan base. While most of the fans may primarily be interested in its entertainment content, the account may not possess significant appeal, trust, or influence outside of that realm. In this scenario, it needs to contemplate how high the conversion rate could potentially be for different brands.

It is crucial to recognize that the influence in this context is intricately linked to the commercial realization capability of the account. Several factors come into play when determining the conversion rate:

The level of engagement and trust developed between the influencers and its fans is critical. The conversion rate is likely to be higher if the account continuously produces valuable and dependable information and fans trust its suggestions. The perceived influence of the account has a significant impact on the chance that fans will consider and act on its recommendations.

Relevance and alignment play a crucial role in the success of promoting a brand through the gossip entertainment WeChat official account. Considering that the account predominantly caters to an entertainment-focused audience, the conversion rate may be relatively lower if the recommendation does not strongly coincide with the fans' interests. However, if the public account has successfully diversified its content or established credibility in the promoted brand industry, the conversion rate has the potential to be significantly higher. This highlights the importance of ensuring a strong alignment between the recommended mask and the fans' interests, as well as leveraging the WeChat official account's reputation and expertise in the relevant domain.

The effectiveness of targeted marketing efforts has a direct impact on the conversion rate. Understanding the fan base's demographics and preferences allows the account to tailor its messaging and approach. The conversion rate can be boosted by using data-driven targeting

approaches and directing the recommendation to fans who are more likely to be interested in special brands.

The effectiveness of the call-to-action and the ease with which fans can convert are important factors in determining the conversion rate. Providing clear instructions, links, or discounts can facilitate the conversion process. Research by Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman (2017) highlights how technology, such as social media platforms, enhances consumers' passion to consume and engage with products and brands, further emphasizing the significance of effective call-to-action strategies for driving conversions.

It is important to note that predicting the exact conversion rate in this scenario without specific data and context is challenging. Conversion rates can vary significantly based on the aforementioned factors. However, if the public account boasts a highly engaged and receptive fan base, maintains credibility, and effectively targets its messaging, the conversion rate for the recommended brand could be substantial. Ultimately, the value of fans lies in their ability to influence purchasing decisions and drive commercial realization for the WeChat official account.

#### **6.4.4 AISAS mode**

What social media marketing advocates is: to pay attention to the model of “attention-interest-search-action-sharing (AISAS)”. The importance of search and sharing becomes more obvious and mutual (Rochman & Iskandar, 2015).

The Internet has a great impact on people's behaviour of obtaining information. Users become more self-aware and conscious, which is manifested in the active attention and sharing of Internet content. As a kind of mobile Internet communication, the public communication of WeChat conforms to the law and presents a more complex form of communication (Rini & Harahab, 2018).

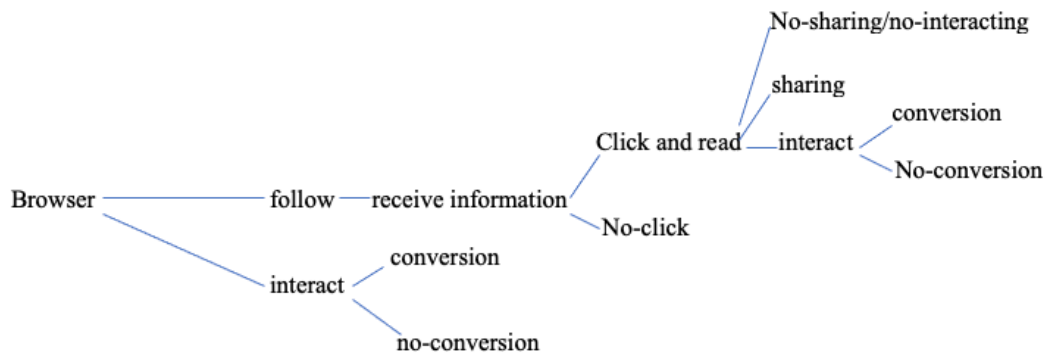


Figure 14 WeChat subscription users' response to information

According to the pattern diagram of WeChat subscription users' response to information, it can be seen that there are three key indicators affecting the communication effect of WeChat official accounts:

**Attraction:** whether the “official account” can attract the attention of users so as to stimulate the demand points or interest points of users, so that users want to pay attention to, is the starting point of the spread of WeChat official accounts.

**Transformation:** after attracting the attention of users, users will show different reactions to the information, which will also lead to different effects, such as whether users will share or actively spread the received information, and whether users will change their behaviour after receiving the information.

**Interaction:** Users can interact with the WeChat official account by asking questions, replying or chatting. Through interaction, they can deepen their impression of the brand or solve problems directly through feedback.

Marketing professionals can effectively utilize the AISAS model to assess the efficacy of WeChat official account advertisements through a structured approach across its key stages.

Firstly, in the Attention stage, marketers gauge the reach and visibility of their advertisements by monitoring metrics such as impressions, click-through rates, and engagement levels.

Elevated metrics indicate successful attention-grabbing efforts, highlighting the effectiveness of the ad in capturing the audience's initial interest.

Moving to the Interest stage, marketers analyse user engagement post-click, examining metrics like time spent on-page, scroll depth, and interaction rates. This provides insights into the audience's level of interest and involvement with the advertised content, aiding in assessing the resonance and relevance of the ad's messaging.

Subsequently, in the Search stage, marketers track user behaviour beyond the ad interaction, monitoring actions such as website visits, product searches, and further exploration of brand-related content. By analyzing these actions, marketers gain an understanding of the audience's intent and their readiness to engage further with the brand.

The Action stage focuses on evaluating the conversion rate, measuring the proportion of ad-engaged users who take desired actions such as making a purchase, signing up for a newsletter, or requesting more information. High conversion rates signify successful persuasion and incentivization efforts, indicating effective ad messaging and call-to-action strategies.

Finally, in the Satisfaction stage, marketers gather feedback and reviews from users who have engaged with the ad or completed the desired actions. Positive feedback and high satisfaction levels indicate successful delivery of value and meeting user expectations, reinforcing the effectiveness of the ad in driving favorable outcomes.

By systematically evaluating ad performance across the AISAS model's stages, marketers gain comprehensive insights into the effectiveness of their WeChat official account advertisements, enabling them to optimize strategies, enhance targeting, and maximize ROI.

#### **6.4.5 Subjective evaluation approach**

Due to the inherent challenges associated with evaluating the effectiveness of promotions on WeChat official accounts, certain marketers or brand managers have adopted an informal assessment method towards assessing their impact. This approach entails leveraging creative or unconventional metrics, such as anecdotal feedback, qualitative impressions, or subjective



assessments, to gauge the success of promotional campaigns. Despite its departure from traditional performance measurement methodologies, this subjective evaluation approach allows marketers to maintain a semblance of control and engagement with their audience while navigating the complexities of WeChat's promotional landscape. Informant Ms Chen said:

*“Marketing is like self-entertainment in most of the time. Some brand clients want all the people could talk about the campaign online and offline and they define it as a success if all the people around them could discuss it. But it is almost unrealistic. For example, most people who make movies and dramas want to be surrounded by ordinary people discussing their films/plays, and their work could become a phenomenon like a big fire. While everyone wants to achieve this effect, it is impossible to achieve; your broadcast volume, your online KPI have met expectations, but there may be few people around you to discuss it. It still does not meet the client's expectations. However, if his/her friends' WeChat moments are all talking about the project, then he/she feel it is a success while he/she does not know his/her friends probably only belong to a small circle”.*

From Ms. Chen, evaluating the marketing effect becomes a kind of self-entertainment mode. Ms. Chen discusses the discrepancy between marketers' aspirations for widespread discussion of their campaigns and the realistic limitations of achieving such ubiquity. It draws an analogy between marketing and self-entertainment, suggesting that many brand clients desire their campaigns to generate widespread buzz both online and offline, akin to the phenomenon of a blockbuster movie or popular television drama. However, Ms. Chen contends that achieving this level of recognition is often unrealistic. Despite meeting broadcast volume and online key performance indicators (KPIs), campaigns may still fail to spark widespread discussion among the broader public, thereby falling short of client expectations.

The passage highlights the subjective nature of success in marketing, noting that while some clients may consider a campaign successful if their immediate circle of friends discusses it on WeChat moment, this may not necessarily reflect broader public engagement. It suggests that success is contingent upon individual perceptions and expectations, with some clients

equating success with widespread discussion among both close acquaintances and the general public, while others may define success more narrowly based on personal connections and social circles.

In academic terms, this passage explores the concept of social influence and the complexities of measuring campaign success in marketing. It underscores the importance of understanding client expectations and the subjective nature of success metrics in evaluating marketing effectiveness. Additionally, it highlights the challenges of achieving widespread visibility and engagement in an increasingly fragmented and diverse media landscape.

Evaluating advertising effectiveness in marketing can sometimes devolve into a form of self-indulgence, wherein marketers focus excessively on subjective enjoyment and creative fulfillment derived from the subjective opinions, rather than rigorously assessing its impact on target audiences and achieving predefined marketing objectives. Consequently, an overemphasis on self-indulgent evaluation of advertising effectiveness may undermine the core purpose of marketing efforts, diverting attention away from tangible outcomes and impeding the optimization of marketing strategies for maximum impact and profitability.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter offers a distinctive examination of influencer marketing on WeChat official account from the perspective of marketers. It covers various aspects, ranging from the selection of co-influencers to the assessment of collaboration methodologies, and extends to the evaluation of marketing efficacy. Through this analysis, the brand marketing process via WeChat official accounts is illuminated.

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the influencer selection process, drawing insights from empirical interview data. Key considerations encompass both objective and subjective aspects, including fan demographics, influencer tonality, brand-influencer fit, harmony, and budget constraints. Following the identification of suitable co-influencers, marketers collaborate with influencers in various capacities, categorized into dominant, cooperative, strategic, and relationship-oriented types.

Subsequently, upon the dissemination of promotional content by influencers on WeChat official accounts, marketers undertake the crucial task of evaluating advertising effectiveness.

This evaluation stage represents the final and pivotal step in the marketing process. Various evaluation methods exist, with essential metrics including communication rate, fan growth, and conversion rate. Moreover, sociological research introduces the AISAS model to elucidate the assessment of WeChat influencer advertising effects. Nevertheless, evaluating advertising effectiveness remains challenging due to the prevalence of unspoken rules and nuanced considerations within the influencer marketing landscape.

While influencer marketing offers numerous advantages, it also presents challenges and drawbacks. In the next chapter, I will delve deeper into the complexities of influencer marketing and explore its dark side, focusing particularly on potential pitfalls and negative repercussions associated with digital performance.

## **CHAPTER 7. THE DARK SIDE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING ON WECHAT BLOGS**

## 7.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the adverse or potentially negative dimensions of social media marketing within the WeChat blogging sphere, examining these aspects at three distinct levels: the influencers, the brands involved, and the audience or broader societal members. The primary objective of this chapter is to scrutinize the challenges and dark facets inherent in influencer marketing, exploring how these manifest for both influencers and brands, while also considering the broader societal implications associated with influencers and their marketing practices.

Key inquiries guiding this exploration include: How do WeChat influencers navigate and overcome tensions, maintaining their audience amid uncertainties arising from platform affordances? What challenges emerge for brands engaged in collaborations with WeChat influencers? In what ways do blogs exert a negative influence on the audience and potentially impact society at large? In response to these pivotal questions, a comprehensive summary is presented, accompanied by pertinent suggestions aimed at addressing and mitigating these challenges within the realm of WeChat influencer marketing.

In recent years, WeChat blogs have evolved into a substantial medium for influencers to connect with their followers, driven by the expansion of social media marketing. While this marketing approach offers numerous advantages, it is imperative to scrutinize potential drawbacks across three distinct dimensions: the influencers, the collaborating brands, and the societal impact on the audience. This chapter delves into empirical data to illuminate the financial pressures experienced by influencers and their repercussions within the digital ecosystem, providing an in-depth exploration of the negative facets associated with WeChat influencer marketing.

Understanding the strategies employed by WeChat influencers to attract attention and monetize their content is undoubtedly essential. However, this chapter goes beyond a mere examination of these strategies, delving into the implications they bear for influencers. It sheds light on the challenges and pressures inherent in these strategies, offering a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted dynamics surrounding WeChat influencer marketing.

Economic pressures play a pivotal role in influencing influencers to explore diverse tactics for revenue generation and maintaining relevance in a highly competitive market. This chapter delves into the intricate economic aspects, examining the challenges influencers face as they strive to strike a delicate balance between audience engagement and navigating the uncertainties presented by the platform's affordances.

The chapter will also look at the effects of influencer-brand partnerships, highlighting how firms may lose out in the quest for more visibility and brand recognition. Brands frequently commit significant resources to influencer marketing, yet the results may not always meet their expectations. To create efficient marketing strategies and reduce potential hazards, it is essential to comprehend the interactions between influencers and brands.

This study will investigate the adverse effects of influencers and influencer marketing on WeChat, extending beyond economic considerations to explore their impact on audiences and society as a whole. The distribution of influencers' content can exert a substantial influence on their followers, and this research reveals that such impact may not always be positive. By examining these consequences, a critical insight into the responsibilities of influencers and the potential societal repercussions of their activities can be gained.

Moreover, this chapter will delve into various aspects of the economic pressures faced by WeChat influencers, exploring sponsored content, advertising, and affiliate marketing. Through the analysis of data and empirical evidence, I aim to enhance our comprehension of how influencers navigate these economic demands and the potential impact on their content creation. Additionally, the chapter will provide insights into the intricacies of influencer-brand collaborations, illuminating the potential advantages and disadvantages for both parties. Lastly, a critical examination of the societal implications of WeChat blogs will be presented, with a focus on issues such as misinformation, unrealistic beauty standards, and heightened consumerism.

## **7.2 The dark side to the influencer**

The rapid surge of social media platforms and the subsequent emergence of influencer culture have provided content creators with an unparalleled opportunity to showcase their talents and gain recognition. However, as emphasized in the article by Hudders and Lou (2021), this

phenomenon has a darker side that cannot be overlooked. While influencers enjoy the limelight, their experiences often entail burnout, disillusionment, and mental exhaustion. The pressure to consistently generate engaging content, contend with market saturation, and sustain a high level of success takes a toll on their mental and emotional well-being. Furthermore, the ever-changing platform policies contribute to a sense of instability and unpredictability. Content creators must navigate these complexities to ensure their content reaches a broad audience and to sustain their popularity.

Influencers are successful on social media, but they also face the struggles, uncertainties, and emotional challenges (Ashman, et al., 2013). Glatt (2021) also reveals that content creators experience stress, uncertainty, and burnout in a fast-paced and ever-changing industry. However, previous research lacks an in-depth understanding of the dark side and specifically we have little knowledge on how influencers themselves perceive the dark side, i.e., various pressure they encounter. The following paragraphs will focus on the dark side of influencer marketing, by analysing the pressures that influencers face in terms of mental, physical and financial aspects.

### **7.2.1 The dynamics of pressure**

Disseminating essential facets of life's shared knowledge, early bloggers not only captured significant audience attention (Halvorsen, et al., 2013), but brand marketers also began acknowledging the substantial social influence wielded by bloggers, recognizing it as a pivotal force in promoting products and brands (Campbell & Farrell, 2022). This suggests that influencers and their followers engage in multifaceted relationships (Lou, 2022). Influencers have played a pivotal role in reshaping marketing practices during this era. Notably, influential figures have not only replaced traditional product brand advertising in some instances (Lou, 2022) but have also emerged as substitutes for specific domain experts (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Navigating the WeChat official account platform poses unique challenges, as it prioritizes delivering in-depth reading experiences, making the sustained creation of top-tier content and the retention of popularity particularly demanding. Beyond content creation, marketing the account proves to be an additional hurdle, amplifying the intricacies of being an influencer on this platform. The confluence of these pressures and challenges not only strains the

professional aspects but also takes a toll on the mental well-being of influencers. Some influencers, in response to these difficulties, opt to close their accounts as a coping mechanism. In the following sections, I will explore the specific dynamics of pressure experienced by influencers.

### **7.2.1.1 Mental pressure in performance**

The mental pressures experienced by influencers emanate from a triad of significant sources, each contributing to a complex web of challenges: the influencer's audience, brand sponsors, and the platforms hosting their content. These pressures, when left unaddressed, can manifest in a range of detrimental psychological effects, including feelings of inadequacy, heightened anxiety, and, in severe cases, depression.

#### **7.2.1.1.1 Meeting readers' expectations**

Influencers navigate a delicate balance between meeting the expectations of their audience and maintaining a genuine and authentic online persona. The pressure to consistently deliver content that resonates with their followers, garners engagement, and aligns with audience preferences can be overwhelming. The pressure from the audience mainly arises from the need to meet readers' expectations (Cocker, et al., 2021) and from receiving critical comments and having to face comments from anti-fans (Glatt, 2023). The competitive nature of the industry further exacerbates these challenges, with creators constantly comparing themselves to others and feeling the need to outdo their peers to stay relevant (Hudders & Lou, 2021). The pursuit of virality and trending topics becomes a primary focus, often compromising genuine creativity and passion. The need to respond to comments and maintain a positive online presence can also lead to burnout and exhaustion (Mardon, et al., 2023).

Informant Ms. Wan in the interview described treating her WeChat official account as though she were writing a complicated magazine:

*"My position is quite clear. Essentially, my WeChat official account embraces a style characterized by high-quality design, tasteful food topics, and a down-to-earth language approach. This distinctive style is deeply intertwined with my personal life. Drawing inspiration from magazines like*



*'small days,' I deliberately crafted my WeChat official account to mirror the essence of such publications."*

Ms. Wan also explained that her desire to continuously produce high quality content for her audience led to feelings of exhaustion:

*"Because when you do the exquisite content for a long time without enough team members, you will feel very tired. Most of our content is very original, and we need to film the project, cut it, edit it, then choose the topic, it is such an exhausting experience if it is in a high frequency."*

It can be difficult for influencers to maintain high-quality content over time, especially when selecting new themes. While striving for excellence is commendable, an excessively perfectionist approach in managing a WeChat official account may lead to resource imbalances, reduced creativity, heightened pressure, inflexibility, audience alienation, and missed opportunities. It is crucial to strike a balance between quality and agility in the dynamic landscape of social media.

Informant Mr. Sun stopped writing blogs because he believed he had covered all the topics he desired to cover:

*"I made the decision to stop updating my WeChat official account when I realized that there was nothing exceptional to write about and that I had already conveyed the messages I wanted to share. The account demanded a significant amount of my time and energy, with little expected payoff. However, this change allowed me to discover that I suddenly had ample spare time, which I even utilized to start playing computer games."*

The constant need for validation and the pressure to garner likes, followers, and brand collaborations can be mentally draining. In recent years, the struggles faced by content creators have become more apparent and it is not only happening in China. The pressures of public life and the expectations to constantly produce content have taken a toll on influencers well-being (Hudders & Lou, 2021).

In addition, despite the generally friendly readership, influencers are often subjected to online criticism, hate, and cyberbullying, which can significantly impact their mental

well-being (Liew, 2019). An example of this is seen in the case of influencer “Six god Lei Lei.” He once shared a blog post addressing an incident involving an anti-fan. Within the article, he included a screenshot of a private message from a reader containing an array of offensive and hurtful words directed at him. The severity of the situation became evident when his sister, who manages reader interactions, was nearly brought to tears upon encountering such abusive language. Out of frustration and to express his anger and emotions, he felt compelled to write a blog post addressing the issue.



Figure 15 The case of “Six god Lei Lei”

While online platforms provide a global stage and an unprecedented reach, they also expose individuals to heightened levels of scrutiny and criticism. Due to the rapid dissemination capabilities of the internet, these negative effects on bloggers can expand infinitely. A seemingly minor incident or statement can go viral in a matter of hours, attracting intense public attention and endless online reactions. A blog post can be shared countless times and seen by an ever-growing audience. The rapidity and scale of online amplification can lead to unexpected consequences. There may even be malicious viewers or even competitors who hire trolls to generate cyberbullying, harassment, and character attacks. These brought the digital performers even more troubles. Both informants Mr. Tei and Mr. Nan indicate that before they publish their blogs online, they will go through numerous rounds of review, fearing that there might be any reference to sensitive public topics, which could potentially attract unnecessary trouble. Due to the internet’s ability to magnify and multiply the effects, some

bloggers admit: “being a blogger is a high-risk profession” (Mr. Sun), and “to become a blogger, one must possess a strong inner resilience to handle various forms of criticism, accusations, and even insults (Ms. Wan).”

#### 7.2.1.1.2 Brand sponsorship demands

Collaborations with brand sponsors introduce another layer of pressure for influencers. Meeting the expectations and requirements of sponsors while preserving authenticity can be challenging. Influencers may feel the need to align their content with brand guidelines, potentially compromising their creative freedom. The fear of losing brand partnerships or facing criticism for perceived promotional insincerity adds to the mental burden. The pressure from marketers mainly comes from unrealistic KPIs/targets, high expectations and unreasonable modifications. For example, Mr. Chen told me:

*“The competitive pressure is unprecedentedly high because we are in an era where anyone can become a blogger. The number of bloggers is increasing year by year. When marketers find that your advertising and revenue-generating abilities are weak, they may seek others” (Mr. Chen) .*

Another blogger FK wrote in his blog detailing his friend’s (a well-known blogger)’s real experience:

*“Late at night, a prominent blogger publicly vented frustration at an unjust client, sparking my curiosity. In a private exchange, she detailed negotiating a comprehensive collaboration, confirming specifics with the client. Despite meticulous preparation, her completed 4000-word article faced unexpected scrutiny, with 10 people critiquing it, including inexperienced interns. The staggering 62 modification requests, often vague and subjective, pushed her to comply despite a valuable advertising opportunity before the Chinese New Year. Five rounds of revisions later, the article transformed into a generic promotion, meeting every client demand. When the revised draft was submitted to the ultimate decision-maker, the big boss, for a ‘quick look,’ his feedback left her in utter darkness: ‘Lacks personality, unreadable; suggest a complete rewrite’.”*

The blogger's collaboration with the client on the mosaic, unfortunately, took a turn for the worse due to unreasonable editing requests. Despite engaging in detailed negotiations and providing a carefully crafted outline for the collaboration, the blogger faced unexpected challenges. The use of the phrase "utter darkness" conveys the profound emotional impact of the feedback on the influencer, suggesting a sense of despair and disappointment. This situation highlights the difficulties and frustrations that can arise when creative efforts face unreasonable scrutiny and demands in a collaborative professional context by offering further insight or new insight into insight into the pressures placed on influencers from brands (Ashman, et al., 2018).

In the contemporary digital landscape, the precarious nature of bloggers' positions becomes evident, particularly as many lack enduring contractual agreements with brands, rendering them susceptible to abrupt collaboration terminations and potential replacements. This dynamic underscores the inherent volatility of the blogger-brand relationship, a phenomenon that aligns with the principles of performance theory. Within this theoretical framework (Schechner, 1988), bloggers can be viewed as digital performers navigating a precarious stage where their roles and engagements are subject to constant evaluation, akin to the performative aspects inherent in theatrical or artistic performances. The lack of long-term commitments accentuates the ephemeral nature of these digital collaborations, reflecting the broader uncertainties and challenges faced by digital performers seeking stability and security in their roles within the evolving digital landscape.

#### **7.2.1.1.3 Platform algorithm, policies, and competition**

The dynamics of social media platforms, with their ever-evolving algorithms and content visibility mechanisms, contribute significantly to influencers' mental stress. Changes in algorithms can impact content reach, affecting an influencer's visibility and engagement. Keeping up with platform trends, algorithmic shifts, and the pressure to conform to platform-specific content norms pose ongoing challenges, potentially leading to stress and burnout. Influencers are also facing the pressure from the platforms themselves and the competitive nature of the influencer market.

Firstly, the WeChat official account platform has considerable restricted policies and unspoken rules in place. Unlike platforms like Google and YouTube where anyone

with a Google account can set up a YouTube account within seconds (Ashman, et al., 2018), registration of WeChat official account requires verification of personal identity. As the adage goes, “nobody knows you are a dog on the Internet.” However, every WeChat official account is connected to an identity, which adds a certain level of authenticity and accountability. According to Mr.Nan:

*“It is exceedingly difficult to register new WeChat official accounts, because every WeChat ID can only be associated with a confirmed bank card up to 5 times.”*

Mr.Nan encountered difficulties with maintaining the account due to political reasons, with several of his accounts being banned by the WeChat platform. As such, he used his IDs, his wife’s IDs and many other relatives’ IDs to set up more accounts.

In a similar vein, Mr.Tei expressed feeling disheartened and dissatisfied when he lost his first WeChat account as a result of writing an article which was deemed to have breached strict platform policies. His account was subsequently closed by WeChat, which meant that he had to cancel his upcoming commercial collaborations, and embark on the challenge of starting a new blog and attracting a new following:

*“At that time, the policy regarding WeChat official accounts was quite perplexing for me. I had made the decision to leave my job and focus on full-time blogging, and I was in discussions with potential investors who were interested in investing in my account. However, due to the restrictions, I had to cancel all the scheduled commercial collaborations in January. It left me feeling disheartened and unsure about what to do next. On one hand, I found it incredibly challenging to attract new users, leading me to question if anyone would even follow me if I were to create a new account. On the other hand, there are already numerous WeChat official accounts, and in the fast-paced nature of today's world, it is possible that people may not even notice or feel the need to engage with a new account. These thoughts and uncertainties have contributed to my dissatisfaction, and I have contemplated the idea of pursuing a job instead. Just the thought of it brings about a sense of sadness and depression.”*

Under current social policies in China, online speech is subject to regulation and control. Many sensitive keywords are banned, let alone topics related to political sensitivity (Xu, et al., 2022). Many bloggers express that they must be extremely cautious while creating content. Otherwise, their articles can be taken down, and their accounts might even be suspended. Since all social media accounts are now required to be registered under real names and ID, individuals who make ‘inappropriate’ remarks can receive visits, warnings, and even penalties or legal consequences from internet police. Especially during sensitive political events, the average review time for blogs tends to be extended. Even in many cases, content is mistakenly flagged as “inappropriate remarks” by the system, which further delay publication time. These are all challenges which WeChat influencers must navigate when creating content.

Apart from the political sensitivities, the fierce competition is another source of pressure. WeChat influencers, like other social media influencers, operate in a very competitive and dynamic environment (Ashman, et al., 2018). Influencer Mr. Fan stated,

*“Many accounts suggests if you have a beautiful appearance or expertise in makeup, you should focus on the beauty area, similarly if you have talent in cooking, then you should explore the food area. And if neither of those applies to you, then becoming a humorous blogger is advised, and in that particular vertical, you should delve deeply into creating engaging content. This is correct, but China has 1.4 billion people; how many of them are being considered beautiful or as talent chiefs?”*

The quote underscores concern related to societal expectations and standards perpetuated by influencer culture. Conventional advice in this realm often fixates on specific attributes like beauty, makeup proficiency, cooking skills, or humor. This advice may inadvertently fuel the darker aspects of influencer marketing by reinforcing narrow and unrealistic ideals. Like latecomers to a gold rush, no matter how hard they try, they won’t find much gold.

Furthermore, the quote challenges the applicability of such advice in a diverse and populous country like China, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach may not suit such a vast and varied demographic. This prompts concerns about potential harm arising from promoting a

limited and exclusive definition of beauty or talent, particularly when applied to the diverse population of China.

Finding a suitable content domain/ niche is difficult due to the large number of existing WeChat accounts. Ms. Xiao stated:

*“First and foremost, the bubble of WeChat official account is growing more serious, and now it is in a white-hot stage. That is, everyone wants to register an account and become an internet superstar. It is a manifestation of social growth where everyone wants to express their own opinions. However, from a commercial standpoint, it is hard to perceive the actual value, as different people write different things about the same new item, and some of it is false. Moreover, WeChat is not used by just two people; it has so many users that individuals only want to view content based on their interests, rather than checking various official accounts all day long; people will follow more accounts, but the limit of their focus is only two or three that they can read. Initially, the focus was around 1500 accounts, but it is doubtful if it will increase to 3000 in the immediate future. Most people do not have time for that. Everyone is vying for attention. All of this is preempting the consumers ‘attention before you can take action. Once there is a focus on the flow, it can be monetized, then you can discuss with businesses for collaboration. At the moment, the media is also considered a profession because partnership is the only way out, and the media functions in such a manner.*

The growing seriousness of the WeChat official account bubble suggests an overcrowded and highly competitive environment. The white-hot stage implies intense competition, making it challenging for new accounts to stand out amid the saturation. Ms. Xiao expresses skepticism about perceiving the actual commercial value due to the diversity of opinions and the potential presence of false information. This uncertainty poses a challenge for businesses aiming to leverage WeChat as a marketing platform. With numerous users and accounts on WeChat, individuals tend to focus on content aligned with their interests. This results in information overload, making it difficult for accounts to capture and sustain users’ attention amid the vast array of available content. The intense competition and limited user focus create challenges for new entrants trying to gain attention. The difficulty of increasing the

initial focus from 1500 accounts to 3000 suggests a daunting task for emerging accounts to expand their reach.

The platform algorithm of WeChat official account is different from others. Previously, WeChat official accounts operated on a follow-and-push system, where the system could only push articles to followers, and non-followers couldn't access the messages. This led to a situation where the strong became stronger, and traffic only flowed into larger pools, leaving other streams nearly stagnant. As a result, many content creators migrated to other platforms with simpler aggregation methods. In an effort to revitalize the situation and encourage movement among creators and users, platforms gradually transitioned from a follow-push system to a recommendation distribution system. This diversified traffic sources, incorporating channels such as search, "Moments," friend activities, and topic recommendations. WeChat bloggers need to optimize their content for exposure and user interaction by understanding and adapting to the algorithmic features of the WeChat Official Accounts platform. Since promoting the account to meet the platform algorithm requires a significant amount of effort, Ms. Wan expressed:

*"I am very tired of WeChat marketing now, but the most troublesome thing is marketing after pushing the article. You need to interact with the audience and spread the article through multiple social media platforms incessantly. If we have a marketing budget, we will send red packets to many groups to ask people to share the article, or we will buy some fake reading rates which provide no substantial assistance. The real help is to forward the article one by one to friends, but I have no time to do it. The whole marketing process is mechanized and boring. If you have time, you can post the same article to many different platforms to attract more readers to the WeChat official account. I hate the process, and now I have asked my assistant to do it. When I did it all by myself, I was very tired since I needed to check my phone to interact with the readers all the time."*

Ms. Wan expresses weariness with WeChat marketing, particularly the post-article promotion phase. This involves continuous interaction with the audience and sharing the article across various social media platforms tirelessly. The author mentions the use of marketing budgets for tactics like distributing red packets to groups or purchasing fake reading rates, which are acknowledged as unhelpful. The author identifies personal forwarding of the article as the most effective strategy but notes a lack of time for such manual efforts. Overall, the



marketing process is described as mechanized and dull. However, in order to meet the platform's algorithm and push the article to more people, it is necessary to repeatedly engage in such mechanical labor each time.

In response to the aforementioned challenges and pressures that WeChat bloggers face, some influencers eventually decide to close their account altogether and quit blogging. One food writer finally removed all his blogs on WeChat platforms for commercial purposes after struggling to keep up with the demands of the platform:

*"I know many individuals started making money with WeChat official accounts. However, we were outdated when we decided to create an account and did not pay attention to the platform's upgraded processes and new features. Without a content generation plan in place, it became difficult for us to keep up. At the time, I was socializing frequently and writing high-quality blog, which I realized was draining my energy and disturbing my writing process. As a result, all of the recipes have been removed from WeChat official account since they have been published in a book. Additionally, all the other vignettes have been removed as they have been published in a book too. Therefore, proving free reading material on WeChat is no longer possible.*

Due to the nature of the WeChat official account platform, where content is freely accessible to readers, some bloggers may discontinue regular updates. This shift in behaviour could be attributed to the platform's recognition of this loophole, subsequently leading to the introduction of a paid subscription model as an alternative.

Essentially, the negative aspect arises from various factors, including fierce competition, uncertainty about commercial value, information overload, limited user attention, challenges for new entrants, hurdles in monetization, platform algorithms, and the professionalization pressures faced by WeChat official account bloggers. In some cases, influencers have ceased updating their content, and in more extreme cases, have even closed their accounts. Additionally, alongside these mental pressures, WeChat influencers also encounter physical pressures, which will be discussed in the next section.

### 7.2.1.2 Physical pressure in performance

WeChat bloggers face physical strain in their efforts to maintain a presence on social media platforms. The demand for continuous interaction with the audience, frequent sharing across various social media channels, and the repetitive nature of promotional activities contribute to the physical stress experienced by these bloggers. The constant need to adapt to platform algorithms, engage with readers, and ensure content visibility can be physically taxing, often requiring sustained efforts that may lead to fatigue and exhaustion.

The imperative to meet crucial metrics for marketers, such as engagement rates and click-through rates, can often relegate the promotion of one's account to the periphery of an influencer's priorities. Striving to maintain these performance indicators can lead to exhaustion and fatigue, causing influencers to overlook or neglect the promotional aspect of their accounts. Ms. Chen articulated her sentiments:

*“Marketing accounts on Weibo can be produced in quantities, but WeChat official accounts cannot. WeChat official accounts are more like small media outlets, influencers need to put a lot of effort and time into operating an account, and usually, it is not replaceable.”*

Ms. Chen discusses the distinction between marketing accounts on Weibo and WeChat official accounts. It suggests that Weibo marketing accounts can be created in large numbers, possibly implying a relatively simpler process. In contrast, WeChat official accounts are portrayed as more intricate, resembling small media outlets. The effort and time required to operate a WeChat official account are emphasized, highlighting the substantial commitment influencers need to invest in managing such accounts. Additionally, the interview implies that WeChat official accounts are not easily replaceable, underscoring their unique and valuable nature compared to the more numerous Weibo marketing accounts.

For example, there is no fixed and stable working hours. The physical fatigue extends beyond the labour involved in creating blog posts and managing marketing accounts. For instance, for food bloggers, the need to go out and explore culinary delights can turn socializing into a physical burden as well. Mr. Kai stated:

*“I do not make money on WeChat official account; it is simply for my personal interest, not for commercial purposes. However, you may know*

*many individuals who like fine dining as much as I do, and we may create a resonance effect through our WeChat official accounts. For example, if you are single, you might not visit restaurants frequently. However, if you have a large group of friends who share the same interest, your frequency of going out for food will increase significantly. Now, instead of writing blogs for enjoyment, I have a greater duty to continually write blogs. I am under greater unspoken pressure to produce a good blog as I feel more responsible when I do not relax or eat too much. In fact, the ultimate result is excruciatingly painful, especially at the end of the year. For example, in November and December of last year, I went out practically three or four days a week for fine dining that ended at 10, 11pm, or even later, which was exhausting, especially when I had to get up early to work the next day.”*

It suggests that the individual emphasizes that their WeChat official account is not created for commercial gain but rather stems from personal interest. Despite the non-commercial intention, Mr.Kai acknowledges the potential influence their content might have on like-minded individuals, creating a resonance effect. This influence is described through the example of encouraging people to go out for fine dining more frequently if they share the same interest. However, Mr.Kai admits that this has transformed the activity from a leisurely pursuit into a responsibility, indicating a sense of unspoken pressure to consistently produce content. This pressure intensifies as the speaker feels a greater duty and responsibility, which leads to exhausting experiences such as frequent fine dining outings, especially towards the end of the year. The passage implies a shift from a hobby to a burdensome commitment due to the perceived expectations and responsibilities associated with maintaining the WeChat official account.

As a food blogger myself, I deeply understand this. Sometimes, I travel long distances to dine at restaurants for the sake of writing articles. If I'm on a trip, in order to savor local delicacies to the fullest, there was once a day when I scheduled visits to ten different restaurants. Writing about food involves not only intellectual but also physical labor. Apart from constantly taking photos during meals, I take notes for each dish, and when writing articles, I often find myself sitting in front of the computer for more than four hours at a stretch. On one occasion, while rushing to meet a deadline, my legs became numb to the point where I

couldn't stand up. When I suddenly stood up, I fell to the ground. My body often can't cope with the demands.

Ms.Duo expressed the whole process is tiring:

*“Because first, I have to go to the restaurant and communicate with people. If you quantify all of this into time, that means writing a piece of blog takes a day, a workday, and maybe include a few hours of work and going out for dinner.”*

Behind the scenes, influencers frequently confront the challenge of meticulously crafting an idealized online persona while endeavoring to preserve an aura of authenticity (Hudders & Lou, 2021). The digital performance, analogous to a physical endeavor, necessitates influencers to intricately navigate their presentation to meet the expectations of both their audience and collaborating brands. This intricate balancing act, however, deviates from conventional employment paradigms, lacking the stability and associated benefits typically afforded by traditional occupations. This absence of job security and comprehensive benefits positions influencers in a precarious situation, a vulnerability that will be further elucidated in the subsequent section.

### **7.2.1.3 Financial pressure in performances**

WeChat bloggers face financial pressures as they strive to sustain and grow their online presence. This often involves a financial investment in content creation, marketing efforts, and maintaining a consistent online persona. Additionally, influencers may face the challenge of unpredictable income streams, relying on factors such as brand collaborations, advertising revenue, and reader contributions. Influencers may also incur expenses related to technology, equipment, and other resources to enhance the quality of their content. Overall, the financial strain on bloggers is multifaceted, stemming from the dynamic and demanding nature of the digital content creation industry. The success of drama is closely related to capital investment, and digital performance on WeChat also involves economic factors. For most content creators, the more favorable the economic environment, the easier it is for them to focus solely on producing good works. Mr. Fan expressed this view in an interview:

*“If you start blogging with the goal of earning money, you will feel anxious and even lost since no one loves it. As a beginner, you should view*

*your blog as a personal diary, not a public diary, so that you have the motivation to publish anything. It is better to have a steady job as being a full-time influencer implies that you have no other source of income. Can you still upload attractive contents if money is your primary priority?"*

The above quote suggests that pursuing monetary gains from the outset can lead to feelings of anxiety and a sense of being directionless, especially when the content fails to resonate with the audience. Instead, the recommendation for beginners is to perceive their blog as a personal diary, maintaining a focus on self-expression rather than catering solely to public preferences. The passage also implies that being a full-time influencer without an alternate source of income can be precarious, and it questions whether one can consistently produce engaging content when driven primarily by financial motives.

However, a tension exists between blogging being a full-time job and being a hobby or “interest”. Many influencers rely solely on brand partnerships and sponsorships, leaving them susceptible to market fluctuations and the whims of companies. The absence of adequate healthcare, retirement plans, and financial stability further highlights the dark side of this industry. Mr. Kai is a trader based in Hongkong and he is also a part-time food influencer. He said:

*“I do not make money from my WeChat official account; it is purely for my personal interest and not for commercial purposes. However, my motivation to write blogs is greatly influenced by my real-life work. As a trader, my job is to keep track of how much money I make each day. When I make a profit, I feel more motivated to write posts on my blog after work. When the market is down, I lose the desire to create blogs and instead I focus solely on my work.”*

Mr. Kai clarifies that his WeChat official account is not a source of income; rather, it serves as a platform driven by personal interest and lacks commercial intentions. However, he admits that his motivation to write blogs is significantly impacted by his real-life occupation as a trader. The correlation is drawn between the financial performance in their trading job and the enthusiasm to create posts on the blog. Making a profit enhances motivation, leading to more blog posts, while facing losses in the market diminishes the desire to blog, shifting the focus solely to the professional work. This indicates that economic pressure doesn't solely

arise from the pressure of whether a blogger can make money. For bloggers who have a primary job, the income from their primary occupation directly influences their mood and the quality of their blog posts. From this, it can be inferred that in an economically secure environment, bloggers are likely to experience a higher level of enthusiasm for their creative work.

Just like actors performing in theatres, if they perform for free based on their interests and without any contractual agreements, it is likely just a hobby, and the enthusiasm for the performance may also be influenced by their primary source of livelihood.

For actors, if there is no applause and cheers from the audience at the end of a performance, then the show is certainly not considered successful. Disrespect from the audience towards the performance can also lead to performers feeling discouraged in the online world.

Ms. Duo expressed a similar opinion:

*“I don’t really like social networks these days because many experts may write a lot of very incisive articles on various subjects, but readers often fail to read them carefully. This is because to many people it may just be a “reach out party” (for those that are very lazy and take other people’s help for granted). For example, a user seeking advice on buying a camera, might receive suggestion from a senior photographer. However, these users may not read the provided information and instead ask basic questions, disregarding the effort put into the article. I feel sorry for this phenomenon, where knowledge is readily available online and not valued. I believe paying for knowledge could be a positive development.”*

Ms. Duo expresses a dissatisfaction with contemporary social networks due to the perceived lack of careful readership. The hidden meaning suggests frustration with users who, despite the presence of insightful articles from experts, treat social platforms as mere “reach out parties.” The speaker is critical of individuals seeking help but not fully engaging with the available information, leading to redundant and basic questions. This phenomenon is viewed with regret, as the speaker laments the undervaluation of readily accessible knowledge online. The statement concludes by suggesting that a positive shift could occur if people were willing to pay for knowledge, emphasizing the potential benefits of assigning value to information.

Knowledge monetization is a challenging choice for many bloggers. If they opt for a paid model, they can indeed gain more revenue and respect. But at the same time, due to the paywall, they may lose a portion of their readership. The loss of some readers can lead to a reduction in overall influence and reach, which is a critical consideration for influencers who rely on their online presence for various purposes, including brand partnerships, sponsorships, and collaborations.

Owing to the intricate relationship between readership metrics and corporate sponsorships, a substantial number of bloggers or agencies, motivated by financial considerations, may engage in the acquisition of spurious data or the buying of “fake reading rate”. Ms. Wan said:

*“When discussing collaboration with bloggers, the focus is more on ‘advertising efficiency,’ ‘ROI,’ and ‘GMV’ rather than saying “the creativity is excellent” or “the content is going viral.” This is easily understandable. The assessment of “creativity” is subjective and varies from person to person, but with data-driven results and a clear strategy, as long as the numbers are large and impressive enough, who wouldn’t acknowledge it as “impressive”? Relying on human conformity, a piece of content that may not be exceptional can become a “hit” simply because the data is outstanding, making it worthy of deconstruction and analysis. We conducted an experiment by posting two same articles with similar titles and similar styles. The article with fake reading rate bought by us had over 10,000 views, which was more than 30 percent higher than the naturally obtained views article. This is intuitive evidence for the impact of artificial data.”*

This practice is indicative of the broader economic dynamics influencing the digital content creation landscape, where the pursuit of economic gains occasionally leads to the manipulation or artificial inflation of crucial performance metrics. The association between authentic readership data and brand partnerships underscores the economic significance attributed to genuine engagement metrics in the context of influencer marketing (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). It also links to Goffman (1959) “dark secrets” in performance: how teams (e.g., bloggers and their teams) need to keep these secrets to avoid them altering the

impression that the performance garners from the audience (e.g., if these dark secrets were released to the audience, then their impression of the performance would be viewed negatively).

The act of artificially inflating view counts through counterfeit means to create the illusion of popularity resembles the team work described by Goffman (1959) as part of the “dark secrets” inherent in traditional theatrical performances. The measure of a blogger’s impact is frequently determined by the readership of their blogs. Consequently, in an effort to secure more company partnerships, several bloggers opt to get a substantial quantity of fabricated data with the intention of augmenting their overall performance. The acquisition of data incurs significant costs. In WeChat blogs, the price range for acquiring 1,000 likes ranges from around RMB 100 to RMB 1,000. Numerous prominent influencers often engage in the practice of purchasing upwards of 100,000 likes for a singular article, incurring costs that span from 10,000 RMB to 100,000 RMB. The monthly expense might range from 80,000 RMB to 800,000 RMB, with an average of around 8 posts per month. This number holds considerable importance. However, in their quest for improved viewership metrics, several influencers often find themselves relying on this approach. Nevertheless, this exacerbates the disparity between prominent influencers and lesser-known influencers. Influencers that possess substantial financial resources have the capacity to allocate larger budgets towards data acquisition, so establishing a reinforcing cycle wherein they garner increased attention and forge lucrative commercial alliances. In contrast, those with smaller social media followings have limitations in their ability to purchase data, leading to less impact and fewer notable statistical outcomes.

Although the use of exaggerated metrics may provide a temporary advantage for a blogger in attracting possible partners, it can undermine the faith of their authentic audience and perhaps result in ethical and legal consequences. The occurrence of a fabricated data event garnered significant media attention in the latter part of September 2016. As a consequence of a technical malfunction inside the WeChat system, a significant number of falsified data were unable to be accurately shown. The readership metrics of some prominent bloggers showed a noticeable decline in comparison to their customary levels. Several bloggers, whose typical daily readership exceeds 100,000, discovered that their actual readership figure for a certain day was just 20,000. The study conducted by Bailes (2011) revealed the occurrence of performance failures, which brings attention to the widespread presence of artificial



engagement within the Chinese influencer sector. This study also emphasises the potential hazards connected with depending on exaggerated metrics.

### 7.3 The dark side to the brand

Influencer marketing, while recognized for its potency in connecting brands with their intended audience and fostering brand visibility, also harbors certain inherent drawbacks or “dark sides” that warrant careful consideration by brands. While influencers can effectively amplify a brand’s message and enhance its online presence, there are challenges and risks associated with this marketing strategy.

One potential downside is the lack of control over an influencer’s actions or behaviour, which can lead to reputational risks if the influencer engages in controversial activities or expresses opinions that conflict with the brand’s values. Additionally, the authenticity of influencer content can be a concern, with some influencers resorting to deceptive practices such as fake followers or inauthentic endorsements.

The case of Mimeng, a WeChat official account that had a particularly harmful impact by disseminating false and misleading information, is one illustration of such a negative influence. This featured misleading content, such as tales of gory steamed buns. In an effort to gain attention, bloggers may use great ingenuity, raising the possibility of providing inaccurate information and providing bad advice. During the interview, marketer Ms. Chen revealed:

*“We had an unpleasant collaboration experience with a blogger before. Due to issues on her end, her reputation took a hit, and we happened to be the most recent brand she collaborated with before the downturn. This situation had a significantly negative impact on our brand. In another instance, a blogger we collaborated with mentioned in a separate blog post that our collaboration was a business arrangement, and she didn't personally buy our product. This created a sense of betrayal on our part.”*

As the influencers are linked to the brand, the negative impressions from audiences to the influencers could further affect the reputations of the brand and its products. As the influencers are linked to the brand, the negative impressions from audiences to the

influencers could further affect the reputations of the brand and its products. Reinikainen and the colleagues (2021) revealed that endorsing brands involved in moral violations can harm the relationships between influencers, brands, and followers. The findings highlight the interconnectedness of influencer and brand betrayals and the spillover effect on associated parties. The quote also shows that using influencers exclusively to promote a brand may result in a lack of diverse marketing techniques. The brand's marketing efforts may suffer greatly if an influencer is dealing with personal or professional difficulties.

Moreover, the influencer landscape is dynamic, and shifts in an influencer's popularity or credibility can impact the effectiveness of a brand's marketing efforts. Brands may also face challenges in accurately measuring the return on investment (ROI) of influencer marketing campaigns, making it difficult to assess the real impact on sales or brand perception. Ms Chen said:

*“I think the problem now the fee is without any regularity in the market law. Now in this industry, the price is not regular, standard, these WeChat public accounts are in their own words, they can set as much as they want, they said the fee is based on fans but even the same fan base, pricing is not the same. It's not like other industries, you buy a book, there is standards and how to set the price. Like petroleum or others. They don't set a standard for pricing of WeChat public accounts. The other thing is the judgment of the result, there is no standard. The industry feels more like an industry with a lot of unspoken rules. Everyone in this business knows this situation, there are no specific standards, and then everyone is trading in this way.”*

Similarly, Ms. Hun as a marketer explained:

*“We evaluate one account is based on studying the style, average reading rate and the quality of the fans of it, we also may ask the brands who had cooperated with it to evaluate its effect. Some accounts may have high reading rate, but the audience are not the matched target customers, then the conversion rate may quite low. Also, the content is very important, even the same account, reading rate is different in different blogs. You can't judge the quality of the account based on the number of the fans, one*

*account may have large audience, but the audience are all very young or low-income group, the value may be lower than the account who has high quality readers but less numbers. You can know the account when you cooperated with it once. For example, after the campaign, you feel one account cannot get your expectation and not because of the content, then there is a problem on its quality of the fans. Next time I won't cooperate with it."*

According to Ms. Chen and Ms. Hun, the brands and its official WeChat accounts have a dark side that incorporates a number of problems. The absence of consistent pricing and evaluation criteria within the sector is one of the main issues. WeChat official accounts have the option to decide their costs dependent on followers, which causes inconsistency and confusion in comparison to other brands with established pricing rules.

Informant Ms. Hun emphasizes that gauging a user's worth entails more than simply counting their number of followers. Conversion rates, audience fit, and content quality are all significant factors. Sometimes an account may have a huge following but poor reader, leading to unsuccessful campaigns and underwhelming outcomes. When bloggers have completed a series of tasks such as negotiating prices with advertisers, signing contracts, making revisions, and finalizing content, issues related to non-compliance during the content release and dissemination phase, such as flow restrictions, blocking, or content deletion, can result in losses for the brand too. Ms Chen in the interview said:

*"We have encountered situations where a blogger's posts were subject to flow restrictions after being pushed, resulting in very poor reading rate. The blogger explained at the time that there might be sensitive words in the article, or for some unknown reason, the platform did not provide traffic. However, since both parties agreed at the time of finalizing, we had to bear this loss. I have also heard of cases where advertisements placed by peer brands were directly ordered to be deleted by the platform. For example, after placing an ad with a certain blogger, the entire account was later banned, making the advertisement completely untraceable."*

The dark side of influencer marketing is also evident in its impact on vulnerable young people. WeChat official accounts could employ dishonest tactics, such as promoting

fraudulent goods or providing false financial advice, resulting in financial losses for their followers. Furthermore, some bloggers may use crude or excessive language, which could mislead and negatively influence impressionable readers.

Furthermore, intense competition among brands has led to a significant shift in expenditure, with a substantial portion allocated to influencer marketing rather than research and development. A manager of a consultancy company Mr. Gao stated in the interview:

*“The cosmetics industry itself is a highly profitable sector. In recent years, the sales gross profit margin of leading companies in the industry has generally been maintained at over 60%, and Pechoin is no exception. However, the high sales costs directly reduce Pechoin's net profit margin, leading to the awkward situation of ‘working for influencers.’ For instance, Pechoin’s annual revenue in 2021 reached as high as 4.63 billion yuan, with a net profit of 580 million yuan and a net profit margin of only 12.5%. Despite a gross profit margin of 66.46%. In the first quarter of 2022, this situation did not see much improvement, with a gross profit margin of 68% and a net profit margin of 12.8%. Emphasizing marketing is a practical necessity, but it also has its drawbacks. Due to insufficient brand strength and the need for frequent exposure to maintain product visibility, marketing has become a focal point for many domestic brands. Brands indeed need to incur high costs for this purpose.”*

In some cases, according to the quote, up to half of the total budget is directed towards marketing efforts. This disproportionate allocation of resources raises concerns about priorities, as essential aspects like innovation and product development may take a back seat. The imbalance in spending, with a heavy emphasis on influencer marketing, is indicative of a potential misalignment between strategic investments and the core elements that contribute to a brand’s long-term success.

In the realm of influencer marketing, the dark side concerning brands can be summarized in several key facets. Firstly, the personal behaviour or betrayal of influencers can exert severe repercussions on the associated brand. Instances of influencers engaging in actions that deviate from brand values or expectations may tarnish the brand’s reputation and integrity.

Secondly, the lack of transparency in influencer collaboration fees and the prevalence of data falsification pose significant economic risks for brands. The opaqueness surrounding collaboration costs may lead brands to incur unforeseen financial losses, while fraudulent data practices can undermine the reliability of performance metrics, impacting the return on investment for marketing initiatives.

Additionally, the algorithms employed by platforms and the intensification of competition contribute to a distorted marketing landscape for brands. The escalating marketing expenses driven by platform algorithms and heightened competition may lead to a situation where brands, rather than reaping the benefits of influencer partnerships, find themselves inadvertently working for influencers. This inversion of priorities, where brands bear the brunt of rising marketing costs, underscores the challenges, and risks inherent in the influencer marketing ecosystem.

#### **7.4 The dark side to the audience and society**

WeChat influencers are perceived to have marketing objectives directed towards both personal and product brands, often being utilized as sophisticated marketing instruments (Wellman, et al., 2020). However, this commercially driven association may yield adverse consequences for the audience and the broader society.

Expanding on this notion, the pervasive monetization of the relationship between WeChat influencers and their audience may contribute to a commodification of content, potentially overshadowing genuine engagement and informative discourse as cynical performance (Goffman, 1959). The emphasis on marketing objectives might prioritize profit over authenticity, fostering a climate where content is tailored for promotional purposes rather than serving the audience's informational or entertainment needs. This trend can lead to a degradation of the content quality and a shift away from the original purpose of social media platforms as spaces for meaningful interactions.

Moreover, the audience, expecting genuine connections and reliable information, may face disillusionment when confronted with content primarily designed for marketing purposes. Trust, a crucial element in any influencer-consumer relationship (Audrezet, et al., 2020), could be eroded as audiences discern the prioritization of commercial interests over their

informational or entertainment needs. In the broader societal context, the widespread adoption of this commercially oriented approach may contribute to a culture where influence and engagement are measured solely by market-driven metrics, potentially undermining the potential positive societal impact that influencers could have.

#### 7.4.1 Negative effect of unethical practices to audience

In certain cases, influencer marketing has resulted in economic losses for readers. Influencers are frequently compensated to promote products, which creates a potential conflict of interest between their endorsement and the true quality of the product. This could lead to their audience being misled and purchasing products that do not meet their expectations, ultimately harming the brand's reputation and eroding consumer trust. One agency marketer Ms. Qi told me in the interview:

*“Nowadays, we conduct stringent reviews for collaborations involving specific products or services, we recommended a weight-loss product before, we asked the influencers to promote these teas as miracle weight-loss solutions, claiming that regular consumption can lead to rapid and significant weight reduction as brand request. Then we found these teas often contain laxatives and diuretics, causing temporary water weight loss and a perceived slimming effect. However, the long-term consequences can be detrimental. We also seldom collaborate with the investing related brands since investment advice maybe inaccurate or unreliable. Readers acting upon such advice may experience financial losses to buy the unhealthy products in their investments.”*

The quote implies the consumers, influenced by the promises made by influencers, invest money in these products only to find that the results are short-lived and may lead to health issues and experience financial losses in their investments. In addition, the lack of transparency in influencer marketing is a major concern. Some influencers fail to disclose their affiliations with brands, resulting in a lack of industry accountability and transparency. This can lead to deceptive advertising methods, further weakening consumer confidence and compounding the issue of authenticity (Karagür, et al., 2022).

Through the influencer's advice, dedicated followers may purchase items they do not need or expect, resulting in financial loss. It has been found that in the process of food promotion, the advertisement of food and beverage that indicates that unhealthy food will be marked, which will lead to more intake of unhealthy food by children but will not promote the promotion of healthy food. Many readers can directly place orders and purchase products within the influencer's blog. Unlike traditional purchasing channels, buying products on blogs may pose challenges in terms of consumer protection due to inadequate regulation. Returning or exchanging products can be much more difficult compared to other channels. In addition, the ostentatious capital of lean as health makes many people excessively pursue body appearance and ignore the happiness brought by fitness. The thin and beautiful appearance will cause jealousy to other people (Valkenburg, 2022) and lead to some eating disorder. However, the influencers will not disclose these prompts to the followers. Another negative impact dressing by implication of the influencer industry is the impact on people's values towards consumption. The internet cultures have over emphasized on materialism and consumerism. The drive towards materialism and consumption has never been so prevalent which also influences consumers' financial situations. (Kasser & Kanner, 2004).

Though not all influencer marketing initiatives lead to losses for readers, instances of inadvertent or unethical practices can have a negative impact on readers' well-being, both financially and physically.

#### **7.4.2 Negative social influence**

Influencers, particularly prominent figures on WeChat, increasingly leverage social media to express their emotions and achieve emotional or intellectual gratification by influencing a large number of followers. This digital form transcends the constraints of traditional physical spaces, enabling the rapid dissemination of both positive and negative information across time and space. It allows for the idealization and conceptualization of information, deeply rooting conceptual information within diverse audiences. The audience plays a crucial role in shaping the development of community culture, fostering shared ideals across various contexts. Simultaneously, the profound impact of this cultural influence leads to the adoption of similar consumption concepts, thought processes, and problem-solving strategies among the audience.

However, lacking a robust monitoring mechanism, WeChat influencers may exploit their platform to propagate harmful ideals, including antisocial and unconscientious behaviours, either for personal gain or as a means of self-promotion. This can result in significant societal consequences.

Furthermore, influencers, as public figures, hold sway over societal norms with their words and actions. Their comprehension of social values varies, and misleading behaviour or content can negatively impact the audience. This influence can exacerbate issues among troubled teenagers and lead healthy individuals astray from virtuous paths, such as making unhealthy lifestyle choices.

Influencers use written constructs to exert negative influences on society. However, there is scarce literature examining the strategies employed by WeChat influencers and how they use written content to generate negative impacts on society for financial gain. Next, I will analyze how typical influencers adopt controversial performance techniques to garner attention, and the societal implications of these strategies.

#### **7.4.2.1 Vulgarization: garnering attention through controversial language and topics**

Driven by the “attention economy”, some WeChat influencers seek economic incentives in order to draw users’ attention to the maximum degree possible. These influencers appeal to and gratify certain readers’ interests in chasing pleasure and excitement, as well as content and emotional interests to seek economic rewards.

Mimeng, the defunct WeChat official account, is an example of the numerous problematic new media sources that have been more influential and had a greater impact. “Mimeng” was the account owner’s alias, and she was noted for her “poisonous” linguistic style. Externally, this “poisonous tongue” is evident by the frequent use of caustic and sarcastic words, profanity, and violent and disparaging expressions. Such as the title of the blog “I really want to change my hubby after having a baby!” “Living blindly is the finest way to live!” “A Guide for Elementary School Parents to Pretend” contains filthy phrases and jargon to highlight her “straightforward personality”. Some of the pieces that were quickly deleted from the WeChat platform included more abusive terms and phrases that were uncomfortable to read. One of the pieces that were removed was “Why is it so common to sleep with unattractive pussies these days?” In the first few sentences of this less than 100-word text,



vulgar terms like “damn” and “shit” appear multiple times, denigrating Zhang Yishan and Huang Bo (Chinese film stars) as “ugly pussies,” and the following includes Gao Xiaosong (a Chinese singer) and others. Gao Xiaosong, Dazhang Wei, and others are also on the list. The blog prompted outrage and condemnation from followers of these celebrities, who accused Mimeng of verbal abuses, and finally Mimeng subsequently removed the piece and apologised to them.

The vulgarity of the language is only one symptom of the WeChat official accounts’ trend to vulgarise. Many influencers chose themes with a vulgar mindset, and the articles frequently centre around the users’ interest and investigate sensitive issues that have a big influence and stimulation on the readers. According to Mimeng, the most popular stories are about hot issues such as money, sex, and violence. Mimeng’s official account was prohibited for one month in September 2017. Before the prohibition, there were three pornographic articles: “Your Boobs, My Boobs,” “I Have a Spring Dream, Will You Do It with Me,” and “A Brief History of Prostitution.” Mimeng seems to learn the lesson of the one-month prohibition as Mimeng began to employ more provocative phrases in its expressions and act dirty.

The intersection of performance theory and the blogging practices of Mi Meng, characterized by a penchant for sensationalism, clickbait titles, and the pursuit of mass attention to garner traffic, provides a rich context for exploration. In the realm of performance theory (Schechner, 2003), where individuals engage in expressive acts to convey certain roles, Mi Meng’s strategic use of attention-grabbing tactics serves as a performative element aimed at capturing the audience’s interest. This performative aspect goes beyond mere content creation, extending into a deliberate orchestration of spectacle and visibility to enhance Mi Meng’s online presence. The adoption of clickbait techniques becomes a digital performative strategy within the overarching framework of performance theory, allowing for a nuanced analysis of the dynamics at play in contemporary influencer practices.

#### **7.4.2.2 Polarization: extreme viewpoints that provoke unpleasant feelings**

The official account of HUGO has been criticized for its subjective and polarized views, deliberately inciting negative emotions, and maliciously selling anxiety. For example, the articles “Scary reality: Chinese men are getting more and more girly” and “Don't get married before 25 years old” have a serious problem of one-sided and subjective viewpoints, while the language style is brutal and bold and whose strong expressions and vulgar words

contribute to the spread of negative emotions. HUGO's articles often focus on the negative problems that common people face in their daily lives and frequently employ negative and sensationalist language, such as "ruin" and "drag down". The title of the post is already worrisome and strongly affects the consumers' inner uneasiness; nonetheless, the content does not alleviate anxiety, but rather uses the consumers' anxiety to create panic. Most seriously, some of HUGO's views and statements are not only negative and radical, but even have distorted values and violate social order and morality. With women as its primary audience, the blogs of HUGO reflect radical feminism and denigrate males. In addition, it encourages money-worship and portrays an extremely vision of love and marriage.

Articles such as "Don't get married if you don't have money", "Some people die after getting married," and "How horrible is the after-effects of a woman's shit after giving birth" encourage women to worship money, talk about the horrors of marriage, and exaggerate the dangers of childbirth. At the conclusion of one of their blogs advocating for women's independence, they declared, "Only slime women continue to fall in love; successful women are all female clients of prostitutes." Such values are extremely distorted and even have the tendency to induce illegal behaviour. Extreme viewpoints, a skewed perspective, purposeful instigation, and anxiety trafficking have a negative effect on the psyche of readers, and there are significant issues with emotional direction.

Social media content is distinguished from traditional media by the fact that its autonomy and uniqueness may be completely realized. In expressing their emotional opinions, WeChat influencers may disregard the blend of reason and emotion due to this trait. The mix of rationality and emotion, which is overly individualized and subjective, is prone to skewed perspectives, which is a typical flaw of human reasoning. This is another typical issue among WeChat influencers as a form of self-media. However, it is impossible for everyone, especially WeChat influencers, to constantly be reasonable and impartial. When discussing emotions, they are typically subjective and unconscious. Unconscious subjectivity is mostly dependent on the influencer's skill. Some WeChat influencers intentionally develop and propagate extremely egotistical and subjective emotional viewpoints and magnify them to provoke readers' emotions. The unconscious subjectivity is more a function of the communicator's abilities. The unconscious subjectivity is more a matter of the influencer's own ability, but some WeChat influencers deliberately produce and spread overly egotistical and subjective emotional views and amplify them to provoke the emotions of consumers.

The goal of emotional blogs in WeChat official accounts is to have people recognize, understand, and agree with the influencer's emotional perspectives through empathy. WeChat influencers is magnifying and polarizing their existing subjective emotional views, heightening the intensity of emotions, resulting in strong and extreme emotional views, and even warped values.

From a performance theory perspective (Schechner, 1988), which explores how individuals construct roles and engage in expressive acts, the deliberate cultivation and promotion of anxiety by bloggers represent a performative dimension aimed at eliciting specific emotional responses from the audience. This performative aspect goes beyond the conventional boundaries of content creation, transforming the expression of anxiety into a strategically orchestrated spectacle to capture and retain viewer attention. The integration of anxiety as a commodity within the broader context of performance theory sheds light on the intricate dynamics inherent in contemporary influencer strategies, where emotional engagement becomes a calculated tool for audience interaction and content consumption.

#### **7.4.2.3 Fictionalization: fabrication of facts and malicious consumption**

"Mimeng" a once-high-ranking official account, had been producing fiction and inventing facts under the banner of "non-fiction writing," and "Mimoun" and its subordinate WeChat official accounts were thus questioned and barred. On January 29, 2019, Mimen's related official account "Talented Youth" published an article titled "The Death of a Scholar from a Humble Family," which tells the story of a student from a humble family who was supposed to have a bright future after becoming the first place in science at the college entrance exam in his hometown, but was not blessed by fate because he worked too hard to earn money for his sister's education while attending college. Due to overwork to pay for his sister's education, he died of stomach cancer. The blog immediately spread among acquaintances via WeChat moment, eliciting pity and attention from readers, and the language of "the futility of studying" and "it is impossible to develop a fine boy from a chilly household" was prevalent. The article was quickly called into doubt since the purportedly terrible account was riddled with flaws, and many facts and details were shown to be fictitious. The article was a complete fabrication, and the author fabricated the tragic life of a poor student under the guise of his real experience, using a false story to elicit readers' pity and sympathy, stirring consumers' emotions about ideals succumbing to social reality, and thus triggering discussions to gain

traffic. Netizens accused her of falsifying and fabricating information in order to cause social anxiety, and eventually Mimeng publicly apologised, and the WeChat official accounts “Mimeng” and “Talented Youth” were cancelled on their own, followed by other social media platforms, which also announced the closure of all their accounts. There are also phrases like “completely closed, no rebirth.”

The above is not an isolated instance of fictional literature that makes up facts. Following the death of “DiDi” (like Uber) passenger, the official account “Ergeng Canteen” published a story titled “Thanks to you, the driver who killed the flight attendant is lying at home counting his money.” These particulars are plainly fictitious. The story received a lot of criticism and condemnation, with many people claiming that “Ergeng canteen” invented the specifics in order to deliberately consume the victims and utilize terrible social events to attract traffic, which is equivalent to eating human blood buns. The story concluded with the official account “ergeng canteen” apologising and being banned by the site. There is nothing wrong with fictitious writing in and of itself, but the practice of sharing fake tales with real stories, deliberately devouring the individuals engaged in the stories, and deceiving consumers’ emotions with false information is a loss of influencers’ bottom line.

The intersection of performance theory and the utilization of fabricated narratives by bloggers to spark societal conflicts for the purpose of attracting attention offers an intriguing subject for theoretical exploration. Grounded in performance theory (Schechner, 2003), which examines how individuals construct roles and engage in expressive acts, the deliberate crafting of fictional stories by bloggers represents a performative aspect aimed at generating specific reactions within the social fabric. This digital performative dimension extends beyond conventional storytelling, transforming the creation of narratives into a strategically orchestrated spectacle to captivate and provoke reactions from the audience. The amalgamation of fabricated stories within the broader framework of performance theory sheds light on the complex dynamics inherent in contemporary influencer strategies, where storytelling becomes a calculated tool for audience engagement, controversy, and the cultivation of a distinctive online presence.

In the context of performance theory, the use of fabricated stories has traditionally encountered minimal negative repercussions on traditional stages. However, within the digital world, the utilization of fabricated narratives by bloggers introduces numerous potential

pitfalls in pursuit of personal gain. The performative dimension of storytelling, when applied in the digital realm, creates a dynamic where bloggers strategically leverage fictional narratives to achieve various objectives, including but not limited to garnering attention, eliciting emotional responses, and seeking financial benefits. This digital landscape introduces challenges related to authenticity, ethical considerations, and the potential impact of fabricated stories on audience perceptions. The intersection of performance theory and the digital realm underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of the implications and ethical boundaries associated with the use of fictional narratives by influencers.

#### **7.4.2.4 Metaphorization: circumvention of platform rules and restrictions**

The above highlights that conventional blogs often employ attention-grabbing tactics, utilizing sensational propaganda indicators or dramatic headlines to attract readers. These strategies involve publicizing unconventional behaviours like anti-intelligence to captivate the audience. However, the information disseminated through these blogs tends to have a predominantly negative social impact and contributes to societal harm. The absence of legislative constraints on social media platforms like WeChat exacerbates the issue, allowing WeChat bloggers and influencers to engage in negative publicity without direct legal consequences. Despite moral condemnation, existing laws do not explicitly penalize such behaviour. Although some internet regulatory organizations have taken punitive measures, the continued actions of these influencers indicate an expanding negative influence on society. One marketing agency director Ms. Duo said in the interview:

*“I have come to understand that many peers, in order to promote controversial products, request bloggers to use homophones, metaphors, and other means in their content to circumvent platform-sensitive words and prevent platform restrictions. Some products and services clearly exist in legal grey areas, yet driven by commercial interests, certain agencies and their affiliated bloggers seem to be willing to do anything.”*

The escalating governmental constraints on online expression have given rise to a dynamic interaction among content providers, such as bloggers, as they strive to convey their perspectives within the confines of sanctioned discourse. This often involves employing linguistic ingenuity to convey ideas indirectly. For example, bloggers may resort to utilizing homophones—words with similar sounds but distinct meanings—to convey a message that, although not explicitly stated, is understood by their readership. The use of English language

elements and the incorporation of metaphors can also serve as strategies to navigate obstacles or explore alternative solutions. Leveraging English terms and phrases enables the communication of sensitive topics more discreetly, as they may not be subjected to as stringent monitoring. In contrast, metaphors offer bloggers a means to express intricate concepts using symbolic language, thereby posing greater challenges for automated monitoring systems in identifying potential infractions.

In traditional performances, metaphors and symbols are often expressed through tangible elements such as costumes, props, and stage design. The physicality of the performance space allows for direct engagement with these symbolic representations, fostering a shared understanding between performers and the audience.

In contrast, digital performance, influenced by the intangible nature of the online environment, relies on metaphorical and symbolic language in a more abstract sense. Metaphors are woven into the narrative or discourse, transcending the physical constraints of a traditional stage. Symbolism, although present, takes on a more conceptual form, navigating the virtual landscape through linguistic and visual representations.

The digital platform allows for a nuanced exploration of metaphor and symbolism, enabling performers to engage with audiences on a symbolic level that transcends the physical boundaries of a traditional stage. Performance in the digital realm thus becomes a dynamic interplay of metaphorical expression and symbolic representation within the fluid and adaptable space of the online environment.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

In delineating the dark side of influencer marketing, its genesis primarily lies in the myriad pressures imposed on influencers, encompassing mental, physical, and financial strains. The mental stressors are intertwined with the expectations from readers, advertisers, and platforms on influencers. Furthermore, the negative aspects of influencer marketing extend to the potential harm inflicted on brands. This encompasses the risks associated with collaborative influencers facing setbacks or platforms implementing restrictions, leading to financial losses. Moreover, factors such as the lack of transparency in influencer fees, data manipulation, and other detrimental practices pose significant risks to the reputation of

brands. The heightened competition among brands exacerbates marketing expenses, potentially creating a scenario where brands essentially operate as conduits for influencers.

Lastly, the dark side of influencer marketing extends to its adverse effects on readers and society at large. This includes the possibility of economic losses for readers, as well as influencers resorting to clickbait, generating inappropriate content, adopting biased perspectives, or fabricating stories, contributing to societal anxiety and conflicts. The multifaceted nature of the dark side of influencer marketing underscores the crucial need to address these issues for the collective benefit of all stakeholders involved.

The internet's quick transmission capabilities have significantly expanded the prospects and hazards for artists in the realm of digital performance. In contrast to conventional theatre performance, on one side, the use of this platform facilitates the rapid dissemination of their blog entries. Conversely, it necessitates the management of amplified adverse consequences and obstacles, such as the reception of criticism, backlash, and even instances of online harassment. Business partners encounter heightened dangers due to the pervasive influence of the internet. Engaging in unwise actions or affiliations can result in the deterioration of one's reputation, impacting not just the individual engaged but also the associated brand or organisation. Audiences may be susceptible to the effect of blog postings that disseminate damaging information, underscoring the importance for consumers of digital material to engage in critical thinking and exercise judgement.

This chapter compiles a lot of first-hand practical data from numerous interviews, which reveals that WeChat influencers, as a vocation, with a significant following, are popular to undertake commercial activities. This behaviour not only fosters economic progress, but it also spreads new media approaches and even revolutionises societal latent consciousness. For example, some scholars have investigated those influencers as market influencers, and how their behaviours and values have both beneficial and harmful consequences on society. They circumvent physical location and time limits in the same network platform to broadcast positive or negative energy to society, and unknowingly affect the collective potential consciousness (Hudders & Lou, 2022). This chapter considers the potential impact of the new Internet economic model from the perspectives of media anchors, audiences, society, advertisers, and so on, for example, media anchors conspire with advertisers to defraud the

audience, or media anchors defraud advertisers unilaterally, and analyses the micro and macro impact of influencers, which is more mature than previous studies.



## **CHAPTER 8. DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTION**

## 8.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a comprehensive overview and analysis of the findings related to influencer marketing on WeChat, followed by an exploration of the contributions and implications that enrich the research outcomes. To begin, a thorough summary of the findings pertaining to the three research questions will be provided. Additionally, I will analyze the similarities and differences between my findings and those of prior research on influencer marketing in communal consumption, as well as research utilizing performance theory to analyze online performance, in the discussion section. This engagement aims to enhance understanding within this domain and expand the application of performance theory in guiding digital performance on social media platforms. Moreover, I will provide a summary of the theoretical advancements made by my research, including the broadening of performance theory's applicability to digital performance and its enhancement in informing performance in online environments, particularly those designed for commercial purposes. At the same time, it will also highlight practical contributions by providing managerial suggestions that are helpful for practice, serving as references for brands and marketers. In conclusion, I will address the limitations of my study and discuss the implications, offering perspectives and recommendations for further research that examines influencer marketing through the lens of performance theory.

## 8.2 Summary of the findings to address the research questions

Drawing upon performance theory, this doctoral research embarks on an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of commercially driven blogs created by WeChat influencers. The significance of this study lies in its potential to bridge existing gaps in contemporary marketing literature by shifting the discourse of social media marketing, specifically influencer marketing, from the well-explored Western context to the unique landscape of the Chinese market and its distinctive social media platform, WeChat.

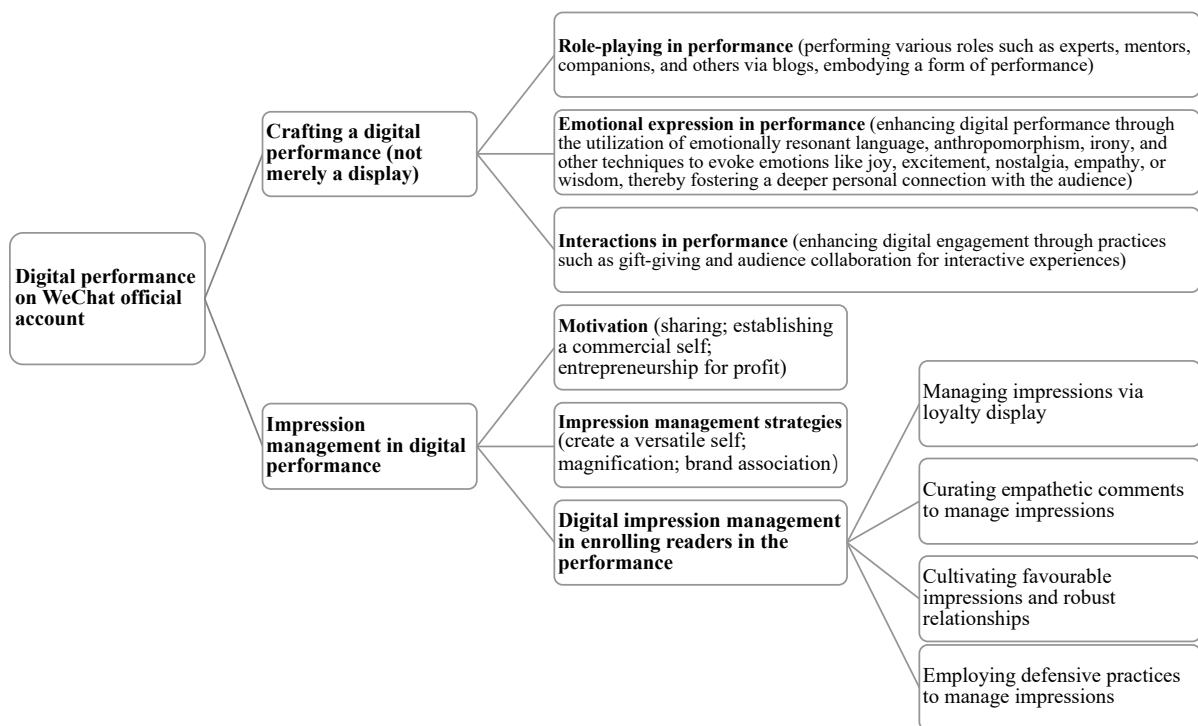
This study aimed to address three main questions with a view to enhancing our understanding of influencer marketing:

1. How do WeChat influencers attract not only readers but also marketers to their blogs, and how do they develop commercially oriented digital performance that satisfies the expectations of both readers and marketers?

2. What factors do marketers consider when selecting influencers to collaborate with, and how do they evaluate the collaboration? Additionally, what insights can be offered into the process of working with an influencer for a better digital performance?
3. What challenges or “dark sides” exist in influencer marketing, and how are these dark performances formed?

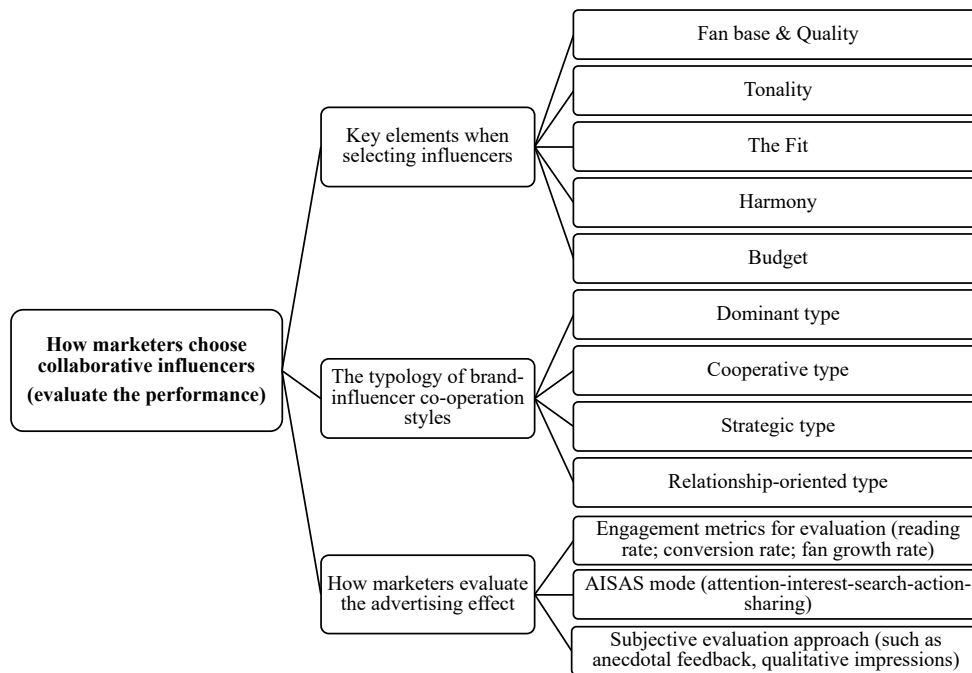
In addressing the above issues, I first explore the strategies used by WeChat influencers in their digital performances in Chapter 5. Employing a netnographic approach, this dissertation reveals that celebrity influencers enhance persuasiveness, excitement, and reader engagement through different techniques of digital performance.

Chapter 5 delineates the digital performance tactics employed by WeChat influencers, namely role-playing, emotional expression, and interactions in performance with the audience. These tactics underscore the multifaceted strategies utilized by influencers to engage their audiences. The data further illuminate the strategies influencers use to manage the impressions of both their audience and attracting marketers to create successful digital performances to build the audience and foster brand collaborations. This nuanced approach reveals the intricacies of digital performance within the expansive landscape of social media marketing on WeChat official accounts. Figure 16 offers a flowchart to illustrate the process/strategies of how influencers create commercially oriented digital performances.



*Figure 16 Chapter 5: Flowchart illustrating the process/strategies of how influencers create digital performance with commercial purposes*

Following this, I investigate the processes used by marketers in their selection of WeChat influencers in Chapter 6. This chapter extends its focus to the decision-making processes of marketing managers involved in influencer marketing. It elucidates the strategic considerations underlying the selection of influencers, encompassing factors beyond basic metrics such as follower counts. Marketing managers evaluate the actual influence, tonality, brand fit, harmony, and budgetary considerations when choosing influencers. The cooperation style also emerges as a critical aspect, prompting the identification and analysis of four types: 1) dominant, 2) cooperative, 3) strategic, and 4) relationship-oriented, each with its distinct pros and cons. How marketers evaluate influencers' digital performance is a practical concern in the industry. Due to the inherent characteristics of WeChat official accounts, there are various evaluation models for assessing effectiveness. In general, there are several modes as follows: engagement metrics for evaluation (reading rate; conversion rate; fan growth rate); AISAS mode (attention-interest-search-action-sharing); subjective evaluation approach (such as anecdotal feedback, qualitative impressions, or subjective assessments). The findings have important implications for marketers when selecting influencers and highlights. Figure 17 offers a flowchart to the process/strategies of how marketers choose collaborative influencers and evaluate digital performance.



*Figure 17 Chapter 6: Flowchart illustrating the process/strategies of how marketers choose collaborative influencers and evaluate digital performance*

Lastly, I examine the dark side of the process that may arise from the performance and the strategies in sustaining commercial success in Chapter 7. In addressing the comprehensive landscape of influencer marketing, Chapter 7 ventures into the dark side of social media marketing on WeChat Blogs. By scrutinizing the perspectives of three primary stakeholders—influencers, brands, and audiences, as well as society at large—the research highlights ethical concerns and advocates for responsible practices. The call for heightened awareness and regulation underscores the need to mitigate the potential negative consequences associated with influencer marketing. In summary, the thesis provides a thorough exploration of influencer marketing on WeChat, emphasizing the intricate nature of digital performances and their profound impact on brands, consumers, and the broader societal landscape within the Chinese market. Figure 18 offers a flowchart to illustrate the dark side of social media marketing on WeChat official account to bloggers, brand and the audience as well as society at large.

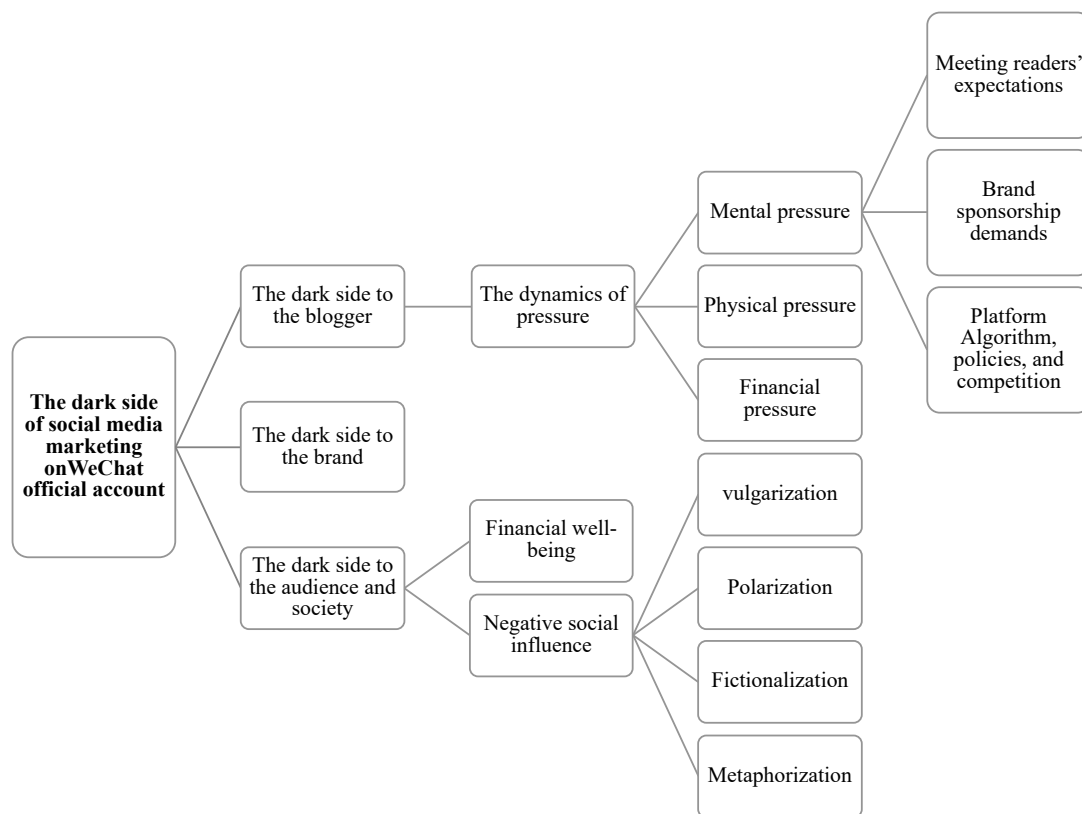


Figure 18 Chapter 7: Flowchart illustrating the dark side of social media marketing on WeChat official account to bloggers, brand and the audience as well as society at large

The dark side of influencer marketing stems from the numerous pressures on influencers, including mental, physical, and financial strains. Negative impacts extend to brands, facing risks from setbacks and financial losses due to lack of transparency in fees and other

detrimental practices. Heightened competition among brands may lead to increased marketing expenses, with brands essentially operating as conduits for influencers. Additionally, adverse effects on readers and society such as economic losses, misleading erroneous values, fostering negative social norms, and giving rise to unhealthy psychological issues which can lead to societal anxiety and conflicts. In addition, this research extends performance theory to the online realm and explores theoretical issues beyond self-presentation within a commercial context.

### **8.3 Discussion and theoretical contributions**

The focus of my study lies in making two significant theoretical contributions. One aspect entails applying performance theory to analyse WeChat influencer marketing, which deepens our understanding of digital performance by including performance theory. This section explores how performance theory can guide real-life scenarios and performance in online environments, highlighting both differences and similarities. It also discusses the practical significance of my research in improving the application of performance theory in online performances.

The other section focuses on examining influencer marketing in the context of communal consumption, enhancing our comprehension of Chinese influencer marketing. The study presents in-depth debates that analyse several dimensions, in contrast to existing literature, and introduces new perspectives.

#### **8.3.1 Integration of performance theory in digital performance**

The scope of performance theory extends beyond a specific framework authored by a specific individual. The subject matter encompasses a wide range of academic fields, incorporating significant insights from respected researchers such as Goffman (1959), Richard Schechner (1985), and Victor Turner (1988).

Schechner (2003) presents a unique viewpoint when questioned about the fundamental nature of theatre. To him, a dramatic event refers to a series of interrelated transformations. Schechner's theoretical framework assigns equal importance to all dramatic components, questioning the traditional emphasis on the author, director, or actor, and integrating many parts into a cohesive entity. In Schechner's paradigm, transformation is central to his

conception of theatre, performance, actors, and the audience, involving a complex interplay of entities. His theory explores internal shifts within theatre, including cross-cultural theatre and dynamic changes among performers, characters, audience, space, directing, and props, as well as external engagement with society, anthropology, and life itself. Within the official WeChat accounts, an influencer has the ability to engage in collaborations with many brands, therefore generating different narratives / digital performance and expanding the meanings of each brand. The aforementioned process has resemblance to the metamorphosis experienced by a performer in the realm of theatre, wherein an actor may undergo a shift from fury to grief within a given scene or alter their viewpoints when portraying several characters. WeChat influencers modify their responsibilities in accordance with the attributes of the brands they collaborate with, so generating a wide range of blog performance. A further metamorphosis takes place among the audience. One potential outcome is that individuals may undergo a shift in their audience roles, transitioning from accidental audience members to external audience members, or vice versa, as a result of the content created by influencers. Conversely, akin to those who attend theatre performances in person, people may undergo a shift from being engrossed or emotionally affected to acquiring fresh perspectives or comprehension of the narrative, characters, or underlying motifs. The influencer's interpretation of a brand's narrative has the potential to shape the perceptions and understanding of blog readers, potentially influencing their desire to purchase the products of the endorsed brand.

Goffman's impression management (1959) refers to the techniques such as dramaturgical loyalty, dramaturgical discipline, and dramaturgical circumspection that people employ to influence others' views of them. It entails actively or subconsciously presenting oneself in a way that impacts how others perceive one's identity, character, and goals. Goffman emphasised that people use impression management to shape how others see and interact with them in social circumstances. This might entail regulating one's appearance, demeanour, voice, and interactions in order to make a good impression or manage social situations efficiently. In my findings, I pointed out how influencers utilize writing and reader comments for impression management, thus orchestrating a purposeful performance. These strategies include managing impressions via displays of loyalty, curating empathetic comments to manage impressions, cultivating favourable impressions / robust relationships, and employing defensive practices to manage impressions. Prior research by McQuarrie et al. (2012) on fashion bloggers, identified several strategies of digital impression management used by

influencers to maintain their audience and acquire economic capital, these techniques included concealing their true financial status and striving to appear very modest and down-to-earth, just like an ordinary person, making oneself approachable. My findings offer a point of departure from existing research by revealing that influencers are more focused on the drama and contrast that bring a sense of surprise to the audience, and they can even joke with readers using their superior status. In another word, rather than downplaying, influencers are dramatising and playing up their enhanced status. Readers accept these blogs because they see the blog as a form of digital performance just like watching a show. Furthermore, the utilization of performance theory within the marketing field has traditionally likened marketers or service providers to actors, the service to a performance, the setting to a stage, and consumers to an audience (Grove & Fisk 1992; Grove & John 2000). However, recent scholarship has advanced this conceptualization by arguing that service experiences are not unidirectional but are co-produced by both consumers and providers (e.g., Sherry & McGrath, 1989; McAlexander & Schouten, 1998; Kozinets, et al., 2002; Tucker, 2007; Tumbat & Belk, 2013). Drawing on a dramaturgical perspective from Goffman (1959, 1961, 1967) and Turner (1986), my findings show this line of inquiry has shifted focus towards the role of consumers in the co-construction of the performance process.

Victor Turner (1986) offers a comprehensive framework for analysing social conflicts, tensions, and crises in societies. It implies that social dramas, which are collective reactions to perceived injustices or disasters, represent greater society concerns. These plays use intense emotions, symbolic actions, and public performances to help individuals and groups to voice their complaints and challenge power relationships. Social dramas frequently address underlying societal concerns and encourage collective action through symbolic deeds and rituals. They are rooted in cultural and historical settings, relying on traditions to construct narratives. I contribute to prior work (Audrezet, et al., 2020; Cocker, et al., 2023; Kozinets, et al., 2010) that has also looked at communal-commercial tensions and the tensions between meeting the expectations of audiences and the expectations of marketers. In my research, I also found that tension (sustaining popularity amongst readers and attracting marketers) exists in WeChat commercial blogs. I discovered that WeChat influencers use role-play, emotional expression, and interaction in the performance as strategies to resolve tension. Cascio and his colleagues (2023) analyses how sensory language in influencer-endorsed content affects consumer reactions, finding that these effects are influenced by perceived authenticity. However, I found that WeChat influencers enhance their digital performance



through strategies like emotional expression, including the use of emotionally resonant language, anthropomorphism, irony, and other techniques to evoke emotions such as joy, excitement, nostalgia, empathy, or wisdom, thereby fostering a deeper personal connection with the audience.

The following diagram illustrates the integration, extension, and supplementation of traditional performance theory terms with online performance.

<i>Term</i>	<i>Definition in performance theory</i>	<i>Expansion in digital performance</i>
<i>Performance theory</i>	A field of study that explores the nature, function, and impact of performances in various contexts.	It refers to the application of theoretical frameworks and concepts from performance theory to analyse and understand human behaviour, interactions, and communication in online environments.
<i>Theatrical performance</i>	Live presentations of plays, dramas, or other scripted works by actors on a stage.	It refers to the intentional and strategic presentation, expression, and communication of oneself, brand, or organization through online platforms and channels such as posts on WeChat official account.
<i>Performer</i>	An individual or group actively engaged in presenting a performance.	Content creators in presenting a digital performance such as bloggers.
<i>Professional performer</i>	“Professional performer” specifically pertains to those who possess advanced skills and technical abilities, such as film actors.	“Professional performer” specifically pertains to those who possess advanced skills in social media, such as influencers / key opinion leaders.
<i>Accidental audience</i>	Individuals or small groups of voluntary viewers, such as the general audience who invest their time and money to attend the event.	Individuals who come across content on social media platforms unintentionally or unexpectedly. These audiences may not actively seek out specific content but rather encounter it while browsing their social media feeds.
<i>Integral audience</i>	An integral audience refers to a supporting audience that is aware of the performance in advance and actively participates in the event.	The core or essential group of followers, fans, or subscribers who regularly engage with and read creator’s content.
<i>Front</i>	The front region pertains to the observable performance in the frontstage presentation of performers.	“Front” in the context of social media typically refers to the public-facing aspect of an individual’s or

<i>Back</i>	The back region encompasses the activities taking place in the backstage area.	organization’s online presence, such as published posts. “Back” in the context of social media refers to the behind-the-scenes or non-public aspects of an individual’s or organization’s online presence such as sending private messages to the content creator.
<i>Outside</i>	The region outside the stage represents the area that cannot be distinguished by the front or back regions and is inaccessible to those who are not part of the performance.	“Outside” in the context of social media typically refers to external factors or influences that impact an individual’s online presence. These external factors can include trends, events, news, and conversations happening outside of the specific social media platform or community being discussed.
<i>Role</i>	The character or identity assumed by a performer during a specific performance.	The character or identity assumed by a content creator during posts / blogs online.
<i>Ritual Performance</i>	Performances that involve symbolic actions and gestures often associated with religious or cultural ceremonies.	“Ritual performance” in social media refers to the repetitive and ceremonial actions or behaviours that individuals engage in regularly as part of their online interactions such as posting content / reading content at specific times.
<i>Dramaturgy</i>	The art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation, including the study of scriptwriting.	Dramaturgy in social media underscores the theatrical nature of online interactions and highlights the deliberate and strategic ways in which individuals manage their digital impressions to engage with their audience effectively
<i>Spectacle</i>	The visual elements and dramatic features of a performance, often emphasizing grandeur and visual impact.	Spectacle in social media refers to the captivating and attention-grabbing content, events, or phenomena that garner widespread interest and engagement on social media platforms.
<i>Interactivity</i>	The degree to which a performance allows for direct engagement or participation from the audience.	“Interactivity in social media” refers to the degree and quality of engagement, communication, and interaction between users or between users and content within social media platforms.

Figure 19 Comparison of traditional performance theory terms with online performance

Analysing online performance through the perspective of performance theory reveals that digital platforms have significantly broadened and changed traditional ideas of performance. Online performance, informed by performance theory, involves a dynamic interaction of factors such as audience involvement, digital mediation, and virtual presence. The conventional concepts of performer, audience, and place are reimagined in the digital environment, as performers roam virtual stages and audiences engage via screens. Furthermore, performance in a digital world blurs the distinction between performer and audience, allowing for increased interaction and co-creation of the content. The use of digital technology enables new means of expression and engagement, which improves the immersive and participatory quality of online performances. My findings are also applicable to other social media platforms like TikTok, where users continuously craft their public personas through performances for their audience, closely aligning with Goffman's frontstage and backstage theory. Performance theory helps dissect how influencers and everyday users refine their content in response to audience feedback. Moreover, TikTok's participatory culture, with features like duets and challenges, turns consumption into an interactive performance, blurring the lines between viewer and performer, fostering a more dynamic and collaborative engagement between users.

Overall, performance theory gives useful insights into the complexity and nuances of online performance, shedding light on how digital platforms have revolutionized the way we conceive, create, and experience performance in the digital age.

### **8.3.2 Influencer marketing in communal consumption**

The findings of my study expand the current body of research on the reception of influencer marketing in communal consumption across several dimensions.

Previous studies have mostly examined the role of brands in promoting community engagement and the manifestation of collective identity (Cova, et al., 2007; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau, et al., 2009; Thomas, et al., 2013). Recent scholarly investigations have placed more emphasis on the ways in which brands contribute to the augmentation of publicity, visibility, and various other manifestations of sociality (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Kozinets, et al., 2010). WeChat blogs, as examined in Chapter 5, are a specific type of consumer gathering that falls between the concept of a brand

community, which focuses on interaction, and the concept of a brand public, which emphasises the collective impact of brands. Common values and shared meanings are created and managed without interaction among participants who left comments on the WeChat blogs. WeChat official accounts create a sense of perceived exclusiveness for participants, especially among those whose comments have been selected by WeChat influencers. The desired information cannot easily be found by searching key words like on Twitter and most of the time, readers become acquainted with new WeChat blogs through recommendations from acquaintances or friends in their WeChat moment, relying on strong relationships to obtain this information. In contrast to Twitter, the design of the WeChat official account also discourages publicity. At the same time, WeChat blogs also differ from consumption communities in that there is lack of coherent social relations and shared rituals or traditions among the audience of a particular WeChat official account. Neither participation is motivated by moral obligation as seen in most other communal consumption activities.

Mardon, Cocker and Daunt (2013), employing the perspective of interactionist role theory, illustrated that embeddedness can entail the assumption of social roles within consumer collectives, accompanied by behavioural changes that restrict economic activities. For example, YouTube beauty vloggers adopted new commercial roles linked to their existing roles, occasionally pursuing personal gain excessively. This contradicted the audience's expectations regarding their established role-related behaviours, thereby precipitating a crisis. Same as both Audrezet and her colleagues (2020) and Kozinets and his colleagues (2010) highlight how followers and audiences often express discontent with the commercialization of content, underscoring the delicate balance influencers must strike between engaging their audience and promoting brands or products. However, from the perspective of performance theory, WeChat official accounts as a social media platform resemble more of a theatre. Audiences choose to watch performances by their favourite directors or actors (WeChat influencers) on this stage because they recognize it as a digital performance. They understand that only with sufficient budget can the performance be enhanced, so the audience may even appreciate the support from sponsored brands. This economic cycle supports their favourite "performers" in continuously performing. If audiences are not interested in the content/director/actors of a performance, most will not choose to enter this theatre to watch a specific show (the audience also consists of both accidental and integral audience members, but the performance can also lead to transitions between them). Thus, connecting a group of consumers with common interests or similar tastes is not for a specific product or brand, but

rather WeChat influencers, or more precisely, the content (digital performance) created by WeChat influencers, even including commercial digital performances. Due to their affinity for the content of a particular WeChat official account, these consumers are willing to engage with a variety of brand collaborations featured on this account and some may even feel a sense of disappointment when reading through a blog without advertisement. Although the brands and products being promoted change periodically, there is often consistency in the types of reader comments as integral audience's support being formulated into a coherent narrative for a complete performance. In contrast to the predominant belief that influencers establish their identities (Schau & Gilly, 2003; Chen, 2010) through their blogs, my findings indicate that WeChat influencers place a higher emphasis on creating content within a performance theory framework rather than projecting their identities. Their emphasis on flexible content development enables them to dynamically adjust social roles, similar to the study by Mardon, Cocker and Daunt (2013), resulting in a wide range of brand-related behaviours. This approach deviates from the traditional notion that influencers strive to maintain a coherent self-image through their online platforms. Instead, WeChat influencers utilize their blogs as dynamic brand enclaves, showcasing a range of brand-related performances to engage and captivate their audience.

In addition to extending research on influencer marketing in marketers' views, my findings also contribute to the broader social media influencer marketing literature. Previous studies have demonstrated that employing numerous endorsers helps alleviate audience fatigue (Hsu & McDonald, 2002). Cocker, Mardon and Daunt (2021) suggest that simultaneous endorsement of a brand by multiple bloggers may have negative effects. The audience only accepts influencers who possess characteristics beyond product endorsement and can fulfill their other needs for brand endorsement. My research findings suggest that in WeChat influencer marketing, having different influencers endorse the same brand rarely leads to negative effects. However, the prerequisite, as proposed by Mardon, Cocker and Daunt (2013), is that different influencers use different styles and characteristics to present and interpret the meaning of the brand. It is akin to the saying "There are a thousand Hamlets (if we see Hamlets as an endorsed brands) in the eyes of a thousand readers," but this impression is not conveyed through a fixed script. Instead, it is through various digital performances that Hamlet is depicted, ultimately extending the meaning of Hamlet through all these digital performances created by influencers. My research has expanded the ways in which endorsement reception is understood. In essence, what readers anticipate are stories with

dramatic elements or performances that are enjoyable to watch. In lengthy WeChat articles, it is rare to see influencers collaborating with brands in a manner similar to Instagram, where they simply post photos of themselves or short descriptions with the brand to endorse it.

Furthermore, previous studies mainly focused on the dark side of influencer marketing, primarily address the mental and economic harm caused to influencers by anti-fans or online bullying (Liew, 2019; Mardon, et al., 2023). However, the WeChat official account platform operates in a semi-closed manner. All reader comments on WeChat blogs are only displayed publicly if selected by the author, which reduces the likelihood of online bullying. Because readers know that bullying or negative comments are unlikely to be chosen by the blogger, the comments generally come from loyal readers. Even if readers create their own public accounts to criticize influencers, the probability of being seen in this closed platform is minimal. My study findings demonstrate how platform visibility, regulation, and governance shape the behaviour of audiences towards influencers (probability of being bullied). The study by Hudders and Lou (2023) emphasizes that influencers' luxurious lifestyles, perfect image in front of the camera, and unhealthy food choices may have a detrimental psychological impact on readers. My research findings shed light on the types of performances that may have adverse effects on audiences and society, such as the vulgarization, polarization, fictionalization and metaphorization of content by influencers. It highlights the potential negative impact of influencers who predominantly use lengthy textual content on platforms, as opposed to those who primarily use videos or images. Furthermore, earlier research by Smith and Fischer (2012) discussed the logic of attracting attention for a broad audience, where professionals such as stock analysts and financial investors focus on dynamic trends or well-known brands within widely cared-about sectors. This parallels the current dynamics on WeChat official platforms, where entertainment and attention-grabbing, sociable news tend to attract more attention due to the audience's curiosity and herd mentality. Regardless of the professional background, practitioners from different fields may find interest in these topics, indicating a sizable market. However, my findings reveal that selecting broadly cared-about topics can lead influencers to fabricate or exaggerate societal phenomena to boost click rates, which could lead to result in negative social consequences such as resentment towards the wealthy or spread unverified gossip, impacting the reputation and image of specific industries or individuals. In other words, these strategies, aimed at increasing audience engagement, have transitioned from positive to negative outcomes in my findings. While previous research (Drenten, et al., 2023) has extensively investigated how

influencers shape consumer ideologies on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram, focusing on tactics such as glamourizing, demystifying, victimising, and tribalizing, my study seeks to broaden this understanding by examining how influencers operating on text-centric platforms such as WeChat official accounts use textual strategies to influence consumer ideologies. Unlike sites like Instagram, which are largely visual, WeChat official accounts rely significantly on textual material to communicate with consumers. In this setting, influencers use vulgarisation, polarisation, fictionalisation, and metaphorization to affect customer perceptions and behaviours. My research expands our knowledge of the varied ways in which influencers on WeChat official accounts develop and transmit consuming ideologies by analysing these textual methods. It also provides insights into the specific dynamics of influence in text-based social media platforms.

## **8.4 Practical contributions**

In light of China's dynamic marketing environment, the swift uptake of social media marketing strategies by businesses has brought forth specific challenges, as underscored by Ogbuji and Papazafeiropoulou (2016). Negotiating this complex landscape, social media emerges as a potent instrument for effectively communicating a brand's objectives and mission. The insights gleaned from this study are not only academically pertinent but also carry considerable practical significance for businesses. These findings provide a nuanced comprehension of how social media marketing can be leveraged, particularly within the context of China, where it holds the potential to significantly bolster a brand's success.

This doctoral research provides practical insights and strategic recommendations tailored specifically to the nuances of Chinese WeChat blogs, empowering marketers / brands and influencers / bloggers to effectively navigate and optimize their influencer marketing strategies in the rapidly evolving digital marketplace. Practically, this research has implications for marketers and influencers seeking to refine and enhance their influencer marketing strategies, especially in non-Western markets like China. The insights into social

media dynamics, particularly within semi-closed platforms, offer valuable guidance for practitioners aiming to maximize the impact of their influencer marketing efforts.

#### **8.4.1 Practical implications for brands and marketers**

With the rising popularity of influencer marketing, the selection of collaborating influencers and the assessment of their success have emerged as two crucial considerations for marketers. During my study, I found that marketers frequently give more importance to the quality of an account rather than the quantity of followers. Most marketers also examine factors such as the alignment of the blogger's tone with the brand's style, the blogger's reputation in past collaborations (including communication efficacy and ease), and financial constraints. Marketers and bloggers typically engage in several collaboration models, such as dominant or subordinate roles, reciprocal cooperation, strategic cooperation, and relationship-based collaboration.

In terms of performance, collaborations that fall under the strategic category, in accordance with the principles of performance theory, are likely to provide the most favourable performance. Strategic partnerships might involve a brand intentionally hiding its involvement or seeking to surprise others throughout the collaboration process. The goal is to enhance the authenticity and emotional impact of the digital performance's tale. Several skilled influencers leverage their formidable creativity to infuse a theatrical element into their digital performance, therefore enhancing the appeal of commercials and transforming influencer-driven digital performances into engaging spectacles with commercial goals.

Similar to how every theatrical production need a monetary commitment to engage superior directors and performers for enhanced performances, audiences are more inclined to embrace advertising partnerships between influencers and brands. There is currently no standardized method for evaluating the efficacy of advertising. It may encompass indicators related to user engagement, the AIAISAS model (attention-interest-search-action-sharing), or subjective evaluation methods including anecdotal feedback and qualitative impressions. My research indicates that experienced marketers advise experimenting with various categories of bloggers when there is enough funding available. Marketers acquire their own list and create intuitive insights for evaluating performance through hands-on experience.



### **8.4.2 Practical implications for bloggers and influencers**

For social media bloggers or influencers, achieving success in the digital realm may be influenced by the logic of performance theory. Whether the motivation is driven by genuine interest in sharing knowledge, building your own brand, or generating material for project management objectives, understanding the logic of performance theory can be beneficial.

Prioritise thorough preparation for a digital performance rather than merely showcasing self-presentation. Effective strategies for this context encompass role-playing, wherein one constructs a persona tailored to their objective, such as an expert in a specific domain or a companion who enjoys shopping for coordinating outfits.

Additionally, employing emotional expression during the creative process to establish a connection with the audience and elicit various reading experiences, such as delight, nostalgia, or even satire, holds the potential for exceptional digital performance with a drama effect.

Ultimately, it is crucial to prioritise engagement with the audience. Various platforms possess distinct characteristics. Bloggers should take use of chances provided by platforms like WeChat official accounts to carefully choose reader comments and transform them into a cohesive presentation, so maximising the benefits for both the blogger and the audience. When selecting comments, it is important to consider several key factors. These include choosing comments from loyal customers, comments that can elicit empathetic responses from readers, comments that can provide commercial value or enhance relationships with cooperative brands. Additionally, negative comments can also be selected and defensive practice strategies from performance theory can be employed to manage impressions and achieve desired goals.

## **8.5 Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into influencer marketing on the WeChat official account platform, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations that may affect the generalizability and robustness of the findings. First and foremost, the relatively small sample size employed in this research may restrict the extent to which its conclusions can be extrapolated to broader contexts. The dynamics of influencer marketing can vary significantly

across different platforms, industries, and regions, and a more extensive and diverse sample could provide a more comprehensive perspective.

Another consideration is the reliance on self-reported information from influencers and marketers. There is a limitation in that I did not interview consumers or audiences; all the data sourced from the audience side is from publicly available internet information. While this data source offers firsthand insights, it carries the potential for bias and inaccuracy. Influencers may be inclined to present their efforts in a more favorable light, and marketers' / consumers' perceptions and experiences can be subjective or context dependent.

Incorporating additional data collection methods, such as objective performance metrics or third-party evaluations, could enhance the reliability and credibility of the findings. Furthermore, the absence of a standardized method for measuring the efficacy of influencer marketing campaigns is a prevalent challenge in the field. This lack of uniformity makes it challenging to compare the results of this study with those of other research endeavours. Developing industry-wide benchmarks and measurement frameworks would not only facilitate cross-study comparisons but also contribute to the establishment of best practices and benchmarks for influencer marketing campaigns.

In conclusion, while this study offers valuable insights into the specific context of influencer marketing on the official WeChat account platform, it is imperative to recognize the limitations stemming from the sample size, data source, and measurement methodologies. Addressing these limitations through broader sampling, diversified data sources, and industry-standard measurement tools would bolster the generalizability and rigor of future research in the field, ultimately advancing our understanding of influencer marketing's effectiveness across various platforms and settings.

## **8.6 Directions for future research**

Expanding upon the existing research landscape, there exists a notable gap in understanding influencer marketing dynamics within non-Western contexts, such as China, boasting the highest number of internet users globally, representing a particularly promising avenue for exploration. Future inquiries could extend the present thesis by delving into consumer behaviours and influencer strategies across various Chinese social media platforms, including

platforms such as Chinese TikTok or Little Red Book. By scrutinizing disparities between influencer marketing practices in China and Western countries, as well as variations across different social media platforms, researchers can glean valuable insights into the nuanced nature of influencer-brand interactions in diverse cultural settings.

Furthermore, from a theoretical standpoint, there exists potential for expanding the conceptual framework proposed in the thesis, particularly in relation to performance theory. Investigating how influencers leverage their content to evoke transformative shifts in audience perceptions and behaviours, akin to the immersive experiences witnessed in theatrical performances, offers a promising avenue for deeper exploration into the efficacy and ramifications of influencer marketing strategies. Such investigations could shed light on the underlying mechanisms through which influencers wield influence and contribute to advancing our understanding of the multifaceted dynamics inherent in contemporary marketing landscapes.

Expanding the scope of inquiry to include a comparative analysis of influencer marketing dynamics across different cultural contexts, including both Eastern and Western perspectives, could provide valuable insights into the universal principles as well as the culturally specific nuances of influencer-brand interactions. Additionally, exploring the intersectionality of performance theory with other relevant theoretical frameworks, such as cultural studies or psychology, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at digital performance in influencer marketing.

Furthermore, the “dark side” of social media marketing encompasses a multitude of facets that necessitate deeper investigation and consideration. For example, in China, a notable instance of this phenomenon is the resentment towards the wealthy, which is often fuelled by the portrayal of lavish lifestyles by influencers. However, the precise nature of the content that incites such resentment among audiences, as well as the ensuing consequences, remains largely unexplored.

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## Appendix

### Sample interview

Informant 24 采访节选 ( 全部采访字数大概在 2 万字，这里只节选部分 )

一个七个月把粉丝做到 17 万的博主

A:XX，您好！我想问一下就是你从什么时候开始打算做公众号的？

B：从去年年底到今年年初，我最初与一位朋友合作开发一个历史地图项目，旨在创建一个历史版的电子地图，类似于现代地图服务如百度地图，但专注于历史路线如丝绸之路。然而，由于项目难度过大，我们决定暂停。随后，我尝试了一个更易操作的项目，名为“地球观察团”，并投入了一年时间进行探索。不幸的是，由于与合伙人的分歧，该项目最终搁置。之后，我独立开始了新的项目“地球知识局”，至今已全职运营七个月，成为我的主要职业。

A：之前是做什么呢？

...

A：嗯 OK 那你最开始创办第一个公众号的时候是什么样的原因去去创办的？

B：因为当时其他方向都没戏了，所以说很绝望。

A：为什么说其他方向都没戏了？

B：因为试过一些不同的东西，发现能力不足。

A：哪些东西？

B：嗯比如我刚才说那个电子地图，然后当时还想做一个那个关于全国博物馆的一个内容平台，信息平台。也很难，对反正是没戏。然后后来我那个朋友呢他又想搞那个搞一个 p2p 的软件，后来呢也没戏，反正就是各种不顺，那就是做什么呢，做力所能及



的呗是吧，那就是这个公共账号这东西，当时我其实才比较重视起来，但老实说去年年初的时候这个公众号已经火了好几年了，所以说我也是我以前是个长期的，是一个慢很多拍的一个人，所以也是很晚才入行，对然后它就比较容易嘛是吧。

A：为什么因为好为什么觉得说做公众号会比较容易？

...

A：那你刚开始比如说你想做公众号的时候你有参考其他功能或者你当时做第一个的时候是怎么定位的？

B：刚才说定位的时候就是同类里面没有人去做这个事情，然后只有我。第一个号叫地球观察团，它那个它的内容基本都转移到地球知识局。

A：那你做那个号的时候第一篇刚开始的时候有人看吗？

B：嗯有，一千多人。

A：为什么第一天会有这么多人看着？

B：就想也不多，可能因为我的朋友圈人多了，这个是一个原因，另外一个就是内容确实还不错，因为我当时想法很简单，因为中国人不能翻墙，不会翻墙，大部分都不会，那么我就我要讲人文地理的话，我只要去把国外的那个卫星图给扒过来就得了吗，是吧？相当于你要看这个大部分的内容。创业无论是图文还是视频，其实最好的部分就是找抄过来，但是他可能是最基本都是没有版权这个观念，尤其是视频方面，因为视频成本更低，连字幕都不需要是吧，它这么太低了，嗯所以说往往是就在于你抄的是谁的。

A：第一篇文章是什么内容还记得？

...

A：你刚才说那个比如说你第一天的时候一千多个阅读率，然后之后慢慢的怎么样运营的怎么样？

...

B：在初期，我的社交圈主要由设计师、学者和历史爱好者等非媒体行业的人士组成，他们虽然才华横溢，但在媒体领域缺乏人脉和广泛的社会联系。因此，我最初在媒体圈内几乎没有任何熟人。随着时间的推移，一些媒体机构如界面新闻和凤凰新闻开始注意到我的工作，并主动与我联系。尽管这些媒体已经开始构建自己的平台，但我对此并不了解，因为我平时不常接触电视媒体，对凤凰新闻的具体情况也知之甚少。在早期，我的方法颇为简单直接——专注于内容创作，每当文章的阅读量达到一千或两千时，我都会感到非常兴奋和满足。

A：当时就没有什么营销然后就就一千两千这么多的阅读？

B：嗯没有啊，但是这个东西怎么说就说内容过硬就可以了。内容其实分两个，一个是过硬的，可能它的绝对价值，然后是它的同类比较，就相对价值嘛，就是说如果你这个文章你这个类别是全网只有你在做这个类别，那么就很容易拉到它的核心粉丝。

A：那边核心粉丝是怎么拉过来？

B：嗯小圈子嘛，比如说我的朋友有很多喜欢地理和历史的，那么他们的朋友可能也是这样的，但老实说嗯几千个人其实很好拿。

A：运营了多长时间，然后就是粉丝到达了一定的规模？

B：我运营能力非常的差，一年的时间才 3 万人，相当于每天几十个人，很痛苦的。

A：那阅读率大概有，每天平均？

B：阅读会很高，但是阅读的话比如五六千六七千。

A：那很高，跟你这个比例不成正比啊不是就是因为现在只有打开率只有 10%左右。

B：其实这样的，如果说你如果说你的粉丝量在 10 万以下的话，那个打开率高，一点都不奇怪，因为都是核心圈子的。相当于你的朋友圈的朋友的朋友圈，在三层以内，

所以大家也都比较熟，兴趣都比较相投，也都给你个面子，我帮你转发是吧，所以说在三层以内你去谈这个阅读比例其实是没多大意义的，就亲朋好友都给你转，那没有意义。你要到广泛的人民群众的陌生人之中他们还能够广泛地帮你传播，那是有意义的，所以说 10%这个比例可能放在人数更多的范围之内是可以的，比如我们现在，我们现在是 17 万人，然后阅读比例是 20%以上，那这个还是不错的。我觉得如果 50 万了还能够维持 20%的话那应该还是很不错的。

A：嗯就是你做这个号，你说找了好多的媒体什么是，是怎么样什么样的契机你发现好像要找？

B：他们找我，到后台找我，包括作者也都是从后台挖掘出来的。

A：他们找你最开始是什么样子的情况？

B：比如说作者找我，那就是我喜欢你的内容，可以交流一下，然后后来发现，他既然喜欢的话，那他可能也是这方面的人士，他要不要哪一天，就不用我写的嘛，我就可以放懒了嘛是吧？那么慢慢的作者圈子积累起来了，这个是作者。然后媒体就是它觉得你这个内容好，然后问能不能入驻它的平台或者能不能被转载，其实也就是这样的这样的常见方式。

A：那你就接受了那些媒体的入驻啊？

B：对，基本都是现在媒体平台基本都做了，网易，搜狐，凤凰，一点，头条，企鹅，大鱼，大概就这些吧。

A：那你这一个人同步这些，把同样的一篇文章同步到这些网站？

B：同步这个事情简单嘛就是粘贴。

A：你比如说你积累这个作者，其实他最开始也是你的读者，然后你把这些人的微信还是怎么样呢？

B：加到微信上，可能会作者群什么。

A：就把这些作者都放到一个社区里，大概有多少人？

B：作者的话核心的是七八个，包括外围的话可能三四十个，但外围这种算不算数的一年出一两天其实意义也不大。

A：你会给他们有有一些什么好处吗？

B：会有会有稿费很低，那是一篇 200

A：OK 大家还是凭兴趣吗？

B：凭数据是一方面，但是这么低的稿费其实也不太能吸引人，所以说有的人凭兴趣那些写几篇之后也不想写了，所以现在的还是学生为主，但学生的话就有个问题就是你怎么能够把这个把这个不太合格的内容给它转出合格内容。就是它有一个流程，这个流程固化之后它的效率还是挺高的，相当于是比如说我可能我能找一个北大历史系的他可能就是擅长改造论文。这篇论文 5 万字，我给他压成 3000 字是吧，这相当于读后感，那么这份 3000 字之后最后的环节是一个环节一个环节，就能够到一个图文配合得比较严密精致，然后又能够抓住群众去，有利于传播这个东西，这么一个流程。

...

A：讲一下接的那个广告的情况？

...

A：那就是说你的广告的形式是什么样的文章呢？

B：软文嘛。

A：就是比如说你们合作的那个发布会的话你是怎么样？

B：那样的就是说一条二条是不一样的，一个一条是真正的是阅读量比较大的，要对读者负责，二条呢可以稍微不负责一些是吧。二条就是它给一个文案，这个可能丑到

爆，然后可能稍微改一改不要那么丑，它也可以放在二条是吧这个可以接受它。一条的范围应该是不会接受硬广，应该那就是软广告。

A：那你们这个广告怎么定价？

B：现在定价是比如现在的用量的话一条可能是 18000，那如果是这个月月底定价的话，那可能一条是 2 万，2 万 2 大概这个价格，因为我们的涨粉速度很快，这个定价是根据什么来定的？嗯就是按照你那个阅读量，比如说你的阅读量有一篇文章大概 3 万人，甚至到 3 万人，那么按照广告不同，其实定价不一样，当然这个有很多，因为这方面没有固定的格式，比如说如果对方是一个特有钱的资金太充裕的，那你可以多要一些是吧，或者呢如果说对方就是那个厂商本身，他绕过了中介和广告公司，但你可以多要一些，如果对方的老板特别喜欢你，就是想让你来发广告，那么你可以多要一些是吧？又或者你这个品牌就特别强势，全网特别有名，那也可以多要一些，但是有些比如说对方如果就是一个做纺织面料的，他本来利润率很低，反正那个纺织面料也就是为了出名，而不是直接卖东西，那你说你怎么可能要高价呢？要不上去。

A：那你这样如果定价不同的话会有人就知道了，会觉得说唉你为什么？

B：价值取决于什么，当然很多那个说是抗议什么的，统一定价是对外的，那个东西它本来就是不一样的，一个广告是直接卖东西的，另外一个树立品牌的，或者就是对方微店的，价格能一样吗？当然不一样

A：你接受什么样的广告嗯有自己的标准？

B：有，就是首先对方的品牌是什么样的是吧？比如像那个嗯互联网金融这方面的，当然有些是靠谱的，但是我还没有这方面的分辨经验是吧？很多是忽悠人的，那你说就不能随便接，万一他忽悠人你要不要负责呢？还有一些杭州的那个广告，他那种广撒网似的那种卖白菜价的那种就不可能接受。那么一个是品质然后一个是类别上是否对

口。比如如果对方是做旅游的或者是做那个地方物产的那么可能就很合适，对吧。如果对方对当时做一个什么比如比如笔记本电脑的那可能跟你这个人文地理的这个好像不太好对接，当然软文都是可以转过去的，但是在倾向上可能会倾向能够和人文自己地理对接的那种。

A：你说的这种软文是什么样的形式？

B：比如说嗯比如说我们可能会出一篇那个椰子产业是吧，椰子在全国分布那可能会从这个椰子的来源，应该是全球的分布，比如说哪个椰子大国一些小国然后最后可能会转到那个椰树牌椰汁，这就是个软广。硬广就是一开始就是一个椰树牌椰汁。

...

A：那公众号怎么样才能火起来？

B：微信公众号的运营策略与传统媒体大相径庭，其早期发展速度迅猛，这要求我们必须清晰理解新媒体的本质。新媒体，简而言之，是各行各业披上了数字化的外衣。以我的一位朋友为例，他运营着一个专注于钢铁行业的公众号，虽然每日仅有数千阅读量，但其广告收益却异常丰厚。原因在于，他的广告主要面向的是高价值的工业产品，如价值数百万甚至上千万的钢铁锅炉，目标受众极为精准——同行业的专业人士。因此，他无需追求庞大的阅读量。

相比之下，如果你运营的是一个发布鸡汤软文、销售日常用品如杯子、手绢、茶桌板凳等的公众号，那么高阅读量就显得至关重要。因为这类商品的利润空间有限，若阅读量不高，广告收入将难以覆盖成本，更不用说盈利了。因此，对于不同类型的公众号，其运营策略和盈利模式也大相径庭。

...

A：那你挑选留言有什么规则吗？

B：有，首先你不要太敏感，啊其次你要有脑，这个还是区别很大的，就有那种上来就是就是种族屠杀这种就是无脑的，当然那种人也不是把他拉黑，因为拉黑不拉黑其实也无所谓，但有些人在后台比如说很攻击性，那种人把他拉黑

...

A：什么情况下会大规模掉粉？

B：没有这种经历，要查原因如果有，就是绝对掉粉，和相对掉粉。比如平台自己关门了，或者没人玩了就粉丝没了。相对掉粉就是你的竞争手越来越多，粉丝走了。微信这种平台粉丝都是活粉。但是平台上的粉丝基本上是死的，比如微信是我们生活，谁会在基础平台上社交呢，因为它是一个工具，平台只是一个中介，聚集了一些流量和内容，把流量和内容卖给广告主，赚差价。这种情况下，你不具备广告盈利能力。如果你想做深入的，比如微信公开课，卖书什么的，这些商业模式在平台上都不能实现，只能在微博微信实现。所以你的目标方向决定你用什么平台。然后内容定位，我在这个平台定位是什么，比如咪蒙很牛，我们也想做一个撕逼的号或者健身的号，你在开之前已经晚了。那你进去时候就发现产能过剩，包括咪蒙他们也一直在出问题，包括咪蒙号称千万粉丝，其实也是就 500 万吧。

...

**Excerpt from Informant 24 Interview** (The full interview is approximately 20,000 words, here is a partial excerpt)

**A Blogger Who Gained 170,000 Followers in Seven Months**

**A:** XX, hello! I wanted to ask, when did you first decide to start a public account?

**B:** From the end of last year to the beginning of this year, I initially collaborated with a friend on a historical map project. The goal was to create a historical version of an electronic map, similar to modern map services like Baidu Maps, but focused on historical routes such as the Silk Road. However, due to the project's complexity, we decided to pause it. Later, I tried a more manageable project called "Earth Observation Group," which I explored for a year. Unfortunately, due to disagreements with my partner, the project was eventually shelved. After that, I independently started a new project called "Earth Knowledge Bureau," which I have been running full-time for seven months now, and it has become my main profession.

**A:** What were you doing before this?

...

**A:** Okay, so when you first started your public account, what was the reason behind it?

**B:** Because all other avenues seemed hopeless at the time, so I was quite desperate.

**A:** Why did you feel that other avenues were hopeless?

**B:** Because I tried different things and realized I wasn't capable enough.

**A:** What kind of things?

**B:** For example, the electronic map I mentioned earlier, and at that time, I also wanted to create a content and information platform about national museums. That was also very difficult. Anyway, nothing worked out. Then my friend wanted to develop a P2P software, but that didn't work out either. Everything just kept going wrong. So, I thought, why not do something within my capabilities? That's when I started to take the public account more seriously. But honestly, by the beginning of last year, public accounts had already been popular for several years. I've always been a bit slow to catch on, so I entered the game quite late. But it was relatively easier, right?

**A:** Why did you think running a public account would be easier?

...

**A:** When you first thought about starting a public account, did you refer to other accounts? How did you position your first account?



**B:** When I talked about positioning, I meant that no one else in the same category was doing what I was doing. The first account was called “Earth Observation Group,” and its content was mostly transferred to “Earth Knowledge Bureau.”

**A:** When you started that account, did anyone read your first post?

**B:** Yes, about a thousand people.

**A:** Why did so many people read it on the first day?

**B:** It wasn’t that many. Probably because I have a lot of people in my social circle, and also because the content was quite good. My idea was simple: since most Chinese people can’t or don’t know how to bypass the Great Firewall, if I wanted to talk about human geography, I just needed to grab satellite images from foreign websites, right? That way, I could provide content that most people couldn’t access. Whether it’s text or video, the best part of entrepreneurship is finding and repurposing content. But there’s often no concept of copyright, especially with videos, since they are cheaper to produce and don’t even need subtitles. So, it often comes down to whose content you’re repurposing.

**A:** Do you remember what the first article was about?

...

**A:** You mentioned that on the first day, you had over a thousand reads. How did you manage to grow from there?

...

**B:** In the beginning, my social circle mainly consisted of designers, scholars, and history enthusiasts—people who weren’t in the media industry. They were talented but lacked connections and broad social networks in the media world. So, initially, I didn’t know anyone in the media circle. Over time, some media outlets like Jiemian News and Phoenix News noticed my work and reached out to me. Although these media outlets were building their own platforms, I wasn’t aware of it because I don’t usually watch TV or follow Phoenix News closely. In the early days, my approach was quite straightforward—focus on content creation. Whenever an article reached one or two thousand reads, I would feel very excited and satisfied.

**A:** So, you didn’t do any marketing, and yet you got one or two thousand reads?

**B:** No, but the key is that the content has to be solid. Content can be evaluated in two ways: its absolute value and its relative value. If your article is the only one in its category, it’s easier to attract core fans.

**A:** How did you attract those core fans?

**B:** Through small circles. For example, many of my friends are interested in geography and history, and their friends are likely interested in the same topics. But honestly, getting a few thousand people is quite easy.

**A:** How long did it take for your followers to reach a certain scale?

**B:** My ability to grow the account was very poor. It took a year to reach 30,000 followers, which is only a few dozen people per day. It was painful.

**A:** What was the average daily readership?

**B:** The readership was quite high, around five or six thousand.

**A:** That's high, but it's not proportional to your follower count. The current open rate is only about 10%.

**B:** Actually, if your follower count is below 100,000, a high open rate isn't surprising because it's mostly your core circle. It's like friends of friends within three degrees of separation. They are familiar with each other, share similar interests, and are willing to help by sharing your posts. So, within three degrees of separation, the read rate doesn't mean much. It's only meaningful when strangers in the broader population start sharing your content widely. For example, we now have 170,000 followers, and the read rate is over 20%, which is quite good. If we can maintain a 20% read rate at 500,000 followers, that would be excellent.

**A:** You mentioned that you connected with many media outlets. How did that happen?

**B:** They reached out to me through the backend, and even the authors were discovered through the backend.

**A:** What was the initial interaction like when they contacted you?

**B:** For example, an author might say, "I like your content, let's chat." Then, if they like it, they might be someone who could contribute. Over time, I built up a circle of authors. As for media outlets, they would notice my content and ask if I could join their platform or if they could repost my articles. It's a common approach.

**A:** Did you accept those media platforms?

**B:** Yes, I'm now on most media platforms: NetEase, Sohu, Phoenix, Yidian, Toutiao, Tencent, Dayu, and so on.

**A:** Do you manually sync the same article to all these platforms?

**B:** Syncing is simple—just copy and paste.

**A:** You mentioned building a community of authors. How did you manage that?

**B:** I added them on WeChat and created author groups.

**A:** How many people are in these groups?

**B:** There are about seven or eight core authors, and around thirty to forty peripheral ones. But the peripheral ones only contribute once or twice a year, so they don't count for much.

**A:** Do you offer them any benefits?

**B:** Yes, there's a small fee, like 200 yuan per article.

**A:** So, it's mostly based on interest?

**B:** Partly based on data, but such a low fee isn't very attractive. Some people write a few articles out of interest and then stop. Currently, most of the authors are students, but the challenge is how to turn their subpar content into something acceptable. There's a process, and once it's solidified, it's quite efficient. For example, I might find someone from Peking University's history department who's good at condensing a 50,000-word thesis into a 3,000-word article. After that, the final step is to refine it into a well-structured, visually appealing piece that's easy to share.

...

**A:** Can you talk about the ads you've taken on?

...

**A:** What form do these ads take?

**B:** Mostly soft ads.

**A:** For example, how do you handle a product launch event?

**B:** The first post is usually the one with higher readership, and we take responsibility for that. The second post can be less responsible. The second post might have a poorly written script, but as long as it's not too bad, we can accept it. The first post usually doesn't accept hard ads, only soft ads.

**A:** How do you price your ads?

**B:** Currently, the price for one post is around 18,000 yuan. By the end of the month, it might go up to 20,000 or 22,000 yuan. Our follower growth is fast, so the pricing is based on readership. For example, if an article gets around 30,000 reads, the price varies depending on the ad. There's no fixed format. If the advertiser is very wealthy, you can charge more. If the manufacturer bypasses intermediaries and approaches you directly, you can charge more. If the advertiser really likes your content, you can charge more. But if the advertiser is in a low-margin industry, like textiles, and just wants exposure rather than direct sales, you can't charge too much.

**A:** If the pricing varies, won't people notice and question it?

**B:** Value depends on many factors. Some ads are for direct sales, while others are for brand building. The prices can't be the same.

**A:** What kind of ads do you accept? Do you have standards?

**B:** Yes, first, I consider the brand. For example, in the internet finance sector, some are reliable, but I don't have enough experience to judge. Many are scams, so I can't just accept any ad. There are also ads from Hangzhou that are sold at very low prices, which I can't accept. The quality and relevance of the ad are important. For example, if the ad is about tourism or local products, it's a good fit. If it's about laptops, it might not align well with human geography, but soft ads can be adapted. I tend to prefer ads that align with human geography.

**A:** What does a soft ad look like?

**B:** For example, we might write an article about the coconut industry, discussing the global distribution of coconuts, from major producers to smaller countries, and then transition to a brand like Yezi Coconut Juice. That's a soft ad. A hard ad would start directly with Yezi Coconut Juice.

...

**A:** How can a public account become popular?

**B:** The strategy for running a WeChat public account is very different from traditional media. In the early stages, the growth is rapid, so it's important to understand the essence of new media. New media is essentially traditional industries digitized. For example, a friend of mine runs a public account focused on the steel industry. Although it only gets a few thousand reads per day, the ad revenue is very high because the ads target high-value industrial products like steel boilers worth millions or even tens of millions. The audience is highly targeted—industry professionals. So, he doesn't need a large readership.

On the other hand, if you run a public account that posts motivational articles or sells everyday items like cups, handkerchiefs, or tea tables, then a high readership is crucial. The profit margins on these items are low, so if the readership isn't high, the ad revenue won't cover the costs, let alone generate profit. Therefore, the strategy and profit model vary greatly depending on the type of public account.

...

**A:** Do you have any rules for selecting comments?

**B:** Yes, first, they shouldn't be too sensitive. Second, they should be thoughtful. There's a big difference. Some comments are just mindless, like those advocating for genocide. I don't necessarily block those people, but if someone is very aggressive in the backend, I might block them.

...

**A:** Under what circumstances do you lose a large number of followers?

**B:** I haven't experienced that. If it happens, you need to investigate the cause. There's absolute loss and relative loss. Absolute loss is when the platform shuts down or people stop using it. Relative loss is when competitors increase, and followers leave. On WeChat, followers are active, but on other platforms, they're mostly inactive. WeChat is part of daily life, but other platforms are just tools. They aggregate traffic and content, selling it to advertisers for profit. In that case, you don't have the ability to monetize ads. If you want to do something deeper, like WeChat Open Classes or selling books, those business models can't be implemented on other platforms. So, your goals determine which platform you use. Content positioning is also important. For example, if you want to create a controversial account like Mimeng, you're already too late. By the time you enter, the market is oversaturated. Even Mimeng, which claims to have tens of millions of followers, actually only has about five million.

## Ethic Form

*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics  
Committee (FASS-LUMS REC)  
Lancaster University*

*Application for Ethical Approval for Research – General Guidance*

**Instructions** Please refer to NOTES in this form for guidance. The application form starts on page 3.

### **A. How to apply to the committee:**

The FASS-LUMS REC forms should be used for **all projects by staff and research students, whether funded or not, which have not been reviewed by any external research ethics committee.** If your project is or has been reviewed by another committee (e.g. from another University), please contact the FASS-LUMS research ethics officer for further guidance.

In addition to the completed form, you need to submit **research materials of direct relevance to your application** such as (but not limited to):

- i. Advertising materials (posters, e-mails)
- ii. Letters/emails of invitation to participate
- iii. Participant information sheets<sup>1</sup>
- iv. Consent forms<sup>2</sup>
- v. Questionnaires, surveys, demographic sheets
- vi. Interview schedules, interview question guides, focus group scripts
- vii. Debriefing sheets, resource lists

For all sections of the form, be specific but concise in the information you provide. The reviewers are academics from the different departments in FASS and LUMS. They will not necessarily be from your subject area or discipline, so make sure to avoid subject-specific terminology and be as clear as you can.

### **NOTE**

<sup>1</sup>We recommend that you use the sample information sheet on the FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee website as the basis of your information sheet.

If your participants include people with a learning disability, your information sheet and consent form should include pictorial representations of the information you are trying to communicate (Makaton). For more information go to <http://www.makaton.org/>

<sup>2</sup>We recommend that you use the sample consent form on the FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee website as the basis of your consent form.

**For all applications you need to:**

**Submit the FASS-LUMS REC application form and any relevant materials listed under A by email to [fass.lumsethics@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:fass.lumsethics@lancaster.ac.uk) as a SINGLE attachment preferably in Word format. *If this is not possible submit the documents in a single PDF. Before converting to PDF ensure all comments are hidden by going into 'Review' in the menu above then choosing show markup>balloons>show all revisions in line.***

You can submit applications at any time.

Projects involving existing documents/data only or the evaluation of an existing project with no direct contact with human participants will be dealt with via chair's action.

All projects involving human participants will be reviewed by at least two reviewers. A lead reviewer will be appointed from the FASS-LUMS REC who will be responsible for providing comments and feedback to applicants. The lead reviewer may contact you for any clarification of your application if needed.

Depending on the project and the ethical issues it raises, your application may be discussed by the full FASS-LUMS REC at their monthly meetings and as applicant you may be asked to attend this meeting. We will contact you if your application will be discussed at the committee meeting. Please ensure you are available to attend the committee meeting on the day that your application is considered, if required to do so.

Committee meeting dates are listed on the [FASS-LUMS REC website](#).

**Projects involving social media and participants recruited or identified through the internet require full consideration by the FASS-LUMS REC.** This is in particular the case if the understanding of privacy in these settings is contentious or where sensitive issues are discussed and where quotes and visual images the researcher intends to use may be identifiable. For example, as part of your study you may be using data from an online context that is publicly available. But this does not mean that the participants/members of this context

also perceive it to be public<sup>3</sup>. Any study involving online interviews, online ethnography or any other use of data from private or semi-private internet sources is considered to involve contact with human participants and therefore needs a full ethics review.

**NOTE**

<sup>3</sup>For more advice on the ethics of internet research, see Association of Internet Researchers, Ethical decision making and internet research, <http://aoir.org/ethics/>

**B. What level of review is required for my project?**

**In order to help the committee decide what level of review your project requires, please consider question 1 below, points a-i.**

**1. Does your research project involve any of the following?**

- a. Human participants (including all types of interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, records relating to humans, use of internet or other secondary data, observation etc.)
- b. Animals - the term animals shall be taken to include any non-human vertebrates, cephalopods or decapod crustaceans.
- c. Risk to members of the research team e.g. lone working, travel to areas where researchers may be at risk, risk of emotional distress
- d. Human cells or tissues other than those established in laboratory cultures
- e. Risk to the environment
- f. Conflict of interest
- g. Research or a funding source that could be considered controversial
- h. Social media and/or data from internet sources that could be considered private
- i. Any other ethical considerations

**If the answer to question 1 above is:**

- Yes** - complete Section 1,3 and 4
- No** - proceed to Section 1, 2 and 4



## FASS-LUMS RESEARCH ETHICS APPLICATION FORM

### SECTION ONE [Must be completed by all applicants]

**Title of Project<sup>4</sup>:** THE ROLE OF KEY OPINION LEADERS OF WECHAT PUBLIC ACCOUNT PLATFORM AND THEIR INFLUENCE IN FORMING THE NEW BUSINESS MODEL

**Name of applicant/researcher:** Yuxin Bai

**ACP ID number (if applicable)\*:**

**Funding source (if applicable)**

**Grant code:**

#### NOTE

<sup>4</sup>Make your title short and descriptive so that people can easily identify the main topic of the research. The title of your project does not need to be the same as the title you propose to use for your publication (e.g. your thesis).

#### Type of study

Involves existing documents/data only, or the evaluation of an existing project with no direct contact with human participants. **Complete sections one, two and four of this form**

Includes *direct* involvement by human subjects (including but not limited to interviews, completing questionnaires, social media and other internet based research). **Complete sections one, three and four of this form**

#### 1. Appointment/position held by applicant and Department within FASS or LUMS 2016

LUMS of Marketing Ph.D. student

#### 2. Contact information for applicant:

**E-mail:** y.bai2@lancaster.ac.uk **Telephone:** +44 7784 992569 (please give a number on which you can be contacted at short notice)

**University Address:** Lancaster University Management School, Charles Carter Building, D44B,  
Lancaster, LA1 4YX

**3. Names and appointments/position of all members of the research team**

PhD Student – Yuxin Bai.

Supervisor – Dr Xin Zhao

Supervisor – Dr Hayley Cocker

**3. If this is a research student project, please indicate what type of project by marking the relevant box:**

Masters by research

PhD

**4. Project supervisor(s):** Dr Xin Zhao; Dr Hayley Cocker

## SECTION TWO

Complete this section if your project involves existing data only, or the evaluation of an existing project with no direct contact with human participants

1. Anticipated project dates (month and year)<sup>5</sup>

Start date:

End date:

### NOTE

<sup>5</sup>These dates should indicate when recruitment will begin (taking into account the timescale of the ethical approval process) and when funding ends or your thesis will be submitted.

2. Please state the aims and objectives of the project (no more than 150 words, in lay-person's language)<sup>6</sup>:

### NOTE

<sup>6</sup>This summary should concisely but clearly tell the reviewer (in simple terms and in a way which would be understandable to a general audience) what you are broadly planning to do in your study.

3. Please describe briefly the data or records to be studied, or the evaluation to be undertaken.

4. How will any data or records be obtained?

5. Confidentiality and Anonymity

a. If your study involves re-analysis and potential publication of existing data but which was gathered as part of a previous project, conducted by another individual or collective, involving direct contact with human beings, how will you ensure that your re-analysis of this data maintains confidentiality and anonymity as guaranteed in the original study?

6. What plan is in place for the storage of data (electronic, digital, paper, etc)?<sup>7</sup> Please ensure that your plans comply with the Data Protection Act 1998.

**NOTE**

<sup>7</sup>State clearly where and what format your data will be stored.

**Timescales:** The standard guidance we provide to people about length of time for retaining data is for a minimum of 10 years. This is not a requirement but a general recommendation. Your study may have a rationale for retaining data longer, but if so, please explain. Where electronic data is to be stored for longer than the recommended period, it should only be kept on Lancaster University servers, and not on portable or home devices.

**Data security:** Data stored on all portable devices (eg laptops) should be encrypted as well as password protected; data stored on the University server does not, however, need to be encrypted. If you are based and work predominantly away from the University, give consideration to how you will store the data securely as you undertake your research, and how it will be securely transferred to the LU campus for longer term storage.

7. What are the plans for dissemination of findings from the research?<sup>8</sup>

**NOTE**

<sup>8</sup>Dissemination covers a wide range of activities including (but not limited to) reports, academic submissions (such as theses and journal articles), newspaper articles, etc.

8a. Is the secondary data you will be using in the public domain?

8b. If NO, please indicate the original purpose for which the data was collected, and comment on whether consent was gathered for additional later use of the data.

9. What other ethical considerations (if any), not previously noted on this application, do you think there are in the proposed study? How will these issues be addressed?

10a. Will you be gathering data from discussion forums, on-line 'chat-rooms' and similar online spaces where privacy and anonymity are contentious?

10b. If yes, your project requires full ethics review. Please complete Sections 1, 3 and 4.

### SECTION THREE

Complete this section if your project includes *direct* involvement by human subjects

**NOTE:** In addition to completing this form you must submit all supporting materials (see general guidance on page 1 of this form).

1. Summary of research in lay terms, including aims (maximum length 150 words)<sup>9</sup>:

This research examines a popular Chinese social media platform (WeChat) and seeks to understand the co-creation of commercial-oriented contents in key opinion leaders' WeChat public accounts. It focuses on this innovative business model as a form of mobile advertising in China. I take a qualitative approach and use both online observation of public available information and depth interviews with WeChat users, key opinion leaders of WeChat public accounts, and marketers who use WeChat as a platform for promotion. My research explores how this business model could be shaped and sustained within China's social media. I also seek to understand the relationships among these major participants (users, key bloggers and marketers) in this process of co-creating values and meanings.

#### NOTE

<sup>9</sup>The summary should concisely but clearly tell the reviewers what you are planning to do. It is very important that you describe your study in such a way that it is understandable to a general audience. Your study will be reviewed by colleagues from different disciplines who will not be familiar with your specific field of research. Avoid jargon and use simple terms. Your study may also be reviewed by the lay members of the FASS-LUMS REC.

2. Anticipated project dates (month and year only)<sup>10</sup>

Start date: December 2016

End date: December 2019

#### NOTE

<sup>10</sup>These dates should indicate when recruitment will begin, (taking into account the timescale of the ethical approval process) and when funding ends or your thesis will be submitted.

3. Please describe briefly the intended human participants (including number, age, gender, and any other relevant characteristics):

Three groups of key informants will be involved. 1). WeChat Users; 2).Key WeChat public accounts' creators (e.g. similar to bloggers); 3). Marketers from different companies. All interviewees are from China. Each group will be around 10 people. All together will be around 25-30 people.

4. Are members of the public involved in a research capacity, for example as data collector (e.g. participatory research) and if so, do you anticipate any ethical issues resulting from this?<sup>11</sup>

No. No public participants will be involved in a research capacity.

**NOTE**

<sup>11</sup>This does not refer to members of the public being interviewed, but to forms of participatory research, where you invite members of the public to collect data.

5. How will participants be recruited and from where?<sup>12</sup>

Initial contacts with WeChat users and marketers will be made from researcher's friends or acquaintances. Participants will be asked to recommend other informants who meet the research criteria.

For key opinion leaders of WeChat public account, they will be recruited from social media platform WeChat public account through public contact information. I will send emails, SMS or leave the message through WeChat public account platform to the potential participants depending on the type of their public contact information as well as convenience.

All participants will be recruited based on their relevance to research questions and theoretical positioning as well as convenience. All participants will be from China and as such the consent form and participant information sheet will be written both in English and Chinese.

**NOTE**

<sup>12</sup>Please include here (if applicable) information about the following: How will participants be able to find out about the study? Will all volunteering participants be included or may you have to turn some away? If you will use different recruitment procedures for different participant groups, clearly indicate this and outline each set of procedures.

6. Briefly describe your data collection methods, drawing particular attention to any potential ethical issues.

There are two stages in my data collection including online observation of public information and in-depth interviews with key informants.

Stage 1: For online observation, I will collect and analyse public available information including media coverage; articles, images and videos posted in WeChat public accounts from 2012 till now.

Media coverage may include both traditional and new media which have reported some public information related to my research topic. According to Internet researcher pioneer Joseph Walther (Kozinets, 2015), people who post material on a publicly available communication system on the Internet should understand that it is public, not private or confidential (Walther, 2002). Apart from the observation of key WeChat public account users' commercial-oriented posts, I will also observe readers' comments (we can only see the reader's WeChat avatar and name). In order to protect readers' anonymity, I will use graphic tools like Photoshop to make their WeChat avatar difficultly to be identified as well as pseudonyms instead of their WeChat username. Since my focus is on the advertising in the blogs as well as marketing learning, even though the essence of advertising is for public, I still will consider every case in my data collection which may involve any human subjects and avoid potential harm (Markham et al., 2012).

Stage 2: Depth Interviews. I would like to interview my participants either using face-to-face interviews or through online video calls such as Skype.

Purposive sampling as well as snowball sampling methods will be used in this study. For key opinion leaders of WeChat public accounts, participants will be selected by the researcher based on their experience of the phenomenon under study (Collis and Hussey, 2013). I will choose typical bloggers whose reading rate are average over 10000 people per article in a given time period (e.g., latest 3 months). WeChat users or marketers will be recruited using snowball sampling (they will be first recruited from my friends or acquaintances based on convenience then I will ask them to recommend other participants who meet the research criteria).

These interviews will last between 45 minutes to 2 hours. Face to face interviews will be conducted either in participants' homes, offices or in public space such as cafes or library meeting rooms.

A potential ethical concern could be that some participants may feel slightly uncomfortable when answering one or two questions e.g. concerning the comments they receive on their blog. I will change my questions immediately if that is the case. I will ensure that participants are aware that they can refuse to answer any questions or stop the interview at any point and will periodically check for assurance.

## 7. Consent

7a. Will you take all necessary steps to obtain the voluntary and informed consent of the prospective participant(s) or, in the case of individual(s) not capable of giving informed consent, the permission of

a legally authorised representative in accordance with applicable law? Yes. If yes, please go to question 7b. If no, please go to question 7c.

7b. Please explain the procedure you will use for obtaining consent?<sup>13</sup> Please include sample participant information sheets (PIS) and consent forms in your application. If applicable, please explain the procedures you intend to use to gain permission on behalf of participants who are unable to give informed consent. Please include copies of any relevant documentation.

Participants will be provided with an information sheet, which provides details during the recruitment stage. They will be asked to sign a written consent form while being verbally assured that all data will be made anonymous and kept private. I have provided a copy of the participant information sheet and consent form with this application.

I will tell them I will not share their personal information this is written in the information sheet. They will be told they have the right to stop the interview at any point, should they wish to, without needing to specify a reason.

They are also told they may withdraw from the study at any time up to two weeks after the interview date. After this it will not be possible to withdraw as information will have been made anonymous and unidentifiable.

#### **NOTE**

<sup>13</sup>If non-handwritten forms of consent will be used in the study, explain why and what they will be.

If your research includes anonymous surveys for data collection, no consent form will be used because that would compromise anonymity. However, a cover sheet or opening page/section or some type of introduction should clearly inform participants that by completing the survey they are providing consent for the use of the data for research. The cover sheet or introduction may also remind participants of other aspects of what they are agreeing to (but without requiring them to sign or type identifying information such as a name at the end of the information).

If you are using computer-based forms of data collection, describe carefully how consent processes will be addressed.



7c.If it will be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time, please explain why (for example covert observations may be necessary in some settings; some experiments require use of deception or partial deception – not telling participants everything about the experiment).

8. What discomfort (physical and psychological eg distressing, sensitive or embarrassing topics), inconvenience or danger could be caused by participation in the project beyond the risks encountered in normal life? Please indicate plans to address these potential risks.<sup>14</sup> State the timescales within which participants may withdraw from the study, noting your reasons.<sup>15</sup>

Embarrassment may be arisen if participants feel uncomfortable when answering some questions (for example, when discussing the comments WeChat content creators/ bloggers receive from their audience).

I will try my best to minimise discomfort by creating an approachable and non-judgmental atmosphere for the participants. Another inconvenience of depth interviews is described as “time-consuming” and “labour-intensive”(Pope et al., 2000), if participants feel tired or any other reasons to give up the interview, they are told to have the right to stop the interview at any point.

I am aware of the possibility of stressful recollections that might occur while discussing this with my participants. For example, some participants have considerable influence in Chinese social media, it is possible that they get many negative or even unfair feedbacks or comments from internet users, therefore, they may have emotional fluctuation when we talk about these issues.

Participants may withdraw from the study at any time up to two weeks after the interview date. After this it will not be possible to withdraw, as information will have been made anonymous and unidentifiable.

Participants will be given my contact information and they can get touch in with my supervisors to discuss the interview or research if necessary.

#### NOTE

<sup>14</sup>Be as thorough as possible in anticipating potential sources of discomfort.

Provide a plan for addressing the discomfort that may arise during the conduct of the research and discomfort that may develop following the conduct of the research, potentially as a consequence of participation in the research. We suggest you include possible sources of support in the Participant Information Sheet. You may also consider providing a debriefing sheet.

<sup>15</sup>Time limits for withdrawing from the study: please avoid the phrase “participants may withdraw at any time” because withdrawal for most studies is time limited. For example, once you have published

your data, withdrawal is clearly not possible in the true sense. You may want to consider a reasonable time period for withdrawal following data collection, depending on the type of study you are doing, for example:

i. If you are collecting interview data and will be conducting simultaneous data collection and analysis, it may be reasonable to give participants a 2 week period following the interview to withdraw their data. [For other studies, longer periods of time may be appropriate.] An example of wording that may be used is “Participants are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time before or during the interview and up to 2 weeks following their interview (or survey completion).”

ii. If you are collecting your data via focus groups or group interviews, it is impractical to allow participants to withdraw their contribution once the group has started and recording begun. An example of wording that may be used is “Participants are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time before the focus group begins, but will not be able to withdraw their contribution to the discussion once recording has started.” You should be explicit in this section about your intention to brief participants about this at the start of the focus group (for example during the setting of ground rules).

iii. If you use anonymous surveys, you need to clearly indicate to participants that they will NOT be able to withdraw their data/contribution once they have submitted it because it will not be possible to identify it as theirs.

9. How will you protect participants’ confidentiality and/or anonymity in data collection (e.g. interviews), data storage, data analysis, presentation of findings and publications?<sup>16</sup>

All data will be kept confidential, with only my supervisors and me having access to pre-anonymised data. All data will be encrypted and be stored securely on encrypted devices and on a password protected computer and will be shared using LU Box, accessible only by my supervisors and me. Pseudonyms will be used during data storage, analysis, presentation and publication. If a participant discloses information that might indicate them being at risk or at harm (e.g., alcohol abuse, suffering from hate crimes, violence, and similar instances) or a risk of harm to the researcher, I will report this to my supervisors.

**NOTE**

<sup>16</sup>In the context of research confidentiality means that you will only disclose information that participants share with you in the forms agreed by them in the consent form. In most case, this

includes offering anonymity, i.e. using pseudonyms and ensuring that individual participants cannot be identified in your dissertation/publications/presentations.

In some studies, it is possible that in the course of the research information arises that gives the researcher cause for concern and that may require her/him to breach confidentiality. For example if in an interview a participant discloses information that indicates that they or others may be at risk of harm, the researcher may need to share this information with others. In your PIS, when eliciting consent, explain the limits to confidentiality. This is in particular important when working with vulnerable individuals or groups.

10. Do you anticipate any ethical constraints relating to power imbalances or dependent relationships, either with participants or with or within the research team? If yes, please explain how you intend to address these?<sup>17</sup>

No. There is no related power imbalance. Participants will be voluntary to take part in the study. I will establish my credibility as a researcher in such scenarios, for example by iterating my credentials, it is much possible to get their trust and understanding.

**NOTE**

<sup>17</sup>For example, if you are a teacher/former teacher conducting research in the school/language school you used to or are still working in, what are the implications for research participants? Explain clearly that their participation or decision not to take part does not affect their studies or any assessments.

11. What potential risks may exist for the researcher and/or research team? Please indicate plans to address such risks (for example, noting the support available to you/the researcher; counselling considerations arising from the sensitive or distressing nature of the research/topic; details of the lone worker plan you or any researchers will follow, in particular when working abroad<sup>18</sup>).

I am aware of the university's lone worker guidelines and I will ensure to abide by them. If the interviews are not online-based, namely if I need to conduct face to face interviews in China, Mr. Guoqing Bai, my father, will be made aware of my travel schedule for interviews.

**NOTE**

<sup>18</sup>The University's guidance on Lone Working can help you with this, see here:

<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/depts/safety/files/loneworking.pdf>

12. Whilst there may not be any significant direct benefits to participants as a result of this research, please state here any that may result from participation in the study.

Discussing social media and marketing issues can be a nice experience. Participants might feel lighter and more aware of their roles in the processes in China after the interview. Their effort could make a difference for western world as well as many related scholars to understand more about mobile advertising trend in China.

13. Please explain the rationale for any incentives/payments (including out-of-pocket expenses) made to participants<sup>19</sup>:

There is no expenses during this process. Most of my potential participants belong to high-income/well-educated groups with relatively higher social statuses, so the question of incentives doesn't really apply.

**NOTE**

<sup>19</sup>If you are intending to use incentives/payments, keep in mind that they should be modest so as not to suggest coercion of the participants. If you are reimbursing for travel, please indicate the financial limit of the reimbursement.

14. What are your plans for the storage of data (electronic, digital, paper, etc.)? Please ensure that your plans comply with the Data Protection Act 1998<sup>20</sup>.

All data will be stored in compliance with the 1998 Data Protection Act. All effort will be made to record on encrypted devices, where this is not possible, the device will be kept secure and data will be transferred as soon as possible to an encrypted and password protected laptop/PC. Once the audio data have been transferred to the protected computer, the original data will be immediately destroyed on any external devices. Interview data will be made anonymous two weeks after the interview, after which point it will be unidentifiable and interviewees will be assigned pseudonyms. Encrypted data will be uploaded and stored in Lancaster University's secure PURE depository for 10 years and it will be destroyed after that time. All data will be kept confidential, with only my supervisors and me having access to pre-anonymised data. All data will be encrypted and stored securely in a PURE folder, accessible only by my supervisors and me.

**NOTE**

<sup>20</sup>Data storage: non-audio and non-video data. State clearly where and what format your data will be stored.

**Timescales:** The standard guidance we provide to people about length of time for retaining data is 10 years (minimum). This is not a requirement but a general recommendation. Your study may have a rationale for retaining data longer and for various intended purposes, but if so, please explain. For example, some data may be specifically collected with intent to be added to a formal databank (quantitative or qualitative), or there may be plans for secondary data analysis that is anticipated from early in the design of the project. Where electronic data is to be stored for longer than the recommended period, it should only be kept on Lancaster University servers, and not on portable or home devices.

**Data Stewardship:** Please state who will have guardianship of the stored data (and if you are a student, who will be responsible for storing/deleting your data once you have completed your course). Please also include information on who will see the data (e.g. supervisors; research team members; transcribers)

**Location:** If your data is stored centrally or will be accessible to others, you should note in your application who will have access to the data.

**Data security:** Data stored on all portable devices (eg laptops) should be encrypted as well as pass word protected; data stored on the University server does not, however, need to be encrypted. If you are based and work predominantly away from the University, give consideration to how you will store the data securely as you undertake your research, and how it will be securely transferred to the LU campus for long term storage.

15. Please answer the following question *only* if you have not completed a Data Management Plan for an external funder.

15a Do you intend to deposit your (anonymised) data in a data archive? <sup>21</sup>

No.

#### NOTE

<sup>21</sup> Most funders require researchers to preserve and share their data via a data archive. Lancaster University's Research Data Management Policy also suggests that all researchers, PhD students included, should store and archive their data in ways appropriate to the specific study and type of data. Please note that if you store data in a data archive where other researchers, upon request, can have access to this data, this needs to be explained on participant information sheets & consent forms. There are different ways of storing and sharing data, but you are likely to follow one of these two options:

Example 1: Data will be deposited in Lancaster University's institutional data repository and made freely available

with an appropriate data license. Lancaster University uses Pure as the data repository which will hold, manage,

preserve and provide access to datasets produced by Lancaster University research.

Example 2: Data will be offered to the UK Data Archive (as per the standard ESRC procedures) or another similar data archive.

For further guidance on data archiving, please see here:

<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/library/rdm/deposit-your-data/>.

15b. If you have responded 'no' to question 15a, please explain briefly why you cannot share your data via a data archive or repository<sup>22</sup>

Due to the small sample size and particular job titles, even after full anonymization there is a small risk that participants can be identified. Therefore, supporting data will only be shared on request with genuine researchers. Access will be granted on a case by case basis by the concerned Faculty.

**NOTE**

<sup>22</sup> You may have reasons for not making your data widely available. For example, due to the small sample size, even after full anonymization, there may be a small risk that participants can be identified. It may also be the case that due to the (commercially, politically, ethically) sensitive nature of the research, no participants consented to their data being shared. You can find more information about ethical constraints on sharing data on this site:

<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/library/rdm/what-is-rdm/preserve-and-share/data-access-statements/>

16. Will audio or video recording take place?  no  audio  video

16a. Will portable devices (laptop, USB drive, audio- and video- recorders, etc) be encrypted (in particular where they are used for identifiable data)? yes  no

16b If it is not possible to encrypt your portable devices, please comment on the steps you will take to protect the data.<sup>23</sup>

**NOTE**

<sup>23</sup>**Transporting audio/video data:** you should state that if you store any identifiable data (audio recordings, participant contact details etc) on portable devices such as a memory stick or laptop you will use encryption. Password protection alone is not sufficient for identifiable data. Information on encryption is available from ISS <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/iss/security/encryptionoptions/> and their service desk is also able to assist.

If your portable device cannot be encrypted, you must confirm that any identifiable data (including recordings of participants' voices) will be deleted from the recorder as quickly as possible (eg when they have been transferred to a secure medium, such as a password protected & encrypted PC) and state that the device will be stored securely in the meantime.

16c. What arrangements have been made for audio/video data storage? At what point in the research will tapes/digital recordings/files be destroyed?<sup>24</sup>

Data will be stored in secure encrypted files and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data securely according to the accordance with University guidelines. Audio data will be erased/ destroyed once my PhD has been examined (on successful completion of the PhD).

#### NOTE

<sup>24</sup>**Storage.** Audio and video data is considered more sensitive than most written data because of its capacity to threaten confidentiality more directly. There are, however, no fixed deadlines, and recordings such as oral histories may be kept in perpetuity. With audio data that does not need to be kept for the long term, it is common to erase/destroy the recording once it has been transcribed and checked. However, we suggest that you retain the recordings until your work has been examined and/or published, in case you need to check the original recordings for any reason. For video, it may depend on the types of analyses proposed for the study. There may be good reason to keep the data longer, but the key in completing this section of the application form is to be explicit about timescales for storage, and the reasons for your timescale should be clearly indicated and explained.

16c. If your study includes video recordings, what are the implications for participants' anonymity? Can anonymity be guaranteed and if so, how? If participants are identifiable on the recordings, how will you explain to them what you will do with the recordings? How will you seek consent from them?

I will not be taking any video recordings.

17. What are the plans for dissemination of findings from the research? If you are a student, include here your thesis<sup>25</sup>. Please also include any impact activities and potential ethical issues these may raise.

Research findings will be disseminated in my PhD thesis. Research findings may also be presented at conferences, submitted for publication in academic/professional journals, and submitted for publication in information and news websites/blogs (subject to acceptance). These findings will include data that is completely anonymous, so no ethical concerns are foreseen.

#### NOTE

<sup>25</sup>Dissemination covers a wide range of activities including (but not limited to) reports, academic submissions (such as theses and journal articles), study summaries, and publications:

-If you are a student, be sure to include your academic paper (such as dissertation or thesis) as a form of dissemination.

-Phrasing regarding publication should reflect that you may pursue submission for publication, but you cannot guarantee that the dissemination will include publication. For example, you may write “Results of the research may be submitted for publication in an academic/professional journal.”

18. What particular ethical considerations, not previously noted on this application, do you think there are in the proposed study?<sup>26</sup> Are there any matters about which you wish to seek guidance from the FASS-LUMS REC?

Due to the small sample size, even after full anonymization there is a small risk that participants can be identified especially for participants who are key opinion leaders of WeChat public accounts. I will make it very clear, verbally and in written form in terms of this potential risk. I would ensure this is included in the consent form and the participant information sheet but put that all efforts will be made to try and ensure anonymity.

During the interview, I will not ask irrelevant or insulting questions to participants. I’ll ensure to iterate their right to stop the interview at any point, periodically checking for assurance. I will discuss the details before the interview with my supervisors.

**NOTE**

<sup>26</sup>It is rare that studies have no ethical considerations at all. Try to be thorough and thoughtful when considering this question. You should not try to invent issues, and at the same time, do not assume that by noting a problem you are hurting your application. This section provides an opportunity for you to demonstrate to the committee that you have a substantial and clear understanding of the potential ethical issues, and that you have given thought to how to address them (even if they may not be able to be addressed perfectly).



SECTION FOUR: Statement and Signatures

**By submitting and signing this form, I confirm that**

- I understand that as Principal Investigator/researcher/PhD candidate I have overall responsibility for the ethical management of the project and confirm the following:
- I have read the Code of Practice, [Research Ethics at Lancaster: a code of practice](#) and I am willing to abide by it in relation to the current proposal.
- I will manage the project in an ethically appropriate manner according to: (a) the subject matter involved and (b) the Code of Practice and Procedures of the university.
- On behalf of the institution I accept responsibility for the project in relation to promoting good research practice and the prevention of misconduct (including plagiarism and fabrication or misrepresentation of results).
- On behalf of the institution I accept responsibility for the project in relation to the observance of the rules for the exploitation of intellectual property.
- If applicable, I will give all staff and students involved in the project guidance on the good practice and ethical standards expected in the project in accordance with the university Code of Practice. (Online Research Integrity training is available for staff and students [here](#).)
- If applicable, I will take steps to ensure that no students or staff involved in the project will be exposed to inappropriate situations.

**Please note:** If you are not able to confirm the statements above please contact the FASS-LUMS research ethics committee and provide an explanation.

**Applicant**<sup>27</sup> **electronic signature:** 白羽辛

Date: 2016-12-12

**NOTE**

<sup>27</sup>**If you are a student**, make sure that you have discussed the project **and the application** with your supervisor. Build in enough time in your preparation schedule for your supervisor to properly review your application and give your comments before submitting it for ethical review.

**Student applicants:**

Please tick to confirm that you have discussed this application with your supervisor, and that they agree to the application being submitted for ethical review

**Project Supervisor name:** Dr Xin, Zhao; Dr Hayley, Cocker

**Date application discussed**

08-12-2016

**Students must submit this application from their Lancaster University email address, and copy their supervisor in to the email with this application attached**

**All applicants (Staff and Students) must complete this declaration:**

I confirm that I have sent a copy of this application to my **Head of Department** (or their delegated representative). **Tick here to confirm**

**Name of Head of Department** (*or their delegated representative*) Professor Maria Piacentini

## Research Participant Information Sheet

**Project Title:** THE ROLE OF KEY OPINION LEADERS OF WECHAT PUBLIC ACCOUNT PLATFORM AND THEIR INFLUENCE IN FORMING THE NEW BUSINESS MODEL

Hello! My name is Yuxin Bai and I am a PhD student in the Marketing Department at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about key opinion leaders on WeChat's public account platform.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part. To participate, please read this information sheet, and sign the consent form.

1. **What is the study about:** This research examines a popular Chinese social media (WeChat) and seeks to understand the value of key opinion leaders' WeChat public accounts. On WeChat public account, users can post either articles or images or voice messages once a day to their readers. Popular users of WeChat public accounts also will get many opportunities to cooperate with different marketers to do the promotion on their WeChat public accounts. We want to know the perspectives among key users of WeChat public account, readers and related marketers about this phenomenon.
2. **Research objective:** I am particularly interested in understanding the roles and relationships between WeChat users, key opinion leaders of WeChat public accounts, and marketers who use WeChat as a platform for promotion. My research explores why this business model could be shaped and sustained within China's social media.
3. **Why have I been invited?** I have approached you because of your role as a key blogger and content creator, a fan or consumer or as commercial partner (marketer or advertiser). For participants who are key opinion leaders in WeChat public account, we are particularly interested in knowing how your WeChat public account came to be, what made your account so popular and what are its impacts and challenges. For participants who are WeChat users, we would like to know your experience and opinions in terms of reading through WeChat public accounts. For participants who are marketers, we would like to listen to your experience and views about cooperating with key WeChat public account users. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.
4. **What does this study involve?** If you decide to take part, the study will involve one interview (social media based online interview or face-to-face interview) with you, lasting approximately 45 minutes to 2 hours. The interview will take place face-to-face or online through WeChat or Skype, if preferred, at a mutually convenient time. Alternative arrangements via phone are possible. During the interview you will be asked questions about WeChat public accounts and the key users on that platform.
5. **Possible benefits of participating:** Taking part in this study will allow you to share your experiences of WeChat. Sharing your experience is a good way to help other people to understand more about WeChat public account as a business model and what kind of role you are playing in this process, so other initiates may benefit from the case. Moreover, understanding its current impacts and gaps considering the perspective of those in China, people like scholars, entrepreneurs and other actors can get more insights and be encouraged by your case. At the same time, through this self-discovery interview, you can also be proud of yourself as a very important role in this process.

6. **Possible disadvantages and risks of participating:** It is unlikely that there will be major disadvantages to taking part. Taking part will however mean investing around 45 minutes to 2 hours for an interview though.
7. **Do I have to take part in the study and what if I change my mind?** It is completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part in this study. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during participation in the study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any data you contributed to the study and destroy it. Data means the information, views, ideas, etc. that you and other participants will have shared with me. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after taking part in the study. If you decide to withdraw after this period, the information you have provided will be used for the project.
8. **Will my participation be kept confidential? After the interview, only my two supervisors (both of them are university academics) and I will have access to the data.**  
I will keep all personal information about you (i.e., your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will anonymise any audio recordings and hard copies of any data. This means that I will remove any personal information. However, I hope you can understand due to the small sample size, even after full anonymization, there may be a small risk that participants can be identified.
9. **How will my data be stored?** Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is, no-one other than me and my supervisors will be able to access it) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.
10. **How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research project?** I will use the data you have shared with me only in the following ways:  
I will use it for academic purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and related publications like journal articles, conference papers and informative media articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.  
When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. When doing so, I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from our interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, you cannot be identified in publications.  
If anything you tell me in this or following interviews suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with my supervisors. If possible I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.
11. **Who has reviewed the project?** This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.
12. **Who can I contact in case of any questions or concerns about the project?** If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact my supervisors or me:

**Primary Researcher: Yuxin Bai**

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If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:

**Head of Marketing Department: Professor Maria Piacentini**

Email: [m.piacentini@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:m.piacentini@lancaster.ac.uk) Phone: (0)1524 510686

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## Interview schedules

**Project Title:** PERFORMANCE IN A DIGITAL WORLD: NAVIGATING COMMERCIAL DRAMA IN WECHAT BLOGS

**Name of Researcher:** Yuxin Bai

**E-mail:** [y.bai2@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:y.bai2@lancaster.ac.uk)

The interview will involve two groups of people, aged between 20 and 55, both male and female, from China. The first group consists of WeChat official account bloggers, who have typically been running their accounts for over a year, with followers ranging from 10,000 to 1 million. The second group includes brand PR managers and other professionals on the client side who frequently collaborate with WeChat official account bloggers.

Each type of interviewee will consist of approximately 10-15 people. In total, there will be around 25-30 participants. The following are the interview questions tailored for the three types, respectively.

### For WeChat Bloggers:

1. When did you start creating your WeChat official account, and what motivated you to do so?
2. Can you describe the different stages your account has gone through? Are there any notable or interesting stories during its development?
3. When did you begin to engage in commercial activities through your WeChat official account, and how did that transition occur?
4. Do you have any concerns regarding commercializing your public account, such as the potential loss of followers?
5. What types of advertising or sponsorships do you prefer to collaborate with, and why?
6. Are there any forms of advertising or sponsorship that you would never accept on your public account? If so, why?
7. Could you describe the process when collaborating with marketers? Do you retain full control over the content, or are there instances where you must adapt to their requirements? How do you approach creating commercially oriented content?
8. What strategies have you implemented to successfully manage and sustain your account? How do you engage with your followers, and do you consider this engagement essential for your success?
9. What is your profession outside of social media? Do you find that people recognize you more for your career or your role as a social media influencer? How do these identities differ for you?
10. Has your motivation for writing and managing your official account changed since you first began? If so, how?

**For Marketers:**

1. What is your role within your company, and could you outline your responsibilities?
2. When did your company first begin focusing on key influencers within WeChat official accounts?
3. Can you provide examples of your collaborations with key users of WeChat official accounts? How do you assess the success of these collaborations?
4. What proportion of your company's marketing budget is allocated toward working with WeChat influencers?
5. Do you enjoy working with these influencers, and what have been your key experiences with them?
6. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of your marketing campaigns with WeChat influencers? Are you satisfied with the outcomes?
7. Does your company have any guidelines or rules for working with these key users? Do you intervene in their content creation process?
8. What types of advertisements or promotions do you find most effective within WeChat official accounts?
9. Why do you think the cost of collaborating with key users is so high? What factors contribute to the pricing structure in these collaborations?
10. How has the increasing popularity of this business model within mobile advertising in China influenced your company or industry as a whole?