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Leiden**  
The Netherlands

## **Selling beauty in digital China: gender, platform, and economy**

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### **Citation**

Guan, Z. (2021, November 4). *Selling beauty in digital China: gender, platform, and economy*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3239040>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3239040>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Chapter 3

### Amateurs, Professionals, and *Wanghongs*:

#### Understanding Beauty Bloggers through the Lens of Platform Labor

Weibo allows every Internet user to have a microphone, to report, post, and share information. Everyone can be a broadcaster, voice his/her own opinion, and present the beauty and ugliness of this world.

Cao Guowei (CEO of Weibo, October 6, 2013).

Weibo is the No.1 platform of *wanghong* incubation.

Wang Gaofei (CEO of Weibo, June 6, 2016)

I had the ideal situation three years ago. At that time, I made little money [from my blog] ... And the [beauty blogger] industry had not yet arisen ... I hope I can run my Weibo account for my hobby, not for making money.

B08 (Beauty blogger whom I interviewed, January 7, 2018)

B08, who began her beauty blogging account in 2014, told me how the environment in which Chinese beauty bloggers are situated has changed. She initially began blogging out of her passion for beauty skills. At that time, she and other bloggers were carefree social media users, interested purely in sharing beauty knowledge. Blogging was so simple that anyone with a social media account could do it. Now, however, beauty bloggers are deemed *wanghongs* and B08 worries about a number of new issues that did not arise in the initial phase of beauty blogging: views, algorithms, competition, multi-channel networks (MCN), and so forth. This reversal of her subjective attitude toward beauty blogging is closely associated with the process of platformization, whereby digital

platforms penetrate the cultural, economic, and other aspects of societies (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). For beauty bloggers, platforms play an increasingly dominant role in their content production. B08's personal experience can be best understood by going beyond an individualistic focus and interrogating social media platforms' impacts on beauty bloggers.

This chapter focuses on how beauty bloggers produce content and their changing relationship with Weibo. Also known as Sina Weibo, Weibo is the largest Chinese microblogging platform. Launched in 2009, it had 497 million monthly active users in the third quarter of 2019. Being one of the most popular social media platforms in China, Weibo hosts many beauty bloggers and has participated proactively in their rise to prominence. How has Weibo contributed to this development, despite the fact that it does not employ beauty bloggers? What role has Weibo played in the flourishing of beauty bloggers? How do beauty bloggers respond to Weibo's involvement? By situating the emergence of beauty blogging in the context of the platformization of cultural production, this chapter attends to how beauty bloggers are transformed from amateurs into platform laborers.

### 3.1 Beauty Bloggers, *Wanghong* Economy, and Platforms

For users of Chinese social media, beauty bloggers are typical *wanghongs*. *Wanghong* is an abbreviation of *wangluo hongren*, which literally means “internet famous person/people.” Unlike conventional celebrities, *wanghongs* garner fame on the internet, especially UGC platforms. The term resembles the English concept of “micro-celebrities” coined by Theresa Senft, which refers to “people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites” (Senft, 2008, p. 25).

An umbrella term, *wanghong* applies to a broad spectrum of popular people on the Chinese internet. According to Angela Ke Li (2019), *wanghongs* can be roughly divided by media forms and content genres into three groups: (1) the young live-streamers performing “singing, dancing, playing games, or flirting with their fans” before a camera; (2) “fashionistas based on Weibo and Taobao” who share fashion products, reveal information about their private lives, and monetize their online fame by transforming their fans into buyers; and (3) producers of creative content (p. 3017). Although this

taxonomy suggests something of the diversity of *wangbongs*, it is not very accurate. For example, beauty bloggers might initially seem to approximate the second group defined here. However, it soon becomes clear that they exceed the bounds of this narrow definition. Beauty bloggers do not only use Weibo and Taobao; some also use live streaming platforms, meaning that they overlap with the first of Li's groups. Besides, one group of beauty bloggers also produce creative content without revealing anything about their private lives, thus overlapping with the third group. Some beauty bloggers only use Weibo but not Taobao. It should be noticed that these three categories do not exclude each other and that the boundaries between them are porous. Some beauty bloggers match more than one description. All of that said, this taxonomy still offers an overall framework in which to situate various types of *wangbongs*, given that we remember that *wangbongs'* practices, in reality, are too diverse or even messy that to fall neatly into these categories.

Although each of the three types of *wanghong* has drawn enormous attention in contemporary China, the second has been most prominent in the debates of the “*wanghong* economy” on account of the rapid profits they make on e-commerce platforms. The media hype surrounding the *wanghong* economy usually focuses on the success of certain fashion or beauty bloggers who combined their social media accounts with e-stores and made an enormous amount of money in a short period (Jing, 2016; Tsoi, 2016; Ye & You, 2016). For instance, the beauty blogger Zhang Mofan's e-stores were sold for ¥150 million (around €19 million) in 2017 (Yuhan Hong, 2018). Given the widespread coverage of successful bloggers, being a *wanghong* is perceived as a profitable profession. The publicity of *wangbongs*—especially successful ones—grew drastically in the mid-2010s. Indeed, the Chinese press named 2016 “year one of the *wanghong*” (*wanghong yuannian*) (Jian Ye & You, 2016; X. Zhang & Su, 2016).

Although beauty bloggers, as a subset of *wangbongs*, received an enormous amount of attention in the mid-2010s, beauty bloggers had already existed for 10 years and many do not run e-stores. Indeed, the first batch of beauty bloggers started running their social media accounts in the mid-2000s and attracted many followers. To understand why beauty bloggers are suddenly well-known today, it is necessary to look back and

investigate how they rose from being a group of unknown amateurs to *wangbongs* on social media.

As existing studies of Western influencers show, micro-celebrities' online fame stems from their purposeful performance and self-branding. Their strategies for capturing others' attention and expanding their fame, as well as the effort that they put into these endeavors, can be understood as "visibility labor" (Abidin, 2016). For micro-celebrities, visibility labor involves both affective and technological work. In terms of affect, micro-celebrities play the "authenticity" card to attract attention and bond with their audiences. As Marwick's study has shown, Western fashion bloggers skillfully present personal and relatable experiences, which distinguishes them from legacy media and conventional celebrities (Marwick, 2013). Beauty YouTubers foster their popularity on social media, García-Rapp (2016) has written, by portraying themselves as "interesting, trustworthy personalit[ies]." Technologically, micro-celebrities seek ways of ensuring their visibility on the internet. Beauty vloggers on YouTube, for instance, speak in distinctive ways so that their verbal expressions can be recognized by YouTube's auto-generated text closed captions. This ensures that their videos and channels are searchable on this platform (Bishop, 2018b). In China, beauty bloggers have taken similar steps to enhance their visibility and popularity. For example, Chinese beauty bloggers such as Zhang Mofan call their followers "sisters" or "wives" so as to construct intimate relationships with followers, leading to carefully maintained, affective bonding. Chinese beauty bloggers are also attentive to the technological affordances of social media platforms, which they try to put to their advantage (as I discuss later in this chapter).

Although the existing literature has accounted for the role of individual agency in the rise of micro-celebrities, it has paid little attention to the platforms on which micro-celebrities/*wangbongs* operate. Proactive individuals' visibility labor may have contributed to the popularity of online personalities, but this can hardly explain the mixed factors behind the *wanghong* phenomenon. As Zhang and de Seta (2018) have argued, the rise of *wangbongs* is "one example of the intra-actions between the agential power of platforms, the workings of infrastructure, and the participating individuals" (p. 61). That is to say, the rise of *wangbongs* must be examined with an eye to interactions among individuals, platforms, and infrastructure. According to Zhang and de Seta (2018), the infrastructural

base for the emergence of *wanghongs* on microblog sites in China was established in the late-2000s, with the prevalence of smartphones, tablets, and 3G mobile internet access (p. 63). Developing this argument, this chapter focuses on the under-explored interactions between individuals and platforms.

If we expand the lens through which we examine the rise of beauty bloggers, such that we do not focus solely on individual techniques and entrepreneurship, it becomes clear that their online fame is formed through the process of platformization, that is, “the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystem” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). Social media platforms are key sites in the “platformization” of societies. Beauty bloggers, who establish their fame on social media platforms, are deeply involved in this cultural, economic, and societal process. They create and share content on these social media platforms. Abidin (2018) points out that:

Unlike the connotations of being a content creator in the Anglocentric parts of the world, a *wanghong* is premised on the acute ability to convert internet viewers traffic to money, relying less on content production than the ability to hold an audience’s attention visually (p. 3).

This interpretation reflects common understandings of *wanghongs*, but it is not fully applicable to beauty bloggers, whose fame is built and maintained by their continuous production of content. In producing content, beauty bloggers draw traffic to both themselves and social media platforms, such as Weibo. Their “voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited” labor significantly benefits and boosts social media platforms (Terranova, 2000, p. 36). In this sense, beauty blogging should be understood as platform labor.

The growing body of research on Chinese platforms points out that the process of platformization is reconfiguring models of labor. Didi, the transportation platform, has increased its technological power by “reinforcing inequalities facing informally employed taxi drivers prior to the emergence of ride-hailing apps” (J. Y. Chen, 2018, p. 2691); food delivery platforms use algorithms to intervene in couriers’ labor (P. Sun,

2019). Studies show how platforms' technological features penetrate and intervene in the routines of platform workers and these studies note that platform workers, such as drivers and couriers, are usually males from the middle and lower classes. Lin and de Kloet's (2019) research explain how Kuaishou, the UGC video and live streaming platform, absorbs "uneducated young Chinese from small cities and rural areas," using a marketing strategy and algorithm that platformizes this "unlikely creative class" in digital cultural production (2019, p. 2). These studies have foregrounded the social status of labor under platforms' surveillance and investigated how platformization influences social practices. Scarce attention has been paid to the diverse sources of platform labor. It is not only those lacking employment opportunities who are increasingly reliant on digital platforms; people of relatively higher social standing are also deeply entangled in the process of platformization. These include beauty bloggers, who are mainly urban, middle- and upper-class women in their twenties and thirties. How do these urban middle-class women participate in the platformization of cultural production? What role do platforms play in ensuring beauty bloggers' prosperity? What are the dynamics between the middle-class workforce and social media platforms?

To address these questions, I now analyze the case of Weibo, examining the changing relationship between Chinese beauty bloggers and platforms, which construct the media ecology in which beauty bloggers take root and grow. Whereas the previous chapter locates beauty bloggers in the cultural landscape, this chapter situates them in the platform economy, in which beauty amateurs are mobilized to contribute platform labor.

### **3.2 UGC, the 1% Rule, and the Crisis of Weibo**

Web 2.0 technologies afford internet users the chance to express and brand themselves. This is demonstrated by the spread of UGC social media. When UGC platforms allow more participation, usability, and interoperability, they induce a considerable number of users to create and share homemade content (O'reilly, 2007). Users of social media both produce and consume content. As such, they can be understood as "prosumers" (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Users' roles become proactive and significant in social media, cutting against the notion of the "passive couch potato" of legacy media (van Dijck,

2009). In the early 2010s, when it first became fashionable the common narrative about Weibo in the Chinese press was that it empowered users by allowing them to participate in public discussions (H. Cao, 2013; Xinzhou Xie, Tian, & Liu, 2013; G. Yu, 2011). Given that legacy media was strictly controlled in China, participatory Weibo was expected to be an “important channel of information expression and circulation” (Zhou, 2011).

When users express and brand themselves on social media, they also generate enormous volumes of data for profit-driven operators. It is difficult to use social media without generating data: users input profile data when they register their names, genders, ages, and occupations; users also provide behavioral data (such as user activities and IP addresses) when they use social media (van Dijck, 2009; S. Wang, 2020a). These data can be utilized in multiple ways, ranging from targeted advertisements to serving data analysis, allowing platforms to make a profit (Srnicsek, 2017). The boundary between public participation and commercial data mining is blurred. Accordingly, UGC has a range of complex connotations. Like its counterparts in the West, Weibo seeks ways of expanding its user data and monetizing these data. Indeed, on 30 October 2013, Xu Zhiliang, the co-president and CTO of Sina, Weibo’s parent company, revealed that “[w]e hope to process and mine all the raw data, push the Chinese mobile internet to another climax with partners and third parties, and develop Weibo into an efficient and social platform of information and service” (N. Zhang, 2013).

Although social media platforms can utilize user participation for data extraction, social media have to lure users in to create data. This is not easy, for many users do not actively generate content on social media. It had already been observed in the mid-2000s that “if you get a group of 100 people online then one will create content, 10 will ‘interact’ with it (commenting or offering improvements) and the other 89 will just view it” (Arthur, 2006). For example, “there are 100 million downloads and 65,000 uploads” on YouTube; the most active 1,000 users of Wikipedia—“0.003% of its users”—make around two-thirds of the edits on the site (Arthur, 2006; Nielsen, 2006). Users on UGC platforms, then, do not participate equally, with only a small percentage of users making major contributions to content creation. Weibo has come across this phenomenon, which is known as the “1% rule” (Arthur, 2006). Although Weibo had accumulated

more than 10 million users in its first year, not all of its users actively created content (Lu, 2011). Cao Zenghui, Weibo's vice president, claimed that "the mechanism of content consumption on Weibo is like this: a small part of people contribute content or service while the vast majority consume content/service and engage" (Z. Cao, 2017).

The 1% rule actually poses a great challenge to UGC platforms in that they have to find the crucial 1% of users who will continuously contribute content. As Cao Zenghui put it, "the central function [of Weibo] is managing content contributors" (Z. Cao, 2017). In practice, UGC platforms do not always manage to secure crucial content contributors. This is what happened during Weibo's crisis of 2012-13.

Before 2012, Weibo expanded so rapidly in the Chinese market that it easily surpassed other microblog platforms. In the beginning, Weibo invited a number of celebrities, including actors, singers, and journalists, to create accounts on its platform, successfully attracting millions of users (Ming Jing & Yang, 2014). These influential Weibo account holders—also known as big Vs—actively participated in public debates and played important roles in mobilizing public opinion (Jia & Han, 2020; Nip & Fu, 2016; Schneider, 2017). These celebrity users and their online activities made Weibo an important outlet for news and reportage. What is more, as crucial users they also contributed considerable flows of information to the platform. However, as the attraction of celebrities gradually weakened and government censorship tightened around the expressiveness of the big Vs, Weibo's content could not retain users (G. Wang & Liu, 2014). Indeed, Cao Zenghui claimed that Weibo was experiencing a "void of content," explaining that "while a big part of the old content is removed, the new content is not supplied" (Z. Cao, 2017). As a result, after a three-year expansion of its user base, Weibo began losing users. The statistics show that the number of Weibo active users had decreased by 40% in the fourth quarter of 2012 in comparison with its peak in the second quarter of 2012 (X. Lan, 2013). The situation became even worse in 2013, when over 80% of Weibo's registered users did not log in and the number of users that were active daily dropped from 60 to 25 million between the middle of 2013 and the end of the year (Wang & Liu, 2014). Amid this crisis, Weibo turned to grassroots micro-celebrities such as beauty amateurs.

### 3.3 The Rise of Amateurs

Beautybloggers existed before Weibo, which was launched in August 2009. In the early days of social media beauty bloggers were seen not as *wangbongs*, but as beauty amateurs. The development of the beauty economy in China from the 1980s onward had, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, nurtured groups of cosmetic consumers. Beauty amateurs gathered on blog sites around the mid-2000. By this time, Web 2.0 media such as NetEase Blog, Sina Blog, and OnlyLady Blog, enabled cosmetic consumers to create and exchange information online. A number of urban female consumers joined these online communities.

At the outset, beauty amateurs did not expect fame or celebrity. They were just ordinary users who liked to spend their leisure time sharing their experiences and posting content concerning beauty. To them, beauty blogging was nothing more than a hobby. B06, who started blogging from 2007 while working as a public relations manager in an advertising agency, told me that she began blogging out of her love of makeup products. Posting articles on her blog was fun and connected her to many people who shared her hobby (interview, January 2018). B07, another informant, said that she started posting beauty content because “it is interesting” (interview, December 2017). Indeed, most informants claimed that they began blogging because it was “interesting” or “fun.” Interestingness and fun, here, derived from two aspects of beauty blogging. First, it allowed them to exchange beauty skills. For instance, B10 said that she started her Weibo account because she “like these things”—“these” here meaning topics and products related to beauty (interview, January 2018). Second, it made it possible for them to communicate with people who enjoy the same hobby and be recognized by others. Unlike other beauty bloggers whom I interviewed, B04 is a professional makeup artist. She started blogging by accident: a serious waist injury confined her to the home. Finding this “so boring,” she began posting beauty content and communicating with people interested in beauty skills on Weibo (interview, December 2017). Her content became popular, so she has continued blogging ever since. These two aspects of fun are usually intertwined.

Unlike ride-hailing and food-delivery platforms, which allow one to work with a driving or health license, there is no clear threshold that one has to meet in order to

enter the world of beauty blogging. There is an invisible threshold, however, in that beauty blogs require voluntary investment during the early phase of their development. “Among the beauty bloggers I know,” one beauty blogger commented, “70 to 80% of them are from well-off families. Cause being a beauty blogger requires a big investment at the early stage. One needs to pay for skincare products, cosmetics, a single-lens reflex camera, and so forth” (Huaxidushibao, 2018). According to blogger B04, being a beauty blogger consumed a good deal of money. When she was posting original articles every two days, she incurred monthly costs for cosmetics of about ¥20,000 (around \$3108). Such investment does not always pay off. Another blogger, B06, had been investing in her Weibo account for a year, yet made no money from her blog in 2017. The long-term investments with uncertain rewards that are required if one wants to try to be a beauty blogger turn a lot of people off the idea.

When their primary intention is to share beauty information and skills and connect with others, bloggers’ online reputations tend to grow gradually. Although the majority of beauty amateurs remain unknown, certain outstanding amateurs become famous on social media websites. Those with the most followers or who contributed popular content are called *meizhuang bozhu* (beauty bloggers) among amateur beauty communities. It is important to notice that there is no clear boundary between beauty bloggers and those aspiring to be beauty bloggers. Some beauty bloggers have tens of thousands of followers; others have tens of millions of followers, if not more. As Sophie Bishop (2018b) remarks, the “question of how many followers makes a microcelebrity is one that has no easy answer” (p. 24). As Marwick and boyd (2011) have observed, on social media platforms “celebrity practices [are] a continuum that can be practiced across the spectrum of fame rather than a schism” (p. 141).

Beauty bloggers first became famous among beauty amateurs. Their content was circulated through web portals and e-commerce platforms. Gradually, the cosmetic products they recommended sold much faster than before. After a popular beauty blogger, Xiaoman, recommended a certain Taiwanese brand’s eyeliner pencils on her blog, for instance, the pencils went viral on Taobao, the largest customer-to-customer shopping website in China, owned by Alibaba. Being aware of Xiaoman’s influence, a large number of retailing stores on Taobao used her blog articles to demonstrate the

merits of using these eyeliner pencils, which they labeled “*Xiaoman tongkuan*” (same choice as Xiaoman). Thereafter, in the early 2010s, several products that Xiaoman recommended became bestsellers, with many cosmetic stores on Taobao even adding new collections named *Xiaoman tongkuan* to their inventories. The previously unknown Taiwanese brand entered China’s mainland market in 2009, achieving great success in a short period of time. Alan Huang, the brand’s general manager, said that the “development of the internet brings us many opportunities. I’m grateful to the fact that, from 2009, many bloggers spontaneously write articles about our new products” (L. Lin, 2015). In this way, beauty bloggers have demonstrated how they can influence consumption, which only strengthens their reputation in China’s increasingly consumption-orientated society.

As influential as they are, many beauty bloggers have remained amateurs. This is not to say that their beauty skills are not honed, only that they are not responsible for regularly producing attractive content. One of my interviewees, B03, stopped posting content for one year because she was unhappy about some malicious comments. “At that moment I graduated from university and just started my career. I was busy with overwhelming things, so I just quit blogging [temporarily]” (interview, December 2017). B13, who started to run her accounts while she was in high school, did not post frequently because cosmetics were prohibited at her school. As a consequence of this, she said, “I only play [at] these things during holidays” (interview, October 2018). When she was just setting out, B10, a beauty blogger majoring in Chemistry, valued her personal preference above the imperative to appeal to audiences. “Because my major is Chemistry, I like to do chemical analysis of beauty products. This kind of content is not easy to understand, so I had few audience members at the beginning” (interview, January 2018).

As amateurs, they did not have to create articles regularly; they did not have to appeal to followers or potential followers; they were not subject to performance assessment; and they could quit whenever they wanted. Remaining amateur allows beauty bloggers to run blog accounts in a carefree way.

Whereas beauty amateurs could be carefree, though, Weibo could not. After the crisis of 2012-13, Weibo had to find ways of retaining users. When the big Vs could not

help, Weibo turned to the grassroots producers, such as beauty bloggers (Z. Cao, 2017). Although these grassroots producers were not as famous as celebrities, they had generated considerable data, which was embodied in new content and intense user engagement. However, grassroots creators do not necessarily benefit Weibo: if they were to continue operating as amateurs, without regularly creating quality content, then they could not have filled Weibo's vacuum of content.

### **3.4 The Making of Content Producers and *Wanghongs***

#### 3.4.1 The Semi-Professionalization of Amateur Producers

Beauty bloggers could create content, but from Weibo's perspective they were not ideal content producers. For platforms, content producers should ideally create a steady flow of quality content, which attracts stable users and traffic to Weibo. To exploit the potential of various kinds of *wanghongs*, Weibo launched the Weibo WeMedia Project in 2014.

At the beginning of this venture, Weibo invited 1,000 accounts, associated with diverse fields, to participate in this project. These accounts were selected on the grounds that they "have creation ability and influence" (Weibo WeMedia, 2014). More specifically, the project engaged those who could generate more than three million views monthly but had fewer than five million followers. These accounts, which would be recognized as "Weibo WeMedia," would get "more followers and payment" (Weibo WeMedia, 2014). The project vaguely claimed that more views would bring Weibo WeMedia more rewards without specifying how this would be calculated in detail. This move separated grassroots micro-celebrities from not only conventional celebrities (whose followers easily surpassed five million) but also ordinary users (who cannot generate three million views monthly). In this way, Weibo targeted those crucial users who could generate content and traffic.

Later, in May 2015, Weibo adjusted the WeMedia project by dividing the invited accounts into two levels: WeMedia accounts and signed WeMedia accounts. Whereas the former refers to accounts that generate original articles, videos, and audios, the latter refers to those with personal brands and a greater influence among Weibo WeMedia accounts. Weibo signed WeMedia is only open to accounts that meet the following

requirements: (1) generating over one million monthly views; (2) having more than three high-quality, original articles, videos, or audio recordings; and (3) verified personal accounts (not verified institutional accounts).<sup>9</sup> Both levels of WeMedia were to receive support from Weibo, but signed WeMedia accounts would receive more visibility and rewards, and better copyright protection (Weibo WeMedia, 2015). The upgraded WeMedia project engaged more content producers and built a hierarchy among them, motivating producers to create more original content and pursue more views.

The bonuses that accompanied that status of a signed WeMedia account were attractive. Many beauty bloggers' accounts became WeMedia accounts as part of this venture; indeed, some became signed WeMedia accounts. The WeMedia Project further promoted the visibility of beauty bloggers, allowing users outside the small sub-cultural circle to know beauty bloggers. At the same time, the project aimed to transform amateur producers into predictable, productive workers. According to Weibo's regulations, each WeMedia account had to produce five or more original articles or videos every month. If a WeMedia account failed to meet the standard for two months, its title and the privileges of being a WeMedia account were removed (Weibo WeMedia, 2016). As a result, beauty bloggers who aspired to win and keep hold of this title and its accompanying privileges needed to create original content regularly. Although beauty bloggers are not employed by Weibo, their work can still be supervised by Weibo's WeMedia Project. In this sense, beauty bloggers are not just amateurs. Within the WeMedia project, they become professional content producers whose work needs to meet Weibo's standards.

Some beauty bloggers, however, were disappointed after securing the "signed WeMedia" title. They might be accorded more visibility by Weibo's algorithms, but they were not rewarded as Weibo had promised. "I have been a signed WeMedia for a while, but I never received a reward from Weibo," said B06, a blogger whom I interviewed (interview, January 2018). Another blogger, B03, claimed that "those who are verified as

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<sup>9</sup> Since the middle of 2014, many grassroots *wangbongs*, including beauty bloggers, have acquired verified accounts. This was once a privilege accorded only to conventional celebrities (indeed, that is why they were called big Vs). Thus, Weibo titled many beauty amateurs' pages "Beauty Blogger." In this way, it distinguished productive, influential users from ordinary users.

Weibo signed WeMedia are supposed to get rewards from Weibo, but the reward was too little to count” (interview, December 2017).

Although the WeMedia Project may not satisfy beauty bloggers’ expectations, it promotes their production of original content and transforms their spontaneous productions into regular, predictable production. This has led to the professionalization of beauty bloggers.

### 3.4.2 The Verticalization of Content and Producers

Although beauty bloggers tend to produce content that has to do with beauty, they also venture into a wide range of topics, including food, travel, and lifestyle. This also applies to other *wanghongs*, whose celebrity practices are not necessarily confined to a certain field. For instance, Luyisi, a beauty blogger on Weibo, loves to create content about beauty, food, and travel, yet her profile page, verified by Weibo, indicates that she is a “beauty blogger.” Many fashion, lifestyle, and health bloggers occasionally post content on beauty skills and products, but Weibo does not label them “beauty bloggers.” The boundary between beauty bloggers and other types of *wanghongs*, then, is not fixed and usually unclear. Would it be possible simply to do without these subcategories and just call these producers *wanghongs*? Weibo’s answer is no. On the contrary, Weibo proactively divides *wanghongs* into diverse groups based on “vertical fields” (*chuízhi lǐngyù*) so as to fill the void of content and increase user engagement.

Vertical fields refer to specializations. Since 2014, Weibo has subdivided content and content producers into diverse vertical fields, such as beauty, travel, fashion, stock, and so forth. There were 55 vertical fields on Weibo in 2016 (Y. Liu, 2016). Between 2009 and 2012, the news was the most visible content on Weibo, which was targeting the general public. Although niche markets like beauty were not championed by big Vs, Weibo did not pay much attention to “middle and small Vs” (Y. Liu, 2016). When the big Vs’ influence had declined after 2012, Weibo started to strategically use middle and small Vs operating in vertical fields to attract users.

Categorizing content into vertical fields has helped Weibo detect users’ interests of users and appeal to users easily. “We keep observing what kind of groups are popular, then we follow up and make them more popular. By this means we can attract users

relatively easily,” said E07, a manager from Weibo (interview, 2018). Accordingly, Weibo identified *wanghongs* as “beauty bloggers,” “fashion bloggers,” or “food bloggers.” In this way, a heterogeneous group of *wanghongs* was subdivided into several relatively homogeneous groups.

At the same time, the development of Weibo’s vertical beauty field draws beauty bloggers from other platforms, concentrating beauty bloggers on Weibo. Before moving to Weibo, a beauty blogger named B07 used an online forum called Baidu Tieba to post beauty content. She described the transition to Weibo in the following way:

At the beginning, I posted things on Tieba, exchanged information with others, and found it interesting. ... [After a while,] Tieba could not satisfy my need for communication. I realized that there were many excellent beauty bloggers on Weibo, so I moved to Weibo ... in the autumn of 2014. (interview, December 2017)

In tandem with the growth of the beauty market, Weibo became a major platform for beauty bloggers in the mid-2010s. “From a cosmetic company, I learn that a vast majority of beauty bloggers [in China] gain visibility from Weibo nowadays,” said B03, a beauty blogger (interview, December 2017). Weibo, it would seem, has secured a large number of content producers.

The verticalization of content and producers is an effective way of boosting not only content creation, but also data screening and targeted advertising. Weibo Advertising’s website indicates that one of Weibo’s core advertising techniques is that of “targeting the followers of designated accounts” (WeiboAdvertising, 2019). This is “Weibo’s unique method of audience screening, based on the data of real social ties, with the tag of designated accounts, generating followers as the target group” (WeiboAdvertising, 2019). The website further explains that “Weibo has millions of stars, IPs, and KOLs for advertisers to choose.” KOL is short for key opinion leader, referring to a person who can influence others’ consumption behavior through marketing. In the Chinese context, KOLs overlap with *wanghongs* to a very large extent, especially *wanghongs* whose content bears closely on consumption, such as beauty and fashion bloggers. For Weibo, verticalized content producers such as beauty bloggers become data filters. When they

create specialized content and attract followers, they unconsciously help Weibo target these followers as potential audiences for beauty advertisements. This advertising technique has effects on every Weibo user. Every time I use Weibo, for example, I see advertisements for plastic surgery and beauty products in my newsfeed. This is probably because I follow 160 beauty bloggers using my own account. Although scholars had argued that Weibo is an advertising agency rather than a communication platform for a number of years, the role of content producers such as beauty bloggers in its advertising has remained under-explored (Fuchs, 2016; Na, 2015). Examining beauty bloggers on Weibo provides key data on this issue. Although Weibo claims that its targeted advertising can “automatically select, aggregate, and recommend accounts through the technology of artificial intelligence,” its mysterious technology is based on exploiting verticalized content producers such as beauty bloggers (WeiboAdvertising, 2019).

Moreover, the commercial value of verticalized beauty bloggers is not confined to targeted advertising. Given their considerable influence on beauty consumption, many beauty bloggers get involved in the e-commerce business. Whereas some of them choose to sell beauty products directly on Alibaba’s platforms, others choose to produce advertisements for e-stores and brands. Content creation in vertical fields boosts business on relevant e-commerce stores. For instance, beauty bloggers can directly promote beauty products on e-commerce platforms. After noticing the influence of KOLs on Weibo, the e-commerce giant Alibaba acquired an 18% stake in Weibo in 2013 (Ghosh & Ramakrishnan, 2013). Alibaba continued to increase its stake in Weibo over the following years. Indeed, by the first quarter of 2019, Alibaba owned 30% of the company and was thus Weibo’s second-largest stakeholder after Sina, its parent company (Y. Wu, 2019). Weibo’s vice president, Cao Zenghui, claimed that *wangbongs* in specialist fields not only bring in “targeted traffic,” but also realize “large-scale and sustainable monetization” on e-commerce platforms. Weibo hosts many diverse vertical fields, but they did not direct equal flows of traffic and revenue from Weibo to e-commerce platforms. In short, clothing and beauty bloggers make larger contributions than other bloggers. As Cao Zenghui has put it, “Weibo has successfully developed two vertical fields, clothing and beauty, among all types of *wangbongs*” (Z. Cao, 2017). Following the success of beauty and clothing bloggers, Weibo began exploiting the

commercial potential of maternal/family bloggers in 2017 (Z. Cao, 2017). Overall, verticalized content producers were bound to the vertical fields of e-commerce business. Beauty bloggers contribute enormous commercial value to the Weibo-Alibaba complex while also creating attractive content and generating data for Weibo.

**Figure 3.1**

*Screenshot from Weibo Advertising's website*



指定账号粉丝定向是微博特有的受众人群筛选方式, 基于微博天然社交关系数据, 以账号为定向标签, 聚拢粉丝生成定向人群。  
**Targeting the specified accounts is Weibo's unique tool to select the targeted audience. It is based on natural social connection on Weibo, generates tags through specific accounts, and selects certain followers as targeted audience.**

*Note.* I have provided translations, which are indicated in red. Retrieved on December 26, 2019, from <https://tui.weibo.com/platform/topfans>

In general, the subdivision of content and content producers effectively makes beauty bloggers and other specialized bloggers, not *wangbongs*, which is a more ambiguous term. The verticalization of content brings Weibo a big team of specialized producers and makes content creation a more prosperous enterprise. What is more, it provides Weibo with a handy instrument of data screening: verticalization works in tandem with specialized fields on e-commerce platforms, taking advantage of beauty bloggers' role as bridges between the two.

### 3.4.3 The Institutionalization of Content Producers

Beauty blogger B08 told me that, whenever Weibo launched new functions or services in 2014 and 2015, she had been contacted by Weibo staff (interview, January 2018). Blogger B03 had a similar experience with Weibo. Given that there was a large group of beauty bloggers, communicating with each of them would have been time-consuming for Weibo. Similarly, it is difficult for Weibo to control the quality of content because there is such a diverse multitude of content creators. The growing number content creators compelled Weibo to find an efficient way of managing both content and producers.

Many problems emerged when Weibo first implemented its strategy of verticalization in 2014. “Every vertical field has its specialty and unique ecology and we ran all the vertical fields on our own. Today we focus on comics, tomorrow we focus on travel, the day after tomorrow we focus on food. I find that we failed to ran all the fields ourselves,” Weibo’s vice president said (Z. Cao, 2017). In dealing with its difficulties, Weibo turned to successful UGC platforms outside China.

To better manage a considerable number of video producers, YouTube has chosen to work with multichannel networks (MCNs) since the 2000s (Hou, 2018; Lobato, 2016; Vonderau, 2016). Multichannel networks are intermediary companies that bridge individual content producers and platforms such as YouTube. In the media ecology around YouTube, MCNs sell advertising, cross-promote affiliated YouTube channels, develop video brands, and sometimes train vloggers (Lobato, 2016; Vonderau, 2016). With MCNs operating across its global market, YouTube has achieved sustainable content output and stable profits. Following YouTube, Weibo has worked with Chinese MCNs to manage content producers efficiently from 2015 onward.

Cao Zenghui (2017) describes their approach in the following passage:

We select one resourceful team in each vertical field, which has a deep understanding of the industry and collaborate with the team. We support these teams with our knowledge of operations. These teams make rules, directions, and goals for each vertical field. ... In 2015 when Weibo promoted videos, we implemented our MCN plan and opened up vertical fields. We set a principle:

Weibo will not contact big Vs anymore. All the work in business development and operation is taken over by MCNs which work collaboratively with us.

In the past, Weibo aggregated hundreds of thousands of content producers; after the change of strategies in 2015, it aggregates diverse MCNs who in turn aggregate content producers.

In 2017, Weibo launched a project called Weibo-vertical MCNs Collaboration (*weibo chuiizhi MCN hezuo jibua*), in which Weibo invited MCNs specializing in certain fields to collaborate with it. Weibo would assign more traffic and resources to the selected MCNs, which, in return, would “properly use the resources of Weibo, expand their account matrix (*zhanghao juzhen*)<sup>10</sup>, and increase high-quality content output” (Weibo Xiaomishu, 2017).

Weibo’s change of strategies has had long-term effects on beauty bloggers. When I first met blogger B02 in 2017, she had been running her beauty blog on Weibo for five years. She told me that she was invited to join MCNs on several occasions. She had rejected these offers, though, because she enjoyed the freedom of being a beauty amateur and joining an MCN might lead to many restrictions being imposed on her. Besides, she had concerns about the MCNs’ motivations. From her perspective, MCNs just took money from beauty bloggers without contributing to their development. Several MCNs even sent her invitations on Weibo multiple times, but she never replied to them. Her attitude toward MCNs changed drastically, however, when I interviewed her again in 2019. By then, she had signed a contract with an MCN working in the vertical field of beauty and fashion. She said:

YS [the MCN that she joined] is a really good company, so I decided to sign a contract with it. It has been around half a year since I began to work with YS and I still think it was the right decision. ... YS and I boost each other’s development. ... For instance, my most-viewed post [when I worked on my own]. I devoted a great deal of time and energy, spent

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<sup>10</sup> The term “account matrix” (*zhanghao juzhen*) refers to a set of accounts run by the same institution. These accounts interact so as to draw and share traffic among each other.

between ¥500 and ¥600 on sending giveaways, and created very high-quality content. I could make one post like this every few years. The final view number of that post was 800,000. But now, I just follow the topics. Sometimes I am featured among Weibo's topics. With the help of official resources, good content can generate more than one million views easily. For average ones [posts] that I make with little effort, I can get hundreds of thousands of views. ... I just want to stand in a position where people can see me. (interview, November 2019)

When asked what the official resources that she mentioned were, B02 explained:

Our MCN gives us the topics, which are hashtags and campaigns initiated by Sina [Weibo] ... Our MCN has a resource exchange with Sina [Weibo]. Regarding the content we make every day, after receiving information about future moves of diverse platforms, our MCN will inform affiliated bloggers immediately, including big Vs and middle-to-small Vs, like me. Sina [Weibo] does not contact individual content producers anymore. It, of course, collaborates with institutions. (interview, November 2019)

To better control the quality of blogger-made content and improve the efficiency of content production, B02's MCN established a video team, which helped affiliated bloggers make their videos. The seemingly homemade vlogs on B02's blog are actually made by a professional team. The aggregation of affiliated bloggers, such as B02, provides Weibo with a stable stream of high-quality content and high user engagement. The number of active users and volume of user activities are the foundation of platforms' profit-making activities, whether they be selling advertisements or trading on financial markets (Fuchs, 2016).

MCNs not only sign contracts with established beauty bloggers; they also make beauty bloggers work in an industrial way. Ruhnn, one of the top pan-fashion MCNs in China, claims that it is "an MCN of *wanghong* incubation and marketing." The company signs contracts with ordinary girls, trains them, makes plans for content creation, and

promotes them as *wangbongs* —the whole process is called incubating a *wangbong*. With Ruhnn’s help, “an ordinary girl can gain from 800,000 to 1,000,000 followers in half a year in the fastest case” (Deng & Zhong, 2019). As the examples of B02 and Ruhnn show, beauty bloggers can easily be made with support from MCNs: ordinary beauty amateurs can grow into small Vs or middle Vs, and middle Vs can grow into big Vs.

The collaboration between Weibo and MCNs has significantly altered the content creation game. The number of MCNs in China has increased from 160 in 2015 to 6,500 in 2019; by 2019, over 90% of top *wangbongs* were affiliated with MCNs (Kang, 2019). MCNs’ influence is not limited to those beauty bloggers who are affiliated with them. The participation of MCNs intensifies the competition for visibility, with independent bloggers increasingly struggling to get attention. Those who are not affiliated with a MCN have fewer opportunities, given that the resources required to secure visibility are mainly controlled by Weibo and MCNs. B13, an independent beauty blogger, updated her Weibo account every day, although no MCN asked her to do so. “Most beauty bloggers post new things every two days. You have to have new content, otherwise, why would audiences follow you?” she told me (interview, October 2018). This comment partially reflects the fierce competition over visibility. Beauty bloggers lose their fame quickly if they cannot be seen. Updating her blog on a daily basis, B13 is now worlds away from the situation in which she began blogging as a high-school beauty amateur, when she posted only during holidays. The process of creating content has changed, turning from something spontaneous, irregular, and entertaining to something necessary, regular, and competitive. Accordingly, beauty bloggers are not only made through “a set of affiliative, representational, and celebrification techniques, but also by engaging in meticulous entrepreneurial calculation” (Hou, 2018, p. 1).

The participation of MCNs has led to the institutionalization of previously amateur beauty bloggers’ content production, whether the bloggers work with or independently of MCNs. Through this process, flows of content are normalized and standardized. Beauty bloggers may still be motivated to create content out of their personal interests, but what they do is no longer simply individual behavior. For Weibo, the involvement of MCNs doubtlessly boosts content production and strengthens its user base.

Figure 3.2

*Top ten beauty bloggers on 2017 Super Internet Celebrity Festival*



*Note.* From KuaimenzhuangBeautyQ's Weibo account, retrieved on May 12, 2019, from [https://weibo.com/5324616226/F8h7k2Gcw?type=comment#\\_rnd1621089199560](https://weibo.com/5324616226/F8h7k2Gcw?type=comment#_rnd1621089199560)

To fill the void in its content and successfully weather the crisis that followed its loss of users in 2012-13, Weibo has implemented three strategies, including the professionalization, verticalization, and institutionalization of amateur producers. These strategies successfully stimulated content production and user engagement on Weibo, as well as *wanghong*s' prestige. In the post-crisis period, beauty bloggers have stepped out from their hobbyist circles to engage with broader audiences and win bigger reputations. Active users of Weibo steadily increased from 2014 onward. In 2017, Weibo's monthly active users outnumbered those of Twitter and its revenues reached new heights (She, 2017). Sina termed this "Weibo's revival" (Sina, 2016). Cao Zenghui, claimed that *wanghong*s were a key factor in this revival (Z. Cao, 2017). To further raise *wanghong*s' visibility, Weibo has held a "Super Internet Celebrity Festival" (*chaoji hongren jie*) annually since 2016. What is more, it presents top beauty and other bloggers with awards (see Figure 3.2). Overall, Weibo's three strategies feature beauty bloggers as content

providers and have enhanced beauty amateurs' publicity, contributing to Chinese beauty bloggers' prosperity in the mid-2010s. From the outset of these strategies, Weibo developed cooperative working relationships with beauty bloggers.

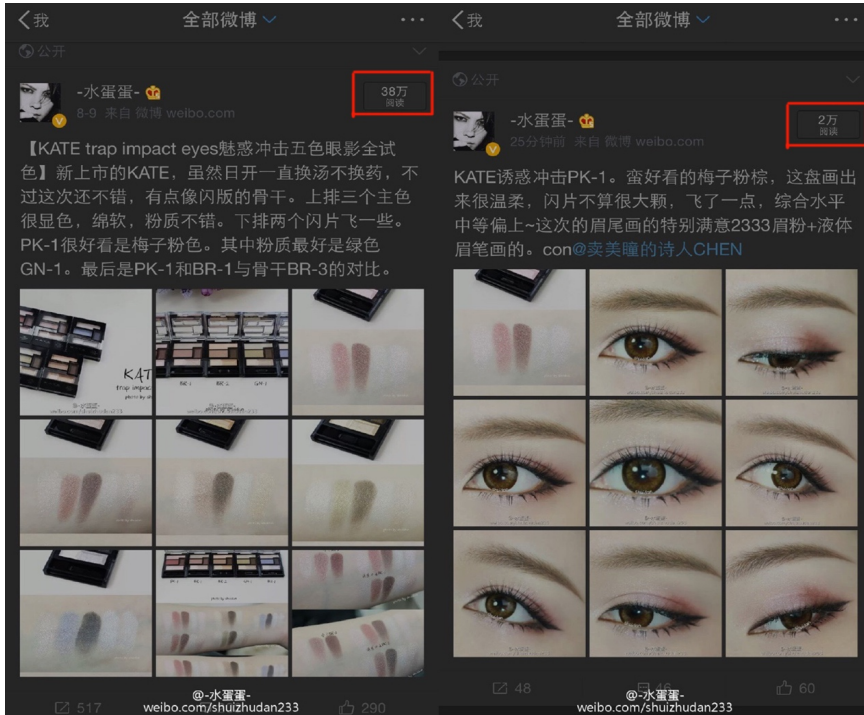
### 3.5 Profit Extraction in the Rise of Beauty Bloggers

Weibo's post-crisis strategies brought the platform many content producers and helped it recover quickly from its dearth of content and user decline. In securing more users, Weibo established a quasi-monopoly in the field of *wangbongs*. According to the beauty blogger B03, by the middle of the 2010s Weibo hosted most beauty bloggers—certainly more than other platforms (interview, December 2017). Weibo's role in the rise of beauty bloggers was not simply to increase content production. As a profit-making company, Weibo seeks ways of maximizing the revenue earned from beauty bloggers, indirectly or directly, while encouraging them to produce content. An example that demonstrates Weibo's complex role in this process is its use of algorithms to intervene in beauty bloggers' visibility.

From 2015 onward, beauty bloggers complained that Weibo was blocking their posts, for they saw a dramatic decline in their view numbers. Shuidandan, a well-known blogger in the beauty community, complained that the number of views of her posts declined precipitously in August 2015. According to Shuidandan, views of her posts on cosmetic products and beauty tutorials, which are usually popular in the beauty community, dropped off sharply. She posted screenshots of her account's behind-the-scenes dashboard, which show each post's view number. This indicated that her posts' view numbers had diminished markedly (Shuidandan, 2015). Whereas it used to be that a single post might generate 380,000 views, the number of views accrued by a recent post had declined to 20,000 (see Figure 3.3). Beauty bloggers termed this drastic decline in view numbers “blockage” (*pingbi*, which bloggers abbreviated as “pb”); Weibo called it “traffic restriction” (*xianlin*).

Figure 3.3

Screenshots of view numbers



*Note.* From Shuidandan's Weibo account, retrieved on May 12, 2019, from [https://weibo.com/2125224720/CvmhX6hTS?from=page\\_1005052125224720\\_profile&cwvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#\\_rnd1621090111207](https://weibo.com/2125224720/CvmhX6hTS?from=page_1005052125224720_profile&cwvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1621090111207)

Blockage involves more than a decline in views. It also can make a post totally invisible. More specifically, Weibo could delete beauty bloggers' posts, the reason given for deletion usually being that the posts contained commercial information. The technology of deletion was upgraded shortly afterward. A deletion might remain invisible to beauty bloggers. For example, after Shuidandan found that the views of her posts had declined notably, she also saw that some of her posts showed up as "deleted" to her followers. She did not delete these posts herself and could still see them through her Weibo account (Shuidandan, 2016).

Beauty Blogger B08 told me that one of her blogger friends had her posts deleted on several occasions. At first, the deletions targeted those of her posts that “contained commercial information” (interview, January 2018). In fact, this verdict was vague and not instructive. The boundary between commercial and non-commercial information is unclear and porous, especially when it comes to beauty blogs, which almost always concern cosmetics from certain brands or stores. Soon afterward she stopped posting things about cosmetics and switched to posting pictures on travel and daily life. Nevertheless, her posts were deleted. “She was watched ... She was extremely anxious during that time”, B08 said (interview, January 2018).

Blockage heavily affected beauty bloggers’ visibility, making them anxious. As beauty blogger B08 put it:

The biggest change in my blogger life is the traffic restriction of recent years. It damages the confidence of content producers, like us. You create content, but only a few people can see the content. Sometimes I’m upset. It really affects me. Now the average views of my posts are lower than one-third of the number before. It’s crazy. (interview, January 2018)

The decline of view numbers directly affects beauty bloggers’ reputation and income. As beauty blogger B03 told me, advertisers pick beauty bloggers according to the measures of “follower number” and “view number” (interview, December 2017).

Although bloggers find their limited visibility on Weibo annoying, they can overcome the issue if they buy *fensi toutiao* (Followers’ Headline). *Fensi toutiao* is a paid service that can make a certain post appear at the top of followers’ newsfeeds on Weibo for 24 or 48 hours. (From October 2015, this feature was expanded so that bloggers could use it to reach users who were not yet their followers.) When one buys *fensi toutiao* for a post, a blogger can choose the size of the audience that they would like to reach (see Figure 3.4). The greater the audience one wants, the more money one pays.

The *Fensi toutiao* feature can markedly increase one’s visibility on Weibo in a short time. As beauty blogger B13 said, “if I buy a ¥100 (around \$15.5) *fensi toutiao*, the views

of one post could reach 40,000 within three hours; without it, the views could be around 20,000 within the same timeframe” (interview, November 2019).

Despite *fensi toutiao*'s usefulness, beauty bloggers did not buy it frequently. B13 explained that “it is quite expensive for me, because it only lasts for a couple of hours” (interview, November 2019). Indeed, the fee paid covers only one post. On average, B13 posts five times a day. If she were to buy *fensi toutiao* for each post, this would add up to a considerable amount of money. A tricky characteristic of *fensi toutiao* is that its price is not fixed, but rather varies from account to account and at different times. For instance, an account with 322,000 followers needs to pay ¥4,057 (¥1.259 per 100 followers), whereas another account with 1,000,000 followers needs to pay ¥14,400 (¥1.44 per 100 followers) in December 2017 (Zhang, 2017). One beauty blogger, B03, told me that she had to pay ¥521.64 to cover 69,000 followers (¥0.756 per 100 followers) in the same month. The price of *fensi toutiao* is calculated by Weibo's algorithm, which remains opaque to consumers.

E07, a manager from Weibo, offered a different narrative about the blockage, which partially rejected beauty bloggers' complaints. “Some people just imagine that they are victims,” he said. “We only focus on the top 10% of *wangbongs*. There are too many small *wangbongs* to watch. One big V condemned us for traffic restriction because of the low view number. There is no traffic restriction at all. It is his/her content that is unattractive” (interview, August 2018). Here E07 suggests that, in most cases, Weibo did not cause view numbers to drop.

One thing that he did not mention, though, is the visibility algorithm behind Weibo's newsfeed. The newsfeed is the primary feature of most social media platforms. Found on users' home pages, it aggregates updates to accounts to which they subscribe. The newsfeed is controlled by algorithms and decides the kind of content that can be seen and how updates are seen. Updates on Weibo's newsfeed were originally listed chronologically. This was the case until 2013, when Weibo launched a smart newsfeed that displayed updates and advertisements without adhering to chronological order. Initially, the smart newsfeed did not dramatically alter the chronological updates.

Figure 3.4

The interface for fensi toutiao

上头条, 阅读量暴涨! **Use fensi toutiao, and content views surge!** ×

**推广给我的粉丝** **Broadcast to my followers**

我的粉丝 **My followers** 0元 ▾

**推广给更多用户** **Broadcast to more users**

潜在粉丝 **Potential followers** 0元 ▾

指定账号粉丝的相似用户 **Followers of designated accounts** 0元 ▾

兴趣用户 **Users with specific interests** 0元 ▾

ⓘ 绑定资质 **选择资质** ▾ [资质管理](#)

**Estimated audience: Estimated hour:**

预计覆盖人数: 0+人 预计投放时长: 0小时  同意《服务协议》及《审核规范》

微博钱包(支持支付宝)  广告账户 **0.00元**

*Note.* I have provided English translations, which are indicated in red. I didn't choose the number of targeted audiences, so the price was zero. Retrieved on December 8, 2019, from weibo.com (This interface does not have an independent link, so I cannot put a link here. This interface will pop out when one clicks the “*tuiguang*” (promotion) button under each post)

A major change came in December 2014, when Weibo announced that its smart newsfeed would be optimized, aiming to “ensure user experience and protect the interest of multiple sides” (Weibo, 2014). The “optimized” newsfeed was to display users' and

advertisements selectively. According to Weibo, the optimized newsfeed would restrict traffic to four types of content: content that was highly visible (in terms of view numbers) but not especially interactive (in terms of reposts, comments, and likes); misleading commercial content; repeating content; and overloads of content stemming from the same type of accounts (Weibo, 2014).<sup>11</sup> Although the detail of the algorithm behind the newsfeed remains opaque, the algorithm had the impact of decreasing beauty bloggers' visibility, leading them to complain about blockage. Shuidandan—whose post was deleted because it “contained commercial information”—ran into trouble after the advanced newsfeed was launched.

As I have noted above, whereas beauty bloggers termed their declining visibility blockage, Weibo referred to it as traffic restriction. The former term implies that beauty bloggers' visibility is totally diminished, reflecting their deep fear of Weibo's unpredictable algorithms; the latter betrays Weibo's technical expertise and shrewd calculation. Indeed, although Weibo restricts traffic, it would not block it, for the platform still benefits from traffic. As a profit-driven platform, Weibo is constantly concerned with finding ways of maximizing its benefit from the traffic.

In the same announcement as it promulgated the optimization of its newsfeed, Weibo added that posts using its market tools (including *fensi toutiao*) would not be restricted by the recent algorithmic change. Taken together, the added information and traffic restriction policy reveal the highly biased design of Weibo's newsfeed, which accords those who pay for its serves greater visibility. Through its technological interference, the platform turned visibility into an even more scarce quality than it had been before and then started selling it to content producers. Because of Weibo's interventions, it has become difficult for beauty bloggers to garner visibility with original content alone. They have a better chance if they buy algorithmic preferences from Weibo.

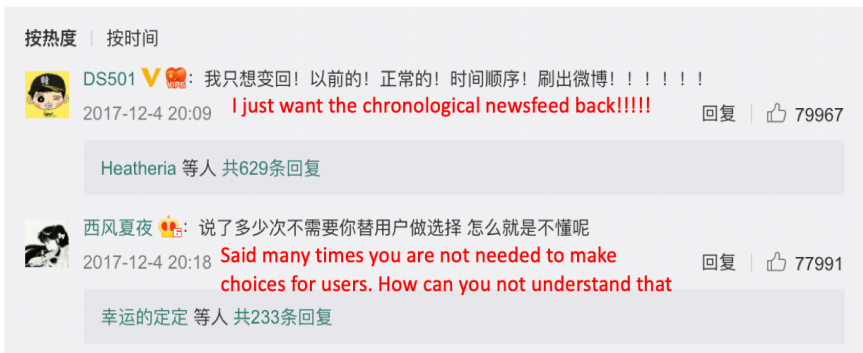
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<sup>11</sup> Sina Weibo divided accounts into different types, including orange V (for producers of content in certain genres, such as beauty bloggers); blue V (official accounts of organizations, institutions, and projects); content accounts (productive accounts without verified accounts); and ordinary accounts (average users). Traffic restriction ensured that the number of different account types that appeared in one's newsfeed should be in proportion to the number of account types to which one has subscribed.

The change to the newsfeed influences not only beauty bloggers but Weibo's general users too. In the second half of 2017, a lot of users complained that they could only partially see posts from accounts to which they subscribed and that Weibo displayed many accounts in which they had no interest (Zhang, 2017). At the same time, bloggers were dissatisfied by the fact that their communication with followers depended heavily on *fensi toutiao*. In terms of traffic restriction, in a media interview a representative from Weibo stated that the platform never guaranteed that a big V's posts could be seen by all of their followers (Zhang, 2017). User dissatisfaction and negative comments were so widespread that on 4 December 2017 Weibo released a statement defending itself. It claimed that it only changed the order of updates and had done so without introducing "blockage and exposure restriction." It also advised users to post more content about a particular vertical field, because Weibo displayed more vertical content (Weibo, 2017b). Angry comments from users were soon posted under the statement. The most-liked comment stated simply that "I just want the chronological newsfeed back!"; the second-most-liked comment ran: "Said many times you are not needed to make choices for users. How can you not understand that?" (see Figure 3.5).

**Figure 3.5**

*Users' angry comments on Weibo's clarification of traffic restriction*



*Note.* I have provided English translations, which are indicated in red. Retrieved on August 1, 2019, from [https://weibo.com/2016713117/Fy7DKg91y?from=page\\_1006062016713117\\_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment](https://weibo.com/2016713117/Fy7DKg91y?from=page_1006062016713117_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment)

Although *fensi toutiao* and the disordered newsfeed caused dissatisfaction, they also brought Weibo huge profits. A MCN spent more than ¥16 million on *fensi toutiao* and another similar tool for affiliated influencers in a single year (Mi, 2020). In the second quarter of 2016, Weibo's newsfeed advertisements accounted for 53% of its total advertisements; small and medium enterprises and individuals brought the most newsfeed advertisements (Liu, 2016).

*Fensi toutiao* provides a new way for Weibo to exploit beauty bloggers. Although the bloggers did not foresee this, it is nothing new for platform capitalism. The “growth-before-profit” model is common among digital platforms and Weibo is no exception (Srnicsek, 2017). During its honeymoon period with respect to beauty bloggers (2013-14), Weibo's aim was not solely that of making beauty bloggers visible. Rather, it focused on rapidly expanding Weibo's share of the ultra-competitive social media market. When Weibo engaged in fierce competition, it swiftly abandoned its close cooperation with bloggers and started to profit from their labor through its control over visibility.

The shifting dynamic between Weibo and beauty bloggers is ultimately an issue of platform labor. Scholars working in the growing research area of Chinese platform studies have noticed that the rapid expansion of digital platforms reconfigures labor models and generates new labor problems (de Kloet, Poell, Zeng, & Chow, 2019). Research on Chinese UGC platforms has pointed out that users, as producers, have stimulated the production of an enormous volume of data, which indirectly contributes to platforms' profits (J. Lin & de Kloet, 2019; S. Wang, 2020b). The case of Weibo complicates UGC platforms' labor model: whereas platforms can profit indirectly from users' production, they can also exploit profits directly by manipulating algorithms. “Digital labor,” therefore, is not limited to social media users' creations (Fuchs, 2015). It also encompasses their financial contributions to UGC platforms. Weibo's contribution to the prosperity of beauty bloggers began with content augmentation, but does not end there.

### **3.6 Beauty Bloggers' Negotiations**

Social media platforms have the power to define and regulate user behavior through both their written terms of use and hidden algorithms (Beer, 2009; Bishop, 2019; Cotter,

2019; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Nevertheless, platforms cannot manipulate the entire “visibility game” because users, algorithms, and platform owners “all play a role in how users use a platform” (Cotter, 2019, title). As users with agency, beauty bloggers do not necessarily squeeze themselves into the framework that Weibo prescribes. While I recognize platform owners’ considerable power in the visibility game, in discussing the interaction between beauty bloggers and Weibo in this chapter, I am keen to avoid falling into the trap of algorithmic determinism.

Weibo’s algorithm-mediated visibility has direct effects on beauty bloggers, who cannot communicate with followers as effectively as before and whose revenue, which is based on their visibility, has been reduced. A beauty blogger, B04, said that “the content you create painstakingly receives few views, reposts, and comments. I just lose motivation. Besides, advertisers do not want to cooperate with you when they see the poor numbers [of your account]” (interview, December 2017). Given the required monthly spending on beauty products around of ¥20,000 (which equates to around \$3096), the high price of *fensi toutiao* and dearth of commercial opportunities made it difficult for her to sustain her blogging.

As Weibo’s policies and algorithms have imposed hardships on beauty bloggers, they have proactively explored possibilities to garner increased visibility. Individually, they try to attract more attention by making novel content. Some attempt to improve the quality of their content. “Despite the traffic restriction, I do my best to create good content. As long as my content can be seen by others, even a few, there is still a chance to be broadcasted,” said B03 (interview, December 2017). Some try to send free gifts. A number of beauty bloggers stage giveaways to users who comment, like, or repost, so as to raise their visibility on the newsfeed without buying *fensi toutiao*. “A lot of followers are attracted by giveaways, so I send giveaways in each of my posts,” said B13 (interview, October 2018). Some bloggers build fan groups on other platforms to avoid Weibo’s traffic restriction. By December 2017 one interviewed blogger, B02, had built eight WeChat groups for her fans. During my interview with her, she kept checking the latest messages in her WeChat fan groups and responded to her followers immediately. Afterward, I joined one of her fan groups on WeChat and saw that she regularly reminded her followers to check her new posts on Weibo. Some beauty bloggers seek

mutual help from one another. As B03 told me, “to avoid traffic restriction, many beauty bloggers request reposts from other beauty bloggers through comments or private messages” (interview, December 2017). In practice, not all of these mitigation strategies work. Because of the weak connections between beauty bloggers, B03 disliked reposting content for bloggers who are strangers to her and seldom answered requests that she do so. For B02, the WeChat fan groups did not really overcome traffic restriction. After a longstanding struggle, B02 joined a MCN and achieved more visibility on Weibo than she could hope for.

That said, these endeavors demonstrate beauty bloggers’ acute observation skills and proven ability to negotiate with Weibo. Weibo’s algorithms encourage beauty bloggers to buy *fensi toutiao*, but do not decide that they must. Like couriers on food delivery platforms and drivers on ride-hailing platforms, beauty bloggers use their knowledge of the technological applications to creatively manage the algorithmic system (J. Y. Chen, 2018; P. Sun, 2019). The dynamics between Weibo and beauty bloggers, then, cannot be reduced to Weibo exerting control over beauty bloggers. Rather, there is a negotiation between a platform with technological advantages and workers with agency.

Weibo responds quickly to beauty bloggers’ strategies. After giveaways became a popular way of capturing users’ attention, for example, in 2017 Weibo imposed strict regulations on this approach. Under these new rules, users can send giveaways to lucky audience members only through Weibo’s algorithmic tool, which resembles a lucky draw machine. The catch, though, is that they need to pay to use it. If they do not send out gifts through Weibo’s tool, then their posts featuring giveaways are likely to be deleted for violating the regulation. Despite the strict regulation, many beauty bloggers find ways of bypassing Weibo proscriptions, in order to reduce the cost of buying the right to send giveaways. To avoid Weibo’s keyword censorship on the disallowed word “giveaway,” beauty bloggers have learned from the previous anti-censorship techniques in online dissent and use homophones of keywords (Yuntao Zhang & Tomlinson, 2012). For instance, B13, a beauty blogger, replaced “福利” (*fuli*, which literally means bonus) with “浮力” (*fuli*, which literally means buoyancy) and replaced “评” (*ping*, which literally

means comment) with “平”(ping, which literally means flat). Her posts are usually titled something like “Buoyancy! Close, curl, and like. I will chitter a cute follower!” This actually means “Bonus! Follow, repost, and like. I will draw a cute follower!” This example illustrates the two sides’ approach to their mutual negotiation. Armed with its technological superiority, Weibo keeps inventing new ways of disciplining beauty bloggers; despite their technological inferiority, beauty bloggers accumulate knowledge and skillful ways of finding opportunities in the visibility game, resisting Weibo’s dominance. Given the consistent efforts undertaken by both sides, the visibility game is not a one-off battle, but an enduring war. This struggle requires long-term, knowledge-based, and cautious engagement on the part of platform labor.

In acknowledging beauty bloggers’ agency and resistance, I do not mean to celebrate how they subvert Weibo’s power in an overly optimistic manner. Indeed, it is crucial to stress that beauty bloggers’ tactics did not seriously challenge *fensi toutiao* and Weibo’s giveaway regulation. Weibo still plays its rule-making role and extracts profits from beauty bloggers. The platform owner still has significant power over platform laborers, including beauty bloggers.

It is also important to note that beauty bloggers do not negotiate with Weibo from equal positions. Those affiliated with influential MCNs and those working independently face different circumstances given that Weibo strategically cooperates with MCNs. Beauty bloggers with more than 10 million followers have a greater capacity to negotiate with Weibo than those with 10,000 followers. This diversity among the niche group of beauty bloggers means that their negotiations with Weibo takes various forms and produces various results.

In negotiating with platforms, beauty bloggers engaged in the visibility game present a markedly different aspect of platform labor to workers on taxi booking platforms or food delivery workers (J. Y. Chen, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Although beauty bloggers, like taxi drivers and food delivery staff, are under pressure from the platform on which they work, beauty bloggers’ visibility allows them to access more revenue streams. When beauty bloggers find themselves in situations in which they cannot get Weibo to pay them for producing content, they can still use their visibility to make

decent profits. For instance, many beauty bloggers run their e-stores on Taobao and some make considerable profits. This is hardly possible for taxi drivers and food delivery staff. Some beauty bloggers still run their blogs as a hobby rather than a way of making a living. For example, beauty blogger B10, who ran a start-up company at the time I interviewed her, said that “I’m not anxious about the traffic restriction. Maybe because I do not count on Weibo for my living. Traffic is not that important to me. I just focus on my articles” (interview, January 2018). Although beauty bloggers share the general context of platform labor with other platform workers, they are also distinct on account of their social status and rewards. After all, top beauty bloggers can make more than ¥100 million a year while it is not possible for top taxi drivers or food couriers. To understand platform labor comprehensively, we need to see beauty bloggers’ relatively disadvantaged positions in comparison with that of Weibo. At the same time, we need to see their relatively advantaged positions in comparison with those of platform workers from the lower classes. In highlighting the heterogeneity of platform labor, my research on beauty bloggers makes an important contribution to this research area.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

Unlike taxi drivers and food delivery staff on digital platforms, beauty bloggers from urban middle- or upper-class backgrounds participate in the platformization of cultural production as part of pursuing personal interests and hobbies. At the outset, they did not produce content to meet their urgent needs. Indeed, their blogging was sustained by their relatively high economic status. Gradually, they accrue influence and fan bases in the niche field of beauty commerce. The fact that beauty blogging rests on the spontaneous expression of personal consumption preferences and requires long-term investment constructs an invisible threshold that prohibits people from the lower classes from entering the field in advance.

Although the rise of beauty bloggers seems to be the result of individual performance and aspiration, these factors cannot be separated from the wider environment of platform capitalism. As the case of beauty bloggers on Weibo shows, their prosperity derives partially from Weibo’s strategic regeneration. Indeed, Weibo accelerated the celebrification of beauty amateurs as part of its drive to find new content providers and

data stimulators following the crisis of 2012-13, when its user base diminished. Through professionalization, verticalization, and institutionalization, Weibo has turned beauty amateurs into regular content providers and connected them with a broad range of audiences. While promoting beauty bloggers, Weibo actively maximizes the profits that it makes from them, whether through user engagement, targeted advertising, and algorithmic preferences. For Weibo, the process of making beauty bloggers or *wangbongs* is also a process of making platform labor. A cultural consequence of the platformization of beauty amateurs is that the circulation of beauty discourse is no longer confined to communities of upper- and middle-class women. Through platform-led institutionalization, beauty has become an entrenched genre on Chinese social media and drawn a wider female public into ongoing shifts in gender norms.

That beauty bloggers are platform labor does not mean that Weibo totally controls them. Instead, they continually negotiate with Weibo, whether by gaming its algorithms or seeking resources outside Weibo. Although Weibo reaps revenues from beauty bloggers, they reject its controlling tendencies. Like couriers on food delivery apps and drivers on ride-hailing apps, beauty bloggers creatively facilitate their visibility through “algorithm remaking,” which resists the platform’s objectives (Sun, 2019).

Although in this chapter I have analyzed the role of platforms in beauty blogging by way of the case of Weibo, Weibo is not the only platform to have shaped the construction of *wangbongs*. Following Weibo’s success, other social media platforms in China have mobilized active users and turned them into predictable creators. For instance, Bilibili launched its “chuangzuo jili jihua” (Creation Stimulation Project) in 2018 (Bilibili, 2018); Douyin launched its “*chuanguozhe chengzhang* jihua” (Creator Development Project) in 2019 (Y. Pan, 2019); and Red launched its “chuangzuo 123 jihua” (Creator 123 Project) in 2019 (ChinaDaily, 2019). All these initiatives target users who can create content, aiming to induce them to do so in a steady and stable fashion. As with Weibo’s strategies, these initiatives neither frame user creation as platform labor nor use terms such as employment. Like Weibo, many social media platforms also develop paid visibility services once they have built firm user bases: Douyin launched its paid visibility-increase service as “Dou+” in 2018 (Douyin, 2021); Red launched a similar tool *Shutiao* in 2019 (ChinaDaily, 2019). What beauty bloggers encounter on Weibo is

commonly found on other platforms too. This urges us to interpret interactions between Weibo and beauty bloggers in terms of a structural relationship between platform and platform labor as such, rather than an adventitious story concerning a single company.

Explaining the rise of beauty bloggers from a perspective informed by the notion of platform labor highlights platforms' important role in the formation of *wangbongs*. Whereas beauty bloggers have contributed to the platforms' expansion, in return platforms—as the dominant side in the relationship—shape *wangbongs* and their practices. High-profile *wangbongs* have captured public attention and enticed the young to join the trend. As a 2017 survey shows, 54% of informants born after 1995 selected *wangbong* as especially desirable among diverse new occupations (Cui, 2017). My close examination of beauty bloggers thus far leaves us with a question: Does the *wangbong* provide an ideal labor model for everyone, given that it is premised upon an invisible class threshold and long-standing platform exploitation