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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).

Summary

Beauty bloggers (*meizhuangbozhu*) are social media users who share content about beauty and thus accumulate fan bases online. In the context of China, beauty blogging emerged in the early 2000s before becoming an ever-growing trend in the mid-2010s. Beauty bloggers were merely marginalized sub-cultural groups on social media, with limited reach on mainstream media at the beginning. As it has grown, beauty blogging has been taken as a means by which people might reap fame and fortune overnight. As such, beauty blogging has become one of the best-known illustrations of the lucrative *wanghong* (internet celebrity) lifestyle at the end of 2010s. Together with other internet celebrities, they are leading China's *wanghong* (internet celebrity) economy. This leads to the key question posed in my dissertation: how did beauty blogging gain its cultural and economic success in China in the past two decades? Secondly, given the global prevalence of internet celebrities, what is the winning feature of Chinese beauty blogging or the Chinese *wanghong* economy?

My approach focuses on beauty blogging's expanding reach in China over the past two decades. It does not take the development of beauty blogs as a natural and predetermined process, nor as a necessary accompaniment to China's economic development or the spread of information technology. Instead, I problematize the rapid growth of beauty blogs, investigating how this process has been shaped and accelerated by gender discourses, platform labor, and the beauty industry, each of which is rooted in the broader context of China's social transformation in the reform era (1978-). I will explicate these three aspects one by one.

Gender is the most visible feature of Chinese beauty blogging: most beauty bloggers and their audiences are socially assigned females and identify as girls and women. My question is how gendered beauty is so powerful that it can gather a considerable number of women to build a digital space of beauty consumption. The craze of gendered beauty is recent since applying cosmetics was still considered moral degradation for some urban

Chinese. To investigate the reason why beauty blogs are popular, it is crucial to map out how gendered beauty mattered in the past two decades.

Platform labor is another important dimension to unpack the development of beauty bloggers in the past two decades. Platform labor refers to labor forces that work on platforms and contribute to platforms, although not necessarily hired by platforms. In that sense, beauty bloggers can be deemed as platform labor for they generate content and bring active users to social media platforms, and they are not hired by social media platforms. The urgent question is how they become platform labor since they are not necessarily at the stance of platforms. Thus, it is crucial to investigate the process of how beauty bloggers are tightly bound to platforms and serve as platform labor.

It would be unfair to investigate Chinese beauty bloggers without taking the beauty industry into account, for the former heavily relies on the latter. There existed no strong beauty market and industry in the late 20th century in China, so it is not unsurprising that beauty bloggers can lead the beauty consumption trend in upcoming years. More interestingly, the beauty blogger fever not only emerges in China, but also in other countries with well-developed beauty industries. From a global scale, how does the beauty industry connect with the increase of worldwide beauty bloggers? From a local scale, how does the Chinese beauty industry affect the development of beauty bloggers? Only when we explore the effects of the beauty industry, can we identify the role of beauty bloggers in a wider political economy frame.

Introduction situates the whole research in China's cultural, technical, and economic transformations and contextualizes my research questions in the broad social changes and local histories in China. This chapter travels back to the end of the 20th century and presents a sketch of China at that time, where cosmetic consumption was not appreciated by people, internet usage was limited to certain male elite users, and the GDP per capita was humble. All of these showed no signal of the popularity of beauty bloggers in upcoming years and urge us to denaturalize the prosperity of beauty bloggers in the 2010s.

Chapter 1 focuses on how beauty blogging, as a site of gender pedagogy, secured a fan base of urban young women. The blogger-audience relationship is extremely important in understanding beauty blogging's popularity. With the fall of socialist

ideology and the national transformation into a market economy, Chinese popular culture needed to erase the marks of socialist attitudes, such as the anti-consumption, anti-feminine image of women that prevailed in the 1960s and '70s. As a key site in the forgetting of Maoist gender practices, beauty blogs provided templates of ideal women, which featured fair skin, slim figures, and an infantilized appearance. Beauty blogs provide an aesthetic education for audience members who might not gain such knowledge from parents who grew up in a de-feminized environment. On the other hand, beauty blogs allow audience members to forge affective connections, who are very likely to be single children (having been raised under the one-child policy). Indeed, the prospect of aesthetic and affective bonding appeals to urban young women, who eagerly display their class and gender identities. Without follower bases made up of urban young women, beauty blogs could hardly realize their cultural and economic influence in China. Beauty blogs may look open, but they are not as inclusive as they claim. People who can be beauty bloggers must have the capacity for consumption and cultural capital; people who follow beauty blogs have buying power and leisure time. Although some beauty gurus try to sell their makeover skills as a way of empowering women living under more marginal social-economic conditions (such as middle-aged rural women), they fail to address the fundamental political-economic structures affecting women's lives. Rather, beauty pedagogy actually increases the economic burdens placed on women and widens class inequalities.

Chapter 2 reflects on beauty blogging as a mode of user creation and examines the ways in which spontaneous and unpredictable amateur production stabilized and expanded on Weibo. Whereas social media platforms allow beauty amateurs to share content online, they do not ensure that beauty amateurs across the world continually share content. The case study of Weibo shows how a platform can benefit from crafting policies and algorithms to transform the previously subcultural group of beauty amateurs (along with other amateur groups) into regular content producers. Beauty bloggers' digital labor has become a source of user activities and data for UGC platforms. If benefitting from beauty bloggers' content creation and sharing practices is already exploitative, Weibo indicates how exploitation can go further, namely by charging beauty bloggers with its algorithmic dominance. This is illustrated by fensi toutiao (followers'

headline). Founded on the blogger-platform relationship, the rise of beauty bloggers has involved spontaneous creators being systematically organized and exploited by social media platforms. It signifies a transformation from a centralized, professional mode of cultural production to an algorithm-aided mode of user production. This shift has precarized content creators.

Chapter 3 expands my analytical framework to encompass scholarship in political economy. In so doing, I put forward two original claims: first, the rise of beauty bloggers, a seemingly sophisticated new occupation in the digital economy, relies on the crude old business of non-digital capitalism; second, the wanghong economy is a result of China's changing role in the global system of value distribution. Beauty corporations' high expenditures on marketing result in the lucrativeness of beauty blogging for beauty blogs become a major channel of marketing in the digital age. Relying on beauty influencers becomes the shared feature of beauty brands in the present day. Accordingly, beauty influencing becomes an entrenched genre because of the constant sponsorship it receives, both in China and the West. Another driver behind Chinese beauty bloggers is the newly developed distribution system for beauty products, which has grown hand-in-hand with beauty bloggers. Chinese e-commerce platforms—latecomers to distribution networks—grew at lightning speed in the 2010s. Now that e-commerce has become the largest distribution channel for beauty products, beauty blogs (as an essential part of Chinese e-commerce) are well supported by e-commerce platforms. This has led to a close collaboration between Chinese beauty bloggers and e-commerce platforms. In this respect, Chinese beauty bloggers differ from Western beauty influencers.

Conclusion offers an integral frame to understand the drivers and effects of beauty bloggers and the wanghong economy in China. First, it emphasizes the hidden but significant role in stimulating the connections between players in the beauty blogging business and the wanghong economy, exemplified as state-led technological infrastructures and national strategies of integrating communication and manufacturing industries. By emphasizing the role of the state, I argue that the explosive development of beauty blogging in China is neither merely individual nor solely cultural. Rather, it is a result of connections and cooperation among heterogeneous actors at a specific historical conjuncture. Second, beauty has played an indispensable role in China's

economic reform in that the former has driven and strengthened the latter and vice versa. One cannot overemphasize women's role in China's economic development: they are the beauty market's target consumers and the principal advocates of highly gendered beauty discourses. Third, the rise of beauty blogging in China is an embodiment of global capitalism, which has strong ties with the beauty industry's pre-digital system of mass production. The flourishing beauty economy, be it in China or Europe, cannot conceal the destructive effects of capitalism on the environment. We need to reflect on how beauty works in our world presently and how it should work in the future.

