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Chinese Video Creator Identities - a Cross-Platform Social Media Perspective

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Abstract

Within a globalised digital environment characterised by increasingly diverse and dynamic social media platforms, video creators and their content production and circulation now typically operate across multiple social media platforms. Focusing on Chinese content creators and their cross-platform and cross-cultural social media practices, this paper draws on digital ethnographic research to analyse how user-generated content and creator identities are constructed across Chinese and Western social media services including YouTube, Bilibili, Douyin and RED. This article asks: how do Chinese content creators produce and circulate videos across multiple social media platforms and diverse cultures? How do these creators navigate platform architectures to present, manage and commercialise their identity given the cross-platform and transnational context?

The findings suggest that Chinese creators' cross-platform practices can be seen as a form of *platform migration*, in which they learn to move within and across platforms to ensure they create the optimal conditions for their content to spread and be viewed. These migratory platform practices are, however, constrained by audiences, algorithms, and advertiser expectations for creators to construct and maintain a single and consistent creator identity. These transnational creator identities include elements of both novelty and normativity in video content, such as niche or exotic performances, which serve up content for negotiating algorithmic visibility, or negotiating audiences for achieving a "cosmopolitan Chinese-ness". As such, we can see that creator identities are both afforded and shaped through the globalised cultures, economies and politics of online video-sharing platforms.

Keywords

Video-sharing platforms, social media, online identity, Chinese creators.

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Introduction

This article focuses on the social media practices of a group of young Chinese content creators in Australia who make and share online video blogs, or vlogs, across multiple platforms. These Chinese creators initially created vlogs for personal reasons, to archive their transnational experiences, and to share videos of their lives with friends and family in their home country. However, as they gained exposure and attracted subscribers on various platforms, they began thinking about the possibility of commercialising their video content. Creators' daily vlogs were initially grounded in their ordinary practices, before becoming content they curated in their entrepreneurial use of platforms (Burgess and Green, 2009).

Although YouTube remains the dominant platform for user-generated videos with more than 2

billion monthly users worldwide (YouTube, 2020), it is being challenged by other fast-growing video-sharing services, such as the Chinese mobile short video app TikTok, and video-enabled social media platforms like Instagram. As TikTok has expanded globally, it has prompted both popular and academic attention on the growing significance of Chinese-owned social media platforms as part of a dynamic and changing global media environment. Subsequently, a video creator's content is no longer located within one particular platform, but operates across multiple platforms. Despite emerging research on platforms, creators, and content within the global social media entertainment industries (Craig and Cunningham, 2019), there is a lack of attention on how content creators post and share videos across multiple commercial platforms, participate in transnational spaces, and engage with culturally diverse communities (Abidin, 2018).

This paper draws on data collected from digital ethnographic research of young Chinese content creators in Australia, and in particular explores their self-presentation practices (Marwick, 2013a), as they navigate international and cross-cultural creator economies. The research adopted a cross-platform perspective to explore how user-generated content flowed, and creator identities were constructed across Chinese and Western social media services including YouTube, Bilibili[1], Douyin[2] and RED[3]. This article asks: how do Chinese content creators produce and circulate videos across multiple social media platforms and diverse cultures? How do these creators navigate platform architecture to present, manage and commercialise their identity given the cross-platform and transnational context?

Building on the literature on creator culture, social media entertainment, self-presentation, and online and cultural identity, this paper aims to bring together different threads of research to address the questions of video creators' cross-platform practice and online identity management. In this way, this article contributes to an understanding of the cross-platform use of social media and its impacts on identity management and performance in a cross-cultural, transnational context.

Our analysis is structured around two key themes. In the section on "platform migration", we discuss how Chinese video creators conduct platform-specific practices and cross-platform sharing to increase their online visibility and popularity. This article does not consider migrant experience in general, or migrant's general use of social media; instead, it focuses on Chinese creators' use of multiple platforms to build audiences and brand themselves across the global context of transnational social media. In the section on "cross-platform identities", we analyse how Chinese content creators manage their self-presentation on social media services through identity curation. We also consider how creators maintain a single, consistent online identity, and how they manage identity through algorithms across platforms. We argue that Chinese creators' cross-platform practices can be seen as a form of *platform migration*, in which they learn to move within and across platforms to ensure they create the optimal conditions for their content to be viewed and spread (Jenkins et al, 2013). As a result of migratory platform practices, creator identities are both afforded and constrained through the globalised cultures, economies and politics of online video-sharing platforms.

Background

Video Creators and the Social Media Entertainment Industry

YouTube has been the dominant platform for video sharing since the early period of social media development. The rise of "entrepreneurial vloggers" on YouTube (Burgess and Green, 2009) and multichannel networks (MCNs) have contributed to the professionalisation and monetisation of

1 Launched in 2009, Bilibili is a Chinese video-sharing site popular among the young generation and it is famous for the bullet-screen feature (Danmu) that allows comments scrolling across the screen in real-time.
2 Launched in 2016, Douyin is the domestic version of TikTok in China
3 Launched in 2013, RED (Little Red Book or Xiaogongshu) is a Chinese social media and e-commerce platform that is popular among female users.

Volume 9.1 (2022): pp. 24 – 42

YouTube amateur content, leading to a new social media entertainment industry where formal entrepreneurialism and non-entrepreneurial activities co-exist within the same space of video-sharing platforms (Craig and Cunningham, 2019; Cunningham et al, 2016; Lobato, 2016; Nicoll and Nansen, 2018; Vonderau, 2016). When vlogging (video-blogging) became a common cultural practice in everyday life (Burgess and Green, 2009), popular YouTuber accounts began to achieve a certain status through metrics such as video views or subscriber numbers. New terminology emerged and developed to account for new types of entertainers, with terms such as "micro-celebrity" (Senft, 2008), "internet celebrity" or "influencer" (Abidin, 2018), or the Chinese term "wanghong" that refers to online celebrities (Xu and Zhao, 2019; Zhang and de Seta, 2018). These social media entertainers are what Craig and Cunningham (2019, p.70) amongst others in media marketing describe as "creators", who produce and share original content on social media platforms, while professionalising their practices and monetising their content and their own media brand online and offline.

Research on participatory cultures on YouTube, and subsequently on entertainment industries on social media platforms provide a valuable lens to understand how contemporary platforms operate as hybrid cultural-commercial spaces that embody inherent tensions among users, advertisers and policymakers (Gillespie, 2010). This foundational research has established a field of study focused on U.S.-based platforms like YouTube and the cultural phenomenon of entrepreneurial content creators in the West, while more recently attention is broadening to platforms outside of the Western world.

Chinese social media platforms, too, present a more complicated case that offers additional perspectives to rethink Western-centric foci. In terms of studies on China's online video space, there is a growing body of research examining the shifting amateurism and professionalism on Chinese video-sharing platforms and the development of Chinese video streaming services (e.g. Wang and Lobato, 2019; Zhao, 2016). There are also case studies on Chinese video-sharing platforms' Danmu feature (e.g. Chen et al, 2015; Liu et al, 2016). More recently, there are emerging studies on the Chinese livestreaming industry (e.g. Cunningham et al, 2019; Zhang et al, 2019), and popular short video apps such as Kuaishou (Lin and de Kloet, 2019), Douyin and TikTok (Chen et al, 2020; Kaye et al, 2020), which analyses their affordances, business models, governance and platform cultures.

Despite some emerging areas of research on Chinese social media platforms as part of global entertainment industries, or as spaces in which Chinese users can participate in transnational communities (e.g. Sun, 2019; Sun and Yu, 2016), there is a lack of attention on how content creators post and share videos across culturally diverse platforms. The recent surge in popularity of the Chinese-owned short video app TikTok has prompted both popular and academic attention on this globalising cultural economy, yet this obscures a much more diverse ecology of Chinese video-sharing platforms and their cross-cultural uses and implications.

Bringing together research on creator culture, social media entertainment and Chinese video-sharing platforms, we can learn that social media platforms across China and the West have been transforming into a hybrid cultural-commercial space. Current understanding of the professionalisation of amateur content creators shows that video creation and circulation on various social media platforms are becoming every day and vernacular practices (Burgess, 2006; Burgess and Green, 2009; Gibbs et al, 2015), although there has been a lack of research on cross-platform usage. As social media entertainment platforms diversify and globalise, there is a need for further research on the transnational use of social media platforms for content production and circulation, and how creators on culturally different platforms contribute to the emerging global social media entertainment.

Through an analysis of cross-platform Chinese content creators, their online identities, and their entrepreneurial and cultural social media practices, this paper aims to contribute to knowledge about the increasing globalisation of video-sharing platforms and culturally diverse forms of participation.

Self-presentation, Online Identity and Chinese Cultural Identity

Scholars have examined the self-presentation practices of content creators, such as studies of "micro-celebrity" (Senft, 2008; Marwick, 2013b) and "internet celebrity" (Abidin, 2018), exploring topics of self-branding, authenticity and publicity, as they spread out across multiple platforms. These terms attempt to capture how ordinary people use videos, blogs and social networks to boost their popularity on the internet through performances that reflect commercial forms of branding and marketing (Senft, 2008 p.25), whilst also acknowledging the significant role social media audiences play as arbiters of authenticity in the identity performance of these celebrity-like entertainers (Marwick, 2013b). Despite this body of research on self-presentation amongst entrepreneurial content creators, there remains a lack of scholarly research on users' cross-platform behaviours on video-sharing sites, how people present identity differently across platforms, and the implications of different platforms on identity construction and reception.

Conceptually, analyses of social media self-presentation have been framed by applications of Erving Goffman's (1956) concepts of dramaturgy and "impression management" (Barbour and Marshall, 2012; Baym, 2010; Hogan, 2010; Marwick, 2013a; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002). Goffman's concepts of self-presentation are valuable to understand key aspects of identity, performance, and evaluations of authenticity in the digital age. Hogan (2010), for example, developed Goffman's dramaturgical approach in social media research, arguing that self-presentation on social media should be spilt into "performance" that happens in synchronous "situations", and artifacts that take place in asynchronous "exhibitions" (Hogan, 2010, p.377). His exhibitional approach considers the temporal structure of online content, as well as the significant role of platforms and algorithms as "curators" in digital spaces. This paper builds on theories of self-presentation and online identity by exploring how Chinese video creators express their creative identity across multiple platforms. It uses empirical evidence to analyse to what extent online identity is shaped by the affordances of platforms, the commercial logic of their operation, and the expectations of audiences.

In particular, this article considers the perspective of Chinese cultural identity, and how it is managed and presented differently across cross-platform and cross-cultural contexts. When discussing these Chinese creators' cultural identity, there is a need to situate it in the cultural, economic and political contexts in which these videos are produced, distributed and consumed. The transnational contexts of China and Australia that form the focus of this paper necessitate that the analysis explores how user-generated videos posted across both Western and Chinese social media are shaped by and in turn shape their cultural identity. The literature on Chinese identity in the transnational context is complex and must be understood in the context of the political history of China (Wu, 1991, p.159). Migrant media studies also recognise the centrality of digital technology in shaping the cultural and social lives of Chinese diaspora (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Sun and Yu, 2016; Yu and Sun, 2019). Being part of a diaspora, one may feel a sense of in-betweenness, hybridity or "cosmopolitan Chineseness" (Yu and Sun 2019, p.18; Yue 2012, p.104), negotiating inherited Chinese identity with acquired local experience in the host country (Sun and Yu, 2016, p.167). This situated experience and identity are in turn mediated through the lens of contemporary global creator economies and cultures.

Current research has developed useful theories to understand how self-presentation and online identity has evolved since the rise of digital technologies. But changing digital platform technologies and globalisation requires further investigation of the complexity of platform affordances, and how users' cross-platform and cross-cultural practices of self-presentation and online identity are shaped by transnational contexts. Thus, by looking at the performance of online identity and more specifically at the expression of Chinese transnational cultural identity, this paper can help to broaden current knowledge of self-presentation and online identity by situating it within both cross-platform and cross-cultural contexts.

Volume 9.1 (2022): pp. 24 – 42

Research Methods

This article draws from digital ethnographic research involving semi-structured interviews, online observation and qualitative content analysis with young Chinese content creators living in Australia. Specifically, we conducted interviews with nine Chinese creators, observed their activities on social media platforms, and analysed their videos and comments.

The digital ethnography approach in this paper allows us to immerse in the digital space, developing a firsthand understanding of these creators by spending time on their online platforms and interacting with them. Because this article explores Chinese video creators' cross-platform practices and online identity management, it is necessary to use ethnographic methods to pursue "thick descriptions" (Hine, 2015, p.1) to understand the complexity and the diverse elements impacted on online identity formation. On the "embedded, embodied and everyday internet" (Hine, 2015), using an ethnographic approach develops an all-round and in-depth understanding of how making videos and posting online are embedded in creators' lives, how their online identities have become a part of them, and how their social media practices have become everyday activities. Applying digital ethnography can help to gather a set of data that can capture the flow of video creators' online behaviours and understand their identities in depth and detail. Thus, digital ethnography (Hine, 2015; Hjorth et al, 2017; Pink et al, 2016) underpins much of this paper, as it is a methodology that combines in-depth research with users and their experiences as content creators, and a close analysis of the materiality of digital technologies that mediate their practices, as well as a critical and conceptual analysis of these data.

The selection of young Chinese video creators for this research recruited participants who identified as Chinese, having been born and grown up in China whilst also having experience of studying and living in Australia. Participants were aged from 18 to 35 years old, and were users who regularly uploaded videos online, posting on more than one social media platform, with their content covering various aspects of their lives in Australia. We recruited nine creators as research participants for interviews and online observation. Of these, six were female and three were male. In all, four were university students in Australia, three were graduates working in China and two were working in Australia. All the participants were on more than three social media platforms. The most common platforms they used were Bilibili and YouTube, and each site had seven of the interviewed creators on it. The second-most popular services or apps were Douyin, Weibo and RED with five creators on each platform. The third-most popular platform was Xigua Video with four creators on the site. Table 1 (pp 29) shows the demographic profile of the nine research participants (their names have been anonymised), and Table 2 (pp 30) shows the details of the most used platforms for sharing videos emerging from this research.

Research participants engaged in semi-structured interviews between June and July 2020. Due to the global outbreak of COVID-19 and social distancing rules, as well as the fact that participants were located in different parts of Australia and China, eight of the interviews were conducted via video chat through digital tools such as Zoom, and there was one offline face-to-face interview conducted in Melbourne. In addition to interviews, online observation of key platforms and research participant videos, profiles, and channels was conducted. Through immersion and participation on various platforms, including YouTube, Bilibili, Douyin and RED, we observed participants' self-presentation and audience interaction. We also conducted qualitative content analysis on publicly available data, including Chinese creators' user profiles, video content, posts and commentary. The collected data on social media was combined with observational notes.

Through interviews, online observations and qualitative content analysis, we collected and analysed data under the topics of cross-platform practices and online identity management to address the two research questions. The analysis was structured around two key themes that emerged from the research, including platform migration and cross-platform identities. These themes are presented in the discussion below. The last part of this article brings together the two themes and draws the connections among cross-platform video-sharing practices and the formation of online identity.

Table 1. Demographic profile of research participants (Pseudonyms have been used).

Demographic profile of research participants				
	Gender	Status	Platforms	Types of content
Taylor	Female	Current university student in Australia	Bilibili Weibo YouTube	Study tips Daily vlogs Travel vlogs Beauty
Bob	Male	A graduate working in China	Bilibili YouTube Xigua Video	Daily vlogs Architectural design Homemade cooking
Bing	Female	Current university student in Australia	Douyin Xigua Video Weibo RED	Daily vlogs
Lee	Male	A graduate working in China	YouTube Youku Tencent Video Bilibili Douyin Xigua Video	Sneaker unboxing videos Daily vlogs Online gaming
Cathy	Female	Current unversity student in Australia	Douyin Weibo Bilibili RED YouTube	Daily vlogs Travel vlogs
Ying	Female	A graduate working in China	Douyin WeChat Video Account Kuaishou Meipai	Daily vlogs Travel vlogs
Emma	Female	A graduate working in Australia	Weibo YouTube RED Bilibili Instagram	Handmade arts Daily vlogs
Kim	Male	A graduate working in Australia	Douyin WeChat Official Account RED Bilibili YouTube Xigua Video	Fitness tutorials Daily vlogs Lip-syncing short videos
Joan	Female	Current university student in Australia	RED Weibo Bilibili YouTube	Daily vlogs

Volume 9.1 (2022): pp. 24 – 42

Table 2. Most used platforms among participants.

Table 2 note: The chart is created by the authors based on sources from Bilibili (2020), Xiaohongshu (2020), YouTube (2020), RTTnews (2020), QuestMobile (2019; 2020).

Discussion

Platform Migration

This study found that Chinese video creators had two main strategies for cross-platform content production and circulation. One is *platform-specific practices,* in which creators adopt multiple platforms and make tailored content for each platform with considerations of targeted audience, platform features, and cultures. The other strategy is *cross-platform sharing*, in which creators intentionally circulate the same content across multiple social media platforms to increase their online visibility amidst the unstable and unpredictable social media platform ecology. As Chinese creators in this research had access to both Chinese and Western platforms, many of them wanted to expand their audience base to the Chinese market within mainland China, as well as a global market that is not restricted to national boundaries.

Platform-Specific Practices

Chinese creators in this research tended to start with one platform, such as Bilibili or Douyin, establishing a practice of posting and sharing videos before developing multi-platform video-sharing practices. Initially, research participants only occasionally posted videos about their hobbies on social media platforms, identifying an interest or passion in a particular area including fitness, cooking, makeup, fashion, design and so on. In addition to sharing the "everydayness" of life in vlogs, these creators also showed their "exceptionalism" (Abidin, 2018) by presenting their expert skills in videos. As Chinese creators gained more experience and grew their subscriber numbers, they not only used platforms and videos as digital archives for overseas memories, but also treated them as tools for making money.

Over time, many of the participants started using various platforms in an entrepreneurial way (Burgess and Green, 2009). For instance, some began creating tailored content based on platform affordances, or strategically conducting "platform-specific practices", which refers to the ways Chinese creators post particular kinds of videos on a platform but not on others. Research participants engaged in platform-specific practices based on the "imagined affordances" of these platforms: that is, their practices were shaped by their expectations about the functionality of different technologies, and how these expectations shaped the way they perceived, approached and used these platforms to share videos (Nagy and Neff, 2015, p.5). Chinese creators perceived platforms differently, and they strategically used the perceived affordances of platforms in various ways towards different ends.

Cathy[4], for example, first adopted Douyin in 2018 when Douyin was getting increasingly popular in China. Douyin is a short-form video app launched by ByteDance in 2016, and the company later released its international version TikTok in 2017, targeting users outside of mainland China. Cathy described Douyin as an app for short and quick videos, and she had to do a lot of fast-cut editing in her vlogs to stimulate viewers' senses and attention. "Most of the Douyin vlogs followed the three-part structure, a question, a story and a golden sentence as a conclusion. The content is very templatised," Cathy said. What Cathy described on Douyin was "circumscribed creativity", referring to "creative potential being shaped or guided by platformization" (Kaye et al, 2020, p.18). Douyin and TikTok are representative platforms of circumscribed creativity, offering templates for users to easily replicate and participate in popular trends on the app.

Originally, Cathy posted short-form vertical videos on Douyin – portrait-mode videos that are taller than wider, with a length usually limited to under 60 seconds. In contrast, she used Bilibili and Weibo to share longer horizontal vlogs that were in a 16:9 aspect ratio and up to 10 minutes duration. As she achieved popularity on Douyin and gradually became an "entrepreneurial vlogger" (Burgess and Green, 2009), Cathy also adopted YouTube and RED for increasing her visibility and monetisation options

4 Pseudonyms of the Chinese content creators in this research have been used.

Volume 9.1 (2022): pp. 24 – 42

across digital spaces.

Besides the consideration of imagined affordances, Chinese creators also noted that their "imagined audience" (Marwick and boyd, 2011) on each platform was different, which suggests that content producers on social media have imaginations and expectations about the audiences they think they are speaking to, and they use strategies to navigate these audiences in mediated conversations. Creators' understanding of their social media audience is limited, but they can take cues to imagine a potential audience, such as checking the locations and the range of ages among their viewers through channel management tools on platforms. For instance, participants suggested that their viewers on YouTube were more diverse and located around the world, whilst on Chinese platforms, the audience tended to be located in mainland China. Based on the knowledge of the imagined audience on each platform, Chinese creators adjusted their platform-specific content to cater to the taste of the targeted audience, as Cathy noted that Douyin users preferred to watch short-form videos whilst Bilibili users expected to consume longer videos.

The competitive and fast-changing digital landscape of social media platforms has posed challenges for Chinese video creators. They are not only required to adapt to the new functionality within platforms, but also to constantly adopt new social media services that they have not used before, to keep up with the shifting trends and preferences of audiences. In addition to platform-specific practices, another common strategy among Chinese creators was to share the same video content across several platforms to increase visibility.

Cross-Platform Sharing

As Chinese video creators gained more experience in making and sharing videos online, they discovered that relying on a single platform was not a wise decision. The ecology of platforms and their preferences means that there is always a new platform emerging and an old service declining. To maintain their popularity on the internet, it was common that Chinese creators had one or two primary platforms, and they also migrated across platforms and shared the same content on multiple services.

Lee, for example, initially established his channels on YouTube and Youku, a Chinese video streaming service owned by the internet giant Alibaba. After posting videos on the two platforms for two years, he paused his use of Youku, and then reposted his previous content on Bilibili and other Chinese platforms. Lee said he had to "escape the sinking ship" because Youku did not support user-generated content (UGC) as it used to. Modelled after YouTube, Youku is one of the pioneers of online video-sharing platforms that emerged around 2005 in China, aiming to build up online communities of amateur video creators (Zhao, 2016). Although it still has a section of UGC, Youku is now known as a video streaming service, similar to its competitors iQiyi and Tencent Video, owned by technology giants Baidu and Tencent respectively (Keane and Wu, 2018; Zhao, 2016).

Similar to Lee, most of the participant creators actively adopted new services and shared content across Chinese and Western social media platforms. They developed patterns of cross-platform content production and circulation for maximising their online exposure, which could potentially bring them more online influence, fame and monetisation opportunities. When creators rose to popularity on a platform, the officials from other platforms also invited these creators to join, promising to offer financial incentives and online traffic supports to newly joined users. Thus, the decision of using multiple platforms was not only because of creators' entrepreneurial insights of branding the self, but it was also because of the dynamic, volatile and competitive online video space in China (Wang and Lobato, 2019) that pushed creators to adapt to the changing digital environment. Creators tried to avoid the risk that a platform, or the account on a platform, might be shut down or unseen because of the instability and precarity of creative labour in the social media entertainment industry (Cunningham et al, 2019; Duffy et al, 2021).

Lee's "migratory behaviour" from Youku to other Chinese platforms shows a process of "media

convergence" and "spreadability" that social media content creators are the driving force for circulating videos across multiple platforms and cultural landscape, and they are learning to use different platforms to bring the flow of the content more under their control and to engage with diverse audiences and platform cultures (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al, 2013). Cross-platform usage is not only because creators wanted to increase online visibility and commercial opportunities, but it is also because of the changing technical affordances and business models within platforms and the precarious nature of online video industries that force creators to migrate in-between old and new platforms. It extends our understanding of convergence and spreadability by showing that "platform ecosystems" (van Dijck, 2013) and the dynamic of social media entertainment also play a role in creators' migratory behaviour.

Bringing together the above-mentioned two strategies of platform-specific practices and cross-platform sharing, we argue that these strategic practices across multiple platforms can be viewed as a form of *platform migration*, in which creators learn to move within and across platforms to ensure they create the optimal conditions for their content to be viewed and shared. Creators' platform migration is based on the imagined audiences and affordances that populate and define the platforms, as well as the consideration of the changing platform ecosystems and social media entertainment. Here the term *migration* is useful to understand the behaviour of using several culturally different platforms at the same time. It describes the movement of content creators from one to another platform, as well as the mobility between multiple platforms and cultural landscape. The idea of platform migration not only refers to the movement across multiple platforms in a technical sense, it also refers to transnational mobility because these creators are part of "Chinese digital diasporas" (Brinkerhoff 2009; Sun & Yu 2016; Yu & Sun 2019), which we explore in the following section to discuss how cross-platform practices have an impact on the ways that creators interacted with their audiences and constructed their cross-cultural social media identities.

Cross-platform identities

The diversity of multiple social media platforms and the complexity of cross-cultural contexts posed challenges to participant creators. Although they had cross-platform strategies for creating and sharing videos, they also needed to be mindful of their online self-presentation to various audience groups on different platforms. Creators had to come up with tactics for managing their self-presentation, authenticity and online identity with considerations of audiences, platform features and affordances, and the transnational context of cross-platform usage.

Identity Curation

Identity curation refers to the process of crafting the self. For Chinese creators, curating online identity involves experimenting with a variety of video content, adjusting the positions of channels and the self, and engaging with audiences across platforms through multiple forms of "performances" (Goffman, 1956). When participant creators received feedback from their audiences, they gained a general idea about the kind of videos that could attract more attention, so they adjusted their self-presentation and personal content to be more likeable among viewers. Taylor, for example, started with travel and beauty content but gradually found her way to educational videos. It was because she realised that studying was something she could do the best at the moment based on her experience and expertise. As her educational videos rose to popularity, Taylor was motivated by the feedback of the audiences and made more study-related videos.

Similar to Taylor, other participants gave attention to cultivating internet celebrities' personalities of everydayness, exceptionalism and exoticism (Abidin, 2018). Creators were everyday because of the mundane and ordinary aspect of life present in vlogs, and they were exceptional because they presented expert skills. As for the quality of being exotic, because participants have the unique experience of living

Volume 9.1 (2022): pp. 24 – 42

overseas, when presenting their Australian life on Chinese social media, their performances were exotic to the local people in China. Showing the cross-cultural part of life was an exotic factor to attract attention from online viewers, and it also led to the formation of a hybrid Chinese identity.

For some participants, recording everyday vlogs of their cross-cultural experience was a chance to explore local places and learn about multiculturalism in Australia. Over time, they gradually formed a hybrid Chinese identity, or a "cosmopolitan Chineseness" (Yue, 2012; Sun and Yu, 2016), showing cross-cultural characters in their videos. For instance, Lee's use of different languages in his cross-platform practices revealed his cross-cultural experience in everyday life. He mainly spoke Cantonese in his vlogs, because he wanted to use the language as a way of preserving the Cantonese culture from his hometown in southern China. Occasionally, he also spoke Mandarin and English according to the themes of a video and the imagined audience whom he wanted to speak to on a platform. Lee posted most of his English content on YouTube but not on Chinese platforms because he believed that the imagined audience on each platform had different language preferences.

The decisions on different ways of self-presentation across platforms indicated that creators had considerations of the content, audiences, platforms and cultures. Because of the unique cross-cultural context, participant Chinese creators utilised their experience in Australia as an exotic factor and performed a hybrid cultural identity on their videos through internet influencer practices (Abidin, 2018). The factor of hybridity was highlighted in participant creators' practices of platform migration for increasing online popularity and potentially leading to more opportunities for monetization. While enjoying the benefits from performing hybrid characteristics, creators had to negotiate and carefully curate their online identities across multiple video-sharing platforms to not confuse the audience.

Although research participants made use of influencer practices to present the self online, they did not deliberately create a persona at the beginning. Instead, their online personae were gradually formed and reinforced through the practices of the video-making process and the interaction with the audience. The gradual construction of online personae found in this paper is different from the current understanding that "wanghong" (online celebrities) creators in China have a preset of special "renshe" (character design) in the Chinese social media entertainment industry (Craig et al, 2021, p.153). Instead, creators in this research carefully curated and performed their online identities, and their personae were gradually constructed and changed as their content genres, or "verticals", changed after testing on different platforms.

It is noted that participant Chinese creators' self-presentation both employed "performances" in synchronous situations and "artifacts" in asynchronous exhibitions (Hogan, 2010, p.377). Their channels were the exhibitions where they archived online videos, in other words, the artifacts that they made in the past. Creators also had real-time interactions with their audience, such as live streaming. But in some cases, the situation became complex when live and recorded performances on various platforms were mixed at the same time, adding multiple layers to the "front" and "backstage" of performances (Goffman, 1956).

In one instance Taylor live streamed via a webcam on the laptop, whilst she also recorded how she filmed a video to her audience using a digital camera. She told her audience that their real-time comments may appear in the final video, and some of the viewers commented that they felt nervous about shifting from an audience member to a visible part of the performance. In this situation, the line between the audience and performers blurred, as did the boundary between performances and artifacts. Using multiple video formats to engage with the audience becomes common practices among creators. It complicates and challenges the established dramaturgical concepts of self-presentation (Hogan, 2010; Goffman, 1956), and creates a messiness to online performance. By adding the layer of live streaming, maintaining authenticity became challenging because video creators were required to control multiple roles in the same space and time. Although Chinese creators enjoyed the flexibility of platform migration and they curated different ways of self-presentation to cater to the audience on each platform, they still needed to be consistent with the performance in their previous videos posted on a platform.

Performance Consistency

Live streaming was a common tool for participants to interact with their audience in real-time. Creators used live streaming as a way to increase audience engagement, and perform authenticity and relatability to their viewers. When live-stream broadcasting to the public, participant creators were also under pressure to perform and manage their online presence because live streaming was equal to a non-stop performance that lasted for a long time. They were required to behave the same as the self in the recorded performances, carefully controlling themselves to not reveal a contradictory backstage reality to the audience. As Chinese creators in this research started making videos as amateurs, they more or less carried through the amateurism characteristics as a way of performing authenticity while professionalising their video practices (Abidin, 2017; Nayar, 2017). Authenticity is not only about being real, but it is also constructed through video creators' different uses of platforms and affordances for being consistent with their online performance over time.

Kim, for example, was a full-time content creator in the fitness genre, who was known for his funny facial expressions. When he started using Douyin, without any particular intention he uploaded a few humorous lip-syncing clips on the app, which attracted hundreds of followers and thousands of likes on the first day. This motivated him to make more funny short sketches to attract more viewership, and by doing this, his online identity was gradually constructed as a comedic creator. Occasionally he also shared gym workout clips on his platform. As he gradually rose to popularity, he signed with an MCN and the company suggested him to focus on the fitness vertical. MCNs are intermediary firms that operate in and around the advertising infrastructure of social media platforms, linking video creators with the advertising, marketing and screen production industries (Lobato 2016). For some participants in this research, signing up for an MCN was an important step to move towards the professionalisation and monetisation of amateur content creation in the social media entertainment industry (Craig & Cunningham 2019). Kim took the advice from his MCN and became a full-time fitness creator who mainly posted workout tutorials, as he reasoned that knowledge content could survive longer than funny sketches in the Chinese short-video industry.

Kim indicated that it took a while for him to work out the style of combining entertainment with useful fitness information. This kind of knowledgeable-funny persona was Kim's form of originality and uniqueness, making him stand out from other fitness creators on Douyin. His online identity is tied to his reliability as a fitness expert, and the consistency and authenticity of his comedic characteristics. Interestingly, as Kim recently adopted RED, Bilibili and YouTube, he did not carry over the comedic persona in his longer-form videos posted on the three newly joined platforms. He did this because he wanted to experiment with something different – to make fitness instructional videos in a more serious style.

Being consistent with the performance on the short video posted on Douyin and trying different forms of content and online persona on other platforms, Kim's experience suggested that platform migration had brought him opportunities for presenting his multiple online identities. As many scholars suggest that people's identity is multiple, fluid, flexible and changeable (Baym, 2010; Goffman, 1956; Marwick, 2013a; Turkle, 1995), Chinese video creators had multiple identities and they could flexibly adjust their self-presentation through different videos posted on several platforms. Just as Taylor turned herself into a study video creator, and as with Kim's story of becoming a fitness content creator, they presented the self strategically based on the niche of content they wanted to focus on, the responses from viewers across platforms and for some, the requirements from MCNs. Over time, as creators developed their video channels, they showed more of their expertise or skills in their hobbies, presenting themselves as specialists in a field and gradually leaning on such skills to create niche content.

The tendency towards niche production is related to the scarcity of attention in the digital economy. The economy of the internet follows the logic of an attention economy, in which one's primary motive is to increase one's share of the attention of other human beings (Goldhaber, 2006). This is supplemented

Volume 9.1 (2022): pp. 24 – 42

by an infrastructural Like economy, which refers to an infrastructure that allows the exchange of data, traffic, affects, connections and money, mediated through the Like button on the social web (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013, p.1353). Thus, on video-sharing platforms such as Douyin, creators attempted to hook the audience within ten seconds, attracting viewers to continue watching the clips, and potentially letting the audience do activities such as liking, commenting and sharing the video. To leave a lasting impression among viewers, creators not only needed to perform consistently because of audience expectations and the platform economy, but they also learned and negotiated with platform algorithms to make their niche content fit into algorithmic categories and to increase popularity.

Algorithmic Management of Identity

Although participant creators could flexibly manage their multiple online identities through platform migration, there was an impetus to adhere to a single, fixed identity on a platform because most of the commercial software collected user data and targeted the audience with advertising (Marwick, 2013a, p.357). It is easier for a single identity to be recognised by the recommendation system in terms of "public relevance algorithms" (Gillespie, 2014) and algorithmic "visibility" (Bishop, 2018; Cotter, 2018). The more focus on a niche, the more possibilities that platforms would promote creators' videos to the right audience through the recommendation systems. Research participants chose their niche of content subjectively, while the decision was also influenced by the algorithms. If a kind of video fitted into a trend on a platform, that video might be supported by the algorithms and recommended to a broad range of audiences. As the viewership rose and creators reviewed the figures, they got the sense that a type of content could help to increase popularity, and so creators would put efforts into making a similar type of videos within a niche area.

This research found that creators had developed personal senses about the operations of this "algorithmic power", and based on their perceptions, they engaged in a range of strategies to intervene in and negotiate the unpredictable algorithms in efforts to enhance their visibility (Bucher, 2012; Bucher, 2017; Cotter, 2018; van der Nagel, 2018). Whilst research participants did not know exactly how a platform's proprietary recommendation algorithms worked, they learnt about the "folk theories" and "rules" encoded in algorithms from their experience, and adopted their own tactics to play the "visibility game" and intervene in algorithmic governance (Cotter 2018; Myers West, 2018; van der Nagel 2018).

Because participant creators had one or two primary platforms with other subsidiary accounts on other services, they usually put more focus on learning the rules of the algorithms on their main platforms. Participants deployed tactics in attempts to enhance their visibility, including trying different trendy keywords in titles, attaching multiple tags that were popular on a platform, frequently uploading new videos and actively interacting with their audiences. They also actively engaged with the assigned topics and events provided by some Chinese platforms. For instance, platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili and RED have various themed topics and templates to guide, inspire and encourage their users to create content. By making themed videos and adding the assigned hashtags in their posts, Chinese creator participants suggested that they could potentially gain online traffic support and even financial incentives provided by platforms. Participants also used analytics of video-sharing platforms to improve their online performance. Sometimes they spent money on running advertising campaigns through the marketing tools on platforms to more precisely target an audience, increase exposure rate and monitor the performance of a video.

The tactics that participant creators used for playing the visibility game were specifically tailored to each platform, although creators might share the same content across multiple platforms. Participants were required to become actively engaged in managing their accounts beyond simply uploading videos, because platforms contain algorithmic ranking that holds the power of determining who and what shows on the top of the users' feeds, the trending list, and the interface where users explore new content (Bucher 2012; Gillespie 2014; Cotter 2018). These algorithmic systems implied a need to spend time and effort

optimizing themselves and their account settings, following the algorithmic logic and cultures on a platform. Through such algorithmically-directed and platform-specific efforts, participants found they could gain the "rewards" of visibility on a platform, and avoid the "punishment" of online traffic restriction or being shadowbanned (Bucher, 2012; Myers West 2018). The scale of their channels was different, but what they had in common was the micro-celebrity-like practices and the move towards a niche and a single identity as the result of algorithmic management.

However, negotiating among the two poles of performing the fluid hybridity across multiple platforms and being consistent on a platform amplified the sense of in-betweenness. This is in part because research participants are members of "Chinese digital diasporas" in Australia, who disperse across the geographical, political and cultural borders between the two countries, In addition to this experience in Australia, they have a shared memory of being a Chinese person in China, and they use Chinese social media platforms for "returning" to the "homeland" of China (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Sun and Yu, 2016; Yu and Sun, 2019). These observations confirm existing knowledge of the sense of in-betweenness among Chinese diasporas (Yu and Sun, 2019, p.18), but they have also led us to see a new perspective that Chinese creators' hybridized practices of the cultural self have been taken place across Western and Chinese video-sharing platforms. There is also a sense of spatial and cultural vacillation with negotiations of cross-platform video-sharing practices and diasporic identities (Zhang and Wang, 2019).

For bilingual and trilingual creators like Lee, sometimes they needed to deal with questions from Chinese viewers in mainland China in terms of the hybridity performed on Chinese platforms, leaving participant creators to consider whether they should continue the performance of cosmopolitan Chineseness that absorbs Western characteristics, or to present themselves more as "pure Chinese". By conducting platform migration practices, Chinese creators in this research enjoyed the flexibility of presenting the self in various ways. However, the performance of cross-platform online identities also reinforced the feeling of being stuck in-between cultures, posing challenges to creators for following the algorithmic logic of platforms by adhering to a single identity while performing the authentic hybrid self at the same time.

Conclusion

This article examined Chinese video creators' cross-platform content production and circulation on Chinese and Western social media services, and their strategies of managing online identities in the transnational context of China and Australia. It used digital ethnography methods and a creator-centric perspective to provide critical and conceptual analysis of the intersection of platforms and cultures in the emerging global social media entertainment industry. It found that Chinese creators posted and shared videos across multiple platforms according to the imagined audiences and affordances that populated and defined them. Due to the dynamic and the increasingly globalised ecology of the digital environment, these creators developed a series of strategic cross-platform practices, which we argue is a form of *platform migration*, in order to create optimal conditions for their videos to spread and be viewed. Based on these migratory platform behaviours, creators were able to present themselves through diverse video formats, including short, longer-forms of videos and live streaming, and to commercialise their video production.

Platform migration allowed Chinese creators to flexibly adjust their performances by engaging with different audiences across platforms, to craft their online personae and to find their content verticles that had the potentials to thrive on a platform. But it also brought challenges to creators' online identity management because of the messiness of multiplatform use. Although creators had multiple, fluid identities, they were encouraged to adhere to a single, fixed online identity because of audiences' expectations and commercial realities, including algorithmic operations and intermediaries like MCNs pushing them to find niche content. As creators applied micro-celebrity strategies and shared their transnational experience across platforms, they tended to form a hybrid Chinese identity, or cosmopolitan Chineseness, as a unique cross-cultural character to attract online viewers. Whilst Chinese

Volume 9.1 (2022): pp. 24 – 42

creators faced challenges of maintaining the consistency of a single identity, they also felt a sense of in-betweenness because of their cosmopolitan Chinese identity. Ultimately, platform migration produced an unstable or precarious online identity, one that needed to be managed continuously, flexible to be ready to shift platforms and their conditions as demanded in this dynamic space.

The findings of this research help to build up the existing knowledge of creator culture and social media entertainment through the investigation of Chinese content creators' cross-platform practices and online identity management. The originality of this research is situated in a cross-platform and cross-cultural context to understand social media use and its impacts on the performance of identity. By developing the concept of platform migration, this research contributes to the gap in researching cross-platform social media use, and helps to understand the intersection among video creators, platform affordances, platform ecosystems and social media entertainment industries. This paper builds on the literature of online identity and self-presentation on social media by showing video creators' practices of identity curation, and their attempts of creating a single identity to meet the expectations of an audience and to follow the logic of platforms. It develops our conceptual understanding of the emergence of a cross-platform cosmopolitan identity, that is a single online identity with hybrid cultural characteristics, as one of the consequences of platform migration. The limitation of this paper lies in data gathered from a small sample of young video creators in a specific transnational context between China and Australia. Future research could explore a greater variety of creators, and survey other perspectives through interviews with MCN executives, platform executives, viewers and other professionals, and consider different transnational contexts and social media platforms.

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Volume 9.1 (2022): pp. 24 – 42

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Volume 9.1 (2022): pp. 24 – 42

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