

Papi Jiang and Microcelebrity in China: A Multilevel Analysis

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The vibrancy of China's microcelebrity phenomenon contrasts sharply with the scant scholarly attention paid to it. To address this lacuna, this article provides a systematic analysis of Papi Jiang, the most prominent and illustrative example of a Chinese microcelebrity. I argue that Papi's rise to fame is dependent on a particular digital environment with technological and cultural specificities. By bringing the phenomenon of microcelebrity in China into the spotlight, my work complicates Western-dominated writings that tend to emphasize the performances of microcelebrities as portraying an authentic, intimate, and accessible self. This article also calls for a broader analytical framework for the study of microcelebrity that invokes a multilevel analysis. I argue that microcelebrity could be better understood through combining a microlevel investigation of its performances, a new focus on the active role of digital technologies, and close scrutiny of the broader media ecology and sociocultural contexts in which microcelebrity takes shape.

Keywords: actor-network theory, gendered technology, performances, Papi Jiang, short video consumption, Chinese Internet

The social media environment provides a plethora of new ways for ordinary people to produce themselves as "microcelebrities." Coined by Theresa Senft (2008), the term *microcelebrity* is used to describe how ordinary people gain popularity by putting their personal lives on display on social media. Through researching different examples of microcelebrities, scholars have analyzed their self-presentation and self-branding strategies and how these practices are constrained by the business models of social media platforms (Hou, 2018; Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Raun, 2018).

Until now, there has been no scholarship that systematically examines the microcelebrity phenomenon in the Chinese context (Zhang & Seta, 2018). However, the flowering of microcelebrity, or *wanghong* in Chinese, contrasts sharply with the scant scholarly attention paid to it. Microcelebrity in China is a recent phenomenon, although Internet celebrities have long histories that can be traced back to the late 1990s when BBS was the dominant social networking platform (Zhang & Su, 2016). The year 2016 has been suggested as the first time microcelebrity became important in China. Since then, *wanghong* has not only existed as an online buzzword, but also as a commercially successful and ubiquitous form of industry (Zhang

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& Su, 2016). Based on an authoritative report, by the end of 2016, China had more than 1 million microcelebrities, and more than 80% of them were women. The economic value of the microcelebrity industry was about 58 billion RMB, exceeding even the total box office takings of Chinese films in 2015 (Liu, 2016). In both China and other countries, the term *microcelebrity* encompasses a wide range of types given that different microcelebrities rise to fame based on different skills and performances (Analysys, 2016). However, in general, *wanghong* in China primarily manifests itself in three forms. First, young live-streaming anchors use coquettish performances to attract followers and gain popularity. They typically spend their days before the camera singing, dancing, playing games, or flirting with online fans. Second, fashionistas based on Weibo and Taobao—China's most influential microblog platform and online retailing platform, respectively—gain fame through sharing fashion products and revealing their private lives in the form of photos, short videos, and live streams (Zhang & Seta, 2018). Because most of the fashionistas own fashion stores on Taobao, the essence of success for them lies in monetizing their followers, that is, in transforming their fans into buyers of their products. In 2016, live-streaming anchors and fashionistas were the two most lucrative forms of microcelebrity in China, occupying more than 86.4% of the total economic value of this industry (Analysys, 2016). The third form of microcelebrity, represented by Papi Jiang in this article, has gained recognition through posting creative and entertaining content rather than showing and selling their daily lives.

Drawing on the case study of Papi Jiang, the most well-known microcelebrity in 2016, this article discusses how digital technologies, the broader media ecology, and sociocultural contexts shape the making and performances of microcelebrities in China. How can we understand Papi Jiang against the background of China's ever-growing consumption of short videos? How do the technological features of video shooting and sharing apps catalyze Papi's popularity? What is the performative identity constructed by Papi, and how does Papi strategically present that identity online? How are Papi's performances constructed by, and consistent with, China's particular sociocultural status quo? Bearing these objectives in mind, this article first situates Papi Jiang's case in the broader media ecology, where the availability of smartphones stimulates people's consumption of short videos via mobile apps. Then, I examine how the technological features of short video apps contribute to Papi's popularity and performances. Finally, I analyze how Papi Jiang gains online recognition through performing personae with her talent for humor, and how such an identity resonates with the online *tucao* (i.e., exposing and criticizing unreasonable behavior or expressions in a humorous way) culture dominating the Chinese Internet.

Method

The case study is both a very common and an efficient methodology used in microcelebrity studies. Prominent examples include Gamson's (2011) analysis of Marlene Dietrich, Marwick's (2013a) analysis of Adam Jackson, and Jerslev's (2016) analysis of YouTuber Zoella. In essence, the case study is extremely useful when scholarly study is patchy and exploratory research is needed (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999). Thus, the case study is considered a robust research method, especially when researchers intend to provide an in-depth explanation of social behavior and a holistic view of the process, which is exactly the aim of my article (Meyer, 2001). The drawback of a single-case design lies in the limitations on generalizing conclusions from it. Nevertheless, one way to overcome this—also adopted by this article—is to link the single case to a theoretical framework to illuminate a larger picture (Meyer, 2001; Zainal, 2007).

This article adopts multiple research methods. First, I collected and closely read all of Papi's videos posted before 2016, the most critical year during which she gained popularity and fame. Following the grounded theory approach, I summarized and categorized the themes of Papi's videos. The process involved "a systematic choice and study of several comparison groups and a conversation between empirical data and conceptual framework to reach higher levels of abstraction" (Glaser & Strauss, 2000, p. 9). Given that Papi's videos are typically no more than three minutes long, most of them incorporate only one theme. Moreover, Papi gives most of her videos a succinct title that cuts to the core of its theme so that audiences can quickly capture the humorous point. All of these features facilitated my analysis. This procedure allowed me to identify what types of content and performances are selected by Papi to attract her followers. I report the frequently occurring themes and representative titles in this article.

Second, to facilitate my analysis of the technical dimensions of short video apps and short video consumption in China, I conducted eight semistructured, open-ended, and in-depth interviews with rank-and-file technicians, senior technology officers, and high-level managers from leading short video app companies, including Bytedance's Douyin, Tencent-backed Kuaishou, and Miaopai. The interviews were conducted from May 2018 to August 2018 in Beijing. Accessing people from China's leading Internet companies was not easy. I recruited the interview participants by creatively tapping into my personal networks. Before each interview, I designed specific questions based on the interviewee's position and company. I also guaranteed complete anonymity and privacy. These interviews not only provided me with an insider's view of China's video-making apps and short video consumption, but also helped me to situate Papi Jiang's popularity in a larger technological and sociocultural milieu.

Third, I reviewed and analyzed all necessary secondary information both in English and Chinese. In general, the documents I collected had two dimensions. There were statistical reports of Internet penetration, smartphone usage, and video consumption, produced by governmental research agencies and authoritative consulting companies. I also drew on interviews with Papi Jiang and trade journals and news articles analyzing her success and related microcelebrity phenomena. All in all, applying multiple methods to case study research not only enabled me to describe the processes of the microcelebrity phenomenon in a real-life environment—at a surface and deep level—but also to explain its underlying complexities.

Papi Jiang and China's Short Video Industry

Papi Jiang, the online moniker for Yilei Jiang, rose to fame by posting fast-talking humorous and satirical short videos. Instead of touching on political and social problems plaguing contemporary China, her videos primarily deal with topics close to the daily life of the young urban generation (Huang, 2016; Qin, 2016). For example, she pokes fun at female stars' self-packaging strategies, satirizes two-faced colleagues within office culture, discloses the typical deceitful strategies of men and the subtexts of women's expressions, ridicules society's discrimination against women, and contrasts languages and culture in Northern China and Southern China. From September 2015, when she launched her online video series, until now, she has posted more than 200 videos. Within an extremely short time, she rapidly accumulated strikingly large numbers of fans and achieved widespread recognition. For example, she had 2 million followers on Sina Weibo in January 2016, increasing to 7 million by the end of March, and

reaching 13 million in May (Luo, 2018). In less than one year, Papi amassed 44 million followers across multiple platforms, such as Weibo, WeChat, and other video-sharing platforms (Qin, 2016). Even though online user data in China are typically characterized by their large scale, the figure far outstrips the followers of some prominent YouTube celebrities, such as Ryan Higa (21 million in 2018) and Jenna Marbles (18 million in 2018; Qin, 2016).

Beyond that, she took just three months to monetize her videos and successfully transform herself from a microcelebrity to an entrepreneur who owns a microcelebrity incubating company. In March 2016, Papi became China's first virtual star, receiving 12 million RMB in total in investments from venture capitalists. In April 2016, Papi established a professional multiple-channel network company, Papitube, a name mimicking YouTube. The company aims to produce original videos, incubate microcelebrities, and monetize content. By June 2018, two years after its establishment, it had signed contracts with more than 60 vloggers and attracted more than 300,000,000 followers across various social media platforms (Mo, 2018). Half of them make funny videos like Papi, and half make beauty, fashion, and lifestyle videos (Mo, 2018). The skyrocketing growth of Papi's popularity, combined with this astonishing commercial success, led Chinese media, Internet companies, and venture investors to unanimously dub her the number-one microcelebrity of 2016.

As the bellwether of China's booming microcelebrity phenomenon, Papi's sudden rise to fame parallels the country's ever-increasing consumption of short videos on mobile devices. Papi mentioned in an interview that this timing was a crucial factor in her popularity. She explained that, on the one hand, there is a rapidly growing demand for high-quality short videos, and yet, on the other hand, there are not many good videomakers competing with her for the market (World Economic Forum, 2018).

According to the China Internet Network Information Center's latest data, by the end of 2017, China had 772 million Internet users and the Internet penetration rate was 55.8%. The development of the mobile Internet remains the principal factor in boosting the growth of Internet users. In China, the mobile phone is by far the most popular online access technology, and 97.5% of Internet users employ their mobile phones to access the Internet (China Internet Network Information Center, 2018). In sharp contrast, there is a declining proportion of Chinese netizens that use desktops, laptops, or tablets to access the Internet (China Internet Network Information Center, 2018; see Figure 1).

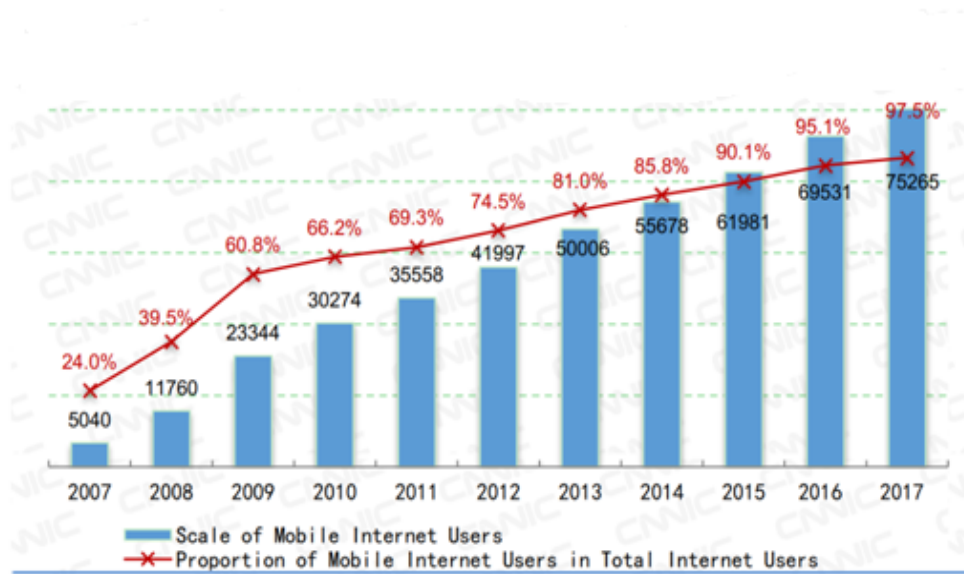


Figure 1. The growth of the mobile Internet and its share of total Internet use.

The widespread availability of mobile phones and the explosive growth of the 4G mobile Internet have led to a spectacular growth in consumption of short (typically up to five minutes long) videos. My interviewees Yao from Douyin and Guo from Kuaishou suggested that,

partially because China's domestically produced smartphones are very accessible, and partially because Internet data is very cheap, the short video has become the newest tailwind behind the growth of China's ICT industry. It is also one of the major ways that Chinese Internet users record and share information online. It is quite understandable. When time becomes more fragmented online, people will increasingly need short content.

Since 2016, China has been witnessing an explosive development of short video apps, which take up an increasing share of netizens' online data and time. Prominent companies in this space include Meipai, Miaopai, Tencent-backed Kuaishou, and Bytedance's Douyin. All of them enable ordinary people to shoot and share short videos with complex musical and visual effects. By the end of 2017, the number of short video users reached 353 million (Iresearch, 2017). The amount of time Chinese Internet users spent watching short videos increased from 45.7 minutes daily in 2016 to 65.8 minutes daily in 2017 (Sykong, 2018). The market value of short videos reached 5.7 billion RMB in 2017, increasing 183.9% compared with the previous year (Iresearch, 2017). Against such a background, the popularity of Papi and her videos, which are short and primarily disseminated via mobile platforms, conforms to the broader media landscape in China.

Assembling Microcelebrities: A Technoscientific Perspective

Mobile Apps and Short Videomaking

Microcelebrities play strategically with digital technologies to construct their performances and establish an online presence (Burgess & Green, 2018; Hou, 2018). Burgess and Green (2018, p. 52) suggest that in many of the most popular user-created videos, there is a noticeable focus on video as a technology rather than artistry. However, existing writings tend to construe social media as a “context” or “backdrop” where the performances of microcelebrities take place (Pace, 2018). Few have explained how particular technological designs or how the materiality of digital technologies actively shape the development of microcelebrities. Science and technology studies—devoted to understanding how technology is produced and how technology exerts impacts on human beings—are instrumental to addressing this shortcoming (Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2014; Latour, 2007). Drawing on actor-network theory (ANT), this section explains how the availability of short video apps and their technological designs provide an effective mechanism for Papi to produce videos, construct personae, and reach larger numbers of audiences.

Developed by key figures Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, ANT intends to “bring the things to the foreground” (Latour, 2007, p. 66). Instead of approaching society as hierarchical entities structured by power relations, ANT considers society as flat networks of heterogeneous materials that compose not only people, but also machines and material elements (Latour, 2007; Law & Singleton, 2005). Accordingly, technology is a powerful “actant” in shaping social realities (Latour, 1996, 2007).

The materialist orientation of ANT enabled me to ponder the important role of digital technology in making Papi an overnight celebrity. Much more important, ANT is also an illuminating methodology that can contribute to microcelebrity research. ANT emphasizes the interrogation of everyday life as semiotic performances in which humans and nonhumans play their roles to create effects (Kien, 2009; Law & Singleton, 2005). Thus, ANT is essentially a performative approach. The theoretical and methodological groundings of ANT are consistent with my discussion of Papi because the culture of microcelebrity is also intrinsically performative.

Papi’s videos are illustrative examples of how ordinary people experiment with the technological capabilities of videomaking, editing, and sharing (Tencent Entertainment, 2016). It seems that it is not difficult for Papi to make a two-minute dialogue with herself in quick moving cuts and subtitles. A large part of her videos’ comic effect comes from the fast-paced and squeaky voice, a little like Alvin and the Chipmunks (Yang, 2016). However, the production of short videos with a fast-talking and high-pitched style is not easy to achieve without the emerging mobile apps that enable ordinary people to produce and consume visual content in an increasingly creative and accessible way.

When Papi produced her videos in the early period of 2015, she used an innovative app called Miaopai to shoot her videos (QQTN, 2016). Literally translated as seconds-shooting, Miaopai was one of the earliest short video apps available in China to possess powerful editing capabilities. Launched in August 2013, Miaopai has enabled users to shoot and upload either 10-second or 60-second videos in an

effortless way. Because of its simple technological design, Miaopai has attracted a phenomenally large number of users. By the end of 2016, Miaopai had 70 million daily active users, increasing by 5 million compared with 2015. It handled 1.5 million short videos uploaded every day, with people watching 2.5 billion short videos every 24 hours (Millward, 2016). Although other short video apps came along later, most of them were influenced by Miaopai's technological logic.

From the technological perspective, four salient features of Miaopai make it particularly instrumental in the production and promotion of Papi's videos. First, the technological function of Miaopai is powerful and accessible. It can be used for shooting a new video or editing an existing video. Different filters, background, emoticons, and music are categorized and stored in Miaopai's material libraries. Moreover, it provides the function of accelerating the speed of speech. These technological designs facilitate the addition of visual and sound effects by ordinary people, even without any professional training. Miaopai is technically designed for ordinary people without professional shooting and editing knowledge, encouraging them to upload and share their tiny videos.

Second, Miaopai designed its product as an app for making 10-second videos in its inception, and later it added a 30-second choice. Designing an app devoted to shooting and sharing videos of such extremely short durations was quite innovative at the time, especially considering that most of the content-making platforms then were dealing with texts, photos, and long videos. However, Miaopai understood and catered to the nascent digital culture, which meant that short videos promised a better way to dominate people's fragmented time online. As my informant Xu from Miaopai explained,

Miaopai found that the most frequently broadcast videos on the Sina microblog are usually shorter than three minutes. It turns out that people are not patient enough to stick around, simply because they have too many videos to choose from.

Papi's early videos were very short in length, typically up to three minutes. Compared with beauty, fashion, and lifestyle vloggers whose videos typically ranged from 20 minutes to 30 minutes, Papi's microvideos were not typical at that time. In addition to making very tiny videos, Miaopai provides a mechanism to edit several separate short video clips and integrate them into a longer one very easily. With Miaopai, Papi could make several segments of microvideo and build them into a rich narrative.

Third, because of its microvideo form, Miaopai is not data-hungry, requiring only 600K of data to upload a video, equivalent to the data used in uploading four pictures (Lee, 2013). Considering that nearly 98% of Papi's viewers are mobile users, watching short videos in scattered segments of time that do not demand a lot of data is a crucial point of attraction (Bi & Wang, 2016).

Last but not least, Miaopai is not an independent tool, but exists within a network that encourages audience participation. Users of Miaopai can easily share their videos to several external social networking sites. Such technological capacity helped Papi quickly to feature on all the video websites that are popular in China, such as Tencent videos and Youku videos (Bi & Wang, 2016).

Gendered Apps: Wanghong Face and Yanzhi Culture in China

With the burgeoning *wanghong* phenomenon, *wanghonglian* (*wanghong* face) has gone viral (G. Zhang & Seta, 2018, p. 64). Literally translated as microcelebrity face, *wanghonglian* describes the uniform and unreal appearance of many of China's microcelebrities. The standards of *wanghonglian* include a doll-like face with big eyes, double eyelids, white skin, a high-bridged nose, and pointed chin. If different celebrities rely on different performances and specialties to gain fame, having a *wanghonglian* becomes the most indispensable feature for most of China's female microcelebrities, which is especially true for online streaming anchors and fashionistas. To gain a microcelebrity face, young women turn to cosmetic surgery and stylized makeup. Thus, what makes *wanghonglian* problematic is not only that it advocates a rather narrow, mechanical, and unreal definition of female beauty, but also it stimulates a ferocious appetite for cosmetic enhancement by means of surgery (Flora, 2016). Thus, to some degree, *wanghonglian* has a negative and derogatory connotation.

Nevertheless, in sharp contrast, Papi seems to be the opposite of China's microcelebrities with look-alike *wanghonglian*. Papi always wears light makeup and dresses in everyday clothes, leading some scholars and media critics to praise her for resisting the shallow understanding of women's beauty and challenging the gendered scripts. Nevertheless, I emphasize that Papi also takes advantage of her appearance to attract followers. In each of her videos, she ends with the tagline "I am Papi, a lady who embodies beauty and talent." Such an expression is valid given that Papi was born with features that meet almost all the *wanghonglian* requirements: a sharp chin, a narrow nose with a straight bridge, double eyelids, and white skin. Such a beautiful appearance has led ordinary people to call her "China's Sophie Marceau" (see Figure 2). Considering that 75% of Papi's fans are urban females between 17 and 25 years of age who love beauty products and taking selfies, her beautiful appearance is an indispensable lure for audiences (Bi & Wang, 2016).



Figure 2. Papi Jiang: China's Sophie Marceau.

Beyond Papi's born beauty, the app she uses to shoot and edit her videos offers virtual plastic surgery features, which can enhance her appearance further by smoothing and whitening her skin. The technical design of virtual plastic surgery makes Papi more appealing, perfectly matching the standards of *wanghonglian*. In fact, all short video apps in China, such as Miaopai, Meipai, Kuaishou, and Douyin, incorporate the function of virtual plastic surgery. Thus, far from a neutral and sanitized tool for making short videos, these apps—serving as a mechanism to reinforce the emphasis on women's appearance—are gendered.

Nevertheless, technology is not an independent force. The way that technology works is deeply influenced and conditioned by existing social structures, of which gender is an integral part (Wajcman, 1991, 2004). Feminist science and technology scholars have suggested that technology is a manifestation of masculinity culture, not only because technology is dominated by men, so as to reflect and reinforce gender divisions and inequalities, but also because the design and the materiality of technology embody patriarchal values. Such coproduction of gender and technology starts with the innovation and design process and continues as people consume technology (Bray, 2007). My interviewee Xu (from Miaopai) demonstrated and confirmed such dynamic processes when he explained the product:

Miaopai—in its inception—is designed for female users, since designers believe that women are especially keen on showing selfies and sharing their private lives. Thus, in our product design, we accordingly embed technological designs to attract female consumers. The statistical data proves our assumptions. By the end of 2016, the dominant users of Miaopai were young girls. Specifically, female users account for more than 70%, among whom 90% are between 12 and 34 years old.

A core emphasis of science and technology studies is how science and technology are socially and culturally contingent. The technical design of virtual plastic surgery functionality in short video apps is, in large part, shaped by the operation of gender interests in contemporary China. For young women born and brought up in the reform era, fashion and beauty became arenas for newly permitted self-expression and experimentation with fantasies of self (Hua, 2013; Luo, 2013; Rofel, 2007). Parallel with the emergence of *wanghonglian* is the whole society's emphasis on women's *yanzhi*, literally translated as the quality of one's appearance. As an online buzzword since 2015, the term is used by people to identify the important feature of current China, a society competing in *yanzhi*. People with high *yanzhi* are more competitive in their careers. As I mentioned above, Papi's widely recognized high *yanzhi*—with the help of technological enhancement—is one crucial lure of her videos.

Performed Personae: Papi as a Lady With Beauty and Talent

To exist and be popular in the social media context that inherently emphasizes representation and connectivity, microcelebrities need to engage in explicit and continuous performances to bring themselves into being (Burgess & Green, 2018; Dijck, 2013; Marshall, 2014). Scholars suggest that connectedness, accessibility, ordinariness, intimacy, and authenticity are central elements in microcelebrities' performances (Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Song, 2018). Audiences are considered active and important actors constituting the landscape of microcelebrity. On the one hand, the

performances of microcelebrities are strategically assembled, based on careful estimations of a niche audience. On the other hand, audiences constantly provide new interpretations of these performances (Marwick, 2015). Thus, most microcelebrities feel obliged to stay connected with, and accessible to, their audiences in order to foster a close and direct relationship with them (Jerslev, 2016). Ordinarity is used by microcelebrities to shorten their distance from audiences. Microcelebrities need to communicate a sense of equality with their audiences through emphasizing that their lives are ordinary rather than superior (Jerslev, 2016). Intimacy is another key principle in their performative strategies, which explains how microcelebrities seek attention through exposing their private, intimate lives and thoughts (Jerslev, 2016; Raun, 2018). Authenticity, as Marwick (2013b) suggests, is the most important principle to differentiate good performances from bad ones. In most of the scholars' studies, authenticity is understood as "showing a palpable sense of truthful self-expression" and "portraying oneself as a real person instead of a staged character" (Marwick, 2013b, p.2). In sum, the online performance of microcelebrities is dependent on, and characterized by, constant presence and interaction, disclosing private matters to foster a sense of intimacy, and presenting one's "real life."

However, not all microcelebrities gain their popularity through revealing their lives. This analytical framework works best for the fashion, beauty, and lifestyle vloggers. There are quite a few exceptions. In examining Korean microcelebrities, Song (2018) shows how microcelebrities present exaggerated and aggressive identities rather than their intimate and real selves. Following this line, I argue that Papi gained popularity through presenting a constructed and designed persona as "a lady embedded with beauty and talents" instead of primarily showing her real daily life. Papi has straightforwardly admitted that the identity was carefully constructed for online consumption, which did not necessarily mean that she always took it seriously in reality (Chieu, 2017). Moreover, Papi does not maintain the close connections with her followers that current scholarship has emphasized. She barely replies to her fans' comments unless she personally knows them. In Papi's interviews, she has repeatedly acknowledged that she is inclined to keep a distance from followers' comments, given that some of them are extremely negative; she also frankly has pointed out that she is easily affected by outsiders and that these negative comments take a toll on her (Chieu, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2018).

As a graduate of the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, China's prestigious performing arts school, with a major in film and drama directing, Papi is very at home with performing, directing, and acting, which gives her a built-in advantage over most videomakers who do not have any formal training. When asking Papi why she decided to use short videos as her main medium, she explained,

Shooting short videos is my way of expression, same as some others express themselves through posting pictures or writing blogs. I am more familiar with and good at acting, and thus I try to use short videos to express myself. (World Economic Forum, 2018)

Before continuing to the detailed analysis of her performances, it is necessary to start by explaining the form of her videos and how Papi benefits from them. To some degree, the discussion of the form of her videos echoes the former technological section. In general, Papi's videos do not have

complex and fascinating visual effects; instead, they are characterized by affordable production. When commenting on Papi's videos, my four interviewees from Douyin and Kuaishou, China's leading microvideo platforms, invariably mentioned that

Being "light" is a notable feature of Papi's videos, which has given her selling points. It means two things: low production costs and a funny performative style. First, Papi's videos are not characterized by high production costs. There is nothing blockbuster about them; they are not carefully designed and filmed by professional media companies. The low-budget and low-maintenance nature of Papi's videos gives the impression to audiences that she is ordinary, accessible, and approachable. Second, Papi's videos are lighthearted and amusing in content and performance, always intended to induce laughter. (Personal interview with Zhang and Guo from Kuaishou and Yan and Wu from Douyin)

Before Papi established Papitube, she shot and edited all the videos herself. Most of them were filmed in her messy apartment without any elaborate decoration. Compared with the clean and organized background typically shown by most beauty and fashion vloggers, Papi's cluttered room shows the low maintenance and ordinariness of her videos. To some degree, revealing her private and untidy living environment achieves an effect of intimacy. As current scholarship has suggested, showing ordinariness and intimacy are essential strategies ingrained in microcelebrities' performances (Jerslev, 2016; Song, 2018).

As I have repeatedly emphasized, Papi's videos are very short in length, typically up to three minutes only. However, for videomakers, the shorter the video is, the more challenging it becomes to present intriguing content and performances. Papi's videos are quite good at capturing the audience's attention in the very first five seconds. One of the most frequently used strategies to achieve this goal is throwing out a quick question, such as "Do you have a friend like this in your life?" or "Have you ever come across such a boss?" In our information-overloaded environment online, attention has become a scarce commodity and microcelebrities compete fiercely for it (Marwick, 2015). In such a situation, it turns out that people become more impatient, less likely to stick around to wait for something to happen. For Internet users, there are simply too many videos to choose from Yan, a senior technology officer from Douyin, said,

If your story or video does not promise something interesting or useful at the beginning, say within 10 seconds, fewer people will continue to watch. This tendency is projected to continue and be exacerbated. The length of audience cold start—the time needed for securing audiences when they approach new content—will become increasingly shorter in the future.

In one interview, Papi detailed the process of making her videos; she explained that the first step is to decide the topics, followed by choosing specific roles to illustrate the selected themes. Thus, to analyze Papi's performances, I start unpacking the most popular themes shown in her videos.

The first video that won Papi widespread attention is one making fun of Shanghai women, who tend to drop English words into conversation to show their cosmopolitan style. After that, she made a

series of videos that derive their humor from tapping into China's dramatic regional cultural and linguistic variations (see Table 1). In fact, China's various dialects have always been fertile ground to create humor, widely used in comedy films. Inspired by this tradition, Papi made four videos contrasting Taiwanese with Northwestern dialects—two opposite intonations—to provoke laughs.

The theme that Papi has discussed most is gender relations, for example, pinpointing how women and men misunderstand each other and varieties of social discrimination against women (see Table 1). All are common issues facing the young generation. Taking a specific example, titled "Survival Tips for Men," Papi created a series of videos dealing with one of the most intriguing and puzzling questions facing almost every couple: Why men find it so hard to understand what women say? The differences between men and women are a tremendously popular topic, especially when it comes to decoding women's language. Papi launched the series to detail typical metaphors and wordings used by women, reveal their underlying meanings, and more importantly instruct men to make proper responses.

The first video of the series starts with a common problem in dialogue between men and women: When women say they are fine, what do they really mean? In fact, many of Papi's videos begin by asking a question that is interesting and frequently encountered in daily life. It is a good strategy for short videos to capture attention because it sets up a situation so that audiences know immediately what to expect in the following minutes. Next, Papi unpacks varieties of possible interpretations in different contexts, tightly focusing her ideas on the theme and delivering them in a fast and humorous way. "It could be, why didn't you buy me a gift in the context of holidays or particular meaningful days?" she said, "or why didn't you notice my new hair or makeup style when women make some changes in their appearance?" In a similar way, she discusses various questions concerning gender relations in a humorous and satirical way. For example, in "The Sorrows of Beautiful Women," she makes fun of women who boast of their own beauty; in "Why Women Always Love Shopping," she mocks the shopaholic woman.

She also touches on family relations, criticizing how parents and close relatives exert heavy pressure on unmarried young people. She bitterly pokes fun at the hypocritical relationships among office colleagues. She reveals the huge difference between real and fake friends. For Papi's audiences, made up mostly of 20- to 30-year-old urban young people, the topics discussed in Papi's videos preoccupy them.

Table 1. Representative Themes in Papi's Videos.

| Themes | Video Titles |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Gender relations | Survival Strategies of Men You never understand the pain of beautiful ladies. It is too hard to be a women in current society. |
| Dialects and geocultural relations | Combining Shanghai dialect with English If a Taiwanese speaks the Northeastern dialect |
| Family relations | Has your mom ever told these to you? Do you prepare well for the spring festival? |
| Friend relations | Do you have friends like these? |

In Papi's videos, she tries to construct an exaggerated performative style. For some videos, she plays a dual role in creatively hilarious ways. Using the dual role to produce comedy is not a new thing; it has a rich history in cinema and stage. For example, Eddie Murphy and Mike Meyers are representative comedians who have specialized in playing dual roles (Haigis, 2016). Drawing on this tradition, Papi typically plays two roles against each other in an amusing conflict to demonstrate how they have misunderstood each other or how they find it difficult to understand each other. For example, in "Boss Zhang Teaches You How to Make a Movie," she plays and contrasts the greedy boss of a film company and an unsophisticated script writer. The former is portrayed as considering the film solely as a commercial product whose content is totally unimportant as long as it makes a profit; in sharp contrast, the latter is portrayed as purely thinking of the film as a cultural work that should have high artistic value. Papi creates a number of situations in which she can play dual roles, such as doctor versus patient, employer versus interviewee, salesman versus customer. For example, the representative videos are titled "Boss Zhang Series," "A Conversation Between a Doctor and a Patient," and "A Daily Conversation between a Company Manager and a Whokaholic," etc. In other videos, Papi uses the form of a talk show to explain a social phenomenon or to satirize some people as ridiculous and problematic. Both of the forms produce comic effects through Papi's nonsensical and burlesque performances, something that she jokingly has called "serious schizophrenia" (World Economic Forum, 2018).

Being satirical and ludicrous in nature, Papi's videos try to playfully subvert a range of authoritative discourses and provide a vehicle for both comic criticism and emotional catharsis. The artistic style of Papi's videos—poking fun at everyday topics dealing with gender, family, colleagues, and romantic relationships—in fact caters to the pervasive online *tucào* culture (Lubatkin, 2016). The boom in online *tucào* culture is conditioned by, and contributes to, the specificity of the Chinese social media sphere. First, it is well known that the Chinese Internet is heavily controlled by the government. Under such circumstances, satire has been a strategy for insubordinate Chinese Internet users to skirt the state's control over online expression (Lee, 2016; Li, 2017; Yang & Jiang, 2015). Even if Papi Jiang does not touch on social and political issues, using a playful and satirical tone in the videos can protect her from censorship. For Papi, concern about political censorship is far from trivial. On April 18, 2016, the State's Propaganda Department required Papi to discipline herself and rectify her use of foul language. She was warned that her videos would be permanently removed if she continued to use swear words (Schoenmakers, 2016). Second, in an age when people live a stressful and anxious life, the playful videos offer addictive, low-cost, and satisfying entertainment and have been used as a trademark in the marketing and publicity endeavors of online videomakers, including Papi Jiang. As my three interviewees invariably suggested,

Life for young urban generations in China is full of too much pressure, characterized by working overtime and paying high mortgages. There is no time and no extra money to do exercise or go to the park during weekdays or at the weekend. Watching short videos is cheap and accessible and thus the best way to relax. (Personal interview with Yang and Lan from Kuaishou and Yao from Douyin)

The third point is closely relevant to the second one. Although academic analysis of the Chinese Internet tends to focus on its political effects, surveys about the reality of Chinese Internet usage have

repeatedly found that people use the Internet more for entertainment and socializing than for “hard news” retrieval, political activism, and social criticism (DeLisle, Goldstein, & Yang, 2016; Lei, 2017; Sullivan, 2014). According to the China Internet Network Information Center’s (2018) most recent data, the leading uses of mobile Internet applications in 2017 included instant messaging (92.2%), search (82.9%), news (82.3%), video (72.9%), and payment (70%). Yan from Douyin and Wu from Douyin agreed that

considering that young adults between 20 to 40 years old are China’s heaviest users of the Internet and those born after the 1980s and ’90s have already cultivated a new sensibility of entertainment and consumerism over politics, it is reasonable to understand the Chinese Internet as an entertainment highway.

All in all, the performances of microcelebrities are shaped by, and respond to, these particular sociocultural expectations. Papi’s videos, touching on very interesting dimensions of daily life that resonate with millions of young people and featuring a dramatic and hilarious performative style, cater to online *tucao* culture and also adapt to a society where people hope to relieve heavy pressure through consuming entertaining content.

Conclusion and Discussion

The evidence presented here explains how Papi Jiang, China’s most well-known microcelebrity, has become a technology-enabled cultural form and performative practice. Applying multiple methods to a case study, this article illustrates how Papi’s rise to fame is the production of a constructed persona dependent on an elaborate and powerful new media environment. The environment has several notable technological and cultural specificities. First, Papi’s sudden ascent to fame should be understood against the background of how Chinese people access the Internet and what they use the Internet for. China has witnessed a rapid spread of smartphone use, which has become the predominant way of connecting to the Internet. In such a situation, short video consumption has become the newest pole of growth for China’s Internet industry.

Second, the boom in the creation and penetration of short video apps and their technical designs has enabled Papi Jiang and other ordinary people to easily produce, share, and consume short videos. However, the app Papi uses to make videos is inherently gendered, with powerful virtual plastic surgery functions. Designed for attracting young urban women who emphasize *yanzhi*, nearly all short video apps in China include the means to enhance people’s appearance. Such gendered features facilitate Papi to construct her identity as a beautiful lady and thus attract targeted audiences. The explosive growth of short video apps in China stimulates the production and consumption of short videos on the one hand, and yet has reinforced society’s objectification of women on the other.

Third, Papi’s fans are overwhelmingly members of the young urban generation and most of them are female. Thus, Papi’s performance is constituted by her audiences and her popularity is a production of a particular type of identity. I argue that Papi constructed a persona as a beautiful and talented woman with a strong sense of humor. Being satirical and ludicrous in nature, her videos try to link the individualized and humorous form of expression in the virtual world to the daily interesting issues that engage with the young urban generation’s concerns. Her performative style caters to online *tucao* culture.

Therefore, Papi's videos are attempts to use networked technologies to construct a performative identity that caters to the broader Internet culture that dominates contemporary China.

This article addresses several lacunae of existing studies. First, it brings digital technologies to the foreground. Extending the insights of science and technology studies, this article has highlighted digital technologies as an "actant" in making microcelebrity and its performances (Latour, 2007). Second, inspired by Song's (2018) work on Korean microcelebrities, I have advanced an interpretation of the performative self, highlighted in Papi's videos, which is different from what has been understood in Western contexts. Although performative identity is an indispensable element of Papi's self-presentation, she does not demonstrate a real and authentic self by showing intimacy and connectedness with her followers; instead, she presents a constructed persona that is often hilarious and exaggerated.

Finally, this article is among the first to provide a detailed examination of the Chinese microcelebrity phenomenon. The case study of Papi Jiang will hopefully lay the foundation for future studies of China's microcelebrities. As my article has revealed, two features of China's microcelebrities make them particularly fertile in adding complexity to the existing literature, which has been developed in the Western context. First, compared with Western countries, although China is a relative latecomer to the emergence of microcelebrity, the speed at which a microcelebrity obtains fame and wealth is often much faster; for instance, some of them, including Papi Jiang, have achieved Internet fame in the space of only three months (L. Yuan, 2016). Then, partially because China's established media are tightly controlled by the government, social media wield particular clout because content from traditional media is generally viewed as irrelevant by most young people. The explosive consumption of short videos on mobile devices, driven by the expansion of short video apps, is one of the most crucial trends in the Chinese Internet. These features of Chinese society will provide scholars with a unique opportunity to develop a fruitful analysis of the intricate relationships among microcelebrity, digital technologies, the broader media ecology, and sociocultural contexts in the future.

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