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Citation: Chen, Z. T., Whyke, T. W., Lopez-Mugica, J. & Peng, A. Y. (2023). Cashing the pink RMB through docile bodies: queering paradox of erotic entrepreneurs on Chinese social media platforms. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 10(1), 491. doi: 10.1057/s41599-023-02006-0

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Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02006-0

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Humanities & Social Sciences Communications

ARTICLE

https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02006-0 OPEN

Cashing the pink RMB through docile bodies: queering paradox of erotic entrepreneurs on Chinese social media platforms

Zhen Troy Chen [1]✉, Thomas William Whyke [2,5], Joaquin Lopez-Mugica[3,5] & Altman Yuzhu Peng [4,5]

This article investigates the emergence of "erotic entrepreneurs" in China, a new category of male influencers who engage in erotic activities and target followers of all genders on platforms such as TikTok/Douyin and Bilibili. Through ethnographic research, we examine how these young individuals strategically marketize their private and intimate experiences as a form of aspiration and commerce. We use Foucault's concept, "docile bodies," to interrogate how these erotic entrepreneurs navigate the power and knowledge systems of the creative economy. We argue that the paradoxical position of these docile male, queer bodies helps to increase their visibility on one hand, whilst renders them vulnerable to exploitation, censorship, and commodification on the other. The findings suggest that this paradox disrupts traditional gender stereotypes and the underlying power structures, but also reinforces the neoliberal and patriarchal order specific to postreform China.

[1] City, University of London, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, United Kingdom. [2] University of Nottingham Ningbo, Ningbo, China. [3] University of Wenzhou-Kean, Wenzhou, China. [4] University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom. [5] These authors contributed equally: Thomas William Whyke, Joaquin Lopez-Mugica, Altman Yuzhu Peng. ✉email: troy.chen@city.ac.uk

Introduction

Today, China has achieved notable progress in areas, such as the creative and platform economy and poverty reduction, although such achievements are unevenly distributed. The official narrative emphasizes meeting the growing material and spiritual demands of the people, which has led to the emergence and testing of new economic activities at a grassroots level (Keane et al., 2020). However, desire and intimacy remain largely hidden in China's private sphere with little public visibility or discussion (Rofel, 2007). In recent years, the growing entertainment and neoliberal media industries have commodified desire and intimacy, turning them into commodities that ordinary citizens can buy and sell online in both explicit and implicit ways (Zhang and Hjorth, 2019; Zhang, 2022). Similar to 20 years ago when karaoke was a hotspot for entertainment and sex work, both of which were stigmatized and regulated (Zheng, 2009), social media and streaming platforms are now the new frontier where regulators aim to cleanse or moderate content while sustaining a thriving creative economy (Yang, 2021).

In this article, we examine the regulatory ambivalence surrounding a tacit form of new economic activity practiced by male influencers and streamers. Even though these influencers engage in the online selling of intimacy and desire, it remains somewhat hidden due to its tactical nature and the scope of such vernacular fandom and consumption. This includes cross-platform transactions to evade censorship and surveillance, digital gift/tip giving, sponsored products, and advertorials. We refer to this emerging profession of influencers and streamers as "erotic entrepreneurs" whose main purpose is to monetize through their digital content production and self-broadcasting embedded with erotic performance and play. However, tactically packaged erotic performance and play are different from sex work in China, where performers and influencers don't identify themselves as such for one thing, for another, sex work is illegal and subject to heavy platform and social norm regulations. This makes our study unique, as it focuses on a multifaceted issue regarding mediated desire that challenges traditional entertainment production and consumption through new media, such as streaming platforms. This issue manifests in the inability to categorize this work as legitimate sex work or labour in China, hence the visibility of relevant sexualities, including sex minorities or majorities.

The discourse of influencers (*wang hong*, literally 'net red'), the profession, and their contribution is highly stigmatised even among their own communities (Craig, Lin, and Cunningham, 2021). However, fans, as affirmed by their own hashtags, term beloved erotic entrepreneurs as "*yanzhi zhubo*" (MCs/hosts with looks) who can self-broadcast any genre available on streaming platforms, ranging from singing, dancing, cooking, gaming, to e-commerce. As entrepreneurs, these influencers often sign a deal with a multichannel network (MCN) incubator agent and must avoid scandals to maintain a clean image and reputation in the Chinese market. They are nonetheless tactical risk-takers who engage in erotic performance and play as "fan services" to attract and maintain followers and boost sales.

Our definition distinguishes our research subjects from "sex influencers" or "*wang huang*" (literally internet pornographers, see Wang and Ding, 2022; Song, 2022) as erotic entrepreneurs' income stream is more diversified compared to selling sexually explicit content. Erotic entrepreneurs' identity and business practices are nonetheless unconventional in many ways, emphasizing looks, sexual innuendos, and libertine values, and can be easily stigmatized as "easy money" and often treated uncritically and flattened as "camming," which is also highly gendered (see Ruberg, 2022). However, this profession and its platform-mediated representation do speak to the taboo of and demand for desires of young Chinese people, further boosted during the pandemic and lockdowns (Ai et al., 2023).

We adopt a Foucauldian approach and examine the productive and normalizing effects of power via discourses and performances online. To this end, we present a critical investigation of the emerging profession of Chinese male-identified and male-presenting erotic entrepreneurs on social media in post-socialist China, specifically their tactical and erotic performance and play targeting fans and clients of all genders on Bilibili and TikTok (Douyin). The datafication and platformatization of desire and affects reflected in influencers' digital media management is not entirely new in recent literature with a focus on Western markets (Evers, 2018). However, literature focusing on Chinese social media platforms and sexual minority groups is still scarce, with some recent exceptions (Wang, 2019; Tan and Xu, 2020; Chan, 2021; Song, 2022). In this article, we focus on a niche of erotic entrepreneurs who use queerbaiting and bromance (Brennan, 2019; Lam, 2018) as a strategy for monetisation and follower accumulation, while their sexual orientation is not disclosed to the audience and fans. Fans and followers often refer to these influencers as 'husband,' 'boyfriend,' 'baby,' '*gege* (brother),' or even '*jiejie* (sister),' forming fandom groups outside of the mediating platforms that host said influencers. Such a practice underscores how the intimacy between erotic entrepreneurs and their followers is performed and capitalised across platforms.

In the analysis, we assume the active role of fans who follow these influencers through various prosumption (consumption and production) practices in China (Chen, 2020; 2021b), to scaffold our cultural analysis. This is because this new genre of the creative economy contradicts the deductive explanation of desire-related professions as the libido economy. As this study will show, the rise of erotic entrepreneurs is co-shaped by multiple factors, such as datafication affects, the neoliberal economy, fans' participatory prosumption, and the controlling and normalizing power structures that underlie it, particularly in how gendered performances are commodified and queered through erotic entrepreneurship.

In the sections below, we first contextualise the emerging profession of male erotic entrepreneurs and review a small body of scholarship on male influencers in the Chinese digital economy and explain why the concept 'docile body' offers a suitable framework that juxtaposes various forms of labour and performance. We then explain the methodology employed for data collection, followed by thematic analysis and concluding remarks.

Docile bodies: assembled and mediated erotic entrepreneurs

Recent research has explored the connection between digital platform management through prosumption. While some focus on media texts and paratexts of established media industries (Lavin et al., 2017), others investigate actual and lived experiences (Evers, 2018; Tan and Xu, 2020; Chen, 2021b). The entanglement and co-shaping of media texts and real-life professions have led to a convergence, as microcelebrities are products and professions at the same time, making influencers a brand themselves (Whyke et al., 2022).

In this article, we examine the relationship between identity and media production by employing a Foucauldian concept, docile body. Foucauldian analysis has been conducted fruitfully in critical labour studies (Tan and Xu, 2020; Ruberg, 2022), branding, persona construction, and parasocial relationships (Chen, 2022) to understand influencers' practice and identity. According to Foucault (1979: 135–138), a docile body is a malleable object. It is subject to constraints, disciplines, and discursive structures for a productive, normalising end. Discourses shape patterns of thought in a given temporal-spatial relationship,

including how we govern ourselves as bodies. Our bodies are both physical and expressive, and we exist as both actual bodies and meaning-making agents.

In addition to classified spaces, the control of our bodily activities is actualised through a composite time, also known as "a piece of machinery". This machinery is manifested in a set of technologies such as social media and algorithm-based promotion and consumption that power up the creative economy. These technologies serve as the working, training, and mediating (promotion and branding) tools for erotic entrepreneurs. Specifically, we offer a contextualised definition of docile bodies that consider both the imposing institutional power (such as the state) and the productive power (such as discursive discipline and normalisation from platforms and consumers) where erotic entrepreneurs emerge.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1926–1984), Foucault responded eloquently to Freud's repression hypothesis and pointed out the productive and normalizing power of social norms. He traced how sex became an identity marker and regulatory regime over time through discourse, now referred to as sexualities. He suggests that the repressive hypothesis is a misrepresentation of the discursive production of sexuality. Instead of being repressed, there was a proliferation of discourse in the 19th century that regulated how people govern their sexualities. In other words, it is the discussion and conduct of sex that monitors and regulates how people engage with sex.

Foucault's second volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1926–1984) further articulates how sovereign and disciplinary subjectivities are shaped by forms of technology, regimes of knowledge, and webs of power. Foucault (1979, p. 147) clarifies how sexuality becomes a disciplinary and productive discourse for both the individual and society:

> We, on the other hand, are in a society of 'sex,' or rather a society 'with a sexuality': the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being *used*. Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body, power spoke of sexuality and to sexuality; the latter was not a mark or a symbol, it was an object and a target.

In our paper, the analysis is contextualised on the basis that erotic entrepreneurs are the new building blocks and the frontier of the assemblage of sexuality discourses, adding one more layer of socially mediated, performative aspect that is subject to domination, use, and, in certain cases, abuse and exploitation. To extend Foucault's critical assessment, *power*, therefore, speaks of *mediated* sexuality and to *mediated* sexuality. Sexuality (mediated included) is not a mark or a symbol, but an object and a target. Once this new reality is established, we must interrogate how power regulates, normalises, and produces the object and target. Here, we adopted the concept 'docile bodies' as the performers who are subject to such regulation, normalisation, and production. The docility is not only shaped by state regulation, but also by platform and fandom expectations (some became paid clients). One important note is that such fandom expectations are sometimes under control by erotic entrepreneurs, while other times out of their control, for example, in the form of fanfics and RPS (real person slash), where 'the fanon' compete with or completely dissolve 'the canon' – influencers' own creation and performance.

We decide to use 'docile body' rather than 'care of the self', as the former refers to the ways in which bodies are trained and disciplined by various power and discursive structures in society. This includes conventional institutions like schools, prisons, and the military, but may also take more subtle forms, such as social norms and expectations. Foucault (1979) argues that these institutions and practices work to produce bodies that are obedient, productive, and useful for the purposes of the said power.

On the other hand, the concept of the 'care of the self' is a practice of self-discipline that individuals can engage to resist the power structures that seek to control them. According to Foucault (1988), "[i]t is the modality of a rational being (homo œconomicus, the economic [sic] man) and not the qualification of a status that establishes and ought to determine, in their concrete form, relations between the governors and the governed" (p. 91).

Foucault argues that individuals may adopt various techniques that allow them to manage their own bodies and minds, and to cultivate their own unique selves. These include practices like meditation, exercise, and self-reflection, as well as the cultivation of aesthetic and ethical sensibilities. The 'care of the self' is therefore a way for individuals to resist the power of institutions and to create a sense of autonomy and self-determination. However, Dilts (2010, p. 2) points out that Foucault's interest is broader than just the status of borders between economics and the other social forces.

In line with Foucauldian critiques of human capital, it becomes apparent that traditional economic analyses of commodity and labour tend to neglect the human subject by separating the human from their labour as homo œconomicus. To invoke such a false distinction between the rational and irrational reminds us that human beings are not only economic (Becker, 1962) but also emotional and affective, among other beings and categorizations. We must also take into consideration the differences in individual persons since they may make starkly different choices even in the same scenario. Our choice of analytical framework is not based on a normalized approach to judge or dictate how these subjects under investigation *should* act, but to understand why and the situations in which their choices are shaped, as well as what these mean to both themselves and the social milieu in which they are situated.

The "ideal" docile body, in a Foucauldian sense, is a neoliberal subject, homo œconomicus, par excellence (Dilts, 2010). According to Foucault (2008), homo œconomicus is the interface of the governing and the individual. In neo-liberal analysis, the goal is to replace homo œconomicus as a partner of exchange with homo œconomicus as an entrepreneur of oneself. In other words, to be an entrepreneur is to become one's own capital, producer, and source of earnings.

This establishes that human capital and the body are inseparable, and Foucault's critique of neoliberalism has shifted the analysis of commodity production and consumption (i.e., Marxist analysis) to human choices as investments made through the body. Consumption is turned into "productive consumption" as it aims for some sort of remuneration, be it economic, affective, emotional, or in flux. However, in *The Care of the Self*, Foucault further developed his critique by identifying what practices constitute free practices. This calls for an account of how some practices can be understood as ones that allow access to a self that is not sovereign, but which "takes care of oneself" as a way of "knowing oneself" (Dilts, 2010, p. 11). In doing so, we extend our contextualised 'docile body' in China's neoliberal digital economy, where the erotic entrepreneurs have moved beyond a sovereign (in terms of government-citizen relationship) but are subject to the market's control and normalisation, reflecting the socially mediated fandom expectations to groom and perform the body.

Therefore, the docile body emerges because of the panopticon effect, when an individual involuntarily polices their own behaviours due to the constant feeling of being observed (Foucault, 1979, p. 217). This concept has been incorporated into surveillance capitalism, where corporations advocate for and control the collection and commodification of personal data. In addition to

such covert panopticon effects, more overt and real-time platform policing also exists, granting fans 'panoptical access' to the streaming and skit performances of erotic entrepreneurs. This, in turn, normalizes what can be performed and what is deemed desirable, including 'forced intimacy' (Publius, 2021, p. 1.2). Disciplinary power is then, indicated, if not dictated, by fandom expectations; and is actualised through fan-led editorial management, real-time gift-giving and e-money transactions. As such, consumer power, activated through socially mediated communication and performance, is not merely an abstract idea; it can be affectively experienced and thus directly shapes the behaviours of erotic entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, as Dilts (2010, p. 11) points out, "the truth of a practice (that constitutes a subject) as a 'free' practice requires precisely an account of the specific rules and practices of a specific milieu, of the truth games or regimes of veridiction that are in play." Therefore, our aim to conceptualize erotic entrepreneurs as docile bodies is threefold.

First, in line with a Foucauldian analysis, we do not anticipate a purely 'free' subject, even if they are entrepreneurial. Rather, we aim to investigate the specific milieu that shaped these entrepreneurial subjects. Second, it allows us to seek ontological diversity that underlines disciplined and normalized bodies as mechanisms of biopolitics (Foucault, 2008). We do this by breaking away from categorizing various labours, as erotic entrepreneurs cannot only be reduced to those who perform various labours, be it emotional, sensual, erotic, sexual, or immaterial. These conceptualizations have their merit; however, the inflation of labour theory has started to lose its critical edge since many such labours are not legally or culturally recognized and thus cannot be protected. Finally, it also allows us to unveil unintelligible alternative bodies of sellers and buyers in the online desire and intimacy economy constrained by a range of contextual factors in China. Therefore, for analytical clarity, 'docile body' is used to bring together both the identification and representation/mediation of the actual working bodies.

Intimacy management through queerbaiting

Establishing erotic entrepreneurs on social media as docile bodies involves the expectation that they will represent and maintain an aspirational, positive, and entrepreneurial persona or personality, to stay relevant with emerging genres, topoi, and scenes (Evers, 2018). Therefore, influencers are adopting the celebrity persona construction strategy to transform themselves into commodities (Chen and Whyke, 2022). The everyday mundane of influencers, which is mediated and orchestrated online, creates a parasocial relationship that uses intimacy and private life to maintain the 'authenticity' of their performed personae.

What makes male-identifying and performing erotic entrepreneurs unique is the fact that their performed intimacy is eroticized through gendered play centred around masculinities that they have learned, practiced and managed. Earlier theorization of erotic labour has been highly gendered and primarily focused on explicit sex work, such as female prostitutes, who "perform skilled emotional labour of sex in exchange for their clients' money" (Kong, 2006, p. 409), and implicit sex work where "emotion, identity and boundary management strategies" are employed (Wood, 2015, p. 250).

Similarly, masculinities have been commodified in entertainment industries long before the digital economy (Hakim, 2011). Chinese erotic entrepreneurs learned and poached (using a fandom term) through employing well-tested media representations. Affective elements sustain and later became a proof of erotized intimacy through edited and mediated performance. These consist of audio-visual cues and topoi, including but not limited to character voice, sexualized roles (jocks *tiyusheng*, tyrant boss *badao zongcai*, warm/caring gentleman *nuannan*, little-fresh-meat *xiaoxianrou*, husband *laogong*), and mediated companionship (Chen, 2022). Such personae are carefully crafted to provide gratifying (fan) services for viewers/clients' fantasies (Chen, 2021b) in a booming segment of the creative economy (termed 'she' economy), driven by financially independent young women (Li, 2020).

What complicates the situation in China is that male erotic entrepreneurs perform for followers of different genders. The "formula of fame" (*liuliang mima*) for erotic entrepreneurs becomes an economic imperative and incentive, a powerful force that trains and sustains their docile bodies in the form of new discourses. Among them, queerbaiting - masculinities under female and queer gaze without eliciting any signs of homosexuality - becomes the new currency in the Chinese context.

The gendered performances of "queerbaiting," is a term used to describe the use of queer imagery in media representation to attract an audience, often with the pretence of portraying a genuine queer relationship. The term emphasizes the stereotypical portrayal of LGBTQ individuals, which may not accurately reflect real-life queer experiences (Brennan, 2019). The exploitation of queer identities and their gendered performances have been established for years in mass media, becoming more debatable among LGBTQ communities on social media (Zhao and Wong, 2020). This digital queer visibility suggests that queerbaiting has been considered not only for a homosocial or homoerotic gaze but also for a heterosexual imaginary of straight male lookers. Here, it can be interpreted as an ambiguous manner of avoiding rejection, censorship (Hu and Wang, 2021), or nonacceptance (Yang and Xu, 2016), while trying to maintain a low-profile appeal to a nonqueer audience (see Ai et al., 2023).

The gendered performances involved in orchestrating and shaping such a crafted, yet ambiguous identity dictates the focus of our article. Specifically, we are interested in how male-identifying erotic entrepreneurs are performing their erotic personae, and how queer desires and masculinities are expressed in this process. Our aim is to examine the ways in which Chinese media platforms can challenge social forces that seek to limit and exploit hypersexualized individuals, while also forging their own unique queer properties.

The erotic intimacy performed by erotic entrepreneurs is imbued with what we refer to as a "queering paradox." Such a paradox is achieved through the generation of algorithm-enabled, repetitive, and spreadable temporal and bodily mediated affects that are deemed "transgressive," "deviant," and "obscure" (see a recent study, Ai et al., 2023). These affects are then packaged and commodified by erotic entrepreneurs as services, commodities, and promotional material to signal to their fans and clients that they are in-group, avant-garde, entrepreneurial, and aspirational, in line with the Chinese national discourse of 'positive energy' (see Chen et al., 2021).

The queering paradox reflected in queerbaiting (read *straight-baiting* in China, as *zhinan maifu* in Chinese, literally means straight-identifying men selling homoeroticism) is co-created by China's neoliberal market imperatives (Chen, 2021a), the commodification and monetization of Chinese desirabilities, and patriotic/nationalistic sentiments (Chen, 2022). This fusion and transformation are the result of China's intertwined neoliberal and illiberal cultures (Song, 2022), despite its progressive potential demonstrated in western markets (Abidin, 2019).

A queering paradox: representing and performing queered masculinities

While interdisciplinary literature has shown that men's emotional lives are diverse and complex, this cannot be assumed in different

social contexts (De Boise and Hearn, 2017). In China, alternative identities and processes of homosocial and homoerotic bonds take on a different form, which we refer to as *queered masculinities*. The representation of these queered masculinities involves tracing subtexts that encompass systems of subordination based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and social and economic circumstances (Crenshaw, 1989).

In China, 'queerbaiting' used by erotic entrepreneurs in media representations assumes that, in a heteronormative society, it is the heterosexuals who "bait the queer." Members of the queer community are neither publicly acknowledged as queer individuals, nor do they openly self-identify as such within their performances (Ai et al., 2023). Therefore, the queering paradox is further entrenched. 'Queerbaiting' in China, in fact, reads more accurately as 'straight-baiting.' Our interpretation captures a historical moment and difference as explained in a recent genealogy of the term 'queerbaiting' in the West,

> The morphology of the term itself also invites a double meaning, suggesting that queer people are the target of the baiting, with queer characters also used as the bait. The latter concept takes on historical resonance if we consider that the original sting operations used to blackmail or entrap gay men also involved straight decoys portraying queerness to serve as the bait, much as many actors 'play gay' whether or not they actually are. In recognition of the growing frequency of canonical queerness, the author of an oft-cited online article on queerbaiting offers a more open definition of the term, positioning it from the perspective of queer audiences themselves.
>
> Bridges (2018, p. 120)

The historical and social differences become crucial when comparing societies where LGBTQ rights are legally protected versus those where it remains a societal taboo. Bridges (2018, p. 119) distinguishes between 'the mechanism of baiting-luring-trapping' as a form of social policing, and 'the specifics of on-screen queer portrayals in terms of text versus subtext'. Bridges further establishes a distinction between queer fans being baited and hooked by genuine queer self-representation, and heterosexual fans' slash imaginations, in both mass and social media.

All these nuances are evident in China, although the struggle for visibility is complicated by the fact that visibility is carefully curated for different audiences. The issue of in(visibility) is shaped by long-standing social taboos against self-identifying as non-heterosexual, but these individuals are still baited, so long as 'they' effectively boost the digital economy and incorporate themselves as part of the heterosexual slash fanbase. As pointed out by Zhao and Wong (2020), while there has been increasing visibility and acceptance of queer identities and relationships in China, there is still a lack of representation and recognition of queer voices in media discourse. Our research then contributes to a greater understanding of the role that the media and, by extension, social media play in shaping and reflecting societal experiences towards gender and sexuality and can help to promote greater acceptance and recognition of the 'queer visuality of the present' (p.481).

We argue that despite their marginalized online social locations, these sexualized erotic entrepreneurs can produce symbolic subjectivities that exist in a liminal space. By operating within a pluralistic mode of virtual spaces, they can highlight the cracks and inconsistencies in hegemonic masculinities, which reinforce the phallocentric patriarchy with its emphasis on strength and aggression (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Erotic entrepreneurs engage in a form of 'baiting the queer' using hegemonic masculinities. This creates a border identity that separates the privileged conditions of production and the epistemologies they generate.

Ahmed (2004) argues that queerness occupies a paradoxical space between the private and the public, and that the subjectivity of same-sex male workers involves navigating boundaries between homosocial and homoerotic relationships, among other possibilities. The study highlights the complexities and contradictions inherent in these intimate relationships and emphasizes a continuum of interaction rather than examining them in isolation as distinct bodily performances. This approach considers embodied experience as a site of sensory perception and earthly feeling and challenges the heteronormative logic.

To put this into perspective, celebrities in the West who avoid explicitly labelling their sexuality as 'queer' tend to be accused of queerbaiting (Brennan, 2019), especially when engaging queer fans (Publius, 2021, p. 3.2). In contrast, in China, this queerbaiting (read as straight-baiting) is tolerated by fans if it contributes to a pragmatic mindset and a sense of solidarity that espouses the philosophy of 'enjoy it while you still can (before it is banned).' As argued by Publius (2021, p. 3.2), 'as a euphemism for same-sex desire or potential desire, "not using labels" allows closeted and passing same-sex-attracted people plausible deniability in situations where owning a specifically queer subjectivity is untenable.' The mediated performance of Chinese erotic entrepreneurs presents one such situation.

We therefore argue that paradoxically, the queer border and phenomenological consciousness can become a stereotypical caricature that ridicules hegemonic masculinities in China. At the same time, they also reinforce and reproduce logocentric landscapes through digital erotic markets that cater to both homo- and heterosexual desires. This paradoxical reinforcement of hegemonic masculinities underscores the limitations of Western feminist and queer theories in facilitating our understanding of these complex phenomena in China.

By emphasizing the queering paradox, we echo that Chinese masculinities are constructed as feminized (Peng, 2019) and queered (Gong, 2017) by orientalist literature, media, and consumers. Such a paradox makes a unique contribution to understanding how masculinities can be queered, undefined, yet accepted. It shapes the way men present and represent themselves in their work settings, requiring further training of their docile bodies with a "growth mindset," willingly or unwillingly, depending on their diverse beliefs and agendas. As we will demonstrate in the analyses, male erotic entrepreneurs have established a complicated occupational identity catering to their clients' needs and wants as docile bodies.

Methodology

According to virtual ethnographer Hine (2015), the internet is a cultural artifact that impacts society at large through its offline and online interactions. Given the study's dual focus on identity performance through prosumption of media texts and digital work practice, an ethnographic approach was used.

First, thematic analysis was used to study media texts/videos created by influencers on Douyin (TikTok) and derivatives on Bilibili. In total, 40 videos were selected across 20 pages on Bilibili using purposive sampling based on the search results of the keyword 'boyfriends', 'husbands', 'confess', and 'PK' (player kill, adopted from video games by Douyin to win commission and e-gifts, where two contestants compete and punish the lost one). These videos were analysed to identify recurring topoi and themes.

Second, participant observation was used to study the actual work and practice of over 20 erotic entrepreneurs through fan groups and live broadcasting immersion on the two platforms. Their streaming sessions are also post-edited and promoted by their fans on Bilibili, which are further fed into their future editorial considerations. Four pairs of influencers are presented here as case studies, including a semi-hidden gay couple (self-

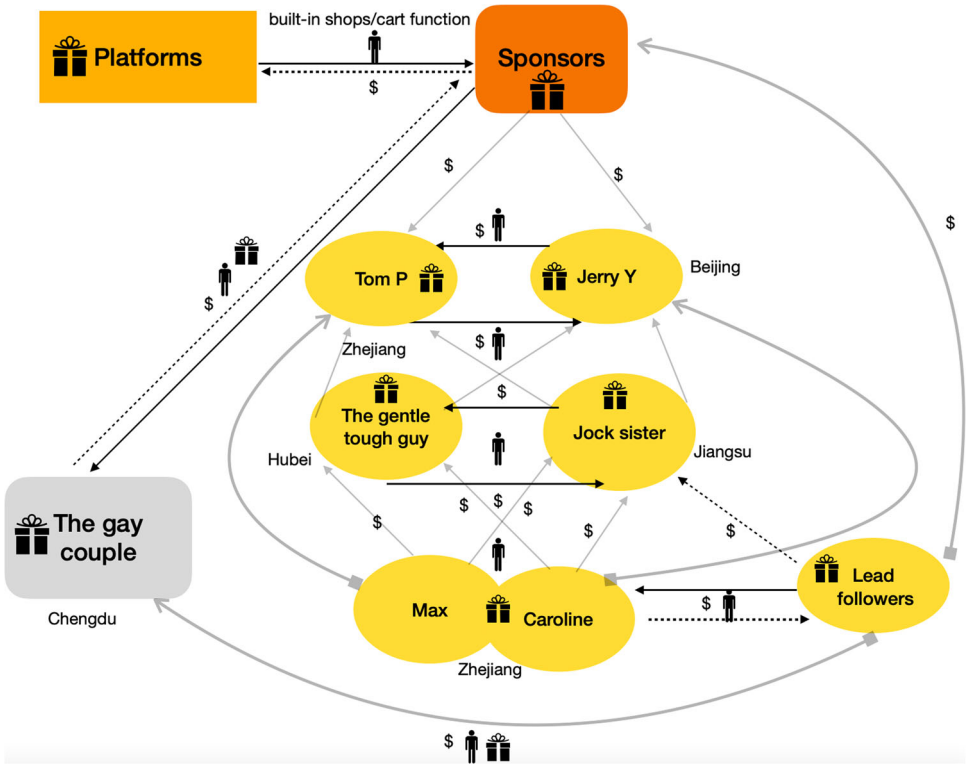

Fig. 1 Influencer engagement during streaming. The relationship between the selected influencers, by ZT Chen.

identified as 'flatmates', see more in Ai et al., 2023), two cross-dressing/cosplay beauty vloggers, and four 'chat-vloggers', and each pair is referred to 'couples' by and in their RPS (real person slash) fandoms (see Fig. 1).

The selection is based on a balance of age, class, and relevant service experiences through which masculinities are queered and consumed. Names, accounts, and shops used are pseudonyms created by the research team to protect the online and offline identities of the informants, following the university's ethical approval.

Findings

Based on the analysis of personality and identity management online, as well as follow-up participant observation, an emerging and complex phenomenon was identified. This phenomenon consists of a spectrum of identities and agendas that share a common goal of capital accumulation and the commodification of the docile body and erotic labour. This is achieved using infrastructure-supported e-gifts, tips, service charges, and fandom entry fees, which serve psychological, economic, and social ends.

The psychological needs and gratification of fans are met through immediate, intimate virtual engagement and affirmation, as provided through well-rehearsed performances and platform-supported fan groups. These are exchanged and sold based on various income streams, such as direct e-gifts, buying sponsored products and merchandise, and other one-on-one engagements that take place after the streaming session. Transactions on the platforms are traceable thus adding one layer of control and disciplinary power (self-censorship on how erotic entrepreneurs present themselves). Such transactions further go for a 50/50 split between the platform and the influencer, with a further cut taken by the MCN (multi-channel network) agency if involved (see 'MCN' in Craig et al., 2021). LGBTQ identity politics are evident within this complex, although they tend to have a marginalized repertoire compared to their Western counterparts (Ai et al., 2023).

Gamification, competition and performance

We found that most of the influencers we observed were self-identified straight men (*zhinan*), and the semi-hidden gay couple we encountered was unique since other self-claimed straight male influencers did not engage with them at all during streaming PK sessions. This indicates that the platformatized gamification design is selective and already excludes outed LGBTQ erotic entrepreneurs. This further reflects the queering paradox, wherein actual queer subjects among the new breed of erotic entrepreneurs are forced back into their closets (as passing same-sex-attracted individuals), to perform as socially desired subjects. This in effect registers them as docile bodies.

Typically, influencers compete and demonstrate the wealth and fame of "their houses" (Chen and Cameron, 2023), and fans must pay to enter the more privileged fandom group who can influence content management, leading to a hierarchical fandom management structure that avoids quasi outed gay couples. This reveals how the staged queerness of influencers enacts a form of queerbaiting for sexual minorities. The sexual orientation of "being gay" is fixed (if outed) at the performance level on Douyin and is part of the authenticity construction based on day-to-day rehearsal. However, queered masculinity performance allows for imaginative spaces where self-identified straight male influencers can remain flexible and conduct their erotic labour, establishing a de facto hierarchy where the straight male identity is most privileged.

After the PK sessions, the winners get an opportunity to punish "the losers" and make them complete various tasks. Our observation revealed that these "punishments" varied, from light-hearted ones such as giving "the losers" an opportunity to show their talents, such as singing and dancing, to more severe ones such as verbal or physical abuse. These are performed and staged based on the paid clients' request and are under real time surveillance by platform content moderators. These punishments included washing underwear, socks, and feet on-camera, wearing ugly AR emojis, doing 10–100 push-ups, and confessing (*biaobai*)

to the winning influencer or top-ranked gift-giving fans in a romantic/erotic way.

Although these punishments are performed for a comic effect, they are full of sexual innuendos. Here, the psychological effect of the erotic entrepreneurs, whether they are involuntary or gaining pleasure, is not the focus of the paper, since all these performances are disciplined both by the state (see a detailed review of the apparatus of administrative decrees and notices since the early 2000s, Ai et al., 2023, pp. 3–6) and by fandom expectations. The latter is more imperative as it is real time, enacted upon payment, further strengthened by post-edited videos and later in-group editorial management. This further established our framework of docile bodies contextualised in the socially mediated performances, adding another layer to the lived experiences of erotic entrepreneurs, since the docile bodies are produced and sustained via such discourses at both the institutional and the performance levels.

The gamification design is based on a neoliberal ethos that turns everything in the livestream into a competition, where followers of different "houses" compete with their e-gifts and, in return, get "fan services" that meet their fantasy towards a particular influencer, or the bromance created between two frequently engaged influencers. For example, Tom and Jerry and Jock Sister and the gentle-tough guy would connect and PK with each other every night for multiple sessions. This blurs the boundary of production and consumption for erotic entrepreneurs, as their erotic prosumption is unified through fandom expectations and fanfic videos, further and evidently fed into their later productions.

At the organizational level, fans would screen record, edit, and repost these sessions on Bilibili. The "climax and juicy clips" were used as evidence and reference to build and maintain erotic RPS between the influencers. Fans who paid for access could have group management conversations on Douyin with other privileged fans and stakeholders to have editorial and strategic control to sustain the momentum and plan financially successful performances for their beloved influencers.

The hierarchical fandom management is also a competition as the highest bidder has a more important say in making decisions about with whom the influencers PK and what punishment or performance shall be prepared and performed. This further reflects the queering paradox, wherein actual queer subjects among the new breed of erotic entrepreneurs are forced back into their closets, as discursively queerbaiters are constructed as straight.

At the textual level, well-received topoi and archetypes, such as straight bromance play, pranks, grooming for sponsored brands, and advertorials, are orchestrated for monetization through merchandising and self-commodification. These formats and topoi are mutually reinforcing and make such erotic labour perpetuating since "every night there is something new going on" for a consumerist end, completing the prosumption circle (see Fig. 2).

In Fig. 2, we first outlined the value chain between the usual topoi and story arch employed by erotic entrepreneurs, including lifestory telling, sketches, coupling and uncoupling (termed as 'collabs'). These collaborations are carefully orchestrated and dictated by fandom expectations, supported by brands, advertorials, and overt product placements. The icons used indicate the topoi that can be monetized as the platform has designed a cart function for fans to buy merchandise or pay/give e-gifts. Similar with genre categorisation, this exercise is messy as it is dictated by or co-created with fans (the market). These include, sending customized photos or social media handles outside of the streaming platform (Douyin); showcasing talents, such as playing instruments, singing, doing sports and weight lifting; and, receiving punishments, such as washing socks and/or underwear, imitating animals (dogs, cats, bulls, and chimpanzees), as well as changing outfits (male to female crossdressing, business casual to sportswear, with or without makeups/beauty filters), all of which can be erotised and sexualised in the ephemeral streaming engagements, all under real time surveillance and incentives.

Disciplinary and performative docile bodies

Based on a thematic analysis of the videos and associated engagements with viewers, the coupling bromance between influencers is closely connected with the Boys' Love (BL) and queerbaiting genre in ACGN (anime, comic, game, and novel) fandom. This genre represents the erotized representation of homo-sociality between alleged straight men, creating a growing body of knowledge/discipline for influencers to learn and adopt in their everyday identity work and performances. These knowledge and disciplines are learned through engagements and competition with other influencers, fans, and followers.

Most videos are created by fans on Bilibili/Douyin as on-demand fan service, such as 'challenges' to mark their milestones

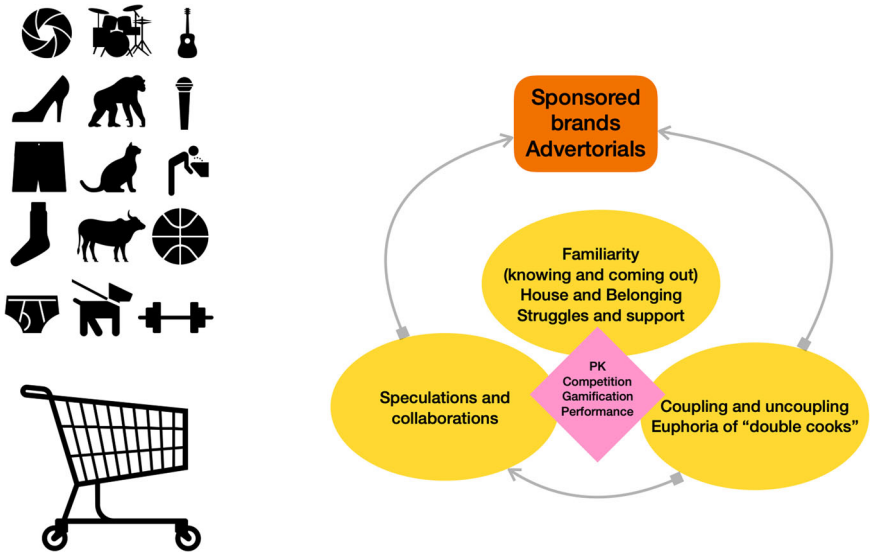

Fig. 2 Steaming performance value chain. The monetisation circle based on gamification, competition and performance, by ZT Chen.

(i.e., reaching100K) in their data- and traffic-driven business endeavours. Therefore, most of the videos collected are pranks with homophobic or sexist yet witty and naughty jokes, such as "meet the gay challenge," "why are we so gay (gay-li-gay-qi)," "you are suspicious (as gay)," to name a few. However, this genre employs a queerbaiting strategy, to be specific 'gay bravado' topos ('too straight to be gay', see more in Bridges, 2018), than mediating real-life LGBTQ identity politics since their queer identities are only hinted at, and at best 'semihidden' (Ai et al., 2023, p.6).

As shown in Fig. 1, the slashed couples seldom interact with the semi-hidden gay couple, to maintain their 'straight men' personae. In China, fantasy has evolved from its previous secretive and unspoken mode to a more expressive and even celebrated one (Rofel, 2007). However, compared to the Western context (Abidin, 2019), the discourse of knowing and coming out is rarely explicit based on our digital observation. Rather, gendered and economic struggles are used as material to produce gags.

For example, the Max and Caroline duo, transvestite cosplayer "sisters" (their own term), leave their identity struggles unvisited and instead focus on struggles along the economic/class line. They extensively discuss how expensive life is in urban cities like Shanghai and Hangzhou and the unfair deals they signed with their previous MCN agency. They also touch upon how conservative their hometown (Northeast China) is, where its manufacture-based economy is decreasing (Chen and Chen, 2021). Although their current city Hangzhou has a booming digital and creative economy, they struggle to make ends meet each month. While such 'speaking bitterness/suku' in retelling their life stories does produce testimony for their economic struggle, the influencers strategically link this economic and emotional hardship to their 'business', addressing their followers directly in PK sessions by saying, "So refresh more gifts and protect our tower (of the house)!"

Homonormalising queerbaiting

As demonstrated in the previous section, gender performances in the Chinese context are paradoxically both liberating and constraining, as the acceptable gender norms are limited and differ from the visibility-based LGBTQ politics in the West (Ai et al., 2023). In an entrepreneurial and platform economy, people's fantasies and desires are selectively represented through various media texts and paratexts. Bromance and queerbaiting (read straight-baiting) are accepted and "copyrighted" by the industry as a well-tested formula. Influencers use these topoi and genres to entertain followers, maintain their popularity and clout, while the authorities are cracking down on "homosexual content" and "correcting sissy pants" online (Chen, 2022).

What is both peculiar and paradoxical is that these influencers adopt a persona of 'not wanting to live a broke life in big cities but wishing to earn some easy and quick money instead' (a recurring theme shared by erotic entrepreneurs). They do this in a blunt and comical way, yet they still manage to bypass censorship. As they are self-identified and perceived as straight (even if they might be queer), they are not subject to the ban on 'homosexual content'. In such carefully orchestrated and edited representations of erotic entrepreneurs, they become the docile body par excellence, objectified, sexualized, manipulated, queered (and 'straightened') at will by the mechanism co-shaped by the regulatory environment, the platform, and their fandom (client) expectations. Therefore, queerbaiting (read straight-baiting) is normalized as an established topos by newbie influencers for monetization.

Interestingly, while performing queered masculinities with homosociality and homoerotica, these influencers simultaneously use pranks to reaffirm traditional gender norms through homophobic and 'gay bravado' comments (see also in Straight White Men, Ward, 2020). Their claims, such as "we are man enough to be a bit queer," signify a sense of pride of hegemonic masculinity in such playful and manipulative conduct. Masculinities can be diversified yet remain hierarchical, maintaining the patriarchal order. One example is that some influencers would demand erotic entrepreneurs to call them "*baba*" (daddy), "*gege*" ("male lover," not "brother" here), "*laogong*" (husband), or other (sexual) roles to be played after their livestreaming PK session as a punishment and fan service. They often request their counterparts to address them with such terms while doing push-ups, facing the camera. When the counterparts do push-ups, it looks as if they were calling their boyfriend or husband while performing penetrative intercourse. They sometimes get banned during such "punishment sessions" by the platform censors for up to 3–7 days.

Here, despite the connection with the BL (boys' love) genre where an (sexually) active-passive/top-bottom/seme-uke pair is established, such portrayals are said to be different from actual LGBTQ sexualities and normalize bottom-shaming as a comic topos to punish those who lost in the PK. Therefore, erotic entrepreneurs compete for the socially constructed top and dominant position during their PK sessions. Useful topoi are depicted in Fig. 1, such as *Dongbei nanren* (Northeast men – Max/Caroline), *Tiyusheng* (Jocks – the tough-gentle guy/the jock sister), and tyranny bosses (Tom/Jerry). They are perceived as physically, psychologically, or economically powerful and use dynamic cues to perform queered masculinities. However, this performance is largely based on digital management and persona construction. It is performed, imagined, and technologically supported for desirable fantasies. In real life, erotic entrepreneurs might be short, small, and poor, contrary to the roles they are asked to play. However, Douyin has a series of built-in beautification mechanisms to sustain such technofantasies, for example, to make people look much slimmer, toned, and taller (Peng, 2021). A meme discussed by influencers on Douyin saying "Never ask people's height on TikTok. If asked, I am 1.92 m" also confirms this as a widely acknowledged tactic to sell technofantasies. Therefore, the virtual and techno space is used to seek or reaffirm "manhood" and traditional masculinities for some erotic entrepreneurs.

In addition, the imposing and perpetuating neoliberal ethos also crystalises competition (in the form of PK) in gendered consumptions, where bromance and queerbaiting are accepted if erotic entrepreneurs self-identify as straight and perform as gender and sexuality conforming, while paradoxically these erotic and gendered performances are not as conforming as outlined by the state apparatus and the platform. Our analyses demonstrate such erotic performances are often based on differences that often generate inequalities, but are nonetheless incorporated for a gendered play, as these docile bodies are compelled to perform what the 'market' wants and desires. These difference-based, yet gendered play include, age (young and old), roles and performance (effeminate and straight acting; tops and bottoms), class (poor and rich), experience (pros and amateurs), all being exploited for monetization in China. These are further reified as erotic capitals (Hakim, 2011), which take many different forms, such as bodily attractiveness, audio/visual modalities and affects, age, gender, class (as roles and professions), and sexual preferences.

Such play and reification can be cruel and recreate inequalities, for example, as a migrant worker (tradies), is eroticized as a fantasy up for sale. What makes erotic entrepreneurs docile bodies is the fact that these topoi are performed and sold (*as in real time surveillance, in the form of monetary and emotional incentive*, our emphasis), supported by orchestration, training, and practice, in a *productive* (normalising) rather than *repressive*

way (as in state apparatus). What makes these Foucauldian docile bodies is that erotic entrepreneurs willingly adopt them as desirable. For example, some can speak several languages using different character voices, while others use costumes, makeup, and beauty filters to cater to the needs of their followers and clients. The docile bodies are thus expected to be talented to be desirable (see Fig. 2). This contributes to the fact that the docile bodies are up for sale for as many aspects as possible. Such docile bodies are also socially mediated, where the "good life" is celebrated and used as a legitimate goal to become an "effortless boyfriend/husband." However, such a profession is not effortless. It inherently requires erotic labour and discipline (a body of knowledge and rules to adhere to). Such norms are "voluntarily" sought after by erotic entrepreneurs, deemed in need of constant improvement, and put into absolute use in an ever commercializing and objectifying setting.

Orchestrated and queered masculinities

Here, it is noted that the services provided by erotic entrepreneurs are carefully recorded, mediated, and edited through social media platforms. However, portrayals of engagements between opposite sexes are scarce and avoided, in addition to engagement with semi-hidden gay influencers, due to the conservative sexual culture and censorship of overt sexuality representations in China, no matter homo or heterosexual ones. Despite this double censorship, queered masculinities find a unique place to sustain themselves on Douyin and Bilibili. It is important to note that if influencers fail to maintain the orchestration of such masculinity, they risk losing fame and appeal, or even their very presence on social media (see Chen and Cameron, 2023).

One illustrative influencer we observed is a case in point. "Jock sister" is a basketball player and coach who carefully chooses his PK contestants, mostly men, in a trained and disciplined process, which are subject to real time monetary inventive and platform surveillance. He avoids PKing with female influencers, as this can lead to him losing followers. He portrays surprise or disgust when being matched with a female influencer by the system, which generates gags and e-gifts. In turn, these moments are collected and re-edited by fans as evidence to suggest his queer sexuality, and as marketing and promotional material. He fits into the jock archetype but performs as a dumb, short-tempered, "whining bitch" (fans' abusive and sadist term) and is thus termed by fans as "jock sister." This is a genre-mashing of cinematically performed stupidity that fits into the archetype of often privileged men, a combination of frat boys and himbos.

His Douyin postings reveal an attempt to perform bromance with various straight-identifying male influencers, with his signature performance of acting tough and talking dirty to his defeated opponents while holding his shoes or belt, or being physically trained (junxun, lit militant training) by his winning opponents. His media repertoire involves staged sadism and masochism play, but he always performs as innocent and avoids picking up any sexual cues on camera.

When asked by fans during livestreaming if he is gay, the jock sister used to offer an ambiguous answer - "Bros, it is the euphoria that you guys are after. We do not have to be serious on the internet," which became an orchestrated and playful answer in his performance. However, he eventually disbanded his fan group after he was "outed" as a straight guy by posting a video in which he kissed his girlfriend on the cheek. His former fan group manager, who had been given privilege based on e-gift contribution ranking (see Fig. 1), had been pre-empting this for a few weeks, accusing the jock sister of being a gold-fishing girl (*laonü/baijinnü*), a fraud who cheated their (queer) followers, as they as an editorial team suggest in a streaming conversation why would their allegedly straight fans care. The gendered performance here is cathartic for some, as it playfully disrupts the established normalising gender hierarchy by double-queering his straight-identified and performed masculinity, while 'straightening' his queer fans (erasing the possibility of their queer identities), first as a "sister" and then being "slut-shamed" for her character's financial motives but for a 'straightened' audience.

In addition to the prevalent genre of playful and performative bromance between self-identified (and for queer ones, self-claimed) straight male erotic entrepreneurs, there are also instances where semi-hidden gay digital boyfriends/husbands narrate their own identities and autobiographical reflections to connect with their audience in the form of 'flatmates', a pun in Chinese as 'friends who sleep together' (under the same roof). Alternative masculinities endowed with rich emotions and vulnerabilities receive more serious and sympathetic engagements on Bilibili and Douyin alongside their parodic counterparts. However, overt homophobic comments that criticize such "speaking bitterness" or "whining" are also evident in the comments. When this occurs, fans within a house (paid and highly engaged ones) police and fight against such homophobic comments, cancel and block the comment initiators, and support the influencers for their courage and creativity (see also Chen, 2021a). The up-approving comments (a function to boost popularity with likes) thus work as a crucial contributing factor of disciplinary prosumption, where fandom expectation gets indicated and materialised (with payments). The comments frame the identity struggles, fatalism, and powerlessness expressed by erotic entrepreneurs as motivational and aspirational. However, the measurement often refers to their following numbers (income), fame, and potential sponsorship opportunities, rather than progressive identity politics. The encouraging words are often framed as "such struggles will better prepare you for your next fight or expedition (*genghao de qianxing*)." However, the destination of such an "expedition" is never explicit or clear. It could well mean continuing to work in such precarious and exploitative conditions within indeterminate and ambiguous gender and sexual politics. Such "pep talks" are used to legitimize erotic entrepreneurs' monetization of their erotic labour and commodification of their docile bodies.

Discussion and Conclusion

The construction and performance of identities by erotic entrepreneurs, as well as the promotion and redirection of their associated services across social media platforms, mutually reinforce each other using intensive and affective cues (Chen, 2020). In their carefully curated and orchestrated (with fans) performances, only the positive and conforming aspects of their service, such as erotic, funny, and witty pranks and parodies, are portrayed for promotional purposes. These performances are informed by the learnt know-how and expertise, while dictated by fandom expectations. Therefore, their contextualized docility lies in the erotic entrepreneurs' involuntary and voluntary submissions to such discourses of mediated sexualities. These discourses are deemed as desirable knowledge and expertise, regulated and/or incentivized by the state apparatus, the platforms, and their fandom, even if the entrepreneurs are queered and exploited in the process.

Here, some erotic entrepreneurs openly identify as gay on other platforms blocked in China such as Twitter (Wang and Ding, 2022), while others self-claim and/or self-identify as straight and adopt a bromance approach. When questioned by followers as to whether they are exploiting the queer community for profit, the straight-acting influencers often justify their relationships with fans as friendships and alliances (*tiezi/laotie/bros*). Most adopt a positive and hopeful persona online, using these

half-open, regulated platforms (where registration and subscription create a small circle of known individuals while still concealing their real identities) as a place to express their alternative desires and gendered troubles (Chen, 2021b; Ai et al., 2023). However, given the diverse and sometimes contradictory identities and interests involved, portrayals of this trade are often entangled with sexism (predominantly male virtual lovers, see Tan and Xu, 2020), ageism, ableism, lookism, and homophobia (used as a 'gay bravado' topos and prank between straight men, see Bridges, 2018).

Our article has argued that the prevailing *industry norm* in the erotic entrepreneurship sector requires these influencers to become docile bodies, constructed and disciplined through discourse and practice, reflected from the state, the platform and their fandom. Despite providing heavily gendered erotic labour, the influencers under investigation repeatedly draw a boundary between their constructed persona and their labouring selves. The ambivalence reflects a Maoist slogan 'carry the red flag against the red flag', meaning these influencers are eroticizing their gendered performances without acknowledging it (when being confronted and under surveillance), and paradoxically advancing queer visibility but self-identifying as straight.

Within the much-celebrated gig and digital economy in China, men's understanding, and construction of masculinities are transformed through labour since their identity construction must be constantly negotiated in such gendered and queering (queerbaiting) labouring processes (Brennan, 2019). What follows is the new imperative to be groomed and trained as docile bodies, where erotic entrepreneurs in the new economy must develop their people skills, increase emotional quotient (EQ), empathy, and the ability to "read the atmosphere" in microsociological interactions as service producers and providers. These skills are traditionally constructed and reified to be feminine (Evers, 2018) and are now being queered.

The study's findings reveal that participants in the erotic entrepreneur market are driven by a neoliberal ethos. This phenomenon has been widely promoted and repackaged to fuel a desire economy, where influencers train themselves and are trained as docile bodies to conduct emotional and erotic labour. In their livestreaming, PK, and punishment performances, erotic entrepreneurs often play an 'edge ball game', taking advantage of the ambiguity left by the current Internet regulatory framework and governance (Ai et al., 2023). This emerging profession and genre are co-shaped by business strategies that rely heavily on data and algorithms to achieve commercial ends.

While there is potential for progressive LGBTQ identity struggles, this should be carefully examined through further research on influencer performance and activism. As demonstrated in our case study, popular and well-tested erotic and queering topoi are used for commercial purposes, allowing erotic entrepreneurs to profit from the celebrated digital economy. Although increased awareness of identity and visibility politics may be progressive for some in a Chinese context, it remains a tricky starting point. As established, erotic entrepreneurs are becoming Foucauldian docile bodies in a neoliberal digital platform economy.

Firstly, the platform itself functions as a form of power that disciplines the bodies of erotic entrepreneurs. Social media platforms control the terms of use, content policies, and payment systems, which means that erotic entrepreneurs are subject to the platform's rules, regulations and functions (cart, e-gifts and streaming as surveillance). To remain on the platform and make a living, erotic entrepreneurs must adhere to these rules and adapt their content accordingly. This can include producing content that conforms to certain aesthetic standards or that appeals to a specific audience demographic, to maintain a following and increase their earnings.

Secondly, erotic entrepreneurs are also subject to societal norms and expectations around sexuality and gender in China, which shape the ways in which they present their bodies and perform for their audience through queered masculinities, but not homosexuality. This is why we use the term 'queerbaiting', but it reads 'straight-baiting' in China. Such a distinction contributes to their ambivalence towards how they self-identify and perform themselves online. To appeal to a wider audience (a bi-erotic space, Publius, 2021), erotic entrepreneurs need to adopt certain behaviours and attitudes that align with dominant cultural norms around sex and gender and present their bodies in ways that are considered desirable or attractive.

Finally, erotic entrepreneurs are also subject to the power of their fans, who have certain expectations or demands regarding the type of content they produce or the ways in which they interact with their peers and followers. Erotic entrepreneurs are pressured to respond to fan requests and produce content that caters to their fans' desires to maintain their following and increase their earnings. When such tacit performance based on trust and playfulness exceeds the thresholds, as the jock sister 'outed' himself as straight, leaving no ambiguities, his paid fan-groups dissolved quickly.

In China, social media platforms connect people and foster solidarity, but the mediated identities, stories, and emotions are often subject to satire, parody, and commodification as the obscure, deviant, and naughty/witty to leave ambiguity for space of manoeuvre. Therefore, the presentation, representation, and prosumption entangled in social media and e-commerce platforms co-shape such a queering paradox. This calls for more qualitative research that examines marginalized groups in the new digital economy to tease out the multifaceted struggles of varying subjects, queer and/or straight, to avoid further marginalizing already queered subjects in monolithic, sensational, or celebratory fashion.

Data availability

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article.

Received: 13 January 2023; Accepted: 26 July 2023;
Published online: 10 August 2023

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to our discussants in ICA 2022 Paris conference where the earlier draft of this article was presented and discussed. We also appreciate the comments and suggestions from the editors and anonymous reviewers. This study was partially supported by the Research Development Fund, Xi'an Jiaotong- Liverpool University through Grant RDF-18-02-04 on Media Prosumption and Identity Performance.

Author contributions

All authors have contributed to material preparation and data analysis. Conceptualization, design and data collection: ZT Chen. Methodology: All. First draft: ZT Chen. Second draft: TW Whyke, J Lopez-Mugica and AY Peng. All authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval

This study was performed in line with the principles of AoIR. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University through Project RDF-18-02-04.

Informed consent

This study has obtained informed consent from participants. However, this article does not contain any interview data or identifiable information that needed informed consent.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Zhen Troy Chen.

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