

Self-Branding Practices of Social Media Influencers—A Case Study of Jiaqi Li

Ruyue Liu

Shandong Yingcai University, Jinan, China

Keywords: Social Media Influencer; Self-Branding; Emotional Labour; Gender Theory

Abstract: Social media influencers (SMIs) have become increasingly popular over the past few decades. This research focuses on Chinese influencer Jiaqi Li, who exhibits specific gender characteristics and emotions as self-branding practices in his living stream. By adopting Hochschild's (2015) work "emotional labour" and applying gender theories in the digital media context, this research aims to unpack the self-branding building that underpins the expression of SMIs. By analyzing the live-streaming clips of Jiaqi Li, this paper argues that the logic of emotion and gender has permeated digital culture. This study aims to give a comprehensive, grounded understanding of the role of influencers in self-branding practices on social media.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have developed rapidly and become indispensable to people's daily lives. Statista^[1] shows that internet users spend 136 minutes on social media daily, and the time people spend on social media has increased over the last six years. Social media has become a common way for people to contact each other and offer various forms of entertainment. Douyin, a dominant social media in China, is famous for its short videos and is called the Chinese version of "Tik Tok". The users usually spend 52 minutes on this platform every day^[2].

Influencers share specific topics in their social media channels, such as travel, food, and make-up. They attract a sizable number of audiences, leading to the growth of influencer marketing^[3]. More and more companies which want to explore the Chinese market have noticed the power of social media influencers (SMI). They tend to cooperate with SMIs to promote their products. Jiaqi Li is a top influencer on Douyin who mainly sells beauty products. In a live-streaming show, Jiaqi Li competed in selling lipsticks with billionaire Jack Ma; he beat Jack Ma and sold 15000 lipsticks within 15 minutes^[4]. On the 8th of March 2018, nearly 200000 viewers watched Jiaqi Li's live-streaming show within 5.5 hours, 23000 deals pulled off and worth 508668 dollars^[5]. His contribution to one live-streaming show is even more than the annual sales of some beauty counters. Due to his popularity in reviewing lipsticks, he was also called "lipstick brother".

This paper takes Jiaqi Li as a case study by analyzing his living stream show to figure out why SMIs have potent impacts on their audiences. This paper combines gender theories, such as metrosexual and masculinity, with social media theories, such as emotional labour and social capital; the argument is that SMIs, as emotional labour, can attract the audience through their gender characteristics and generate intimacy with followers, which can be regarded as a form of social

capital. Influencers can transfer the social capital to economic capital for themselves.

2. Literature review

The term "social media influencers" (SMIs) refers to opinion leaders in the digital space, and these SMIs may be authorities in specific areas, such as beauty and fashion^[6]. There are many different types of influencers, such as close friends of celebrities, wealthy people who show off their lavish lifestyles, and even high school students who are pretty^{[7][8][9]}. Recent scholarly discussion of SMIs has touched on four main aspects: the differences between "mainstream" celebrities (defined as people who become famous from mainstream media such as television or film rather than online media) and social media influencers^{[10][11][12][13][14][15][16]}; the personal characteristics of the SMIs^{[17][18][19][20][21][22]}; the relationship between SMIs and their audience^{[23][24][25][26][27][28]}; and the links between SMIs and self-branding^{[29][30][31][14]}. Self-branding commodifies an individual's self-presentation and empowers these individuals with a unique personal style that appeals to a potential audience^[32]; thus, the practice of self-branding and SMIs are mutually dependent^[29]. Jerslev^[14] argues that SMI is a self-presentation activity created for self-branding. SMIs act as a connection between media and marketing, and the performance of SMIs has widespread significance for social and cultural studies. Therefore, attention needs to be paid to this evolving phenomenon, and issues such as how SMIs present themselves online must be further explored.

Hochschild^[33] coined the concept of "emotional labour", which centres on managing personal feelings and presenting facial and bodily characteristics accessible to a public audience. In her opinion, emotional labour requires interaction with others and provides specific emotional value for other people. While this concept was initially applied in the workplace, it was later widened to the domestic area to analyze issues related to females. The idea of "emotional labour" can be applied to analyzing the influence of SMIs on Douyin. More recently, scholars such as Abidin^[7] and Arnesson^[15] have discussed labour in terms of SMIs, highlighting influencers' visibility and authenticity features. Another concept, "fan labour," refers to different activities that fans engage in, such as fanfiction and beta reading^[14]. It shows that online labour is driven not only by SMIs but also by fans. The influencers' audiences can adjust their behaviour to fit the specific fan culture, and it also proves the particular impact of influencers towards their fans.

3. Jiaqi Li as emotional labour

On Douyin, Jiaqi Li posts live-streaming clips on his account, most of these short videos are about product recommendations. He usually faces his audience, and his face takes up one-third of the screen. When the audience views Jiaqi Li's videos on Douyin, they will see his face very close to themselves, as if they are making video calls with their friends or family. As emotional labour, it is a smart strategy for Jiaqi Li to generate intimacy with his audiences. To create positive emotions in viewers, Jiaqi Li also adopts metaphor and exaggeration to describe the products and make his audience associate the products with many wonderful imaginations. One of his videos is about reviewing lipstick, he said:

You must wear it when you go to the beach, and actresses wear this lipstick when they walk the red carpet. It has an inexplicable feeling of sweetness.

Jiaqi exchanges the abstract shade of lipstick for real things, giving the lipstick a wonderful imagination. Watching Jiaqi Li's videos can put the audience in a good mood. It is an essential capability of Jiaqi Li as emotional labour.

However, as emotional labour, the public could ignore Li's feelings in the commodification process. Li usually tests 300 lipsticks daily^[34], which is challenging for his lips. Sometimes, he feels

pain even when he is eating or drinking. The live-streaming show is shown for 7 hours every day^[34]. He also faces substantial physical and psychological pressure.

4. Metrosexuality and hegemonic masculinity appear in Jiaqi Li

Jiaqi Li found that although most of his followers are female, his male audience has increased since June 2018, and currently, males occupy 20% of his total followers^[35]. Jiaqi Li's beauty vlogs could attract these male audiences. It shows that males have a huge demand for beauty products, and because Jiaqi Li is also a male, he appears to have some metrosexual traits to some extent. Simpson^[36] defines a metrosexual as a rich man who is also young; he can be homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual, and it does not matter; he treats himself as his love object; he likes the city area due to the great shops, clubs and hairdressers are around. With the development of modern society, a bunch of males are present in these features, and they do not regard making up as a girlish behaviour. Instead, they are enthusiastic about decorating themselves.

The side of the metrosexual of Jiaqi Li presents both his behaviour and his knowledge of lipsticks. On the one hand, Jiaqi Li not only sits in front of the screen and introduces the beauty products but also tests the shades of the lipsticks on his lips. He tried every lipstick he recommended before making any comments about these lipsticks. Thus, his audience can gain a perception of the effects of lipstick. Besides, Li wears lipstick the same as their female audience; his female viewers are familiar with his behaviour because Li does what they do in their daily lives, which can let them generate a sense of intimacy with Li.

On the other hand, Li has more knowledge about lipsticks than his female viewers. It is partly because of his career needs. At the same time, his behaviour allows the public to view males from an unconventional perspective. Traditional males generally do not know much about the shade of lipstick. However, Jiaqi Li knows the tone differences between lipsticks and lipstick brands. He knows the preferences of females when they choose lipsticks, and he is an expert in this area; his audience trusts him and learns beauty knowledge from him, such as the information about newly released lipsticks. Therefore, his features of being a metrosexual can attract audiences to his beauty videos.

Jiaqi Li not only presents the features of metrosexuality in his short videos but also maintains his masculine side. It is an essential cause for him to attract followers. According to Kimmel^[37], Carli^[38] and Thomas^[39], there are some masculine qualities that the public expects to see in a traditional male; these qualities include strength, courage, independence, leadership, and assertiveness. Jiaqi Li's masculinity is shown in his dominant words and masculine aesthetics. Li's job is to promote sales; he can be regarded as a salesman, but unlike other sales who treat customers as gods, Li uses straightforward language in his short videos and sometimes even commands his viewers to purchase beauty products. One of his videos is about lipsticks of YSL circle tube; after he tried YSL 86, he sighed heavily and shouted, "Buy it". Then he put YSL 80 on his lip, and he yelled:

Wow, please fill the screen with the word "BUY".

He does not hide his motivation for promoting sales, but usually, after he says "buy it", he also adds, "That is very beautiful", and it makes the viewers feel that "buy it" means it is an excellent product. Therefore, viewers would not reject this word, which is essentially full of marketing meaning. Because some female consumers are indecisive as buyers, Li uses "buy it" as one of his familiar sayings, which is also a smart strategy to persuade his audiences to make their final decisions.

Moreover, Li shows masculine aesthetics in his short videos. It can attract female audiences to watch videos. When Li tests Hourglass lipsticks in one of his videos, he connects the shade "I

Crave" with the heroine in the film, Malena, who is gorgeous and fascinates men. He hints that if women wear lipstick, it could have a similar appeal. In a live-streaming show, Li mentioned that for girls, wearing an Armani 400 is better than wearing an LV bag because the first thing a man sees a girl is the colour of her lipstick instead of her purse^[5]. He told his female audiences the expectations of males to a female and which shade of lipsticks can grab males' attention. Jiaqi Li, as a male, introduces masculine aesthetics and can be more believable and persuasive.

5. Transfer social capital to economic capital

Jiaqi Li combines masculinity with metrosexuality, which is attractive to his audiences. Bourdieu^[40] points out that there are three kinds of capital: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital; among them, social capital is more about the network of relationships, the breadth and depth of the social network, and the actual and potential resources include in the system. Jiaqi Li transfers his charm to his social capital. He attracts a large number of followers on various social media platforms. Merely on Douyin, he has 35 million followers, which compares well with the followers of some movie stars.

By attracting followers by his gender characteristics, he has accumulated more social capital. Portes^[41] argues that the owners of social capital can gain some benefits from it, and sometimes, people build social relationships on purpose to create resources for themselves. Li, as a social influencer, owns powerful social capital. He attempts to expand his social capital and grab more attention from the audience. The reason is that Li can gain economic profits from his social capital.

Marxism^[42] describes economic capital as a currency that can purchase products and only sell them again to realize a profit. Jiaqi Li transfers his social capital to economic capital. Li earns more than 1000 0000 RMB monthly by promoting beauty products on social media platforms. Jiaqi Li got a university job due to his significant online influence and great success in boosting sales. In December 2017, Jiangsu Normal University hired Li to teach "Taobao Writing and Communication" to students studying new media practices.

His social capital helps him gain more economic capital; the more economic capital he has, the more social capital he can grow. For instance, when a beauty brand cooperates with Li, the brand manager would care about the number of followers Li has if Li has a high fan-to-product conversion ratio. Li has many followers, and his followers are highly loyal to him. Therefore, many beauty brands are willing to cooperate with Jiaqi Li. To get the opportunity to work with him, these companies must give Li a very low price. The result is that audiences who buy products from Jiaqi Li can save money compared to those who purchase the same products from other channels. His followers increase steadily, not only because of the strength of his charisma but also because he can bring tangible benefits to his followers. Also, the companies were satisfied with working with Jiaqi Li. Although sometimes they can not gain many economic benefits from Li due to the low price they offer to Li, their brand has become famous by presenting in Li's short video. From a long-term perspective, it is still worth cooperating with him. In this process, Li gets a better price from companies with the aid of his social capital (his followers); after he has a reasonable price for beauty products, his followers are more likely to buy products from his channel, which means his social capital transfers to economic capital successfully. The high conversion ratio of economic capital means his social capital is valuable and can attract more commercial cooperation; then, a beneficial price can bring him more followers. It means his economic capital transfers to social capital effectively. It forms a virtuous circle for him.

6. Rethinking Li's self-branding strategies

The reason why SMIs can attract followers and build up their social capital is complicated, as

gender characteristics contribute to it. Besides that, other causes, such as their mantra and fair judgment, can not be ignored. Netizens widely know Jiaqi Li mantras; one is very classical, like "Oh, my god". The covers of every product recommendation video have his mantra, "Oh my god". And followed by the name of the products. The mantra appears in most of Li's promoting videos. When he introduced MAC Love Me lipstick in one of his videos, at the beginning, he said:

MAC Love Me lipstick, start!"

Then he added:

Oh my god, it is beautiful!

Most of the time, after Li says, "Oh my god", he praises the product. Therefore, "oh my god" is like a symbol of good beauty products. It repeats in his different videos, repeatedly; his audience, even some netizens who never watch his videos, know his common saying is "Oh my god". The high frequency of this pet phrase can help him build up his self-brand; he can have a highly recognizable identity among social media influencers, which is a valuable way to attract followers.

Li is unlike most social media influencers, who only introduce the positive sides of their products and try to promote cosmetics, which lets the audience doubt whether the products are good or if the influencer wants to sell them out. Li's short videos are more like testing the effects of the products. He gives both positive and negative comments on the products in his videos. That makes him more like a shopping guide who is willing to assist customers in finding products that are suitable for them. One of his short videos is about testing the shades of the latest YSL lipsticks. After he put YSL 123 on his lip, he comments:

The shade is fit for white girls; Chinese girls can not use it; otherwise, their skin will look darker.

The audiences like objective evaluation; it seems authentic, and Li's videos can also help them learn about the features of different products and make better decisions (sometimes the audiences tend to over-consume due to too many recommendations from Jiaqi Li's videos). As Li says in a short video, the video is for saving money. Because people who did not watch his videos may buy something that did not fit them, Li's videos can give them the right direction.

7. Conclusion

Jiaqi Li, as emotional labour, creates his self-brand and gives the audience a deep impression of his products and himself; he attracts many followers. Li has a metrosexual side; he knows different types of lipsticks very well and tests the shades on his lips, which makes Jiaqi Li look professional as a beauty vlogger. Besides, as a male, he is eye-catching in this traditional female industry; his masculine side can form persuasiveness and influence the buying decisions of his audience. His female followers are likelier to believe his promotion due to his masculine aesthetics. Furthermore, his gender characteristics and other elements, such as his objective tests and mantras, also helped him to increase the number of fans. His fans build up his social capital for him, which can attract more beauty brands to cooperate with Li, and his social capital could effectively transfer to economic capital.

Nowadays, Jiaqi Li works as a beauty vlogger and appeared on an Italian fashion magazine (Grazia) covers in October 2019. He joined the variety show (Roast) in 2019, and Li now has multiple jobs. He tries to expand his opportunities and explores diverse fields. Is it a positive thing or a negative one? He gains rich experiences with new career possibilities. However, some may doubt how long SMIs can maintain the public's attention. Can SMIs be a permanent job? Some issues are still worth discussing further.

Acknowledgements

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

References

- [1] Statista. (2018). Daily time spent on social networking by internet users worldwide from 2012 to 2018 (in minutes). Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/433871/daily-social-media-usage-worldwide/>
- [2] Iqbal, M. (2019). TikTok Revenue and Usage Statistics. Retrieved February 27, from <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/>
- [3] Chandler, D., & Munday, R. (2016). influencer marketing. In *A Dictionary of Social Media*. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191803093.001.0001/acref-9780191803093-e-632>
- [4] China daily. (2019). New selling point: Social media influencers. Retrieved March 3, from <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201903/04/WS5c7cd53ba3106c65c34eca34.html>
- [5] Global time. (2018). Lipstick King: The man who sells most lipsticks in China. Retrieved November 15, Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1127510.html>
- [6] Ki, C. W. C. and Kim, Y. K., (2019). The mechanism by which social media influencers persuade consumers: The role of consumers' desire to mimic. *Psychology & Marketing*. 36(10), 905-922.
- [7] Abidin, C., (2016). "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?" *Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity*. *Social Media+ Society*. 2(2).
- [8] Saul, H. (2016). Instafamous: Meet the social media influencers redefining celebrity. *The Independent*. Available from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/instagrammodelnatasha-oakleyiskra-lawrence-kayla-itsines-kendalljenner-jordyn-woods6907551.html>
- [9] Marshall, D. (2010). The promotion and presentation of the self: Celebrity as marker of presentational media. *Celebrity Studies*. 1(1), 35-48.
- [10] Bennett, J. and Thomas, S., (2014). Tweet celebrity. *Celebrity Studies*. 5(4), 501-503.
- [11] Tse, T., Leung, V., Cheng, K., and Chan, J., (2018). A clown, a political messiah or A punching bag? Rethinking the performative identity construction of celebrity through social media. *Global Media and China*. 3(3), 141-157.
- [12] Senft, T. M., (2013). Microcelebrity and the branded self. In: J. Hartley, Burgess, and A. Bruns, eds. *A companion to new media dynamics*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley- Blackwell. pp. 346-354.
- [13] Jerslev, A., (2016). Media times | In the time of the microcelebrity: Celebification and the YouTuber Zoella. *International Journal of Communication*. 10, 19.
- [14] Thomas, S., (2014). Celebrity in the 'Twitterverse': History, authenticity and the multiplicity of stardom Situating the 'newness' of Twitter. *Celebrity studies*. 5(3), 242-255.
- [15] Deller, R., (2011). Twittering on: Audience research and participation using Twitter. *Participations*. 8(1), 216-245.
- [16] Barbour, K., Lee, K., & Moore, C. (2017). Online persona research: An Instagram case study. *Persona Studies*, 3(2), 1-12.
- [17] Fägersten, K. B., (2017). The role of swearing in creating an online persona: The case YouTuber PewDiePie. *Discourse, Context & Media*. 18, 1-10.
- [18] Pooley, J., (2010). The consuming self: From flappers to Facebook. In: M. Abonczyk and D. Powers, eds. *Blowing up the brand: Critical perspectives on promotional culture*. New York: Peter Lang. pp. 71-89.
- [19] Cocker, H. L. and Cronin, J., (2017). Charismatic authority and the YouTuber: Unpacking the new cults of personality. *Marketing theory*. 17(4), 455-472.
- [20] Pruchniewska, U. M., (2018). Branding the self as an "authentic feminist": Negotiating feminist values in post-feminist digital cultural production. *Feminist Media Studies*. 18(5), 810-824.
- [21] Duffy, B. E. and Hund, E., (2015). "Having it all" on social media: Entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers. *Social Media+ Society*. 1(2).
- [22] Wang, S. (2020). Chinese affective platform economies: dating, live streaming, and performative labor on Blued. *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(4), 502-520.
- [23] Marwick, A. E. and Boyd, D., (2011). To see and be seen: Celebrity practice on Twitter. *Convergence*. 17(2), 139-158.
- [24] Muntean, N. and Petersen, A. H., (2009). Celebrity Twitter: Strategies of intrusion and disclosure in the age of technoculture. *M/C Journal*. 12(5).
- [25] Giles, D. C. (2002). Parasocial interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media psychology*, 4(3), 279-305.

- [26] Garc á-Rapp, F. (2017). Popularity markers on YouTube's attention economy: the case of Bubzbeauty. *Celebrity studies*, 8(2), 228-245.
- [27] Marwick, A. E., (2015). *Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy*. *Public Culture*. 27(75), 137-160.
- [28] Hearn, A., (2008). Meat, Mask, Burden: Probing the contours of the branded self. *Journal of consumer culture*. 8(2), 197-217.
- [29] Lair, D. J., Sullivan, K., and Cheney, G., (2005). Marketization and the recasting of the professional self: The rhetoric and ethics of personal branding. *Management communication quarterly*. 18(3), 307-343.
- [30] Marwick, A. E., (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- [31] Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, 'microcelebrity' and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity studies*, 8(2), 191-208.
- [32] Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [33] Fanlore (2022). Fan Labor. Available from: https://fanlore.org/wiki/Fan_Labor
- [34] China daily. (2018). Male beauty blogger finds road to wealth on Taobao. Retrieved January 10, from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201801/10/WS5a55b328a3102e5b17371e20_1.html
- [35] Alizila. (2019). The rise of male beauty in China. Retrieved March 27, from <https://www.alizila.com/the-rise-of-male-beauty-in-china/>
- [36] Simpson, M. (2002). Meet the metrosexual. *Salon*. Retrieved July 22, from <https://www.salon.com/2002/07/22/metrosexual/>
- [37] Kimmel, M. (1994). Masculinity as homophobia: fear, shame, and silence in the construction of gender identity. In H. Brod & M. Kaufman (Eds.), *Research on men and Masculinities Series: Theorizing masculinities* (pp. 119-141). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- [38] Carli, L. (2001). Assertiveness. In Worell, Judith (ed.). *Encyclopedia of women and Gender: sex similarities and differences and the impact of society on gender*, Volume 1. San Diego, California: Academic Press. pp. 157–168. ISBN 9780122272462.
- [39] Thomas, R. M. (2001), *Feminist perspectives*, in Thomas, R. Murray, ed. (2001). *Recent theories of human development*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage. p. 248.
- [40] Bourdieu, P. (1983). *Ökonomisches Kapital, kulturelles Kapital, soziales Kapital*. *Soziale Ungleichheiten* (Soziale Welt, Sonderheft 2), edited by Reinhard Kreckel. Goettingen: Otto Schartz & Co. pp. 249.
- [41] Portes, A. (1998). Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 24: 1–24.
- [42] Marxism. (2013). Definition of Capital on Marxists. *Encyclopedia of Marxism*. Marxism.org. Retrieved February 8, from <https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/c/a.htm#capital>