# Practice, identity, and tactic: Young Chinese vloggers' interactions with the social media platform Bilibili

## Abstract

Vlogging (video blogging) on social media platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok, has never been more pervasive around the globe. China has witnessed the rapid growth of this phenomenon since 2018, mainly on successful Chinese social media platforms, such as Bilibili and Sina Weibo. Filming and sharing one's daily adventures have become fashionable practices for young people to present who they are and how they live. For the majority of vloggers, this practice remains a form of personal expression. For some, however, these digital diaries lead to huge follower bases, online fame, and, consequently, possibilities to monetize their attained cultural capital. Similar to how successful online content producers have come to be known as *influencers* in the Anglo-Saxon world, in China, they are labeled as wanghong*s*, which literally means "popular people on the internet."

Over the years, Chinese social media platforms have noticed this trend and its commercial opportunities. Through various promotional campaigns, platforms (e.g., Bilibili) have actively encouraged Chinese social media users to engage in the production of vlogging and participate in it, which has further boosted the vlogging culture in China. As such, the vlogging culture in the country forms a particularly interesting example of a bottom-up, user-generated practice that is enabled by interactive technologies and is also heavily entangled with the commercial logic of Chinese *big tech*. This tension is tangible in the everyday engagements of vloggers, whether wanghong*s* or not, with the platforms they use to share their videos—a tension between individual empowerment and directed commercialization—which makes the vlogging culture in China complicated.

Following these observations, this thesis aims to explore young Chinese vloggers' tactical identity construction and negotiation in coping with the hegemonic power of the wanghong culture and the platform economy. This thesis has three central questions:

- How do young Chinese vloggers perform their online identities tactically through vlogging practices on the platform Bilibili?
- How do the specificities of the Chinese vlogging culture shape young vloggers' video productions and practices?
- How do young Chinese vloggers use vlogs to construct their identities online while dealing with the economic and cultural pressures engendered by Chinese vlogging platforms?

By investigating these questions, I seek to, first, provide a theoretical framework of young vloggers' online identity construction; second, enrich the understanding of vloggers' practices in the context of China; and, third, apply nuance to the examination of young people's relationships with vlogging and social media platforms in audience studies.

In this thesis, I follow a digital ethnographic approach. I conducted four empirical studies from September 2018 to May 2022 to address the research questions. Bilibili was chosen as the main field site for digital ethnography because it is one of the fast-rising vlogging communities in China oriented toward young Chinese people. The platform is especially known for its feature called *danmaku*. This instant commentary system provides us with a space to investigate the interactions between vloggers and audience members. In our first empirical study, I combined ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews with vlog-focused campaign participants of Bilibili to examine how the platform enhances its institutional power to promote the vlogging culture in China. In the second empirical study, I combined ethnographic observation and 9 in-depth interviews with regular vloggers who participated in the vlog-focused campaigns that Bilibili hosted to explore young Chinese vloggers' struggles, tensions,

and tactics to deal with platform power. In the third study, I used ethnographic observation and qualitative content analysis to investigate how wanghong vloggers construct their online identities tactically in order to draw attention and gain capital. In the last study, I combined ethnographic observation and 16 in-depth interviews with school vloggers on Bilibili to examine how regular Chinese vloggers construct layered online identities through their platform engagement on Bilibili.

The results illustrate the variety of tensions between vloggers and social media platforms in China. Young Chinese vloggers' practices are configured by the norms, affordances, and regulations of the wanghong cultural standard and the platform economy. Nevertheless, young Chinese vloggers cope with this structural power by tactically constructing and negotiating self-identities. In the conclusion, I explain three contributions of the present study to the fields of Chinese vlogging studies and audience studies. Basing on these contributions and limitations, I encourage more researchers to focus on the multiple effects of structural power, for example, the state's agenda and ideologies, on diverse groups, such as women's and rural children's vlogging practices.