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An Invisible Occupation Perspective of Online Influencers in China: An Overview and Discussion

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Abstract:

The economic development and the progress of science and technology have promoted the rapid development of the Chinese internet economy, featuring in particular Chinese online influencers benefiting from the wider availability and application of 5G technologies. However, the existing research on the online influencer economy in China has only focused on its own development and the related issues, while there is little understanding of the industrial and employment spill overeffect. Filling in this gap, this paper reviews the relevant literature and uses the available data in suggesting a new perspective to analyse the impact of online influencer on the Chinese society and economy. This paper comprehensively discusses the literature of invisible occupation and online influencer economy, combining economic and social perspectives to analyse the potential industrial and employment spill overeffects that may have been generated by online influencer economy in China. With the continuous development and change of market demand, the influence of netizens should be fully utilized to promote the balanced development of netizens' economy.

Keywords: Chinese economy, China, invisible occupation, Internet economy, online influencers

1. The Background of Online Influencer Economy in China

According to the *Statistical Report on China's Internet Development* released by the China Internet Information Centre; China's online retail sales reached 11.76 trillion yuan as of December 2020. Of this, 9.76 trillion yuan of sales resulted from the online transactions of physical goods. According to the same report, the scale of online payment users in China has reached 854 million, while the scale of online shopping users has reached 782 million. In addition, the number of e-commerce live-users has reached 309 million. Since 2013, China has been the world's largest online retail market for eight consecutive years. The advent of the Internet era has accelerated the speed of information dissemination, making people's lives more convenient. At the same time, in light of a large number of Internet users, new business models have been forming in capitalising on online traffic, namely, the online influencer economy or what Chinese people call the 'online-hot economy' (‘网红经济’).

The online influencer economy is there the online influencers use their own visions and ideas to select commodities and promote them, carrying out targeted marketing through major platforms. The online influencers capitalise on online traffic flow, and transform their fans' attention and admiration into sales of the commodities that they market and promote. In 2015, online live-broadcasting began to become popular among mass populations, which laid the foundation for e-commerce live-broadcasting. In 2017, the major social media platforms began to use their existing data traffic base to develop e-commerce live-broadcast. Among these, the most important are TikTok (‘抖音’) and Kwai (‘快手’). Due the influence of the covid-19 pandemic, the offline real trading and sales market has been seriously hindered in China since 2020, which gave a further boost of the online economy. In just a few months after the initial lockdown in Wuhan, the development of online influencer economy produced an impressive leap. Below, we discuss the phenomenon of online influencer economy in China featuring a proposed perspective of invisible occupations. To ease the reading experience of the audience, we have decided to minimise the in-text citations while providing the reading with a summary of references. Readers can contact the corresponding author whose contact details are noted in the footnote for more details¹.

2. Invisible Occupations in the Chinese Online Influencer Economy

Cao Guowei, the Chairman of Sina Weibo, said at the Entrepreneur Summit Forum of the sixth World Internet Conference that the scale of economic benefits continued to expand with the development of online influencer economy. In addition, in his opinion, the progress of technology and the development of the Internet have integrated all aspects of

society and social media, promoting the development of digital economy in China. Not only has the birth of e-commerce brought economic benefits, but also made 'online influencer' or 'wanghong' ('网红') a new economic label whose future development will be booming.

With the development of online economy, many invisible occupations have also resulted. As the name suggests, we refer visible occupations as occupations that are usually visible, obtained according to certain standardised employment channels. For visible occupations, it is convenient to measure the number of employees and other relevant information, as opposed to the invisible occupations. We suggest that for most workers with invisible occupations are difficult to identify, although they perform regular or irregular tasks and obtain regular or irregular incomes. These workers may be considered as unemployed by some of the existing official standards. We propose that these workers in invisible occupations contribute to new economic models, i.e., the online influencer economy which has not been well studied. We further discuss the below aspects of the online influencer economy in China.

2.1. The Becoming of the Ear of Online Influencers in China

According to a survey, the number of live-webcasts in China totalled 617 million by December 2020, while less than 10,000 real online influencers appeared statistically visible or significant, i.e., as 'celebrities on the Internet'. This indicates that there were likely to be a large number of online influencers who remained invisible or insignificant in economic terms. They may have gone live and shoot short videos like those online celebrities, and they could have also gotten a certain level of income. However, they were not recognised possibly due to their limited income. Most people might have a misconception that being an online influencer is easy, making money by doing nothing at home. For example, people might think that, if you are a successful online celebrity, you could earn over ten thousand Yuan in a couple of hours by saying a few casual words in a live studio. Besides, there also seems to be a common perception that the online influencers have no or little educational background, work experience or other qualifications, skills, or knowledge which may have enabled them to obtain a visible occupation.

Nonetheless, in reality every live-broadcast needs to be carefully designed, from makeup or appearance of the online influencers, the content of the broadcast, to talent which the online influencers can offer. Therefore, it is not easy to become a successful online influencer. As the online influencer market gets more competitive, more newcomers have come joint the market, leading to longer hours of work because every online influencer would like to be seen by more fans comparing to the others. Taking the more successful online celebrities like Li Jiaqi and Weiya for example, it has become standard and come for them to stay live online for more than ten hours a day.

However, to become successful, a person has to have both beauty and talent. Even if the appearance could get them the initial attention and support of many fans, the retention of fans depends on personal charm and talents. Furthermore, becoming a successful online influencer requires emotional intelligence. Nowadays, there are many good-looking people and many who have a level of talent. But not everyone of them can become a successful online influencer. Sometimes, an online influencer can become successful without a good look, if they can interact with the viewers successfully to turn them into fans. For example, the online celebrity Weiya once said that she needed to learn to be a model to suit her role as an online influencer. She worked very hard every day and persisted in trying and learning. She was grateful for the experience which helped her develop both personally and professionally. She believes that it is the most important to do a good job in the moment, striving to improve herself and maintain groups of fans. However, not every online influencer has this understanding, while most of the unsuccessful ones thought they could succeed with little effort.

Interestingly, there are also some online influencers who do not actually want to be popular nowadays. Their persistence in trying out the role as an online influencer is only for their own interests. For example, Pang Mailang became popular for a while owing to a song called 'my skateboarding shoes'. However, he did not stop at where he was and insists on singing what he likes trying to hold online concerts for his fans. This has not made him a famous or rich man, but his agent admired his effort for inspiration to his dreams. Pang still writes his own songs, entertaining himself and taking care of the feelings of his small number fans. Another example would be the domestic worker Fan Yusu who became famous for her autobiography 'I am Fan Yusu'. But she was afraid of becoming popular and preferred Su Shi's freedom. In their views, they do not need the approval of others, as long as they live a good and happy life that they choose to have.

2.2. The Chain of Industries behind Online Influencers

At the same time as the online live-broadcasting economy has been gradually recognised, the type and content of Chinese online influencers' live-broadcasting have also developed in variety. This gives rise to a chain of industries spinning off the online influencer economy in china that have become more visible in the everyday life. There are many industries involved in the train, and each part of the industrial chain has specific operation standards and procedures. It is the emergence of the online influencer economy that gives rise to a variety of invisible occupations in such chained or connected industries or professions. For example, it is revealed that the popular online influencer Weiya has a large team of more than 1,000 people behind her live-broadcasting, and there are professionals who are responsible for each step or part of her shows.

At present, most online stores and business incubation companies have a very strong industrial chain. They have adopted new types of sales and new methods of business, which have been mainly used by the more experienced online influencers in China. This is because more experienced online influencers understand the value of a strong support team/chain of support, which can ease their minds when they have to satisfy the needs of consumers by live-streaming or making short-videos to be put on major online platforms in China. Through frequent interactions with viewers and fans, and the help of big data and professional analysts, more experienced online influencers have advantages in selecting the

product samples, brands and advertisers which can then succeed with more fans and sales, with the feedback from consumers and with the transmission of high-quality content of communication designed by the online influencers. The feedback from the online influencers should get to the manufacturers as quickly as possible, who shall then quickly incorporate the feedback into the design and production of the concerning products in order to suit the market needs better. At the same time, manufacturers need to quickly respond to the market, using big data and other relevant information, to understand the constantly changing market needs and demands. Both the manufactures and online influencers need to stay flexible in order to cope with the rate of change of the market, adapting the style and quality of products being produced and promoted, in order to accurately locate and optimise costs to obtain the maximum profit.

3. The Economic Impact of Online Influencer Economy in China

We discuss a few aspects of the economic impact of Chinese online influencer economy below.

3.1. Optimising and Advancing Traditional Business Models

Traditionally, the sales mode of common goods is mostly through online and offline advertising, in order to stimulate consumers' purchase intention and increase sales. However, there are many disadvantages in advertising. To begin with, this kind of publicity method of advertising can only transmit commodity information from manufacturers to consumers in one direction, which is very easy to cause information asymmetry. For this reason, it is difficult for manufacturers to get consumers' feedback on commodities in time. Moreover, viewers tend to get used to the commonly adopted advertising methods and are aware of 'the routines'. Therefore, to try to find advertisements that can penetrate people's heart and soul is a very difficult task. In addition, consumers' trust in products is also exhausted by various low-quality advertisements in the market. Against this background, online influencers with different/new images and identities can easily excite consumers and obtain feedback. Through various online platforms, online influencers carry out information exchange with consumers, which virtually improves consumers' sense of trust.

In general, the arrival of the online influencer economy era has changed the traditional business model, saved costs and resources while better met the needs of consumers, in order to take lead in the market while achieving win-win situation between the seller and buyer. In this case, supply and marketing are no longer separated, and the efficiency of industrial chain operation has been greatly improved.

3.2. The Changing Economic Structure

Far from being a simple operation, Chinese online influencer economy requires a complex and networked cooperation before different professions and industries. Although there is no official education or training to become an online influencer, they do need some support before going alive online. They are usually provided with special brokerage/support companies, in addition to the live-broadcasting platforms and product suppliers. Nowadays, the massive depth and width of the Internet makes it very difficult to attract the public's attention, and it is difficult to generate a huge 'wave'. Therefore, every industry or part involved in the online influencer economy in China needs to invest a large number of personnel and large amounts of resources in order to promote and advance it. This means that the Chinese online economy has promoted the development of the third-party industries to some extent. At the same time, it has also promoted the deeper integration of Internet and social employment, brought more jobs to the society, and changed the social and economic construction of social classes to some extent. A new business form of economic development has been formed. The 'Internet+' mode of businesses in China has presented major threats to the development of the offline economy, but promoted the quick growth of online business platforms and more efficient developments of the market economy.

The advent of the Internet age has greatly facilitated our lives while improving the employment rate in China. For example, we can now choose our favourite products directly online by the recommendations of online influencers when we would like to do shopping for everyday products. When we need to understand and learn the related things about the products, we can make ourselves more involved in this eager learning situation online interacting with online influencers. Online influencers can also help us form opinions and plans for both indoor and outdoor leisure activities. These are just a few examples of the conveniences brought by the development of online influencer economy in China, which cannot be afforded by the previous and traditional business models. We suggest that the benefits and commercial performance brought by the existing online influencer economy are inevitable in the developmental path of the Internet economy in China, basing on the combination of traditional industry and Internet system.

4. The Future Development of Online Influencer Economy in China

We will discuss the future development of online influencer economy in China from the below aspects.

4.1. Social Value of Online Influencers

We think it is important to first address the sustainable development of online influencer economy in China in the future, which requires congruence between the value online influencers promote and the mainstream values of the society. Therefore, online influencers must strive to conform to the mainstream value orientation of the Chinese society, especially because the Chinese society closely observes the collective culture and values. Promoting the popularity of online influencers' economy from a cultural perspective would require good standards and codes of online influencers in their daily work.

In the 5G era, not only does big data enrich Chinese people's dreams, but also makes external information more easily accessible and understood to common people in China. When they come into contact with various advanced

products, it also makes most consumers no longer satisfied with the excellent use functions of some basic products. They may begin to pay more attention to the spiritual side and personality of the products, emphasising their feelings when they use the products over the actual usage of the products. Therefore, online influencers must ensure that consumers' needs, experience, and feelings are all satisfied.

Although product quality will certainly affect the sales of the product, the social and cultural value imbedded in the product a very important factor that can make the product deeply rooted in the hearts of people in China. For example, in the previous Xinjiang cotton incident, even if the brand was high-end and the quality was guaranteed, and while Nike and Adidas were very popular among Chinese students, their conflicts with Chinese cultural beliefs and values brought endless resistance from the Chinese people because they believed the brand values of such products were not worthy. Another example is the recent Hongxing Erke incident. Because the brand positioned itself vaguely in the Chinese market and the product designs could not meet the changing market in China, it was not very popular among Chinese people. It was constantly squeezed by the sports brands in the domestic market, and HongxingErke's sales were declining gradually. However, during the recent flood disaster in Henan, HongxingErke silently donated 50 million Yuan. This practice promoted and was congruent with the Chinese culturally perceived 'self-sacrifice for the good of the country', which has Hongxing Erke one of the most popular brands today in the Chinese market.

During 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has indeed inspired Chinese people's national confidence. The Xinjiang cotton incident further deepened the patriotic spirit of the people in China. Hongxing Erke was perceived by the public to have never forgotten its root in China, which won its huge popularity among Chinese consumers. In addition, the leaders HongxingErke have treated employees with a humble attitude, and worked hard to develop products for better comfort and build better cultural values associating with its brand. Similarly, we suggest that the value of online influencer is to attract people with the same values by expressing their internal feelings and convincing them with emotional appeals. Therefore, online influencers themselves should establish good values, spread good values, and be good practitioners and guardians in terms of good network atmosphere. This will bring the long-term vitality of Chinese online influencer economy and make its development more sustainable in the future.

4.2. Quality of Live-Streaming

The essence of online influencer economy is that online influencers choose commodities and promote them through their own tastes and ideas to capitalise on viewer traffic online.

We suggest that the quality and design of the content of their communication to viewers is a very important factor, affecting the results of the development of online influencer economic in China in the future. The ideas and related information carried by Chinese online influencers, who are the source of content of their communication to viewers, in the messages transmitted on the online media platforms, which should accurately reflect their own sense of responsibility, values and social morality through the organisation and logical construction of the intended image of Chinese online influencers. The online influencers would then need to accurately express their personal ideas and promotions through major online platforms, spreading their messages to the public bearing in mind the potential effects on the internal thoughts and emotions of viewers.

As to the audience of content of online influencers' communication and messages, views and fans urgently need high-quality content of communication or promotion. At the same time, good content will also enhance the public's trust in society. The content of communication or promotion carried by Chinese online influencers must accurately provide the information the viewers and fans need. Furthermore, they have to meet the urgent needs of social groups and to realise cultural and social values for the Chinese society. In a nutshell, the products being sold through the online influencer economy should satisfy the problems of consumers' everyday needs, but also bring a sense of beauty and value as well as satisfy the spiritual needs of people and communities in China.

The online influencer market in China will continue to show the trend of homogenisation in competition, while the space for obtaining benefits will continue to decrease and the Chinese online influencers will become a lot more in number. Therefore, online influencers in China must use their professional knowledge and rich social skills to provide more effective information by good communication for their viewers and fans.

For the professional fields relating to online influencers in China, it will take a long time before the field can mature accumulating knowledge over a longer period of time. While the field is developing, online influencers should try their best to attract fans and remain them, creating a dependence from views.

At the same time, due to the era of information explosion, things are difficult to have a deep-rooted impact on consumers, and the changing information will make their hearts quickly replaced with new things forgetting the old ones. Therefore, it's better to innovate and lead the trend of the market rather than to spend time seeking the latest information in order to keep pace with the times and not be eliminated by the market and competition. In order to achieve long-term developments, the most important thing for online influencers in China is to establish own brands and be good at grasping market opportunities. Even if you can't innovate very well, you should seize the opportunity to make use of major concurrent events to extend and establish your own unique image, so as to win the favour of the public.

4.3. Extended Development

With the development of the new era, the market demand from consumer groups is more diverse, and thus the online influencers economy is forced to develop into a wide range of services. There is a general trend to broaden the production lines and capitalise on the fans of online influencers. To create a complete industrial chain of online influencers economy, there must be some mutual benefits and a win-win situation between online influencers economy and national economy. For online influencers in China, with the changing market demand, their production lines should be more

diversified, but at the same time be standardised and specialised. Deeper meanings embedded in the messages carried by online influencers can achieve more emotional effects which may be desirable. Only when the online influencers truly form their own brands, can they have highly viscous fan groups and achieve success. In addition, the online influencers economy tends to be more team oriented, while the online influencers industrial chain is very diversified. Furthermore, the online influencers can become more cultivated, and the number of fans of online influencers in China is used to promote e-commerce commodity transactions and realise profits.

Not only that, the online influencers' economy goes deep into all links of the industrial chain, to widely play a role in production and consumption. They also maintain the balance between supply and demand while promoting industrial developments. When increasing the coverage of online influencers' economy and going deep into other fields, we should also create in dependent brands. Online influencers can establish their own brands. They should make the image and values of online influencers deeply blend with products. When it is different from other brands, it can reduce the impact of other external factors. This can help the online influencers' economy develop better.

The advent of the big data era has brought new opportunities to the online influencers' economy. New technologies breed new forms. Driven by the Internet, the online influencers' economy continues to develop. In the future, it is expected to transform from consumer Internet to production Internet, creating greater development space for social economy.

5. Conclusion and Remarks

The advent of the 5G era has promoted the rapid development of the online influencers' economy, which has also affected our consumption concept, changed our lifestyle and benefited countless people. However, the road to explore the long-term effective value of the online influencers' economy is still very long.

The similarity in content, poor team management and poor product quality will lead to the decline of online influencers' economy. Nowadays, although netizens can get more benefits through major platforms, most netizens are uniformly cultivated by incubation companies, with low recognition and less long-term stable fans. At the same time, the increasing number of online influencers makes it a FMCG. In the long run, the audience will have visual fatigue, the cost of cultivating online influencers will continue to rise, and the profit will continue to decrease.

With the continuous development of online influencers' economy, more and more problems will be exposed. Although we can't stop the development of online influencers and celebrities, we can prevent the emergence of negative energy and shape the media image of 'China's good online influencers' in the new era of promoting socialist core values.

Therefore, we need to constantly innovate the development model of online influencers' economy, explore the incubation and non-replicable problems of emerging online influencers, reduce the dependence on online influencers and reduce the economic cost of online influencers, so as to ensure the sustainable and healthy development of online influencers' economy.

Generally speaking, in today's society, the influence of online influencers' economy on social economy is very important. Finding the driving force of online influencers' economy, exploring its development model, understanding the shortcomings in its development and promoting the sustainable development of online influencers' economy is the top priority. With the continuous development and change of market demand, the influence of netizens should be fully utilized to promote the balanced development of netizens' economy. For the various problems existing in the e-commerce live-broadcasting industry, we should improve the market standardization mechanisms. We should also improve the live-broadcasting delivery system, improve the online influencers' quality. We can furthermore strengthen supervision and protect the rights and interests of consumers. In the era of 'we media', we should make full use of the existing advantages and improve the shortcomings in the development process. There are unlimited development possibilities in the future of online influencers' economy.

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