



Influencing differently: how Chinese male beauty influencers develop influencer marketing beyond Silicon Valley[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Prior research in influencer marketing suggests the articulation of ideological values (e.g., Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity) can be critical to their commercial and cultural success, usually by signaling authenticity, relationality, legitimacy, and so on. Yet, prior studies have primarily focused on influencers in the commercial and cultural systems of the Global North, taking the ideologies of Silicon Valley for granted. We know far less about influencers and influencing in other markets and consumer cultures, under other ideological conditions. Our paper focuses on Male Beauty Influencers (MBIs) in China. These actors describe themselves as Wǎng Hóng, a term similar to, but not quite identical to, the Global North's notion of an influencer. MBIs have markedly different business models and ideological environments than influencers in the Global North, tacitly advocating for more pluralistic understandings of masculinity simply by being men who publicly share beauty practices. While ideas and ideals like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion rarely appear on Chinese social media, MBIs are highly successful, with vast followings and lucrative sponsorships. Reflecting on this paradox, we ask: are MBIs mostly similar to influencers in the Global North, or does Wǎng Hóng help elucidate different approaches to social media creation and consumption? We use a five-year netnography to identify Zhēn (Authenticity), Shàn (Kindness), and Měi (Beauty) as ideas and ideals, or ideologies, that outline MBIs' distinctive approach to social media. We conceive this approach as an ideological antechamber — ideas or ideals that do not fit neatly into existing frames (i.e., DEI of the Global North) — and so elucidate the boundary conditions of influencer marketing by demonstrating influencers and influencing can manifest differently outside the sociohistorical trajectories of Silicon Valley and the Global North. In an era of divisive, hateful, and even violent forms of influencing, different marketing approaches are sorely needed.

1. Introduction

Influencers exert considerable influence on consumer culture, using digital platforms to promote themselves, then acquire sponsored products and services (Gurrieri, Drenten, & Abidin, 2023; Kozinets, 2019; Kozinets, Gretzel, & Gambetti, 2023). This is the eponymous axiom of influencer marketing — influencers influence. Prior business and cultural studies have considered *how* influencers influence — via authenticity, relationality, and so on — *why* influence and influencers matter so much today — in an attention-driven economy (Bollmer & Guinness, 2024; Borges-Tiago, Santiago, & Tiago, 2023; Hugh, Dolan, Harrigan, & Gray, 2022; Leung, Gu, Li, Zhang, & Palmatier, 2022). Today, 'the influencer' is a term so widely and regularly used that it affords less and

less explanation, but mostly in the Global North (regions like North America, Europe, or Australasia). The influencer is not a universal, taken-for-granted figure; however, a cluster of ideas and ideals from the Global North (more specifically, Silicon Valley) is represented as a global, unifying business model.

In this paper, we argue that influencers and their marketing practices of influence are sociohistorical contingencies. Influencers emerge from a specific historical trajectory of relations (economic, technical, political, etc.), which could have been otherwise. The model that emerged from the Global North is a template designed in Silicon Valley, but as it was exported, employed, and embedded across many countries, certain ideas and ideals became the baseline for influencer marketing (as a system of practices, policy recommendations, and theories). For many, it is now

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difficult to think differently about market societies and consumer cultures in our social media era. The ideas and ideals of Silicon Valley have been naturalized, taken-for-granted as universal, ahistorical facts, not sociohistorical contingencies. This naturalization shuts out or cuts off other possibilities, which is increasingly problematic when influencing contributes to polarizing, harmful, or even deadly outcomes, like ‘manosphere manfluencers’ (Gerrand, Ging, Roose, & Flood, 2025; Kennedy-Kollar, 2024) or misinformation on vaccines, wars, or cellular agriculture.

The sociohistorical contingencies of influencing become visible when we juxtapose business scholarship over time. A blogger (Gannon & Prothero, 2018; MacQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) or vlogger (Marton, Cocker, & Daunt, 2023) was once a popular identity position or label, but these have largely been absorbed into the more general concept of the influencer. In a recent court case, YouTube’s lawyers were keen to define their contributors as content creators, not influencers, as the prosecution sought to sue the owners of YouTube and Instagram for addiction-by-design (Hays, Saad, & Morris, 2026). This case shows how the boundary conditions of influencing (who is an influencer and who is not?) can be revised, with other concepts (like ‘content creator’) being used to make sense of other identities and activities on social media platforms. Yet, these rare or replaced exceptions only serve to reinforce the rule — the influencer is the dominant metaphor for a person who uses social media to amass a following, build a personal brand, gain sponsorship deals, or attempt to reshape the public discourse — at least in the Global North today.

What about elsewhere? We focus on Male Beauty Influencers (MBIs) in China. These actors do not call themselves influencers. In Chinese, the term Wǎng Hóng is used, roughly translating as “Internet Red (Fame).” While this encapsulates a similar meaning to the word “influencer”, as defined above, it can also be applied to other entities, many times even non-human, like a city, foodstuff, or makeup routine (Abidin, 2018; Guan & Zhou, 2025; Morris & Cong, 2024). Wǎng Hóng, as a workable but slightly misaligned translation, draws attention to the boundary conditions of influencers and influencing, in theory but also in practice. Accordingly, we ask: are MBIs mostly similar to influencers in the Global North, or does Wǎng Hóng help elucidate different approaches to social media creation and consumption? In the next section, we conceptualize influencer marketing drawing on past ideological theories in business and socio-cultural fields.

2. Theoretical distance: the ideologies of influencers and the ideology of influencers

Our project is about elucidating the boundary conditions of influencers, influencing, and influencer marketing. We begin, therefore, by finding a parallax position from which to review our existing knowledge (Coffin et al., 2022; Žižek, 2008). Asking a fish about water is like asking a human about air or an influencer about influencing; from within a medium, the medium is invisible. If we wish to perceive the contours of influencer marketing and find the possibility of an outside, it helps to reframe influencer marketing as an ideology with a series of social, moral, political, and economic functions, rather than a body of literature that simply describes a set of platforms, practices, and people’s ‘out there’. We first define the nebulous concept of ideology as powerful ideas and ideals. Using ideology as a lens, we draw a line between the (plural) ideologies of influencers and a (singular) ideology of the influencer, so we can ask what might lie beyond influencing, a question we can then answer empirically.

Studies in influencer marketing do not address ideology in extensive detail, but today business theory assumes ideology is everywhere (Schmitt, Brakus, & Biraglia, 2022). What is ideology? The concept has a long, contested history (Eagleton, 2014; Kozinets, 2008). We define ideology as a cluster of powerful ideas and ideals. Here, ideas are perceptions that describe how the world is, ideals are normative perceptions of how the world should be, and power refers to the ability to act,

react, and enact as one wishes, but also the ability to coerce, restrain, or force others to follow one’s wishes (Grant, Canniford, & Shankar, 2025; Schmitt et al., 2022). Ideologies are ideas and ideals with the power to shape thoughts, feelings, and actions in individual consumers or market institutions (Kozinets, 2008), competing unevenly with other ideas and ideals (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010; Schmitt et al., 2022), and usually speak about power relations themselves (Brunk, Giesler, & Hartmann, 2018; Coffin & Egan-Wyer, 2022). For instance, when an influencer advocates for more positive understandings of disabilities (Södergren & Vallström, 2023), age (Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021), race (Edwards, Bourne, Cabañes, Castro, & Keddo, 2025; Sobande, Kanai, & Zeng, 2022), or queerness (Chen & Kanai, 2022), they are questioning entrenched power relations that privilege able-bodied, young, white heterosexuals.

Schmitt et al. (2022, p.75) argue ideology “functions as a playground — and battlefield — in consumer markets.” They do not elaborate on the distinction, but prior works show how consumers can play with ideas and ideals that are logically contradictory at the etic level, but play nicely enough together at the emic level (Brunk et al., 2018; Kozinets, 2008; Veresiu & Giesler, 2018). They also show consumers, brands, and other market actors battling with one another to determine which ideas and ideals can reshape markets or society (Giesler, 2008; Gopaldas, 2014; Nøjgaard, 2023; Valor et al., 2021). Another way of thinking about the distinction is that the ludic agency (the playfully creative ability to act) can be directed to play with and within the rules, or to break and remake the rules, though the latter is more difficult and likely to result in socioeconomic censure (Kozinets et al., 2004). As such, ludic agency is mostly aligned to the playground metaphor, whereas other uses of agency, like activism, focus on structural concerns (Gopaldas, 2014; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Valor, Lloveras, & Papaioannou, 2021), and so are better understood through the battleground analogy of ideology.

Traditional theories of ideology assume ideas and ideals are used by the powerful to exploit and control the powerless, so the purpose of analysis is to expose ideological claims as misinformation and manipulation; contemporary theory, however, assumes ideologies are everywhere, so every idea and ideal existing in a shifting, competitive market of other ideas and ideals (2018; Coffin & Egan-Wyer, 2022; Žižek, 2008). Simple categories like powerful or powerless, conscious or unconscious, free choice and coercion are ambiguated into fields — battlefields for brands, activists, or other market actors (Giesler, 2008; Schmitt et al., 2022), or playing fields of meaning-making enclosed by ideologues like work machines, techtopian evangelists, green luddites, or techspessives (Kozinets, 2008). Questions of power, intention, and agency remain, but require more nuanced analyses and concepts. For example, Cronin, Fitchett, and Coffin (2024) introduce the concept of the ideological antechamber to describe ideas and ideals that are difficult to locate vis-à-vis other ideologies. For instance, clicktivists use convenient tools like online petitions to express discontent; avoiding activism’s temporal, financial, or emotional costs, they are also called slacktivists. Its ability to change the status quo is also uncertain (Kristofferson, White, & Pelozo, 2014), so the antechamber evokes an adjunct position that is neither here nor there, but also not between or beyond two positions. An antechamber is nearby, not detached, but connected to more than one space, with multiple purposes.

Having reviewed past studies on ideology, we can now review the literature on influencer marketing to distinguish between the (plural) ideologies of influencers and the (singular) ideology of the influencer. We have already introduced the former. Some influencers market themselves by marketing positive ideas and ideals of queerness (Chen & Kanai, 2022), race (Edwards et al., 2025; Sobande et al., 2022), disability (Södergren & Vallström, 2023), or aging (Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021). Other influencers promote opposing ideas and ideals, like those in the manosphere (Gerrand et al., 2025) or those promoting eternal youth (Stulberg, 2024). The ideologies of influencers (in the plural) are the competing ideas and ideals that individuals promote or

oppose. Studies of influencer marketing, as well as the influencers themselves, comment on these ideological differences. However, all these are underpinned by a single ideology, the influencer, that fades into the background of perception and amongst the lines of discourse. This ideology is singular because all influencers, by virtue of being influencers, tacitly subscribe to the common ideas and ideals of influencer marketing, such as the value of attention, conveyor-belt content creation, and platformization. This extends to marketing theorists and practitioners, who measure source trustworthiness, audience perception, or purchase intent (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023; Hugh et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022) and represent attention as a resource, currency, or end-in-itself (Bishop, 2025; Bollmer & Guinness, 2024; Brooks, Drenten, & Piskorski, 2021). Atop these shared ideas and ideals, ideological differences can play out without undermining the power of social media owners (Kotkin, 2023; Zuboff, 2019; Zwick, 2018).

To be clear, we are not suggesting the singular ideology of the influencer is totalizing. Influencers and social media users may have an uneasy, ironic, or critical relation to the ideas and ideals of influencer marketing. However, insofar as they use social media, they buy into an ideology of the influencer as a figure built on social media platforms, attention economies, and content creation, to some degree of complicity, acquiescence, or inattentiveness. This is a parallax view (Žižek, 2008), showing how ideological differences (e.g., between feminists and manfluencers) are connected by a common ideology of what it means to be an influencer. The influencer model is a product of specific affordances built into the social media platforms of Silicon Valley, a template that has been exported elsewhere but ultimately contributes to the concentration of data, capital, and power into a small part of California. This reminds us that the common ideology of the influencer is a sociohistorical contingency, things could have been, might still be, and already are otherwise. Social media users in the Americas, Europe, or Australasia use ‘influencer’ in English, Spanish, German, or quotidian French (though the *Académie Française* officially promotes ‘créateur de contenu’). Chinese social media users do not use the term, however, but rather Wǎng Hóng, which only roughly aligns with the notion of the (Silicon Valley) influencer.

Wǎng Hóng hints at already-existing alternatives to the ideological hegemony of the (Silicon Valley) influencer, but it may just be a clunky translation, an artefact of language. So, we turned to an empirical context through which we can better understand Wǎng Hóng.

3. Methodology: a five-year netnography of male beauty influencers in China

Wǎng Hóng who rework ideas and ideals of male beauty, can, in English, be called Male Beauty Influencers (MBIs). For most purposes, this translation is workable. However, it may not resonate with the lived experiences of Wǎng Hóng, nor the emic understandings of their followers and other consumers. In short, the issue of translation is not simply linguistic, but offers an entryway to unpick the contingencies of ‘the influencer’ ideology by studying social media users in different sociohistorical conditions. Empirically, we focus on China, but conceptually, we reflect back on the boundary conditions of influencer marketing from this alternative vantage point. We undertook a netnography to collect, analyze, and build theory from online traces and spaces as data (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024; Kozinets, 2019).

Context. In China, as elsewhere, beauty is traditionally associated with women and femininity within binary gender frameworks. Yet, MBIs have millions of followers, lucrative sponsorship deals, and no obvious social repercussions (Huang, De Graeve, & Van Praet, 2025; Li & Wu, 2025; Li, Gurrieri, Figueiredo, & Yu, 2024). This seems to be a puzzle. In the Global North, non-normative expressions of gender survive in niche subcultures (Goulding & Saren, 2009; Kates, 2002) unless broader societal norms change (Campana, Duffy, & Micheli, 2022; Eichert & Luedicke, 2022; Venkatramen, Ozanne, & Coslor, 2024). In China, however, MBIs thrive despite no obvious shift in societal norms. By their

very existence as male beauty influencers, MBIs embody diversification, yet they do not explicitly promote ideas and ideals like ‘Diversity’, ‘Equity’, or ‘Inclusion’, as might be expected in the Global North (Arsel, Crockett, & Scott, 2022), nor is there a notable “anti-DEI” movement (Scott, Mende, & Ramon, 2025, P.1). Many MBIs are ambiguous about certain topics, such as romantic partners (Yang, 2026), but continue to live as embodiments of not-so-traditional, not-quite-binary ideas and ideals — living in and as an ideological antechamber (Cronin et al., 2024). MBIs, their business models, and the consumer cultures in which they operate are difficult to categorize as DEI influencer marketing. Yet, we also see some family resemblances. As such, this is a useful case through which to study the extent to which Wǎng Hóng are synonymous with, or distinct from, the influencer ideology.

Data Collection. We undertook a netnography from December 2019 to October 2025, collecting three forms of data – immersive, investigative, interactive – over these five years (Table 1), preceded by initiation and completed by integration (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024).

Immersion involves being part of an online culture for an extended period of time and journaling impressions, reflections, and other research-relevant experiences (Kozinets, 2023). Before that comes initiation – accessing and learning about a culture, identifying contacts and relevant sites of activity (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). The first author’s personal interest in MBIs inspired the project; he became familiar with the actors, discourses, platforms, or other cultural elements. In the institutional ethics approval process, these were formally mapped. Then, immersion began. Immersion journaling involved keeping notes of the first author’s lived experience as a record of situated, embodied knowledge production, but also as a source of first-person data (Kozinets, 2023). Their dual identity as a researcher and cultural member developed into the detection of subtle affective cues that might

Table 1
Data collected.

Type	Source	Data Description
Immersion Data	Two authors	• Immersion journal (March 2021–October 2025), totaling 84 pages. • Fortnightly entries for initial sensitization (March 2021–February 2022). • Deep immersion: weekly entries (March 2022–September 2022) for richer data generation and research reflection. • Author dialogues every 4–6 weeks, becoming more frequent (January 2023–December 2025); written notes incorporated into the immersion journal. • Continued fortnightly immersion journaling (October 2023–October 2025), focusing on reflection and reinterpretation of MBI behaviors following collaborative discussions.
Investigation Data	15 male beauty influencers, with a range of audience sizes (from 32,000–11.5 million + followers on RedNote; 5,400–1.79 million followers on Bilibili)	• Social media content (posts + comments), totaling 126 pages/88,362 words. • Podcast interviews (2019–2024): 12 episodes (45–120 min), generating 459 pages of transcription. • News reports (2019–2023): 6 articles.
Interactive Data	10 beauty influencers (from 1 K to 33 K + followers on RedNote) and 10 followers.	• 20 semi-structured interviews, from 44 min to 93 min per participant, average 69 min, totaling 440 pages of transcription.

elude a detached observer, with affect defined as embodied forces that are difficult to categorize in words, like mixed emotions, unexpected desires, or unspoken moments of understanding (Coffin & Hill, 2022; Hill, Canniford, & Mol, 2014; Kozinets, Patterson, & Ashman, 2017; Shamayleh & Arsel, 2025). The second author did not keep an immersion journal as he was not immersed in the culture, but leveraged his role as a detached observer by asking questions when encountering data, codes, or interpretations (e.g., “Is Zhēn like indexical authenticity, or...?”). The second author’s naïveté helped to short-circuit theory-building (Coffin et al., 2022), sparking twists and turns of divergent interpretation, which ultimately helped both authors to perceive the ideology of the influencer. During one meeting, the second author casually asked how to translate ‘influencer’ into Chinese, which led to a conversation about the (mis)translation of Wǎng Hóng and to a budding re-theorization of influencer ideology. Because immersive data are underutilized (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024), we made a special effort to include them in the findings section below.

Investigations followed up on themes, queries, and curiosities emerging from first-person immersion and dialogue between the two authors (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). From immersion, 15 focal MBIs were identified (Table 2), and the first author looked regularly at their profile, whilst also searching for their name in the news and on social media. New sites of interesting data were identified in these investigations, like podcast interviews, influencer livestreams, and commentaries on (or by) platform workers. In this project, investigations involved observing and documenting only, or ‘lurking’ (Kozinets, 2015), as the authors were concerned about the potential harm of drawing attention to MBIs and their followers through commenting or direct messaging. While such issues are a consideration in any netnography (Drenten & Gurrieri, 2025; Kozinets, 2019), they are especially salient here as Chinese platforms are highly centralized and surveilled (Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Yang, 2026). Investigative data were collected in batches. The second author, as a Anglophone academic from the Global North, contributed a parallax epistemic position to assess each round (Coffin et al., 2022). He questioned assumptions and offered alternative readings in meetings and within manuscript comments. These discussions shaped the next round of investigation – who, what, where, when, and how many next? Boundary or negative cases were sought to stress-test, nuance, and hone our emerging interpretations (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Immersion and investigations also informed the interactions undertaken.

Interactions online allow other actors to provide their perspectives on a focal cultural phenomenon (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). Initially, we contacted MBIs directly, but received no response or were requested prohibitively high fees, so we shifted to snowball sampling from the first author’s connections to recruit lesser-known influencers. Our sampling criteria and interview guide drew on insights from the immersion journal. To ensure interviews were sufficiently detailed and relevant, influencers needed to have produced beauty-related content for one year or more, while followers had to follow at least one MBI for three years or more. 10 influencers and 10 followers were interviewed via Zoom or Microsoft Teams at times convenient for them, ranging from 44 to 90 min (average 69), resulting in a total of 440 pages of transcription (Table 3). Interviews began with gentle, open-ended, ice-breaking questions to understand each participant’s professional or personal trajectory and their perceptions about MBI’s cultures. Then, interviews transitioned into participants’ experiences with or as MBIs, with emergent themes encouraged when these helped to deepen our understandings of how Wǎng Hóng related to the Global North’s understanding of influencers. Each interview ended with an open invitation for anything missed, a check on the participant’s well-being, a thank you for their contribution, and a reminder of their agency (e.g., to withdraw from the study). Pseudonyms were assigned, and all identifiable information was removed or paraphrased. The first author’s interactions with MBIs and their followers added important data, like backstage emotional labor or unattractive lived experiences that were

Table 2

Observed MBIs, Follower Counts and Rationale of Selection.

MBI Pseudonyms	Follower Numbers on RED/Bilibili	Rationale of Selection
Ling	80.2 K/65 K	Transitioned from posting to live streaming in 2021; the podcast interview from Ling offer rich secondary data in terms of their journey as MBI and platform adaptation illuminate access and representation opportunities in evolving more-than-human technocultures.
Fan	45 K/166 K	Active since 2017; Founder of a beauty brand and media interviewer; consistent engagement—each post garners 300 + likes. Fan’s commercial success and visibility reflect how equitable recognition and brand equity are navigated by male creators.
Tree	NA/80 K	Long-standing influencer (since 2015); featured in very first report (2019) about the rising phenomenon of MBIs in China, since 2021 has now focused on livestreaming and deactivated RedNote account in 2024. Offers insights into platform inclusion trajectories and the shifting affordances for male beauty influencers.
Yong	344 K/NA	Continues to post beauty content on RED, Specialized in animal-themed and non-human like themes makeup (monsters, aliens etc); only male influencer to win a Chinese influencer competition. Embodies how diverse aesthetic identities can claim legitimacy and challenge normative visual standards
Benny	32.3 k/1.24 M	Among China’s earliest openly queer beauty influencers and a beauty brand owner. Active in LGBT + charities and interviewed on queer visibility. Crucial for understanding how sexual diversity intersects with brand influence and inclusion in restricted cultures.
Nie	1.2 M/1.25 M	Highly recognized, commercially successful beauty influencer. Known for transformative makeup content showcasing male-to-female appearance shifts. Offers a window into gender queerness, aesthetic hybridity, and the friction of normative beauty structures—central to DEI theorization.
Li	11.5 M/1.79 M	Runs a major influencer agency and started as a beauty merchant. Demonstrates structural power and gatekeeping within beauty ecosystems, implicating equity in the cultural economy of influencer culture, also offer insights about stakeholder and organization perspectives.
Er	64 K/187 K	Posted weekly long-form beauty content until 2023, each video generating over 2,000 comments. Offers valuable historical and comparative insights despite recent inactivity.
Hua	58.1 K/1.1 M	Produces comedic yet cosmetics-focused content. While not self-labelled as a beauty influencer, maintains a substantial cosmetics-related output and audience engagement on make up content.
Bu	3.3 M/30 K	Active from 2017 to 2022, specializing in male-to-female drag makeup transformations, contributing to diversity of representation in the sample. Highlights gender performativity and aesthetic equity, Consistent creator since 2019; RED video racked 210 K likes. Illustrates audience inclusivity and digital reach, pivotal to evaluating equitable visibility across platforms.
Hai	65.7 K/504 K	Active since 2017; one of the few male beauty influencers still on Bilibili. Offers
Tig	32 K/86 K	

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Table 2 (continued)

MBI Pseudonyms	Follower Numbers on RED/Bilibili	Rationale of Selection
Ali	1.8 M/206 K	comparative insight to RED in terms of platform affordances and content continuity. Maintains weekly beauty content since 2017; signed with multiple beauty brands. High engagement levels position Ali as a leading industry figure. Demonstrates how institutional inclusion and commercial equity play out in brand-creator networks.
Wu	38.6 K/5.4 K	One of the earliest male beauty influencers (since 2015), profiled in in-depth media interviews. Since 2021, shifted from Bilibili to exclusive livestreaming.
Tian	236.3 K/1.15 M	Continues to produce weekly men's makeup and amateur makeover content, attracting significant online traffic and expanding male beauty representation.

Table 3
Social characteristics of informants.

Influencer Pseudonym, Gender Identification, Occupation, Follower Numbers on RED	Follower Pseudonym, Gender Identification, Occupation
Jia, male, live streamer/influencer, 1 K	Ye, non-binary, influencer marketing agent
Yuan, female queer, marketer/influencer, 33 K	Yang, male, PhD researcher of social media marketing
Liu, female/queer, influencer, 3 K	Wang, female, PhD researcher of marketing
Zhang, male, influencer, 4 K	Yan, female, PhD researcher of marketing
Zhu, male/queer, student/influencer, 16 K	Ai, female, social media marketer
Zhu, male, student/influencer, 3.6 K	Hui, female, PhD researcher in marketing
Zhang, male, journalist/influencer, 5 K	Luo, female, PhD researcher of social media
Yu, male/queer, lecturer/influencer, 7 K	Xu, female, PhD researcher of marketing
Han, male/queer, influencer, 34 K	Wei, female, Red Note marketer
Feng, male/queer, student/influencer, 10 K	Ru, female, PhD researcher in marketing

not publicly posted.

Integration and incorporation bring a netnography into publication by analyzing, interpreting, theorizing, and representing data (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). Our analytical approach involved open and axial coding, synthesizing codes into themes, and consulting the literature to draw on abstract connections and draw out transferable concepts (Belk, Kozinets, & Fischer, 2012; Spiggle, 1994). During data collection and the review process, we also re-integrated our theorization through author reflection, dialogue, and rewrites (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024; Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). Both authors' voices were incorporated throughout, but also presented as immersive data quotes (Coffin et al., 2022; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024).

4. Findings: negotiating Chinese social media with ZSM ideologies

Our findings show MBIs negotiate their ideas and ideals into and within the cultures of Chinese social media. We organize these emic ideas and ideals into three ideological nodes (Kozinets, 2008): Zhēn, Shàn, and Měi. We find they share a family resemblance to progressive ideals like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the ideological battlefield of pro- and anti-DEI (Arsel et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2025). Zhēn describes authenticity, honesty, and sincerity, outward expressions of one's 'true self' in all its diversity; Shàn means kindness as a form of moral goodness, at times expressed by treating others more fairly or equitably; Měi denotes beauty if outward appearance hints at inner

virtues, with MBIs observed affirmatively, including other people's Měi in their content. Insofar as Zhēn, Shàn, and Měi are like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, we might coin ZSM as a comparable acronym, yet our analysis shows these three ideological nodes do not neatly match their DEI counterparts. In the sections below and Table 4 in the Appendix, we question the linguistic, conceptual, and ideological translation of Z, S, and M into D, E, and I, and through this juxtaposition, we explore similarities and differences between Wǎng Hóng and influencers in the Global North.

4.1. Zhēn – being authentic, honest, and true, but diverse too?

Zhēn is associated with ideas and ideals similar to authenticity, honesty, or truth. It means courageous truth-telling, enhanced by beauty products and practices, usually requiring vulnerability and candor, foregrounding self-doubts, failures, and precarity. MBIs with Zhēn 'dare' to create 'imperfect' beauty content that is 'raw' or 'real', rather than using beauty that covers over, covers up, or erases their faces, bodies, or lives. As such, Zhēn draws attention to the artifice and falseness that surround other MBIs, tacitly promoting more diverse forms of beauty without necessarily labeling this as 'diversity'. In the Global North, diversity in the beauty industry is usually represented by bodies that are codified as 'different' to the white, thin, youthful, and able-bodied baseline (Edwards et al., 2025; Sobande et al., 2022; Södergren & Vallström, 2023; Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021). Differentiation was subtler in our data; MBIs were mostly Han, slim, young, and did not publicize any disability, but diversified from the cultural baseline of flawless beauty and unfailing success with beauty built on doubts, failures, and precariousness. From Zhen we may infer, but never presume, an ideological critique of beauty cultures:

"I couldn't keep living as a 'fake person.' Waking up every day and putting on a façade was exhausting, so I shaved everything off. A bald head is better than being half-bald, right? Hair loss hasn't physically hurt me—it just makes me 'uglier'—but the emotional toll was crushing. For years, I cried daily, asking, 'What do you want from me?' Eventually, I accepted it: it's just hair. Why not embrace it? In a world full of chaos, why not choose happiness? Shaving it all off was liberating." (Ali, MBI, RedNote post, 2022)

When Ali asks, "What do you want from me?", to whom are they speaking? Ideological analyses take an abstract 'you' as the Other, a personification of an imposed ideology (Žižek, 2006). The Other is an ideological placeholder to be filled by our ideas and ideals (Kozinets, 2008; Žižek, 2018). If Ali is speaking to God, society, or the algorithm, the ideological Other functions the same, as an imagined figure on which to project anxieties (hair loss) and reflect on necessary actions (hair shaving), without naming, blaming, or shaming a particular person:

"Every beauty influencer has intense fear and anxiety about ageing and skin deterioration. Becoming a beauty influencer is actually a very demanding process [...] Their ability to maintain their skin and appearance over the years involves significant financial investment, extensive time, and physical pain from repeated procedures such as laser treatments, microneedling, and chemical peels." (Benny, MBI, RedNote post, 2023)

As shown in the quotes above, Zhēn is non-adversarial. Adversarial ideologies name a clear enemy or villain to construct an "us-versus-them" worldview (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Valor, Lloveras, & Papaiokonomou, 2021). In contrast, MBIs use Zhēn to make sense of lives affected by multiple, overlapping forces, where the biological (aging, hair loss, etc.) interfaces the sociopolitical (chaos), the economic (earning a living in an attention economy), and the technological (beauty treatments). These blend and blur; as Benny's quote suggests, cosmetic interventions involve embodied pain, financial gain, psychological strain, and more. But, while some MBIs may secretly enhance their faces and bodies, Zhēn means creating and posting content about

such procedures. Shaving one's hair or candidly talking about painful treatments both illustrate the same ideological node of Zhēn – the face value ideas and ideals of being authentic or courageous enough to be true to oneself throughout.

We describe the ideas and ideals Zhēn at face value as these emic understandings do not hold under etic analysis. Kozinets (2008) shows how the internal logics of any ideology become illogical when taken to their own conclusions. Similarly, notions like authenticity are problematic because they rely on the notion of a stable, internal essence, which is difficult to justify in objects, let alone people (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Similarly, it is a matter of debate whether it is more courageous to undergo a cosmetic treatment or to ignore the social pressure to do so. Prior studies of influencers in the Global North shown the *performance* of a real, raw, or true self adds value to influencers' personal brands (Patry-Beaudoin, Handelman, & Thomas, 2025; Koles, Audrezet, Moulard, Ameen, & McKenna, 2024; Nunes, Ordanini, & Giambastiani, 2021), but this only evidences an incentive to present vulnerabilities, failures, precariousness, and doubts. In our analysis, Zhēn does not provide evidence of an essential self, nor does it corroborate claims of vulnerability, failure, precarity, or doubt. At the same time, theories of self-presentation or performativity remind us that there is not a strict demarcation between the public and private self, for we become what we regularly enact (Butler, 1990; Chatzidakis, Eckhardt, & Husemann, 2025; Thompson & Üstüner, 2015). Ideologically, however, the 'reality' of the self and one's intentions are somewhat moot. What matters most is how Zhēn functions to connect MBIs and followers, generating value by differing from the flawless, successful baseline of beauty:

"Although my situation is not quite the same as yours (Ali), I can deeply understand that having a physical "imperfection" different from others can cause enormous emotional and psychological harm. It's hard to imagine how much effort you must have put in to get to where you are now, and to be able to speak openly about it in front of the camera (hugging emoji). This is the first time I've come across your video—thank you. I was truly moved and inspired. I'll keep going too." (Comment under Ali's RedNote post, 2022)

Patry-Beaudoin, Handelman, and Chalmers Thomas (2025) found social media consumers are increasingly cynical, knowing enough about algorithms, platforms, and attention economies to believe that nothing online is quite as it seems. However, this cynicism allows them to appreciate that authenticity is not linked to an essence but ongoing processes of self-creation, self-presentation, and self-censorship. Audiences seek out content creators willing to reveal more about themselves, not necessarily everything, using formats and aesthetics that appear less rehearsed and polished, without necessarily assuming content is entirely spontaneous or unedited (Patry-Beaudoin et al., 2025). Similarly, while Zhēn is associated with ideas and ideals like authenticity, courage, or truth, these are ambiguous and endlessly re-interpretable:

"I experienced complex emotions (in the meantime, relatable). On one hand, I was shocked by his (Benny's) openness; on the other, I felt sympathy and empathy for the bodily labour he undertakes to maintain a perfect appearance. Yet, I don't fully agree that all beauty influencers build their careers upon appearance anxiety (look at Ali). As a queer scholar studying feminism and queer theory, I know such rationalizations of bodily exploitation are problematic. Yet somehow, I do feel very relatable; these conflicting emotions coexist within me." (Immersion note for Benny, first author, 2025)

While beauty brands trade on ideas and ideals of self-expression or self-actualization (along the lines of becoming your best self), market-mediated beauty is traditionally critiqued as promoting inauthenticity (Smith, van Dellen, & Ton, 2021). At face-value, Zhēn diverges from mainstream beauty practices (covering up, presenting one's best self, etc.) with different definitions of what beauty might be. Yet, closer analysis suggests Zhēn may or may not be as authentic, courageous, or

truthful as it claims, but that this does not necessarily or negatively affect its ideological function. It can be understood as an ideological antechamber (Cronin et al., 2024), a claim to move beyond the norm that does not unequivocally achieve that aim. We can equivocate about whether Zhēn is 'really' authentic, courageous, or truthful and whether followers perceive MBIs to have these qualities, but our evidence suggests these questions miss the ideological point. Zhēn introduces forms of diversity into Chinese beauty markets that MBIs and followers both value:

Li's decision to establish Hope Primary Schools (a programme to help rural area kids to get educated), a government-supported initiative aligned with state interests, was widely praised a documentary's comments section, where followers commended Li for "taking social responsibility" and being a "high-quality creator." [...] Whether this gesture is performative or sincere is impossible for me to determine." (Immersion note for Li, first author, 2022)

By performing Zhēn, Li is legitimated for, and by, existing and new followers. Other data also suggest Zhēn being knowingly leveraged as a resource, tool, or strategy:

"My content has always been Wen (soft) and conversational. Some [consumers] find it flat, even sleep-inducing. But I stayed resolute—I believe gentleness holds power. Many men get labeled 'effeminate,' yet those called 'soft' often embody true 'manliness': inner strength, integrity, and the courage to stand up for others. Meanwhile, superficially 'macho' figures often lack substance [...]. If called 'sissy,' that's their edge — especially in beauty, where individuality should be celebrated." (Yong podcast interview, 2022)

Liu and Kozinets (2022) show how gender norms in China lead to stigmatization and other forms of vulnerability that consumers must manage, but Yong presents vulnerability as an advantage. Staying "resolute" is a branding signal of authenticity, remaining true to one's own principles even if differing from cultural norms. Yong uses phrases like 'true manliness', 'inner strength', and 'integrity', all of which circle around the ideological node of Zhēn. This quote also refers to 'the courage to stand up for others', which extend self-differentiation (as a branding practice) into promoting difference (as a moral principle). Speaking for a podcast interview, however, there is also a possibility that Yong is carefully performing for audiences, leveraging Zhēn for attention, followers, and sponsorship. By articulating difference in terms of 'individuality', Yong also avoids making any explicit structural critiques. Unlike the DEI agenda of the Global North, where differences are organized around gender, race, class, and other structural categories (Arsel et al., 2022), Yong's celebration of difference is more akin to the multicultural consumerist logic where diversity plays out in a marketplace of choices, not through solidarity movements that rearrange power dynamics (Veresiu & Giesler, 2018).

Zhēn as a node of ideas and ideals that allows MBIs and their followers to navigate, ameliorate, or monetize many overlapping vulnerabilities, failures, precarities, or doubts, but only at an individual level, mediated by the social media marketplace. We found few calls for structural changes in the data. In this sense, Zhēn is different from the Diversity of the DEI agenda (Arsel et al., 2022), more akin to the symbolic differences of market multiculturalism (Veresiu & Giesler, 2018). However, this also explains why Zhēn generated no significant backlash. In our data, we find no anti-Zhēn discourses, no equivalent to the Global North's anti-DEI movement (Scott et al., 2025). As such, we interpret Zhēn as an ideological node that illustrates both the plurality of Wǎng Hóng ideologies and the singular ideology of the Wǎng Hóng. Promoting differences brings multiple ideas and ideals into play, but none battle with the underlying principle of the social media business model, nor the wider social, political, and economic structures beyond:

"All of this is deliberately designed by the platform: when to promote your content, when to give you traffic—it's all arranged to make you

post more. And so, creators end up extremely anxious and scared. Indeed, the platform wants you to be anxious, because only when you're anxious will you keep producing content." (Benny, Podcast Interview, 2021)

Benny's interview highlights that Zhēn allows Wǎng Hóng to play with authenticity, courage, truth, vulnerability, precarity, and other ideas or ideals (and play seriously, for profit, fame, and for others), but never to battle against the social media platforms themselves. Here, it seems the ideology of Wǎng Hóng overlaps entirely with the ideology of the influencer, with relatively minor differences in Zhēn and diversity. However, what about our next theme?

4.2. Shàn – kindness and morality, but what about equity?

Shàn generally refers to kindness and moral goodness. In the context of MBIs, it manifests through acts rooted in hopeful, relational care and solidarities that reach out to other marginalized groups. Crucially, Shàn does not mean labelling these groups, mapping power relations, or explicitly calling for fairer treatment in the way that might be expected in the Global North's discourse on equity (Arsel et al., 2022; Waverley, 2024). For instance:

"[...]Hua's detailed observations of 'ordinary people' who remain invisible in daily life, and Hua's humor—witty yet never offensive, with a strong sense of humanity and care, Hua puts in a lot of effort, has strong empathy, and exudes both gentleness and strength, he can embrace others in society with such an adorable and accepting attitude. Maybe the encouragement and kindness from those around him have helped, but I also want to say that perhaps Hua has a natural gift for fighting against the world's ugliness with love, 'sissy pants' can also be a weapon—how cool and cute! I feel Hua may never become a 'mainstream' top-tier influencer, but everyone who watches their videos will return the love they share." (Paraphrased Comment under Hua's Bilibili post, 2022)

In Chinese culture, Shàn is a highly prized virtue. In mythic stories, Shàn stands in opposition to evil and has long been celebrated in Chinese philosophy (Ho, 2022). In this, Shàn complements morally antagonistic narratives of the Global North, where good opposes evil (Luedicke, Giesler, and Thompson, 2010) in markets of villains, victims, and virtuous consumers (Gopaldas, 2014; Valor et al., 2021). However, as shown in the comment above, Shàn do not necessarily need to depict specific others as evil, bad, or cruel. Instead, Shàn is positioned against a generalized abstraction of social malice (e.g., "the world's ugliness"). This, again, is an Other or ideological placeholder that can be filled with diverse emic content (Kozinets, 2008; Žižek, 2008, 2018). In the context of beauty, it is perhaps unsurprising that "ugliness" is the emic term used to define the mirror image of Shàn. However, this diffuse or nebulous antagonist defuses or negates antagonisms between actual groups of people, unlike oppositional ideologies that pit individuals and institutions against one another (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Luedicke et al., 2010; Valor et al., 2021). Shàn promotes general solutions (be kind to everyone) to general problems (being unkind). Indeed, even the problem itself can be incorporated into the solution as a necessary antecedent and component:

"I still remember those days, carrying my schoolbag, when boys would throw things at me from behind. And I didn't even dare to fight back [...] Some hurtful words don't just disappear; they seep into your blood and carve themselves into your bones. Thank you [to my followers] for reconciling with me, but at the same time, it was also because of them (hurtful experiences) that I became stronger [...] That's why later I always tell (my followers who are parents): you have to be friends with your children. If you're always afraid they'll make mistakes, always worried they'll get into trouble, then they'll never tell you anything." (Nie, RedNote post, 2023)

"Hearing Nie's story was deeply painful and resonated strongly with me. [...] Some (hurtful) experiences [...] leave emotional wounds that are often difficult to move on from in many years. Yet they also allow me to empathise more compassionately [...] Just as Nie uses his platform to urge parents and schools to listen to children's voices [...], I saw many comments praising him and sharing how his videos made them feel seen [...]." (Immersion note for Nie, first author, 2025)

Much like yin and yang contain a small dot of each other, kindness and unkindness can be seen as co-constitutive rather than antagonistic or oppositional. In this instance, Shàn operates as an ideological antechamber (Cronin et al., 2024), with kindness and unkindness distinct from each other, but never quite escaping or negating the other:

"In the beginning [...] I wanted the project to be... masculinity. A very sexualized form of masculinity—whether that meant showing certain body parts, or creating a certain atmosphere. As long as it conveyed things like muscles, or, for instance, wearing socks—photos that rely on symbolic cues of that sort. [...] Now, when I post, I consciously try to avoid those symbolic masculinity cues [...]. Before, I did it deliberately (to perform masculinity). But now I avoid it—although I'm also aware that I don't have to avoid it entirely. I follow my mood; if I feel like posting, I'll post. [...] My content must convey kind and positive energy. With more followers, my responsibility grows [...]. Many followers are exhausted office workers. I hope my slow, sincere feelings give them resonance—not in a condescending 'awakening' way, but so they feel seen. If they feel understood, that's meaningful." (Han, MBI, interview, 2022)

Relatedly, we found that while Shàn was a response to unkindness or other immoral or bad phenomena (e.g., cruelty), it could also generate its own unkindness. On social media some MBIs used highly coded terms to avoid censorship and build in-group affiliations. This betrays seemingly universal calls like "be kind to everyone" by creating in-group-out-group dynamics, a form of symbolic violence (Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Sibai, Luedicke, & De Valck, 2024). For instance:

"I don't know how to phrase it to get past the censorship. The term 'niangpao' (sissy) is actually safer than some of the community's specific coded terms. So now even 'note book' doesn't work anymore? The censorship dictionary has been updated again. Some of the coded words we used before can't be used now; the censors understand everything now. Censors, please, give us a break! There's nothing we can do. If we could just say the actual word directly, of course we would." (Hua, Bilibili post, 2024)

The second author understood this post by reading the first author's immersive notes:

"Hua is referring to insider slang used within queer communities in China. Using 'note book' refers to the gay community, a term whose true meaning is only clear to those familiar with that specific cultural background." (Immersion Note for Hua, first author, 2024)

Individuals may not benefit much from this information unless they know what these coded terms mean, so Hua 'kindly' decrypts for his followers. This is arguably a kindness for those who want to join a community and have been unkindly excluded up until now, but how kind is it to reveal a secret code to the public? Shàn is associated with kind and moral acts, but few choices are unambiguously kind or moral. It is an ideological node of ideas and ideals that perform kindness and morality, but one whose intentions or consequences are very difficult to locate. The phrase "censors, please, give us a break!" can be read variously as pleading, exasperated, or sarcastic. Does Hua hope to challenge censorship, for catharsis by releasing some frustration, or more followers from a tongue-in-cheek show of outrage? Just as Zhēn can leverage vulnerability into monetizable content, Shàn is neither entirely altruistic nor egoistic if it can help ideas, ideals, and individuals go viral and get

more traffic. Kozinets and Gretzel (2024) stress that intention is often less important than impact in a netnographic analysis. Our analysis focused on the ideological function of Shàn circulating in the culture of MBIs, not what Hua intended to achieve or what his followers thought his intentions were. Manifestations of Shàn were always ambiguous and polysemous, requiring and empowering human interpretation:

“I was surprised to learn that content censorship involves both AI and human moderators. I noticed comments left by self-identified moderators in the comment section. Regarding censorship, one of them wrote (paraphrased): ‘I’m a censorship moderator [...] if you want to pass the censorship, just come up with new terms (dog side eye emoji). Maybe you’ll even make a new term go viral and get more traffic [...] When a blacklisted word is detected, variations usually aren’t blocked. For example, if Huā gets blocked, you can change it slightly to Huá (here, two tones represent different Chinese textural characters, but the audience within the community still could perceive the meaning; the creators in China commonly use this technique to avoid censorship detection).’” (Immersion note for Hua, first author, 2024)

Netnography is a research approach that recognizes the value of a human immersed in the richness of culture, a human attuned to nuances and subtleties that elude Large Language Models (LLMs) and big data methods (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024; Kozinets, 2019). As shown above, as Chinese is a tonal language, its written characters are thin, underdetermined media whose meaning is only fully determined by being spoken or embedded in a wider context. This means a consumer (or netnographer) is afforded considerable latitude for interpretation. Therefore, while Shàn uses universal or general ideas and ideals like kindness to everyone, its ideological orientation seems to be to direct kindness to those who need it most. But, who decided who needs kindness and who does not need kindness? Does this not run the risk of introducing unkindness, by accident or by design? These questions remain unresolved in the ideological node of Shàn, which presents itself as self-evident and logically coherent but is actually riven with logical contradictions and is ultimately an empty conceptual vessel to be filled and refilled with different emic understandings (Kozinets, 2008). The hole in the node became evident when the second author added his own reflections to an immersive note:

“There is a famous saying from the San Zi Jing, an ancient Chinese poem collection. ‘At the beginning of life, human nature is fundamentally shàn.’ This was written around 1190–1274 C.E., but these poems continue to be inspirational. The state celebrates treating people with kindness, and this Chinese moral philosophy is promoted by the state, as Hong et al. (2013) point out. (Firs Author’s Immersion note for Hua, 2025)

“If human nature is assumed to be fundamentally shàn, a lack of shàn in society is assumed to be a deviation from this natural resting point. Something must be pushing humanity away from its origins in shàn. This is quite the opposite of our thinking in the Global North, dominated by the Christian model, in which humanity has original sin that must be resisted. In Jewish thought there are two impulses to be balanced, as both are beneficial in tandem but detrimental in isolation. My point here is that there are many models, but if the assumed moral ideology is shàn as the ‘natural’ human condition, then there must be something external that prevents this from flourishing. Thus, kindness becomes tacitly (even unintentionally) political.” (Second author’s immersive note in response, 2025)

MBIs did not name or shame any individual or institution for unkindness, cruelty, or immorality, so external forces making Shàn so rare remained unstated and undebated. Shàn could be interpreted as an empty platitude, an uncontroversial appeal to be kind, caring, or moral, but today such ideas and ideals should not be taken for granted. Far from the utopian visions of the early Internet (Kozinets, 2001), social media has become increasingly toxic, polarizing, and violent (Sibai et al.,

2024). Against such a backdrop, Shàn need not be specific because there are so many external forces and people to worry about:

“Watching Hua’s content, I was deeply moved and learned how to navigate relationships with friends, family, and even the hostility of society. Through Hua, I also connected with other scholars studying their work and formed friendships with them. After engaging with Hua’s content, I felt personally empowered. Hua collaborates with many everyday people—many from sexual-minority backgrounds, including parents of queer individuals and transgender community members, where the visibility in general is very low in China. Although these pieces don’t align with majoritarian ideologies, they have still achieved very high view counts, become subjects of study by other academics, and more importantly, constructed the visibility, representation, and dignity of underrepresented aesthetics.” (Immersion note for Hua, first author, 2025)

Equity in the Global North is usually a project of identifying marginalized individuals or groups and then building local, organizational, or institutional systems to ensure greater opportunities, fairer treatment, and intersectional solidarity (Arsel et al., 2022). This, in turn, can generate resistance from those who feel left behind by these ideas and ideals, stoked by those who have something to lose from a more equitable society (Scott et al., 2025). Shàn can evoke similar ideas and ideals — for instance, being kind to everybody is not dissimilar to the idea of treating everyone fairly — but does not coalesce into a coherent ideological frame of equity-building projects across society. Rather, kindness and morality remain an individual project to be enacted interpersonally, without affecting the business models of social media. As with Zhēn, Wǎng Hóng plays with the ideas and ideals of Shàn, but does not battle with the underlying ideology of Wǎng Hóng. Yet, the distinction between Shàn and equity is greater than Zhēn and diversity, as Shàn is non-antagonistic and does not work with (or to resolve) intergroup conflicts. Here, the ideology of Wǎng Hóng appears to diverge more from that of the Silicon Valley influencer, who thrives on polarizing positions and stoking antagonisms.

4.3. Měi – including non-normative beauty, but inclusively?

Měi, sometimes MěiHǎo, refers to beauty or the beautiful in Chinese. Amongst MBIs, it is associated with ideas and ideals of recognizing beauty in non-normative bodies or the natural world, referring to inner beauty, personality, and unconventional aesthetics. Měi is an everyday term, used as though everyone agrees on its precise meaning. Like other everyday terms — technology, nature, utopia — it functions as an ideological placeholder for competing clusters of sometimes contradictory concepts (Kozinets, 2008). Měi usually refers to humans who are feminine, slim, and youthful. MBIs use the term more expansively — including those aesthetics, practices, or individuals, traditional ideas and ideals understood as ugly, deviant, or abnormal. For instance, MBIs describe feminine men, larger and older bodies, or nonhumans — nature, animals, and artificial entities — as Měi:

“The (product) series is called ‘The Gem Moth’. [...] The butterfly is widely seen as a beautiful creature, while the moth, which resembles it, is often considered ugly or unlikable. But in my eyes, there is no real difference between them. Just like many children, some may come from difficult backgrounds, grow up in poverty, or even be unable to attend school. But who says moths cannot be beautiful? Who says barren soil cannot produce gems? I have always believed that a child’s heart is the purest and most honest thing in the world—more precious and more radiant than any gem. It’s not only butterflies that deserve beautiful wings; moths do too. For the blush packaging, we incorporated the element of the iris flower. In Greek, ‘iris’ means rainbow, because of its rich variety of colors; it is also called the ‘flower of light.’ In Chinese culture, the iris symbolizes bright prospects and limitless potential. After saying all this, what I

truly want to express is very simple: Every life can shine; every life deserves to be seen.” (Benny, Bilibili Post, 2019)

“Travel and nature recharge my creativity for looking for beauty [...] only by touching the grass and grounding myself in nature can I feel spiritually alive.” (Tian, MBI, podcast interview, 2020)

This more expansive usage works because Měi does not solely refer to beauty in an outward, physical, or aesthetically pleasing sense, but also inner beauty, personality, or unconventionally attractive aesthetics. In this, Měi has much in common with the English word beauty, is proverbially in the eye of the beholder (Etcoff, 2011). Hua and Benny used makeup to present “scary,” “humorous,” and “animalistic” styles, looks not traditionally associated with beauty. Yet, audience comments suggest they interpret these aesthetics under a more expansive definition of Měi:

“Non-human and mythical imagery pepper the video: the messy red lips are humorously likened by Hua to a ‘bridal beast having just eaten a child,’ and there is a reference to the ancient Chinese deity Nánjī Xiānwēng (‘Old Man of the South Pole,’ the god of longevity). Viewer comments echo this spirit of inclusive play:

‘I just love unwinding with Hua. Here you’ve got Ts, straight men, and even user “0” (a queer slang term for bottoms)—totally different groups, yet everyone has fun together. This is how the MěiHǎo (beauty and goodness) world should be, right?’

“When watching this video, I couldn’t help but laugh—its humor truly resonated with me. Hua fuses together three semiotically marginalized figures: the straight man whose masked persona is mocked; the butch lesbian’s comically incongruous makeup; and Hua himself, as a queer figure at the center, having an “abnormal,” almost non-human, ugly-like makeup applied by the other two. These acts of semiotic play not only generate comedic effect but also reveal the shared roots of marginalized affect under heteronormative norms—and the alliance that emerges from them.” (Immersion Note for Hua, first author, 2022)

Beauty is a central, eponymous construct for beauty influencers in the Global North; so too for beauty-focused Wǎng Hóng in China. For both, normative beauty ideologies can be restrictive, especially for those who feel excluded from mainstream standards. As such, Měi could be compared to the ideas and ideals of inclusivity, ideologies that promote integrations that generate feelings of belonging and other mutually-beneficial outcomes for all (Arsel et al., 2022), including nonhumans (Waverley, 2024). Yet, while we can describe more expansive notions of beauty as inclusive, this would only be in a technical sense (including more) unless there are also processes by which individuals and groups become more integrated together. In the Global North ideology of DEI, inclusivity is not just the physical or digital inclusion of diverse bodies, but also includes diverse bodies more equitably (Waverley, 2024). Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), for instance, show how fat acceptance bloggers worked to make the fashion industry more inclusive of diverse shapes and sizes — inclusive in the fuller sense of fairly integrating their needs and generating positive experiences like belonging. Our analysis of Měi, however, found little evidence of MBIs trying to rework beauty markets or cultures:

“I constantly feel that I don’t meet beauty standards. Those beauty influencers who tell you “don’t worry about your looks” are themselves hypocritical, because appearance anxiety is the very foundation of this industry. Without appearance anxiety, no one would watch your videos or buy the products you recommend—things like acne serums, whitening serums, and products.

Many beauty influencers inevitably suffer from intense appearance anxiety over beauty standards. They have an overwhelming fear and anxiety about aging and deteriorating skin. Regardless of their actual condition, they always believe their skin isn’t good enough, and always wish to be as smooth as rubber and forever young.” (Podcast interview, Benny, 2022)

MBIs rework Měi as an ideological antechamber (Cronin et al., 2024), a larger node of ideas and ideals that can include various understandings of beauty, but without fundamentally changing the mainstream. In the following quote, Han does not criticize majority preferences, those aligning with cultural norms for attention, profit, and self-satisfaction, or the platform:

“Buddhist aesthetics fascinate me (for my content creation): genderless, fluid, empty of fixed form. Sometimes I post not for attention but to express a mood—beauty as feeling [...] More men need to see this kind (of beauty-related) content. I believe that beauty and aesthetics can gently transform a person by prompting reflection rather than leaving them in a numb state. [...] If I am someone who cares about building aesthetic sensibilities, what I see will be completely different. However, the platform does not guide people toward content with greater aesthetic value. I cannot say whether this is right or wrong because the platform needs to make money. If it recommends content that goes against the preferences of the majority, it may lose traffic. As if another platform follows these traffic logics, it might rise (in popularity) instead.” (Han, MBI, interview, 2022)

Han’s approach is more playful or ludic (Kozinets et al., 2004). Despite claiming that “sometimes I post for attention but to express a mood”, atypical aesthetics are likely to grab attention. Han seems ambivalent about social media platforms and his own role within them, so his more inclusive (expansive) use of Měi has an unclear similarity to the Global North’s understanding of inclusivity (as equitable inclusion). Měi does increase consumer agency by stimulating, instructing, and to some extent legitimating their own ludic, playful engagement with beauty. As Kozinets et al. (2004) show in their study of ludic agency within service environments, play is about creatively and enjoyably bending the rules of a game, but this requires that the rules be known, respected, and followed to some degree. In our data, followers were inspired by MBIs to play with beauty, but not to battle to change the majority’s definition of beauty, or to call for the beauty market to change its offerings or infrastructures to suit them:

“I think (the reason why I love them) [...] it’s not really about them being good-looking. I actually feel that, for example, the three influencers (Ali, Nie, and Liang) I just mentioned, when you look at their appearance, or if you imagine them without makeup, or look at their dressing styles and the way they present themselves — their looks don’t really fit with the mainstream aesthetic standards. But I think they resonate more with my generation’s sense of beauty. [...] I think the influence of (Ali and Nie) lies more in how they broaden people’s perspectives on beauty, making people realize that beauty isn’t just one single thing. The way they present beauty can also be beautiful, just in a different way, it’s an appreciation of beauty in multiple forms. [...] That’s what made me start reflecting on what kind of beauty suits me personally, what kind of aesthetics feel authentic and right for me.” (Xu, follower, interview, 2022)

The playful approach to beauty is distinct from the battlegrounds in prior studies from the Global North, where influencers and their followers were explicitly reworking markets and cultural norms (Edwards et al., 2025; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Sobande et al., 2022; Södergren & Vallström, 2023; Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021). While Měi is an ideological node with a family resemblance to inclusiveness, the two are best described as second cousins. Another distance between the two is morality. Inclusivity in the Global North mobilizes explicit moral arguments, arguing that an individual or group should be included as this is fair or just (Arsel et al., 2022; Waverley, 2024). This also generates moralized reactions in anti-DEI movements (Scott et al., 2025). In contrast, Měi invokes (ostensibly) amoral ideas and ideals like the pursuit of consumer desires, individual choice, and self-control:

“From an aesthetic perspective, the pursuit of beauty is a kind of “basic need.” There is no reason to feel anxious about it, such as worrying [...] Human bodily desires are neither fixed nor morally pure; they have priorities and room for compromise [...]” (Jiang, MBI, RedNote Post, 2021)

“I agree with Jiang. “fú měi yì (serving beauty military)” can be painful. If putting on makeup for school or work feels troublesome, then don’t wear makeup. My principle is that I must control my makeup, my makeup should not control me [...] As long as these practices don’t create additional burdens for them, then whatever brings happiness is good,” (Follower comment under Jiang’s post, 2021)

Měi is an ideological node that avoids explicitly moral claims, even the diffuse moral claims of Shàn, in favor of a laissez-faire logic. Prior studies show consumer desires, market choices, and notions of bodily or psychic autonomy are generated by complex, multiscalar, and power-laden assemblages (Coffin, 2022; Kozinets et al., 2017), but an ideological function of Měi is to include more principles and practices of beauty (including more people) without evoking difficult questions. In contrast, inclusivity introduces a silent, invisible J into the DEI acronym, assuming justice is integral for inclusivity (Arsel et al., 2022). Justice is difficult to define and even more difficult to achieve (Sandel, 2010), but it often involves changing social hierarchies, power relations, and economic distributions so that individuals and groups are fully and fairly integrated in all their diversity. This helps explain why anti-DEI movements form to resist these changes (Scott et al., 2025), but also why some DEI proponents have used phrases like Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) as more palatable alternatives (Zhang, 2025). These elide the troublesome ideas and ideals of equity and justice, much like Měi as used by MBIs. From this perspective, we were unsurprised to find some MBIs who pushed definitions of Měi even further, but only in ways that play with meanings, not to battle with the mainstream market:

“Benny often calls himself Ye Ji (‘Wild Chicken’) or Ji Wang Mu (‘Mother Hen Goodness’). I also learned that Benny’s followers collaboratively authored a BL (Boys’ Love) fanfiction starring Benny and his partner GouZi (‘Puppy’), who is also a beauty influencer. Titled Ji Quan Bu Ning (‘The Vibrant Life of Chicken and Dog’), the story casts Benny as a chicken and GouZi as a dog, symbolizing their chosen names. One such short story received 3,814 likes.”

“I was astonished by the popularity of the Boy’s Love (BL) fan-fiction written by Benny’s followers (over 3814 likes), and pleasantly surprised that it had not been removed by the platform’s censors—especially given its explicitly erotic content, which would normally trigger review. At the same time, it reminded me of the long-standing boom in BL fiction in China: for many years, BL novels have been a common medium through which women and other sexual minorities express homoerotic desire (Bao, 2021). In this case, the fan author blends animal aesthetics with homoeroticism, using metaphorical language to depict desire while still evading platform scrutiny. I observed that these fans—who possess a pro-homoerotic affect and are themselves marginalized—have forged allyship with the MBI and his partner (both members of the queer community and likewise marginalized) through their collaborative content.” (Immersion Note on Benny, first author, 2022)

Wang (2020) found members of the Chinese gay community frequently adopt animal or other nonhuman codenames online — such as “bear,” or “monkey” — to signify different body types. MBIs extend these polysemic words with zoomorphic makeup to play with the human-nonhuman boundary. We describe this as playful, as there is little evidence these aesthetics are intended to battle against human-centric hierarchies (Waverley, 2024) — for instance, by encouraging followers to empathize with animals and stop purchasing meat or dairy. Rather, our analysis suggested Měi was more similar to food pornography, enrolling nonhumans as material or symbolic resources to

accelerate, intensify, and momentarily meet human desires (Kozinets et al., 2017). We found no MBI who expanded Měi to include living, feeling nonhuman embodiments, though it should be noted that animal-inclusivity remains rare in the DEI ideologies of the Global North too (Waverley, 2024). In conclusion, while Měi seems to overlap with inclusivity, they differ greatly in theories of change (individual or structural), moral positioning (elided or integral), and orientation (expanding to others or expanding for others).

Our finding here also suggest that the underpinning ideology of Wǎng Hóng seems most distinct from the ideology of the influencer. In the Global North, cause-driven beauty influencers use their platforms to promote change in markets and societies for themselves and others (Edwards et al., 2025; Sobande et al., 2022; Södergren & Vallström, 2023; Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021). This can include changes in social media business models, like algorithms deprioritizing certain bodies or interfaces that exclude certain consumers. MBIs play with the boundaries of Měi, but not to drive any structural changes in the market, societies, or on social media platforms. Instead, they expand Měi to include more aesthetic possibilities for themselves and their followers.

5. Discussion

Are MBIs mostly similar to influencers in the Global North, or does Wǎng Hóng help elucidate different approaches to social media creation and consumption? Our findings show that the (MBI) Wǎng Hóng ideology is most distinct from the ideology of the (Silicon Valley) influencer when expressing the ideas and ideals of beauty or Měi. Zhèn is a node where these ideologies overlap the most. Shàn sits between. As such, our answer to the first part of our question is mixed. MBIs are similar to influencers in the Global North, but to differing and uncertain degrees. However, this mixed analysis does not prevent us from answering the second part of our question. In the final analysis, it is clear that Wǎng Hóng elucidates the boundary conditions of influencers and suggests it is indeed possible to create and consume social media in a different way. The ideology of Wǎng Hóng is not radically different from that of the influencer — to reuse the familial metaphor, they are first, second, or third cousins, depending on the context — however, our study does unpick the influencer as a node of powerful ideas and ideals that could have been, and might still become, different. In doing so, we hope to open new avenues for business scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to explore. We now discuss three: (1) influencers as ambivalent ideological intermediaries, (2) distinctions between playing with plural and battling singular ideologies, and (3) the possibility of influencing under market constraint.

5.1. Influencers as ambivalent ideological intermediators

Influencer marketing usually focuses on the monetary value that influencers can generate, positioning them as intermediaries between brands and consumers (Drenten, Gurrieri, Huff, & Barnhart, 2024; Thomas & Fowler, 2023). Researchers study variables like source trustworthiness, audience perception, and purchase intention (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023; Hugh et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022), seeking to help brands and influencers manage and maximize financial gain. However, other business scholars have studied influencers as human beings shaping (and shaped by) the consumer cultures in which they live. Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner (2010, p. 76, 77, 79) identify evaluation, embracing, endorsement, and explanation as four activities undertaken by influencers, noting how these are contoured by the “fear of selling out”, “ostensible exhibitionism”, or the “goal of gaining genuine human contact”. That study suggests ideas and ideals like authenticity mix with other ideas and ideals, including their opposites (e.g., inauthenticity), in the markets and cultures co-created by influencers and followers. On this line of thinking, we conceive MBIs and other Wǎng Hóng as ambivalent intermediaries, living with admixed ideas and ideals.

Our findings do not conclude with a definitive analysis of what Zhēn, Shàn, and Měi mean at the emic level, nor how they relate to one another and other ideas and ideals like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. However, we take this as an insight into the function of these ideas and ideals, rather than a conceptual or methodological failing. Put simply, we argue it is the ideological function of Zhēn, Shàn, and Měi to be strategically ambiguous. Following the analysis of technology ideologies by Kozinets (2008), we conceive each term as an ideological placeholder, a vessel for various ideas and ideals. While none of these terms is empty of meaning, none of them has an unambiguous, fixed, agreed-upon usage, and so allow MBIs and others to play with their meanings. In particular, they act as ideological antechambers (Cronin et al., 2024), allowing claims, stakes, or identities to be made without needing to be substantiated, achieved, or disproven. We position influencers and Wǎng Hóng as ambivalent intermediaries because they deal with ideologies that are fundamentally uncertain, open-ended, and inconsistent (Kozinets, 2008; Žižek, 2018).

A small number of business studies have begun to consider influencers as ideological intermediaries. For example, Södergren and Vallström (2024) show how disabled influencers on Instagram enact a revised ideology of personhood and participation, whilst challenging the ‘inspiration porn’ that commodifies their bodies for the benefit of able-bodied others. Drenten et al. (2024) study U.S. influencers curating gun ownership as a consumption ideology. Yet, studies like these work within (with and in) the ideologies of Silicon Valley social media platforms, where oppositional positions and negative sentiments like outrage are rewarded. Such dynamics were documented in earlier eras of the internet (Giesler, 2008; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004), but have been sharpened in the era of social media (Valor et al., 2022). In our study, we found far greater emphasis on ambiguity, diffuse problems, and the freedom to play within (rather than battle against) structures. Future studies should continue to explore how other social media platforms or technological media (even those that are only subtly different from the Silicon Valley template) can lead to substantive differences in actions and lived experiences.

5.2. Ideologies (plural) and ideology (single)

We also contribute to influencer marketing by drawing greater attention to the conditions within which influencers work (Fowler and Tomas, 2023). Prior studies show influencers are not just attention-seekers. Some are motivated to draw attention to societal problems and to help change practices, institutions, or cultures (Cayla, Bhatnagar, Nanarpuzha, & Dey, 2025; Drenten et al., 2023; Mardon et al., 2023; Tomas and Fowler, 2023). Yet, these studies focus on influencers in the Global North, on platforms designed to benefit from polarization, antagonism, and the ricochet of content as each influencer responds to the last. While early internet pioneers foregrounded non-commercial ideas and ideals (Kozinets, 2001), power has gradually centralized around a small number of profit-maximizing corporations in Silicon Valley (Kozinets, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). As bloggers and vloggers gave way to influencers, the ideologies being mediated have pluralized at the level of content, but singularized at the level of structure. Put differently, we can debate anything on social media, so long as we continue to use it (detoxing or anti-surveillance advocates still post their recommendations there, for instance).

Social media platforms are highly centralized, opaque, and shaped by exploitative power relations (Coffin, 2022; Yang, 2026; Zuboff, 2019). Our study emphasizes how the single ideology of the influencer functions to mask, normalize, and legitimize these as taken-for-granted facts of life, rather than sociohistorical contingencies that could have been, and might still be, otherwise. As shown in prior studies, ideology can be depoliticizing when it suggests there are no alternatives to the current system, only alternatives within the (market) system (Veresiu & Giesler, 2018). This frays somewhat in contexts where individuals have lived with other systems, such as consumers in post-communist

countries (Brunk et al., 2018). In a similar vein, we study China’s social media as a system with similarities and differences to Silicon Valley, providing a parallax position through which to unpick the ideology of the influencer and ask what other forms of social media content creation and consumption might be possible. In doing so, our study can stimulate discussions around how social media in other countries might be rebuilt to engender dignity (Lambert, 2019), allyship (Gopaldas, 2014), or justice (Arsel et al., 2022), for humans and nonhumans alike (Waverley, 2024).

We challenge the dominant Global North conceptualization of the “influencer,” which is typically rooted in the logics of the Silicon Valley attention economy. This view assumes that influencers act as autonomous individuals who exercise agency and operate with relatively free marketing expression within neoliberal market systems (Bollmer & Guinness, 2024). Our study questions the universality of these assumptions and, in doing so, opens up alternative ways of understanding content creation and consumption. At the same time, we do not claim that Wǎng Hóng are entirely distinct from their Silicon Valley counterparts, nor as different as some critics might suggest. Rather, our contribution lies in unpicking what we term an ideological node: a dense bundle of ideas and ideals that has become so naturalized it appears simply as “the way things are.” To unpack this, we distinguish between an ideological *playground* and an ideological *battlefield*. While Schmitt et al. (2022) invoke these terms, they do not clearly differentiate them. We refine this distinction by conceptualizing *ludic agency* as playful engagement within existing rules (Kozinets et al., 2004), whereas *agency* refers to efforts that challenge and seek to transform those rules (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). This distinction also suggests a broader implication: apparent ideological conflicts at one level (for example, feminists versus “manfluencers”) may leave deeper layers of consensus untouched, and may even reinforce or obscure them (such as the underlying ideologies of social media platforms). Future research could further unpack these layered ideological dynamics.

5.3. Influencing within constraint

The metaphor of rules invokes the idea of constraints. While neoliberalism frames markets as ‘free’, research has shown how the ideologies of the Global North sell a certain kind of freedom without allowing others to flourish or even be conceivable (Cronin et al., 2024). Coffin and Egan-Wyer (2022) argue that those calling for alternatives are also caught in their own ideologies, so there is no truly ‘free’ position. Rather, it is a choice amongst ideologies (Kozinets, 2008; Schmitt et al., 2022). The Chinese market is a context that is usually described as more state-regulated, with greater control and surveillance, but our analyses corroborate prior studies of MBIs, where identities, relationships, and activities are multifaceted, shifting, but also open to creative adaptation (Huang et al., 2025; Li & Wu, 2025; Li et al., 2024; Yang, 2026). In other words, we agree that Chinese social media has constraints, but it also has affordances. In this sense, it is just like Silicon Valley but arranged differently. Our study shows that similarities and differences in these constraints lead to similarities and differences in what content creation and consumption mean, with Wǎng Hóng bearing an extended family resemblance to influencers. For instance, while attention is important in both social media models, our data suggest Wǎng Hóng like MBIs tend to work with more ambiguous ideological positions than cause-driven influencers in the Global North. Future research could try to tease out other differences and similarities across influencers, Wǎng Hóng, or other content creators and consumers. As noted earlier, lawyers for YouTube sought to argue that YouTube content creators are not influencers, but the jury disagreed. Here, the boundary conditions of the influencer ideology had legal ramifications.

Our contribution is to deconstruct the tacitly universalized template of the influencer and advance a more pluralistic, global, and dynamic understanding of influencer marketing. As platform ecosystems fragment across geopolitical contexts, regulatory environments shift, and

new forms of influence emerge, influencer marketing must be understood as multiple, situated, and evolving rather than singular and universal. This also means that future research may wish to unpick related concepts, such as the practice of influencing (why this metaphor, when it can be misconstrued as manipulative?), the platform of social media (is it still social, in an era of polarization, trolling, and hate-bait?), or the people who use these technologies (are we all consumers of content, or could we become something else)? Future research may be descriptive, focusing as we have on an empirical, already-existing case, or prefigurative. The *Conserver Research Manifesto* (Kozinets and Dion, forthcoming), for instance, asks us to rethink the seemingly axiomatic concept of the consumer subject. For business scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers, this may be one unpicking too far, but why not consider what influencer marketing, influencers, influencing, and social media might become in a conservative or non-neoliberal culture, rather than our current consumer cultures?

6. Conclusion

Our paper redirects attention in influencer marketing research towards a market that is not dominated by Silicon Valley platform logics. In contrast to the neoliberal market environments typically examined in Western contexts, we explore how Chinese male beauty influencers navigate constrained market conditions as they market themselves. Drawing on over five years of netnographic investigation and analysis, and with the help from prior ideology-related theories in marketing scholarship, we highlight the role of influencers as ideological intermediaries and recommend influencer marketing moves towards localized, plural cultural contexts beyond the Silicon Valley business model.

Appendix

Table 4
Definitions of ZSM with Illustrative Data.

Concept Definition	Associated Influencer Behaviors with Illustrative Data
Zhēn denotes authenticity in Chinese, associated with ideas and ideals like honesty, vulnerability, candor, even foregrounding self-doubts, failures. It presents an ideology of courageous truth-telling enhanced by beauty products and practices.	Honest Self-Disclosure of Fear, Anxiety and Self-doubt (Benny, Ali) “Every beauty influencer has intense fear and anxiety about ageing and skin deterioration. Becoming a beauty influencer is actually a very demanding process [...] Their ability to maintain their skin and appearance over the years involves significant financial investment, extensive time, and physical pain from repeated procedures such as laser treatments, microneedling, and chemical peels.” (Benny, MBI, 2023, social media post) “I felt shocked yet empathetic toward Benny’s openness and the bodily labor required to sustain beauty. As a queer scholar, I recognize the tension between resisting and reproducing DEI ideologies; these contradictions coexist within me.” (First author’s immersive note on Benny, 2025) “I couldn’t keep living as a ‘fake person.’ Waking up every day and putting on a façade was exhausting, so I shaved everything off. [...] For years, I cried daily, asking, ‘What do you want from me?’ Eventually, I accepted it: it’s just hair. Why not embrace it? In a world full of chaos, why not choose happiness? Shaving it all off was liberating.” (Ali, MBI, 2022, social media post) Candor Critique of Platform Power and the Creator Economy (Benny, Han) “All of this is deliberately designed by the platform: when to promote your content, when to give you traffic—it’s all arranged to make you post more. And so, creators end up extremely anxious and scared. Indeed, the platform wants you to be anxious, because only when you’re anxious will you keep producing content.”(Benny, Podcast Interview, 2021) “However, the platform does not guide people toward content with greater aesthetic value. I cannot say whether this is right or wrong because the platform needs to make money. If it recommends content that goes against the preferences of the majority, it may lose traffic. But if another platform follows these traffic logics, it might rise instead.” (Han, MBI, interview, 2022) “I reacted with surprise when he (Han, influencer) described the extent of the RedNote’s control over their content creation, blurting out, said ‘It really devours people.’ Yet I was also deeply moved: Han spoke with striking candor about both the platform’s extraction and his own past complicity in it. This reminded me of other MBI’s disclosures about their appearance anxiety-stories that were both painful and profoundly affecting (e.g., Benny) [...]” (First author’s immersive note, 2022)

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Our findings show how Chinese MBIs, or Wǎng Hóng, construct marketing legitimacy through localized moral frameworks, revealing mechanisms that differ from the universalized models of influencer marketing. In doing so, we challenge the dominant conceptualization of the “influencer,” particularly the assumption that attracting attention is the primary objective of both businesses and influencers. Instead, we argue that influencer marketing should move towards diverse cultural and moral frameworks that shape what is considered legitimate, valuable, and acceptable. In an era marked by increasingly divisive, hostile, and even violent forms of influencing, our study demonstrates that ideology-intermediated approaches to influencer marketing, particularly those emerging from marginalized positions, are not only possible but urgently needed.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Shuyu Yang: Writing – original draft. **Jack Waverley:** Writing – original draft.

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Table 4 (continued)

Concept Definition	Associated Influencer Behaviors with Illustrative Data
	Candidly admits precarity (Nie, Feng): “Staff: I just hope you can grow up a bit faster. [...] Your psychological age is about sixteen, honestly. You need to grow a little more. Nie: Was I even more childish before? Staff: Two years ago you were like eleven or twelve, the most mischievous stage. You’re a little more mature now, but still in your rebellious phase. Nie: Your description is spot-on (laugh). I am in a rebellious phase—my little temper comes out, especially when I push back against you” (Nie, RedNote post, 2024) “Another reason Nie attracts audiences is the emotionally candid, playful, and self-deprecating way he reveals his precarity, immaturity, and ongoing ‘rebellious phase,’ destabilizing the expectation that influencers must embody polished professionalism.” (First author’s immersive note on Nie, 2024) “Question: What is the main reason you think your followers follows you? Feng: I can’t deny that RedNote reflects an era dominated by yan zhi (beauty value). Many people initially follow (me) because of good looks. Only a small number of followers appreciate natural, unforced content paired with good appearance. I change my looks frequently [...] There was a period when I hoped that working out would make me look more muscular, but later I had to lose weight because some brands wanted me to look slimmer. So aesthetic standards are never fixed. But fortunately, I’m only doing this part-time—it isn’t my main job.” (Feng, MBI, interview, 2022) Staying Resolute (Han, Feng): “My content has always been Wen (soft) and conversational. Some [consumers] find it flat, even sleep-inducing. But I stayed <i>resolute</i>—I believe gentleness holds power. Many men get labeled ‘effeminate,’ yet those called ‘soft’ often embody true ‘manliness’: inner strength, integrity, and the courage to stand up for others. Meanwhile, superficially ‘macho’ figures often lack substance [...]. If called ‘sissy,’ that’s their edge—especially in beauty, where individuality should be celebrated.” (Podcast Interview, Yong, 2022) “Previously, my main focus was making money and taking brand deals. But as more people followed me, I felt a stronger sense of responsibility. ‘Improvement’ isn’t about filming techniques, it’s about whether your content can touch people.” (Han, influencer, interview, 2022) “What I found comforting and reassuring was that it seems like over his many years of influencer work, from Weibo to Xiaohongshu, Han has been able to find his community and increasingly clarify his own voice, despite operating in an environment that has become ever more platformized and tightly monitored by capital.” (First author’s immersive note, 2022) “As a man, wearing makeup is fine—we all want to show our best selves. But I still feel like that if people can clearly see the heavy foundation or overly sculpted face, it feels unnatural. Sometimes when my makeup is too strong, I feel awkward myself. So I prefer natural products that subtly enhance my features—ideally, makeup that others can’t notice.” (Feng, interview, 2022) Offering Hope to Others (Hua, Nie) “Hua is truly impressive. Perhaps the encouragement and kindness of friends and loved ones around him have helped him become such amazing person, but I also think he might simply have a natural gift for defeating the world’s ugliness with love (even being “sissy” can become a weapon—how cool and adorable!). Thank you for being willing to show us this gift, and thank you for trying to create a gentler little world.” (Comment from Hua’s post, Bilibili, 2021) “As a researcher, I found myself on the same page as this comment. Watching Hua’s content, I was deeply moved and learned how to navigate relationships with friends, family, and even the hostility of society. Through Hua, I also connected with other scholars studying their work and formed friendships with them. After engaging with Hua’s content, I felt personally empowered.” (Reflection Note for Hua, first author, 2025) “Back then, we also donated to several schools—“Hope Primary Schools” and similar philanthropy projects. We built ten Hope Primary Schools. When we visited the children, some of them interacted with us. In fact, this product was inspired by something many of the children told me. They said they really wished they could have a small dog toy, and that they hoped they could have a “dog toy family” to keep them company, just like I do. They desperately wanted a little pet to accompany them. So we thought—why not make a plush toy? That way, whenever we visited children or carried out the public welfare projects, we could bring these plush dolls with us and give them to the kids. I remember that the children loved them. They felt that even though they didn’t currently have the means to take care of a real pet, having a little plush companion could still bring them comfort and a sense of healing.” (Li, RedNote Post, 2022) Creating Solidarity (Hua, Nie) “Hua collaborates with many everyday people—many from sexual-minority backgrounds, including parents of queer individuals and transgender community members, where the visibility in general is very low in China’s technoculture. Although these pieces don’t align with majoritarian ideologies, they have still achieved very high view counts, become subjects of study by other academics, and more importantly, constructed the visibility, representation, and dignity of underrepresented aesthetics.” (Reflection Note of Hua, first author, 2025) “Nie: Our whole team is basically “yong ai fa dian” right now (use love to pay bills, means financially they don’t earn much; many projects are carried out of love and passion.) All brand negotiations and commercial partnerships are handled by him (one of Nie’s staff). Don’t underestimate him—he may look playful, but without this “funny one,” I might not survive in this industry (Nie, RedNote post, 2024).

Shàn refers to kindness and moral goodness in Chinese; it associated with ideas and ideals of hope, relational care, and solidarity that reach out to other marginalized groups as equals.

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Table 4 (continued)

Concept Definition	Associated Influencer Behaviors with Illustrative Data
	“Observing the relationship between Nie and his staff, I immediately thought of the notion of a chosen family. Although they are not related by blood, they support one another. The staff member’s tears, hopes, and long-term care for Nie illustrate a relational work ethic—a form of mutual protection, affection, and moral responsibility within small creator teams who ‘run on love’ rather than profit.” (Immersion note on Nie, 2024) Creating Relational Care with Humanistic Ethics (Hua, Nie, Han) “[...]Hua’s detailed observations of “ordinary people” who remain invisible in daily life, and Hua’s humor—witty yet never offensive, with a strong sense of humanity and care, Hua puts in a lot of effort, has strong empathy, and exudes both gentleness and strength, he can embrace others in society with such an adorable and accepting attitude.” (Comment from Hua’s post, Bilibili, 2021) “I don’t know how to phrase it to get past the censorship. The term ‘niangpao’ (sissy) is actually safer than some of the community’s specific coded terms [here Hua refers to insider slang used within queer communities, such as using ‘address book’ to refer to the gay community—a term whose true meaning is only clear to those familiar with that specific cultural background].” “So now even ‘note book’ doesn’t work anymore? The censorship dictionary has been updated again. Some of the coded words we used before can’t be used now; the censors understand everything now.” “Censors, please, give us a break!” “There’s nothing we can do. If we could just say the actual word directly, of course we would.” (Hua, social media post, 2024) “My content must convey kind and positive energy. With more followers, my responsibility grows. ‘Improvement’ isn’t technical, it’s emotional. Many followers are exhausted office workers. I hope my slow, sincere feelings give them resonance, not in a condescending way of ‘awakening’ them but want them to feel being seen. If they feel understood, that’s meaningful.” (Han, interview, 2022) “In the beginning [...] I wanted to project was... masculinity. A very sexualised form of masculinity—whether that meant showing certain body parts, or creating a certain atmosphere. As long as it conveyed, things like muscles, or, for instance, wearing socks—photos that rely on symbolic cues of that sort. [...]Now, when I post, I consciously try to avoid those symbolic masculinity cues. For example, I avoid posting foot photos, or photos where I’m wearing very little, or showing my muscles. Even though I go to the gym every day, I won’t take too many mirror selfies in the gym. I feel like... it’s too typical, trying too hard and it’s not me. Before, I did it deliberately (to perform masculinity). But now I avoid it—although I’m also aware that I don’t have to avoid it entirely. I follow my mood, if I feel like posting, I’ll post. But once I became aware of these symbols, I stopped posting single-angle mirror selfies all the time. For instance, if a gym mirror selfie goes viral, I wouldn’t post another one just like it next. I don’t want my social media to present a singular image of me. I refuse to do that because I don’t want to be seen in that way.” (Han, interview, 2022) “Regarding Han’s transformation, he deliberately reshaped his online persona to be less aligned with “favouring masculinity.” This intentional shift felt reassuring to me because, in observing several other influencers, I was disappointed to see them stigmatize sissy identities in their makeup content—for example, by promoting “not feminine” or “natural and masculine (zi ran yang gang)” makeup looks that distance themselves from being “niáng” (effeminate). Han, by contrast, made me feel that many MBIs are still actively contributing to the de-stigmatization of feminine men.” (Immersion note on Han, 2022) Advocating for Other Marginalized Groups (Hua, Tree, Nie) “I’ve done charity for LGBTQ + and AIDS communities—but this is my personal choice. Advocacy must be voluntary, not imposed.” (Benny, secondary interview, 2019) “It’s not just me; this charity under my brand invites everyone to join. [...] One person’s strength is small, but collective kindness is powerful.” (Benny, Bilibili post, 2019) “I follow Tree not just because of looks, their videos feel warm, kind, like gaining another friend. People may not understand male beauty influencers, and that’s fine. You don’t have to like them, but please don’t hurt them. I choose tolerance over criticism; existence itself is legitimate.” (Tree’s follower comment, 2019) “After hearing that classmate read the words from those who used to attack me, especially those kids from primary school, I realized that I still can’t forgive them. Because some hurtful words don’t just disappear; they seep into your blood and carve themselves into your bones. Thank you for reconciling with me, but at the same time, it was also because of them that I became stronger. [...] That’s why later I always tell parents (in my content): you have to be friends with your children. If you’re always afraid they’ll make mistakes, always worried they’ll get into trouble, then they’ll never tell you anything. Many people ask why I’m so mature, why I seem to understand others so well. [...] It’s because I’ve gone through all those cruel words and bitterness that most people never experience. [...] This video is just something I wanted to share with you all [...] I want to tell every student still in school: time waits for no one. If I could go back to my school days, I would definitely study harder and make the most of it.” (Nie, RedNote post, 2023) “Hearing Nie’s story was deeply painful and resonated strongly with me. [...] These experiences [...] that are often difficult to move on in many years. Yet they also allow me to empathize more compassionately with those positioned in powerless state, [...], it motivate me to use my work to amplify powerless voices [...] Just as Nie uses his platform to urge parents and schools to listen to children’s voices and extend kindness to more people, I saw many comments praising him and sharing how his videos made them feel seen [...]. I feel spreading kindness is not only an individual practice, it becomes a call for change [...] that

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Table 4 (continued)

Concept Definition	Associated Influencer Behaviors with Illustrative Data
Měi, sometimes called MěiHǎo, refers to beauty or the beautiful in Chinese. It is associated with ideas and ideals of an inclusive aesthetic, recognizing beauty in non-normative bodies, intimacies, and the natural world. It connotes inner beauty, personality, and aesthetics that may be attractive in unconventional ways	when one leverages their influence to advocate for those without a voice.” (Immersion note for Nie, 2023) Express Beauty in Non-Human/Natural Aesthetic (Benny, Tian) “The butterfly is widely seen as a beautiful creature, while the moth, which resembles it, is often considered ugly or unlikable. But in my eyes, there is no real difference between them. Just like many children—some may come from difficult backgrounds, grow up in poverty, or even be unable to attend school. But who says moths cannot be beautiful? Who says barren soil cannot produce gems? I have always believed that a child’s heart is the purest and most honest thing in the world—more precious and more radiant than any gem. It’s not only butterflies that deserve beautiful wings; moths do too. [...] In Greek, “iris” means rainbow, because of its rich variety of colors; it is also called the “flower of light.” In Chinese culture, the iris symbolizes bright prospects and limitless potential. After saying all this, what I truly want to express is very simple: Every life can shine; every life deserves to be seen.” (Benny, Bilibili Post, 2019) “Non-human and mythical imagery pepper the video: the messy red lips are humorously likened by Hua to a ‘bridal beast having just eaten a child,’ and there is a reference to the ancient Chinese deity Nánjī Xiānwēng (‘Old Man of the South Pole,’ the god of longevity). Viewer comments echo this spirit of inclusive play: ‘I just love unwinding with Hua. Here you’ve got Ts, straight men, and even user “0” (a queer slang term for bottoms)—totally different groups, yet everyone has fun together. This is how the MěiHǎo (beauty and goodness) world should be, right?’ (Immersion note on Hua, 2025) “Travel and nature recharge my creativity for looking for beauty [...] only by touching the grass and grounding myself in nature can I feel spiritually alive.” (Tian, MBI, podcast interview, 2020) Beauty as Visibility and Dignity for Marginalized Intimacies (Hua, Tree, Benny) “When watching this video, I couldn’t help but laugh—its humor truly resonated with me. Hua fuses together three semiotically marginalized figures: [...] These acts of semiotic play not only generate comedic effect but also reveal the shared roots of marginalized affect under heteronormative. (Immersion note on Hua, 2025) “Beauty is (my) individuality expression, and gender should not restrict it.” (Tree, MBI, secondary interview, 2019) “Benny often calls himself Ye Ji (‘Wild Chicken’) or Ji Wang Mu (‘Mother Hen Goodness’). [...] I was astonished by the popularity [...] and pleasantly surprised that it had not been removed by the platform’s censors—[...] I observed that these fans [...] have forged allyship with the MBI and his partner [...] through their collaborative content.” (Immersion Note on Benny, 2022) “I constantly feel that I don’t meet beauty standards. Those beauty influencers who tell you “don’t worry about your looks” are themselves hypocritical, because appearance anxiety is the very foundation of this industry [...] They have an overwhelming fear and anxiety about aging and deteriorating skin. Regardless of their actual condition, they always believe their skin isn’t good enough, and always wish to be as smooth as rubber and forever Yong.” (Podcast interview, Benny, 2022) Beauty as Experiential Feeling and Aesthetic Transformation (Han, Yong) “Buddhist aesthetics fascinate me (for my content creation): genderless, fluid, empty of fixed form. Sometimes I post not for attention but to express a mood—beauty as feeling [...] More men need to see this kind (beauty-related) of content. I believe that beauty and aesthetics can gently transform a person by prompting reflection rather than leaving them in a numb state. In China, many people, [...] focus on money and practical concerns, so their sensitivity and openness to visual aesthetics or creative forms of presentation are still limited. I know that if someone presents themselves in a certain style in daily life, the content they encounter will also be filtered through that style. If I am someone who cares about building aesthetic sensibilities, what I see will be completely different.” (Han, MBI, interview, 2022) “One more thing I want to share with everyone is that right now I might seem a bit more relaxed, but some time ago — and possibly in the coming period as well — I’ll still have moments when my state is really not good. And I hope that when everyone is going through difficult times, whether emotionally or financially, you can remember that <i>everything that happens is ultimately beneficial</i>. Everything that happens is ultimately in our favor. With this kind of mindset, your state will become more positive, and you may really start attracting better things. But if your own state is bad, and your emotions are low, then yes... you’ll just keep sinking deeper. I strongly agree with this because I believe that positive things become more positive, while negative things pull you down like a whirlpool. So you need to give yourself positive psychological cues. Without exception. Truly. For example, people have been praising my room this year, right? Even though it’s small, when I first moved in, I knew I had to make it beautiful and comfortable. Because I needed to create a good environment for myself so that I could gradually get better. And when I finished setting everything up, I could feel my own state changing. Decorating my small room helped shift my mood. Beauty is also about creating a comforting environment so you can improve. And another thing is, like you said, I think many things should be viewed from a positive angle, no matter whether today...” (Yong, MBI, podcast interview, 2022) Beauty as Inclusive Reforming Force (Hua, Nie, Ali) “Staff: Over all these years, what I’ve felt is that you have been growing, but I still hope you can grow faster. Once you’re older and stronger, you’ll be able to protect everyone around you. And then... (cries) Nie: Don’t start acting like you’re on the verge of dying here (laughs through tears). Nie: Look, he’s crying (Nie also cries). Oh my god, (I am) really crying. Honestly, he (the staff) has had a very hard time and he’s truly a good person. He is

(continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

Concept Definition	Associated Influencer Behaviors with Illustrative Data
	exceptionally talented and full of ideas, always giving us inspiration. He is ahead of his time. That's why I let him oversee many of my creative projects. For example, future MVs or music, he brings a unique aesthetic sense [...]" (Nie, RedNote post, 2024) "I am touched by the 'sisterhood' relationship within Nie's team. The exchange between Nie and the staff also implicitly gestures toward aesthetics, not as surface aesthetics but as relational, the tenderness through which team members inspire one another, co-create aesthetics, and sustain each other emotionally in a demanding digital environment. Together, this moment captures how MBIs' backstage dynamics complicate Western assumptions about individualized influencer labor, revealing networks of interdependence, emotional reciprocity, and culturally grounded ways of caring" (Immersion note of Nie, 2025) "When you look at their appearance, or if you imagine them without makeup, or look at their dressing styles and the way they present themselves — their looks don't really fit with the mainstream aesthetic standards. But I think they resonate more with my generation's sense of beauty. [...]. I feel that Yong people's aesthetics today are quite diverse. [...] Everyone is in pursuit of beauty, especially Yong women. [...] <i>I think the influence of (Ali and Nie) lies more in how they broaden people's perspectives on beauty, making people realize that beauty isn't just one single thing.</i> The way they present beauty can also be beautiful, just in a different way, it's an appreciation of beauty in multiple forms. [...] After seeing these influencers, I started to realize that there are now many different expressions of beauty. [...] three are more in the 'transformative' or 'drag-style' category [...]. But there are also others, [...] who focus on very simple, natural styles — they teach you makeup techniques based on your own facial features, like your face shape or eyebrow shape, helping you think about what kind of style suits you. That's what made me start reflecting on what kind of beauty suits me personally, what kind of aesthetics feel authentic and right for me." (Xu, follower, interview, 2022) "In traditional Chinese culture, narratives of beauty, especially inner beauty, tend to resonate more deeply with followers. For example, much of Hua's content is no longer related to makeup, and their videos about queer community life actually evoke stronger resonance for me. The follower I interviewed, Xu, also expressed that beyond surface-level visual beauty, the three influencers she has followed the longest (Nie, Ali, and Liang) have broadened her understanding of what beauty can be. For Xu, beauty is not only a matter of external appearance but also a process of breaking and remaking the standards of inner beauty." (Immersion note on Nie and Ali, 2022) Beauty as Autonomy, Playful, and Bodily Freedom (Jiang) "From an aesthetic perspective, the pursuit of beauty is a kind of "basic need." There is no reason to feel anxious about it such as worrying [...] Human bodily desires are neither fixed nor morally pure; they have priorities and room for compromise. For this reason, I don't agree with statements like "Only when you remove your nail polish or take off your high heels are you a 'real woman.'" On the contrary, I would say: even if you wear nail polish or high heels, you can still be a "real man." Here, "real man" is simply borrowed from social language and has no gender-essential meaning. If we (men) don't do manicures or wear high heels, does that suddenly make us "OK"? And if so, should we also all cut our hair short—since long hair is much more trouble (and feminine) than short hair?" (Jiang MBI, RedNote post, 2021) "I agree with Jiang. "fu mei yi (serving beauty military)" can be painful. If putting on makeup for school or work feels troublesome, then don't wear makeup. My principle is that I must control my makeup, my makeup should not control me. Yet when men do these things, no one assumes they are trying to please the opposite sex. Perhaps this is because men, when making such choices, are less constrained by social expectations and more often acting out of bodily autonomy [...]. (Jiang's follower, 2021). In observing Jiang's video on "serving beauty," he articulates his own understanding of what beauty is, and many of the follower comments reveal a sense of sudden clarity. One follower wrote that beauty is "largely about bodily autonomy." I do not fully agree with Jiang's claim that beauty is natural or innate. I believe that what counts as beauty is still largely produced through social structures. Yet I agree with Jiang that the desire to pursue beauty does exist. But what about those who do not experience such desire? [...]. (Immersion note on Jiang, 2022)

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