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Game Playing in the Platform Society: A Cultural-Political Economy Analysis of the Live Streaming Industry in China

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Abstract: With the continuing innovation of digital technologies and mobile multimedia terminals, the live steaming industry still has its relatively enormous market share in China. However, the aura of the platform profit-making period seems to glow faintly after 2016, the year regarded as “the booming year of the Chinese live streaming industry”. As the user bonus fades, the growth of the online live broadcasting industry becomes stable, and the industry development returns to rationality. This work poses several questions: in what ways can the survived platforms move forward to seek profits? What type of potential transformations have happened during the monetization for capital accumulation in the digital economy blended with diverse cultures? How can the labor rights of common people be ensured among the persistent chess-play in the virtual live streaming world? By jumping out from techno-optimistic research rhetoric and orthodox political economy discourse, this study stems from a macroscopic perspective of cultural political economy (CPE) with systematical consideration of broader functional factors. Netnography, online in-depth interview, and walkthrough qualitative methods are also conducted to analyze the transformation development in China’s live streaming industry. Results disclose that a gameplay still exists at the core of the dystopian cyberspace, especially residing among different context factors in the platform society, and this academic disclosure can be viewed from cultural and political economy dimension.

Keywords: cultural political economy, live streaming, capitalization, monetization, consumption culture

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1 Introduction

With the continuing innovation of digital technologies and mobile multimedia terminals, China's live streaming, after Blog, SNS, Weibo, and WeChat, has constantly developed and attracted a considerable number of netizens and a large amount of capital since 2016, the year regarded as "the booming year of the Chinese live streaming industry". Almost half of Chinese Internet users (more than 710 million) watch live streaming sites, such as Douyu, Huya, Zhanqi, Panda, 6. cn, and Kugou. In 2017, China's live streaming industry more than doubled in size, with revenues of approximately \$3bn according to iResearch report, which is an authoritative internet data provider with almost 9 years of experience in China. More than 100 companies now offer the service of providing a platform for performers in exchange for their earnings. Most performances on a variety of broadcast platforms are associated with "lifecasting", while others either come from professional incubators or originate from available media programs.

After the skyrocketing development, the aura of the platform profit-making period seems to glow faintly in the past two years. In July 2016, 4313 online showrooms were forced to shut down because they "promote obscenity, violence, abet crime, and damage social morality". According to the 43rd China Internet Network Information Center report¹, the scale of live streaming users had reached 397 million before the end of December 2018, which demonstrated a decrease of more than 25 million people compared with the number from last year. From then on, the whole industry development has returned to rationality and faced a reshuffle as the user bonus fades, and the scale growth has become stable. Considering the current live streaming growth condition, many scholars and industrial professionals contend with the vision that a potential transformation exists at the core of the dystopian cyberspace in China. This notion means that capital in the Chinese live streaming industry is accumulated and reconstructed in different ways rather than mostly through virtual gifting and advertising in the past. The whole live streaming system seems like an arena accommodating different factors with different strengths and power. For example, the e-commerce live streaming industry showed meteoric growth in digital economy, especially Taobao, the biggest B2C e-commerce platform in China, which dominated the market with \$28 billion in sales in 2019² (the number is projected to double in 2020 because of the government's support on e-commerce during the COVID-19

¹ The 43rd China Internet Network Information Center Report: online broadcast [EB/OL]. (2019-02-28). <https://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2019-02-28/doc-ihxncvf8299486.shtml>.

² Rita Yang, Hans Tung, Is Live Streaming the New Frontier of Ecommerce? [EB/OL]. (2020-07-23). <https://www.ggvc.com/insights/is-live-streaming-the-new-frontier-of-ecommerce/>.

lockdown period). Nevertheless, several political policies and laws have been enacted in successions, for instance, Provisions on the Administration of Internet Live-Streaming Services released in 2016, Guidance on Strengthening Supervision of Online Live Broadcast Marketing Activities initially released in 2020, and some other related laws like Advertisement Law and Anti-unfair Competition Law, to progressively regulate various illegal or edge-ball playing speeches and behaviors on live streaming platforms, like adventurous activities, rumor dissemination, feudal communication, fake produce sale, prostitution and violence, so on and so forth. Thus, the domestic video platform industry is better to be illustrated in the integral environment embedded with plenty of functional factors, including political, economic, cultural, technological and social elements, with both empirical and critical/cultural studies.

2 Previous Studies and Research Focus

Web broadcast, which originated from traditional TV stations, is regarded as “Live Web Casting” or “Live Streaming”. Across live streaming platforms, users have generated onscreen performances, which include game play, cooking, painting, karaoke, and “social eating” (Recktenwald & Du, 2017). The types of webcasts include entertainment, game, e-commerce, and professional live streaming forms in China.

The general existing Chinese articles associated with China’s live streaming can be mainly divided into several study directions sorted out here: live streaming industrial analysis (Liao & Yang, 2019); language narratives in news web broadcast (Luo & Xu, 2019); digital ethics and law regulations related to copyrights in live streaming (Gao, 2019; Liu & Huang, 2019); live streamers’ motivations and demands (Wang & Xie, 2019); the analysis of webcast effects (Yang, 2019); the critical/cultural analysis of live broadcast in China (Xu & Zhang, 2019; Yao & Chen, 2019). With regard to the related English academic materials, some research pertains to comparative studies on live broadcast in North America, Europe, and Asia (Lu et al., 2018; Recktenwald & Du, 2016); China’s live streaming industry (Cunningham et al., 2019); consumption motivations and behaviors in live streaming (Li et al., 2018); and the critical/cultural analysis of China’s live streaming monetization (Zhang et al., 2019; Zou, 2018).

A majority of current materials conform to Lasswell’s 5W model path inclined to empirical research methods, and some debates around participatory culture, user-generated content, and collaborative innovation are often over-optimistic (Fuchs & Fisher, 2015: 4), while there are still big spaces waited for being explored in depth, although some critical/cultural studies have been conducted. Moreover,

research about the Chinese online live streaming industry is scarce, even in this post-epidemic era. On this basis, this work aims to fill up the blank of current studies with regard to China's live streaming world in two dimensions (critical/cultural studies and industrial analysis) for an in-depth understanding of the ongoing transformations like a game-playing that happened in the webcast territory. During the dynamic zero-sum gaming environment in live streaming industry of China, the main research questions of this article include three aspects:

- (1) After the earlier huge profit-making period, in what ways will the existing or survived live streaming platforms move forward to seek profits?
- (2) What types of potential transformations have happened during the monetization for capital accumulation in the digital economy associated with diverse cultures?
- (3) How can the labour rights of the common people be ensured with the large population Internet penetration rate in the virtual live streaming world?

Industrial transformations are connected with the surrounded environment including policies, capitals and cultures, and also with people or labour situated inside. The three aspects of questions above are linked with each other. After exploring and analyzing cultural political economy of the live streaming industry in China, some functional factors contributing to the industrial transformation in these years can be analyzed in depth, and then, the labour rights can also not be ignored, as people and environment are connected with each other. In sum, by jumping out from techno-optimistic research rhetoric and an orthodox political economy discourse, this study adopts a macroscopic perspective of a cultural and political economy, supplementing in-depth interview with a qualitative method to analyze the transformation development that emerged in China's live streaming industry. This work discloses that a game-playing mechanism still exists at the core of dystopian cyberspace, where the industry accommodates plenty of political, economic and cultural factors that cooperate or compete with each other.

3 Explanatory Frameworks

Political economy is particularly interested in acknowledging “power” as embedded in markets and institutions (Mosco, 1999, p. 104). Power relations are negotiated among different actors in media landscape, and they include global and local capital, government and state agencies, and workers in the media area (Ferrer-Roca, 2020). In the theoretical framework, the political economy of communication studies have recalled Marxism since the published article “Blindspot of Western Marxism” (Smythe, 1977), which call upon the public to

focus on the complex role of communications in capitalism. Meanwhile, an increasing number of political-economic scholars worldwide are inclined to a common viewpoint that the dark side of capitalism, such as income gap between the rich and the poor, widespread free labour without adequate life guarantee, deep penetration of neoliberalism, and global capitalist crisis on the global scale, is now recognized worldwide within both the “east” and “west” territories (Fuchs & Mosco, 2012).

Although the political economy dimension can make up for the shortage of critical analysis in many existing empirical studies, it does not conflict with cultural interpretations in this media convergence era. Inspired by the Marxian critique of the political economy, the cultural political economy (CPE) not only critically accepts methods of the orthodox political economy, but also emphasizes the contextuality and historicity of all claims (Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008), especially those converged with platform studies (Poell et al., 2019). They pay attention to exploring how platforms bring together different human and non-human actors, and transforming culture production, distribution and circulation with the logic of the platform economy to build a new ecosystem (van Dijck et al., 2018).

Following the analysis routes provided by the viewpoint of the cultural political economy, this paper will systematically adopt critical and cultural theoretical perspectives by referring to the current new media fields in China: (1) While criticizing the capital aspect, such as “platform capitalism” (Srnicsek, 2017), the study is also trying to explore context factors which may affect the integral and dynamic platform ambience. Here the “platform” refers to a mode of socio-technical intermediary and business arrangement that is merged into a wider process of capitalization—at the centre of the critical analysis of digital economic circulation (Langley & Leyshon, 2017). In the meanwhile, platforms can also privilege flows of data by algorithmic sorting, and users’ cultural production and consumption are essential for constructing the platform ecology. (2) While criticizing the commodity side, such as the “audience commodity” (Smythe, 1981), the “free-lunch” content is capable of shaping the communicative practices of platform users. Dallas Smythe pointed out that audiences are the main commodity which can be sold to advertisers, and labour of audience is the main product of mass media. When it comes to the digital platform age, the proliferation of digital technologies completely immerse audiences in a hyper-commercial environment (Dolber, 2016), and this kind of commercialization or monetization becomes even more fierce and severe, as digital technology has enabled media producers and marketers to better quantify the value of audience labour than they had been in the broadcasting era. Christian Fuchs (2012) illustrates how this process of exploitation works in the digital environment. van Dijck et al. (2018) and Plantin (2017) pointed out that commodification of users’ participation exploits the immaterial labour

of users, creates precariousness and shifts economic power from traditional institutions, although it democratizes the market to some extent. In the long run, especially in the era of convergence media and even smart media when things are all going through mediated transformation, contents sourced from this process have more or fewer implications on users directly or potentially. (3) While criticizing the labour aspect, such as “immaterial labour” (Lazzarato 1996; Terranova, 2004), “precariat” (Standing, 2011; Graham et al., 2017), “digital labour” (Scholz, 2017), “unpaid labour” (Fuchs, 2010), “free labour” (Terranova, 2000), “network labour” (Qiu, 2009), and “iSlave” (Qiu, 2017), there are also interactions and communication among labours, which largely form network cultural environment seducing more labour force to join in the drastic webcast area.

The three critical/cultural theoretical perspectives illustrated above are interrelated with each other. While these three theoretical dimensions pay great attention to power differences and class inequality, they also tend to explore cultural force acting within this fierce and competitive power arena. Given that the process of the “socialist market economy” already started in the late 1970s in China, conducting some critical/cultural studies around the relationship between communication and society would be wise for ensuring the healthy movement of technology and protection systems established for the general public. Furthermore, the research is mainly founded on these three theoretical angles as a critical/cultural framework for an in-depth understanding of China’s live streaming industry.

4 Research Design

4.1 Research Methodology

This study is mainly focused on critical/cultural thoughts sourced from cultural politic economy (CPE). Nevertheless, some qualitative investigations, such netnography, online interviews, and walkthrough methods, are applied to supplement clear theoretical illustrations with an in-depth understanding of online users’ psychological feelings and satisfactions. This study supplements the primary critical/cultural analysis with participatory observation and in-depth online interview for investigating the true China’s live streaming world and understanding online users’ psychological feelings and satisfactions. The combination of netnography and online interviews integrated online and offline studies to achieve great consistency in various processes, such as data collection and analysis (Sherry, 1990). The combination of these qualitative methods is helpful in achieving a comprehensive and accurate research process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Netnography can be regarded as ethnography adapted to the study of online communities. Netnography can be also referred to virtual ethnography, which is the process of conducting and constructing an ethnography by using the virtual online environment as the site of research (Evans, 2010), and it is provided for field participation and observation (Hine, 2000). The approach seems faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography provides researchers with a window into naturally occurring behaviors, thereby offering valuable opportunities for exploring relationships between researchers and online users. Morton (2001) provided two ways of conducting ethnography online—distanced or involved, and Schwara (1999) extended the meaning of the term. Distanced research is composed of the evaluation of sources, such as texts, images, or emotions, and the observation of (but not participation in) social interactions in networks. Communicative research can lead to the subjectivity of the actors being revealed (Kendall, 1999) and enables researchers to theoretically understand the identity performance of the user and the significance of the interactions that have occurred (Heidegger, 1996). The participant observations were conducted for more than 2 years ranging from September 2018 to June 2021 to give the author adequate time to understand the operational patterns, profit-earning models, and online interactions of various live streaming platforms. As China's live streaming industry had stepped into the stable development stage leaving less than 100 authorized platforms by the end of 2018³, several major APP platforms were selected for self-experiences, such as Inke, YY Live, Huajiao, Kuaishou, and Douyin (the equivalent of TikTok in the US), to receive first-hand materials and feelings from online engagement. The field work can be divided into two phases: first, starting from September 2018, the author participated in *Huajiao* platform as an outsider, observing the integral live streaming operations, such as platform functions and users' comments; second, from May 2019 to June 2021, the author and a recruited student joined several online fan groups to approach some live anchors who may have many followers. In this way, we can get to know more details about the platforms' salary system, profit allocation and streamers' daily lives.

The walkthrough method is an approach that enables researchers to identify an app's context and highlight the vision, its operating model, and governance that forms a set of expectations for ideal use (Light et al., 2018). We walked through the app's registration, daily use, functional selection, social interaction, and recreation finding. The method allowed for recognition of the embedded cultural values in the app's features and functions and also provides a foundational analysis of the app. It could be combined with online interviews to gain further

3 Tendency of China's live-streaming industry [EB/OL]. (2019-01-10). <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1622236965729544229&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

insights into users' application and appropriation of the app technology to suit their purposes (Light et al., 2018). In this way, app users' self-expression, relationships, and interactions could be extensively explored.

Apart from deep participation and observation methods used above, the study also adopted online interviews as a methodological supplement. Broadcasters ($n = 8$) and audience users ($n = 5$) were selected on the basis of snowball sampling, and the selection of the interviewees depended on two factors: time length and use frequency on live streaming platforms. Given that, this study aims to explore the phenomena that have not been extensively described before through an in-depth interview. It pays attention to the richness of data contained in the sampling process, instead of just lingering on the number of samples. The interviewing time was approximately 2–2.5 h for each person, and the interview questions were prepared on an interviewing outline in advance. All interviews were smooth and comfortable. No one left or gave up the interview. The subjects were classified according to the defined topics, and the names of the interviewees were anonymous to ensure the legal protection of personal privacy. The data achieved from the interview were further analyzed to complement the main critical/cultural analysis.

4.2 Research Objective

The research objective covers two areas: main live streaming platforms and platform users (including broadcasters and audience users). The main platforms include three different types: entertainment type—*Douyin*, *Kuaishou*, *Huajiao*; Game type—*Douyu*; e-commerce type—*Taobao*. The interviewed platform users include eight broadcasters and five users, and all of them at least have two-year live streaming experience. For instance, two interviewees are regarded as *Wang Hong* or online celebrity (Tse et al., 2018) because each person has more than 100,000 followers in the virtual world. Another six interviewees have played as video hosts on webcasting platforms for more than three years. The remaining five people can be considered heavy users who use live streaming platforms for more than 7 h per day. Their rough demographic features are listed as follows:

5 Capital Gameplay and Video Culture

China's live streaming industry has undergone three phases: a huge profit-making phase, a legitimate adjustment phase, and an industrial transformation phase. The embryonic form of Webcast can be traced back to Podcast in 2008, and a variety of live streaming platforms were developed at an astonishing speed around 2016. During

ID	Gender	Age	Years of use	Has streamed themselves	Live streaming platform	Province/Autonomous region/Municipality in China
P1	M	24	3	Yes	<i>Douyu</i>	Shanghai
P2	F	24	3	Yes	<i>Taobao</i>	Shanghai
P3	F	24	3	No	<i>Douyu</i>	Beijing
P4	F	45	2	No	<i>Taobao</i>	Sichuan
P5	M	27	2	No	<i>Taobao</i>	Jilin
P6	M	26	2.5	No	<i>Dianping</i>	Shanxi
P7	F	27	3	No	<i>Taobao</i>	Zhejiang
P8	M	28	4	Yes	<i>Taobao</i>	Beijing
P9	F	28	3	Yes	<i>Taobao</i>	Tianjin
P10	F	23	3.5	Yes	<i>Huajiao</i>	Shanghai
P11	F	22	2.5	Yes	<i>Douyin</i>	Hunan
P12	M	28	3	Yes	<i>Kuaishou</i>	Shenzhen
P13	M	25	2	Yes	<i>Huajiao</i>	Hebei

that period, many online hosts became online celebrities from original grassroots, earned a large sum of money from self-performances on computer or mobile phone screens via virtual gifts (Li et al., 2018). That can be deemed as a unique characteristic of Chinese live streaming compared with the other countries' platforms with the same video-showing functions. In the second phase, fierce competitions happened among diverse live streaming platforms, and each of them was struggling for additional capital and flows. Some platforms were driven into distorted trails, where they were filled with pornography, violence, seductive content, immoral words and fake news to realize maximum monetization. From then on, a series of governmental policies have been gradually enacted to maintain the healthy development of the live streaming industry in China. After legitimate adjustment, the current webcasting industry is stably moving forward with some transformations on many platforms that have experienced capital reorganizations and financial competitions, and some platforms are embedded in people's daily cultural lives like *Douyin* and *KuaiShou*. From the cheerful applause with great jubilation for the emergence of new *Social Media Entertainment* (SME: Cunningham & Craig, 2019), the existed platforms' convergence with the political economy and video culture cannot be ignored.

5.1 Capitalization and Contextualization Feature of the Platforms

In the field of political and economic communication, the main meaning of "capital" is not money or investment capability, but a type of social relationship—

the class relationship between labour and capital. David Harvey's (2007) analysis in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* indicated that the process of "capitalism" is not only the self-protection and re-expansion of the current beneficial owner but also the maintenance of the existing power relationship and organization. Capitalism demands that firms constantly seek out new avenues for profit, new markets, new commodities, and new means of exploitation (Srnicek, 2017, p. 3). This notion means that capital always find strategies to maximize itself. The nature of the transformation is not far from capital accumulation regardless of the forms of social media platforms. With the advancement of information techniques and network system, a wave of "platformization" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) sweeps the world. The conception of "platformization" is associated with "how the political economy of the cultural industries changes through platformation, affecting the production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4275). Castells (2000, p. 190) noticed that the network has brought about great reform transiting from "*quantity production*" to "*flexible production*" with the coming of a "*Post-Fordism*" age. When many people acclaim for the arrival of sharing economy and digital democracy, the emergence of platform capitalism cannot be ignored. Specifically, the way of capital accumulation is becoming highly flexible with the changes of media and social ecology. The Internet platforms reorganize labour relations in flexible and multiple ways to a certain extent. Specifically, some live streaming platforms greatly exploit labours' scattered time and resources, inducing them to engage in different types of part-time or even full-time activities without any protection from commercial contracts. This notion means that many webcast business companies shift the committed cost onto the shoulders of public participants.

The monetization model of Chinese live streaming is normally about virtual gift-giving, which is in the form of pictographs, such as flowers, yachts, and hearts paid by streamers and received by hosts who give real-time performances. Apart from initial virtual gift-giving, e-commerce live broadcast launched around 2018 can also be regarded as one of the most prominent embodiment of contextualization. "Contextualization" means that with the development of mobile terminals, the Internet, the Internet of things and live broadcasting technology, online and offline communication can achieve a face-to-face interaction. With a strong sense of participation, both parties are in the same scene and environment (Zou et al., 2020). Customers and anchors can interact in real time. A realistic and vivid context is better than traditional texts and graphics, and different live streaming forms can be interconvertible. The gifts are cash-convertible; hence, the final revenue can be split between the platform and the live hosts. When

some hosts become *Wang Hong* through congregating many fans, they turn the traffic flows into revenues by stepping into e-commerce area for high profits. For instance, a popular mukbang (Chibo 吃播) Mizijun (密子君) has her own e-commerce stores earning over 5 million Yuan (equal to almost 710 thousand US dollars) per year. Although those online celebrities have made astonishing profits in these years, a large number of content creators still face great challenge. However, when the webcast consumption environment is largely formed, there are still more and more streamers who both live domestically and exotically enter this video culture era. One of the interviewees P4 told her live streaming experience on *Xiaohongshu* platform in the US. She has lived in New York for nearly 5 years. She said that her audiences like her telling some exotic studying and living news, and this interaction can enrich the emotions between the streamer and viewers, and even can make contribution to participants' consumption behaviors online. In particular, this interviewee also pointed out transcultural communication is inclined to increase online connection and consumption. Like P4 said, "when I stayed overseas, I would like to share some personal experiences of living in a foreign country, and my audience in live streaming platform were likely to give enthusiastic responses and even follow my suggestions to make more purchase online. But, when I go back to my hometown in China, it is apparent to see that the viewers' enthusiasms of interaction are falling down day by day."

According to the iiMedia Research Report, over 70% of we-media people have salaries of less than 5000 yuan (about 715 US dollars) per month⁴, which cannot offer them roughly decent lives in the contemporary society. At a press conference for the third session of the 13th National People's Congress, Premier Li Keqiang stressed that China has "600 million low- and middle-income people, and their average monthly income is only about 1,000 yuan"⁵. Two interviewees expressed their living conditions as follows:

In the earlier platform bonus period, I earned much more money in comparison with my current income, as every big live streaming platform has increased their profit-sharing proportion. (P13)

In the earlier days, we could get followers and virtual gifts just through randomly displaying our daily common lives. But, nowadays, we need to make efforts to show various creative contents in order to maintain stable flows which may be hopeful for turning into our profits, although there are few viewers paying the gifts online. (P12)

⁴ 2017 Report on Chinese we-media works' living conditions [EB/OL]. iiMedia Research. (2017-02-15). https://www.sohu.com/a/126329017_505807.

⁵ How to understand "600 million people's average monthly income is only about 1,000 yuan, today evening news" [EB/OL], (2020-06-11). http://epaper.jwb.com.cn/jwb/html/2020-06/11/content_15355_2831829.htm.

5.2 “Webcast +” Content Transformation and Third Space Formation

Capital almost penetrates into every aspect of the media/society operation system, even though it appears with different masks at diverse stages. In the we-media content structure, the *User-generated Content* (UGC), *Professional-generated Content* (PGC), and *Occupation-generated Content* (OGC) are the essential expressions of flexible capital accumulation (Qiu, 2014; Wang, 2016). UGC is a new concept in digital capitalism, which is regarded as addictive “sugar” in the 21st century (Qiu, 2014). The informational data are assembled into an important part of the Big Data analysis to provide advertisers with accurate data source and describe direct research goals for many science-technology companies. During the digital engagement and content transmission, an increasing number of customers fall into “iSlave” on a variety of platforms; audience’s reading experience and public participation are embodied into the “clipping rate”, becoming a bargaining chip for capital accumulation.

Several network broadcast platforms had received different investments, such as *Kuaishou* (350 million US dollars), *Yi Webcast* (3 billion US dollars) and *Huajiao* (227 million US dollars)⁶. Nonetheless, a great deal of broadcasting companies collapsed around 2016–2017 with the imposition of some official policies authorized by the government for limiting negative shows on live streaming platforms. In 2016, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) issued the *Notice on Issues Related to Strengthening the Management of Live Streaming Services for Online Audiovisual Programs*, requiring network anchors to hold certificates and get real-name authentication⁷. On April 13, 2016, *Baidu*, *Sina*, *Sohu*, *iQIYI* and more than 20 other major enterprises engaged in network broadcast jointly released the “self-discipline convention of Beijing network broadcast industry”, and gradually established the “blacklist” system, setting an example in self-discipline⁸. YY, *Huajiao*, *Inke*, *Douyu* and other major webcast platforms banned more than 30,000 accounts of offending anchors, closed nearly 90,000 direct broadcast rooms, and deleted nearly 50 million harmful

6 2016 Chinese Live-streaming industry report [EB/OL]. (2017-01-06). https://www.sohu.com/a/123562665_440641.

7 Jihui Yang. The management of live-streaming chaos [EB/OL]. People Forum Web. (2019-03-06), <http://www.rmlt.com.cn/2019/0306/541147.shtml>.

8 “Surveillance + Self-discipline” manage webcast chaos. Network Communication [EB/OL]. (2016-09-12), forward by http://www.cac.gov.cn/2016-09/12/c_1119553055.htm.

comments. The Cyberspace Administration of China ordered websites to rectify the problems found, and urged enterprises to strengthen self-discipline⁹.

From then on, the live broadcasting industry is largely reshuffled. Specifically, some mainstream live streaming platforms cooperate with each other for consolidating their positions in the market (Chart 1). Other business companies seek other strategies to hold energetic and attractive activities that appeal to people's tastes and implement *Live Broadcast + strategy* to expand *Webcast + Social intercourse*, *Webcast + Outdoor activities*, and *Webcast + games* and ensure that high data rates will flow through different types of platforms to prepare for recourse realization. Although the forms of operation constantly change, the nature of capital accumulation for monopolistic capitalists is not transformed during the informational capitalism period (Fuchs, 2012). In the meanwhile, in spite of the flexible capital accumulation constantly, kind of third places are likely formed on diverse platforms. Third places (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982) exist outside the home and beyond the “work lots” of modern economic production; they are places where people gather primarily to enjoy each other's company. The main characteristics of a third place: lively conversation, joy of association, intermediate zone between the usual and typical, change with the shifting patterns of life style. “Webcast+” strategy exists different platforms, creating various third places that satisfy with the needs stemmed from different users or consumers. These places not only make profits for business and platforms, but also

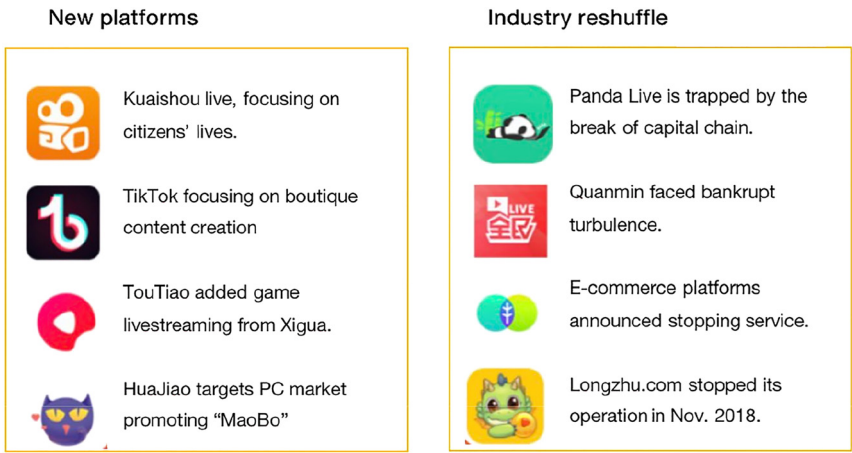


Chart 1: 2018 iiMedia Research Inc, <http://www.limedia.cn>.

⁹ The Cyberspace Administration of China and other three departments formed a joint inspection team to crack down on live streaming disorder [EB/OL]. (2016-12-30), http://www.cac.gov.cn/2016-12/30/c_1120224139.htm?from=singlemessage&isappinstalled=0.

provide users with relaxation, recreation, company, communal interest, etc., potentially forming a unique Chinese live streaming culture.

6 Audience Commercialization and Consumerism Culture

6.1 Prosumer Formation in the Consumerism Paradigm

Canadian scholar D. W. Smythe (1977) systematically illustrated the theory of *audience commercialization*, which pointed out that the activity of watching media content was to be packaged as commodities and sold out to different advertisers. According to Smythe, the rights of self-expression and freedom are “bites”, namely, “free lunch”, for reselling audiences’ information to advertisers. New media is an enormous database that categorizes its audiences on the basis of several pieces of information, such as age, gender, income, and housing agency. Thus, advertisers are likely to implement accurate marketing strategies. Under the reward-based system, which is associated with virtual gift-giving, the live anchors and viewers may become consumers and even prosumers (Toffler, 1981, p. 11). We take the “Star of the week” contest on *YY Live* as an example. Some viewers might throw themselves into a “purchasing contest” through buying online gifts for their supportive anchors because the rule provides that the final streaming-winner would directly return what they have earned from the virtual gifts to their financial supporter. In this way, the platform deducts a great percentage from a sum of money in the “purchasing gifts—withdrawing deposit” capital circles, thereby making a number of participants into flow propellant and content consumers, namely, prosumers in the logic of digital capitalism.

Live streaming in China is extremely commercialized, with features of monetization (Zou, 2018). Based on the 2018 iiMedia Research, showroom live streaming is categorized as the top percentage part of the whole online broadcasting content (at 43.3%), outnumbering the others, such as entertainment (23.5%), games (27.3%), and other contents (5.9%). “Beautiful girls” are presented as the main content for “left-over men” living in metropolitan cities. Jean Baudrillard said in his renowned book- *Consumption Society* that “in a full set of equipment in consumption, there is one thing that is more beautiful and glorious than others. That is human body.” (Baudrillard, 2014, p. 139). In the age of “post-human” symbolized by the deep convergence between human and digital technology, body is becoming a type of media disseminating various pieces of information online and offline. For instance, facial values are boosted in China’s

live streaming industry. To attract fans online, numerous female anchors even undergo the sore of plastic surgeries for achieving stylized body images with a high forehead, round eyes, a long nose, and a thin jaw and for satisfying a large proportion of audiences’ aesthetic interests (Chart 2). Most streamers and viewers are voluntarily manipulated by “invisible hand”, directly and indirectly contributing their time and energy for capital exploitation; accordingly, the emergence of urban middle-class is trapped in the circle of “*New Poor*” (Bauman, 2010, p. 85). An interviewee with a three-year webcasting working experience was asked about her response to cosmetic face as follows:

I adjusted my jaw last month in a Beauty Clinics opened by my relatives. My previous jaw was a little, square and short. I want a new one appeared like Angelababy (a famous Chinese star who has a photogenic face, and she is sometimes resembled to *Wang Hong* in some online deliberations). (P11)

6.2 Emotional Interactions and Consumption Culture

Emotions in the capitalist consumer culture become “things” that are managed, monitored, manipulated, or manufactured (Hochschild, 1983). Zhenyu Luo, one of the most successful UGC creators, said, “trust is the most crucial thing in this democratic information society. It means that appealing personality is the essence to create sense of confidence”. Online celebrities on diverse platforms mold themselves into the figures that appeal to their audiences’ tastes through authentic interactions with massive netizens. During the trust generation, audiences are transformed into consumers. For example, a Chinese well-known TV host, Xiang Li, opened a live streaming column selling products online. Reports indicated that she sold sanitary napkins at astonishing revenue, almost achieving more than million US dollars per day.

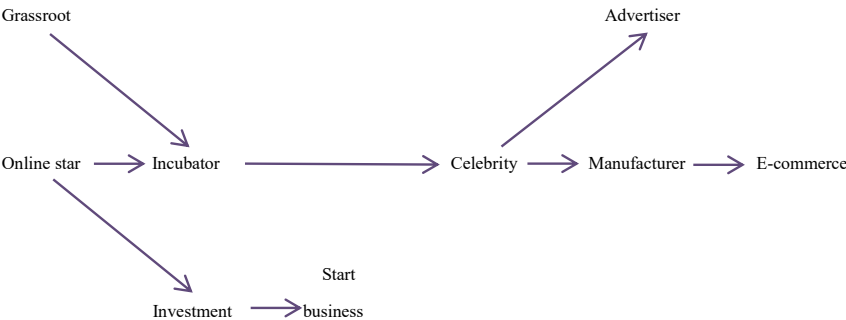


Chart 2: Online celebrity incubator.

Zygmunt Bauman, a British scholar, stated in his book *Work Consumerism and the New Poor* that the consumption society, which is different from the production society, has forged an unsatisfactory context that constantly wraps consumers by diverse material stimulation (Bauman, 2010, p. 6). A large number of “online celebrities” created by diverse companies make every endeavor to play attractive programs on webcast platforms, forging different types of space or fields to contribute to participants’ emotional interactions. The power of emotional connection is bigger than direct selling products. Just like one interviewee said, “I paid to enter a game streamer’s online VIP group. The anchor treats everyone very kindly, and I’d like to watch him every day.” (P3). Besides, a mid-aged person P4 thought e-commerce live streaming has more trust than previous B2C mode, and she said, “I’d like buying life necessities on Taobao live-streaming rooms, as anchors introduce products with real-time interaction that has more trust than before”.

People’s desires and affects are not their own, but “part of the capitalist infrastructure” (McKinlay & Smith, 2009, p.29). Instant interaction and real space enhance the trust extent of social communication, and the collective entertainment behind mouse clipping largely gives rise to capital collection, which means that people continuously spend their scattered time purchasing virtual gifts for their favorite live anchors. Under most circumstances, audiences always do not mind what online celebrities said, and what they really care about is the jubilation accompanied with the persons who greatly attract their eyes in the network society.

The free labour on the network is a type of foundation for the digital economy and is characterized by emotional investment and satisfaction gains. The gradual congregation of followers brings about a prosperous landscape of the e-commerce market. A number of webcast platforms and companies that aim to forge “online celebrities” who analyze Internet data on the basis of the followers’ preferences constantly, and then confirm the marketing requirements for exact commodity production, have realized the transformation from “data flow” to “consumption” by opening online stores targeting at consumers’ demands. For instance, Ziqi Li (李子柒), a Chinese famous blogger, has more than 50 million followers on various video broadcasting platforms, excluding the foreign fans on YouTube. She periodically uploads her own-manufactured cooking videos with romantically retro feelings and promotes intangible culture heritage, such as mud stove rice, woodcarving, embroidery artifact, and stamp seal, which have received worldwide attention. Meanwhile, she has also started e-commerce business, selling her own brands, such as the food she cooked in the videos. A *Wang Hong* accepted an interview, and she relayed her own experience in response to the content above:

Happily, in the earlier stage, a lot of revenue received back from virtual gifts shared with the platform. Certainly, I can only take 20% of the total profits every time based on the rule of contract and the proportion share is decreasing gradually. Till now, my soup cooking videos are pervasive in every corner of the network, but frankly speaking, the webcasting work occupies a large proportion of my time, resulting in the downsides of my health. (P9)

7 Digital Labor and Internet Entrepreneurship

7.1 The Industrial Formation from Grass-root to Online Celebrity

The digital audiences' engagement with new media platforms turns out to be "immaterial labour" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p.77) or "*free labor*" (Terranova, 2004) in the discourse of Marxist theory of alienation. The related conception of "digital labor" absorbs some minds from Karl Marx's species concept, which illustrating that the spirit and body of digital labour have been dissimulated by current electric network and biotechnology. First, "online celebrity" and "grass-root" work for the monopoly capitals. With the emergence of webcasting territories, an increasing number "online celebrity incubators" (Chart 3) have received great attention from people, including some big capitals (e.g., Zhenge Funds, Hongshan Capital, and IDG) and monopoly Internet corporations (e.g., Tencent and Sina)¹⁰. There are many big capital organizations like MCN (Multi-Channel Network)—a new mode for operating online celebrity economy, expecting to grasp high surplus values and consolidate their social controlling statuses. MCN is like a training cooperation with the functions of incubating online star or grassroots. While MCN provides a large number of resources to recruited staff who are working in front of camera, they also need to share profits with them on the basis of different contracts. The scale of profitable share, which can be sourced from advertisers or E-commerce, is largely depended on network flows brought about by streamers and the possibility of cashing the flows.

In addition, there is another training incubator which is often called as "Association" (工会) by lots of anchors. One interviewee claimed, "MCN is responsible for managing Wang Hong, while Association manages recreational anchors. Both of them have the quality of mediation. They provide you with advertising resources and recommendation positions on platforms that increase the possibility of attracting more audience to enter rooms. However, they always

¹⁰ Webcast platform: bonus is vanishing, and the industry is changing rapidly [EB/OL], Sichuan News Network, (2016-08-01), http://www.ce.cn/culture/gd/201608/01/t20160801_14382678.shtml.

take larger proportion of profits and periodically evaluate anchors' performances. If some anchors become famous, like attracting one million fans, they will not let them quit the job. in this way, the cooperation contract is similar to an indenture for selling yourself to big companies." (P1)

Another interviewee splendidly responded, "Yes. No matter whatever resources, or game contest opportunities, all of my works come from the Association. As for the profit share, it greatly depends on different platforms' scales. *Douyu* would offer 35–40% of profits after tax, and other platforms with few reputations would give you 33–38% of profits after tax. Only big anchors can get 45–50% of profits. Different platforms have different associations, while only few associations are capable of collaborating with many platforms. One association can make many contracts with many anchors and get profit shares from each of them." (P2)

Second, network anchors could be viewed as marketing agencies selected by existing privileged elite class to expand the market space associated with monetization and wealth increment. Powerful IP has the function of being an "Opinion Leader". Instead of cultivating millions of netizens, capital corporations would prefer to select some eligible "online celebrities", obscuring the boundary between leisure time and work time, to create high surplus values. In addition, "webcast celebrities" can set a more impressive example for citizens than big capitals do, and the concept "everyone could become famous" is embedded in the network society. Nonetheless, becoming media-exaggerated "successful" individuals, who can realize the transformation from the proletariat to the bourgeoisie through some exceptional ways, such as "singing and dancing" reality shows on the platforms, is difficult to achieve. Majority of these so-called "rising elites" are kinds of commodities that exist during the distribution of early bonus by some monopoly enterprises.

In addition, the basic logic of the business model of online celebrity economy is to guide a large quantity of fans to follow online well-known people's values and their lifestyles and then affect followers by advertisements that adopt "pull strategy" rather than "push strategy". The three main approaches that can help online celebrities earn profits are as follows: advertising agencies, online business, and gift bonuses. Regardless of the above-mentioned pattern, capital competitions originate from Internet renowned people themselves, and the competitive ways can be divided into two models, i.e., video hosting and the community economy. The hosts comfortably chat with their audience and entertain them to please online followers to a large extent. These online celebrities account for a large proportion of the webcast market and they gradually expand their popularity by attracting a number of fans to obtain profits through their followers' bonuses. The interviewee's feedback to the conceptual analysis above is presented as follows:

A Cloud marketing company hires me to introduce their wood-made furniture on live streaming platforms every day, for my own network flow of followers is very astonishing, almost over 200 thousand people..... I cannot differentiate my leisure time from work time, for the computing is flickering every moment through 24 hours per day. (P8)

The second model leans on some online celebrities to organize diverse communities, such as Logical Minds (the well-known UGC creative company in China), which is a popular network community in China in these years. This kind of model largely depends on advertising profits and member fee. For example, Logical Minds continuously attracts its followers by prompting them to buy its membership and also appeals to diverse types of advertisers' tastes for receiving advertising fee.

In the digital economy of attention, "one-dimensional man" (Marcuse, 2002/1964) has received a great deal of false consciousness propagated from a considerable number of network platforms, similar to a big pool congregating a variety of factors and agents sourced from policies, economic conditions, subculture, and people's engagement. Given that existing elites, they need an entrance to call upon many individuals to work for them, adding connotations of "civic participation" into manufacturing procedures, to prompt the development of labor exploitation in a highly potential way. If democratic public engagement brought about by an array of technological platforms receives great approval, then a substantial amount of labor will be thronged into the daily rolling operation of various platforms even without considering their insurance and housing funds. Like an interviewee said, "I used to work as an entertainment anchor, streaming eight to 15 hours per day. The previous days seems like living in prisons. From now on, I only stream myself 4 h per day, lasting for 20 days per month, earning about 10,000 Yuan (equal to 1513 dollars) per month. I have a stable poor life.....". (P2) Thus, the naked exploitation of free labour is concealed behind the slogan "The era of live broadcast to the whole people is coming.", but lots of individuals can indeed make a living in the video world which is full of consumerism culture and participation culture, and some of them are selected or appointed by big capital to be online celebrities, so as to make more profits and set examples for others.

7.2 Playbor or Labor: Pros and Cons of Internet Participation

Many theoretical accumulations regarding the issue of "labour" in the network society can be found in the academic field. For instance, Manuel Castells (1989) came up with a viewpoint that the global network society has two categories of labour, namely, "self-programmable labour" and "immaterial labour". In the "sharing" economy, many fans have become profit-earning tools working for

capital increment, and their bodies and spirits have been alienated by current social media in nature. An article entitled “Cruel language from lower classes: Chinese countryside described by a video software” enumerated many amazing and eye-catching examples, such as placing fireworks into pants and eating raw dead pigs, which have been forwarded by a number of people on their WeChat moments, thereby exposing the webcast App *KuaiShou* to billions of Chinese citizens. Currently, the features of different live streaming platforms are slightly conspicuous: in contrast with *Kuaishou*, who focuses on disseminating village-characteristic contents, *Douyin* emphasizes on diffusing elaborate and elegant self-made programs that satisfy the tastes of elites living in first-tier cities or metropolis. Although many “fans” and “playbors” on webcast platforms attract a great deal of attention, their personal labour functions or capabilities have been packaged selling out to diverse advertisers or directly transformed into shopping abilities. “Masters” that stand out from a large quantity of netizens are rarely seen, which means that the majority of we-media creators and participants are becoming victims of continuously serving for huge capitals, consequently turning out to be the naked “iSlave” (Qiu, 2014) in the network society. The essence of being squeezed from the beginning to the end conforms to Fuchs and Sandoval’s (2014) perspective, which pointed out the duel-commercialization nature of the fact that commercial capitals continuously exploit “digital labours”. An interviewee gave feedback as follows:

Chinese live streaming platforms or Associations usually sign two forms of contracts with streamers: flow contract and popularity contract. The former regulates that recruited anchors need to receive at least 100,000 yuan (equal to 15,130 US dollars) gifts per month, and famous anchors are forced to get at least five times of that profit. The latter means that anchors need to maintain a stable audience rating per day or per month. For example, there are at least 300,000 audience watching the streaming content on a monthly basis. If anchors do not arrive at the purpose stipulated by the two contracts, they will be deducted money. (P2)

As for some viewers’ crazy watching behaviours, one interviewee said, “I like the show very much. I watch the live video all day and all night.” (P5)

The mainstream formation of “playbor” is often exposed on three primary online territories: game zones, talent-show zones, and comment websites. First, some dominant live streaming platforms at present conduct an in-depth exploration of their gaming market. Platforms also make efforts to find their own paths with creativity, such as struggling for contest copyrights, signing up with professional game rangers, and self-manufacturing their own game IP, apart from inviting anchors to synchronously broadcast game events. The reform of some platforms is similar to “putting new wine into old bottles”, which means that the nature of capital accumulation is still maintained, but the appearance of online activities held in various networked spaces is changed. However, the

ever-changing patterns of the virtual world are highly tempting for Chinese youth. According to some related statistic data, the audiences of different Chinese web-cast platforms are mainly “network generation” who are born with digital multi-media technologies. The young customers have been cultivated to pay for Internet contents at this digital times, thus bringing about fresh profit patterns to mobile webcasting to a large extent (Baudrillard, 2014, p. 139). These types of media use and culture consumption customs are associated with not only digital revolution but also expansion of global capitalism based on the neoliberalism ideology and the social reality transforming traditional entity economy into virtual economy.

I have more than 5 years’ e-shopping experience in *Taobao* without going to physic stores or markets anymore. I usually surf on the shopping website in the evening after my daily work. Live streaming salespersons are kind of attractive and interesting. They will try on new clothes that I directly called on the e-commerce webcasting platform, and this quick feedback and visual enjoyment will promote my commercial behaviours. (P7)

The other two areas, namely, talent show and comment websites, are still advancing in China. The percentage of impromptu performances gradually declined after some official policies have been released by the government. Meanwhile, the proportion of “anchor + singer” path is created by some live steaming platforms. For instance, *Douyu* developed a strategic cooperative partnership with *Kugou*, and they created the “anchor music dream factory”. They invited some professional teams to manufacture well-qualified digital albums and depended on both sides’ online and offline promotion channels to establish a new ecology of “anchor + singer” for increasing anchors’ adhesiveness to the platforms. In this way, majority of streamers are fastened on the platforms of their own accord and voluntarily contribute their power to the labor force even losing precious time and energy to do self-enhancement in this fiercely competitive society. With the deep convergence between live streaming functions and some existing *Dianping* (点评) websites (customer review APP software that is equivalent to Yelp in the US) and increasing acceleration of network speed in the mobile age, users can “shop, work, and socialize without leaving the physical space of the home” (Andrejevic, 2003, p. 148). An increasing number of streamers take selfies whenever and wherever, thus giving rise to the consumption of surroundings on a large scale (Chart 4). Viewers’ real-time interactions, comments, recommendations, and group-purchasing behaviours are endlessly provided for the platforms’ data storage that can be analyzed by big data, data-mining, or algorithm techniques. The further statistical analysis of data archives can be used for delineating accurate customers’ images for capitalists and promoting precise customized information to each viewer. Consequently, many embodied users will likely depend on locative information offered by these types of platforms. This situation may lead to

a “self-cocooning effect”, which means that everyone may only care about the information pushed by platforms prompted by scientific algorithm techniques without knowing the outside world alienated from their own experience. Consequently, people living in urban territories may feel lonely and eventually lose their capabilities in fighting for capital exploitation in this super-commercial world.

Exactly, I largely depend on Dianping.com for guild-touring in public space and eating out for dinners. The APP integrates many functions like searching, webcasting, reviewers, interactions, etc. It has memory that can remember what I like and dislike, what attracts me to spend more money on all those aspects such as clothing, food, housing and living. (P6)

8 Conclusion

The emergence of new media is positively pursued by many academic scholars and industry professionals. However, a majority of previous researches are likely to consider the possibility of human emancipation and social democracy brought about by the advancement of digital technology without adequate critical/cultural consideration on the power contradiction that emerged among technology and society, political policies, economic situations, local culture and public engagement. The cultural political economy (CPE) is associated with the political economy and cultural studies, not only critically illustrating issues from political and economic basis, but also viewing technical and economic objects as socially constructed, historically specific, socially embedded in broader networks of social relations and institutional ensembles. This research timely fills the gap in previous studies and considers the relationship between technology and people from the perspective of cultural political-economy study concepts, exploring a game play power among different context factors. The study is also supplemented with participatory observation and in-depth interviews. Three inductive thoughts from the analysis above are listed here to answer the questions listed at the beginning of the research.

First, many live streaming platforms have undergone different types of industrial transformations, such as regrouping themselves, listing on the stock market, reorganizing business structures, and capital raising, as user bonus fades. According to the critical theoretical analysis and practical investigation, the statement “putting old wine into new bottles” can be applied here because the changed forms of webcasting platforms are not likely to transform the nature of capital accumulation. However, by some cultural consideration stemmed from current technological and social environment, it cannot ignore that live streaming world have created plenty of spaces with the same functions of the Third Place,

satisfying with people's different demands, like relaxation, recreation, communal interests, so on and so forth. Although online broadcasting on selling goods is a type of profit-earning during the COVID-19 period, the long-term operating model should be largely considered to ensure that many people can avail of the benefits.

Second, the content, data flows, platform itself, emotions, and even bodies can be transferred into commodities sold out to diverse advertisers or huge capitals to increase the capital. Although some brand new live streaming strategies, such as "Webcast+" held online, and previous landscape of the live streaming world reorganized, the eye-catching nature of the upgraded platforms for constant capital circles is not changed fundamentally compared with the industry in the old days. The main profit-earning model of the live streaming industry can be concluded into three primary aspects: virtual gift-giving, advertisement agency, and e-commerce. A large amount of data flows may be commercially used by platform owners and huge capitals in the consumerism paradigm, thereby giving rise to the invasion of customers' privacy, heavy dependence on information pushed by algorithm analysis, and potentially enlarging the gap between the rich and the poor, especially a "new poor" associated with consumption culture cultivated in the society.

Besides, streamers and viewers should be reminded about "digital labour" or "iSlave" in the digital economy to protect their rights. Capital exploitation can be all-pervasive in every aspect of the live streaming industry, including entertainment talent-show, impromptu performance, gaming, and some systematic APP platforms (e.g., *Dianping* in China [equal to Yelp in other countries]). Online users cannot differentiate leisure time from work time, both of which may be invested into the dynamic process of capital growth. The gamification context may probably lead to audience commercialization for the final stage of monetization. With the increasing acceleration of network speed and the growth of multiple electric terminals in the mobile age, viewers' real-time interactions, comments, recommendations, and group-purchasing behaviors are endlessly provided for the platforms' data storage that can be analyzed by advertisers with strong financial strength.

In summary, three main sides, namely, "platforms", "hosts", and "spectators", establish profit chains connected with each other to constantly chase capital during the profit-chasing of different webcast platforms, which are penetrated with different cultures. Only if we adopt a dialectical illustration viewing a drastic gameplay among diverse context factors, our individual and group rights will be effectively protected, and the whole media ecology will be relatively healthy and fresh in the near future.

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