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# Navigating the economy of ambivalent intimacy: gender and relational labour in China's livestreaming industry

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## ABSTRACT

By examining female streamers' everyday interactions with their viewers and their experiences as showroom livestreamers (*xiuchang zhubo*) in China's livestreaming industry, this article adopts—but also re-examines—the premises of relational labour in order to investigate the gendered power relations involved in the showroom livestreaming sector. Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with female livestreamers, we argue that showroom livestreaming work is contingent on relational labour and constitutes a precarious balancing act. On the one hand, female streamers are positioned in a gendered economy, searching to monetize their production of sexually ambivalent intimacy. On the other hand, through constant negotiation, they try to maintain the correct degree of intimacy in order to avoid violating both platform regulations and the social moral standard. Therefore, the implicitly sexualised and intimate performances undertaken by female streamers are the result of negotiating livestreaming platforms' technological and economic affordances, the male viewers' needs for intimate personal interactions, and their own subjectivities. We claim that the economy of *aimei*, or ambivalent intimacy, represents a deeper form of exploitation, whereby female streamers themselves bear the responsibility to navigate tensions and emotional alienation at the nexus of financial security, sexual desire, and morality.

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## Introduction

In 2017 the BBC produced a three-part documentary on China's livestreaming industry, which featured a female livestreamer called Lele Tao. According to the last episode of the documentary, entitled *My Unrequited Love for Internet Showgirls*, Lele had a loyal fan, Shage, who had spent more than \$15,000 USD in her chatroom and had been her online friend for four years. They mostly interacted with each other in Lele's livestreaming chatroom, though Lele sometimes contacted Shage through private calls to share stories and experiences from her livestreaming. Before shooting the documentary, they had never met in person. Regarding his unique relationship with Lele, the young man, who looked a bit shy on camera, said, "Relationships on the internet are fragile and mostly

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money-oriented. It is difficult to trust people, but I think she trusts me.” In this story, money and emotions seem to be the two forces that modulate the streamer-viewer relationship.

The documentary offered a glimpse into the gender dynamics affecting “showroom livestreamers” (*xiuchang zhubo*) in China’s livestreaming industry. Showroom livestreaming features various kinds of entertainment such as singing, dancing, and chatting. In this sector of livestreaming, the entertainment content is mostly produced by young women. According to a report published by Momo (2019), a leading showroom livestreaming platform, women constitute 78.8% of the workforce while the viewers are predominantly men. Female livestreamers in China are acknowledged as engaging in gendered performativity, often described as “pretty girls” appealing to the emotional needs of “lonely leftover men” (Stuart Cunningham, David Craig, and Junyi Lv 2019, 725). Nonetheless, their work cannot be reduced to a pretty girl earning virtual gifts just by being on livestreaming platforms. Ge Zhang and Larissa Hjorth (2019, 814) detail the labour of female streamers, which “often involves applying make-up before a live stream, adjusting other paraphernalia, twisting the programmes, being social during the stream itself, interacting with fans off-stream and so forth. The labour is intensive, whether physical, technical or emotional.” Moreover, as they observe, female streamers often commit considerable time and effort off-stream to maintaining interpersonal relationships with their viewers through private messages and other social networking applications such as WeChat and QQ.

The continuous interaction and communication between streamers and viewers, in the livestreaming chatrooms and in private chats during off-stream hours, resonates with Nancy Baym’s concept of relational labour (2015). In contrast to Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (2003 [1983]) concept of emotional labour, which refers to the labour of managing one’s feelings in single encounters, Baym (2015) uses relational labour to emphasize ongoing communication over time that builds social relationships and fosters monetary rewards for cultural workers (in her case, musicians). More importantly, this continuous interaction, which “may bear a greater resemblance to friends and family than to customers and clients” (Nancy Baym 2015, 20), is enabled by contemporary uses of social media, which promote a rhetoric of connection that obscures the hard work of relating. In the realm of digital cultural production, the maintenance of such connections involves institutionally ingrained routines and practices that intersect with content distribution and revenue opportunities (see Brooke Erin Duffy 2016; Brooke Erin Duffy, Thomas Poell, and David B. Nieborg 2019). In the complex entanglement of interpersonal relationships, institutional regulation, and economic rewards, labour plays out quite differently than in traditional Marxist understandings of alienation.

In the case of livestreaming, female streamers must conduct relational labour to maintain affective interpersonal relationships with the viewers to secure their income in the livestreaming chatrooms. In the interviews carried out for this project, female streamers use terms like “clients (*kehu*),” “family (*jiaren*),” or “friends (*pengyou*)” to describe their viewers, suggesting that various gradations of intimacy emerge from these interpersonal interactions in ways that are not addressed in the current research on China’s livestreaming industry. What should not be neglected is that, for female streamers, the line between entertaining the clients and making friends is easily blurred, given the intimacy that arises in the ongoing interactions with their male viewers.

This article adopts, but also re-examines, the premises of relational labour to investigate the gendered power relations involved in the showroom livestreaming sector in China. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews, this research has gathered rich empirical data with a focus on the subjective experiences of female streamers in order to better understand the role of gender and sexuality in the context of showroom livestreaming. By critically examining female streamers' everyday interactions and experiences, we argue that livestreaming work is contingent on relational labour and for that reason constitutes a precarious balancing act. Female streamers seek to monetize their production of sexually ambivalent intimacy while distancing themselves from the label of sex labourers in order to avoid moral condemnation. Befriending their viewers may protect them from the latter, but it also creates the risk of emotional alienation. We claim that the female streamers' ongoing interactions with their male viewers, based on a relational labour that they cannot strictly control, constitute an economy of *aimai*, or ambivalent intimacy. Unlike Baym's study, which considers the relations between musicians and fans as a form of mutual exchange, we find a power dynamic at work in showroom livestreaming that opens up questions about gender, sexualisation, and agency in relational labour.

### The labour of livestreaming

Livestreaming, as a nascent form of social networking and entertainment in China, has spawned a distinctive model of cultural production at the nexus of platforms, institutionalised streamer guilds, and the wider socio-economic structure. Although China's livestreaming industry has become highly professionalised in recent years, developing a range of business models, including collaboration with e-commerce (Cunningham, Craig, and Lv 2019), showroom livestreaming performances are mainly monetised through the virtual gifting mechanism, where streamers receive payment in the form of virtual gifts purchased and sent by the viewers. In some cases, in addition to the income from virtual gifts, streamers receive a basic salary from the guilds with whom they have signed exclusive contracts (see Xiaoxing Zhang, Yu Xiang, and Lei Hao 2019), but all livestreamers engage in an affective economy (Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka 2018). After conducting an autoethnography as a Momo livestreamer, Wang (2021, 623) argues that "the livestreaming platform facilitates the creation of a range of positive and negative emotions, which are circulated as a form of capital that accumulates affective value." Sheng Zou (2018) emphasises the self-presentation and intimate disclosure that are embedded in livestreaming practices, whereby individual streamers' libidos, affects and emotions accrue a kind of instrumental rationality for monetisation.

Accordingly, we adopt Zou's definition of livestreaming as "a prime example of flexible yet precarious paid labour online, where streamers get compensated for their affective work" (2018, 807). However, one important aspect of the affective interactions between streamers and viewers is overlooked in the aforementioned research. Whereas Zou (2018) reveals a process in which platform capitalism expropriates affective engagements between streamers and viewers into a continuous cycle of value production, their interactions outside of livestreaming chatrooms are often left unexplored. If, as they claim, livestreaming is "[blurring] the boundary between leisure and work and [creeping] into intimate and interstitial spaces" (Zou 2018, 817), then it is necessary to incorporate observation of the streamers' related off-stream activities that better represent private

and intimate spheres. We, therefore, aim to explore how female streamers are constantly managing their emotions and feelings, even off-stream, to maintain social relationships with their viewers.

### Comparing female streamers with camgirls

There has, moreover, been limited discussion about the gendered and sexualised undertone embedded in the affective interpersonal interactions between female streamers and viewers. In fact, the showroom livestreaming sector stems from a voice chat programme called YY, which was originally used for multiplayer online video games but developed, from 2009, into a platform providing “live interactive web entertainment” featuring female broadcasters (Ge Zhang and Larissa Hjorth 2019). Zhang and Hjorth (2019, 809–810) argue that “YY set the industrial standard of propagating livestreamers featuring *nǚzhubo* (meaning female streamers in Chinese).” Their observation explains the current high participation rate of female streamers in the industry and reminds us that the configuration of China’s livestreaming industry has long been gendered and even sexualised.

While the showroom livestreaming content introduced by YY is similar to “camgirls” content in the Western context, Zhang and Hjorth (2019) caution against taking a universal approach to a gender-based analysis of camgirls. To start with, the phenomenon of camgirls in the Western context originated from personal home-camming practices in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Theresa M. Senft 2008). Research regarding this period of the camgirls phenomenon often focuses on female webcam operators’ control over the demonstration and interpretation of their bodies and personalities through the construction of their personal webcam sites. For instance, Michele White (2006) and Senft (2008) both address the feminist intervention brought to the Internet by women webcam operators, using webcams as a site of resistance to gender norms. In contrast, China’s showroom livestreaming practices rely on enclosed platforms, where female streamers have hardly any say over production formats, not to mention distribution and circulation.

In this regard, Chinese livestreaming platforms can be seen in parallel with adult webcam platforms. Research on adult webcam platforms, such as Chaturbate, regards them as machines for “the labouring of affect” for their capacity to “exploit, accelerate, and capitalize on the online sexual performances and personal interactions” (Antonia Hernández 2019, 1). Yet, unlike Chaturbate and other adult webcam platforms, the Chinese livestreaming industry is not an offshoot or partner of the sex industry, which is an illegal sector in China. In fact, most livestreaming platforms have strict regulations against vulgar and erotic content, following the state’s guidelines of the anti-yellow campaigns (*saohuang*). Therefore, these platforms adopt the more ambiguous position of “promoting female [streamers] and certain unspecified forms of erotic performances” (Zhang and Hjorth 2019, 812). Accordingly, female streamers use the beautifying digital tool (*meiyan*) provided by the platforms to demonstrate “attractive faces and bodies” and constantly signal their intimate availability to the viewers verbally and/or with obscure but codified gestures. That is to say, while camgirls, generally referring to women working on adult webcam platforms, are seen as sex workers who conduct *sexual* labour (see Angela Jones 2016; Niels van Doorn and Olav Velthuis 2018), female streamers do not engage in explicit forms of sex work in their livestreaming practices (Wang 2021). Instead,

the work of livestreaming is *sexualised* without being sexually explicit. Female streamers, therefore, navigate the tension between cultural forces and interpersonal intimacy, as well as economic incentives, in a different way.

Working in the showroom livestreaming sector, female streamers often conduct performances such as singing, dancing, and offering attentive conversations in the livestreaming chatrooms. Their activities largely overlap with what Rhacel Parreñas (2011) identifies as “entertainment work,” which describes the labour of sexually titillating customers via song, dance, and lively conversation in Tokyo’s hostess clubs. In Parreñas’s account, most hostesses do not engage in sex with their customers; rather, they “offer customers nothing more than the lure of sex or the promise of sex, a promise that oftentimes remains unfulfilled” (2011, 146). Moreover, she points out that hostesses negotiate and limit the extent of their sexual intimacy with customers through “boundary work.” It is worth noting that Chinese female streamers’ work bears similarities with the work of hostesses, leading us to explore how female streamers’ understandings of sexual affect in their work complicates the way in which they manage social boundaries with their viewers.

## Methods

This article draws on a sample of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted from March to November 2020. A total of 24 Chinese female informants participated in this research, consisting mainly of women who have been working in the livestreaming industry on different platforms, namely, Douyin, Momo, and Bilibili. While most of our participants devoted their energy and time to a single platform, streamers often change platforms in the livestreaming industry. The research participants were 19 to 31 years old and lived in different cities in China, ranging from top-tier cities like Beijing to lower-tier cities such as Nanchang<sup>1</sup>. Our participants were recruited by two means: (1) we posted recruitment information on our personal social media accounts (WeChat and Douban), and (2) we sent direct messages to those who openly advertise their livestreaming practices on social media platforms (Weibo, Douyin, Momo and Bilibili) and invited them to participate in our research on a voluntary basis.

Due to the fact that the research participants were geographically dispersed, we conducted the interviews using various forms of online communication, including video-call, phone-call, and text messages, rather than traditional face-to-face interviews. Online interviews can be beneficial for both the researcher and the participant in terms of time-scheduling and location choice, which in turn provides comfort to both sides and leads to an increased willingness to talk openly and honestly (Kimberly Nehls, Brandy D. Smith, and Holly A. Schneider 2015). It is also worth noting that our participants were familiar with different sorts of online communication channels due to the nature of their work, and they had their preferences for communication. We respected their preferences and conducted our interviews in different ways. Table 1 summarises the demographic details of the research participants and the ways they were interviewed. To ensure the confidentiality of the research participants, their names have been changed into pseudonyms. The interviews with all participants were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, while the selected quotes were translated into English by the researchers.

**Table 1.** Details about interview participants.

Name	Age	Location	Platforms (streamed/streaming on)	Interview methods
Yuli	23	Beijing	Bilibili	WeChat video-call
Hailin	31	Jiayuguan	Momo	WeChat video-call
Manting	26	Shanghai	Douyin	WeChat video-call
Bingbing	26	Guilin	Douyin	WeChat texting
Wendy	24	Chengdu	Douyin	WeChat texting
Cissy	24	Nanjing	Douyin	WeChat texting
Lovely	25	Suzhou	Douyin	WeChat texting
Xiaoyun	30	unknown	Bilibili	WeChat audio-call
Fanni	28	Beijing	Bilibili	WeChat audio-call
Qiu	20	Jiaxing	Momo	WeChat audio-call
Anan	19	Nanchang	Momo/Douyin	WeChat audio-call
Ying	unknown	Guangzhou	Bilibili	WeChat audio-call
Pear	22	Shanghai	Douyin	WeChat audio-call
Jessie	22	Chengdu	Douyin	Phone call
Gill	22	Beijing	Douyin	Phone call
Qiao	23	Chongqing	Douyin	Phone call
Sugar	25	Beijing	Douyin	Phone call
Finn	23	Qingdao	Douyin	Phone call
Gigi	21	Henan	Douyin	Phone call
Yiyi	24	Chengdu	Douyin	Phone call
Jean	unknown	Chengdu	Douyin	Phone call
Pearl	24	Chengdu	Douyin	Email/Douyin texting
Sea	23	unknown	Douyin	Douyin texting
Daisy	22	Hefei	Douyin	Douyin texting

The data gathered from our interviews present a spectrum of cases that shows the subjective experiences of female streamers, most of whom regarded their livestreaming practices as a side job. Adopting a semi-structured format, our interviews covered a wide range of topics, including how and why they started working as livestreamers; their streaming routines and social life; their off-stream interaction with viewers; and their relationships with streamer guilds when applicable. Apart from Hailin, our participants were all *dibu zhubo* (bottom-ranked streamers)<sup>2</sup>. Even though most of them were affiliated with streamer guilds—agent companies that provide trainings and assistance to livestreaming practices—they have been working alone, unlike top-streamers who have a team of professional staff to help them manage their accounts and reply to messages from viewers. Therefore, the emotional connection they built with their viewers, whether during livestreaming or off-stream, was highly personal. It is crucial to conduct a closer examination of their personal experiences to gain insights into how their subjectivity and agency emerged in the complex navigations of livestreaming work.

### Asymmetrical relationships on screen

The encounters and primary interactions between female streamers and their viewers are mediated by the technological affordances of livestreaming (Zhen Ye 2021), which Zhang, Xiang, and Hao (2019) reveal to be bound and shaped by the money-making capacity of virtual gifting, limiting the possibilities of being communitarian and reciprocal. In other words, platforms cultivate a business model of monetising virtual intimacy between streamers and viewers. In another study, Ye (2021) conducted an interface analysis on Douyin and Momo, where she argues that these two platforms position the livestreaming service differently in their systems, but their interface design of livestreaming chatrooms



is fundamentally similar. Walking through the functions of real-time comments, virtual gifting, competitions (*pk*), and subscription, Ye (2021) points out that the interface design of showroom livestreaming discursively and affectively shapes and normalises the engagements between female streamers and their viewers, resulting in two subject positions: ‘the “ideal” viewer is a heterosexual man who is empowered through the consumption of virtual gifts; whereas the “ideal” streamer is an attentive young woman who conducts emotional labour and affective performances’ (70). Douyin, Momo, and Bilibili all share a similar livestreaming chatroom interface design that highlights these positions, whereby streamers are presented at the centre of the screen and surrounded by various features such as real-time comments and virtual gifts. Fanni commented on the features in the livestreaming chatroom:

Livestreaming is all about interacting with audience. Unlike (working for) traditional media, when you’re livestreaming, if someone comments, you need to react quickly! It was challenging (. . .) I think *pk* is created by them (platforms) as a smart way (for streamers) to ask for virtual gifts. A way to make money! They, platforms, use *pk* to stimulate streamers and viewers.

Hailin and Xiaoyun also mentioned that they feel like asking for virtual gifts through *pk* is what the platforms nudge them to do when livestreaming.

Although the interface design of livestreaming chatroom affects streamers and viewers simultaneously, we noticed that the technical and commercial settings of livestreaming platforms create an asymmetrical power relation between female streamers and their predominantly male viewers. The technical set-up creates a higher threshold for streamers to experience co-presence than the viewers, even though the appeal of livestreaming lies in the “real-time and interactive communication between streamers and viewers, shoring up a sense of co-presence” (Zou 2018, 807). In a livestreaming chatroom, while viewers normally engage with the streamer through tapping (selecting and sending virtual gifts) and typing actions (leaving comments), the streamer perceives these engagements through texts or images that occur at the interface and responds to them vocally and physically. The technological environment of platforms thus provides viewers with visual and audio experiences that approximate face-to-face communication, and strengthens the intimate feelings of being addressed personally. On the other side of the screen, however, the female streamer enacts a higher degree of self-disclosure than her viewers: her face is being watched, her voice is being heard, and her physically situated environment is being observed.

This technical access to the livestreamer lead one of our participants, Jean, to describe livestreaming as arising from an economy of loneliness (*gudu jingji*):

Nowadays, a lot of people feel quite lonely; therefore, they want to talk to someone. Think about it, celebrities are too far away from them. It is difficult to talk to celebrities. But to talk to a streamer, all you need to do is to type and leave comments on the screen and the streamer will communicate with you.

Jean’s words reveal that female streamers feel pressure to devote time and effort to offset viewers’ loneliness by maintaining communications on the platforms that fulfil the viewers’ need to talk. Sitting alone in a small studio room or a corner of her bedroom, a female streamer’s work is to read out the text that appears at the interface and to interact with the content for hours. Although the flow of this conversation starts from the loneliness of viewers



who are eager to have interpersonal interactions, in the wake of delivering chatty, personal, and intimate conversation to viewers who appear only as usernames, female streamers begin experiencing loneliness themselves against the backdrop of this asymmetrical power relation.

Besides the technical setting, the commercial nature of their encounters on these platforms also determines the gender dynamics between female streamers and their male viewers. Since a streamer's income relies on the number of virtual gifts collected, female streamers attempt to trigger virtual gifting behaviours by fulfilling the needs of viewers. Female streamers generally address their main financial supporters as *dage*, which literally means "elder brothers." Calling someone with political or economic power *dage* to acknowledge his higher social status is a common cultural practice in Chinese society. It demonstrates the feminine subservience of the streamers and ensures that viewers deemed to be *dage* feel themselves distinguished from other users and worthy of admiration and deference. Hailin, who used to be an influential streamer on Momo, explained the dynamic:

I think a lot of people who watch livestreaming are like, you know, he is not recognised, or he hasn't been given importance in his daily life and in his work. But in the livestreaming chatrooms, he can bawl and request. He feels that "I am spending money, so I am the one who matters. Whatever I want, I shall be satisfied." It is exactly because of this kind of inflated vanity (that keeps him in your chatroom). And . . . you need to satisfy him.

According to Hailin's description, the viewers' satisfaction is normally fulfilled when she pays attention to them and responds to their commands. The *dage's* requests can go beyond conversational level, such as asking the streamer to play a certain song or to answer his questions about her daily life. Sometimes, the *dage* may even harshly comment on the female streamer's body and clothing, reflecting a patriarchal ideology in livestreaming chatrooms. Anan, a college student who worked as a livestreamer during her summer break, told us this story:

Once I was wearing make-up with freckles. My *dage* didn't appreciate it. He told me to remove them; otherwise, he wouldn't come back to my chatroom. I like my freckle make-up. I think the freckles look cute! After a while, he came back and astonishingly asked me, "why haven't you removed your make-up?"

The *dage* clearly expected Anan to follow his order because he was well aware of his position as a customer in control of Ana's economic resources. "For a streamer, losing a *dage* means that she is temporarily out of employment," said Pearl. In this relation, it is up to the streamers to show an obedient attitude and meet the commands of the *dage*. The male viewers, especially the *dage*, are empowered not simply through showing off their financial capacities in the chatrooms with virtual gifts, but also through exerting their dominance over female streamers' bodies, objectifying the female bodies under the male gaze (Laura Mulvey 1975).

Catering to the expectations of *dage*, female streamers' communicative and relational strategies are constantly adjusted to sustain playing a conventional gender role of the submissive and caring woman. This gendered power relation in livestreaming chatrooms has a profound influence on what kinds of interpersonal relationships can emerge through streamers' ongoing communication with their viewers, which is much different to the relationships between musicians and fans in the context of Baym's research, where gender differences in attitudes or expectations of relational labour were not detected.

## Relating to viewers: implicitly sexualised performances

When Fanni reflected on her previous livestreaming experiences, she said in a somewhat cynical tone, “I think it was extremely boring ... I felt like someone who’s selling smiles (*maixiaode*).” In the Chinese cultural context, the word “*maixiaode*” normally refers to prostitutes or showgirls working in nightclubs. Fanni’s description of livestreaming practices as “selling smiles” not only reveals that female streamers’ emotions are performed for economic reward, but also indicates that there are certainly sexualised affects generated by way of intimacy during the interpersonal interactions.

Conducting entertainment work in livestreaming chatrooms, female streamers actively engage in producing sexualised affects in order to “accommodate to patriarchal heterosexual norms and to seduce their rich patrons into gift-giving” (Wang 2021, 625). When our interviewees received virtual gifts, they would smile, wink, blow a kiss towards the camera, or put their hands together to form a heart-shape in order to respond to provide an intimate response alongside the visual effects on the interface. Nonetheless, when they faced a love confession or a flirting message in their chatrooms, instead of directly confronting or responding to it, they would shy away from it with a sweet and flattered tone. Some viewers may thus feel encouraged to take more action, as Bingbing told us:

Of course, there were some viewers with exaggerated wishes, like meeting up for a date or having a romantic relationship with you. Depending on different streamers, there are different ways to deal with the situation. But it is always said that female streamers are liars, or they play with the viewers’ feelings.

Although Bingbing disagreed with identifying female streamers as “liars” or people who play with the viewers’ feelings, her phrase “dealing with the situation” indicates that streamers must have a strategy for negotiating such requests without deflating the sexual or romantic expectations embedded in their interpersonal relationships with the viewers. The streamers’ tactical performance of shying away from direct acknowledgement of sexualised affects may be (mis)taken as an unspoken promise to develop more intimate relations with the viewers. It is precisely this ambiguity that lures the viewers into staying in the chatrooms.

Meanwhile, the sexual affect and intimate feelings often overflow into off-stream interactions between female streamers and their viewers, adding a dimension of relational labour to this operation. Female streamers are aware of the fact that their interpersonal interactions with viewers are tied to their economic viability. The most effective way of maintaining the transactional relationship with *dage* seems to be by having intimate off-stream interactions with them, as Pearl confirmed: “in my chatroom, there were some *dage* from time to time, but then they disappeared. I know it is because of me not giving them my private number.” Therefore, the streamer guilds and managers often train streamers to imagine *dage* as their boyfriends and establish intimate interpersonal bonds with them, starting with sending them WeChat messages such as “good morning” and “good evening” in daily life. Qiao told us,

My manager asked me to flirt with *dage* as if he is my boyfriend. His opinion is that nobody will sponsor me for no reason. if a viewer thinks of me as his girlfriend, then he will spend money to support me. (...) Once there was a *dage* who sent me WeChat messages and asked me to be his (romantic) partner, to go to his city. But I won’t go there, of course.

According to Qiao's understanding, flirting with *dage*, or creating an illusion that they are in a romantic relationship, is a strategy to secure income in her livestreaming chatrooms. However, their intimate relationship should only exist in the online space, namely, her livestreaming chatroom or WeChat. For Qiao, adopting the attitude of a girlfriend is acceptable, whereas a physical meeting with a potential boyfriend is not. In another interview, Finn also mentioned that her manager encourages her to establish intimate interpersonal bonds with her *dage* while warning her not to "cross the boundary to involve a sexual relationship." She was told that if a viewer expresses his romantic or sexual expectations, she must not reject him directly but should also not agree to his demands. Thus, female streamers often find themselves facing a dilemma: they are neither able nor willing to provide sexualised intimacy to an extent that can fulfil the viewers' desires, yet they need to encourage these desires to gain tokens. These findings suggest two ways in which female streamers are caught in an ambiguous position in relation to the nexus of sex and commerce in China's culture market.

Firstly, female streamers' rejection of romantic or sexual relationships with their male viewers aims to avoid the stigma of being involved in sex work. In both the Chinese and Western contexts, sex and intimacy remain "special" or sacred features preserved for an authentic interpersonal relationship, making transactional sexual behaviours unacceptable in social life (see Kavita Itona Nayar 2017; Shuaishuai Wang 2020; Viviana A. Zelizer 2009; Harriet Zurndorfer 2016). Yet, in the history of modern and contemporary China, the morality regarding sexual practices and commercial sex has undergone changes. In the late Qing period, the moral distinction between good people (*liang min*) and pariahs (*jian min*) was intertwined with people's class status and their sexual lives (Susan L. Mann 2011). *Liang*, as Mann (2011, 71) states, "connoted sexual purity, meaning that sexual activity was confined to marriage," although this moral standard was almost exclusively focused on protecting female chastity. This sexual morality was then challenged by the modern notion of "free social interaction between sexes" (Mann 2011, 47) at the start of the 20th century. As sex became increasingly seen as a source of pleasure and a sign of modernity (Gail Hershatter 1997), the market for prostitution quickly expanded in urban areas such as Shanghai. Yet, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Communist leadership announced a complete elimination of prostitution and rehabilitation of female sex workers (Hershatter 1997; Yingying Huang and Suiming Pan 2014). The government sanctified and encouraged a normative view of sexual relationships as occurring within the confines of the heterosexual marital unit (Mann 2011; Gary Sigley 2007). In the late 1970s, the economic reform revived a sexualised market of cultural production in China, in which women's sexuality and femininity were commodified and consumed (Zurndorfer 2016). Since then, the government has adopted the periodical enforcement of anti-prostitution laws and has introduced other regulations, such as anti-yellow campaigns (*saohuang*), to restrain commercial sexual services and the circulation of pornography or erotic cultural products (Petula Sik Ying Ho, Stevi Jackson, Siyang Cao, and Chi Kwok 2018; Sigley 2007).

However, there has always been a grey zone for the sexual economy to develop in China despite the tightening of state control. Young women who provide entertainment services in *karaoke* bars (see Tiantian Zheng 2009) or are salaried mistresses (*ernai*) of wealthy businessmen (see Xingkui Zhang 2010) are 'neither considered morally upright members of the "white" world of marriage and legitimate employment, nor are they

labelled immoral like prostitutes or sex workers engaged in the “black” underworld’ (Zurndorfer 2016, 8). In this sense, rejecting any explicit involvement in transactional sexual relationships with their viewers demonstrates female streamers’ attempt to keep their positions in the grey zone in order to avoid being labelled as immoral.

Secondly, the ambivalent position of female streamers is caused by the platforms’ regulations against erotic content. The majority of these regulations are focused on disciplining female bodies. Researchers have examined the streamer handbook provided by Douyu, a livestreaming platform with a focus on video gaming in China, and noted the control of female bodies in details such as “which part of the skin can be visible on the livestream and which parts are forbidden” or “the exposed area of female breasts cannot be over one-third of the total area and the skirt must cover the buttocks” (Zhang and Hjorth 2019, 813). Thus, female streamers are made responsible for managing (and to a large extent hiding) sexualised or erotic content (Wang 2021). As we have seen from the interviews, however, institutional forces in the industry, such as streamer guilds, push female streamers to conduct off-stream relational labour and build intimate relationships with *dage* as it is the most effective way to generate income.

We position these tensions as a deep form of exploitation where objectification and sexualisation are internalised through subjective choices. This form of exploitation has been articulated by Rosalind Gill (2007) as an element of post-feminist sensibility. She claims that under the neoliberal capitalist regime “girls and women are (...) endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy” (2007, 152). Similarly, it is crucial to note that sexualization and objectification in livestreaming is not straightforwardly imposed on the female streamers, but is rather acknowledged and actively performed by them due to economic incentives. Yuli said in the interview that “I am confident in presenting my cuteness for men. I know how to make a man like me, although this is a trashy thing to do, but I know how to do it as a professional streamer.” She judged her practice as “trashy,” reflecting again her moral concerns, yet acknowledged that this is what her profession requires her to do. Hence, female streamers undertake implicitly sexualised and intimate performances, which are formed in the continuous negotiation between platforms’ technological and economic affordances, the male viewers’ needs for intimate personal interactions, public moral discourses, and their own subjectivities.

### **Befriending viewers: ambivalent intimacy and precarious relational labour**

It became clear during the interviews that the notion of using livestreaming to provide and solicit sexual intimacy for economic advancement is disturbing for our informants, but they lacked the language to articulate their position. When asking the female streamers to define their intimate relationships with viewers, we noticed constant changes in their categorisation of the viewers: sometimes they described the viewers as clients, and at other times they claimed the viewers are like friends or family members. Contextualising musicians’ relational labour, Nancy Baym (2012, 2015) argues that the negotiation of artist-fan relationships is dependent on both the artists’ and audience preferences, stretching across a continuum between distant commodity relations and close interpersonal bonds. The difference between Chinese showroom livestreamers and musicians, however, is that the former have no cultural commodity to offer other than

their own affect, emotion, and intimacy, which makes this a much more difficult balance to sustain. Setting the right tone and degree of intimacy with viewers is a laborious undertaking that all female streamers suffer to some extent, revealing the precarious conditions of such relational work.

On the one hand, female streamers use terms like “friendship” or “family-like” to gesture toward their attempts to de-sexualise the intimate relationships that they must nonetheless build. Their management of intimate boundaries shows similarities with the boundary work of hostesses in Parreñas’s (2011) research. Hailin expressed this as an issue of navigating appropriate and inappropriate intimacies:

To make your chatroom, I mean, a good and healthy chatroom, you cannot bring these *messy emotions* inside. You and your clients, or viewers, share a kind of emotional bonding. But it’s definitely not *that kind of emotion*. Instead, we should be like brothers and sisters, like families. (. . .) However, how to balance it well? You need to have a scale in your heart.

Hailin’s description reveals the complexity of managing the different gradations of intimacy during interpersonal interaction. She chose to demonstrate a “family-like” feeling in her chatroom instead of performing romantic love or sexualised intimacy, which in her words are “messy emotions” or “that kind of emotion.” Her words indicate the ever-present danger of connecting the emotions in livestreaming work with sexualised affects.

The Chinese term *aimei*, denoting an ambivalent intimacy, captures this highly contingent nature of intimate bonding between female streamers and their viewers. *Aimei*, as a noun, refers to a stage in a relationship when both parties show fondness for and interest in each other, but usually not (yet) explicitly. Using *aimei* as a verb, however, meaning to maintain an ambiguous and flirtatious relationship with someone, brings the negative connotation to the fore. As we mentioned, the only form of sexual relationship that is legitimate according to the moral standards of today’s Chinese society is an exclusive heterosexual relation leading to marriage. Maintaining *aimei*, without attempting to further actualize the intimacy in a (possible) marital relation, is considered socially illicit. Therefore, even though female streamers’ intimate boundaries with some viewers are ambivalently sexualised, they attempt to stay in the grey zone by not framing their emotions and feelings as *aimei*.

One such tactic is for female streamers to refer to their viewers as “friends.” These interpersonal interactions should not, however, be seen as an emotionally diminished rationalisation. Rather, Daisy revealed the basis for how she classifies her viewers:

When some people leave (my chatroom), I will lose money; when some people leave (my chatroom), I will lose companionship; when some others leave (my chatroom), it does not make a difference to me.

Daisy’s categorisation reminds us that, beside economic rewards, emotional exchange with viewers in the form of “companionship” is important to female streamers. For instance, when Fanni felt uncomfortable about “selling smiles” (*maixiaode*) on Huya and other platforms, she moved to livestreaming on Bilibili where she found that “people are more friendly, and they are really into talking to you. Most of them are young boys you know, students, and they want to talk to girls.” Fanni appreciated her interactions with the young college students on Bilibili, who have less economic capacities to send her virtual

gifts than *dage*, because she could enjoy the conversations and feel less that she was being sexualized or commodified.

A streamer might develop a personal emotional attachment with one or more viewers, in particular with those who visit her chatroom frequently and become part of her everyday life through commenting and private chatting. This familiarity leads streamers to befriend viewers—that is, to invest emotionally in viewers—which in turn blurs the distinction between livestreaming as work and as “hanging out” with friends. For instance, Qiao commented on two of her viewers, who had long been watching her livestreaming and interacting with her:

I do not expect them to spend money on me. They are important to me because they are so loyal and keep me company at work every day. Helping me to activate the atmosphere in the chatroom and so on. I think every streamer needs to have some loyal fans like that, being your *fangguan*, helping you welcome *dage*.

Interestingly, this quote suggests that Qiao does not see her livestreaming practices as being *for* these viewers. When Qiao positions these viewers as *fangguan*—a type of viewer who voluntarily devotes energy and time in helping a streamer to manage her chatroom—instead of *dage*, she feels it easier to befriend them. Qiao obviously gained pleasure from them and a sense of sociality and intimacy, rather than monetary rewards.

However, as long as a streamer considers her livestreaming practices primarily as a way of making money, then the sociality gained from interpersonal interactions might be fragile. This holds even in cases where the intimate investment is real on both sides. Yuli told us a story of how she lost one of her loyal fans after the young man confessed his love for her through private chat. Knowing that she would never accept his love, a sense of guilt pushed Yuli to make it clear:

He kept spending money on me. Of course, I also cared about him. As a friend, it was unbearable to see him keep devoting emotions to me. I knew that it was about sunk cost: if he kept spending money, he would find himself having more attachment to me. So I told him not to spend money on me anymore. In that way, it was easier for him to move on.

When the man stopped showing up in Yuli’s chatroom, this had considerable impact on her mood and she paused her livestreaming practices for a while. Yuli said that she had treated him as a friend sincerely; therefore, losing his companionship and his support upset her deeply. This experience is shared among many streamers, as Jean made clear:

Female streamers should treat their viewers as clients and pretend to be friends with them. But you cannot really treat them as friends. Otherwise, when they leave you, you will have a mental breakdown. It is difficult, too difficult.

In the case of Qiao and her *fangguan*, the economic dimension of their relationship also became an obstacle, making her question the value of their friendship. She said with a self-pitying tone at the end of the interview:

Look at me, I spent too much time on people who don’t bring revenue. I thought of them as my friends, but I came to realize that they were not taking me seriously as a friend. They were just searching for entertainment and killing time with me.

Qiao’s feelings suggest that she is well aware of herself being positioned as “entertainment provider,” which is underpinned by the consumer power of male viewers, precisely

because they make a choice about whether or not to spend money on her. Pulling away from a belief that her relationship with certain viewers could be one of friendship helps to preserve her from emotional alienation, which is a consequence of the blurred boundaries between work and private life for streamers.

### **Conclusion: the economy of ambivalent intimacy**

This paper has sought to complicate China's cultural phenomenon of livestreaming by looking at the intersection of gendered power dynamics, sexualised affects, and relationality that make up the work and experiences of female streamers. We argue that the showroom livestreaming business model is compelling evidence of the economy of *aimei* in China's socio-cultural context. The ambivalent intimacy, *aimei*, which blurs the distinctions between romantic love and friendship yet avoids explicit sexualisation, evades the state's strict regulation of obscene and pornographic online content. The performance and maintenance of *aimei*, therefore, is fabricated as a renewed form of entertainment work in which women's emotions (such as caring) and sexualised affect are commodified. However, it also represents a deeper form of exploitation, whereby female streamers themselves bear the responsibility to navigate tensions and emotional alienation at the nexus of financial security, sexual desire, and morality. Female streamers' on-screen practices and their off-stream interactions with the viewers are closely connected to such navigation, entailing intensive relational labour.

The relational labour that female streamers undertake to maintain interpersonal relationships has created different gradations of intimacy, the navigation of which requires female streamers to carefully calibrate the boundaries. In one sense, female streamers are positioned in a gendered, but not overtly (hetero)sexual, economy; they have to implicitly perform sexualised intimacy for commercial interests. In another sense, through intensive relational labour and constant negotiation, they try to maintain the correct degree of intimacy to avoid violating both platform regulations and their own sense of morality. In other words, female streamers face a dilemma: to secure their source of income, they have to perform an illusion of romantic or sexualised intimacy in their interactions with male viewers, yet legal and moral standards prevent them from fulfilling or even acknowledging these sexualised affects. It is under these conditions that they draw on the language of "friendship" to protect themselves from being involved in the commodification of sexuality. As a result, female streamers are trapped in an economy of *aimei*, straining to keep a delicate balance under the precarious and highly contingent conditions of livestreaming work.

The economy of *aimei*, already familiar from China's long socio-cultural history (see Zheng 2009; Parreñas 2011), has now evolved into the form of showroom livestreaming in contemporary China. As Ho et al. (2018) state, the politics of sexuality in China involves gender and sexual issues in a border context of socio-economic inequalities. While some researchers believe livestreaming provides social mobility for less educated and lower-class women (see David Craig, Jian Lin, and Stuart Cunningham 2021), our research unveils the affective transactional costs of a relational labour model that fails to provide economic and emotional sustainability to female streamers engaged in a precarious balancing act.



## Notes

1. The Chinese city tier system is a hierarchical categorisation of Chinese cities, based on the income level, population size, infrastructure, business opportunities and other urban factors.
2. According to industrial standard, livestreamers are ranked into three categorisations based on their follower numbers. Streamers with more than one million followers are considered *toubu zhubo* (top-ranked streamers), while *yaobu zhubo* (middle-ranked streamers) refer to those have more than 100,000 followers, and *dibu zhubo* (bottom-ranked streamers) refer to those have less than 100,000 followers.

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