

Live-streaming, games and politics of gender performance: The case of *Nüzhubo* in China

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Abstract

In the emerging scholarship on live-streaming sites, the role of gender has been relatively overlooked. This article aims to address this oversight by capturing the controversial rise of *nüzhubo* (Chinese for ‘female casters’) in the Chinese live-streaming platform, Douyu. Through ethnographic research on Douyu over 2 years, we have witnessed female performers who – motivated by both entrepreneurial spirit and creative agency – have embraced new forms of performative practices in, and around, video game commentary cultures. We begin with a brief contextualizing the gendered nature of media in the history of Chinese video sites and how theories around gender – especially gender performativity – might be adapted. While acknowledging the homogenizing effect of the term *nüzhubo*, we focus on two performers on Douyu – Hani9 and Nvliu – that are challenging conventional *nüzhubo* tropes. We argue for a situated notion of gender performativity that also engages with the platform-specific social, cultural and technical infrastructures – ‘platformativity’ to use Thomas Lamarre’s word.

Keywords

China, Douyu, gender performativity, live-streaming

Introduction

In the West, the phenomenal rise of YouTube has given way to, more recently, live-streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv. Formerly known as the video game section of Justin.tv, Twitch.tv is a reiteration of earlier experiments of ‘lifecasting’ by Justin Kan in which video games featured. The integration of ‘Let’s Play’ videos – which document the playthrough of a video game with

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commentary of the player – into the novel medium of live-streaming have recalibrated the previous performative practices of ‘lifelogging’.

As a global phenomenon, the rise of live-streaming manifested differently at the local level. However, this localization should not be understood by geographic boundaries or parochialism but ‘fragmentary networks’ of different platforms and areas (Maitra and Chow, 2015: 26). The development of online video streaming media in China – as it is epitomized by the case of Douyu – is emergent, volatile and heavily influenced by various global actors rather than immediately fixed as an enclosed area of ‘Chinese characteristics’. Chinese platforms are an assemblage of fragmentary global networks such as YouTube and Twitch.tv, regional influences from Japan and Korea, local media histories, user practices and so forth.

In order to capture the temporal and nascent nature of the current live-streaming industry, we have deployed ethnographic methods over a 2-year period on Douyu. These methods include regular participate observation on livestreams in real time (rather than just watching archived replays), consistent online and offline interactions with key informants, asking participant to re-enact scenarios of use, reading message boards, attending offline fan gatherings and finally semiformal interviews conducted with livestream performers themselves after acquiring contextual knowledge of their livestreams for an extended period of time.

Female livestreamers – or *nüzhubo* in Chinese – have become the nucleus of the controversial debates on contemporary screen culture politics regarding the role of gender performativity in and around games. In the midst of once predominantly male face of gaming (especially through masculine tropes of eSports), livestreams on Douyu both reinforced and diverged from normalized gender types. In order to explore this disputed terrain of *nüzhubo*, we have selected two performers (Hani9 and Nvliu) to highlight the intertwined relationships between media infrastructure (such as live-streaming platforms and their social institutions), cultural objects (such as video games) and gender performance in mundane and ritualized forms. For over 1 year, we have observed and participated in Hani9 and Nvliu’s livestreams, interviewed them, along with regular conversations with their viewers and fans.

In order to contextualize the discussion on Hani9 and Nvliu, we will firstly provide a brief history of online video platforms in China from the early days of Youku to the contemporary rise of live-streaming. The next section revisits notions of gender performativity and agency, through which we then discuss the social stigma and moral panics associated with the term *nüzhubo* in the broader social context today.

Platformivity: A brief history of online video platforms in China (2005–2016)

While undoubtedly global in its phenomenon, live-streaming is local in its meanings. Particular genres and topics are inflected by the local nuances. Hence to understand Douyu, we need to acknowledge it as more than a Chinese version of Twitch.tv and situate it within the particular historical and socio-economic contexts of online video platforms in China. The shifting dominance of various platforms over time points to a performativity via platforms – what Lamarre calls ‘platformivity’ (2017: 24).

As Lamarre (2017: 25) further explains: ‘In platformivity, the platforms and infrastructures play an active role, or more precisely, an intra-active role, as they iterate, over and again’. The concept of platformivity points to the limitation of the scope of area studies: the designated area is often not self-sufficient as we presuppose. Although not unprecedented, Douyu as an inchoate

phenomenon should not be solely studied in an enclosed space – that is, the Chinese Internet. Thus, in our history of online videos in China, we identify the various localizing practices in the ‘fragmentary networks’ of platforms in different countries, cultures and even temporalities.

The well-known pioneering Chinese video-sharing portals Youku and Tudou – both founded in 2005 and merged in 2012 – were commonly considered to be generic databases of mostly user-generated contents during the early years. These portals included both pirated or appropriated contents such as fansubbing and vernacular contents of remixing videos, *e’gao* (spoofing) or parody videos, DV cultures, short films, documents of mundane everyday life and so forth (Li, 2016; Voci, 2010, 2013). These platforms later morphed into a convergence of proprietary traditional media contents such as entertainment shows, many of which are directly produced or sponsored by Youku-Tudou, and ‘obtaining exclusive licences for certain TV shows’ (Horwitz, 2015), as well as a huge array of user-generated contents, monetized by advertising revenues while not very rewarding for the original creators in financial terms.

There are many discernible resemblances between Youku-Tudou and YouTube, therefore, they are often dubbed as ‘YouTube of China’ in English reports (Horwitz, 2015). However, the major divergence is that these video portals have largely failed to replicate YouTube’s gradual process of transformation through professionalizing platform-specific celebrities and formalizing of amateur contents, as well as redefining its purpose and infrastructure, institutional forms and even its ‘cultural logic’ (Burgess, 2015; Burgess and Green, 2009a, 2009b; Lobato, 2016; Vonderau, 2016). Not until its recent hyperbolic announcement of ‘devoting 10 billion yuan (about US\$1.6 billion) towards producing “professional-generated content”, meaning high-quality videos made by semi-pros’ in 2015 (Horwitz, 2015), Youku-Tudou was very late to the game of encouraging and capitalizing on vernacular creativity.

The first wave of these video portals around 2005 gradually receded from the spotlight after numerous legal issues and copyright battles, and new forms of video portals – such as Acfun and Bilibili – which learnt predominantly from the Japanese video site Niconico Douga (instead of its Western counterparts) began to emerge around 2010. Acfun and Bilibili were initially centred around subbed releases of *bangumi* (anime shows) and the feature of *danmuku* (literally, bullet screen, a commentary system) but soon the websites became subcultural hubs for remix videos and popular Internet memes. Acfun and Bilibili actively encouraged such vernacular creativity, promoted and celebrated their main content creators, thus giving the sites distinct identities (Yin and Fung, 2017).

The early form of participatory livestreams stemmed from a guild voice chat programme YY, which was comparable to Teamspeak. Since 2009, YY made the transition from MMOG (massively multiplayer online game) guild or clan channels into a PC-based proprietary software for broadcasting and viewer participation and introduced the contents of ‘cam girls’, which was still an inconspicuous area of the video industry at the time. Barboza (2014) reported on the thriving ‘lucrative’ business of female hostesses who ‘work out of tiny apartments, fitted with webcams’ and the quoted example was YY. As a pioneer of the burgeoning industry of ‘live interactive web entertainment’ (which soon shifted to the mobile app market in 2015), YY set the industrial standard of propagating livestreams featuring *nūzhubo*. Mainstream media and officialdom largely ignored the existence of this sector until the recent controversies around *nūzhubo* in 2016.

Later in 2013, the Anime Comic Games portal Acfun experimented with an early prototype of Web-based live-streaming site ‘Acfun namahōsō’ (live-streaming in Japanese). In January 2014, this branch of Acfun was relaunched as a separate site known as Douyu.tv and the website design was also revamped following the general features of Twitch.tv such as interface and broad

orientation towards gameplay livestreams. Since then, Douyu was often regarded as the Chinese equivalent of Twitch due to these similarities. Douyu's initial success and exponential growth in its first year not only brought in significant investments particularly from Tencent and accelerated the rest of the video industry, but also cultivated and fostered its own celebrity streamers.

In the hype of live-streaming, new competitors especially in the form of mobile streaming apps have emerged. According to an iiMedia research report (2016), there were more than 200 live-streaming apps/sites launched during 2015 and the industry attracted more than 9 billion RMB (US\$1.31 billion) of investments in China. Since 2016, Douyu has been noticeably deviating itself from the initial reputation of putting *nǚzhubo* on the front page but many mobile live-streaming platforms such as Huajiao and Inke still primarily feature 'cam girl'-like contents.

The rise of Douyu is not an isolated event and it is crucial to acknowledge by the time Douyu was founded, the screen ecologies in China are vastly different from the times of Youku-Tudou. While Youku-Tudou was initially exploring the possibilities of commercialization of amateur contents and simultaneously converging with traditional television programmes, Douyu has discerned that the primary means of building a sustainably profitable live-streaming platform is cultivating its own celebrities and participatory cultures since its inception.

In addition, broadcasters on Douyu today are almost universally motivated by monetary gains and informed by media entrepreneurialism, rather than a conflictual ambiguity between creative amateurism, subcultural integrity and desires to monetize seen in the early years of online videos. Personal branding, professionalization of production and stylized performances among female performers are conspicuous in contemporary cases such as Papi Jiang. Media professionals and critics began to name the phenomenon '*wanghong* (internet celebrity) ecology' – a media ecology based on an attention economy of 'internet celebrities' and such terms became catchphrases that encapsulate the entire contemporary Chinese mediascape.

Reframing gender performativity in the context of live-streaming

Having contextualized Douyu's emergence in the history of Chinese streaming video industry and women's past roles in makings of online videos in the past decade, we will now turn to understanding how gender is being performed in contemporary live-streaming. Unlike many other live-streaming portals globally, Douyu has built its success on the popularity of *nǚzhubo*. This popularity has made the *nǚzhubo* a highly contested symbol of contemporary live-streaming in China. Thus, understanding *nǚzhubo* and the predominance of women performers in Chinese live-streaming requires us to attend to the cultural norms that inform a culturally specific notion of gender performativity in China.

Gender performativity is always contextual and each cultural milieu brings with it its own norms and regulations. Coined by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (2006), 'performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration' (xv). As Butler observes elsewhere, gender is constructed and inscribed through a series of actions and iterations: 'an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (1988: 519). In other words, gender is naturalized through a series of often-negligible bodily acts in mundane and ritualized form.

For Butler (2006), the role of agency further complicates performativity, whereby 'the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency' (xxv) and 'agency is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition' (198). Thus, performativity as it is iterated in nuanced

mundane contexts is adhered to the theory of agency. According to Mahmood's interpretation, 'there is no possibility of "undoing" social norms that is independent of the "doing" of norms; agency resides, therefore, within this productive reiterability' (2009: 29). In this sense, agency cannot be replaced with terms such as resistance against domination, but 'a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable' (28). The agency of female performers thus lies in their everyday iterations to embody the institutional norms. A livestreamer can either conform to or transgress designated genres and gender stereotypes in order to gain popularity. Within each individual case, as we will specify in our case studies, the mundane reproduction of gendered identity is often arbitrarily and temporarily disrupted.

Moreover, Ortner (2001) specified another kind of agency beyond the narratives of domination and resistance – the agency of intentions – which is about 'people having desires that grow out of their own structures of life, including very centrally their own structures of inequality, and it is about ethnographic writing that brings these to the fore' (81). Some largely self-employed performers, compared to those who are not directly employed and administrated by a third-party 'model agency', have more relative freedom in deciding what they want to do with their performance. Many performers are originally from impoverished background and the initial motivation of starting a channel is usually monetary gain. However, this monetary incentive does not necessarily invalidate the possibility of subversive performativity as we will demonstrate in the following case of Hani9.

We can no longer frame today's livestreams as a 'webcam subculture' (Andrejevic, 2003b: 193); rather, livestream viewing has become a mainstream pastime with more than 200 active live-streaming platforms and millions of concurrent viewers every day in contemporary China. While we are not addressing the political economy of live-streaming industry, our ethnographic research is looking at the intricate performative practices of these women livestreamers in positioning themselves in attention economy much like Senft (2008) did in her study. She wants to surmount our obsessive 'preoccupation with the reality effects of new media' (30) and study the various level of performances – emotional, technical and social.

Senft (2008) also highlights the various levels of agencies among cam girl rather than construct them as undistinguished whole. This perspective is very crucial for us as we are looking at very concrete examples which do not necessarily represent the entirety of the profession. The actual situation is way more nuanced, so we will elaborate the specificity of each individual and her agency in determining her performance in relation to the institutional power such as economic relations, platform regulations and broader social climate of spectatorship.

Institutions of gender norm: The stigmatized bodies of *nüzhubo*

While explicitly sexual contents are banned, much of the mainstream media attention in China has focused upon live-streaming sex scandals exclusively related to *nüzhubo*. This is by no means unique to video business in China – even YouTube founders attempted, but failed, to popularize the site by hiring 'attractive girls' on Craigslist to post videos (Burgess and Green, 2009b: 2). However, the difference is that female sexuality was never just an initial instrument to gather viewers during the early stage of Douyu. It remains the popular imagery of the site, and possibly the entire live-streaming industry.

The term *nüzhubo* (literally, female hostess) – or 'female livestreamer' in Chinese – is worth our emphasis as the term is often singled out from referencing to streamers or stream hosts in general and the 'female' pronoun is hardly neutral in this case. *Nüzhubo* has become central to the

stigmatizing discourses espoused by both the outsiders such as mainstream media and commentators and the live-streaming community itself. For instance, Ministry of Culture in China recently initiated to ‘stem the tide of “immoral live-streaming”’ (Zhang, 2017). Some of the newspaper headlines containing *nüzhubo* are as follows: Pretty *nüzhubo* ‘forgot’ to turn off webcam, the entire footage of undressing got broadcasted (Tencent News, 2015); Man charged with embezzlement, all just to please a *nüzhubo* (Jia Ding Procuratorate, 2016); Online *nüzhubo* who is an anti-drug propagandist proves to be a drug dealer (Beijing Daily, 2016).

As these headlines demonstrate, *nüzhubo* is often subject to constructions of the male gaze. The popular imagination of *nüzhubo* alludes to not only the stereotypical sexualized, sometimes even menacing as reflected in the quoted news headlines, female body but also the libertine impulses of livestream spectators. This stigma corresponds with White’s ‘cam girls’ definition in the United States. As White writes, ‘women webcam operators’ complex skills are denigrated by the convention of describing them as “cam girls” and the suggestion that they pander to spectators in order to receive gifts and other favors’ (2006: 67).

Furthermore, Wallis (2013) and Sun’s (2014) work on female migrant workers in China can be especially informative to our current research on *nüzhubo*. Wallis (2013: 12) has postulated migrant women’s bodies as ‘the site of numerous configurations of power’ and highlighted *dagongmei* (literally, working little sisters) as a powerful gender discourse that serves to subject the bodies of female migrant workers under various regimes of power. In her work on migrant literature in Southern China, Sun (2014: 175) has explicitly outlined a ‘cultural politics of agency’ through female workers’ literary works in order to understand *dagongmei*’s sexual agency beyond ‘the docile virgin/promiscuous whore split image’. Both authors point to the contested corporeality of the female body in the Chinese context, which is also prevalent in gender norm institutionalized upon the bodies of *nüzhubo*.

The official position of Douyu on female livestreamers is rather perplexing as the website is promoting female casters and certain (often unspecified) forms of erotic performances while simultaneously prohibiting other ‘illicit’ forms of performances such as nudity. Gender plays an indispensable role in the navigation of the website and the Android/iOS app. Categories on Douyu are often arbitrarily created according to popularity and demands rather than a complete catalogue of video games like Twitch. Only popular video games have their own separate categories, which are then subdivided into subcategories according to modes of performance such as professional gamers or fun casual streams. Within popular video game categories such as *League of Legends* and *HIZI*, there are subcategories specifying the host of channel is female, thus discernibly segregating the female casters from the rest of casters playing the same game. Figure 1 demonstrates a common *League of Legends* stream set-up on Douyu, in which webcam window is enlarged while gameplay window is compressed. These imageries of *nüzhubo* gradually became the common perception of what the term entails.

Outside the video games livestreams, there are several sections dedicated to *nüzhubo*. For example, ‘*yanzhi*’ (literally, face value, implying a blatant lookism) is an independent section of the site that is distinguished from other sections on Douyu because the overwhelming majority of casters are women – instead of cached screenshots, the front page of all channels are presented with enlarged and ‘beautified’ profile pictures. The performance modalities of livestreams in this section elicit the following: mundane activities such as consumption of food in front of the camera (often broadcasted from a smartphone), gaming activities but only limited to mainstream games such as *League of Legends*, engaging repetitive conversations with viewers and occasional borderline erotic performances (see Figure 1). The segregation of these genres from the supposedly

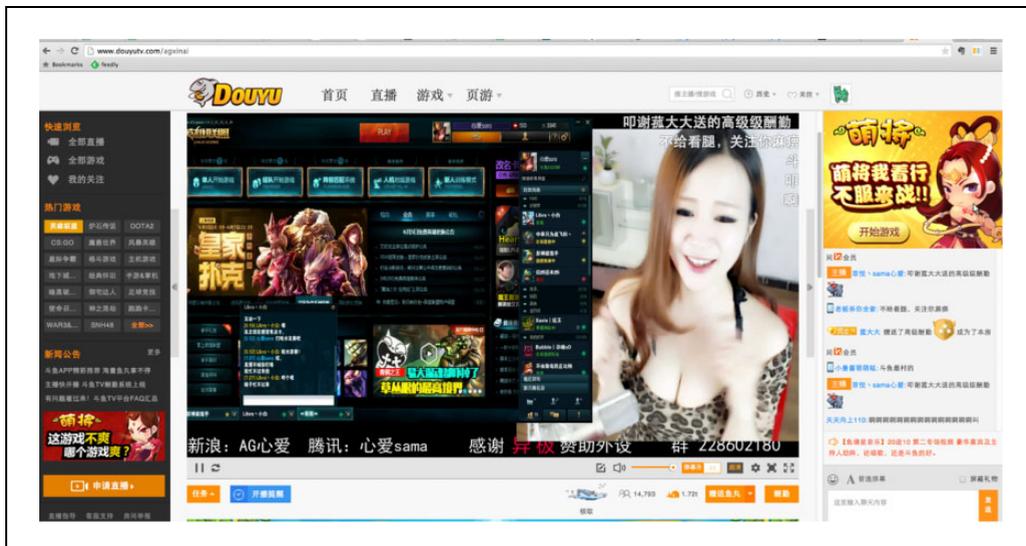


Figure 1. A Douyu channel with an enlarged webcam window and a resized gameplay window.

main contents of video games hints at the different levels of legitimacy bestowed to different genres of performance – vulgarity exists but always under supervision.

Furthermore, Douyu has dedicated many lines, in its fairly brief and equivocal statement on its official regulations, to specifically discipline the female body. Figure 2 is extracted from the Douyu handbook for streamers (2016) and it demonstrates which parts of skin can be visible on the livestream and which parts are forbidden. For example, the exposed area of female breasts cannot be over one-third of the total area and the skirt must cover the buttocks. The section on the regulation of streamer behaviours and dress codes (in total 631 words) only refers to female bodies – male body is not even mentioned once. However, most scandalous reveals, some of which are possibly fabricated for media attention, point to the frailty of implicitly or explicitly sexual contents and transient status of these woman livestreamers. The turnover rate is very high and yet new channels keep appearing.

Apart from institutional efforts of normalizing and regulating the female body, the stigma is also very commonplace within the live-streaming community itself. We interviewed a male livestreamer, *Dongma* (pseudonym), who has openly expressed his concern over *nüzhubo* broadcasting under the banner of video games. *Dongma*'s views on female livestreamers reflect his grievances towards the platform itself and construction of online personality. *Dongma* paints himself as someone who is preoccupied with video games, which can be interpreted as a moral high ground of self-identifying as a collector of Steam games and a critic of indie games. For *Dongma*, the popularity of *nüzhubo* represent the low taste of the majority of male viewers who are superficially attracted to female bodies rather than focusing on the depth of video games commentary.

Similar to Wallis' and Sun's critical attention to gendered terms like *dagongmei*, the image and discourse of *nüzhubo* do not reflect the complexity of the identity performed by most women livestreamers. White (2003, 2006) argues against the popular imaginations of webcam as a device that only empowers the male voyeuristic gaze. She highlights the power women webcam operators have in maintaining control of their representations through particular modes of performativity.

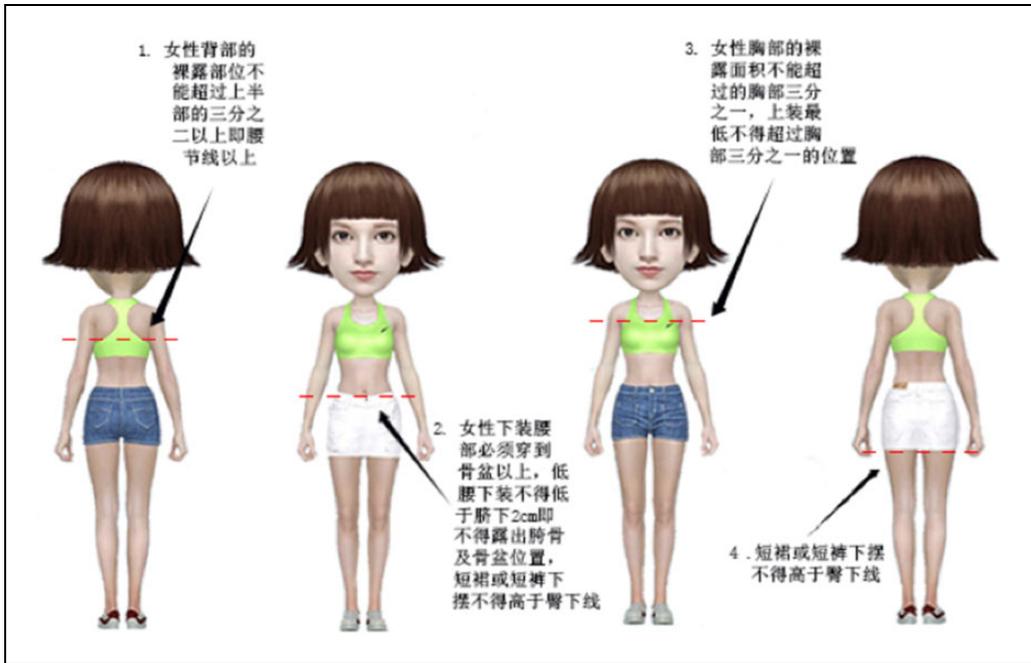


Figure 2. Douyu handbook for streamers (2016 edition).

For White, a woman's webcam does not necessarily grant an empowered male gaze to the private domain and women webcam operators do 'maintain control of their representations and develop a form of power by the ways they become visible' (2006: 57).

White (2006: 67) uses the term 'webcam operator' to 'emphasize the significant work that women do in technologically, visually, and conceptually sustaining this practice'. The word 'operator' – following Benjamin's (2008: 25) allegorical connection between the surgeon and cameraman – implies the many subtle tasks in the work of being a livestreamer. Similarly, *nüzhubo*'s 'work of being watched' – to appropriate Andrejevic's (2003a) words – is not as simple as it sounds: it often involves applying make-up before livestream, 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. For instance, from this well-circulated image (Figure 3) of a livestream studio set-up, we can observe a careful reproduction of feminine domesticity: lighting effects both in front of and behind the webcam; wall-paper masquerading as the spatiality of a very 'stereotypically girly' room decorated with pink bow ties; a giant Hello Kitty doll and so forth.

As Pearl and Polan (2015: 191) write, 'much of the power of celebrities lies in their very liveness, their existence as actual people who can and must . . . communicate the illusion of access'. Instead of adopting a narrative of behind-the-scene reveal, most of the viewers we interviewed already know that these imageries of access are highly produced and the 'illusion' is not as covert. Some of the viewers we interviewed even acknowledge the labour and efforts performers put into the role, which include not only the set-up but also the tenacious practices of singing, dancing and gaming skills depending on their specific genres of performance. Authenticity, when utilized as an



Figure 3. Studio constructed as a “typically” girly room.

absolute standard, should not burden our perception of gender and corporeality of *nüzhubo*'s bodies. As Butler (1988: 527) reminds us, ‘gender reality is performative which means . . . that it is real only to the extent that it is performed’. The body of *nüzhubo* is only materialized through the incessant repetitions of gender performances.

In order to understand the complicated and diverse ways the *nüzhubo*'s bodies are iterated through infrastructure on Douyu and reiterated by performer (and vice versa), we have chosen two examples. The first case is Hani9, who is a very popular cross-dressing performer. His gender ambiguity and queer body is rarely rejected but celebrated not only by his fans but also the official Douyu. He was the only male participant in a beauty contest hosted by Douyu and won a prize. The significance of his case is not necessarily his act of subversion, which can be disputed, but the near-fanatic devotion of his fans and his role in destabilizing their perceptions of gendered norms.

The second case is Nvliu, whose channel mainly consists of play-through of indie games, intellectual discussions of games and various sorts of Q&A format sessions. As she often denies her sexuality and focuses on her work as a commentator and critic on video games, she seems to represent an exceptional case and perhaps even a counterexample to the frequent allegations of infidelity and indecency against *nüzhubo*. The impression that she is the educated, intelligent and cultured face of Douyu is embedded in the official promotion of her channel.

Hyper-femininity through the *Weiniang* body: The case of Hani9

Despite the popular portrayal of the licentious Douyu, femininity is a very contested area on the platform in and through *nüzhubo*. The genres and categories we outlined in the previous section are



Figure 4. Profile picture of Hani9's channel.

official and unofficial efforts to institutionalize different kinds of gendered performer tropes. Queer identities seem to resist this institutionalization – at least temporarily.

Figure 4 is the profile picture of Hani9's channel page. It demonstrates his dual identities as a heterosexual male 'in real life' and a cute girl on livestream. Hani9's channel operates under the category of '*Xinxiu*' (Star Show), which is a female-dominated section of Douyu. His presence as a self-proclaimed heterosexual male highly destabilizes the often clearly indicated straight- or gay-friendly livestreams. Gay livestreams do exist on many live-streaming platforms and some of them are even very vocal about homosexuality (Boreham, 2016). Homosexuality can be visible and accepted within an institutional framework – that is, it is not supposed to disrupt the gender performance of heterosexuality and that's why the constructions of these genres matter. Hani9, however, presents a very curious ambiguity – demonstrative of Abidin's (2016) notion that microcelebrities are ambivalent as they are political.

Hani9 was born in a rural town in Sichuan province. He farmed and worked in various labouring jobs. He initially took up the work of live-streaming for lucrative purpose. In order to attract viewers, he started experimenting with cross-dressing without prior experiences. In the work of live-streaming, he taught himself how to apply complicated make-up, use various cosmetic items and acquaint himself with uncomfortable dresses and high heels. He even went to many dance classes to improve his dancing skills. In Hani9's own words, 'initially all this work was solely motivated by financial gain' and the novelty of queer culture on the generally homophobic Douyu proved to be an excellent entry point to gather viewers and even fandom. Hani9 narrates his own experiences of being a livestreamer,

I was dancing on the square for the whole evening [while live-streaming] and I got a lot of onlookers and harassers. People were curious about whether this person was male or female. Someone threw his slipper at me. . . . Gradually I have learnt to enjoy my job and I enjoy interacting with my viewers . . . the work is really demanding. When I finish live-streaming, it's almost midnight but then I have to reply fan messages when I am done with those, it would be 2am. Then I just want to go straight to sleep without even removing the make-up.

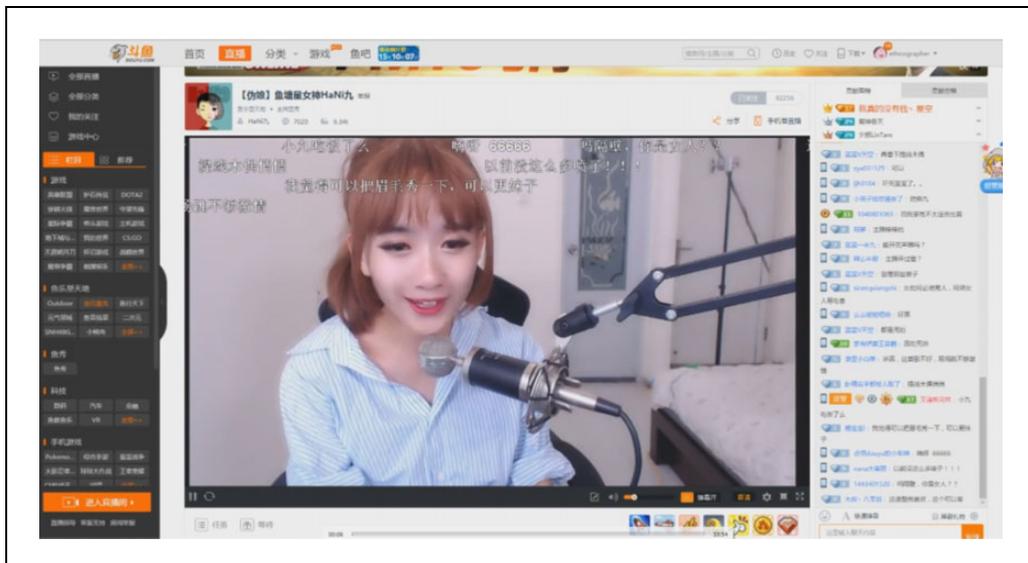


Figure 5. Hani9 on livestream.

Hani9's own narrative has primarily focused on his labour and the nature of his work rather than his choice of gender performativity, which was an arbitrary choice he made to gain viewers. He dresses up in various costumes, performs different dances and talks in a feminine voice (see Figure 5 for a screenshot of his channel).

Hani9 even openly talks about his seductive power towards males and jokes about it. However, he does not identify with transgender or homosexuality – he seems devoid of any identity politics intentionally. Hani9 always refers to himself as a 'he' on livestream. He is a heterosexual male performing femininity and he is fairly frank about his intention of making money. In Hani9's hands, identity is normalized as a way for commercial gain. The 'sincerity' of conceding 'I am doing it for money' serves as the foundation of trust, which feeds back to our earlier discussion on the agency of intention. Since this intention is no secret, viewers who are attracted to him do not see it as an ethical issue as Hani9 pays a lot of efforts to perform and keep the consistent image of a '*kawaii*' (cute) girl. His viewers appreciate the efforts, even calling him the champion of '*ban shou*' – toying with male sexuality/sexual orientation.

Senft's (2008) critique of the 'digital drag' points to the overemphasis of the novelty of it – obscuring Butler's argument that all identity is performative. When Hani9 expresses his agency as a performer of a particular stylized gender – in his own narrative, this labour, such as applying make-up and learning the subtle 'feminine' bodily gestures, is constructed as a very technical skill that can be acquired through long-term practice, which exactly demonstrates Butler's (1988: 519) point that 'gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time'. His repetition of this technical and affective labour on his very mundane livestreams has gradually perfected his skill to wear the face of an 'idealized *kawaii* women' – for instance, the tenuous bodily act of covering up his cleavage when leaning forward the webcam.

Yet, Hani9 still emphasizes on a 'reality' of his gender, that is, the heterosexual male, and an 'unreality', that is, his alluring female body. As Butler (2006: xxiii) reminds us that we should not

presuppose the drag as a ‘model of political agency’, ‘in such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion’. While Hani9 insists on a compulsory binary of gender onto his different modes of performance (i.e. when he is in drag and when he is in his ‘normal’ male form), subversion can take place at the blurring line between ‘reality’ and ‘unreality’.

Hani9’s livestream is thus not a ‘coming-out’ ritual for him but his viewers. The naturalized knowledge of gender of Hani9’s viewers are persistently challenged and destabilized. Hani9’s viewers understand him by giving equal seriousness to hani9’s heterosexuality and his *weiniang* identity (literally, fake woman), which can be compared to Japanese term *Otokonoko* (literally, male girl). The seemingly contradiction of having two faces does not seem to bother many of his viewers. It is not necessarily true to claim that his viewers ‘discover’ their queerness but at the very least, Hani9 disturbs the gender norm by embodying the heterosexual female ideal. His disturbance creates confusion, which, in turn functions as the subversive act. Some viewers struggle to accept the dual identity of a male and female at the beginning. However, once they do, the ambiguity is exactly what makes the Hani9’s livestream exceptional – his livestream is neither a replication of the stigmatized *nūzhubo* nor a visual document of a transgender coming out. His variation destabilizes the essentialism of both heterosexual male gaze and transgenderism.

Hani9 often talks to his viewers on livestream when he is not dancing. One of the authors personally witnessed a very intriguing conversation between him and one of his viewers over a phone call on his Douyu channel. This viewer confessed to be a 15-year-old boy undergoing a hormone therapy to become female. Hani9 was quite shocked and responded in a caring voice, ‘as your older brother [emphasising his gender is male], I wish you the best and please do not take too much drugs and be healthy’. Obviously, Hani9 is not familiar with the transgender side of the spectrum – in China, *weiniang* (fake woman) is often considered to be someone who is only interested in the surface level of cross-dressing, whereas *yaoniang* (drug woman) is someone who proactively using therapy or surgery to undergo a physical transformation.

We contacted this viewer afterwards and asked her opinion on Hani9. She said,

Hani9 is my role model, but not merely because of his behaviour [meaning his act of cross-dressing] but *his looks*. I aim to become a girl who look as good as him, insofar Hani9’s successful transformation represents a possibility and hope for me to become a good-looking woman. I admire him for his body.

Curiously in this case, a young transgender does not consume Hani9 as a queer symbol nor a politically motivated transgression, because she is quite aware of the difference between Hani9 and her: Hani9 never intends to fully become ‘a woman biologically’. In this sense, the transgression lies in Hani9’s body being consumed as sexual object and a role model by both the straight male and transgender.

Gender performance through video game commentary: The case of Nvliu

Unlike Hani9 who is still arguably at the margin of mainstream attention despite his subcultural popularity, our second example Nvliu is often regarded as one of the most popular Chinese gaming personalities in the past 2 years. In the time span of 3 years, she moved from an amateur producer of visual essays and ‘Let’s Play’ videos of obscure indie games on Youku to one of the most celebrated streamers on Douyu who has been interviewed on the China Central Television and

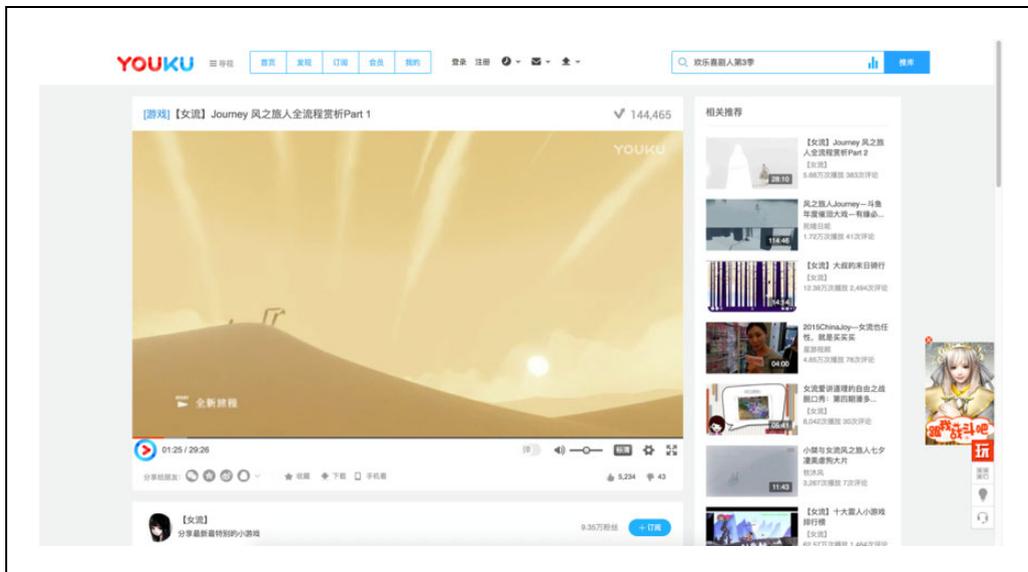


Figure 6. Nvliu's Journey gameplay video, posted on Youku in 2013.

featured in Microsoft's commercial. Over the last 2 years, we collected and archived screenshots and videos of Nvliu's movement from Youku to Douyu. The benefit of long-term observation is that we witness the gradual change of approach to gender performativity in Nvliu's Youku videos and livestreams.

Frustrated by Chinese gaming communities' limited ways of depicting and discussing games, she decided to be an active participant in changing how video games were played and analysed. In 2010, Nvliu started making videos about video games she liked and posted them on Youku – mostly indie games such as *Full Pipe*, *Aquaria* and *Journey*, which are mostly unheard of in the Chinese mainstream who rarely ventures beyond Blizzard games, *League of Legends* and *Dota2*. The format of Nvliu's Youku videos largely resembled the 'Let's Play' videos on YouTube where she narrated, with her very comforting voice, with gameplay footage. These were not instructional tutorial videos, which were more common on Youku at the time, but stream-of-consciousness narration while playing a game and even some highly contrived video essays of her organized thoughts on video games such as *Journey*. Deeply situated in the 'Let's Play' genre, Nvliu was able to develop her video game criticism without actively claiming to be a critic.

Nvliu's early Youku videos (see Figure 6) were often deprived of a webcam showing her face, which later became a crucial departure Nvliu's fans delineate after her transition to Douyu. Her presence on Youku prior to 2014 also coincides with aforementioned lack of rewards for vernacular contents on the platform at the time. Her primary motivation was thus a passion for video games and the emergent community of indie game fans. Her initial limited success on Youku earned many followers who appreciated her taste and opinions in games. However, her real identity was still relatively concealed as no face was shown and little personal information was given. Her gender, while distinctively female in voice, was very nebulous, perhaps due to the lack of visual cues and her seriousness in presenting video games.

In 2014, live-streaming platforms began to flourish as we mentioned earlier in the brief history of online video industry in China. At the time, Nvliu was working in Perfect World Entertainment as a promotional video producer. The company saw the live-streaming platform as an opportunity and asked Nvliu to experiment with Douyu. Two years later, she is one of the most popular livestreamers on Douyu with a regular concurrent 100,000 viewers. In her livestreams, Nvliu continued her earlier practices of exclusively playing indie games like *Bridge Constructor* and *Undertale* but with microphone and webcam both on, for the first time on Douyu.

The stigma of *nūzhubo*, as discussed earlier, still haunts many livestreamers who seek alternative ways of performance. Nvliu pushed against easy attention-grabbing techniques like wearing provocative clothing and asserted her agency through the role of promoting marginal video games. While maintaining control and autonomy in what video games she chose to play, Nvliu's viewership grew steadily beyond the original community of indie game fans. She was not willing to compromise her choice of games for her viewers,

I am the kind of person who cares about my own feeling. The game I play on livestream must be a game that I like. If I don't like the game, no matter how recommended or 200k people watching, I won't livestream the game. I am self-centred. I am this sort of livestreamer.

This 'self-centeredness' of Nvliu is posing directly against the instrumentality of video games in contemporary livestreams. For two anonymous female streamers we interviewed, video games are props or backgrounds in which their performance is iterated. However, malleability of such live-stream lies in the fact that the game of choice is often determined by its popularity among viewers rather than the passion of the broadcaster.

As we have previously mentioned the system of categories on Douyu, indie game is a subcategory under the main directory of 'console games', which in the context of Douyu does not indicate gaming platforms but a generic umbrella category for non-popular games. Indie games, as a category, is fairly small in terms of total viewership but Nvliu has played a significant role in the promotion of alternative gaming cultures within this designated category. For this contribution, Nvliu is awarded with a great deal of moral legitimacy against the stereotypes of *nūzhubo* and even entrusted with the role of representing more 'cultivated' side of Douyu.

Figure 7 is indicative of Nvliu's usual livestream set-up. The webcam screen is in the top right corner. The webcam window is resized fairly small so it's hard to see the facial features very clearly. This set-up is relatively consistent except for the Q&A session on Sunday where the stream is more conversational and the webcam window will be larger than usual without the gameplay window. The issue of showing her face was broached by Nvliu during the interview. As disclosed in the following quote from Nvliu, the performance of live-streaming seems to necessitate the use of the webcam to give a more 'live' feeling.

When I was merely uploading my videos, I had *jiechao* (dignity); When I started streaming, I lost it. When I started streaming on douyu in January 2015, I only had viewers from the old fanbase who watched my Youku videos because I kept my old style – I don't show my face in Youku videos (just my voice narrating to gameplay footages). My colleagues told me that a camera (a live feed webcam) would add a bit more 'live' effect to the livestream. So I bought a camera but I still resisted to show my face (I have pointed the camera towards my chin or whatever). I guess the old model doesn't fit the live-streaming platform anymore. I started to show my face in June and my viewership on Douyu.tv began to increase.



Figure 7. Nvliu's livestream channel on Douyu in 2015.

This “‘Live’ effect’ can be interpreted as a gendered affective construction of liveness (Auslander, 2008). People are well aware that the live transmission that they are watching are events unfolding at the present moment and the same contents are also watched by others at the exact same time – what Crisell (2012: 97) calls a ‘simultaneity of consumption’. This knowing is very fundamental to the experience of liveness. What Crisell (2012: 14) is emphasizing is that the human need for liveness resonates our need to confirm that whatever voice we are hearing is alive – it is both ‘conveying presence’ and ‘possessing life’. There are multiple layers to confirm the temporal and bodily ‘plural co-presence’ as ‘co-presence can be experienced as spatially and temporally dispersed, across online and offline’ (Hjorth and Richardson, 2016: 106). For instance, an active chat room tells you that there are other people watching and reacting to the same content; a livefeed camera of face talking while hearing a voice confirms that the voice and the person who possess the voice is in sync; livestreamer responding to ‘the chat’ (i.e. viewers) promptly further confirms that the livestreamer is sharing the present with the viewers.

In addition, the issue of face revealing is a particularly gendered one in this affective construction of co-presence, which is verifiable by the fact that many top male video game livestreamers do not install webcams on their channels. The expectation on whether to install a webcam is very different for male and female livestreamers. Pressures from sponsors, viewers and the general climate on Douyu.tv often compel or even necessitate the use of webcams on female livestreamers’ channels. Webcams have grown exponentially into unsuspected objects of daily life since Andrejevic’s (2003b) initial formulation of ‘webcam subculture’ of the Jennicam in the late 1990s – and in a way, the webcam has always been gendered since then.

As indicated by Nvliu herself in the interview, her viewers who followed her from one platform to another and revealing her face during the livestream after the transition to streaming was often constructed as ‘capitulation’ to the new regime of gender performativity – the



Figure 8. Nvliu playing Undertale.

webcam. Webcam in Chinese is *shexiangtou* (literally, record-image-head), becomes a homonym for *sexiangtou* (literally, lewd-image-head). Therefore, *jiechao*, best interpreted as a sense of self-worth in this context, is considered lost in the act of conforming to the standard practice of webcam. The reveal of Nvliu's face on livestream even triggered some backlash initially. In her own words,

Now every time I start the livestream, there will be a group people spamming 'Nvliu, you have changed'. I let them these days. At the very beginning when I started live-streaming, there were always a few who kept spamming 'Nvliu you have changed'. So in the end, I just decided to make fun of it/myself. When I was making videos, I usually had an opening speech. So I told my viewers, from now on, your opening words of livestream would be 'Nvliu, you have changed'. Whenever I start the livestream now, the comments will be full of 'Nvliu, you have changed'. Because people thought my videos (prior to live-streaming) were nice works that contained real contents, ideas and thoughts about videogames, and when I started to livestream, I have become a person who is cynical and making fun of myself, maybe even a bit dumb and bad at controls. This is a different person from viewers' previous impressions. I don't know about others. *But I never really changed in my personal life. I never consistently tried to be profound nor funny. I am a normal, everyday, ordinary person.*

The medium of heavily edited videos, her previous style of 'Let's play' videos that densely laid out her thoughts, and ambiguity inherited in the facility of her Youku channel have built her an idealized image of a dignified intellectual figure. The reveal of her face and liveness of her bodily co-presence has shattered this imagination and under the new context of Douyu seems to be threatening the vanity of the previous image. 'Rather than speculating on who a

Web personality “really is”, viewers tend to debate the personality’s obligations to those who made her *what she is*’ (Senft, 2008: 25). Some of Nvliu’s loyal viewers from the early days perceive Nvliu’s change as a violation of tacit (presumably mutual but possibly non-existent) understanding of her role as a Web personality. As she has hinted multiple times during our conversation, live-streaming is a different platform and the protracted duration of the medium has profoundly impacted her self-presentation. On livestreams, she can no longer enjoy the level of control she had in edited videos and the performance is forcibly rendered mundane and unpredictable at the same time.

Nonetheless, Nvliu insisted on the autonomy of her ‘self’ and that she built her image as someone did not waver in the face of general fluctuation of content production on the live-streaming platform. Nvliu was able to bypass the accusations and joke about the often repetitive *nüzhubo* stereotype – cleavage, pale skin, long hair, disproportionate large eyes (possibly after the magnifying effect of both make-up and camera filter) and so forth – and make a difference in her own iteration of such gender performativity.

Figure 8 is a screenshot of Nvliu playing *Undertale* on livestream. She has a photoshopped image of her face onto a famous model’s torso, which is a static image disguised as a webcam window. The joke is ‘36D’ (breast size), a meme originated from her channel, to make fun of her body as well as objectification of women on Douyu in general. Nvliu has either deliberately avoided her gender by minimalizing its impact by expressing her agency as intellectual figure and specialist in indie games, or in this instance, ridiculed it by exacerbating the body of *nüzhubo*. This resistance to ‘selling out’ have become the core of her gender performativity and moral authority.

Conclusion: From performativity to platformativity

In this article, we have sought to demonstrate the role of gender performativity on Douyu through two contrasting examples: Hani9’s body conforms to the idealized and sexualized female body in his subversive repetition of *weiniang* performativity, while Nvliu tries to resist the body of *nüzhubo* by ridiculing the stereotype and seeking alternatives in video games to express her agency. The selection of these two examples is not based on their capacity to represent the platform as a whole but quite the contrary – through Hani9 and Nvliu, we can glimpse into the diversity of identities and modes of gender performativity often shrouded by the stigma of *nüzhubo*.

Our two case studies highlight the ways in which platforms can afford the space to both question and subvert traditional performative norms – what Lamarre calls ‘platformativity’. Through a series of actions and practices over time, Hani9 and Nvliu provide us with gendered possibilities around platformativity. The technical, conceptual and affective role of performativity on live-streaming sites can be observed in many different gender tropes within the lexicon of livestreamer personalities. While Douyu is demonstrative of ‘*Wanghong Shengtai*’ (literally, web celebrity ecology) – complex networks of talent agents, streamer guilds, individual studios and streamers – we can see ways in which conventions around the *nüzhubo* can be challenged.

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