



Internet Celebrities in China. An Investigation into the Conversion of Capital Behind Social Media

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Abstract. While there has been much discussion on the conversion of capital existing in the real society, few connections have been made between fields and virtual communities established on social media. This paper investigates how a group of internet celebrities can utilize and convert their cultural capital to obtain reputation and profits on social media through the perspective of field theory proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. In addition, during the conversion of capitals, social media allows Knowledge Network Reds to reproduce culture in an equal and influential manner, solving problems of class inequalities in educational systems, which has long been Bourdieu's concern for the consequences economic and cultural divisions. By investigating three cases of KNRs, this paper finds that KNRs gain fame and wealth by converting their cultural capital into symbolic and economic capital and demonstrates a comprehensive analysis of the trend on social media in China. This paper will provide new case study results for the research of online media and internet celebrities.

Keywords: Field Theory · Capital · Social Media · Knowledge Network Reds

1 Introduction

In recent decades, the popularization of social media creates opportunities for the construction of virtual communities and the rise of internet celebrities. Computer-mediated communication (CMC), particularly social media, plays a significant role in modern social life. In China, Knowledge Network Reds (KNRs), namely internet celebrities who earn reputation and profits by online sharing knowledge from their educational experiences, have risen to a new social phenomenon that largely influences the process of cultural reproduction. This report investigates how KNRs acquire fame, obtain profits, and reproduce culture through the lens of field theory proposed by Pierre Bourdieu [1]. Academically, while much has been written on the conversion of capital existing in real society, relatively few connections have been made between fields and virtual communities established on social media. The majority of studies specifically dealing with media and field theory were published in the late 20th century, a trend that presumably occurred because of the large interest in the social space of traditional media including journalism. Until recently, essays concerning field theory sought to explain the relationship between

social capital and social media, whereas only through the early interactions between internet habitats [2]. Moreover, although some studies have been carried out to investigate the cultural reproduction in social media, including the construction of a “third culture”, little has focused on the role of opinion leaders and the conversion of capital in this reproduction process [3]. Therefore, from Bourdieu’s conception, there is still a gap in studying the capital conversion of social media, especially from the perspective of internet celebrities. In addition, particularly on these social characters, some scholars paid attention to the difference between celebrities in the internet media and public intellectuals, while ignoring that these two identities can coexist on KNRs. Thankfully, due to the large impact of KNRs in China, more and more Chinese scholars have researched KNRs’ behaviors in e-commerce, information dissemination, and cultural influence on a mass audience. Furthermore, field theory would be an appropriate view to explain the social phenomenon of internet celebrities on social media. Bourdieu recognized fields as arenas in which individuals accumulate and exchange different kinds of power sources [4]. For all individuals, he identified social, economic, cultural, and symbolic fields as four main arenas, and each field carries out its own rules. However, different kinds of power sources, or capitals as Bourdieu noted, can convert to each other [1].

With the theoretical notions of field and capital, this paper will discuss whether social media allows KNRs to convert their cultural capital into symbolic and economic capital, weakening the inequalities of cultural power reproduced by educational systems. Moreover, this paper will be divided into three parts, including KNRs’ conversion of cultural capital to symbolic capital, conversion of symbolic capital to economic capital, and social meaning in reproducing higher knowledge to the public independent of educational systems.

2 Methods

To examine the conversion of cultural capital to symbolic capital, it is necessary to determine or measure them using certain methods. First, this paper took three cases to overview the general feature of KNRs in China. Since three well-known KNRs, including Luo Xiang, Zhang Chenliang, and Zhang Xuefeng, were from three different subject fields and became popular on three different social media, Bilibili, TikTok, and Sina Weibo, which were the three largest social platforms in China. They provided various information as reliable representatives of research subjects. Generally, Luo Xiang was a law professor who graduated from the China Youth University of Political Studies and had earned millions of followers in Bilibili; A male biologist Zhang Chenliang had uploaded over a hundred videos about introducing rare species of animals and insects on TikTok; Zhang Xuefeng was a famous teacher specializing in tutoring students to pass Chinese postgraduate entrance exams. Separately, they focused on law, biology, and education, but they all gained their recognition on the Chinese internet by sharing knowledge in short video format. Hence, this study compared and contrasted the implications of three cases by using empirical results and critical analysis.

Through case studies, as mentioned, both the cultural and symbolic capital of the three KNRs had be determined or measured. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital could manifest itself in an embodied, institutional or objectified form. Clearer definitions were given in the next section of the essay. Therefore, using short and explicit

sentences or phrases, information including institutionalized certificates or diplomas (institutionalized cultural capital) and intellectual ownerships of works (objectified cultural capital) of each KNR would be recorded and organized in a chart (paragraphs in the next section would discuss the social preferences, or embodied cultural capital, in a more detailed way). Using a chart would reveal a more obvious contrast between results collected for each case. Moreover, personal profile information on corresponding social media would be reliable sources of results to summarize their cultural capital. The personal profile of a blogger or a “video uploader” is often officially certified by platforms, so it can ensure a certain degree of credibility for the results collected. Moreover, it is directly displayed to the audience, so it can reflect the public image of these KNRs, which is also closely related to the accumulation of their symbolic capital. In addition, Bourdieu identifies symbolic capital as an individual’s reputation, recognition, or fame to the public. Similarly, information about their recognition and influence on internet users would also be collected on the official numbers provided by corresponding social media. In a more quantified way, information including the number of followers, number of likes, and number of plays/readings would be the parameters measured. In a chart, the cultural capital and symbolic capital of KNRs would each occupy two columns, facilitating the visual comparison and contrast in the discussion section. Measurements of economic capital are from online websites which reported the personal property of the KNRs. Overall, with reliable sources on official social media platforms, this essay can explore the three cases with detailed results and quantified results.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Conversion of Cultural Capital into Symbolic Capital

Internet celebrities, particularly KNRs, would demonstrate their cultural capital in three forms to increase their credibility and obtain symbolic capital. Social media, especially short video platforms, creates a chance for people with different backgrounds to attain fame and recognition. Among them, people with expertise in certain subject fields usually earn more credibility for their public expressions [5]. Moreover, based on the report by China Netcasting Services Association (CNSA) in 2019, the average number of followers for KNRs (with over 10,000 fans) is at least 150,000 more than other types of internet celebrities (with over 10,000 fans) on short video platforms [6], which suggests that KNRs attain relatively more fame or recognition on social media.

This phenomenon can be explained by the notions of cultural and symbolic capitals. As mentioned in the method section, cultural capital, or culturally defined assets, can manifest itself in an embodied, institutional or objectified form. In embodied state, cultural capital is in a “form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and the body” [1]. In other words, embodied cultural capital is associated with preferences of a person’s actions and reactions in socialization. Institutionalized cultural capital then contains “the degrees and diplomas which certify the value of the embodied cultural capital” [7]. Objectified cultural capital indicates an individual’s ownership of a cultural and material product, such as an artwork, a book, etc. In addition, Bourdieu identifies symbolic capital as an individual’s reputation, recognition, or fame to the public. In his theory, capitals in all fields are convertible and transmittable [8], which provides a theoretical basis

for the relationship between the cultural and symbolic capital of an internet celebrity. Individuals with more cultural capital would correspondingly earn more symbolic capital on social media.

To discuss the empirical conversion of cultural capital to symbolic capital on social media, this report focuses on three empirical and representative cases of KNRs, including Luo Xiang, Zhang Chenliang, and Zhang Xuefeng. KNRs could convert their cultural capital into symbolic capital by reproducing short videos on social media. For example, Luo Xiang, a law professor who graduated from the China Youth University of Political Studies, has 22.484 million followers and received 67.145 million likes on Bilibili. For embodied cultural capital, Luo is well-known for his black suit, his humorous manner of speaking about national provisions, and his thoughtful ideas in responding to complicated cases. As a new form of media, short videos enable him to present his traits directly and visually. These embodied characteristics benefit Luo to attract followers of different ages and classes and thus gain his reputation on social media. Additionally, since social media platforms allow users to post their personal information in the “Profile” section, Luo could consequently show his institutionalized cultural capital to any audience who clicked on his page. Luo displays his doctorate from Peking University Law School and his certificate for being a professor at the China University of Political Science and Law in his profile. Due to the high recognition of these two schools in China, particularly in the law field, Luo increases his credibility and public recognition as a KNR specializing in law. Furthermore, he also shows his intellectual property rights to two specialized law books in his profile, further strengthening his image in the public mind. Therefore, by reproducing short videos and showing honorable certification related to his expertise, Luo gradually convert his cultural capital into symbolic capital. In contrast, Zhang Xuefeng has relatively fewer followers on Sina Weibo (6.265 million), although Weibo has 573 million monthly active users in 2021 (more than twice the number of Bilibili) [9, 10], which suggests the difference between their symbolic capital is not directly subject to the number of audiences on different platforms. It is reasonable to claim that the smaller number of followers would probably associate with his less institutionalized and objectified cultural capital because based on Bourdieu’s theory, there is not enough cultural capital for Zhang Xuefeng to convert to symbolic capital. In other words, since he has fewer educational experiences and representative works, he is less recognized by the public. Overall, these cases demonstrate that KNRs could convert their cultural capital into symbolic capital by reproducing audiovisual products on social media.

3.2 Conversion of Symbolic Capital into Economic Capital

Second, social media allows KNRs to convert their symbolic capital into economic capital through platform rewards, endorsements, etc. KNRs, with credibility and public recognition, become online opinion leaders on social media. Studies suggest that individuals’ purchasing decisions are likely to be affected by opinion leaders online [11]. With their influence power, KNRs can earn profits by leading a certain audience to selected purchases. According to Bourdieu, economic capital includes “purely individual material assets which can be directly and easily convertible into money or maybe

institutionalized in the forms of property rights” [8]. Since capital is convertible, symbolic capital is also possible to turn into economic capital indirectly. Connecting with empirical evidence, in May 2021, Zhang Xuefeng, as a legal representative, established Suzhou Fengxue Weilai Education Technology Co., Ltd. This educational organization has registered capital of 10 million YUAN, which is part of Zhang’s economic capital earned as a KNR [12]. Relying on his witty and straightforward expression manners, Zhang owns his reputation as a tutor of undergraduate examinations on social media. He attracts many young audiences who are pursuing Chinese master’s degrees, and thus earns money through selling academic products and holding public speeches. While he attracts a potential audience who is interested in undergraduate degrees in China, social media aids Zhang to accumulate his capital by providing him a platform to receive direct payment: he holds an online store on Weibo as a channel to buy his books and book his guidance courses, so his followers can buy products easily and quickly. With increasing economic capital and followers, Zhang is then able to build his educational organization and set tutoring sessions targeted at his followers to earn more profits. Therefore, he successfully converts his symbolic capital into individual material assets. In a summary, supported by field theory, KNRs convert their cultural capital into symbolic capital which is then transformed into economic capital.

3.3 Social Meaning of Capital Conversion

Finally, social capital enables the transmitting of higher knowledge over classes to a large extent, contributing to the solutions to inequalities reproduced in educational systems. For society, social media broaden ways of acquiring knowledge independently. As of December 2020, China has 873 million online users of short video platforms, which covers almost all age groups and regions [13]. Social media provides free opportunities for people with different backgrounds and experiences to gain higher knowledge. In contrast with educational systems, people are only required to have the access to the internet and a technology device. Therefore, KNRs could utilize social media to communicate cultural capital regardless of economic divisions. Bourdieu claims that cultural and economic differences would cause more inequalities in education. To be more specific, children from higher social class families often have more economic and cultural capital. Different from children from lower classes, they would obtain better educational chances and resources and receptive abilities, resulting in higher cultural capital after graduation and higher position in the workplace. In this cycle, educational systems would reproduce legitimate inequalities and significantly widen divisions between classes [14]. On the contrary, social media provides a platform for people of all classes to receive different fields of knowledge without considering their background, economic power, or other factors that prevent them from higher education in real life. For example, the famous biologist Zhang Chenliang has uploaded over a hundred videos introducing rare species of animals and insects in the world. He focused on the living conditions, habits, outer features, and other aspects of those organisms, popularizing natural science knowledge for the public and providing scholars with a unique angle to learn. Currently, he began to plan and record some special trips all over China, enabling more people to observe the rare species closely through his cameras. Zhang, as the main editor of *Nature History*, actively shared his knowledge online and received 120 million likes in total on TikTok,

which demonstrates his influence as a KNR on social media. Many of his followers appreciate Zhang's videos for showing interesting and rich information about nature. Thus, while KNRs convert their cultural capital into symbolic and economic capital, they also promote the reproduction of equalities in cultural capital by providing free access to higher knowledge. Throughout time, new careers are changing society and bringing people benefits that they are not aware of.

4 Conclusion

Social media not only introduces a new way of communication, but also opened a new space waiting for youngsters to discover and utilize. Through the lens of Bourdieu's theory, this paper finds that KNRs gain fame and wealth by converting their cultural capital into symbolic and economic capital. Luo Xiang, Zhang Chenliang, and Zhang Xuefeng are real cases that could evident that KNRs use their knowledge to succeed as internet celebrities. Because life today moves at a faster pace, people unconsciously prefer short videos with stunning visuals and informative content. This may also be an instinct: everyone is willing to achieve more at less cost. Short videos produced by KNRs meet the social preferences of modern people, they are short but information-rich. Taking this advantage, KNRs attain their recognition by sharing knowledge through audiovisual products, because they convert their embodied, institutionalized, and objectified cultural capital into symbolic capital. Likewise, as a celebrity, they are also able to earn money by endorsing goods, selling their products, or other methods. There is a conversion of symbolic capital and economic capital behind it. By extension, KNRs' conversion of capital would also benefit people other than themselves. The users of social media are from all classes, which means that the public can acquire knowledge and information equally by watching KNRs' videos. However, in educational systems, children with higher economic capital can enter better schools with more educational opportunities, yet families from lower classes can support their children to study in small schools with few resources. It results in a wider division between classes in terms of cultural and economic capital, leading to the reproduction of inequality in society. Hence, KNRs, as teachers with free knowledge, treat different people equally and solve the social issue potentially. In conclusion, KNRs on social media convert their capital flexibly, and finally eliminate some potential class discrimination and benefit the whole society. From another perspective, the popularization of social media, an essential contributor to KNRs' success, has become an irresistible trend, and the only way we could deal with it is to accept it, explore it, and, at the same time, criticize it. The most important thing for humans to do is to manipulate advancing tools and facilitate their own lives, instead of flowing with technologies unconsciously or lost in the changing age.

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