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Crystal Abidin

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Mainstreaming *wanghong* in the international press discourse

Crystal Abidin^{a,b}

^aProfessor of Internet Studies, Curtin University, Bentley, Australia; ^bInfluencer Ethnography Research Lab, Curtin University, Bentley, Australia

ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a surge in global interest in *wanghong*. *Wanghong* are chiefly known for their prowess as communicators who efficiently parlay viewer traffic into sales and have become staples for international brands that aim to break into the Chinese market as well as domestic breaks that aim to expand worldwide. *Wanghong* are also pioneers in experimenting with novel and curious communication formats that often challenge the status quo of attention economies, and have swiftly become indispensable partners to social media and e-commerce platforms. Most prominently, with their ability to dissect and disseminate information into digestible media for laypersons, in many markets *wanghong* have also become essential extensions of public relations management for governments and public service entities. In a nutshell, the growing and dominant presence of *wanghong* in everyday life as evidenced through their visibility and influence across interactive media, industry verticals, and online platforms is a testament to their trade as arbiters of digital cultures for everyday users. This paper looks more deeply into the global interest in *wanghong* by studying how the phenomenon and the discourse surrounding it has been mainstreamed by the international press discourse. Drawing on an original corpus of international press articles in the English language concentrated on four key seasons in the last decade (2014–2024), during which worldwide interest on *wanghong* registered significant movement, the paper presents a content analysis of the news corpus to uncover the discursive shifts pertaining to: Conceptual synonyms, genres, platforms, topics, and concerns in *wanghong* cultures.

KEYWORDS

Wanghong; greater China; industry; press; content analysis

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a surge in global interest in *wanghong*. *Wanghong* are chiefly known for their prowess as communicators who efficiently parlay viewer traffic into sales and have become staples for international brands that aim to break into the Chinese market as well as domestic breaks that aim to expand worldwide. *Wanghong* are also pioneers for experimenting with novel and curious communication formats that often challenge the status quo of attention economies and have swiftly become indispensable partners to social media and ecommerce platforms. Most prominently, with their ability to dissect and disseminate

CONTACT Crystal Abidin  crystalabidin@gmail.com

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information into digestible media for laypersons, in many markets *wanghong* have also become essential extensions of public relations management for governments and public service entities.

In a nutshell, the growing and dominant presence of *wanghong* in everyday life as evidenced through their visibility and influence across interactive media, industry verticals, and online platforms is a testament to their trade as arbiters of digital cultures for everyday users. This paper looks more deeply into the global interest in *wanghong* by studying how the phenomenon and the discourse surrounding it has been mainstreamed by the international press discourse. The paper conceptualises 'mainstreaming' in the vein of communication scholar George Gerbner's cultivation theory, which has historically focused on television audiences. The theory offered that avid watchers of television were more likely to have their perceptions of the world aligned with depictions as (narrowly) portrayed on the repertoire of contents available on television (Gerbner *et al.* 1982). In other words, it was asserted that the technology and medium of television could 'mainstream' or widely disseminate in a structured and coherent process, ideas, values, beliefs, mindsets, practices, and the like by way of viewers' continuous exposure to programming that demonstrated these contents. Contemporary studies have similarly examined how various discourses – especially those previously perceived to be marginalised or alternative – have been mainstreamed via other media practices like the press and social media (Askanius and Gustafsson 2010, Solea and Sugiura 2023).

Drawing on an original corpus of international press articles in the English language concentrated on four key seasons in the last decade (2014–2024), during which worldwide interest on *wanghong* registered significant movement, the paper presents a content analysis of the news corpus to uncover the discursive shifts pertaining to: Conceptual synonyms, genres, platforms, topics, and concerns in *wanghong* cultures. In summary, this article finds that the international press discourse has mainstream understandings of *wanghong* in five ways. Firstly, the evolution of conceptual synonyms for *wanghong* point to mainstream valuations of the digital culture alongside traditional celebrity, the growing influence of *wanghong* on the economy, and the integration of *wanghong* into the global discourse on 'influencers' and 'creators' at large. Secondly, the evolution of genres has progressed from staples like 'beauty' and 'fashion' to spotlight emergent genres specific or unique to the greater China market, like 'rural' and 'luxury', while also pointing to the cross-cultural hybridity across the region through the uptake of genres first originating from elsewhere like 'mukbang'. Thirdly, the longitudinal coverage on platforms continue to mainstream 'super apps' and 'e-commerce' platforms as key stakeholders in the *wanghong* industry, alongside updates in trends as video platforms pivot in their focus from 'longform' to 'livestream' to 'short-form'. Fourthly, specific topics on *wanghong* maintain their focus on 'economics', 'industry', and 'internationalisation', but the global news coverage has significantly expanded the depth of the conversation by delivering more precise and sophisticated insights, which points to more mainstream interest in the phenomenon. Finally, the concerns regarding *wanghong* cultures have taken on a more nuanced and serious tone, shifting from worrying social trends to the more hard-hitting issues of values and mores, and governance and regulation.

Scholarly context

Wanghong have been described as the technological-driven celebrification of the ordinary on the internet (Xu and Zhao 2019), who have contributed to the ‘new possibilities and forms of celebrity as well as new ways of interacting with celebrities’ (Zhang *et al.* 2022). Media studies scholars have interrogated how the cultural production of *wanghong* in China constitute a form of Chinese ‘social media entertainment’ (Cunningham and Craig 2016), which are an alternative online ecosystem to international markets given the high reliance on state interventions and regulation (Craig *et al.* 2021). However, newer scholarship from the emic have also asserted that the socioeconomic conditions of *wanghong* production reveal savvy deployments of individual creativity amidst state control and propelled by global aspirations (Lin 2023). As important components of the creative industries in China (Craig *et al.* 2021), *wanghong* have been studied via the lens of platformisation (Lin and de Kloet 2019, Zhang 2021), as e-commerce entities (Guan 2021) and business models (Han 2021, 2022), as entrepreneurs (Guo 2022), for their cultural capital and labour practices (Fung *et al.* 2022), and as a political economy (Craig *et al.* 2021).

Shifting to the socio-cultural locus, the rich diversity of *wanghong* is also exemplified in the scholarship focused on subcultures like *hanmai* (Xu and Zhang 2021), marginalised communities like queer citizens (Song 2021, Wang 2021) and ethnic minorities (Li and Kang 2021), and stigmatised practices like eating disorder communities (Shen 2022). In recognition of how the phenomenon of *wanghong* has developed and matured extensively in the past years, more recent research has considered deployments of *wanghong* beyond roles, actors, and careers, to consider their abstractions as a mindset (Xu 2024). These include the proliferation of *wanghong* cities that are uniquely designed to attract prospective visitors and cultivate digital footprints through social media publicity (Zhang *et al.* 2022), thus stimulating conversations about the encoding of ‘mediatized culturalization’ in urban places throughout China (Zou 2025).

Yet, despite the spotlight on news coverage, newer trends, concerns, and deployments, longitudinal scholarship on the phenomenon of *wanghong* is rarer. Zhang and de Seta (2018, p. 57) have noted the evolving meaning of *wanghong* as ‘a profitable profession, an inspirational role model, a morally condemnable by-product of internet economies, and in general a widely debated social phenomenon among local users’. More recently, Abidin and Guo (2023) have reviewed the longitudinal changes in corporate discourse on *wanghong* and creator vocabularies across six Chinese platforms. I note that there is a wealth of scholarship on how *wanghong* break into the international market (e.g. Craig *et al.* 2021) – the phenomenon also known as *chudao* [出道] ‘going out’ – including through the prolific exemplars like beauty *wanghong* Li Jiaqi (e.g. Guan and Zhou 2024, Ma and Yue 2020) and Chinese rural *wanghong* Liziqi (e.g. Li 2020, Sui 2020, Zhang *et al.* 2023). In this vein, this paper takes interest in the mainstreaming of *wanghong* discourse in the international press, rather than tracing the actual mainstreaming of *wanghong* worldwide.

Methodology

In this paper, I review how *wanghong* are mainstreamed in the international press discourse through content analysis. In the first instance, Google Trends was used to identify ‘worldwide’ interest in the topic of ‘*wanghong*’ in the last ten years 2014–2024.

The search was conducted in December 2024. Filtering for ‘web searches’, the trends reveal that the first notable instances of ‘*wanghong*’ being mentioned in the English language corpus of Google content first spiked in early-2016, peaked in late-2019, began to fall by late-2020, and rose again in early-2024 (see [Figure 1](#)).

Interest was primarily from China, but also from neighbouring countries in the Asia Pacific including India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. Outside of this region, interest was recorded primarily from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom (see [Figure 2](#)).

Having identified the years 2016, 2019, 2020, and 2024 as when worldwide interest in ‘*wanghong*’ pointed to significant shifts, I assembled a corpus of English language news articles published in these four years as a representative sample of discourse on ‘*wanghong*’. The outlets are generally based in Australasia, the UK, and the US; produced by reputable media companies; and written by ‘international desks’ or reporters delegated to the ‘international beat’. As such, the articles tend to focus on translating and simplifying highly localised cultural nuance for accessible and timely coverage of international affairs, primarily for English-language readers and a general international audience.

Adapting from previously established methods for the content analysis of online news articles (Abidin, Barbetta *et al.* 2020, Abidin *et al.* 2020), Google News was used to query the search term ‘*wanghong*’, although results also automatically included the term stylised as ‘*wang hong*’. For each year, two different rounds of search were conducted. In round one, the search was limited to the period of the year (e.g. 1 January 2016 to 31 December 2016) and the top 10 results sorted ‘by relevance’ were collected. In the second round, the search was filtered by quarters (e.g.

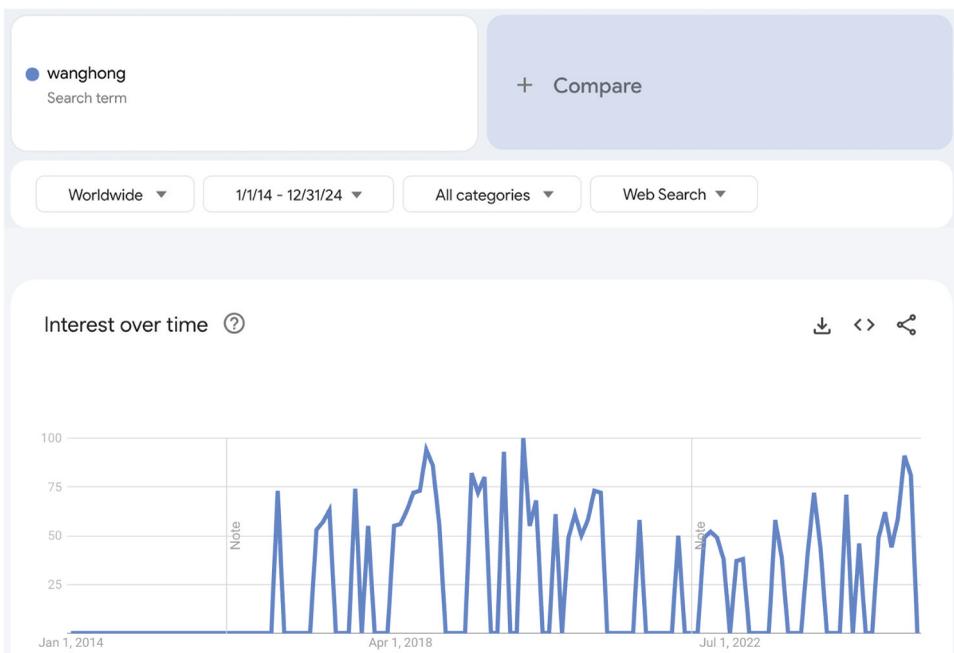


Figure 1. Google trends for ‘*wanghong*’, indicating interest over a ten-year period (January 2014–December 2024). Image by author.

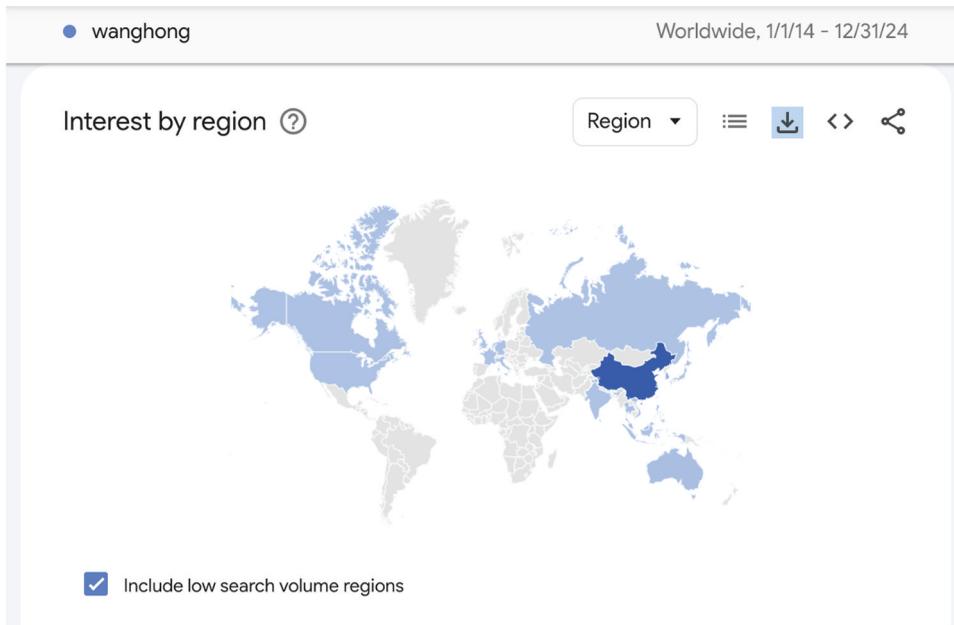


Figure 2. Google trends for ‘*wanghong*’, indicating interest by region over a ten-year period (January 2014–December 2024). Image by author.

1 January 2016 to 31 March 2016, 1 April 2016 to 30 June 2016, 1 July 2016 to 30 September 2016, 1 October 2016 to 31 December 2016) to reveal a more representative spread of news articles across the year, and the top 10 results were sorted ‘by relevance’ were collected. While this method would have accumulated up to 10 articles for the annual search and up to 40 articles for the quarterly searches per year, there were instances where the quarterly search yielded fewer than 10 articles.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria similarly adapted from established methods for content analysis of Influencer press discourse (Abidin, Barbetta *et al.* 2020): duplicates and reposts of news articles were omitted, as were obvious spam and low-quality paid promotions. Audio-only and video-only news articles without text were also excluded. Drawing on market research in Australia which found that the most reputable news sites preferred by readers tended to be open access (Cheik-Hussein 2019), paywalled news sites with gated access were also excluded. Finally, the corpus was tidied up to exclude repetition. The final corpus for close analysis resulted in 45 news articles (see Appendix A). Articles were read in full, and text mentioned in the headlines, story, and figure captions were studied. Coding parameters and analysis are discussed below.

Overview of news corpus

In the study of international press discourse on Google News, valid search results for ‘*wanghong*’ first surfaced in 2016, spiked in 2020, peaked in 2022, and have been on the decline since (Table 1). The 3 and 2 results for 2014 and 2015 respectively did not satisfy

Table 1. Google trends for 'wanghong', indicating interest by region over a ten-year period (January 2014–December 2024). Table by author.

Year	Number of results	Eligible for analysis
2014	3	n/a
2015	2	n/a
2016	7	7
2017	197	n/a
2018	281	n/a
2019	788	12
2020	2660	7
2021	1860	n/a
2022	2670	n/a
2023	2020	n/a
2024	1470	22

the inclusion criteria. Applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the number of articles eligible for analysis is noted below.

The articles were then coded for the general focus of their contents, including discussions of *wanghong* with respects to commerce, genres, industry, adjective use, trajectories, trends, places, metadata, destinations, items, and festivals (see Table 2).

These general themes guided the framework for the main discursive elements covered across the corpus of articles, giving rise to the open codes below. The headlines, story, and figure captions for all articles were then coded in five iterations, each focused on the following open codes, which represent the main discursive shifts in the international press discourse on *wanghong*:

- **Conceptual synonyms:** What terms were conflated or used interchangeably with 'wanghong';
- **Genre:** What categories of content are referenced;
- **Platforms:** What interfaces or services are mentioned;
- **Topics:** What subject matters are discussed; and
- **Concerns:** What troubling issues are raised

Table 2. Content focus of articles on *wanghong* in the corpus (2016, 2019, 2020, 2024). Table by author.

Year	Articles	Themes	Corpus
2016	2	<i>wanghong</i> commerce	Meng (2016); Tsoi (2016)
	2	<i>wanghong</i> genres	BBC (2016); Yin (2016)
2019	7	<i>wanghong</i> , industry	Brown (2019); Han (2019); Oh and Kim (2019); Siyan (2019); Specter (2019); The Moodie Davitt Report News Room (2019); Youmshajekian (2019)
2020	5	<i>wanghong</i> as adjective	Chew (2019); Knotts (2019); Li (2019a); Li (2019b); Yu (2019)
	2	<i>wanghong</i> trajectories, trends	Wu (2020a); Zhuang (2020)
2024	4	<i>wanghong</i> places	Liu (2020); Nelson (2020); Sun (2020); Zhang (2020)
	1	<i>wanghong</i> in metadata	Leung (2020)
2024	6	<i>wanghong</i> trends, new phenomena	Armen Press (2024); Aw (2024); Lim (2024); Nan (2024); Tortermvasana (2024); Wang (2024)
	9	<i>wanghong</i> destinations, items, festivals	Kilpatrick (2024); MacLaren (2024); Steiner (2024a); Steiner (2024b); Sun (2024); Vinci (2024); Wainwright (2024); Wu (2024); Wu (2020b)
	8	<i>wanghong</i> in metadata	Jeon (2024); Lee (2024); Lee (2024); Lu (2024); Sun (2024); Tan (2024); Zhang (2024); Zhang (2024)

The sections below discuss the analyses of these five discursive elements in relation to their axial and closed codes.

Conceptual synonyms

The conceptual synonyms for *wanghong* in the international press discourse point to implications in three ways. Firstly, they underscore the medium of the market, reminding readers that *wanghong* is a concept, a role, and a career that originates on the internet and in digital cultures, thus setting it apart from more older valuations of mainstream celebrity from the traditional entertainment industries. When their impact is assessed alongside traditional celebrity, *wanghong* are mainstreamed in the discussion and perceived as equal – if not more competitive – actors in the attention economy. Secondly, they underscore the economics of the *wanghong* industry, generally highlighting their leadership, persuasion, and impact on audiences as prospective consumers. The focus on the economic contributions and skillsets of *wanghong* demonstrate that they are becoming indispensable and thus mainstream to the advertising and marketing industries. Thirdly, the internationalisation of *wanghong* has seen them being interchangeably referred to by conceptual synonyms (like ‘influencer’ and ‘creator’) that originate from global markets and platforms, indicating that global news discourse has shifted its perspective of the phenomena being a uniquely Chinese phenomenon to an iteration of a more mainstream industry at large.

The early conceptual synonyms (Table 3) for *wanghong* were products of their time, evoking the dated prefix ‘cyber’ in 2016, before leaning into the prefix ‘online’ and ‘internet’ in 2019. At this point, the definitions of *wanghong* still focused on the medium of the market, or how they were an online, internet, or digital entity, as opposed to mainstream ‘offline’ celebrities in the more traditional entertainment industries like film and television.

Between 2019 and 2020, ‘key opinion leaders’ and ‘key opinion customers’ – which are terms that tend to highlight the economic potential of *wanghong* over their socio-cultural and political potentials – began to take root. The more international term ‘influencer’ also began to enter the lexicon, as news outlets were moving away from pigeon-holed and exceptional framings of *wanghong* in the Chinese market, to understanding them as being a part of the global influencer and internet celebrity industries. Through conceptual synonyms like ‘mukbang stars’, 2020 also saw the introduction of cross-cultural conceptualisations of *wanghong* across genres and practice, as the phenomenon of ‘mukbang’ which originated in South Korea began to proliferate across Asia to become especially popular in the Chinese markets. Since 2020, terms from the international market were more prominent in the lexicon, with *wanghong* being prominently described as ‘influencers’ (Aw 2024, Jeon 2024, Lee 2024, Lim 2024, Wang 2024, Zhang 2024, 2024), micro-influencers (Aw 2024), and ‘creators’ (Tortermvasana 2024). The focus on *wanghong* economics is maintained through the dominance of ‘key opinion leaders’ or ‘KOLs’, but global understandings of the influencer market have also flourished to include variants and gradations like ‘micro-influencers’.

Between 2020 and 2024, the vernacular of ‘creators’ became globally popular, considering platforms like the newly emerging TikTok launching international creator partnership programmes and the established YouTube upgrading their creator programmes.

Table 3. Conceptual synonyms for ‘*wanghong*’ in the international press discourse (2016, 2019, 2020, 2024). Table by author.

Year	Conceptual synonym	Corpus
2016	Market medium: ‘cyber personalities’ ‘cyber celebrities’ ‘cyber stars’ ‘online stars’ ‘internet celebrities’	Meng (2016); Tsoi (2016); Yin (2016)
2019	Market medium: ‘online celebrities’ ‘internet celebrities’ Economics: ‘key opinion leader’ or ‘KOL’ Internationalisation: ‘influencer’	Oh and Kim (2019); Siyan (2019); Specter (2019); Youmshajekian (2019) Brown (2019); Youmshajekian (2019) The Moodie Davitt Report News Room (2019)
2020	Market medium: ‘internet celebrities’ Economics: ‘key opinion leader’, ‘KOL’ ‘key opinion customer’, ‘KOC’ Internationalisation: ‘mukbang stars’	Jiayun (2020); Wu (2020a) Zhuang (2020) Leung (2020)
2024	Market medium: ‘online personalities’ ‘online celebrities’ ‘internet celebrity’ ‘internet sensation’ ‘internet famous’ Economics: ‘key opinion leaders’, ‘KOL’ Internationalisation: ‘influencer’ ‘micro-influencers’ ‘creators’	Armen Press (2024); Aw (2024); Kilpatrick (2024); Lim (2024); Sun (2024); Tan (2024); Tortermvasana (2024); Wainwright (2024); Wu (2024b) Lu (2024); Nan (2024) Aw (2024); Jeon (2024); Lee (2024); Lim (2024); Tortermvasana (2024); Wang (2024); Zhang (2024); Zhang (2024)

Despite this diversification, the collective efforts towards understanding the different categories, forms, and nuances of *wanghong* point to its mainstreaming rather than its erasure, indicating an evolution towards industry maturity. In 2024, international press interest in *wanghong* appeared to decline significantly (Table 3), but a closer interrogation of the conceptual synonyms deployed brings more optimism. There was a return to the historical context and origin stories of *wanghong*, invoking the prefixes ‘online’ and ‘internet’ again. The dominance of ‘internet celebrity’ as the preferred conceptual synonym of the mid-2020s has elicited the reinstallation of ‘internet’ as an adjective modifier, with *wanghong* also being described as ‘internet sensation’ (Wu 2024b) and ‘internet-famous’ (Wainwright 2024).

Genres

In general, the genres of *wanghong* content covered content styles, demographics, and practices (Table 4). Articles covering content styles tended to deliver primers on new genres, including the typical visual elements that make the genre identifiable, the main topics covered in the genre, and the demographics they may best appeal to. Throughout the years, the news coverage has covered the usual genres like ‘fashion’ and ‘beauty’ but

Table 4. *‘Wanghong’* genres in the international press discourse (2016, 2019, 2020, 2024). Table by author.

Year	Genres	Corpus
2016	Contents: Fashion Demographics: Grassroots, <i>Laowai</i> , Youth Practices: Accidental virality	Tsoi (2016) Meng (2016); Yin (2016) BBC (2016)
2019	Contents: Beauty, Traditional culture Practices: Livestreaming	Brown (2019); Siyan (2019) Han (2019); Oh and Kim (2019)
2020	Genres: Rural, Mukbang Impact: E-commerce, Sales	Leung (2020); Sun (2020); Wu (2020a) Sun (2020); Wu (2020a)
2024	Contents: Rural, Luxury, Political Practices: Livestreaming	Armen Press (2024); Lee (2024); Nan (2024); Wang (2024); Zhang (2024) Armen Press (2024); Aw (2024); Kilpatrick (2024); Lee (2024)

equally spotlight genres unique to the greater China market like *‘laowai’*, *‘traditional culture’*, and *‘rural’*. In response to socio-political nuances in the Chinese market, the coverage has also caught on to timely developments to focus on the backlash against the *‘luxury’* genre, or the emergence of the *‘political’* genre. This deeper, culturally situated insight has assisted in the mainstreaming of *wanghong* as it introduces diversity and depth to the phenomenon. The various practices of *wanghong* continue to occupy the global news coverage, but later pieces from 2019 have focused on livestreaming and *wanghong’s* significant impacts on e-commerce and sales, thereby moving away from mere descriptors to deeper dives into their significant contributions towards the development of platforms and the maturity of the economy.

For content styles, *‘fashion’* and *‘beauty’* were long popular in the *wanghong* industry. By 2019–2020, newer genres were introduced in the press discourse, including rural *wanghong* who showcase traditional heritage through practices and products (Sun 2020, Wu 2020a), and mukbang *wanghong* (Leung 2020) or livestream binge eating marathon streamers. These point to the proliferation of subcultures and diversity of interests in the market. In the early wave of 2016, *wanghong* were still discussed as genres of demographics: Those from the *‘grassroots’* in opposition to traditional celebrity, the first cohort of *‘laowai’ wanghong* in an otherwise relatively homogenous domestic market, and the prolific indication of *‘youth’* and young people who were evidencing financial success earlier in their life course. Finally, the practices of *wanghong* genres have shifted from *‘accidental virality’* to the more intentional craft of *‘livestreaming’* especially for *‘e-commerce’* and *‘sales’* agenda. These point to a clearer delineation of *wanghong’s* impact on the economy, with *‘e-commerce’* (Wu 2020a) and *‘sales’* (Sun 2020) being described as genres in conjunction with earlier practices of content creation.

Platforms

Three types of platforms dominate the press discourse on *wanghong* (see Table 5). The long-term references to super apps underscore global interest in the complex and mature platform markets in the greater China region, including the uncanny ability of businesses, tech conglomerates, the financial sector, and government bodies to collaborate and streamline the everyday experiences and logistics of consumers and citizens (Jia *et al.* 2022, Steinberg *et al.* 2022). Discussions of video platforms pivot according to market

Table 5. ‘*Wanghong*’ platforms in the international press discourse (2016, 2019, 2020, 2024). Table by author.

Year	Platforms	Corpus
2016	Super apps: WeChat, Weibo Video: Bilibili E-commerce: Taobao	Tsoi (2016) Yin (2016) Tsoi (2016)
2019	Super apps: Weibo Video: Douyu E-commerce: Taobao	Brown (2019); Siyan (2019); Youmshajekian (2019) Specter (2019) The Moodie Davitt Report News Room (2019); Youmshajekian (2019)
2020	Super apps: Weibo Video: Douyin, Kuaishou, Xiaohongshu International: Instagram	Zhuang (2020) Sun (2020); Zhuang (2020) Zhuang (2020)
2024	Super apps: Weibo, WeChat Video: Douyin, Kuaishou, Xiaohongshu	Armen Press (2024); Jeon (2024); Tan (2024); Zhang (2024) Armen Press (2024); Aw (2024); Jeon (2024); Lee (2024); Lu (2024); Nan (2024); Tan (2024); Zhang (2024); Zhang (2024)

trends, demonstrating a sensibility in tracing how the *wanghong* industry itself is mainstreaming its uptake of emergent platforms and formats. E-commerce platforms are another mainstay in the greater Chinese market, and continued global press interest in the market has facilitated the mainstreaming of its structure and operations, especially as international versions – like Alibaba Group’s AliExpress and PDD Holdings’ Temu – have been launched for external markets.

Firstly, there are consistent references to micro-blogging sites and super apps like Weibo and WeChat throughout the years, considering their legacy and longevity in the Chinese market. While there are also continued mentions of video platforms, they have shifted from longforms like ‘Bilibili’, to livestreams like ‘Douyu’, to shortforms like ‘Douyin’, ‘Kuaishou’, and ‘Xiaohongshu’. Finally, there is a longstanding focus on e-commerce platforms like ‘Taobao’ and ‘Xiaohongshu’, considering the very early association of *wanghong* with sales marketing. While Xiaohongshu is not exclusively a short video app

Table 6. Platforms featuring ‘*wanghong*’ in the international press discourse (2016, 2019, 2020, 2024). Table by author.

Year	Topics	Corpus
2016	Practices: Luxury and glamour Economics: High income, e-commerce experts Internationalisation: Intercultural audience reception	Tsoi (2016) Meng (2016); Tsoi (2016) Yin (2016)
2019	Economics: Brand marketing value, Livestream sales, Shopping festivals, Livestream campaigns, Fan donations, Brand owners Industry: Eateries, Cafes, Verticals, Agencies Internationalisation: Foreign brands, Bilateral business partnerships	Siyan (2019); Oh and Kim (2019); Youmshajekian (2019) Brown (2019); Siyan (2019); See Table 7 Oh and Kim (2019); The Moodie Davitt Report News Room (2019)
2020	Economics: Pandemic livestreams, Shopping mall collaborations, Government investment Industry: Governance, Regulation Internationalisation: Appeal to foreigners, Platform aesthetics	Wu (2020a) Sun (2020) Sun (2020); Zhuang (2020)
2024	Economics: Rising valuation, Livestream direct sales, Consumer patterns Industry: Recognised as occupation, Industry accolades, Consolidated buildings, City initiatives, Entrepreneurs becoming <i>wanghong</i> Internationalisation: Korean collaboration, Thai investment Practices: Parasociality, Charity work, Cultural diplomats	Armen Press (2024); Aw (2024) Aw (2024); Kilpatrick (2024); Lim (2024) Lee (2024); Tortermvasana (2024) Lu 2024; Nan 202; Wang (2024)

nor solely an e-commerce platform, its integrated functions along with social media features have made it popular over the years. Only one international platform is mentioned in the corpus – Instagram (Zhuang 2020) – although there was no elaboration on its connection to the *wanghong* market.

Topics

The range of topics in the global news discourse on *wanghong* has broadly focused on economics, internationalisation, industry, and practices (see Table 6). All four topics are consistently surfaced in the news corpus, but the nature of their discussions and the extent of detail has become more precise and sophisticated over the years. The coverage often corresponds to the rapid developments in the greater China market, thus mainstreaming insight into the backend processes of the *wanghong* industry as it unfolds.

Considering their integral contributions to the advertising industry, discussions on *wanghong* economics are a staple in the news corpus. 2016 focused on the earning power of *wanghong*, including tallies of their peak earnings out-earning even mainstream celebrities from the traditional entertainment industries of film and television (Tsoi 2016), and how their pace of sales established them as emerging e-commerce experts (Meng 2016). Press fascination with the income of *wanghong* continues into 2019, but more critical discussion focuses on their marketing value for brands (Youshshajekian 2019), and newer models of commerce like livestream sales (Siyan 2019) and online shopping festivals tied to livestream sales campaigns (Oh and Kim 2019). During the pandemic in 2020, *wanghong* were highlighted for being crucial to maintaining livestream sales (Wu 2020a), and later on installing successful collaborations with offline shopping malls in post-pandemic recovery, as supported by investment from government departments (Wu 2020a). In 2024, the press notes that the *wanghong* continues to rise in valuation (Armen Press 2024), and the focus on livestreaming to engage in direct sales (Aw 2024) is stronger, in the context of changing consumer behaviour patterns where audiences prefer visual

Table 7. Topics featuring ‘*wanghong*’ modifiers in the international press discourse (2016, 2019, 2020, 2024). Table by author.

<i>Wanghong</i> modifier	Examples
<i>Wanghong</i> establishments	Cafes, shops (Knotts 2019, Yu 2019) Mall (Nelson 2020) Restaurant (Sun 2020) Eatery (Steiner 2024a) Building (Wainwright 2024)
<i>Wanghong</i> destinations	Mountains (Liu 2020) Cities (Sun 2024) Roads (MacLaren 2024) Site of attraction Wu (2024b)
<i>Wanghong</i> products	Traditional snacks (Chew 2019) Foods (Steiner 2024b) Miscellaneous items (Wu 2024)
<i>Wanghong</i> aesthetics	‘ <i>wanghong</i> brands’ (Zhang 2020) ‘trendy <i>wanghong</i> concepts’ (Li 2019a, 2019b) ‘ <i>wanghong</i> style’ (Zhuang 2020) <i>wanghong</i> Airbnb and fashion (Zhuang 2020) <i>wanghong</i> event (Vinci 2024) ‘ <i>wanghong</i> -style reporting’ (Armen Press 2024)

contents delivered by *wanghong* and rely on their interpersonal skills to make purchasing decisions (Armen Press 2024).

The topic of internationalisation has been recurring and becoming more specialised throughout the years. Initially, there was a special focus on the new genre of 'laowai stars' and how they are popular on Chinese platforms for appearing 'exotic' to domestic audiences (Yin 2016). By 2019, news reports began to highlight the emerging global power of *wanghong*, who were increasingly hired by foreign brands and companies to promote to domestic Chinese consumers (The Moodie Davitt Report News Room 2019), and who were prioritised in bilateral business partnerships such as the establishment of live-streaming studios in Korea exclusively for Chinese *wanghong* to promote Korean products while travelling abroad (Oh and Kim 2019). Given the growing international popularity of the rural *wanghong* genre, articles in 2020 focused on their appeal to foreigners (Sun 2020) and began to illuminate platform-specific norms and aesthetics (Zhuang 2020) that may be second nature to locals but new to foreigners. By 2024, international investment in and collaboration with Chinese *wanghong* and their expertise is growing. Korean brands continue to enter the Chinese market to tap on the skills of *wanghong* (Lee 2024), and Thai companies are investing in creators by drawing on the expertise gleaned from *wanghong* economies (Tortermvasana 2024).

From 2019, the press began to focus more on the industry and structure of the *wanghong* phenomenon, focusing on industry verticals (Brown 2019, Siyan 2019) and the role of agencies in brokering connections between businesses and *wanghong* (Brown 2019). The 'second generation' of *wanghong* were also beginning to emerge as successful brand owners rather than mere content creators (Siyan 2019). Given the rapid maturity of the industry, 2020 pivoted to discussions on governance and regulation, shedding light on prohibitions of illegal marketing of goods and services (Sun 2020) as the livestreaming industry continued to flourish. By 2024, 'live-streamers' were recognised as an official occupation by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security from 2020 (Aw 2024), and *wanghong* were collectively validated through industry accolades such as *wanghong* being named on Forbes lists (Aw 2024). They also began to consolidate in specific buildings with local city initiatives dedicated to supporting their trade (Kilpatrick 2024). The concept and practices have become so mainstream that business leaders and entrepreneurs are also being encouraged to be *wanghong* to promote their sales (Lim 2024).

The practices of *wanghong* are still occasionally mentioned in the press discourse, although the focus has shifted from introductions to illuminating their parasocial strategies, like assuaging envy by pointing to how some audiences enjoyed the 'likeable' (Lu 2024) personas of the top 1%, and how some luxury *wanghong* also make charitable contributions (Nan 2024). The press also considered the new emergence of political *wanghong* as a genre, with an article focused on *wanghong* as 'cultural diplomats' and how they are involved in political movements (Wang 2024).

Concerns

Finally, the discourse of public concerns about *wanghong* have stretched from surface-level optics like beauty standards and accurate representation, to more nuanced praxis like market saturation and structures of regulation. There are consistent concerns over the saturation of the industry, which has featured strongly in the corpus throughout the years.

However, the market continues to grow and expand in the past decade, evidencing that the discussion is not aimed at questioning the longevity of the *wanghong* industry, but to provoke conversation on projecting its next iteration, development, or progression specifically because it has fast become mainstream.

In 2016, there were concerns regarding the unrealistic beauty standards set by *wanghong*, exemplified through trends like ‘internet celebrity face’ (Tsoi 2016) or ‘*wanghong lian*’, which in turn appeared to encourage young people to undergo plastic surgery. Despite ‘*laowai wanghong*’ being a relatively emergent genre, there were already concerns it was approaching saturation given the volume of foreigners who appear ‘exotic’ by Chinese beauty standards and who could speak Mandarin fluently (Yin 2016). Finally, there was also emerging scepticism as to how accidental or orchestrated overnight *wanghong* or *baohong wanghong* were, with commentary questioning the marketing behind the growing trend of such instances.

As discourse about *wanghong*, luxury, and income became mainstream, in 2019 concerns focused on their values and morals. Articles focused on faux pas by some *wanghong*, such as exploiting the homeless from over-exposure in their livestreams (Han 2019) and the excessive use of beauty livestream filters to the point of deception (Specter 2019). Considering the growing international interest and investment in *wanghong*, there was also general commentary about whether the late-2010s generation of *wanghong* as a cohort were engaging in fair representation of Chinese society and values (Siyao 2019).

In 2020, there were two main concerns regarding *wanghong*. Firstly, as *wanghong* were swiftly becoming mainstream both in the Chinese market and worldwide, commentaries began to consider the consequence of their saturation, describing rampant store displays and building interiors as ‘overkill’ and ‘gimmick[y]’ (Zhang 2020), and the now well-rehearsed marketing efforts as ‘cheapen[ing] the concept’ (Zhuang 2020). Secondly, *wanghong* governance has emerged as an important concern, pointing to the need to regulate some genres due to clickbait and wasteful behaviour (Leung 2020), and the legal consequences faced by prolific *wanghong* who have committed false advertising (Sun 2020).

By 2024, the press corpus surfaced three main concerns about the *wanghong* industry. The most prominent concerned governance, specifically the regulation of ‘excessive wealth flaunting’ (Zhang 2024) through bans (Jeon 2024, Zhang 2024), ‘disappearances’ (Zhang 2024), and being made ‘unsearchable’ (Zhang 2024), and campaigns from the Cyberspace Administration of China (Zhang 2024). Regulation was also taking place among *wanghong* for tax evasion (Aw 2024), and some *wanghong* who have engaged in false advertising have been sentenced to prison terms (Lee 2024). The second concern questioned the authenticity of *wanghong* performances, as unlike the original ethos of being from the grassroots, entrepreneurs are being suspected of relying on paid staff to cultivate their online persona (Tan 2024). Finally, perhaps signifying the rapid growth and maturity of the *wanghong* industry, commentaries and editorials were highlighting the possible saturation and limits of growth, arising from the stringent workings of platform algorithms and recommender systems (Aw 2024), and the plagiarising of *wanghong*’s products (Kilpatrick 2024).

Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated that the horizontal expansion of the breadth of topics covered and the vertical expansion of the depth of specificity conveyed has resulted in

more nuanced contextualisations of the *wanghong* phenomenon across the years, leading to enhanced understandings of the industry in the mainstream milieu. The discourse has shifted away from mere descriptors and primers that plainly introduce the industry, to commentaries and editorials that raise important questions about the state, growth, and future of the industry, which in turn point to the integration of *wanghong* discourse across socio-cultural, economic, political, and diplomatic sectors. Moreover, the magnitude of the news coverage has extended from a siloed focus on the domestic market of greater China, to the cross-cultural and international partnerships, implications, and significance of *wanghong* as they become mainstream as a concept, a role, a career, a market, and an industry globally. More crucially, the news coverage has emphasised the increasing institutionalisation of the *wanghong* ecology, with industry stakeholders and government partnering up to boost investments in and better regulate the sector. This points to more stringent governance across the board, and is reflected in the discourse of public concerns about *wanghong* which have stretched from optics like beauty standards and accurate representation, to praxis like market saturation and structures of regulation.

Further, two more meta-trends have surfaced which point to the mainstreaming of *wanghong* as a discourse. Beyond being a person or actor, the notion of ‘*wanghong*’ has been expanded as an abstraction and concept (see Table 7), echoing the scholarship of Xu (2024), Zhang *et al.* (2022), and Zou (2025). This includes *wanghong* establishments, which are places of business designed to be experienced in person and photographed for documentary on social media; *wanghong* destinations, which are natural attractions and scenic urban spots that have been marketed as iconic attractions; *wanghong* products, which are items designed to be photogenic and are thus deemed exclusive or valuable; and *wanghong* aesthetics, which describe a sensibility and ethos of prioritising high visibility and interest, however superficial, to attract attention.

Most importantly, within the *wanghong* industry, a proliferation of developments across socio-cultural, economic, political, and diplomatic domains (see Table 8) point to the institutionalisation of *wanghong* cultures. Firstly, interest in the practices of *wanghong*

Table 8. Categories of ‘*wanghong*’ concerns across domains in the international press discourse (2016, 2019, 2020, 2024). Table by author.

Domain	Examples
Practices (socio-cultural)	‘Create original content’ (Tsoi 2016) Association with ‘grassroots’ (Meng 2016) Connect with ‘young netizen’ (Meng 2016) Accidental virality (BBC 2016) Rural vlogs and <i>wanghong</i> (Siyan 2019, Sun 2020, Wu 2020a) Saturation and struggles (Aw 2024, Kilpatrick 2024)
Entrepreneurship (economics)	Livestreaming becoming popular (Siyan 2019) E-commerce livestreaming proliferating (Sun 2020, Wu 2020a), <i>Wanghong</i> entrepreneurs as a strategy (Lim 2024, Tan 2024)
Governance (politics)	Regulate mukbang and false advertising (Leung 2020, Sun 2020) Bans on excessive luxury (Jeon 2024, Zhang 2024, 2024) Regulate tax evasion (Aw 2024, Lee 2024)
Internationalisation (diplomacy)	‘ <i>Laowai</i> ’ appeal to domestic audiences (Yin 2016) <i>Wanghong</i> promote Korean products (Oh and Kim 2019, The Moodie Davitt Report News Room 2019) <i>Wanghong</i> lubricate Korean brands’ entry into China (Lee 2024) <i>Wanghong</i> expertise in Thailand investment (Tortermvasana 2024) Internationalisation of ‘ <i>wanghong</i> ’ as ‘influencers’ (Aw 2024, Lee 2024, Lim 2024, Lu 2024, Sun 2024, Tan 2024, Zhang 2024, 2024)

have evolved from a mere description of their work, to the inner workings of their production, to diversity across genres and formats, to reflections on the harsher realities of the business. Secondly, *wanghong* have become a cornerstone in entrepreneurship, at first popularising digital technologies like livestreaming, then evidencing economic potential through e-commerce success, then being widely adopted as a business strategy across verticals. Thirdly, *wanghong* have been mainstreamed and institutionalised through governance and regulation, at first enacted as a reactionary measure in light of wasteful consumption and false advertising, then as a pre-emptive measure to standardise tax disclosures and punish tax evasion. Finally, the internationalisation of *wanghong* visibility, skillsets, and ethos point to the global mainstreaming of the phenomenon, with early 'laowai' *wanghong* already learning *wanghong* techniques to appeal to domestic audiences, *wanghong* involvement in the promotion of foreign brands domestically and internationally, *wanghong* expertise being utilised to cultivate other domestic markets, and a gradual shift in the lexicon to acknowledge *wanghong* as less of an exotic outlier and more as a significant and instrument part of the global influencer industry.

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Notes on contributor

Crystal Abidin is Professor of Internet Studies at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia. She is Director of the Influencer Ethnography Research Lab, and Founder of the TikTok Cultures Research Network. Contributions to this paper were supported by an ARC DECRA (DE190100789). Reach her at wishcrys.com.

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Appendix A: List of news articles studied in the international press discourse

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