

From grassroots to celebrities in healthcare— professionality as a new persona in China's celebrity culture

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Abstract

The global pandemic motivated the emergence of grassroots celebrities in healthcare who led online opinion through their professional insights and sharing of health and medical-related knowledge in China. A certain number of practitioners introduced their professional guidance to general netizens through pay-for-answer subscription with the help of Chinese social media. This article interrogates grassroots celebrities via Zhihu, China’s largest community for questions and answers (CQA). It extends Western-focused scholarship on microcelebrities.

Keywords: Zhihu, grassroots celebrity, answerer, professionality, medical, healthcare, pandemic

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Introduction

During the two years of the global pandemic (2020-22), platform-based knowledge sharing has enriched the celebrity industry that a growing number of medical practitioners turned to be a microcelebrity with more than 100,000 followers online. Through sharing their professional guidance, medical practitioners gained their prominence and thousands of followers on social media sites. In doing so, we argue, these practitioners may be considered ‘grassroots celebrities’ whose professionalism plays a key role in leading online opinion and building a new type of public persona. These grassroots celebrities accumulated large numbers of followers on short notice and initiated their own businesses through pay-for-answers subscriptions with the help of social media. We contend that the global pandemic and platform development cultivated these new types of internet celebrities (grassroots celebrities) and business models, which diversified the attention economy. This essay, therefore, aims to scrutinise the nuanced manifestation of internet celebrities in medical and health areas during and after the global pandemic in ways that extend existing celebrity studies research on microcelebrities.

Internet Celebrity Studies

In celebrity studies, the notion of celebrity refers to ‘a person whose name, image, lifestyle, and opinions carry cultural and economic worth, and who are first and foremost idealised popular media constructions’ (Redmond 2013, p.5). Due to the evolution of cultural, social and technological contexts, the term celebrity has been enriched and updated- internet celebrities have come into being as the infusion of celebrity culture occurs through social media as a manifestation of deep mediatisation (Couldry and Hepp 2016). The advent of the internet and the wide application of social media facilitate internet celebrities to ‘attain prominence and popularity native to the internet’ (Guan 2020, p.326). The internet celebrity,

thereby, depends on ‘the cultural norms of the people, the social practices around media devices and personalities, and the structure of technological capabilities that mediate a population’s access to content’ (Abidin 2018, p.2). Social media/digital technologies afford the chance for ordinary people to brand themselves, leading to online fame which they cannot attain in the offline world (Khamis *et al.* 2017). As Xu *et al.* (2019, p.86) argue, the emergence of ordinary celebrities is another trend in the scholarship of internet celebrities because ‘ordinary people can not only easily access celebrity content and sometimes become caught up in celebrity news everywhere, but also seem to have more opportunities than ever to broadcast their own extraordinariness (e.g. Turner 2010, Redmond 2013)’. Because of the affordance offered by social media technologies, an increasing number of ordinary people brand and market themselves to become internet celebrities by infusing everyday practices such as providing professional guidance and leading the trend of consumption.

Understanding Microcelebrity

The inclusion of the everydayness of ordinary people has enriched the term of internet celebrity by engaging with microcelebrity. Microcelebrity was coined by Senft (2008), who describes ‘ordinary people – the audiences of traditional celebrities – using social media to build fame’ (p.52). Early research on microcelebrities explored the dynamics of personal branding and self-commodification that focused on individual influence and its relations with the public (Senft 2008, 2013, Marwick and Boyd 2011a, 2011b). Later, it turned to the study of the process of ‘cyber-self-presentation’ (Marshall 2014, Turner 2010, 2013). Marwick (2017, p.1) argues, ‘microcelebrity is both the state of being well known to a niche group of people and a practice whereby people present themselves public personas, create affective ties with audience members and view followers as fans’. Self-branding has become a key research arena for microcelebrity studies (Marshall 2014, Turner 2010 2013, Marwick 2017)

as it is one of the marketing strategies that have been frequently adopted by microcelebrities to gain attention and build fame. Over this process, the internet greatly facilitates microcelebrities for self-branding and attention garnering - specifically, social media technologies allow individuals to engage enormous audiences for their status updates, digital pictures, or creative work (Marwick 2017). Microcelebrities utilise social media technologies to ‘amp up’ their popularity and treat visibility as a status to build and maintain their persona online (Senft 2008, Marwick 2015, Johnston 2020)- they may also respond to individual inquiries or share intimate moments to deepen the bond between themselves and their followers (Marwick 2017). On the one hand, microcelebrities take great pains in their self-branding for online fame, which they cannot attain in the offline world (Khamis *et al.* 2017, Usher 2020); on the other, they become mindful of authenticity, intimacy, and access in maintaining professional relations with fans (Johnston 2020) as it may easily run counter to a carefully constructed persona.

Grassroots Celebrity in Healthcare in China

Chinese grassroots celebrities for online opinions and shopping are an emerging subgroup of microcelebrities, the implications of which have been largely amplified in times of COVID-19 when people were enforced to stay at home and rely on the internet (e.g. digital apps or platforms) for daily necessities (Fan 2020). Zhihu, a socialised question-and-answer platform in China that establishes a space for knowledge sharing (Deng *et al.* 2020), plays a key role in helping grassroots medical practitioners share and disseminate professional knowledge about healthcare and become internet celebrities through their knowledge sharing and pay-for-answer subscription during and after the pandemic. Zhihu meanwhile facilitates netizens to possess a better understanding of medical-related knowledge/products/services by asking different questions and reading the posts from the answerers in Zhihu communities even if

their first encounters with the products and services in person may be delayed due to restrictions emerging from the global pandemic. Therefore, we focus on Zhihu to unpack these grassroots celebrities and the evolved pay-for-answer model in detail. By employing the netnography method (including participant observation, digital interaction, posts and comments reviews, and digital scraping on Zhihu), we observed 83 influential Zhihu accounts (answerers) with more than 100,000 followers and 100,000 likes from May 2020 to August 2023 and focused on nine Zhihu accounts (answerers) that have paid special attention to healthcare and medical-related areas to examine how grassroots celebrities promoted the knowledge-sharing economy by answering netizens' questions and initiating pay-for-answer subscription. The table below is thereof created based on our observation of the nine medical Zhihu accounts that share pandemic and health information.

Table 1. Zhihu answerers who share COVID-19-related knowledge with more than 100,000 followers

Nicknames of Zhihu Accounts	No. of Followers	No. of Answers	No. of Likes	No. of Pay-for-Answer Subscriptions	Price of Every Question	No. of Recommended Products	No. of Online Lectures/Reviews
Curry Chicken	344,769	304	847,650	1,824	168RMB (text)/ 499RMB (video)	1	4
Jisa College- Leng Zhe	136,019	2,601	994,539	30	100 RMB (text)	18	n/a
Kkhenry	110,870	538	525,221	44	99RMB (text)	73	1
Miss Salt doesn't eat salt	119,927	273	151,228	131	39RMB (text)	n/a	n/a
Qian Sur	2,006,393	1,599	691,236	n/a	n/a	17	7
Shaking Hands- Doctor Mao	124,436	647	665,888	37	50RMB (text)	n/a	1
Spokesman of the deceased	448,539	763	331,708	n/a	n/a	22	10

Sun Yueli	182,825	1,141	176,041	1,091	39RMB (text)	28	15
Teacher A Yuan	821,556	2,187	391,255	374	50RMB (text)/ 200RMB (video)	205	6
Note: the accounts were collated alphabetically, and the data was collected by August 2023.							

All Zhihu answerers in the table have accumulated more than 100,000 followers and received over 100,000 likes as of August 2023. They are all from medical-related backgrounds and have been dedicated to addressing various questions about healthcare and medical science. Zhihu answerers rely on their professional knowledge in certain fields to introduce prescriptions, medicine, services and experience in choosing appropriate healthcare and medical products to netizens with different demands. Generally, they are inclined to post personal working experiences in certain areas to answer questions from other netizens. For instance, Qian Sur, the answerer with the most followers (2,006,393) in Table 1, is a doctor with doctoral and postdoctoral research in surgery. Writing posts, reviews and answers on Zhihu was initially a habit during her doctoral studies. Later, she noticed it is a good way to connect with netizens in different specialisations and help the public to address enquiries in which she is adept. Similarly, Sun Yueli, the answerer from Shanghai is a doctor in orthopaedics and traumatology. Relying on his professional knowledge in the aforementioned areas, he started to answer questions on Zhihu by posting clinical cases, charging fees for addressing questions from netizens, receiving commission from netizens' likes and comments, and benefiting from publishing online lectures/reviews and monographs, as well as recommending relevant products on his expertise. These are the typical ways for Zhihu answerers to make business and profits. Influential Zhihu answerers switched from an ordinary practitioner to a grassroots celebrity for attention economy who translated attention to tangible necessities for survival (e.g. money) as attention has always been limited, valuable, and scarce (Davenport and Beck 2001).

Our digital ethnography reveals that popular Zhihu accounts have initiated a new business model by introducing pay-for-answer subscriptions for individual followers who would like to ask specific questions that have not been covered in the existing reviews/answers. To this

end, followers/consumers can request one-to-one answers by paying extra money for tailored questions, subject to the price set by the answerers. If an answerer welcomes extra questions, s/he tends to show the price per question beforehand on his/her personal profile page. To keep the authenticity and draw attention, these answerers maintain frequent contact with followers and netizens to create intimate ties between themselves and the viewers by updating their answers. As part of our research, we observed the messages from netizens to the influential answerers and noted down the average turnaround time of their replies. The result shows answerers usually responded to questions/messages within one day. In general, Zhihu answerers request a pay-for-answer subscription or extra payment if the questions/messages take more than 30 minutes to complete. A majority of Zhihu answerers contributed to the collective community of knowledge sharing out of interest, not for making profits. This is also one of the major distinctions of grassroots celebrities: they develop their business on Zhihu for reciprocal benefits. The global pandemic thus afforded new business opportunities in this regard.

Professionality as a New Persona

Our research further reveals a certain number of Zhihu answerers began their e-business as practitioners through pay-for-answer subscriptions and professional introduction, which has evolved into a new type of occupation for *knowledge-led commerce* (*zhishidaihuo* in pinyin). In the process of turning from a Zhihu answerer to a grassroots celebrity, professionalism, as a new kind of social prominence and online fame, plays a crucial role. Grassroots celebrities heavily rely on their professionalism to target potential consumers for self-branding and e-marketing. To keep authenticity and credibility, all answerers in Table 1 have listed their working experience as either a doctor or a science writer in relevant areas on their personal profile pages for netizens' reference. During the pandemic, all answerers continued to write

posts and answer questions; what is more, they maintained a high frequency of sharing pandemic or health-related enquiries and experiences. This was an effective way of self-branding to build professional personae and fame and was welcomed by netizens through increasing likes, comments, pay-for-answer subscriptions and followers.

We observe that *professionality* has been interpreted and constructed in four ways: **a).** answerers all possess professional educational and/or working experience in health and medical-related areas with high academic qualifications. In Table 1, eight out of nine answerers have obtained a PhD degree. **b).** answerers remain insightful and objective in sharing clinical cases with texts and images, which means they must have dealt personally with each case; **c).** answerers have conducted thorough research before uploading a post and/or addressing a question- they all attached references to their writings like an academic essay for authenticity; **d).** answerers have been validated by Zhihu because of their frequent professional sharing and accumulated likes by thousands of netizens based on their posts.

Along with the construction of professionality, these cases showcase three intertwined features of the grassroots celebrities- **i).** answerers are adept at using professional reviews to e-brand themselves for netizens' attention, something that is widely recognised by the public as valuable social capital (*c.f.* Guo et al. 2017), and creates a new type of entrepreneurship because of their professionality; **ii).** answerers establish their professionality by either conducting research about certain healthcare products/services or detailing their personal experience as doctors/science writers to guide netizens, which has engaged with autoethnographic reflection; **iii).** answerers are open to all netizens, including interested and potential netizens beyond their fans and followers to welcome enquiries and critiques by open space of comments. This forum therefore creates a democratic sphere for knowledge update

and iteration for the public because people always have different enquiries about the various diseases around them in daily life. Especially during the pandemic, thousands of people were concerned about this new disease, which sparked a large number of online enquirers. It is different from microcelebrities in the existing scholarship who always focus on a niche group of people (Marwick 2017).

All of these ingredients contribute to the identity of grassroots celebrities that distinguish them from other internet celebrities (*wanghong* in pinyin). First, grassroots celebrities do not come into being for profit-making in the first instance, but out of interest, and occupy a unique position within the existing wanghong economy that is famous for ‘evolving performativity’ (Han 2021, p.318) and ‘stylized performances’ (Zhang and Hjorth 2019, p.810) as business strategies for monetary gains. It takes time for grassroots celebrities to earn a reputation of professionalism driven by their interest. Only for those with a reputation, can the business model of pay-for-answers subscription be motivated and progressed.

Second, grassroots celebrities create intimate ties/relations through frequent posts of professional answers and insightful sharing, which has formed into knowledge-sharing culture for knowledge-led commerce and knowledge-guided consumption. In this context, grassroots celebrities such as those influential Zhihu answerers are ‘knowledge providers’ that match up with the demand from ‘knowledge seekers’ (*cf.* Wang *et al.* 2020), who are netizens: a relationship between microcelebrities and followers (fans) that is not reliant on affective affinities, but on updated connectedness (Jerslev 2016). The fans of grassroots celebrities were connected by professional knowledge and not limited to a niche group of people (e.g. followers)- they are general netizens or even patients who require professional suggestions and guidance on healthcare and medicine, which is not a niche group of people

because of the outbreak of the pandemic in particular. For this reason, grassroots celebrities have acted as both Online Internet Influencers (OILs) (*cf.* Xin 2020) and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) (*cf.* Song *et al.* 2020) in this context.

Third, grassroots celebrities are open to knowledge contributions from any netizen. They are experts, but not monopolists in their specialised areas; instead, they are keen on social interaction for knowledge exchange with different stakeholders as a doctor celebrity. The role of knowledge providers is interchangeable as answerers could be an expert in specific cases but also a knowledge seeker in other circumstances. The interchangeability features the knowledge-sharing community and updates the understanding of internet celebrities.

Implications for Chinese Celebrity Culture

Internet celebrities have developed for more than a decade ‘as a viable identity and occupation’ (Johnston 2020, p.508). However, scarce attention has been paid to grassroots celebrity culture with professionalism and knowledge-led commerce in a non-Western context to date (especially during and after the global pandemic). Even though recent research has studied the social, political and economic values of doctors in China (Guo *et al.* 2017; Chen 2018), insufficient studies have examined practitioners as grassroots celebrities. Placing focus on grassroots celebrities in the Chinese digital sphere thus enriches studies of internet celebrity as it magnifies the value of professionalism and knowledge for the public whilst helping the public to address the dilemma of choosing appropriate healthcare/medication/remedies/medical products at home. Generically, the persona of Chinese internet celebrities is reinforced by the Chinese government, who emphasised moral virtue as an example and standard for the moral direction of society (Chen 2015). Celebrity culture is thus harnessed in China as a vehicle for promoting traditional virtues, socialist

values, and patriotism (Sullivan and Kehoe 2019). In the culture of grassroots celebrities, professionalism becomes the new persona and virtues of being pandemic celebrities, while grassroots-turned-celebrities further cultivate idol-follower relationships – as they maintain an authentic celebrity persona of professionalism and reliability in the attention economy. Different from other internet celebrities (*wanghong*), grassroots celebrities make great efforts to build their reputation and are dedicated to articulating their knowledge presentation online. As a new type of microcelebrity, grassroots celebrities contribute their knowledge out of interest that serves as an asset for the identity construction of pandemic celebrities.

Although the future development of grassroots celebrities is difficult to predict, its societal, cultural, and economic implications have validated the popularity and authenticity of the emerging subgroup of internet celebrities in recent years. This essay has suggested that the global pandemic forged the conditions for new types of grassroots celebrities, such as those popular medical Zhihu answerers who largely helped netizens to tackle the difficulty of not being able to have timely treatment and advice about certain symptoms at the special time. The construction of their celebrity identity provides new insights into the studies of pandemic celebrities, especially from a non-Western perspective. Thus, further research in this area is strongly suggested to understand the dynamics of grassroots celebrity culture and its relation to various stakeholders in digital capitalism.

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Additional information

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