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The “Journalistic I” in Multiplatform: A Comparative Study of Chinese Journalists’ Branding Practices

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ABSTRACT

Taking Goffman’s theater metaphor as a theoretical perspective, this study explores how Chinese journalists engage in branding practices in a multiplatform environment through content analysis of profiles ($N = 34$) and posts ($N = 506$) from Weibo and Douyin. The results show that journalists tend to employ Weibo as a relationship-oriented platform, offering back stage insights, humor, and support for personal, organizational, and institutional brands. Conversely, Douyin is more understood by journalists as a content-oriented platform, favored for publishing matters related to public affairs and expressing personal perspectives on news topics. The results also reveal the platform preferences of Chinese journalists’ branding practices across media types. Journalists from party-oriented official media and market-oriented commercial media have balanced professionalism and individuality by flexibly applying platform logic, while market-oriented commercial media journalists have maintained a relatively consistent presentation of their identity on Weibo and Douyin. This study provides insights into the dynamics of journalistic branding and the concept of the “journalistic I.”

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Introduction

With news organizations’ embrace of social media, the focus on personal brand development has undeniably become a crucial component of modern journalists’ careers (Mellado and Alfaro 2020). Research shows that journalists have crossed traditional professional boundaries and norms by incorporating commentary, opinion, and humor into their social media content (Hedman 2015; Mast and Temmerman 2021). They are no longer the “nameless” figures behind the scenes of news reporting but have become the “journalistic I” active on the front stage. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among professional journalists, who face a precarious business model and diminishing public trust in the media (Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2019).

The widespread acceptance of social media also poses a significant challenge to journalistic norms. Objectivity has traditionally upheld the public authority of journalism and profoundly shaped journalists’ perceptions of professional practices (Blaagaard 2013;

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Harbers and Broersma 2014). However, a revised understanding of subjectivity conceives journalism as a hybrid practice, situating journalists along “a continuum between pure unobtainable objectivity and inherent subjectivities” (van Antwerpen and Fielding 2023, 186). Journalists continually navigate the reconciliation between professional norms of objectivity and subjectivity to “redefine their public task in an online environment” (Brems et al. 2017, 443). In this context, they must consider how to present themselves directly to audiences on social media, rather than assuming their traditional role as objective reporters.

While a comprehensive body of literature has illuminated journalists’ perceptions of branding and their practices (e.g., Canter 2015; Hanusch 2018; Hedman 2015), empirical studies focusing on Chinese journalists are still markedly scarce. Chinese journalists adhere to Confucian intellectual ideals in their participation in public affairs (Pan and Lu 2003), while simultaneously navigating the constraints imposed by professionalization and marketization (Wang and Sparks 2019). Social media, on the one hand, offer alternative platforms for journalists to engage with topics that are challenging to cover in traditional media, to disclose in-depth narratives behind news stories, and to interact directly with a broad audience (Wang 2022). On the other hand, the political mandate of Chinese news organizations to guide public opinion necessitates that journalists’ social media practices align with journalistic norms and political values while carefully managing potential risks to the organization’s reputation (Jian and Liu 2018).

Drawing on Goffman’s theatrical metaphor (Goffman 1959), this study executes a quantitative content analysis of personal profiles and posts from 17 professional Chinese journalists on Weibo and Douyin. Cross-platform comparisons point out that journalists adopt a relationship-oriented self-presentation on Weibo, while on Douyin, their “journalistic I” is more content-focused. We further examine journalists’ adaptation to social media through the lens of media types. This study responds to the growing call within journalism scholarship to move beyond Western-centric frameworks and single-platform analyses, offering new insights into journalists’ branding practices and the evolving norms of journalism (Brems et al. 2017; Mellado and Alfaro 2020).

Literature Review

Self-presentation in the Age of “Journalistic I”

Goffman (1959) employed “theater metaphor” to conceptualize the world as a stage where social actors engage in role-playing. The front stage is “where the performance is given” (Goffman 1959, 32) and individuals deliberately curate their behaviors and images to align with societal expectations (Smith and Sanderson 2015). In contrast, the back stage is “where the real self resides” (Song and Chang 2017, 1067). Individuals are less constrained by social norms and “the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (Goffman 1959, 112). By maintaining a distinction between front and back stages, individuals “attempt to control the impressions others form of them” (Leary and Kowalski 1990, 34) and prevent the audience from accessing the true back stage (Willment 2020).

Goffman’s framework offers a valuable lens for discussing objectivity and subjectivity in journalism on social media. Objectivity is considered the cornerstone of Western

journalistic practice, aimed at delivering a fair, neutral, and accurate representation of reported realities (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013; Holton and Molyneux 2017). This disciplined rationality requires journalists to make a clear distinction between front and back stages and to underpin the professional ethos of journalism in a depersonalized manner (Ward 2008; McNair 2017). However, this normative inertia has resulted in the underarticulation and lack of explanation for the role of journalists' subjectivity within the practice (Blaagaard 2013). Under the concept of "journalistic I," the bylined subjectivity of journalists is explicitly acknowledged across all facets of news production and is recognized by the professional community (Steensen 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013). It has been argued that social media blurs the boundaries between the audience and the actors (Bullock 2018), providing additional space for journalists to challenge traditional journalistic norms (Fu and Lee 2016). Journalists are increasingly positioning themselves at the forefront of social media, where they transparently share the details of their journalistic endeavors and their emotions with audiences (Holton and Molyneux 2018; Meng and Wang 2025).

Furthermore, journalists' self-presentation involves revealing aspects of their private lives to the public. In the informal space provided by social media, journalists can symbolically differentiate their online personas from offline identities through "disassociation" (Suchman 1995, 298). They temporarily escape professional responsibilities and organizational norms and share their lives like ordinary users. This appropriation of private life from the back stage to the front stage can be viewed as a strategic self-presentation to attract audience attention and foster personal affinity (Marwick and Boyd 2011). Additionally, the interactive nature of social media enables journalists to deepen audience engagement by responding to comments and participating in conversations (Molyneux 2015). By negotiating subjectivity across front and back stages, journalists accrue significant brand capital and serve as critical intermediaries, thus bridging news organizations with diverse audience segments.

Journalistic Branding and Social Media

Journalistic branding is defined as "seeking to establish and promote a public-facing journalistic identity" (Holton and Molyneux 2018, 444), which aims to cultivate and sustain public trust in news organizations and their reportage. The traditional perspective of brand journalism, which positions institutions as the primary subject, has faced significant challenges in the era of social media. This transformation is primarily driven by platforms like Twitter, facilitating the accumulation of visibility through individual self-expression (Bruns 2012). As a result, the focus of journalistic branding has shifted from an organizational emphasis to a spotlight on individual journalists to attract and maintain audience engagement.

Existing research has explored the motivations behind journalists' brand practices, which can be attributed to three levels: institutional, individual, and professional community. The institutional level addresses the economic and cultural crises journalism faces due to the erosion of traditional business models and declining trust in media, exacerbated by social media (Ottovordemgentschenfelde 2017). In reaction, news organizations have adopted comprehensive social media strategies that encompass "collaborative and collective newsgathering, production and management" (Hermida 2013, 360) and

encourage journalists to engage with audiences and share content on social media (Hedman 2015).

From an individual perspective, journalists craft personal brands to generate editorial capital and safeguard the integrity of journalism (Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2019). Those active on social media can gain timely access to news tips, potentially attracting audiences and prospective employers. Proactive disclosure of the news production process on social media can also help reflect the professionalism and constructiveness of journalism (Tong 2018). Simultaneously, this practice of transparency is often regarded as “a ritualized routine” (Meng and Wang 2025, 140), inherently performative and designed to cultivate audience trust rather than to regulate journalistic conduct.

On the level of the professional community, the ubiquitous integration of social media into journalism has sparked a competitive dynamic among journalists in personal branding. Hedman and Djerf-Pierre (2013) categorized social media users among journalists into three groups: skeptical shunners, pragmatic conformists, and enthusiastic activists. This categorization highlights a professional digital divide, where the extent of social media engagement may intensify disparities within the field. Despite this competition, some journalists express willingness to support their peers’ efforts in establishing personal brands on social media, thereby fostering greater collaboration within the profession (Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2019; Molyneux and Holton 2015).

Analysis of journalists’ social accounts showed that they employ social media to demonstrate their professional transparency and engagement with public affairs and share personal narratives that rarely appear in traditional news contexts (Jukes 2019; Molyneux 2019). These narratives often include elements of their family life, hobbies, and leisure activities, providing a broader view of their identities (Bossio and Sacco 2017). Some journalists incorporate humor or sarcasm into social media posts to establish a more personal rapport with their audience (Molyneux 2015). While diverging from the constraints of objectivity traditionally imposed on journalists’ emotions and stances, these practices exemplify a further expression of mediating subjectivity in their branding efforts. As news dissemination becomes increasingly ambient (Hermida 2010, 298), journalists are eager to establish personal brands on social media to engage in meaningful conversations with users and adapt to the changing dynamics of digital communications. A study on TikTok revealed that journalists are modifying their roles and online behaviors, such as participating in user challenges and creating dance videos, to seek spaces of influence within a platform predominantly inhabited by the younger generation (Negreira-Rey, Vázquez-Herrero, and López-García 2022).

China’s Media System and Journalist Branding Practices

The high degree of correlation between news organizations and political structures renders China’s media ecology far more complex than that of its Western counterparts (Wang et al. 2017). Although Chinese media continues to bear the political mandate of being the “mouthpieces of both the Party and the people” (Zhou 2000, 592), market-oriented reforms since the 1980s have introduced gradual changes to the media system (Wang and Yin 2024). On the one hand, the government’s direct or indirect supervision of news organizations serves as a constant reminder of the media’s responsibility to serve the national interest and guide public opinion (Yin, Fu, and Zheng 2024). On the

other hand, the sharp reduction in government subsidies and intensifying market competition have compelled news organizations to seek new avenues for growth through business innovation (Tong 2015). Under the dual forces of politicization and marketization, Chinese news organizations have diversified into distinct categories: party-oriented official media, popular-oriented official media, market-oriented commercial media, and district media convergence centers, collectively constituting the contemporary Chinese media system (Zhao and Ye 2025). Among these media types, popular-oriented official media combine political party voice delivery with popular journalism techniques to create a more engaging form of journalism (Wang et al. 2017).

Chinese journalism's adoption of social media is a pragmatic response to the evolving information environment and media management crises. As online communication has become an important channel for expressing opinions, professional media must join the new media ecosystem to maintain their relevance and influence over audiences (Yin and Liu 2014). With the government's support, media convergence, or an all-media strategy centered on "Weibo and WeChat, App, and Douyin", has emerged as the tactic to address digital media's challenges. The directives dictate that all traditional media entities need to establish an official WeChat public account, a Weibo account, a mobile news application, and a Douyin account. Although this strategy did not fundamentally change the core work of Chinese journalism, in the name of convergence, professional news organizations began to employ social media to reach diverse and dispersed audiences (Xiong and Zhang 2018).

Chinese journalists, pivotal in the media convergence process, are incentivized to disseminate compelling news stories across diverse social media. This approach shares similarities with the branding practices of Western news organizations, where journalists are granted autonomy in content creation. As one Swedish journalist noted, organizations were "sitting back and watching us, letting us run sorta free" (Molyneux and Holton 2015, 233). However, the difference is that Chinese journalists' online practices must balance the dynamics of politics, media, and the market. Firstly, under China's news management system, only traditional news media organizations and their affiliated websites possess the right to gather and publish news (Cyberspace Administration of China 2017), meaning journalists must be institutionally affiliated to ensure the legitimacy of their work. Journalists must register and obtain their employers' consent before creating social media accounts related to their professional roles. They are also prohibited from publishing any information acquired through their work activities without prior approval (National Radio and Television Administration 2013).

Secondly, the decline in journalism revenue and the digital disruption caused by social media have intensified the instability of the journalism profession. In contrast to the "Reform and Opening Up Generation" of journalists from the 1990s to 2011, who embraced journalistic idealism and critical inquiry, the "Digital Generation" of journalists is more inclined toward utilitarian economic logic (Wang 2021; Xu and Jin 2017). This newer generation tends to be driven by profit and entertainment motives to fulfill their professional tasks while simultaneously seeking to establish personal brands on social media to bolster their sense of superiority and alignment with organizational values (Wang, Huang, and Guo 2020).

Finally, the burgeoning platform economy in China has recently fueled the growth of a robust Multi-Channel Network (MCN) market. Zhang and Tong (2024) observed that

traditional Chinese media organizations have proactively established MCNs to offer personalized agency services to journalists. In turn, these celebrity journalists will leverage their social media accounts to promote their organization's content and enhance its visibility. In conclusion, although branding is a common strategy for journalists in China and the West, the contexts and drivers of digital innovation differ significantly. For Chinese journalists, self-presentation on social media provides opportunities for personal branding yet remains constrained by organizational culture, political forces, and journalistic norms.

Research Questions

Considering the heterogeneous logic of social media and its diverse impacts on journalism (Barnard 2016), it is important to examine how Chinese journalists manage and coordinate their self-presentation across multiple platforms. Insights derived from Chilean journalists indicated that journalists customize their social media strategies to align with each platform's distinct logic and regulations (Mellado and Alfaro 2020; Mellado and Hermida 2024). On professional platforms such as X (Twitter), journalists frequently adopt the role of a promoter, facilitating discourse and information flow. Conversely, on platforms that lend themselves to more personal or behind-the-scenes content, like Instagram, they often take on the roles of celebrities or jokers.

In our study, Weibo and Douyin are selected as the focal platforms due to their widespread popularity in China and their significant contribution to the development of personal brands (Ning, Miao, and Wang 2024; Tang, Chen, and Gillenson 2018). Weibo, launched in 2009, combines the features of X (Twitter) and Facebook. The timeliness and interactivity of Weibo have made it a vital platform for news organizations and journalists to disseminate information, especially when traditional news channels are constrained or delayed (Sullivan 2012). Douyin, the Chinese counterpart of TikTok, is a short video platform established in 2016 that has swiftly gained popularity due to its user-friendly video editing tools and intelligent recommendation algorithm. As of January 2024, Douyin has reached 751.6 million daily active users, making it the largest short video information and social platform in China (We Are Social 2024). Utilizing Douyin's algorithmic services, news organizations can promote their content to audiences precisely (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García 2022). In addition, both Weibo and Douyin provide exposure services for users. By mentioning platform assistants, such as @Weibovideo (@Weiboshipin) and @Douyinassistant (@Douyinxiaozhushou), users can gain the opportunity to have their content recommended by platform administrators. Another intervention mechanism is the use of trending hashtags, which often serves to boost user engagement with popular topics or give content prominent visibility outside of the algorithmic process (Hagar and Diakopoulos 2023).

Based on existing literature, we categorize journalists' branding practices into performance (profiles, posts) and outcomes (audience engagement). We further differentiate the platform preferences of journalists affiliated with a media organization to explore the details of journalistic branding practices within China's media landscape. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What content do Chinese journalists present in their profiles on Weibo and Douyin?

RQ2: What content do Chinese journalists present in their posts on Weibo and Douyin?

RQ3: How do journalists' branding practices relate to audience engagement (like, share, and comment) on Weibo and Douyin?

RQ4: What are the differences in branding practices employed by journalists within a media organization on Weibo and Douyin?

Method

Sampling

Without an official directory of Chinese news practitioners, we constructed a proprietary database to track journalists who regularly engage with multiple platforms, utilizing manual indexing methods. The selection of participants adhered to a criterion of representativeness, encapsulated by three requirements: (1) active, verified journalist accounts on both Weibo and Douyin; (2) a minimum following of 10,000 followers on each platform; and (3) a minimum of 10 posts on each platform during the year 2023. Drawing on the work of Molyneux, Holton, and Lewis (2018), we excluded media roles such as producers, editors, and presenters, who generally do not engage in independent journalistic writing.

Our search captured 17 Chinese journalists with multiplatform usage habits and their 34 personal accounts (see Table 1). They were employed in party-oriented official media ($N=4$), popular-oriented official media ($N=3$), and market-oriented commercial media ($N=10$), and the majority were women ($N=10$). Following the methodology of Mellado and Hermida (2024) and considering our sample's social media usage patterns, we systematically collected the most recent 15 posts from each journalist on Weibo and Douyin as of December 31, 2023. Despite two journalists having published only 13 posts on Douyin in the specified year, their data was included to ensure the integrity and representativeness of our dataset. Data collection was facilitated by a custom software program, which harvested these journalists' profile texts ($N=34$) and posts ($N=506$).

Measures

Based on previous literature, we devised a coding manual that delineates the various aspects of journalists' branding practices across their social media profiles and posts (see Table S1 in the Supplementary Material).

Journalist Profiles

Each profile was coded according to whether it included organizational information (e.g., organization name in accreditation information and account name) and personal information (e.g., private information, disclaimers, and personal honors). These two coding items are coded through a series of dichotomous questions and then summed to obtain quantitative measurement data. Given the increasing significance of visual branding in social media, coders assessed the presence or absence of user profile photos and header images and documented their type and content.

Table 1. Identity information and popularity of journalist accounts.

Parent media organization	Gender	Media position	Media type	Number of followers: Weibo (in 10 thousands)	Number of followers: Douyin (in 10 thousands)
Print	Female	Journalist	Market-oriented commercial media	25.8	9.9
TV	Female	Journalist	Market-oriented commercial media	2.8	7.4
Agency	Female	Journalist	Party-oriented official media	330.2	165.3
Online	Female	Journalist	Market-oriented commercial media	33.9	103.5
TV	Female	Journalist	Market-oriented commercial media	513.8	167
TV	Female	Journalist/Presenter	Market-oriented commercial media	166.1	75.3
TV	Female	Journalist	Party-oriented official media	109.7	75
TV/ Online	Male	Journalist/Commentator	Popular-oriented official media	24.3	102.5
Online	Male	Journalist/Commentator	Party-oriented official media	36.9	24.5
TV	Male	Journalist/Commentator	Popular-oriented official media	112.3	38.7
TV	Female	Journalist	Popular-oriented official media	19.7	46.6
Print/Online	Male	Journalist	Party-oriented official media	143.3	33.9
Print	Male	Journalist	Market-oriented commercial media	101.8	28.1
Online	Female	Journalist	Market-oriented commercial media	153.6	14.1
TV	Male	Journalist	Market-oriented commercial media	1.7	13.6
Online	Female	Journalist	Market-oriented commercial media	55.3	14.8
Print	Male	Journalist	Market-oriented commercial media	410.8	32.6

Journalist Posts

Each post was systematically coded for branded elements, including references to the journalist's work, the employing organization, other news organizations or journalists, user engagement with the news, and the presence of hyperlinks. The targeted user of the link was identified, and the post was categorized according to its type, thematic focus, and the perspective it presented. Furthermore, posts were coded for the presence of hashtags related to personal branding, organizational branding, news events, platform trending, and daily events. The focus on personal branding was interpreted as incorporating one's name or nickname in the hashtag. Similarly, organizational branding refers to incorporating the name of an organization or a specific news section in the hashtag. News events were encoded when journalists addressed words about news content or topics in hashtags. Platform trending was coded if the reporter used trending hashtags, such as event challenges or charity promotions. Finally, daily events were references to personal matters or the person's actions.

Additionally, we incorporated an analysis of audience engagement by normalizing the data on likes, shares, and comments for each post against the number of followers of the

account, quantified in tens of thousands. This normalization allowed for the calculation of comparable audience engagement metrics across accounts with varying follower counts, providing a more accurate representation of engagement levels.

Reliability

Two coders were trained before jointly coding 10 percent of the sample. Based on the Krippendorff alpha formula, our intercoder reliability ranged from 0.69 to 1, with all categorical data within acceptable levels. When different opinions appeared, the coders chose a suitable one after discussion.

Results

We first discussed findings related to branding practices in profiles and posts and compared them across platforms to illustrate differences in journalists' management of the "journalistic I." Subsequently, we explored potential correlations between variables to Weibo and Douyin profiles and posts — such as topics, hashtags, and mentions — and audience engagement. Finally, we tested whether cross-platform differences in journalists' branding practices persist across media types.

Journalist Profiles

RQ1 sought to identify cross-platform differences in journalists' profile presentations. It was observed that most journalists opt to include both their organizational affiliations and personal details in their profiles, and they also choose to use individual photographs as their profile avatars on both platforms.

The results of the *t*-test showed that there might be no significant differences in the number of followers ($M_{Weibo} = 131.88$, $M_{Douyin} = 56.04$), organizational information ($M_{Weibo} = .88$, $M_{Douyin} = 1.06$) and personal information ($M_{Weibo} = 1.76$, $M_{Douyin} = 1.76$) between Weibo and Douyin ($p > .05$). However, significant disparities were identified regarding the choice of header photo type and content across these social media platforms ($p < .05$). Journalists would be more likely to use the default header photo on Weibo ($\chi^2 = 6.10$), while personal photos might be predominantly chosen on Douyin ($\chi^2 = 8.82$). In addition, the correlation test showed that journalists who disclosed more organizational information in their Weibo profiles would be more likely to use the default image on Weibo ($r = .642$, $p < .05$).

Journalist Posts

RQ2 investigated what journalists present in their posts and whether this content differs between Weibo and Douyin. A noteworthy distinction might be raised from the inherent technical limitations of the platforms. Douyin, unlike Weibo, does not permit reposting, mandating that all content be original and directly posted by journalists or in collaboration with other users. As a result, post types on Weibo and Douyin would be significantly different in terms of singleton ($\chi^2 = 47.25$, $p < .001$), reposts ($\chi^2 = 3.95$, $p < .05$), and repost with comment ($\chi^2 = 42.59$, $p < .001$).

Entertainment events (30.4%), personal opinions (27.9%), and personal lifecasting (21.7%) emerged as the predominant themes in the posts. Journalists would demonstrate a tendency to publish news on public affairs ($\chi^2 = 8.39, p < .05$) and express personal opinions ($\chi^2 = 12.66, p < .001$) more frequently on Douyin. In contrast, content characterized by humor might be more commonly presented on Weibo ($\chi^2 = 3.97, p < .05$). The analysis also highlighted that journalists might predominantly present a professional front stage (54.5%) and personal background (20.8%) in their posts. The cross-platform comparison further indicated a preference among journalists on Douyin to adopt a professional front stage ($\chi^2 = 4.66, p < .05$) and express opinions ($\chi^2 = 17.20, p < .001$) when introducing the news content, whereas on Weibo, they would be more likely to employ a professional back stage to elaborate and clarify news stories ($\chi^2 = 13.01, p < .001$).

Considering the technological convenience provided by social media, we examined journalists' embedding and differentiation strategies for brands in mentions, links, and hashtags (see Table 2). The results suggested that Chinese journalists would rarely make direct mentions on social media or provide links to the work of individuals, organizations, or institutions. In terms of the sample data, journalists would be more likely to mention other news organizations ($\chi^2 = 5.98, p < .05$) and news users ($\chi^2 = 12.10, p < .001$) on Weibo and use links to promote the work of their own ($\chi^2 = 11.90, p < .001$), of their colleagues ($\chi^2 = 17.32, p < .001$), and of peers from other journalistic institutions ($\chi^2 = 5.98, p < .05$).

While the data did not reveal the use of institutional hashtags, the results suggested that journalists would prefer to include personal branding ($\chi^2 = 25.01, p < .001$) and organizational branding ($\chi^2 = 14.08, p < .001$) in Weibo hashtags while inserting news events ($\chi^2 = 34.42, p < .001$), platform trending ($\chi^2 = 53.42, p < .001$), and daily events ($\chi^2 = 12.43, p < .001$) on Douyin.

Further correlation analyses showed that platform assistant and traffic hashtags would be strongly associated with post topics (see Tables S2 and S3 in the Supplementary Material). On Weibo, posts that mentioned platform assistants showed a significant correlation with content focused on public affairs ($r = .146, p < .05$) and advertising

Table 2. Mention, link, and hashtag of journalists on Weibo and Douyin (%).

		Weibo (N = 255)	Douyin (N = 251)
Mention	Individual branding	0.0	0.4
	Organizational branding	2.4	0.8
	Institutional branding*	2.4	0.0
	Users related to news ***	4.7	0.0
	Other individual users	1.6	1.2
	Platform assistant	6.3	6.0
Link	Individual branding ***	7.5	1.2
	Organizational branding ***	6.7	0.0
	Institutional branding*	2.4	0.0
	Other users	0.4	0.0
Hashtag	Individual branding ***	13.3	1.6
	Organizational branding ***	7.5	0.8
	News event ***	34.5	60.0
	Platform trending***	19.6	50.6
	Daily events ***	1.2	7.6

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

promotion ($r = .173, p < .001$). At the same time, there might be a negative correlation with the posting of entertainment events ($r = -.133, p < .05$). Posts labeled with news event hashtags were positively correlated with topics for opinion ($r = .143, p < .05$) and advertising promotion ($r = .159, p < .05$), and negatively correlated with topics for personal lifecasting ($r = -.165, p < .01$).

The mentions and hashtags used by journalists on Douyin showed differences from those on Weibo. Douyin's posts mentioning platform assistants would be significantly positively correlated with content on opinions ($r = .493, p < .001$) and significantly negatively correlate with content on public affairs ($r = -.135, p < .05$), entertainment events ($r = -.169, p < .001$), and personal lifecasting ($r = -.144, p < .001$). There would be a significant positive correlation between platform trending hashtags and humor themes on Douyin ($r = .249, p < .001$), but a strong negative correlation with entertainment event themes ($r = -.387, p < .001$). Additionally, the news event hashtag would be associated with public affairs ($r = .158, p < .05$) and entertainment events ($r = .190, p < .01$), and less likely to appear in opinion topics ($r = -.388, p < .01$). This was the opposite of the use of the daily events tag ($p < .05$).

Journalistic Branding and Audience Engagement

RQ3 explored potential correlations between journalists' branding practices across multiple platforms and audience engagement. The results of the *t*-tests demonstrated significant variations in audience engagement between Weibo and Douyin. Specifically, journalists' activities on Douyin would be associated with significantly higher levels of user engagement, as evidenced by a more significant number of likes [$t(238) = -3.820, p < 0.001$], shares [$t(223) = -1.989, p < 0.05$], and comments [$t(223) = -3.892, p < 0.001$].

The correlation analysis revealed significant relationships between various factors and journalists' audience engagement on Weibo (see Table 3). Results indicated that posts

Table 3. Variables significantly associated with audience engagement on Weibo.

		Like	Share	Comment
Profile	Content in profile image_Smile close-up	-.234**	-.093	-.138*
	Content in profile image_Action	.378**	.337**	.003
	Content in profile image_Posed body	.006	-.109	.167**
	Type of header photo_Default header photo	.155*	.111	.022
	Type of header photo_Photo	-.155*	-.111	-.022
	Content in header photo_Professional context	-.215**	.015	-.060
Posts	Content in header photo_Related to beat	-.150*	-.094	-.094
	Type_Singleton	.147*	.137*	.063
	Type_Repost with comment	-.130*	-.127*	-.049
	Topic_Public affairs	-.191**	-.073	-.008
	Topic_Entertainment event	.127*	.006	-.024
	Topic_Opinion	-.112	.130*	-.081
	Topic_Personal lifecasting	.211**	-.069	.170**
	Perspective_Personal background	.151*	-.067	.118
	Perspective_Viewless repost	-.081	-.059	-.132*
	Mention_Users related to news	.126*	-.037	-.031
	Mention_Platform assistant	-.156*	-.087	-.093
	Link_Organizational branding	-.136*	-.088	-.082
	Hashtag_News event	-.133*	-.161*	-.007
	Hashtag_Platform trending	-.094	-.121	-.131*

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

characterized by action-oriented profile pictures and singleton posts would be positively correlated with more likes and shares ($p < .05$). Conversely, the use of smiling profile pictures, posting posts with comments, and the use of news event hashtags would be inversely associated with audience engagement ($p < .05$). Notably, mentions of platform assistants or the use of platform-specific trending hashtags were found to negatively impact audience engagement, particularly affecting likes and comments ($p < .05$).

In comparison, the dynamics of Douyin might be notably less complex (see Table 4). Posts related to recreational activities and hashtags containing the organization's brand would be both significantly and positively correlated with higher likes, shares, and comments ($p < .05$). Additionally, profiles using a default header photo would be positively associated with the number of shares ($p < .05$).

Media Types, Platforms, and Journalists' Branding Practices

Analyses of RQ1 through RQ3 revealed differences in branding practices (profiles and posts) and outcomes (audience engagement) among Chinese journalists on Weibo and Douyin. RQ4 further asked whether there were differences in branding practices between journalists of the same media types on Weibo and Douyin.

A series of ANOVA and stratified chi-square analyses indicated no platform differences in profile presentation for most media journalists. However, journalists from market-oriented commercial media would be more likely to use personal photos as backgrounds on Douyin than on Weibo ($\chi^2 = 8.57, p < 0.05$). Additionally, for journalists across all media types, the number of likes, shares, and comments received may not differ significantly between the two platforms.

However, journalists exhibited distinct platform preferences when posting. Specifically, journalists from party-oriented and popular official media might tend to share personal opinions on Weibo, whereas those from market-oriented commercial media would prefer to broadcast their personal lives on Douyin ($\chi^2 = 4.65, p < 0.05$). Regarding perspective choice, journalists from popular official media might favor posting professional front-stage perspectives on Douyin ($\chi^2 = 14.33, p < 0.001$), whereas journalists from market-oriented commercial media would tend to present a professional back-stage on Weibo ($\chi^2 = 14.33, p < 0.001$) and a personal background on Douyin ($\chi^2 = 20.66, p < 0.001$).

Journalists in popular-oriented official media would be also more likely to mention organizational branding ($\chi^2 = 4.14, p < 0.05$), institutional branding ($\chi^2 = 4.14, p < 0.05$), and platform assistants ($\chi^2 = 10.07, p < 0.01$) on Weibo with links to their work ($\chi^2 = 5.18, p < 0.05$). Journalists in market-oriented commercial media similarly would prefer to mention their work ($\chi^2 = 8.00, p < 0.01$), the work of their colleagues ($\chi^2 = 15.38, p < 0.001$), and the work of journalists from other news organizations ($\chi^2 = 4.95, p < 0.05$).

Table 4. Variables significantly associated with audience engagement on Douyin.

		Like	Share	Comment
Posts	Type of header photo_Default header photo	.119	.160*	.106
	Topic_Entertainment event	.176**	.150*	.210**
	Hashtag_Organizational branding	.211**	.191**	.367**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

on Weibo, but might tend to interact with platform assistants on Douyin ($\chi^2 = 13.37, p < 0.001$).

A notable finding was that journalists across all media types would prefer hashtags on Douyin over Weibo for news events and platform trending ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, journalists from market-oriented commercial media might exhibit greater cross-platform differences in hashtag use, showing a tendency to incorporate personal branding ($\chi^2 = 14.69, p < .001$) and institutional branding ($\chi^2 = 13.24, p < .001$) in Weibo hashtags, and daily events in Douyin hashtags ($\chi^2 = 12.00, p < .001$). Additionally, journalists from popular-oriented official media would be likely to use personal brand hashtags on Weibo ($\chi^2 = 11.76, p < 0.001$).

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on data sets from Weibo and Douyin, this study explores the branding practices of Chinese journalists in the “journalistic I” era. Goffman (1959) indicated that identity shaping and self-presentation of an individual is performed in a given environment with specific interactions. Our findings emphasize that platform logic, organizational culture, and broader journalistic norms provide a complex context for Chinese journalist practices.

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to examine Chinese journalists’ branding practices across multiple social media with quantitative content analysis. It provides insights into the strategic decisions Chinese journalists make in leveraging social media for self-presentation and offers new perspectives on balancing professional identity with personal characteristics. Overall results from RQ1-RQ3 suggest that journalists convey a more relational “journalistic I” on Weibo, including frequently engaging with personal, institutional, and organizational brands, disseminating humorous content, and providing detailed explanations of news items. In contrast, their “journalistic I” presentation on Douyin is more content-oriented. The promotion of the topics of public affairs and personal opinion in Douyin’s posts reflects the efforts of journalists to balance professionalism and personalization in their news releases in a subtle way.

The malleable multiplicity exhibited by Chinese journalists in their identity presentation on social media corroborates the self-presentation theory’s assumption that individuals change to adjust their identities and behaviors according to audiences and contexts (Carpenter, Kanver, and Timmons 2017; Wang, Huang, and Guo 2020). Weibo, a platform emphasizing text and images, attracts users who seek in-depth information and extensive interactions. Consequently, journalists on Weibo relationally engage with their audience to enhance their professional image and facilitate multi-dimensional information dissemination. In contrast, Douyin, a platform focused on short videos, caters to users who prefer quickly consuming and visualizing content. This leads journalists to adopt an approach similar to that of anchors, attracting viewers with charismatic images and personal opinions.

RQ4 broadens the concept of journalist branding across media types in China, addressing calls to examine the logic behind journalists’ adaptation to social media platforms from a journalistic culture perspective (Mellado and Alfaro 2020; van der Nagel et al. 2023). Our findings enhance the understanding of digital journalism innovations and the contemporary media landscape in China. The flexible identity switching of journalists in popular-oriented official media across platforms challenges the traditional stereotype

that these journalists are merely conformists. Compared to other media categories, they have benefited from more significant financial support and relational capital, facilitating their innovation efforts during media transformation (Wang and Sparks 2019). With clear brand goals and operating norms, their journalists are better able to balance specialization and personalization on Weibo and Douyin.

The branding practices of journalists in market-oriented commercial media are strongly platform-oriented. Their adaptation to platform mechanisms reflects a consistent “tabloid” style (Huang 2001; Wang, Sparks, and Yu 2018), emphasizing audience engagement on Douyin and relationship management on Weibo. As for popular-oriented official media, their positioning combines an official media orientation and a market-friendly orientation, presenting government actions and business elites in a humanized way (Zhao and Ye 2025). Our results suggest that journalists in popular-oriented official media generally maintain consistent identities across platforms. They adhere to traditional journalistic norms, present a professional front-stage perspective on news stories, and infrequently use hashtags for content promotion.

Moreover, our findings support the view that journalism on social media is becoming increasingly normalized (e.g., Hedman 2015; Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013). In addition to foregrounding their personal opinions and daily lives, journalists across all media types sought to attract the attention of platform administrators by mentioning platform assistants and using trending hashtags to enhance the visibility of their accounts and content, a trend particularly pronounced on Douyin. Such trends may reflect a normative shift in the journalistic profession, moving from reliance on traditional organizational structures to adapting to digital platforms’ inherent logic. Alternatively, this could be viewed as an effort by journalists to amass online capital to strengthen their brands (Mellado and Hermida 2022; Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2019), indicating a strategic adaptation to new media dynamics.

However, these journalists do not fully cater to the trend of entertainment and over-commercialization (Mellado and Hermida 2022). Data from Weibo and Douyin suggest that Chinese journalists have intentionally avoided engaging in the use of platform algorithmic mechanisms to disseminate entertainment content or personal live streams, practicing to some extent their commitment to the professional ethics of objectivity. This cautious yet strategic adaptation signifies an evolving professional identity in the digital age, where personal brand-building through online engagement does not inherently compromise journalistic standards. Instead, it reflects a nuanced approach to navigating the new media landscape without undermining professional ethics or audience trust. This behavior may represent a broader global shift in journalism, as journalists worldwide reconcile their roles as content creators and guardians of objectivity within an increasingly commercialized and fragmented media environment (Gulyas 2017; Jukes 2019).

Limitations and Future Directions

Firstly, due to the absence of an official roster of Chinese journalists, this study was constrained to identifying professional journalists through conditional searches, excluding non-accredited media practitioners and citizen journalists. Future research should aim to strengthen the robustness of these findings by collecting a more diverse and balanced dataset of journalists’ accounts, particularly to deepen our understanding of the role of

media type in shaping journalists' branding practices. Additionally, comparing the branding practices of citizen journalists and professional journalists could further enrich our understanding of this issue.

Secondly, the focus of this research on the multiplatform activities of reporters on Weibo and Douyin limits its generalizability to other social media platforms, such as Xiaohongshu and Bilibili. Previous research on media repertoires indicates that the current information environment comprises various platforms rather than systematically replacing one medium with another (Tang and Cooper 2013). The synergistic effects of combining different news platforms suggest potential advantages over using a single platform (Oh, Lor, and Choi 2021). Future research could explore the implications of journalists' varied usage of multiple platforms and their diverse role presentations from a media repertoire perspective.

Thirdly, the results of the correlation analysis underscore a significant interaction between Chinese journalists and social media platforms, as well as audience resistance to mentions of platform accounts and trending hashtags. Given the ambiguity over whether these findings are uniquely related to specific platform contexts or are influenced by journalists' identity attributes, further comparative research is needed to dissect the nature and dynamics of journalists' engagements with social media platforms.

Finally, since our data collection and analysis relied on journalists' public accounts, it is difficult to answer the question of the factors and specific processes that influence journalists' branding practices at the level of individual motivation. Future research should incorporate interview or participant observation within newsrooms to explore journalists' motivations for establishing public accounts, the organizational norms and political guidelines that govern content distribution, as well as their perceptions of different social platforms and satisfaction with their branding practices.

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