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Understanding "smaller-scale" platforms: An ethnographic case study of Chinese-owned multinational infotech enterprises

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Abstract

This article develops the concept of "smaller-scale platforms," distinguishing them from both large-scale, infrastructural platforms (such as Silicon Valley giants and Chinese infotech monopolies), and small, single-use platforms. To do so, it presents an ethnographic case study of the Chinese-owned, multinational entertainment live-streaming platform, Bigo Live. The article argues that smaller-scale platforms, positioned at the fringe of the internet business ecosystem, are non-infrastructural yet still serve as integral components of the larger, global platform economy and international trade. The ethnography presented shows how smaller-scale platforms target niche and occasionally unconventional markets, offering specialized services within agile, cross-platform, and transnational business sectors. The ethnography also depicts the naturalization of the Chinese "internet thinking" business model, as well as unusual and even extreme events among Chinese expatriate platform personnel, local non-Chinese employees, guilds of live-streamers, the live-streaming audience, and other stakeholders operating within complex geopolitical contexts. Finally, the paper delineates prospective research trajectories stemming from the theorization of smaller-scale platforms, articulating potential inquiries that could enhance scholarly understanding within this field.

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Introduction

In the wake of the international success of TikTok, an increasing number of Chinese-owned, smaller-scale infotech enterprises have expanded operations globally. Many have faced challenges stemming from intense competition within China's saturated domestic market and the necessity to comply with increasingly stringent restrictions imposed by the Chinese authorities (Z. Chen & Wang, 2019; P. Yang & Tang, 2018; Y. Yang, 2021). To navigate these challenges and appeal to a broader global audience, a cohort of these enterprises is opting to relocate their headquarters to Singapore. This choice is motivated by Singapore's proximity to China, its relatively stable business environment, and its bilingual (Chinese-English) legal system. One such enterprise is Bigo Live, an entertainment-oriented live-streaming platform headquartered in Singapore. Other examples include HoYoverse, the Singaporean multinational enterprise (MNE) branch established by Chinese game developer miHoYo (米哈游); Nimo TV, the global version of the game-themed live-streaming platform Huya (虎牙); and the online dating platform Mico (米可).

This article, which is drawn from findings of a larger research project, explores and develops the concept of "smaller-scale platforms," through an ethnographic case study of Bigo Live. It addresses the ongoing need for a deeper understanding of the Chinese platform economy, characterized by an operational ethos that emphasizes profits, a fast-paced approach, relationship/*guanxi*-based international expansion paths, and a neglect of work rights. Such an ethos shapes and constrains experiences of people working within a trans-platform, transnational, and trans-local creative labor sector. This ethos is sometimes referred to in Chinese parlance as "internet thinking" (*hulian wang siwei*), a concept explained below.

Understanding the "smaller-scale platform"

Research on smaller-scale platforms is important and timely, particularly in relation to Chinese media expansion globally. Smaller-scale platforms differ from large-scale, infrastructural platforms such as Silicon Valley giants and Chinese infotech monopolies. They are distinguished by various metrics, including, but not limited to, employee numbers, revenue, user base, internet traffic, and market penetration rate. In terms of employee numbers, a large platform typically has a workforce in the tens of thousands. For example, Meta Platform Inc. had 67,317 full-time employees as of December 2023,[1] and TikTok had over 15,000 employees worldwide as of the end of 2021.[2] In contrast, the smaller-scale platforms discussed in this article usually have fewer than a thousand formal employees.

Smaller-scale platforms frequently cater to niche markets with specialized services supported by agile, cross-platform, and transnational business models, which large corporations cannot offer due to their legal and ethical constraints. Smaller-scale platforms often grapple with resource scarcity, increased precariousness, and competitive pressure from large platforms. This pressure sees large platforms adopting business models of smaller platforms, while offering salaries that smaller platforms cannot match to poach talent. Additionally, smaller-scale platforms encounter a lack of governmental support. In China, the government typically pays little attention to the viability of smaller platforms and often opts for a blanket shutdown approach when problems arise, as the losses incurred are deemed minimal.

Compared to small, single-use platforms—such as those for banking, tax filing, or gambling—a key distinguishing feature of smaller-scale platforms is their commercial power for international expansion through a vast network of global outsourcing. The smaller platforms demonstrate robust resilience against market risks, actively pursuing multinational expansion in the face of increasingly saturated domestic competition.

Two recent lines of academic inquiry further provide the foundation for conceptualizing "smaller-scale" platforms. One pertains to the infrastructuralization of platforms (Hanseth & Lyytinen, 2008; Plantin & de Seta, 2019; J.-C. Plantin et al., 2018; Tiwana, 2013; Y. Zhao & Lin, 2021), while the other concerns "fringe platforms" (de Winkel, 2023; Van Dijck et al., 2023).

In relation to the first strand of literature, Star (2002, p. 116) notes that traditionally, infrastructure such as railroads, highways, electricity, and, more recently, the information superhighway have been simplistically understood as physical substrates that processes "run on" rather than as relational systems. J.-C. Plantin et al. (2018) suggest that there are differences in scale and scope between infrastructure and non-infrastructure platforms. Infrastructure platforms integrate heterogeneous components through socio-technical gateways and are widely accessible as essential elements of daily life and work, with some being government-funded, managed, and regulated to some extent (J.-C. Plantin et al., 2018). These digital infrastructures are highly reliable, as transparent as possible, and widely shared, constituting a crucial component of business, government, work, and daily life. Consequently, if a disaster were to cause their collapse, a certain sector of society would be paralyzed, severely affecting users' work and lives.

In comparison, "non-infrastructure platforms" are typically built on a smaller scale and aim to establish modular frameworks while maintaining an invisible management system—often under corporate control rather than direct government regulation. Smaller-scale, non-infrastructure platforms (such as Bigo Live) lack the ubiquity, reliability, expansiveness of gateways, and the breakdown resilience typical of infrastructural platforms (Plantin & de Seta, 2019; J.-C. Plantin et al., 2018), although they share common features such as embeddedness, a certain degree of invisibility, extensibility, and broad coverage, benefiting from innovation by numerous third-party developers.

In addition to their non-infrastructural nature, smaller-scale platforms share attributes of fringe platforms (de Winkel, 2023). Over the past decade, scholars in various fields have employed the term "fringe" to characterize a spectrum of digital communities, services, or ideas that advocate for free speech and oppose left-leaning ideologies, existing outside the mainstream (Barkun, 2017; Rieger et al., 2021; Schulze et al., 2022; Woolley et al., 2019; Zannettou et al., 2018). Bail (2012) describes the "fringe effect" as the institutional amplification of non-mainstream ideas that alter mainstream, progressive discourse. A new definition of fringe digital platforms was introduced by de Winkel (2023, p. 35), building upon the studies mentioned above and developed through his approach to studying the United States–based platform Gab. Founded in 2016 by Andrew Torba, a conservative Republican Christian and Trump supporter, Gab emerged in response to reports of bias against conservatives on social media platforms like Facebook. Despite its fringe and pro free speech position, it has been observed to be a highly effective alt-right echo chamber (Zannettou et al., 2018). It is an integral part of the larger platform ecosystem and the ongoing platformization of the public sphere (de Winkel, 2023).

The smaller-scale platforms we examine in our research exhibit traits of fringe platforms—they intentionally position themselves at the edge of internet, promoting the idea of free speech and free trade, catering to a diverse range of users who push the boundaries of legality and morality. Van Dijck (2020) once used a metaphorical framework that likens the information ecosystems of major digital platforms to trees, where just as trees grow through photosynthesis by absorbing nutrients,

platforms grow by continuously collecting user data and developing new business models and work cultures (J. C. Plantin et al., 2018). In Van Dijck's (2020) analogy, an infrastructuralized platform functions as a tree within a broader ecosystem, exerting influence over the overall digital landscape. Extending this metaphor, smaller-scale platforms can be compared to lesser-known wildflowers in a forest, contributing significantly to the shaping of the digital ecosystem yet awaiting closer examination. As we will show in this article, despite their fringe position, these smaller-scale platforms are rapidly evolving from what initially appeared as niche, leisure-focused, apolitical spaces into politically charged and culturally influential arenas.

Background and methodology

Bigo is one of the digital products of JOYY Inc., an international corporation with subsidiaries in various countries. Its jurisdiction of organization is in the Cayman Islands, its principal executive offices are located in Singapore, and financial reports indicate that daily operations are conducted mainly in Guangzhou, China.[3] Bigo operates in several key regional markets worldwide: Its most profitable markets are the Middle East and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS; mainly Russia). Southeast Asia is characterized by lower overall profits despite high user engagement, while European and North American markets have fewer active users but generate considerable profits. In traditionally Anglophone markets, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, Bigo typically gains popularity among culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. The platform has around 5 million users globally, with a high turnover of employees, typically ranging from 500 to 600 on a daily basis. This employee scale is relatively small compared to larger platforms, as we outlined above.

Each Bigo market typically employs over a dozen employees, including both Chinese expatriates and non-Chinese staff. Bigo's relatively small workforce manages its global scale through extensive outsourcing, primarily to streamer agencies (guilds), individual streamers, and digital currency traders who purchase virtual currency in bulk from Bigo and resell it to guilds and streamers. Despite operating globally, like all Chinese platforms, self-regulation of adult content and political content is a crucial element to ensure success, protecting the platform from breaching Chinese regulations. This moderation task is often outsourced to places within China where labor costs are lower, such as Foshan in Guangdong Province.

Bigo serves as an exemplary case study for examining smaller-scale platforms due to its global reach with limited resources, operating in diverse markets with a relatively small workforce compared to larger platforms. Despite its modest size, it is not a small platform either, as evidenced by its international reach and ability to generate considerable profits in diverse markets. The variation in its financial performance across different regions, coupled with a workforce comprising both Chinese expatriates and local staff, exemplifies how smaller platforms tailor strategies to address diverse market conditions and manage international operations. Bigo's reliance on outsourcing illustrates adaptive operational models, while its approach to content moderation—navigating stringent regulations and cultural landscapes—highlights the challenges and strategies employed by smaller platforms to thrive in niche markets of competitive digital economies.

In the case study of Bigo, we adopt a holistic anthropological approach that views smaller-scale platforms as integral components of the global digital economy, aiming to understand platform-based work ecosystems comprehensively (Ellen, 2010; Horst & Miller, 2012; Pertierra, 2018). The theorization of "smaller-scale platforms" is culture-based, founded on classic constructivist grounded theory and constant comparison (Charmaz, 2006, 2014), where researchers continually compare newly collected data on smaller-scale platforms with that of Silicon Valley giants and

Chinese infotech monopolies, as well as between the work experiences of Chinese expatriate staff and their non-Chinese colleagues.

The ethnographic fieldwork undertaken for this paper consists of three main components. First, between February and May 2024, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 36 participants: 8 staff members from Bigo, 3 staff members from JOYY Inc.'s competitor MeiQiJiaCheng (a pan-entertainment platform company rumored to be phased out and preparing for liquidation), 8 guild staff, and 17 live-streamers, both Chinese and non-Chinese. Second, participant observation was carried out in Bigo live-streaming shows involving 14 top and popular streamers from various regions, with each show lasting for more than 1 hour. During these observations, researchers tipped and asked questions to elicit dialogue and interaction. Third, we developed a critical textual analysis of key documents related to Bigo, including guidelines for guilds and training materials for streamers, and conducted an interface analysis of the app and researched information on Bigo's daily activities. Three Chinese research assistants proficient in Turkish and Russian, along with one Turkish-speaking Azerbaijani gatekeeper, were recruited to facilitate this transnational, trans-platform research. They assisted not only with translation during interviews but also with interpreting documents related to Bigo.

Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the School of Journalism and Communication at Jinan University (Application ID: JNUSJC-2024-042). The primary ethical considerations involved protecting the privacy of the interview subjects, who shared insights into the platform's internal operations. To ensure their privacy, we employed heavy disguise by anonymizing and altering their demographic variables without compromising the factual integrity of the article (Bruckman, 2002). Additionally, for the safety of the researchers and research assistants, the University Ethical Committee advised against traveling to Turkey and Russia due to the current volatile situations in those countries. Consequently, only five interviews were conducted in person; the others were online, primarily using Google Meet. These sessions typically involved one interview subject, a research assistant as a translator, and the first author. On one occasion, a focus group with three participants was conducted in Turkey, facilitated by a research assistant translator and the first author.

The "internet thinking" model goes global

The mode and strategy of China's leading, infrastructural, large-scale infotech corporations' overseas expansion have been extensively documented and understood as government-sponsored extension of operational models already established within China. Among the earliest actions to gain international attention was the involvement of Chinese state-owned enterprises in developing infrastructure across the "One Belt, One Road" region, which aligns with the historic Silk Road traversing Central Asia (Huang, 2016). The government-sponsored rhetoric of the Silk Road, emphasizing the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation," has since been employed by leading digital communication and entertainment companies Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent as they establish strategic bases for international expansion (Keane & Chen, 2019; Keane & Wu, 2018; Keane & Yu, 2019). Keane and Wu (2018) understand this expansion as occurring on three levels of "going out": Cultural products and services, ideology, and organizations.

When initiating this research, we expected that government-sponsored patriotic rhetoric would significantly influence the work of smaller-scale platforms. However, in both interviews and company promotional media content, Bigo and its staff seldom mention any material support or slogans promoted by the Chinese government. Instead, as these platforms expand globally, they actively promote the operational model and work culture centered around the so-called "Chinese

internet thinking." The term "internet thinking" began to be widely used in the early 2010s, though pinpointing its first articulation proves challenging. A prevalent view posits that "internet thinking" has ushered in a new economic model, distinct from traditional agricultural and industrial production, characterized by features such as being free, low-cost, rapid, and optimized.[4] An overlapping perspective suggests that due to the influence of the internet, industries that were traditionally non-internet based are now comprehensively integrated with infotech industries, facilitating enterprise upgrades and product enhancements.[5] The term reached its peak usage with the publication of *My Internet Thinking* by Huateng Ma, the co-founder and chief executive officer of Tencent (L. Zhao, 2014). In this autobiography, "internet thinking" is celebrated for embodying the pride of Chinese infotech corporations, noted for their swift development, extensive penetration, and systematic operational practices. In contemporary everyday work settings, "internet thinking" has evolved to encompass business practices that prioritize maximizing profits, often at the expense of employee welfare and well-being, a phenomenon known as the "996 work regime" (J. J. Wang, 2020; Zheng & Qiu, 2023). Moreover, it involves normalizing a preference for profits over platform brand and market share, which sharply distinguishes smaller-scale platforms from larger-scale ones. Smaller-scale platforms intentionally maintain a low profile, with their top executives rarely making media appearances.

In the realm of entertainment live-streaming, such an operational model involves the platform—in this case, Bigo—establishing the rules for revenue distribution and the performance vibe. The performance vibe refers to the overall atmosphere or style of the live-streaming sessions that is encouraged or set by the platform (Liu et al., 2023; Zhang & Hjorth, 2019). Bigo vastly outsources business operations to live-streaming guilds, which are responsible for recruiting, training, and managing individual live-streamers (Liu et al., 2023; Zhang & Hjorth, 2019). In non-Chinese markets, Bigo primarily provides live-streaming and videos that target adult males and often incorporate sexual innuendo or soft porn content (Y. Wang, 2021). The biggest spending male viewers are respectfully referred to as "big brothers" (*da'ge*), a custom developed in mainland China (Liu et al., 2023). The overseas operation of Bigo also requires the involvement of non-Chinese staff to ensure that the content aligns with specific local cultures and customs. These non-Chinese staff members are typically divided into two groups: One group deals with the guilds and streamers, while the other interacts with the affluent "big brothers." Both groups report to their Chinese superiors.

Chinese expatriate staff report that at the outset of operations in non-Chinese markets, they were not well-versed in the preferences of the local market, nor in the subtle differences of user preferences, making cross-cultural communication crucial for their work. For example, in Turkey, a significant market for Bigo with a predominantly Muslim population, they had to understand a mix of Islamic traditions and a secular social environment. Jason, a Chinese, Turkish-speaking male, 28, one of our participants, gradually learnt from his Turkish colleagues that live-streaming shows in Turkey featuring women wearing headscarves and adhering to conservative values attracted the highest viewership and donation rates. In Russia, Gina, a Chinese, Russian-speaking, female, 27, told us that provocatively dressed, lively, and enthusiastic female live-streamers who create a vibrant atmosphere are the most popular. A prominent streamer in the Russian market embodying such popularity is Настя Кош (English name: Nastya Kosh). Настя Кош has a Caucasian, cisgender appearance typically associated with models and is known for her long, wavy blonde hair. Due to Настя Кош's fame and large fan base, many other Russian live-streaming platforms are interested in poaching her. These local market dynamics go beyond Gina's professional knowledge and understanding. Therefore, the task of retaining Настя Кош primarily falls on Gina's Russian

colleagues. Similarly, Russian staff and guilds are dedicated to finding female streamers and attracting them to Bigo for continued streaming.

Given the importance of such cross-cultural understanding to business success, we were interested to know how non-Chinese staff make sense of "Chinese internet thinking." Our interviewees provided us with some insightful responses. First and foremost, as noted above, "Chinese internet thinking" signifies a mindset that is profit-oriented and successful in the market. When discussing Chinese internet thinking, our interviewees mention that "the Chinese internet makes it very easy to earn money." Kaplan, a Turkish-Azerbaijani, male, 30, pointed to the direct investment from Chinese major platforms which provides a large number of formal jobs for locals, as well as the arrival of smaller-scale platforms creating informal, outsourced jobs. In Kaplan's words, "there are many people who have free time and who want to get money from the internet, then they would work as agencies."[6] Another aspect they reflected on is that China develops apps very meticulously, with comprehensive functionality.

Our non-Chinese participants perceived Chinese corporate culture as punctual and hierarchical, characterized by well-defined rewards and punishments, and rigorously focused on quantitative metrics. Most of our non-Chinese participants had prior experience working for international companies, and they described themselves as being often intimidated by the discipline of Chinese company culture. Chinese employees often quietly work at their desks, rarely chatting about anything outside of work; Chinese employees are also extremely punctual, delivering tasks on time no matter how urgent. Kaplan described China's clear reward and punishment system as follows: "If you work hard, you can earn more money." Aslan (Turkish-Azerbaijani, male, 28) and Akıncı (Turkish-Azerbaijani, male, 29) complained that Chinese companies are too strict when dealing with numbers, making it challenging for them to maintain relationships with local agents and "big brothers." Aslan jokingly said:

> Bigo establishes a recharge threshold for "big brothers" (on Bigo, VIP users must recharge monthly to retain their premium or higher-level status). I frequently hear complaints from these affluent friends because if they spend less in a month, Bigo will immediately reduce their VIP level. In Turkish culture, numbers are flexible; you can sometimes spend a little less without issue. However, this is not the case for Chinese people, for whom numbers are precise: one hundred thousand is one hundred thousand, and 99,999 is not considered one hundred thousand by Chinese standards.

While a focus on profit was largely seen as successful, the business model based on "internet thinking" appears to be quite unsustainable in terms of staff recruitment and retention. As detailed above, non-Chinese staff find the rewards and punishment measures strict, and often perceive them as brutal. On the other side of the cultural divide, despite enjoying high salaries, Chinese expatriate employees find themselves subjected to double standards, working long hours almost every day while their non-Chinese colleagues can enjoy reasonable working hours and benefits aligned with local standards. Unlike formal expatriate programs, which typically allow expatriate employees to bring their spouses and children to the host country, Bigo does not offer such support. When recruiting employees, Bigo tends to prefer hiring young, unmarried individuals. Our interviewees, Danny (Chinese, German-speaking, female, 31), Jason, and Gina, described their workdays typically ending at 11 pm, often extending until three or four in the morning. Danny mentioned that she fell asleep within minutes of reaching her bed each night. TheyWhile working in non-Chinese regions abroad, they neither take leave for Chinese holidays nor observe the holidays of their host country. They report that their Chinese superiors shamelessly justify this demanding work pace by claiming, "Working like this is to help you save money. If you don't take time off, you won't spend

money, right?" Typically, employees at these smaller platforms burn out and resign after about a year, with those lasting 3 years being rare examples of unusually loyal staff.

Interestingly, Chinese internet thinking is not solely rooted in patriotism. Some executives (mostly Chinese) at platforms like Bigo harbor a desire to immigrate to countries with superior welfare systems once they have accumulated sufficient wealth. Based on the information available to us, it appears that the top management staff at these infotech corporations have already successfully immigrated to Singapore or European countries. Our interviewees reported that Bigo's leadership once motivated staff with the analogy that Bigo is akin to Noah's Ark, through which employees can secure a path to successful immigration.

China-centric world views

Bigo's business practice of targeting and actively adapting to racially and linguistically diverse communities does not necessarily indicate an adherence to egalitarian cosmopolitan values. Rather, Bigo's operational strategy remains centered around China-centric "internet thinking." An example of this centering can be seen in the company's approach to platform–agency–content creator outsourcing relationships, where live-streaming guilds pretend to be viewers rewarding the streamers, pushing them up the ranking lists, using a strategy originating from within China (Liu et al., 2023; Zhang & Hjorth, 2019). As Gina and Ellen (Chinese, Russian-speaking, female, 28) noted, "When we brainstorm new operational strategies, we usually scroll through Douyin and Xiaohongshu to see what events they have and take inspiration." Chinese multinational smaller-scale platforms prioritize the adoption of successful practices from within China's digital ecosystem such as those infrastructural platforms and apply them to international markets.

During fieldwork in the Russian market, the first author collected a 24-page brochure used by Bigo to train female streamers, which showcases how Bigo introduces Chinese female streamers as role models to demonstrate how to become successful streamers globally. The brochure presents contents titled "Learn from Role Models – Star Interns," which outlines key criteria for being a star, high-quality streamer. These include appropriate streaming hardware, such as a stable internet connection, high-resolution camera, good audio quality, bright lighting at the streaming location, strong language skills, an attractive appearance and physique, high-quality clothing, a professional demeanor, and emotional energy. In this training brochure for Russian live-streamers, a Chinese female streamer sits smiling at the camera on the right side of a key page, serving as a role model.

As fieldwork progressed, it became increasingly clear that the operational model emphasizing "internet thinking" ultimately shapes a worldview in which the Chinese business model lies at the center, often characterized by essentialist views on race, ethnicity, and gender among its employees (X. Chen & Liu, 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Peng et al., 2022). Stone (Chinese, Turkish-speaking, male, 28) astutely summarized this worldview regarding various global markets:

> When evaluating the quality of a live-streaming ecosystem in a market, we primarily consider certain aspects. Firstly, we assess the level of wealth disparity within a country. The greater the wealth gap, the better the live-streaming ecosystem—this is because the essence of live streaming involves affluent male viewers tipping female streamers, deriving a sense of prestige, emotional connection, and sexual gratification from this interaction. For instance, markets like China, Turkey, and Russia are considered favorable live-streaming ecosystems. Conversely, regions with nice welfare systems and minimal wealth disparities, such as Australia and the Nordic countries, are unsuitable for live-streaming, as women there may not seek to be tipped by wealthy men. We (Bigo) generally avoid targeting the Nordic markets. Additionally, a market must possess a culture that values physical attractiveness, where people enjoy

watching physically attractive men and women. Australia, for instance, does not meet this criterion. Do you know what I mean?

Based on the narratives by Stone and our other interviewees, a good live-streaming ecosystem involves several critical factors. First, markets with significant wealth disparities are seen as favorable since the nature of live-streaming hinges on affluent male viewers tipping female streamers to gain a sense of prestige and emotional connection. Another characteristic of a "good" ecosystem is that the higher the income disparity between men and women within a country, the greater the potential for live-streaming development. Cultural norms also play a crucial role; a market that values "superficial," physical attractiveness is considered suitable, as viewers are more likely to be drawn to appealing streamers. Moreover, male audiences should be willing to contribute financially, often seeking personal or emotional gratification through their support. Conversely, regions with comprehensive welfare systems and minimal wealth disparities may not provide an ideal environment for live-streaming, as individuals are less motivated to seek financial backing through tipping.

A feminist critique of this perspective exposes several issues deserving further exploration, echoing the critique on fringe platforms (Bail, 2012; Barkun, 2017; de Winkel, 2023; Rieger et al., 2021). Clearly, a reliance on affluent male viewers tipping female streamers perpetuates traditional gender roles and reinforces stereotypes that objectify women for male gratification in different contexts. However, the staff at Bigo who participated in our interviews, regardless of gender, did not critique this phenomenon. Linking the quality of a live-streaming ecosystem to wealth disparity reflects a business culture within which there is little interest in economic equity or social inclusion; interview data suggests that economic inequality and the exploitation of women are normalized within the framework of Chinese "internet thinking." These interviews also highlight an additional distinction between smaller-scale platforms and larger-scale platforms: Smaller-scale platforms like Bigo prioritize profits over market share by avoiding regions with strong welfare systems and lower wealth disparities, based on the assumption that women in those regions may not seek tips from wealthy men.

Some Chinese employees have found their values compromised due to the problematic race and gender perspectives embedded in the Bigo business model. Now-departed employees Jason and Gina expressed their dissatisfaction in this regard. Gina's reflection that "The world is already bad enough, and our work only adds to that negativity" led to her resignation. Jason pursued a master's degree in psychology post-Bigo, viewing it as a more meaningful pursuit. Danny, who returned to Bigo after a hiatus, bluntly stated, "I'm only here for the money; this job lacks real value."

Naturalization of unusual events

In their daily interactions with culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse colleagues, agencies/guilds, "big brothers," and female streamers, employees of these smaller-scale platforms are accustomed to unusual events—events such as sudden, enormous material success, danger, events taking place on the edge of law and morality, and extreme situations due to changes in national or international circumstances. Unlike Chinese domestic corporations that operate in strict legal environments, or larger Silicon Valley platforms with powerful legal teams, Bigo cannot provide its employees with adequate protection due to the company's smaller scale and lack of high-level legal resources. Such a situation could be best described by the Chinese idiom "a mix of fish and dragons," (*yulong hunza*) which means a mix of bad and good, of profane and sacred (Jayne et al., 2021).

Given their daily operations within lucrative yet politically turbulent regions, particularly in markets of the Middle East and Russia, Bigo's executives can only ensure safe and stable functioning by networking strategically with key government officials, influential business personalities, legal experts, and other relevant stakeholders in the targeted markets. Unlike large corporations that typically formalize their operations and expand market reach through participatory and algorithmically driven approaches (J. Lin et al., 2023), smaller-scale platforms safeguard themselves by leveraging relationship-based networking, often referred to in the Chinese context as a *guanxi* mindset (Bian, 2017; Wong, 2012; Yan, 1996). In the realm of live-streaming, Bigo employs the app's VIP ranking system and offline public relations events to build interpersonal connections that facilitate exchanges of favors, potentially benefiting the platform.

One of the notable "good" occurrences in Bigo's overseas operations is the emergence of exceptionally wealthy and generous "big brothers" among their audience base. These powerful and influential "big brothers" are not just customers of the platform. Certain "big brothers" can also protect the platform and its employees in cases of legal disputes or when the platform is targeted by local gangs.[7] Informal stories about various big brothers are widely circulated within the overseas live-streaming community. For instance, in Turkey, one "big brother" is known to be a skilled gambler and also a gambling streamer, and is allegedly based in Montenegro (because gambling is illegal in Turkey). When he wins money from gambling, he spends lavishly on Bigo; this is a common trait among Bigo's big brothers, whose sources of wealth may not always be entirely legitimate. Another big brother is rumored to be in charge of Turkey's national security agency and has been described as the fourth most powerful figure in the country.[8]

Having strong business relationships with key government officials, influential business personalities, and legal experts has yielded various benefits for Bigo. Jason shared an anecdote illustrating the productive outcomes of these relationships. In 2020, in Egypt, a well-known streamer committed suicide during a live-streaming show. This incident caused a significant stir, and since it was live-streamed and broadcast without intervention, the Egyptian police detained Bigo employees stationed in Egypt for investigation, questioning them for several days. Eventually, these employees were released, mainly due to the intervention of certain powerful "big brothers." Those involved in the release of Bigo staff included the son of a former Jordanian Prime Minister.[9] Such events and rumors have made Bigo's employees increasingly aware of the importance of accumulating relationship/*guanxi* with influential "big brothers."

Stone, a 28-year-old Chinese man fluent in Turkish, shared an example of how much Bigo invests to maintain relationships with these powerful figures. As Stone recalled, Bigo hosted a lavish gala in Dubai toward the end of 2023 to celebrate their remarkable success in the Middle East market. The gathering included prominent figures such as "big brothers" from around the world, guilds, and high-profile female streamers. Attendees were treated to a gala dinner complete with a red carpet, where "big brothers" and female streamers were elegantly attired. Furthermore, guilds that excelled in their operations, particularly in recruiting and managing female streamers effectively, were acknowledged and rewarded with generous cash prizes. In a separate interview, Kaplan, who was in charge of organizing these events, expressed the pressure he faced. As Bigo invites the most important "big people" globally, Kaplan had to arrange visas, flights, and accommodations for each one. He mentioned a past incident where a "big brother" faced visa issues, which required the intervention of high-ranking officials to resolve.

In February 2022, dramatic events left a lasting memory on Gina, a Chinese expatriate who was in Moscow at the time: "On the previous evening, after working late, a dozen of us were enjoying hotpot in the office. The next day, we woke up to the news that Putin had announced the commencement of a 'special military operation,' with troops to invade Ukraine. The company

immediately instructed us to pack all our belongings, terminated the office lease, and we hastily sought refuge in the nearest office in Turkey overnight." This event highlights the considerable uncertainties faced by smaller-scale platforms and their expatriate employees. Sudden geopolitical developments, such as the Russian military operation in Ukraine and China's COVID-19 lockdown policies, underscore the unpredictability of their expatriate work life, which can disrupt normal business operations and present challenges for expatriate employees.

Gina described her sudden move from Moscow to Turkey, saying, "I immediately packed everything […] I didn't even tell my parents I was leaving Moscow; I only told them once I arrived in Turkey. Some of my colleagues who were traveling with us had just recovered from COVID-19 and were not fully healthy yet." The swift response of the company to the unfolding events demonstrates the need for the agility and adaptability of smaller-scale platforms in such environments. For Bigo's Russian employees, the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war had an even greater impact: Some of the men among them were conscripted and sent away for military service, while others quickly resigned and left Russia to avoid conscription. Such events further underscore the determination of Bigo to maximize profits at every given moment, as they must remain prepared for the unpredictability of markets.

Extreme events like the Russo-Ukrainian War may not occur frequently, but more common dangers faced by workers in day-to-day operations are encounters with savvy users attempting to lure money away from the platform, facing violence and death threats, and for female streamers on Bigo, experiencing instances of threatened or actual sexual violence. As we mentioned earlier, Bigo's system of rewards and punishments for employees, agencies, and streamers is strictly predetermined quantitatively, a phenomenon scholars refer to as "datafication" (Yin, 2020). This datafication mechanism is also used for rewarding ordinary platform users, including through small lottery games embedded in Bigo. In this process, Bigo acts as the house, much like a casino. However, in the South Asian market, according to our participants, a particularly challenging market, users would spend a lot of time and effort studying these lottery games—researching patterns and probabilities of winning, employing mass tactics by mobilizing a large group of people to gamble on Bigo. As a result, Bigo staff often find themselves operating at a loss in the South Asian market, despite enormous internet traffic.

Jason shared an incident related to frequent violence and danger that he encountered. In his first week of work in Turkey, on May 20, 2021, an accident occurred: A well-known female streamer was raped after meeting with a "big brother" offline one week earlier. Meeting offline is considered an essential element of Bigo and the streamers' revenue model (Liu et al., 2023). That said, on Jason's first day at work, the incident was reported to him. This incident was allegedly part of a premeditated scheme orchestrated by a rival streaming platform. The "big brother" recorded nude footage of the streamer and threatened to make the video public unless she left Bigo to stream on the competitor's platform. The case was reported to Jason, who had no prior work experience and felt powerless to address it. Ultimately, the streamer's loyal guild led a group of gangsters to beat up the "big brother" responsible for the rape. Reflecting on this experience, Jason described his first lesson at Bigo as follows: "I'm working in a lawless place." It can be seen that there is intense competition among local agencies to compete for big brothers and streamers. Expatriate employees in China—because local agencies are aware that Chinese employees typically make decisions—are usually strict about keeping their contact information and addresses confidential. However, even so, Chinese expatriate employees are often harassed by agents and even receive death threats.[10]

Concluding remarks: Three critical questions for future research on smaller-scale platforms

Overall, this article theorizes smaller-scale platforms by ethnographically examining Bigo, a Chinese-owned multinational, non-infrastructural, fringe platform, and its staff's work experience. A number of the aforementioned Bigo employees (for instance, Jason who received death threats) and their outsourcing staff have departed or are in the process of leaving Bigo for various reasons—a characteristic attribute of smaller-scale platforms being the unsustainability and high fluidity of their human resources. It is likely that these individuals will continue to work for similar platforms. Concurrently, our broader research on smaller-scale platforms remains ongoing. In recent years, despite the rise in smaller-scale platforms, certain subjects within this domain have received inadequate research attention or have been deemed insignificant altogether. We are now at a point where the study of digital platforms will be hampered by continued inattention to such issues. This concluding section outlines three key unanswered questions in the study of smaller-scale platforms and the digital labor working on them that should be research priorities moving forward.

First, what are the smaller-scale platforms? We need greater investigation of these diverse smaller-scale platforms to understand the services they provide, the products they produce, and the community cultures they construct. The development trajectories and international expansion modes of these smaller-scale platforms also need to be mapped based on empirical studies. These will help us comprehend the complex interdependence between platforms across different scales and sectors, particularly in considering both mainstream and fringe platforms as interconnected components of the constantly evolving, contested, larger platform ecosystem (de Winkel, 2023).

Second, in the actual work of employees and content creators on the smaller-scale platforms, what kind of cross-cultural, cross-border work, symbols, and systems of meaning do they actually produce? Given that many of these smaller platforms operate multinationally and occupy a fringe, ambiguous space, as illustrated by Bigo, they frequently serve as converging points, assembling a "cluster of heterogeneous elements"—which encompass technologies, business acumen, content creators, and social norms (Z. Lin & Zhao, 2021, p. 210), with patriotism, nationalism, and geopolitical tensions exhibiting unique complexity in contexts (Fang & Repnikova, 2017; Han, 2021; Liu et al., 2021). Answers to this question would shed light on the less visible, yet persistent processes of international infotech trade, negotiation, and the contestation of representation, meaning, and identity reconstruction which are integral to the practices of platform labor.

Third, what are the potential benefits and downsides of smaller-scale platforms? The ethnographic study of smaller-scale platforms like Bigo highlights several benefits and downsides the multinational smaller-scale platforms have on different stakeholders, including users, workers, policymakers, and entrepreneurs. For users, smaller platforms present a wealth of entertainment and information options that are particularly valuable in areas where the media landscape is more conservative or restricted. However, they also run the risk of promoting oversimplified and potentially biased narratives that align with specific nationalistic or cultural viewpoints, which may not contribute positively to global understanding. Workers, then, benefit from the employment opportunities created by these platforms, which range from formal positions to informal roles within the gig economy. This can be especially important in regions struggling with high rates of unemployment or underemployment. Nevertheless, the work environment on these platforms can be challenging. Employees may face high pressure, low job security, and toxic conditions; the ethnographic study of Bigo further underscores the vulnerable situation of expatriate employees in host countries, as they contend with threats and harassment from aggressive competitors, agents, or other stakeholders. For entrepreneurs and policymakers, the growth of smaller platforms can spur local

economic development and innovation in business models adapted to regional needs and cultures. These dynamics can influence global policy decisions aimed at nurturing a more diverse and inclusive media and technology landscape. However, the rapid expansion and the sometimes disruptive nature of these platforms pose regulatory challenges, especially when they operate across different cultural and legal frameworks, potentially leading to conflicts with different laws and regulations.

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Notes

1. For details, see "*Number of full-time Meta Platforms employees from 2004 to 2023,*" via https://www.statista.com/statistics/273563/number-of-facebook-employees/ (visited on 6th June 2024).
2. For details, see "*Number of TikTok employees and annual turnover (in Chinese)*," via https://tiktok.iluohuan.com/jiaocheng/24062.html (visited on 10th May 2024).
3. For details, see *JOYY INC. Annual Reports* via https://ir.joyy.com/financial-information/annual-reports (visited on 10th May 2024).
4. For details, see "Starting from Jack Ma's Internet Thinking," *China Youth Daily* , via https://zqb.cyol.com/html/2014-09/09/nw.D110000zgqnb_20140909_3-02.htm. (Author: Qi-Ping Jiang; Publish in 2014; Visited on 30th May, 2024).
5. For details, see "The Core of Alibaba's Internet Thinking That Jack Ma Won't Easily Reveal," via *Senior Internet Marketing Specialist*, https://mp.sohu.com/profile?xpt=cHBhZzE3NjBmOGFjMDgwYUBzb2h1LmNvbQ==&spm=smpc.content-abroad.author.1.1717057248853l9JwTKd (Author: Jian-Chao Wang; Published in 2018; Visited on 30th May, 2024).
6. By 2022, the ICT sector in Turkey had achieved its highest level of employment, nearing nearly 288,000 individuals. For details, see "*Number of employees in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector in Turkey from 2012 to 2022*," via https://www.statista.com/statistics/1329249/turkey-employees-in-the-ict-sector/ (visited on 10th May, 2024).
7. In this context, "gangs" doesn't just mean criminal gangs; it refers to informal organizations that sometimes engage in violence and semilegal activities.
8. The information was gathered during fieldwork. We could not confirm its authenticity.
9. The information was gathered during fieldwork. We could not confirm its authenticity.
10. The information was gathered and verified during fieldwork.

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