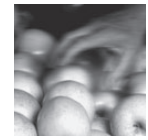

Article

Journal of Consumer Culture
0(0) 1–21

DOI: 10.1177/1469540515572239
joc.sagepub.com
SAGE

Fashioning the feminine self in "prosumer capitalism": Women's work and the transnational reselling of Western luxury online

Lin Zhang
University of Southern California, USA

Abstract

Through ethnography and interviews, this article examines the social media–based transnational reselling of Western luxury by Chinese women through the lens of gendered transnational prosumption. Linking prosumption to debates on the feminization of labor, it analyzes the paradoxical implications that neoliberal global capitalism's demand for more agentive and participatory prosuming female subjects have for international feminist politics. Disrupting the boundaries between the commercial or public and personal, virtual and physical, and work and consumption, transnational mobile middle-class Chinese women have "reinvented" prosumption as a cultural, technological, and economic solution to the contradictions that inhere in competing demands of different gender regimes. In their hands, prosumption becomes a gendered response to the tensions inherent to China's Post-Socialist modernity, allowing some women more choices, autonomy, flexibility, and mobility through the strategic performance of gendered identities and networks. But such freedom is often already contained by the biopolitical governmentality of both advanced capitalism and the patriarchal Chinese state, which divide women based on class, race, and nationality; render employment precarious and atomized; encourage consumer global citizenship; and foster a self-promotional, commoditized, and "always-on" interactive subjectivity. As such, this article seeks to complicate the current discussion of prosumption by highlighting the structuring imperatives of gender, class, race, and nation.

Keywords

Prosumption, feminization of labor, Web 2.0, social media, participatory culture, China

Corresponding author:
Lin Zhang, University of Southern California, 3502 Watts Way, G6, Los Angeles, CA 90007, USA.
Email: zhan370@usc.edu

Introduction

Vicky is a 24-year-old foreign student from China in Florence. Like many young women her age, she loves fashion and shopping. But unlike most of her middle-class peers, she is a frequent buyer of high-end luxury. She goes to a nearby luxury outlet twice a week by train, visits the brands popular with Chinese consumers, sneaks selfies of herself wearing the new releases, and catches up with a few sales associates who have become friends. Then she posts the pictures on her microblog sites, goes for lunch, text chats on her phone, and returns to the boutiques to make purchases. After a typical shopping trip, she comes home with a full carry-on suitcase of branded luxury goods like Prada handbags, Tiffany necklaces, and La Mer cream, which she mails to her ''clients'' in China who placed orders online. Like a growing number of young Chinese women who live abroad, Vicky is an Internet-based luxury agent (*daigou*) who buys branded Western luxury products overseas and then resells them via social media platforms to middle-class consumers in China.

This niche market emerged around the mid-2000s as a result of the Chinese middle class' growing brand awareness and spending power, increasing transnational mobility, and the huge price disparity between luxuries sold in China and abroad. The industry took off in the aftermath of the global crisis and soared after the country became the world's largest luxury market in 2011, accounting for a quarter of global luxury consumer spending. A quick search of two of the most popular reselling platforms, Sina Weibo and Taobao.com, generated more than 33,000 shops specializing in reselling branded foreign products and almost 20 million items on sale, respectively. The most profitable of those businesses deal with luxury fashion and beauty products and are mostly run by young middle-class women who are, themselves, potential luxury consumers. Faced with huge tax revenue loss incurred by this booming informal economy, the government has tightened regulations regarding custom inspection since 2011, adjusted duties for international travelers and overseas package shipping, and even prosecuted a few resellers.

The phenomenon of ''prosumption,'' the co-constitution of production and consumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) that ''occurs as a consequence of increasing participation of the consumer'' in content production (Beer and Burrows, 2010), has become pervasive following the rise of ''Web 2.0'' technologies exemplified by Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Ebay (p. 6). These women luxury agents are ''prosumers'' in that they not only consume but also resell for a profit through personalized ''engagement marketing'' on social media, ''co-creating'' value for both the luxury brands and the social media platforms. Through social media–based cultural production that merges the personal with the commercial, they actively fashion their gendered identities in interaction with the networked publics. That is, they not only produce content but also construct the gendered ''self'' through online prosumption, which, in the Chinese context, is intertwined with a collective ''refashioning'' of the national self in search of Post-Socialist identities (Rofel, 2007). This gendered ''professionalization'' of ''prosumption,''

be it YouTube "amateur" filmmakers, camgirls, mobile phone novel writers, or fashion bloggers and lifecasters, is rapidly gaining global momentum following the commercialization and mainstreamization of social media technologies but is often overlooked by researchers.

As a concept, prosumption has been the subject of some critique for its lack of attention to issues of labor and consumerism, "diversity and historical specificity" (Zajc, 2013: 2). The current study seeks to address these issues by attending to how specific prosuming practices intersect with structuring imperatives of gender, race, class, and nation in facilitating transnational flows of cultural content, values, commodities, and people. It also contributes to discussions of the changing face of labor on and through the Internet by connecting online cultural production to offline circuits of commerce (Scholz, 2013). It examines these women's prosumption activities in light of the Post-Fordist feminization and globalization of labor and capital's increasing demands for versatile, flexible, mobile, and affectively invested labor – outside the traditional workplace, beyond the dichotomies of global and local, production and reproduction or consumption, private and public, and work and leisure. In doing so, it tells the personal, yet collective story of the gendered dreams, yearnings, and aspirations that simultaneously produce, articulate, negotiate, and resist locally embedded neoliberal global capitalism. Challenging the dichotomy of "Western consumers vs. non-Western producers" (Larner and Molloy, 2009), this article shows how young middle-class Chinese women as "non-Western prosumers" are transforming the meanings and practices of work and consumption as the Post-Socialist nation grapples with economic, political, and cultural transitions to further integrate into global capitalism.

The research is based on 23 in-depth interviews with women luxury resellers, and a 10-month online ethnography conducted from August 2013 to May 2014, observing on a daily basis the visual and discursive self-representation of the prosumers and their interaction with customers on social media platforms. I also accompanied a Los Angeles-based reseller on one of her boutique shopping trips in April 2014 and visited the home office of a Beijing-based reseller in August 2013. These methods are complemented by an analysis of media coverage of the e-commerce luxury reselling industry in both Chinese and English. In addition, I started to closely follow and observe 52 luxury resellers' (including my 23 interviewees) social media sites and online shops since August 2013 on a daily basis. The sites include Sina microblog, Instagram, Wechat friend circle, and Taobao.com. I also occasionally approach some resellers as customers and inquire about product information; on three occasions, I purchased products from them. In addition, I chat regularly with a few resellers who have become friends about their business and life and joined their online customer chat groups, in which I observe group interactions between the seller and her customers and keep records of important messages regularly. In general, this multi-pronged and immersive experience in the luxury reselling industry allowed me to bridge the virtual with the physical and the personal with the public and commercial in my research.

In doing so, the study explores women's motivation for prosumption, the emotional labor of online self-branding and "interactivity," the risks and stigmas that come with the emerging profession, and strategies they employed to cope with the flexibility of "prosumer capitalism." Troubling the boundaries between the commercial or public and personal, virtual and physical, and work and consumption, transnational mobile middle-class Chinese women have "reinvented" prosumption as a cultural, technological, and economic solution to the contradictions they experienced navigating the competing demands of different gender regimes. This gendered response to the tensions inherent to China's Post-Socialist modernity allows some women more choices, autonomy, flexibility, and mobility through the strategic performance of gendered identities and networks. But such freedom is often already contained by the biopolitical governmentality of both advanced capitalism and the patriarchal Chinese state, which divide women based on class, race, and nationality; render employment precarious and atomized; encourage consumer global citizenship; and foster a self-promotional, commoditized, and "always-on" interactive subjectivity.

Women's work and globalization in "prosumer capitalism"

With the growing popularity of Web 2.0 technologies and interactive social media in the past decade, the increasing participation of consumers or media users in content production online has garnered attention from scholars of various disciplines. Borrowing the term "prosumer" from the futurist Alvin Toffler (1980), sociologists Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) commented on the intensified blurring between consumption and production as both a continuity and rupture from earlier forms of capitalism, tracing the rise of "prosumer capitalism" with Web 2.0 technologies as major "means of prosumption" (p. 16). However, what the discussion on prosumption seldom raises is how this technology-facilitated convergence of consumption and labor reflects a broader shift that feminist scholars have been theorizing for more than two decades – that is, the amplification in Post-Fordism of what used to be considered "feminine" attributes of work, economy, and culture, such as consumption skills, aesthetic judgment, emotional or affective labor, sociality, flexibility, and precariousness (Gray, 2003; Hochschild, 1983; Jarrett, 2013; Larner and Molloy, 2009; McRobbie, 2011). This observable "qualitative feminization of work" in late capitalism has paralleled a quantitative shift whereby women in both the affluent West and emerging societies have – especially in the past three decades – entered the workplace en masse.

What such transformation in gender and labor entails for women is contentious and ambiguous. Some see the reconfiguration of consumption skills as a "new source of economic power" and "workplace authority" for women, identifying the valorization of "reproductive labor" (Cameron and Gibson-Graham, 2003), and the blurring between consumption and work in certain female-dominated industries like fashion as presenting potential challenges or alternatives to patriarchal capitalism. Others are less optimistic about the aestheticization of labor in

contemporary service industries and ''cognitive capitalism's'' tendency to prioritize ''extracting value from relational and emotional elements'' (Morini, 2007). They look at these shifts as the colonization of life by work, which lead to new forms of alienation (Hochschild, 1983), discrimination, re-entrenchment of job segregation, and fetishism of consumption (Williams and Connell, 2010: 349). Even when such feminization of work contributes to the desegregation and detraditionalization of labor, its effects are often unevenly distributed along lines of class, race, and nationality and are often preempted by the ''biopolitical governmentality'' of ''consumer culture and the promises of personal satisfactions therein'' (McRobbie, 2011: 72).

The transnational dimension remains oddly under-explored in both the literature on prosumption and the recent feminist interventions into prosumption. This neglect is especially surprising given, on one hand, the ferocious expansion of neoliberal global capitalism assisted by new technologies, re-organizing production and consumption, and generating new and locally embedded prosuming subjects wherever it goes and, on the other hand, the added labor that non-Western ''prosumers'' have always invested in circulating, decoding, resisting, or rendering meaningful Western cultural and commercial products. Examining prosumption as a transnational practice and process directs us away from reinforcing the false binary of ''global'' and ''local'' as distinct and ''authentic'' existence, instead focusing on tracing the deep permeability and interpenetration of the two through culturally and historically specific lived experiences.

Globalization and its latest phase as driven by digitalization and financialization is often conceptualized as a masculine and Western endeavor – a macro-economic process traversed by white, male Silicon Valley innovators and Wall Street bankers with non-Western women as its victims (Chang and Ling, 2000). This paradigm explains why the majority of research on gender and labor in China to date has concerned working-class manufacturing and service workers, studies that – ironically – have obscured the growing number of female middle-class working professionals, college students, housewives, and entrepreneurs in academic literature. Broadening the discussion of prosumption to middle- and upper-middle-class Chinese women in transnational and non-Western spaces challenges the prevalent but problematic construction of ''Western prosumers/consumers'' versus ''non-Western producers.'' It also deconstructs the myth of both globalization as a unidirectional process and its latest, ''neoliberal'' evolution as a ''Western'' and stable formation with predictable consequences, opening up the possibility that the inherent variations and contradictions of neoliberal capitalism already contain the seeds of their own opposition.

Beyond ''the rice bowl of youth''? The female prosumer in ''Web 2.0 China''

Modern Chinese womanhood has always been defined in relation to the producing and consuming female body (Barlow, 1994; Wu, 2009). While consumerism was

abhorred as bourgeois, the ideal female subject in Socialist China was the ''iron girl'' – the gender-neutral female model worker. Having been liberated by the Communist party-state from feudal bonds, her body was placed in service of the grand Socialist project (Anagnost, 1989). Granted an ''iron rice bowl'' – a symbol of ''guaranteed employment, housing and social services'' – in the socialist workplace, Maoist femininity was mainly constituted by women's work and participation in socialist construction (Hanser, 2008).

Since China's reform and opening up in the late 1970s, the state's embrace of an export-oriented and labor-intensive manufacturing economy and the emerging urban consumer market instigated parallel waves of feminized labor: one has drawn female peasant girls (*dagongmei*) to manufacturing jobs in the factory zones on urban outskirts; the other has witnessed the emergence of a distinct urban ''pink-collar class'' represented by the young, vivacious, and often hypersexualized eaters of ''the rice bowl of youth.'' These women joined newly formed urban service industry professions, ranging from luxury hotel waitress, beauty products sales girls, and flight attendants to fashion models and show girls. Women's participation en masse in the urban workforce boosted their consumption power and spawned a booming consumer sector targeting professional women, such as high-end shopping malls, beauty salons, and cosmetic surgery clinics. The market-driven post-reform feminization of work and the rise of consumerism are said to have contributed to a return of traditional gender norms, reinforcing ''gender essentialism'' and – according to some – retrenching gender equality in the absence of Socialist radical equalitarianism (Wu, 2009). Although a younger generation of women is experiencing the new work and consumption choices as liberating from Maoist asceticism and erasure of sexuality (Rofel, 2007; Zhang, 2000), their empowering potential has been tempered by a widening urban–rural divide and growing urban gender gap, especially following the mass layoffs of female workers from state-owned factories since the mid-1990s (Hanser, 2008).

The female prosuming subject has emerged from these fluctuating gender dynamics. A new cosmopolitan subject defined by her consumerism and transnational mobility – still facing traditional patriarchal feminine codes of respectability, self-sacrifice, subordination and domesticity, and the legacy and haunting ghost of socialist feminism – the female prosuming subject embodies the complexity and unsettledness of Chinese new millennium neoliberalism (Rofel, 2007). The overwhelming majority of the those who engage in online luxury reselling are college-educated and transnational mobile middle- or upper-middle-class young women in their twenties to early thirties. As members of the urban post-1980s (*balinghou*) and post-1990s (*jiulinghou*) generations – the first batch born after the Communist state embarked on the reform and opening up policy in the late 1970s – they have reaped the fruits of the socialist feminist revolution, the ''single child'' policy, education reform, and the material wealth accumulated after the economic reform, all of which have accorded them equal status with their male counterparts in terms of educational and professional credentials.

According to mass media depictions and scholarly research, a few characteristics have set these urban middle-class young women apart from both the previous generations and their working class and rural peers. Coming of age after the nation's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, they are generally more cosmopolitan, transnationally mobile, and attuned to global pop culture trends due to an unprecedented influx of commodities, images, and ideas from the West and from Asian neighbors facilitated by new communication and transportation technologies. Upon graduating from college, many of the women work in foreign or joint ventures in major cities as "white-collar ladies," a term that emerged in the mid-1990s in reference to college-educated urban female knowledge workers operating in the new "Post-Fordist" sectors of the transitional economy. Heavily subsidized by their parents, a growing number obtains Western degrees or migrates abroad as professionals or middle-class wives. Unlike the *dagongmei* and the pink-collar class, their skills, education credentials, and "can-do" attitudes have made them as competitive – if not more – as men in the new knowledge economy.

However, the extent to which these gains by urban middle-class young women in education, and to a lesser extent, in employment, can be translated into political empowerment is less certain – not to mention that such advancement is often made at the expense of their working class and rural sisters. The commoditization of women, either as objects of consumption in media and other cultural products or as consuming subjects – a "consumer citizenship" encouraged by the post-socialist "state-market nexus" to seek self-worth through consumption in want of political participation and rights – has contributed to a resurgence of traditional patriarchal gender norms (Wang, 2000). In the past decade, with the growing buying power, consumer confidence, and global outlook of middle-class *balinghou* and *jiulinghou* women, global luxury brands have emerged as the latest marker of class distinction and cosmopolitanism. Workplace gender discrimination and female underemployment is on the rise along with women's declining labor participation, especially following the state's retreat from ensuring egalitarianism in employment and welfare for women in the mid-1990s under pressure of the market, and more recently exacerbated by the flexibilization of labor in both traditional industrial and service, and the new knowledge sectors (Ong, 2006).

These converging elements in post-WTO China conspire to make the female prosumer the ideal subject of the global new economy, opening up new political possibilities while generating new regimes of power and exclusion. No passive consumer of Western luxury, she knows where and how to locate the best deal using her "feminine" consumer skills and knowledge. More importantly, her technology savvy and cosmopolitan worldliness serve her effort to convert "feminine" knowledge and gendered networks into monetizable capital for online entrepreneurship. The valorized "prosuming self" often manifests through self-conscious and highly skilled construction and publicization of a personal brand based on classed and gendered identities, experiences, networks, and bodies. This gendered and technology-empowered "prosumer citizenship" seems to have handily

"resolved" the conflict between the neoliberal feminine ideal of a consumerist, individualistic, global mobile, and actively desiring woman and the self-sacrificing woman shaped by traditional patriarchal norms and whose identities are defined by her familial kinship. Although the young women might still be structurally disadvantaged, their gendered and "professionalized" prosumption practices serve as a coveted alternative – or supplement – to their white-collar career track, educational pursuits, and housewifery. But this cultural solution to structural problems runs the risk of legitimizing, even making desirable, the rising flexibilization of labor, withering public welfare provisions, new domesticity, and feminine retreatism. Far from a nondiscriminating equalizer, this emergent regime of value generates new forms of exclusions, and privileges certain versions of "femininity," rendering others less valuable, visible, or desirable.

As the Chinese economy struggles to transition from industrial to Post-Fordist, further integrating into neoliberal global capitalism, these gendered transnational prosuming subjectivities will be desirable and necessary to constituting a different regime of accumulation and economic rationality. The female "prosuming" subject represents a rupture in subjectivation from the socialist "iron rice bowl" or the industrial "*dagongmei*" and the "rice bowl of youth," nonetheless personifying the nation's struggles at this particular historical conjuncture in which different elements – traditional, socialist, and neoliberal capitalist – battle to define their identity and future (Wu, 2009).

Prosuming Western luxury, fashioning the feminine self

The transnational quest for mobility and autonomy

Luxury reselling, either pursued as a part-time hobby turned job or as a full-time career, was often experienced by my interviewees as a quest for spatial and social mobility and personal or financial autonomy. A few of the women identified their desire to get into luxury reselling as a means to an end of making it out of China. For instance, Amanda quit her job to become a full-time luxury reseller in Dubai:

> I know a few Chinese women who are in the same business here. They are very much like me, former white-collar office ladies who felt stuck in their old professions, have a good fashion sense, and want to explore the world.

She now runs a team of six: one online customer service in China and five buyers scattered in Europe and the United States. Similarly, Sally left her former job 1 year prior to our interview after a "passport epiphany":

> This woman in my office, who was in her early thirties, unlike everyone else, she always wore a smile on her face at work. She never worked overtime like us, and she just didn't seem to care as much as we did about work. I was bewildered until she

> told me that she holds a Canadian passport and bought a house in Vancouver a few years ago. I said to myself: "You need to get one of these."

Sally now operates a social media luxury reselling business on Sina Weibo with almost 9000 "followers" while working toward her MBA in Los Angeles. "Hopefully, I will find a way to stay permanently in the US," said Sally. The West, as a signifier of cosmopolitanism, presents a sought-after alternative to the China, which is considered by many of my interviewees as "less livable" given its current environmental problems; so, too, is luxury reselling a more desirable profession than the hyper-exploitative Chinese workplace – now a new and fiercer battleground of neoliberal global capitalism. The emblematic superiority attached to Western citizenship, luxury commodities, and lifestyle holds so much allure for young middle-class Chinese women like Sally and Amanda that the quest itself is experienced as a search for social mobility, personal autonomy, if not the "true" gendered self (Rofel, 2007).

The feeling of empowerment afforded by association with Western consumer culture also resonates with women who are based in China but make frequent overseas "shopping trips" that often serve multiple purposes – commercial and personal, business and tourism. Mina left her research job in a cosmetics company in Northeast China to start an e-commerce shop specializing in reselling foreign cosmetics. She rotated with her business partner, a full-time white-collar worker in a German company, in their bi-weekly shopping expedition to duty-free shops in Seoul. Like most of my other China-based interviewees, international travel for Mina is one main attraction of the profession for its cosmopolitan cache and the sense of mobility it affords. Consider the comments made by Ellen, a full-time agent just returned from graduate school in the United States to Beijing, who compared her current job to an alternative preferred by her parents:

> I just couldn't take that job (working in a state-owned petroleum corporation). I know it's gonna be much more secure and much less stressful and risky, but it's simply too boring and fixed. I cannot bear doing the same tasks 9-to-5 in the same office everyday. I like traveling, getting to know different culture, going shopping too much to trade my soul for security!

Ella and Mina are not alone in their longing for the exotic and cosmopolitan cultural experience that comes with overseas tourism and luxury consumption. In recent years, a boom in transnational air travel and consumption has been fueled by a fast-growing Chinese middle class, and the number of outbound overseas air travelers is forecasted to double in 5 years. Luxury agent emerged as a niche profession amid these trends, propelled by the gendered and classed aspirations of the new generation of Chinese middle-class women. If, as Rofel (2007) has posited, cultural tourism in Post-Mao China – in contrast to travel for political goals in Socialist China – indicates the "truly free self" for young urban women, then the rise of luxury reselling as a profession perfectly unites economic rationality or

pragmatism and the romanticized cosmopolitan sensibility "embodied in the act of traveling" that ultimately symbolizes a new kind of feminine subject (p. 128). Indeed, the Maoist class-based spatial politics of "going to the countryside" has been replaced by the contemporary calling of "going global" in renegotiating China's post-socialist position in the world.

However, not everyone "intentionally" gets involved in the business, and for those who "accidentally stumbled upon" luxury reselling while living or studying abroad, it was often a delight to realize that they could actually make money out of their favorite pastime while maintaining close contact with their home country. For the part-timers – mostly full-time students or professional women – reselling is less "serious" but functions more like an extension of their leisure and hobbyist pursuits, such as sharing sales information or new purchases via social media, going shopping after work, or following the latest fashion information through blogs and magazines. Those who end up turning full time are often young housewives with small children, part-time students, or women between jobs or schools. As an important source of supplementary family income, reselling delivers a much-needed sense of achievement or autonomy from housework, unemployment, or underemployment. Being a luxury agent, as an Internet-based profession that merges work and leisure, allows young mothers and housewives to balance their household chores, such as shopping and cooking, with a well-paid job. Here, the flexibility of the profession that merges the private with the public, domestic with commercial, goes toward reconciling the contradictions between duties demanded by their traditional gender roles as mothers, wives, daughters, and girlfriends and individualistic pursuits of business success, financial independence, and consumption to craft the feminine self.

The perks that come with prosumption – VIP membership of luxury brands, pampered shopping experience, and staying in the know with global fashion trends – reinforce the sense of mobility and empowerment – real or imaginary. However, simply equating luxury prosumption with leisure or feminist empowerment risks romanticizing this gendered labor practice. Indeed, this "prosumer global citizenship" is complicated by the emotional labor women must assume in managing their business personae and maintaining flows of communication online.

The emotional labor of online prosumption

In a competitive market of service-oriented social media selling, the gendered affective relationships between sellers and customers are key to business success. The social media–based marketplace of luxury brands and "prosumer"-generated services is also a transnational space in which cultural identities form, different cultural values clash, and consequential human interactions take place. This interconstituency of culture and commodity and the shifting of "cultural labor into capitalist business practices" (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 8) are the defining features of a prosumer capitalism, which challenges the "long held dichotomy between instrumental and affective action" rooted in "Western European cosmopology"

(Rofel, 2007: 223). Prosumer capitalism also intersects with the competing forces of the global and local in shaping the construction of the new womanhood, which holds contradictory implications for feminist politics. My interviewees strategically engaged new media practices like online branding and lifecasting as both "authentic" expressions of the cosmopolitan self and as a less intrusive means for product promotion. Online transnational networks and interaction solidify emotional ties and cross-cultural solidarities, but the excess of instrumentalization and interactivity also generates emotional and physical burdens.

Fashioning an "authentic" self – that is successfully annexing individuals' unique personalities and life experiences to commercial products through visual and discursive narratives – is paramount to attracting customers, enhancing "stickiness," and increasing profit margins. To excel amid fierce competition in a risky, mediated informal market, these women must be skilled at communicating their personal and affective appropriation and engagement with Western luxury brands. The brands and their cultural meanings, in turn, become resources through which the women articulate "authentic" gendered identities that are, in fact, heavily coded with class markers, patriarchal feminine codes, and cosmopolitan distinction. Successful women agents creatively highlight the product's aura of authenticity while conveying personalized messages to their target customers. One glimpses this creativity in the names these women give to their online businesses, as well as in the multiple ways they describe the self-brand they seek to project (Figure 1).

In addition to strategically naming and presenting their businesses, all of the women – to different extents – engaged in social media lifecasting. Selfies taken inside the fitting room wearing branded products are juxtaposed with photos of their children, dogs, houses, meals, or daily activities and events, such as concerts, picnics, parties, and tourism. Product information is narrated along with prosumers' individualized curation based on personal engagement with the product or retweeted in a "customer show" that presents client-generated visual and discursive testimonies of the product and services provided. The interactivity of social media selling constitutes a sense of quasi-community that contributes to substantiating the "authenticity" of the luxury brands.

Interviewees who lived in certain time zones would occasionally "live broadcast" their shopping trips, taking orders while making purchases in the shopping venues – in their view, a smart promotional strategy that both authenticates their products and offers vicarious shopping pleasure to their clients. These bits and pieces all function to constitute coherent gendered self-brand images in relation to their various social roles as mothers, daughters, wives, girlfriends, students, or businesswomen. However, these feminine images are never value-free – they are always encoded with middle- or upper-class cosmopolitanism via branded material status symbols and the symbolism of place. A quick scan of the recent "leisure photos" posted by my interviewees reveals the tendency to showcase conspicuous consumption and leisure in global landmark locations, such as a romantic dinner for two at a Michelin-ranked restaurant in Beverly Hills, an evening at a fashion show in

My European Home:

I came up with this name to make customers feel at home in my shop. . . . Of course, adding "European" gives me cache—everyone knows that Europe is the heaven of high-end luxury.

Global Shopping Girl:

My shop's name contains a sense of self-mockery. But it's who I am—I like shopping, especially global brand names. I believe that's what most of my customers like to do as well. Oh, I know the word "global" makes me sound too ambitious. (Laugh).

Kevin Baby's Mom @ USA:

Kevin is my two-year-old's name. I name my shop after him partly because that I set up this business to earn him a better life. I realized after a while that my customers trust me more because of my identity as a mother. Many of them are young mothers too, so in a way we are not just doing business but are helping each other out to make life better.

Figure 1. Naming online shops.

downtown Dubai, a facial at an upscale beauty salon in Shanghai, and a relaxing Sunday morning spent with girlfriends at an art gallery in Warsaw (Figure 2).

This annexation of affect by economic rationality works to reconcile the contradictions between the individualistic, flexible, consumerist, and enterprising femininities commanded by mobile capital, and the respectable, family-oriented, and altruistic womanhood anchored in traditional Confucian values. If anything, traditional female "virtues" and gender roles are often deployed by the resellers both subjectively and objectively to mitigate excessive commercialism and justify mercantile interests. The complex interaction of the two provides the dominant gender scripts in shaping "prosumer subjectivities," filling the void left by the fading socialist feminism.

These implicit cultural expectations of multiple feminine ideals function as biopolitical power that disciplines the women's bodies. Only certain identities and stories are brandable, and brandability in an online market of luxury goods can require constant self-work and a perpetual reshaping of the feminine self in compliance with – rather than challenging – gender scripts dictated by mainstream consumer culture. For example, Xiaolan, who showcased high-end bags, such as Hermes and Chanel in her photos, told me that she hired a "personal nail technician" who visited her home twice a week. Lily sold clothes but had given birth half a year previous to when we talked. She confided in me the pressure to "slim down fast" and "tighten up her muscle" so that she could feel confident again about posing in the photos. The constant need to stay photogenic requires both

Figure 2. Photos taken from the social media sites of some well-known luxury resellers.

self-surveillance and a form of ''aesthetic labor'' that subsumes everyday leisure activities into ''the productive domain'' to create the ''look'' for work (Wissinger, 2009: 281).

If the labor invested in ''looking good'' generates both pleasure and burden, to ''sound right'' in an interactive, ''always-on'' mediated environment only takes more work (Williams and Connell, 2010). The muddling of leisure and labor, private and commercial in online prosumption conflates the sense of social recognition gained from the gendered network with self-exploitation and overwork, blurring the distinction between the community logic of mutual sharing and female solidarity with the profit-driven imperative of commercial utilitarianism. Oftentimes, the extent to which ''online interactivity'' felt like work on a subjective level varied according to the woman's degree of involvement in the business.

For those who participated in a more leisurely manner, shopping for family or a small circle of friends felt more pleasant than burdensome. Modestly engaged, the emotional labor of interactivity helps the women maintain established workplace or friendship ties transnationally while expanding their social network beyond the small circle of people at work or school. These virtual interpersonal ties are often reported to be especially beneficial to the emotional well-being of stay-at-home moms:

> It used to be just me and my baby. My husband is super busy during the day and tired at night after work. It is hard for me to make friends in the suburban neighborhood where we live. Now I feel much happier waking up every morning knowing that there are people waiting for me online who find my advice useful and who appreciate my taste and hard work. I guess this is what motivates me.

Because most of Xiumei's customers were also mothers, they often exchanged tips about child rearing, which helped her ''make better sense of the cultural difference in family pedagogy between China and the US.''

However, self-exploitation and overwork were common among more established agents, who often managed a large base of regular customers with little extra help. As the business expanded and the customer network grew in size, many interviewees started to feel overwhelmed by the expectation to be constantly available to answer client inquiries that may or may not lead to a deal; living in different time zones from their customers only exacerbated the onus. Some women's prosumption commitments jeopardized their personal networks. For instance, a few were ''defriended'' by their old acquaintances in social media or received complaints about ''being bombarded by commercials on things they can never afford.'' This interpenetration of life and work echoes the collapsing of personal and business identities in online self-branding but was felt more concretely by the prosumers on a daily basis. Most women reported feeling guilty about spending less time enjoying leisure activities with their family and friends after getting into the business. The contradictions generated by competing gender ideals, the

"potential trauma" of the "excess" of representation, although inherent to the neoliberal "prosumer" subjectivities, proved hard to reconcile in everyday practices.

Risk, stigma, and alienation

The industry's association with high-end luxury products, cosmopolitan lifestyles, and the high-tech sector has drawn numerous young aspirants, but beneath the profession's veneer of glamor are the many contradictions these women negotiate on a daily basis. Being novel and informal, the profession often appears illegitimate in the eyes of the older generation. In a culture in which many middle-class parents expect their daughters to focus on getting good grades in school and entering a stable and reputable profession like teaching or working for the government so that they can "marry well" and enjoy a "balanced" life, becoming an e-commerce entrepreneur is unconventional at best. Several women shared stories of being misunderstood or teased by their parents when they first started their businesses:

> I was so afraid of her disapproval that I didn't tell my mom about my business until half a year later. She was quite mad at me because I was making a good salary at the newspaper. Being a journalist sounds right for a girl like me.

Risks and uncertainties are also part of the informal industry, which demands quick reaction, high-risk tolerance, and good problem-solving skills. One risk concerns tax and customs evasion. Many of the women were playing the legal system, for instance, by concealing an immigration status that prevented them from engaging in money-making activities or mailing and physically carrying commodities past customs as personal items to avoid taxation. The Chinese state, facing huge custom and tax revenue loss, has begun to get tough with the industry in the past couple of years. The women agents also confronted numerous risks unique to international trading, such as those incurred by transnational shipping, unstable currency exchange rates, intricacies of the banking system, fake luxury, unreliable clients, and the often hostile attitudes of the luxury brands toward reselling practices.

Conducting business in a legal gray zone comes with stigmas that are often intricately linked to citizenship, race, and nationality. In spite of being relatively privileged in China, these young middle-class women had to constantly negotiate and readjust their identities in dealing with the luxury brands. Such negotiation is made trickier by the world's ambivalent attitudes toward China's newly acquired love for luxury and its growing purchasing power as an "upstart" nation. Many women reported that some luxury brands racially profile Asian or Chinese customers online to maintain a brand image of exclusivity and to ensure the profit of their overseas branches. One of my interviewees had her Bank of America credit card blacklisted by Louis Vuitton after a one-time online purchase. Another was rejected on her first attempt to use her Visa credit card issued by a Chinese bank to

purchase a Coach product online. This ethnicity- or nationality-based discrimination in virtual transactions is bitterly ironic considering that many of the luxury products (or their parts) are manufactured in China by working-class factory girls on the global assembly line with their ''nimble fingers'' and who might never be able to afford transnational mobility or the pricy goods they themselves make (Pun, 2005). Although able to buy multiple citizenships through large capital investments, these elites nonetheless cannot entirely escape the racism of immigration laws as well as everyday forms of racism. The specificities of these gendered and racialized experiences, along with the inassimilable reality of widening social inequality and what many perceive to be a moral crisis in China, serve as a constant reminder of the limitations of such ''flexible citizenship'' based on consumption rights and transnational entrepreneurship. The women's struggles epitomize the nation's dilemma – the contradictions embedded in ''Socialism with Chinese Characteristics'' – in transcending its positions defined by past histories, hierarchical international divisions of labor, and global geopolitics, while maintaining autonomy, independence, and preserving its unique cultural and revolutionary traditions.

Facing a variety of constraints based on race, class, and nationality, most of my interviewees were well aware of the widening social inequality, consumerist national image, and commodity fetishism that they, in fact, foster. Some rationalized the structural and personal barriers as a natural stage China is going through after decades of economic reform and opening up. According to Kitty: ''I just go with the demand. Chinese people are so hungry for these (Western luxury products). Why not just take advantage of the trend.'' Others realized the limitations of such ''prosumer'' global citizenship in offering a truly meaningful career and life. Many women complained about feeling ''alienated'' by consumption after the initial joy. For example, one told me that, at first, she was very excited about ''doing shopping with someone else's money,'' but later she started to develop ''aesthetic fatigue'' after ''buying similar products and going to the same boutiques over and over again,'' which ruined her love for shopping.

Flexibility as the new normal

In September 2012, a news story shocked China, provoking anxiety in the agent community. A 26-year-old former flight attendant was sentenced to 11 years in prison plus a hefty fine for smuggling. As the story goes, the young woman set up an e-commerce shop 3 years previously, after being fired from her flight attendant job for having a chronic disease. Thanks to her former professional identity (she named her online business ''Flight Attendant's Small Shop''), her business reselling luxury products bought in Korean duty-free shops was making good profits. Within a year, the woman and her boyfriend made 29 smuggling trips back and forth between Beijing and Seoul, evading more than 1 million RMB worth of duties, before she got caught passing through customs at the Beijing Capital Airport, carrying six bags of unpackaged cosmetics. This story exemplifies

the coexistence of uncertainties and opportunities faced by contemporary Chinese young women, which require constant re-adjustment, considerable flexibility, and an enterprising mentality – traits that are both quintessentially "feminine" and typical of the neoliberal "new economy" (Gray, 2003).

Of course, women have been relegated to the "flexible labor reserve" throughout modern Chinese history (Wu, 2009). Even during the height of Maoist feminism when women's participation in the labor force was celebrated as a major political achievement under socialism, they were interpolated by the state to shoulder the double burden of serving the Maoist metonymic state or family (*jiaguo*) beyond their self-interest (Barlow, 1994). In Post-Mao China, flexibilization intensifies with deepening market reform, campaigns that encourage women to "return to the family" (*funvhuijia*) and engage in "periodic employment" (*jieduanxing jiuye*) are launched whenever unemployment rate jumps (Wu, 2009). However, what makes the post-socialist notion of flexibility different is a neoliberal governmentality that emphasizes women's freedom of choices as a self-serving and self-reliant "economic person," epitomized by the discourse of quality, or *suzhi*, that demands constant adjustment, retraining, and self-improvement in response to capricious capital. More recently, China's growing importance in the global economy not only as producer but also, increasingly, as consumer and investor has opened up new "flexible" transnational career and life opportunities for middle-class Chinese women.

The flexibilities that attend the profession were nonetheless perceived by many of my interviewees as necessary or even inevitable for success or for a meaningful life in the contemporary world. One of the agents, Yaosi, stated,

> I feel like it's very common, or even necessary for young Chinese woman nowadays to maintain an informal career apart from whatever they do during the day . . . It's not just the money, for us *balinghou*, it's more about the excitement and the process of self-discovery. A lot of my professional women friends also run part-time businesses, like a restaurant or an online shop.

Her belief in the necessity of an "informal career" for Chinese young professional women might be exaggerated, but it is nonetheless strong enough to rationalize her overpacked schedule. Later in our interview, she confessed that she "overwork(s) herself with an extra job" to build up "people network" so that she can "have connections in different industries." The importance of multitasking and networking had never occurred to her until her sudden layoff in 2009; it took her a long time to get back on her feet because she was too focused on "getting the work done" and lacked professional connections beyond her company. Because she planned to invest in the new media industry in China, luxury reselling helped her establish her network and better understand the market.

This conscious move to externalize and "transfer" value associated with their feminine identities and youthful bodies to something more "gender-neutral" or lasting – a website, network, more stable business enterprise, or in-demand skills

– was echoed in several interviews. The majority of the women saw luxury prosumption as a transitional, temporary, or supplementary profession that afforded transnational mobility and useful skills, experiences, or resources that would ultimately lead to something more stable and lasting. However, in this fickle economy, it is less certain whether they will ever be able to find or feel fulfilled with a permanent or stable job.

Their flexibility in adapting to the capricious global market and in transcending the narrow value that the market places on their feminine and youthful body recalls Gray's (2003) conceptualization of contemporary "enterprising femininity," which speaks to the "new value" that the Post-Fordist labor market places on feminine and consumer skills accrued through informal means. Their willingness to self-transform, to undertake personal makeovers, and to upgrade their knowledge and skills to adjust to – or even outwit – both the neoliberal transnational capital and the disciplinary state power paradoxically speaks of their "high quality" (*gaosuzhi*). In coping with the risks and uncertainties of a volatile industry, the women entrepreneurs ran themselves like an "enterprise," braving the market as different "made-up" subjectivities that allow them to respond to changes and opportunities.

Conclusion: The politics of "prosumer global citizenship"

Focusing on Internet-based luxury reselling as a transnational gender and culturally specific practice of "prosumption," this article explores how the technology-driven restructuring of labor and consumption on a global scale intersects with changing gender regimes in crafting individual subjectivities. Unlike the universalizing accounts of prosumption, I have situated the women's motivations, practices, frustrations, and aspirations in the history of the feminization of labor and consumption, and the novelty of luxury prosumption in the dynamics of globalization, nation-building, and economic and class restructuring. Examining prosumption in relation to intersectionalities of gender, race, class, and nation as a global phenomenon complicates its politics and empowering potentials, repudiates the unidirectionality of globalization, and problematizes the dichotomous construct of the global and local.

The Internet-based luxury prosumption has emerged as a cultural, economic, and technological "fix" to the contradictions that young, middle-class women in urban China experience as a result of the competing demands of different gender regimes in post-socialist China. The practice is empowering in offering globe-trotting middle-class women the opportunity to expand mobility, gain autonomy, and pursue individual dreams and desires despite of constraints. This social media–based selling that merges affect with economic rationality provides resources for cultural expression, human connection, identity construction, and business entrepreneurship as the women creatively deploy their gendered network, skills, and bodies in fashioning an informal circuit of branded commodities that bypasses corporate and state control and "democratizes" luxury for emerging middle-class consumer in China. More significantly, the multiple flexibilities proffered by the

profession allow women to find a balance – if always delicate and precarious – between fulfilling their traditional gender roles as mothers, wives, daughters, or girlfriends and the individualistic, independent, enterprising, if not self-serving traits "set free" by global capital.

It is harder to tell whether their participation in the informal transnational circuit of brand name commodities challenges global capital's profit-maximizing logic or merely heralds a more advanced form of corporate power that aims at "working with and through the freedom of the consumer" (Zwick et al., 2008). It also begs the question of the extent to which the politics of prosumption challenge the Chinese state's post-reform regime of governance that fosters a self-reliant, self-improving, and economically rational personhood (Ong, 2006; Rofel, 2007). Although this "prosumer global citizenship" can be empowering for some women, it also subjects them to the biopolitical control of advanced capitalism and is unevenly structured to exclude their working-class and rural peers from the "space of flows" of networked communication.

Unlike the working-class female service workers in newly emerged shopping malls or luxury hotels (Hanser, 2008; Otis, 2011), or the factory girls working on global assembly lines in China, women prosumers represent a different type of gendered "global value subject" (Hearn, 2008) as the nation makes the transition into Post-Fordism. The pleasure that the women in this study derived from monetizing female "reproductive labor," transnational travel, shopping high-end brands, experimenting with novel identities, and making meaningful connections online are real – but so are the pains incurred by the imperatives of online self-branding and interactivity, balancing life with work, juggling different time zones, and being constantly responsive and emotionally invested in their service.

However, it would be partial at best to understand the flow of influence as unidirectionally from the "global" to the "local" or the women as passive victims of neoliberal capitalism. The women prosumers' ingenuity in piecing together different cultural and social resources – at times exploiting and at other times trying to resist or outwit various regimes of subjectization – reinvents and redefines the very meaning and practice of "prosumption." Ultimately, their stories are not only about individual women's struggle in neoliberal times but also about the nation's, if not any nation's, collective search for identity and meaning in a world dominated by global capital, that is, to make neoliberalism work for them.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sarah Banet-Weiser, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Guobin Yang, Manuel Castells, and the two anonymous reviewers for their generous feedbacks on various drafts, and Annalisa Zox-Weaver for her meticulous copyediting.

Funding

This research is partially supported by the fieldwork grant issued by the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California.

References

Anagnost A (1989) Transformations of gender in modern China. In: Morgen S (ed.) *Gender in Anthropology: Critical Reviews for Research and Teaching*. Arlington, VA: American Anthropological Association, pp. 313–342.

Banet-Weiser S (2012) *Authentic^{TM}: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. New York: NYU Press.

Barlow T (1994) Theorizing woman: Funu, Guojia, Jiating (Chinese Women, Chinese State, Chinese Family). In: Grewal I and Kaplan C (eds) *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. Minneapolis, MN and London: University Minnesota Press, pp. 173–196.

Beer D and Burrows R (2010) Consumption, prosumption and participatory web cultures. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10(1): 3–12.

Cameron J and Gibson-Graham JK (2003) Feminising the economy: Metaphors, strategies, politics. *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 10(2): 145–157.

Chang KA and Ling LHM (2000) Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. In: Marchand MH and Runyan AS (eds) *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances,* vol. 2. London: Routledge, pp. 27–43.

Gray A (2003) Enterprising femininity: New modes of work and subjectivity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6(4): 489–506.

Hanser A (2008) *Service Encounters: Class, Gender, and the Market for Social Distinction in Urban China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hearn A (2008) Meat, mask, burden: Probing the contours of the branded self. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(2): 197–217.

Hochschild AR (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Jarrett K (2013) The relevance of ''women's work'': Social reproduction and immaterial labour in digital media. *Television & New Media* 15(1): 14–29.

Larner W and Molloy M (2009) Globalization, the ''new economy'' and working women: Theorizing from New Zealand designer fashion industry. *Feminist Theory* 10: 35–59.

McRobbie A (2011) Reflections on feminism, immaterial labour and the post-Fordist regime. *New Formations* 70: 60–76.

Morini C (2007) The feminization of labour in cognitive capitalism. *Feminist Review* 87: 40–59.

Ong A (2006) *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Otis E (2011) *Markets and Bodies: Women, Service Work, and the Making of Inequality in China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Pun N (2005) *Made In China: Women Factory Workers In A Global Workplace*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ritzer G and Jurgenson N (2010) Production, consumption, prosumption: The nature of capitalism in the age of the digital ''prosumer.'' *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10(1): 13–36.

Rofel L (2007) *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Scholz T (ed.) (2013) *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*. New York: Routledge.

Toffler A (1980) *The Third Wave*. New York: William Morrow.

Wang Z (2000) Gender, employment and women's resistance. In: Elisabeth P and Mark S (eds) *Chinese Society: Change Conflict and Resistance*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 62–82.
Williams CL and Connell C (2010) ''Looking good and sounding right'': Aesthetic labor and the social inequality in the retail industry. *Work and Occupations* 37(3): 349–377.
Wissinger E (2009) Modeling consumption: Fashion modeling work in contemporary society. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9(2): 273–296.
Wu XY (2009) Shichanghua beijingxia de xingbie huayu de zhuanxing [Changing gender discourse under marketization]. *China Social Sciences* 2: 1–13.
Zajc M (2013) Social media, prosumption, and dispositives: New mechanisms of the construction of subjectivity. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. Epub ahead of print 4 July. DOI: 10.1177/1469540513493201.
Zhang Z (2000) Mediating time: The ''rice bowl of youth'' in fin de siecle urban China. *Public Culture* 12(1): 93–113.
Zwick D, Bonsu SK and Darmody A (2008) Putting consumers to work: Co-creation and new marketing governmentality. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(2): 1163–1196.

Author Biography

Lin Zhang is a PhD candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California. She is interested in cultural industries, globalization, critical cultural theories, and the culture and history of new media technologies.