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# The interplay of gender, motherhood, and the digital economy in China: exploring the experiences of urban mothers in WeChat businesses

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## Abstract

In recent years, there has been tremendous growth in the e-commerce industry in China. This study focuses on the experiences of urban mothers who engage in e-commerce on the WeChat platform. Through in-depth interviews with 35 urban mothers as digital laborers on WeChat, our findings reveal that career disruptions due to childbirth and the lack of public support for domestic care work often drive urban mothers to engage in e-commerce. However, only a small number of highly educated mothers who strategically exemplify the practices of intensive motherhood ideology are able to generate sufficient income. This study sheds light on the commercialization of the online mother communities on WeChat and how these communities reinforce the intensive motherhood ideology. The separation of the public and private spheres in China after the economic reforms has resulted in urban mothers with young children engaging in precarious digital work. Meanwhile, the commercialization of the private sphere has blurred the boundaries between the public and private spheres with market logic, further perpetuating gender inequalities in contemporary China. Further research is needed to understand the impact of the digital economy on female digital labor in China, especially for mothers with young children.

**Keywords:** Urban mothers, Intensive motherhood ideology, WeChat e-commerce, Commercialization of online mother communities, Gender inequalities

## Introduction

China's e-commerce industry has seen remarkable growth in recent decades. In July 2020, thirteen departments, including the National Development and Reform Commission, and the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), jointly issued the "Opinions on Supporting the Healthy Development of New Forms and Models, Activating the Consumer Market to Drive Employment Expansion<sup>1</sup>". This policy emphasized the necessity of further reducing costs associated with online entrepreneurship and

<sup>1</sup> "Opinions on Supporting the Healthy Development of New Forms and Models, Activating the Consumer Market to Drive Employment Expansion". 2020. [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-07/15/content\\_5526964.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-07/15/content_5526964.htm). Accessed 10 December 2022.

employment, diversifying employment opportunities, and actively fostering the growth of social e-commerce and the digital economy. Within the context of these state-led initiatives and the burgeoning e-commerce landscape, labor participation in the digital economy has notably surged. In particular, the involvement of women, specifically mothers with young children, in the e-commerce industry has increased substantially (AliResearch 2022).

Women have become a significant part of the e-commerce industry in China, with female employment and entrepreneurship in the digital economy exceeding 57 million (AliResearch 2022). This includes women who own Taobao (淘宝) stores, female hosts on Douyin (抖音) or TikTok, and female drivers on mobile transportation platforms such as DiDi (滴滴). Nearly 30% of female labor in the digital economy consists of female participants in the “community/group buying economy” on the WeChat platform, reaching approximately 17.49 million (AliResearch 2022). Mothers with young children have become a vital segment of social e-commerce on the WeChat platform. This report posits that the digital economy mitigates the disadvantages faced by women in the labor market and offers new employment opportunities for mothers. It enables them to balance work and family while earning income as stay-at-home mothers (AliResearch 2022). Nonetheless, whether the digital economy decreases the gender gap in the labor market is a topic warranting further discussion.

The study examines urban mothers who participate in various forms of e-commerce on WeChat platforms as digital laborers. This group includes those involved in direct sales through multilevel marketing companies and group buying through WeChat Applets or Mini programs. Despite the growing body of research on female digital laborers in China and notwithstanding prior investigations into the phenomena of “mommy influencers,” “mommy bloggers,” and “sharenting” practices in Europe, the United States, and South Korea (Jorge et al. 2021; Wilson and Yochim 2017; Nguyen-Thu 2021; Song 2021; Mäkinen 2020), a limited number of studies have exclusively focused on the unique socioeconomic context shaping the experiences of mothers who utilize social media platforms for e-commerce in urban China. The present study endeavors to illuminate the motivations that drive urban mothers to engage in e-commerce through the WeChat platform while also unpacking the social and economic forces that shape their career trajectories. By examining the experiences of these mothers, this study aims to gain a more nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay among gender, motherhood, and the digital economy, set against the backdrop of privatized childrearing and consumerism among urban mothers in China.

## Literature review

### The shifting gender ideologies and gender inequalities in urban China

The burgeoning digital economy, coupled with shifts in gender ideologies and inequalities, considerably impacts mothers with young children participating in the digital economy. Gender ideology encapsulates the construction of social gender within a historical and societal context, establishing power structures and hierarchical relationships among genders in society (Wu 2009). The transformation of gender ideologies in urban China has undergone two distinct phases: before and after the reform and opening up. Despite state-imposed gender equality before the economic reforms,

women still bore a substantial burden of domestic work. Following the reform, gender discourse in contemporary Chinese society began reflecting the dynamic interplay among the state, market, and traditional patriarchal culture. Consequently, gender ideology has evolved toward a market-dominated neoliberal discourse, emphasizing individual merit and fair competition, and aligning with the state's modernization discourse (Wu 2009).

This evolution of gender ideology resonates with the principles of neoliberal feminism, a concept rooted in Western capitalist ethos. Neoliberal feminism accentuates women's self-responsibility for achieving gender equality but disregards institutionalized gender inequalities (Rottenberg 2014). Yuzhu Peng (2021) offered a critical examination of the rise of this discourse in China, perpetuated by prominent female key opinion leaders (KOLs) on WeChat, such as *Mimeng* (咪蒙). This discourse underscores women's self-reliance but neglects the patriarchal socioeconomic structure of Chinese society. Concurrently, the emergence of neoliberal feminism in China coincides with the growth of consumerism and fashion culture and the resurgence of traditional gender ideologies, intensifying the objectification and commodification of women (Ji et al. 2017; Wallis and Shen 2018; Wu 2009). Moreover, marketization and privatization following China's market reform have exacerbated gender disparities in China's labor market (He and Wu 2017; Li and Xie 2015; Xu 2021). This trend manifests in an increasing gender gap in income and employment rates, heightened gender discrimination, occupational gender segregation and a growing trend of motherhood wage penalties. The trend is underscored by the declining employment rate for urban women, which dropped from 77.4% in 1990 to 63.1% in 2000 and further decreased to 60.8% in 2010 (Attané 2012).

Ji and colleagues (2017) developed a comprehensive framework for understanding gender inequality since 1978. The collapse of the *danwei* (单位) system (the work unit of state-owned and collective-owned enterprises), along with the retreat of the state from public childcare services, burdened women with the costs of social reproduction, thereby exacerbating work-family conflicts and negatively impacting women's labor market outcomes, especially for mothers with young children. Women, particularly less-educated women, were most vulnerable to job loss during the extensive SOE (state-owned-enterprise) lay-offs between the late 1990s and early 2000s (Appleton et al. 2002; Jin 2000). Following career interruptions due to large-scale layoffs or personal circumstances such as marriage and childbirth, women were more likely to secure informal employment than reenter the formal workforce (Jin 2000, 2006; Liu 2020). In addition, limited access to community daycare facilities and escalating caregiver costs have restricted mothers' labor market participation and working hours (Du and Dong 2009). Simulations indicated that the decline in day care availability accounted for 46% of the decrease in mothers' labor force participation during the public-sector restructuring period from 1997 to 2000 (Du and Dong 2009). Furthermore, Juhua Yang (2019) found that more than one-third of mothers with one or two children have experienced career interruptions, defined as a gap in employment or wage income for longer than six months.

In conclusion, the evolving gender ideologies and entrenched gender inequalities in urban China have created a complex socioeconomic landscape for women, particularly mothers with young children. This landscape is characterized by a "double penalty" at the intersection of gender and motherhood (Yang 2019). Understanding these gender

ideologies and inequalities is crucial for comprehending the participation of mothers in the digital economy in contemporary urban China.

### **Intensive motherhood ideology for urban mothers in China**

The cultural ideology of intensive motherhood, which underscores significant emotional, time, and financial commitments, has become pervasive in Western societies (Hays 1996). Research has identified a similar trend among urban Chinese mothers, although it is uniquely shaped by China's historical context, and the interplay of state and market forces (Chen 2018; Shi 2018; Tao 2013). Despite socialist policies that have fostered women's participation in work through public childcare services and the *dan-wei* system, traditional gender roles within the family remain, with women bearing the majority of unpaid domestic work (Ji et al. 2017; Shi 2018). Subsequent market reforms, characterized by the state's withdrawal from the private sphere and diminished public childcare, further entrenched women's roles as primary caregivers for children and the elderly within the family. The implementation of the "one-child policy"<sup>2</sup> added to the complexities of childrearing for urban mothers. Urban middle-class mothers in China increasingly engage in "knowledge-intensive motherhood" (Chen 2018). They carry considerable emotional labor, constantly updating their parenting knowledge to foster their children's physical and mental well-being. Moreover, the privatization of education has positioned mothers as "agents" responsible for coordinating family, school, and market-oriented educational resources for their children (Yang 2018).

Increasingly, mothers have been portrayed as key consumers essential to their families' welfare. As a result, the practice of motherhood has become intertwined with the "correct" form of consumption linked to childrearing (Meng 2020; Orgad and Meng 2017). This convergence of motherhood and consumerism has been amplified by the rise of social media platforms, especially WeChat, which influence the discourse around motherhood and heighten anxiety among urban middle-class mothers (Meng 2020). In line with Bingchun Meng's research, Guo (2022) analyzes the impact of lifestyle blogging platforms such as Xiaohongshu (小红书) or "Little Red Book". Guo asserts that these platforms have facilitated the commodification of personal life experiences, contributing to the construction of a "consuming self."

In addition, Catherine Rottenberg's work (2019) delves into how the domain of reproduction and care is increasingly represented in managerial terms, deepening the connections among neoliberalism, consumerism, and motherhood. Notably, Rottenberg's (2019) analysis of Ivanka Trump's book, *Women Who Work*, illustrates the transformation of women into potential capital-enhancing subjects. This transformation blurs the boundary between the private (self) and public (business enterprise) spheres, prompting individuals to adopt self-investment and entrepreneurial self-care strategies. This underscores the pervasiveness of market forces, even within traditionally private spaces and the ongoing marketization of private life. This trend emphasizes how neoliberal market forces permeate and redefine traditional dichotomies, fostering an environment where

<sup>2</sup> The one-child policy was implemented by the Chinese government in 1979 and officially ended in 2015. This policy mandated that couples have only one child, with the exceptions made for rural families and ethnic minorities. This policy had far-reaching social and economic effects, including a significant reduction in the birth rate, a skewed gender ratio due to son preference, and intensive pressure on families to provide for their only child.

every aspect of human life becomes subject to market metrics (Rottenberg 2019). Consequently, the intertwining of intensive motherhood and consumerism within China's urban landscape, further amplified by digital platforms, highlights how market forces blur private–public boundaries. This profound marketization of private life calls for a comprehensive understanding of the market forces underpinning the career choices of mothers engaged in WeChat business.

### **Female digital labor in the platform economy and the commercialization of online mother communities**

In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature exploring female digital labor, emphasizing female content creators on social media platforms. This body of research unveils the commercialization of female bodies and different forms of labor, such as emotional, affective, and aesthetic labor (Su 2022; Xu and Xiong 2019; Zhang 2017, 2018; Zhang 2021a, b). It also explores how platforms and algorithms have engendered and heightened precarities for online female entrepreneurs and creative laborers (Duffy 2020; Duffy et al. 2021; Guo 2022). Female creative laborers grapple not only with the unpredictability of social media visibility (Wang and Keane 2020) but also with a digital double bind. Female entrepreneurs are often expected to engage in soft self-promotion and maintain interactive intimacy with customers. However, such displays of femininity can lead to them being perceived as less competent than their male counterparts (Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017).

Despite the surge in research on female digital laborers in China, limited studies have focused exclusively on mothers engaged in e-commerce on Chinese social media platforms. The literature has examined mommy influencers, mommy bloggers and sharenting (a fusion of sharing and parenting) practices in Europe, the United States and South Korea (Jorge et al. 2021; Mäkinen 2020; Nguyen-Thu 2021; Song 2021; Wilson and Yochim 2017). This body of work underscores the perpetuation of neoliberal feminism and the “supermom” ideology, which advocates that “women can have it all” through online representations of motherhood and parenting. It also highlights the reinforcement of an intensive motherhood ideology, potentially leading mothers to question their own competency after internalizing the motherhood practices portrayed by these mommy influencers (Davis et al. 2019; Jorge et al. 2021; Ouvrein 2022).

Within the few studies exploring mothers on WeChat in China, the emphasis has predominantly been on labor processes and the role of emotional and affective labor in social e-commerce (Li 2022; Zani 2021). Ye and Ding (2021) shift their focus to how mothers leverage digital platforms to convert their social connections into economic benefits, noting the impact of social capital on their work. They contended that online communities offer flexible solutions for mothers juggling intensive childrearing responsibilities and the challenges of re-entering the workforce. Similarly, other research has examined the experiences of rural young mothers engaged in e-commerce, finding that the digital economy offers opportunities for economic empowerment and influences their social relationships, familial status, and self-identification (Li et al. 2023; Zhang 2021a, b). However, Yu and Cui (2019) argue that e-commerce involvement for

rural women can be exploitative and does not necessarily lead to political or cultural empowerment. These conflicting perspectives underscore the need for more nuanced, context-specific research exploring the intricate interplay of e-commerce, gender, and motherhood.

### Data and methods

This study delves into the experiences of urban mothers participating in WeChat businesses in China. We recruited 35 participants through snowball sampling methods for in-depth interviews from July to December 2021. Additionally, online ethnographic data were collected through long-term participation in WeChat group chats and the documentation of WeChat Moments postings by the mothers. Notably, participants in this study were not entrepreneurs but rather involved in various forms of WeChat businesses, such as direct selling through multilevel marketing companies (MLMs) promoting maternity products on WeChat, *daigou* (代购) (personal shoppers and resellers of foreign products), and operating group buying through WeChat Applets or Mini programs (小程序). They resided in various cities, including Guangzhou, Wuhan, Shenzhen, Chongqing, and northeastern cities such as Daqing and Harbin. We refer to them as urban mothers based on their residential areas, despite some not having urban *hukou* (户口). They work and settle down in urban areas with their families and are heavily influenced by urban motherhood ideologies and parenting practices.

The average age of the participants was approximately 32 years old, with each having an average of 1.4 children. The average age of their children was approximately five years old. They typically began participating in e-commerce during pregnancy or shortly after childbirth. Categorizing the interviewees' employment status proved challenging due to the dynamic nature of their work-life strategies across various stages of childrearing. Half of the interviewees experienced career interruptions due to childbirth (18 out of 35 interviews), subsequently transitioning into part-time e-commerce upon becoming stay-at-home mothers. Others maintained their previous employment or switched jobs during pregnancy or after childbirth but engaged in WeChat e-commerce as a part-time or side job. However, mothers employed in governmental departments or state-owned enterprises (5 out of 35 interviewees) experienced no career interruptions beyond the mandatory maternal leave and operated as product sellers on WeChat in a part-time capacity. Consistent with existing studies, we found that mothers with young children, particularly those in the private sector, are most vulnerable to career interruptions (Yang 2019).

In terms of educational level, most interviewees had a relatively high level of education, with one having a master's degree and seventeen (17 out of 35) having bachelor's degrees. In general, mothers with higher educational levels had a higher average income (refer to Appendix Table 1 for detailed demographic data). Despite our efforts to understand the family's socioeconomic status, some respondents chose not to disclose details on this matter. The reported family incomes varied greatly, although the majority earned more than 10,000 yuan per month. According to the National Bureau of Statistics,<sup>3</sup> the

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.stats.gov.cn/xgk/sjfb/zxfb2020/202301/t20230117\\_1892129.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/xgk/sjfb/zxfb2020/202301/t20230117_1892129.html)



nationwide per capita disposable income stands at approximately 3,073 yuan per month (36,883 yuan per year); hence, our respondents appear to represent the urban middle or higher class. Their engagement in knowledge-intensive motherhood practices aligns with patterns observed in prior research on urban middle-class mothers (Chen 2018; Yang 2019).

Interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded with the participants' permission. The transcripts were transcribed verbatim and analyzed in English using NVivo 12 software. We conducted a semi-structured interview protocol, which lasted approximately two hours on average and covered various aspects of the participants' work and family lives. Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and all participant quotes in the results section have been translated into English.

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), was employed to analyze the transcripts. The initial stages of thematic analysis involved becoming familiar with the data and using open coding to identify key concepts and themes within the data, such as "child/family-first ideology" and "perceptions of idealized motherhood". These initial codes were then categorized into broader themes, with "knowledge-intensive motherhood" emerging prominently. We examined these themes among subgroups of mothers with different monthly incomes, highlighting that knowledge-intensive motherhood, insufficient childcare support, and flexibility were influential in shaping the motivations and work experiences of these mothers in the digital economy.

## Findings

### Gender inequalities faced by urban mothers in the digital economy

The devaluation of women's social reproductive work and the pressures from neoliberal feminism, encouraging the image of "supermoms" adept at balancing work and family, has led to significant stress among urban mothers in China. Neoliberal feminism in China, embodied by influential WeChat opinion leaders such as *Mimeng*, advocates for women's self-reliance and self-responsibility without confronting the patriarchal socio-economic structure in Chinese society (Peng 2021). This pressure drives them into the digital economy, seeking self-affirmation and the maintenance of social connections (Song 2021; Van Cleef 2020).

Advertisements by e-commerce companies consistently devalue stay-at-home mothers without an income. One such advertisement posted on a participant's WeChat Moments stated, "*Say goodbye to a life of asking support from your husband and living with your hands up*". This implies that stay-at-home mothers who lack paid work are reliant on their husbands for financial support, akin to beggars holding their hands out. Xiaoman transitioned to being a part-time content operation manager for an e-commerce company, guiding new mothers on how to effectively promote and sell products on WeChat. When asked about her passion for this job, she explained:

*"Many moms after having a baby, they disconnected from the society, and then maybe, they stay at home without a salary and must ask their husband for money."*

*So, I feel a sense of mission doing this because it can help moms balance their family and work by having a source of income while staying at home.” (Xiaoman 08310121)*

Anya shared her personal experiences of resigning from full-time employment during her fifth month of pregnancy due to adverse symptoms resulting from excessive work demands and a lack of childcare support from family. Later, she joined the WeChat e-commerce platform when her child was approximately one year old, advertising and selling products for two maternity brands through her WeChat Moments and earning commissions. During the interview, Anya shared her motivations:

*“I think it’s important to have a sense of security, and that comes from having money in your pocket. I think being independent is really important. Sometimes I feel like staying home with my kids doesn’t give me a sense of worth, you know? It seems like all of society is like this, you expect women to take care of the kids and make money and run the household, like they have to be good at everything. It’s actually really hard.” (Anya 09130021)*

Her statement sheds light on the impact of neoliberal feminism on women in urban China. Following China’s market reform, the marketization process has emphasized individual merit and choice (Wu 2009). Young urban Chinese women perceive maternal employment as a moral obligation, equating wage work with being a “good” mother and an “ideal” woman (Zhou 2020). However, despite societal shifts in China, these women face amplified burdens due to the slow evolution of domestic gender roles, complicating their navigation between work and family life (Zhou 2020). Neoliberal feminism portrays the ideal woman as one who is emancipated and can balance a successful career and family life (Rottenberg 2019). However, the devaluation of social reproductive labor and the moral interpretation of maternal employment have led to a lack of recognition of these duties as sources of self-worth. The pressure to excel in both one’s career and one’s personal life has resulted in significant stress and self-doubt among urban women.

This, in turn, drives women to seek financial independence as a validation of their worth. Mei engaged in e-commerce activities, promoting products through a mobile application, including WeChat Applets. She utilized her WeChat Moments to advertise the products, managed two WeChat customer groups with a total of over 800 mothers and was one of the few mothers to attain a monthly income exceeding 20,000 yuan. She shared her reasons for participating in the WeChat e-commerce platform:

*“I just feel like the main thing is to find a balance between taking care of the kids and making money for myself. It’s important for both setting an example for the kids and for one’s own status at home. I used to sense my in-laws’ dissatisfaction when I wasn’t working but was spending money..... I realized I needed to make money for myself, not just staying at home like I wasn’t doing anything. Now that I have a steady income, I can see that their attitudes have changed. They consult me on things and don’t make decisions without my agreement. Financial independence is so important for women.” (Mei 10140021)*



Mei realized that economic independence is crucial for a woman to gain respect from her family, particularly her in-laws. Her successful involvement in WeChat e-commerce, through which she earned more than her husband, resulted in a perceived improvement in her household status and increased respect from her in-laws for her childrearing decisions. Mei's experiences shed light on the influence of neoliberal feminism on women and the wider population. However, her increased income did not alleviate her responsibility for raising two children. Mei suffered from sleep deprivation, sleeping on average less than five hours per day. Initially, we scheduled our interview for 11 pm, but due to her busy e-commerce workload, she had to reschedule. When we finally spoke on the weekend, she shared her daily schedule:

*"I usually wake up at 7:10 AM every day to take my elder daughter to kindergarten and then take care of my younger child. In the evening, sometimes I have a lot of work to do. For example, if I took some pictures today but didn't have time to edit it and write the scripts. I'll do it when it's quiet (late at night). Sometimes I don't even go to bed until 2 or 3 in the morning"* (Mei 10140021)

The division between the public and private spheres has exacerbated gender inequalities in urban China, leading to a disadvantaged labor market status for women and a disproportionate responsibility for domestic care work (Ji et al. 2017; Xu 2021). Out of the 35 interviewees in this study, ten respondents shouldered the full responsibility of childcare without any assistance from their own parents or in-laws or domestic helpers. Four participants employed domestic helpers, with two employing professional nannies and the other two hiring domestic helpers for housework once a week. The remaining respondents relied on their parents or in-laws to share childcare duties, especially those with more than one child. However, defining childcare arrangements for most families is challenging due to changes in these arrangements as children age and the mothers' employment status evolves. Some mothers take full responsibility for childrearing until the children reach three years old; then, with the help from their parents or in-laws in picking up and dropping off their children at school, these mothers are able to reenter the labor market.

These narratives illuminate the complex interplay among the emerging digital economy, neoliberal feminism, and shifting gender norms in urban China. It emphasizes the dichotomy of women's experiences within the digital economy. On the one hand, it provides a platform for women to achieve financial independence, thereby enhancing their status within the family and maintaining their social ties. On the other hand, the influence of neoliberal feminism, which can place women at a disadvantage in the labor market and pressure mothers, particularly those with young children, to enter the informal digital economy, is very evident. Moreover, these e-commerce opportunities do not alleviate women's traditional domestic responsibilities. Instead, they pressure these mothers to strive for self-responsibility and work-life balance, thereby exacerbating existing gender inequalities.

### The influences of intensive motherhood ideology on urban mothers

Globally, childrearing has evolved into a sophisticated and professional task. Urban mothers in China, particularly those who have left full-time employment, face significant pressure to meet the demands of child-centric and knowledge-intensive motherhood (Chen 2018; Meng 2020). One participant in this study, Guo, a former school English teacher without a stable labor contract, aptly exemplified intensive motherhood practices. When asked if her burden lightened after her child began kindergarten, she responded:

*“No. Because he’s going to kindergarten, I have to arrange what he’s going to do in the morning and in the evening after he comes back from kindergarten. When he wakes up in the morning, I’m going to practice oral English with him, and then I’ll help him learn some traditional Chinese poetry. Then, when he comes back in the evening, I’ll play board games with him or read picture books or graded books. I want to arrange time reasonably, try not to let him get tired, and let him learn happily..... I have to prepare lessons in advance. I feel like it’s even more tiring than going to work.” (Guo 09010221)*

Guo treated childrearing as a profession, merging her teaching background with her mothering role. She dedicated herself to crafting daily learning schedules and lesson plans. When discussing career aspirations, she expressed a desire to take the national government officer examination to secure a formal teaching contract. When asked about alternative plans, she responded:

*“I was thinking, with this new ‘double reduction policy,’ I’ll probably end up taking care of my son more myself. If he doesn’t do well on tests, I will just help him with that specific subject. Basically, I will put him first. If I need extra money, I might do some tutoring in my neighborhood and bring my son along. I will find someone around his age to let them learn together.” (Guo 09010221)*

The Double Reduction policy is a nationwide initiative aimed at addressing the increasing privatization and marketization of education and alleviating the intense competition faced by Chinese students. Despite the policy’s original aim to improve the well-being of the students, for Guo, it has resulted in increased focus on her son’s upbringing and created more work for her to secure his admission into prestigious schools. China’s privatization of education and the shift of childrearing responsibilities from the collective to individual families, along with the prevalence of intensive motherhood ideology, have intensified anxiety among middle-class mothers. This is attributed to a “fear of falling” (Meng 2020). Urban middle-class mothers, such as Guo, are particularly influenced by neoliberal feminism and intensive motherhood ideologies. Even with support from grandparents, some mothers left full-time employment to fully embrace intensive motherhood and raise their children according to their idealized version of motherhood. This requires a continuous process of acquiring maternal knowledge and skills, with mothers striving to become “the knowing mother” who uses her maternal knowledge to care for and nurture her family (Davis et al. 2019).

### Empowering a select few mothers in WeChat e-commerce

Within the e-commerce industry, recruitment advertisements often share the stories of stay-at-home mothers who have found success through e-commerce. These advertisements use slogans that promise success to all, such as “Join the top-earners with monthly income over 10,000 and lead a team as a middle manager with competitive benefits” and “Become a Partner, Lead Your Own Independent Subsidiary”. However, the reality is that only a small group of mothers are able to generate enough income to support their families. Furthermore, informal workers and stay-at-home mothers performing unpaid care work are not eligible for social security benefits. Some of the interviewed mothers, who had left their previous full-time employment after childbirth, resorted to pretending to be the employees of their previous company to retain enrollment in the national social security program, but they had to bear the cost of both their own and the company’s contributions.

One e-commerce company, which recruited a significant number of mothers, promised “access to social security, cloud-based office (work-from-home) and a career path that can be planned.” Such companies attracted stay-at-home mothers and mothers in informal employment by offering to cover their social security benefits for them. Xiaoman, who initially worked as a product seller for a maternity brand company before becoming a part-time content operation manager, revealed that social security benefits were only provided to the mothers at the V5-2 level (VIP5-2). The company classified mothers based on their total sales and customer base, with V5-2 representing the second tier of the VIP 5 categorization.

*“I started at V2 when I joined. To progress from V5-1 to V5-2, you have to make monthly sales of at least 60,000. Once you reach V5-2, you have to maintain at least 40,000 in monthly sales. Otherwise, they will stop paying for your benefits unless you reach 60,000 again. It’s like constantly pushing a donkey forward by dangling a carrot in front of it.” (Xiaoman 08310121)*

This vivid analogy of “pushing a donkey forward by dangling a carrot in front of it” portrays the precarities and uncertainties experienced by e-commerce mothers in the digital economy. Xiaoman, after failing to pass the national government officer examination, taught Chinese calligraphy before entering e-commerce. As a self-employed individual, she was responsible for her own social security benefits. Her primary motivation for joining WeChat e-commerce was the promise of social security benefits. Nevertheless, the provision of such benefits by the company is a tactic to keep the mothers working but benefits only a limited number of them. To reach the V5-2 level (VIP 5-2), mothers are required to have monthly sales of at least 60,000 yuan and then to maintain minimum monthly sales of at least 40,000 yuan. Failure to do so results in revocation of the V5-2 level, unless the mother can reach 60,000 yuan again. These policies mean that only a select few mothers are able to reach the V5-2 level and thus receive the social security benefits from the company, let alone become managers or partners, as advertised in the recruitment advertisement.

### **The commercialization of online mother communities and reinforcement of intensive motherhood ideology**

After engaging with WeChat e-commerce, some of the interviewed mothers strategically employed their knowledge of scientific parenting to enhance their product promotion efforts. For instance, prior to her involvement in WeChat e-commerce, Xiaoman took several courses related to baby feeding, basic medical care for children and child development psychology, which she later leveraged to better market the products she sold on the platform. In addition to daily product recommendations in her WeChat mother groups and WeChat Moments, she regularly forwarded courses from other platforms for mothers in her WeChat group to learn. She said,

*“In my WeChat group, I shared medical courses by doctors from a pediatric clinic 1–2 times a week, and sometimes I added a few other courses. I posted pictures of food I made for my babies, and there’s also a group assistant robot to answer questions about common problems in childrearing. I always share daily recipes. It is really nice to have a group of mothers who believe in the same things and are evidence-based in their parenting.” (Xiaoman 08310121)*

The term “evidence-based medicine” is a professional terminology frequently employed by private pediatric clinics and mommy bloggers or market influencers. This refers to medical diagnoses based on the latest scientific research literature. Mei subscribed to several WeChat public accounts that advocate evidence-based medical practices during pregnancy and after giving birth. From her perspective, the reason why she was able to attract a large number of mothers in her WeChat group was her ability to offer them childrearing and parenting advice.

*“If their children were sick, they would come and ask me first. I think asking me made them feel a bit more at ease because when you go to the hospital and get medicine, you cannot let your children take a lot of the medicine that the doctor gives you. And they would go to the hospital and still come back and ask me. I think asking me made them feel a bit more at ease.” (Mei 10140021).*

As reported by Mei, mothers in her WeChat group asked her for advice on the safety and healthiness of medicines prescribed by doctors. In this study, many mothers expressed mistrust in traditional Chinese medical practitioners, community hospitals, and even high-end hospitals in major cities when discussing “evidence-based medicine”. These mothers, like Mei, often shared or posted articles written by private pediatric clinics in their WeChat Moments to promote scientific and evidence-based parenting. They believed that by doing so, they could establish their own authority in the field and gradually build trust among their customers through a professional approach.

Businesses play a crucial role in advocating knowledge-intensive motherhood by targeting a select group of mothers and offering them training opportunities in evidence-based medicine and scientific parenting. These mothers are then encouraged to promote these training courses and related products within online mother communities. Consistent with previous studies on the interplay between motherhood and consumerism,

mothers are increasingly perceived as critical consumers whose childrearing practices intertwine with their purchasing decisions (Meng 2020; Orgad and Meng 2017). The rise of social media platforms such as WeChat amplifies this consumerism, heightening anxiety among urban middle-class mothers (Meng 2020). As the number of mothers who publicly share their intensive motherhood and scientific parenting practices on WeChat continues to grow, endorsing and purchasing these products becomes symbolic of choosing a scientifically sound approach to childrearing.

This study involved multiple mothers endorsing and selling products for a baby food brand. This brand attracted new mothers by offering free seven-day baby food training camps, converting them into customers in the process. The brand employed a distribution model engaging mothers in distribution and providing free parenting courses for those motivated to learn. These courses covered topics such as baby feeding, basic medical knowledge for childcare and child psychology. Xiaoman was one of the few mothers in this study who successfully applied for a free learning opportunity. The requirement for course fee reimbursement involved taking notes during the course and later sharing the knowledge within the community.

*"If you want to help others, you must be qualified first, and that means you have to learn relevant knowledge. When I was taking a course from [company], and I really had to study every day until 11 or 12 at night, and then I had to attend class and take notes while taking care of my child. Each of the 60 chapters required notes, and I spent two months working on it. The same thing goes for the [company] parenting class. At that time, I was also in my postpartum confinement, and I was reading and taking notes." (Xiaoman 08310121)*

On average, in this study, mothers with higher levels of education tended to earn higher income through online e-commerce than those with lower education levels. Higher-income mothers were more effective at embodying knowledge-intensive motherhood. Sisi, one of the mothers in this study, had an average monthly income of 5000–10,000 yuan. When asked about her strategy of maintaining her customer group on WeChat, Sisi replied:

*"In order to retain members in a community, the community has to be valuable to others. People have to gain something from being in the community, not just because you want to sell them things. People have to find value in the information shared in the group. We want to bring value to people beyond just buying products. That's what makes the group more meaningful. Otherwise, it's just a group that sells things, no different from others, where everyone is buying the same things on Taobao or Tmall, maybe a little cheaper." (Sisi 09040021)*

Sisi emphasized the added value provided by WeChat e-commerce compared to traditional e-commerce. Her online group targeted mothers and focused on sharing information related to child development and parenting:

*"I will share how to play with toys in a way that helps with child development, such as fine motor skills, color and math recognition, musical education, and other interests. I also share creative ways to play with toys such as magnetic tiles."*

By sharing her knowledge and expertise, Sisi aimed to provide added value to her customers, helping her maintain her customer base. Her approach exemplified intensive motherhood practices within online mother communities, reinforcing the perception of the “right” way to engage in motherhood through informed consumer decisions for their children.

When discussing their challenges, many e-commerce mothers recognized that WeChat, as a social media application, primarily targeted private domain traffic. Relying solely on their personal networks and referrals would not be sufficient for growth. To expand their customer base, these mothers acknowledged the need to attract traffic from larger public domain platforms such as *Weibo* (微博) or Little Red Book. Mothers with higher education levels and income demonstrated greater proficiency in converting public domain traffic into their own private domain traffic. Li, a participant in a scientific parenting group managed by a company, became known as “Teacher Li” due to her active engagement and sharing of course notes in childrearing and scientific parenting. When mothers within the group sought advice, Li invited them to join her personal WeChat account. More mothers began following her account, and she eventually began managing her own WeChat group, effectively transforming public domain traffic into her own private domain traffic. As the only respondent in this study with a master’s degree, Li utilized her parenting knowledge to provide value for mothers, converting them into customers. Her expertise in scientific parenting facilitated the retention of her customer base. Overall, higher-earning mothers were better positioned to embody the ideology of intensive motherhood, enabling them to retain customers and maintain their recommended product purchases as being the best for children. This process perpetuated the intensive motherhood ideology within the commercialized mother groups.

On the other hand, mothers in this study found what Kara Van Cleaf (2020) referred to as the “pleasure of connectivity” on WeChat. Van Cleaf (2020) proposed a conceptual framework called the “digital maternal gaze”, which challenges the “male gaze” and its heteronormative patriarchal gender norms. The “digital maternal gaze” reconfigures the pleasures of motherhood and care, fostering mutual recognition within online mother groups or communities, also known as the “mamasphere”. However, Van Cleaf (2020) noted that while the pleasure of motherhood and mutual recognition might help mothers navigate the neoliberal ethos of “having it all”, increased connectivity among mothers ultimately generates more economic value for the digital economy. These groups or communities are often commercialized by the platform economy and digital social media.

Unlike public social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, WeChat provides infrastructure for deep connectivity between sellers and customers. Moreover, WeChat groups naturally formed a “mamasphere” (Wilson and Chivers Yochim 2017), referring to a “web of advice, friendship, information, entertainment... fueled by algorithms and mothers” (p. 17). In this study, mothers repeatedly emphasized the importance of online mother communities for emotional support and childcare advice from “knowing mothers” (Davis et al. 2019).

Yuan experienced significant challenges during her pregnancy, and becoming a mother was a turning point in her life. After experiencing a miscarriage in her first pregnancy, she took a month off work and then returned to work for a year before trying to conceive



again. Upon successfully conceiving and reaching the age of 30, she left her full-time job to focus on pregnancy and childrearing. During this period, she redefined herself and embraced her role as a full-time mother. The WeChat group she managed provided her with a sense of pleasure and recognition. Although the group was initially organized to serve customers and recommend products, she found warmth and mutual assistance from the mothers within her group.

*“Being a full-time mother can be very stressful, and if there’s no outlet to socialize with others, it can lead to depression. The pressure of childbirth, caring for the baby, and changes in the family dynamic can be overwhelming. This is where WeChat groups can be valuable, as they provide a space for mothers to chat, vent, and find comfort in knowing they’re not alone. While the focus may be on buying and selling products, the group can also provide a sense of value and relieve parenting and family anxieties.” (Yuan 09090021)*

Like Yuan, many mothers in this study highlighted that the WeChat groups they organized served as a means to connect with other mothers share childrearing practices and provided emotional support. However, intertwining motherhood with consumerism within the WeChat customer group has led to commercialization by e-commerce companies, the WeChat platform and participating mothers. As more mothers experience the pleasure of connectivity within the group, greater profits are generated for companies and the WeChat platform, in turn benefiting only a limited number of mothers with higher incomes.

In summary, the era following the economic reforms in China has brought a shift toward the separation of public and private spheres imposed by the state, exacerbating gender inequalities for urban women and resulting in increased gender discrimination in the labor market (Wu 2009; Ji et al. 2017; Meng 2020). Simultaneously, market forces, by blurring boundaries between public and private domains, have encouraged the prevalence of knowledge-intensive motherhood among urban middle-class mothers. The intricate connection between ideal motherhood and consumption, against the backdrop of the privatization of the education system, exacerbates the burden and anxieties these mothers face (Meng 2020). In response, many have turned to running WeChat businesses, where they organize and manage commercialized online groups. By showcasing their own commitment to intensive motherhood practices, these women sell and promote products. In doing so, they guide their fellow mothers within the group to actualize their own intensive motherhood ideology by making so-called informed consumption decisions.

## Conclusions and discussion

This study investigates the participation of urban mothers in e-commerce via the WeChat platform. Our findings highlight the significant impact of the rise of neoliberal feminism after China’s reform and the effect of the development of the intensive motherhood ideology on the career trajectories of these mothers. Despite the advantages offered by the flexible and supportive infrastructure of WeChat, only a select group of

highly educated mothers who effectively integrate intensive motherhood ideology into their business are able to generate substantial income through e-commerce. Within these WeChat mother groups, the ideology of knowledge-intensive motherhood has been reinforced and commercialized rather than dismantled.

This article contributes to the literature in three major ways. First, there has been limited research exclusively focusing on mothers participating in WeChat e-commerce in China. Prior studies have examined the experiences of female digital laborers in various settings, such as female content creators on platforms such as *Douyin* or Little Red Book (Duffy 2020; Duffy et al. 2021; Su 2022; Xu and Xiong 2019; Zhang 2017, 2018; Zhang 2021a, b), but few have specifically focused on mothers as a unique group. Among the limited studies that have done so, the primary focus has been on labor processes and the role of emotional and affective labor in social e-commerce. Moreover, research in other countries has emphasized the prevailing narratives of neoliberal feminism and the “supermom” ideology within online representations of motherhood (Jorge et al. 2021; Wilson and Yochim 2017; Nguyen-Thu 2021; Song 2021; Mäkinen 2020). However, few studies have addressed how these narratives are internalized and negotiated by mothers engaged in WeChat businesses within the specific cultural and socioeconomic context of urban China. Recognizing the distinct labor market disadvantages experienced by mothers, known as the “double penalty” (Yang 2019), they are more likely to engage in precarious employment. Our study reveals that the prevalence of intensive motherhood and the exacerbating gender inequalities in urban China push mothers of young children out of the workforce and draw them toward the widely accepted neoliberal feminist ideology, thus leading them to participate in e-commerce.

Second, our study offers a nuanced understanding of the commercialization of the mamasphere on WeChat and its impact on urban mothers in China. The mamasphere refers to online groups that bring together mothers for advice, friendship, information and entertainment (Wilson and Yochim 2017) and is facilitated by platforms such as WeChat. We find that both sellers and customers in these WeChat online communities experience a sense of connection and mutual recognition. However, the mamasphere has become highly commercialized in a consumerist society. As more mothers connect and enjoy the “pleasure of connectivity”, the online communities generate more economic value for the digital platform and the businesses. This leads to mothers who are also sellers or customers being channeled into highly privatized and commercialized online communities. Instead of “consuming away anxieties” (Theodorou and Spyrou 2013), these communities produce and reinforce anxieties arising from knowledge-intensive motherhood in urban China. Although the monetized online communities provide economic value to mothers, this is limited to a small group of mothers with a higher level of education who are adept at exemplifying intensive motherhood ideology in their work. Furthermore, even for those generating sufficient income from e-commerce, transitioning back to standard employment opportunities is more challenging, leading to increased precarities in their work and life.

Finally, this study highlights the intersection of the platform economy, the marketization of the private sphere and the blurring boundaries between the public and private

spheres, which leads to new forms of precarities for urban mothers in the digital economy. Ji and colleagues (2017) proposed a framework for explaining the role of the nation state in perpetuating gender inequalities in urban China over the last four decades through the separation of the public and private spheres. However, this framework does not account for the impact of the digital economy and neoliberal feminism on blurring the boundaries between the public and private spheres, resulting in new forms of gender inequalities (Rottenberg 2019).

In conclusion, the shifting responsibilities in care work, shaped by the retreat of the nation-state and the separation between the public and private spheres, have imposed childrearing responsibilities predominantly on women. Consequently, this shift forces urban mothers into precarious digital work, even as the infrastructure of the digital platform offers a semblance of work-family balance. Encouraged to act as crucial economic agents, women, especially mothers, find themselves at the intersection of motherhood and consumerism, fueled by digital platforms such as WeChat and the Little Red Book (Guo 2022; Meng 2020). The relentless marketization of private life, juggling all aspects of human life according to market metrics, attests to the far-reaching intrusion of neoliberal market forces into traditionally private domains (Rottenberg 2019). Our findings underscore the paradox of digital platforms, which, while offering connectivity and flexibility, also intensify commercialization and privatization within the mamasphere, exacerbating anxieties related to knowledge-intensive motherhood. This research calls for updated theoretical frameworks that encapsulate the complex interplay of sociocultural narratives, digital economies, and shifting public-private dynamics, particularly in the context of gender inequalities in urban China.

### Limitations

This study focuses on urban mothers from middle-class or higher socioeconomic backgrounds who are engaged in e-commerce through the WeChat platform. Consequently, the findings may not be applicable to broader demographic groups. The experiences of rural mothers and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are notably absent from this investigation, as is the examination of female entrepreneurship. Future studies should explore the e-commerce experiences of rural and lower-income urban mothers and conduct a more thorough empirical analysis of the impact of the digital economy on gender inequalities in contemporary China.

### Appendix

See Table 1.

**Table 1** Demographic information of research participants

Case Number	Education level	Age	Monthly Income from WeChat Business	Number of children	Age of children	City	Family Income	Childcare arrangements (Mother or father refers to the respondent's parents)
07260020	Vocational senior secondary school ( <i>zhongzhuan</i> )	50	7500–10,000	1	16	Guangzhou	10,000	Mother's help: for a period of time after her son was born, she was not in good health and had to travel frequently for work. During this time, her mother stepped in and took care of the respondent and her child
07270020	Master's degree	31	20,000	1	3	Unknown	Under 40,000	Parents in-laws are responsible for helped to pick up and drop off their children and the respondent takes charge of the education
07310020	Primary school	27	Under 500	3	8, 5, 1	Guangzhou/Wuhan	Unknown	Parents in-laws helped all of the childrearing due to three children within the household
08010020	Higher vocational education ( <i>zhuanke</i> )	38	5000–8000	2	15, 4	Guangzhou	Under 16,000	Parents in-laws helped to pick up and drop off their children
08040020	Higher vocational education	Unknown	2000–4000	1	4	Guangzhou	18,000–20,000	No external support
08050020	Bachelor's degree	35	4000–5000	3	15, 13, 12	Shenzhen	Unknown	No external support
08150020	Bachelor's degree	33	5000–8000	1	2	Shenzhen	Unknown	No external support
08180020	Higher vocational education	32	1000–2000	1	2	Chongqing	Above 3000	Parents helped during March 2019 and May 2021 when the respondent was at hometown where she sought assistance in childcare, though she primarily took care of the child with occasional help from parents
08190020	Vocational senior secondary school	32	Under 500	1	8	Guangzhou	12,000–15,000	Parents in-laws helped to pick up and drop off their children
08260020	Higher vocational education	33	Under 500	1	3	Zhongshan	Unknown	No external support
08280020	Bachelor's degree	41	4000–5000	1	10	Guangzhou	20,000	Mother helped to pick up and drop off the children

Table 1 (continued)

Case Number	Education level	Age	Monthly Income from WeChat Business	Number of children	Age of children	City	Family Income	Childcare arrangements (Mother or father refers to the respondent's parents)
08310120	Bachelor's degree	28	2000–3000	2, under age 1	2	Pingtian	Unknown	Mother helped during the daily childrearing work but the respondent is responsible for intensive motherhood work, such as making specialized baby food and reading books with the children
08310220	Bachelor's degree	29	7500–10,000	1	2	Shanghai	Unknown	Domestic helpers with housework
09010220	Bachelor's degree	32	2000–3000	1	3	Daqing	Unknown	Parents come to help after the child turns 3 and go to kindergarten
09010320	High school	34	2000–3000	4	14, 6, 4, 1	Guangzhou	Unknown	Father-in-law helped due to the heavy childrearing burden
09020120	Junior high school	33	2000–4000	3	12, 9, 4	Pingtian	22,000–24,000	No external support
09020220	Bachelor's degree	34	10,000–15,000	2	6, 4	Shanghai	40,000–50,000	The interviewee's mother has always primarily been responsible for picking up and dropping off the child, as well as assisting in childcare. However, the interviewee perceives a discrepancy between her mother's child-rearing philosophy and her own
09040120	Bachelor's degree	27	5000–10,000	1	2	Fuzhou	Unknown	Mother helped to pick up and drop off the children
09040220	Unknown	30	Unknown	1	9	Guangzhou	Unknown	Unknown

Table 1 (continued)

Case Number	Education level	Age	Monthly Income from WeChat Business	Number of children	Age of children	City	Family Income	Childcare arrangements (Mother or father refers to the respondent's parents)
09060020	Higher vocational education	29	Under 500	1	5	Guangzhou	Unknown	During the period when the child was six to seven months old up to thirteen months, the interviewee noticed personal emotional issues while caring for the child herself. As a result, she sought assistance from a relative who helped with the childcare until the child was seven-teen months old. When the relative needed to return to hometown, the interviewee contacted a nursery that agreed to enroll the child. Subsequently, the interviewee has been responsible for childcare until now
09080020	Bachelor's degree	30	10,000–13,000	1	1	Lishui	40,000–50,000	
09090020	Bachelor's degree	32	2000–3000	1	2	Wuhan	Unknown	
09130120	Higher vocational education	28	500–1000	1	2	Honghu	17,000–21,000	
09130220	Higher vocational education	28	Unknown	1	2	Quanzhou	Unknown	In May 2020, she resided at parents' house for a period of time, during which parents provided assistance in childcare. Currently, her father in-law helps with grocery shopping and cooking
09140120	Bachelor's degree	31	5000	1	3	Xuancheng	10,000–13,000	
09140220	High school	40	3000–8000	1	6	Hangzhou	Unknown	
09220020	Bachelor's degree	37	10,000–15000	1	3	Chongqing	30,000–35000	



**Table 1** (continued)

Case Number	Education level	Age	Monthly Income from WeChat Business	Number of children	Age of children	City	Family Income	Childcare arrangements (Mother or father refers to the respondent's parents)
09290020	Bachelor's degree	33	2000–3000	2	2, 1	Chongqing	Unknown	When the interviewee's first child was about seven to eight months old, her mother came to help take care of him for a period of time. However, her mother suffered from cerebral hemorrhage and hemiplegia, which rendered her unable to care for the child alone. Additionally, the interviewee was pregnant with their second child. She had to take care of her mother and children. As a result, they sent their older brother to a daycare center. Currently, they receive assistance from a nanny for childcare duties
09300020	Higher vocational education	31	Unknown	1	7	Chongqing	Unknown	Parent in-laws responsible for housework and the respondent takes the primary responsibility of childrearing
10020020	High school	33	5000–7500	2	6, 3	Liuzhou	10,000–15,000	Parent in-laws
10070020	Bachelor's degree	33	30,000–40,000	1	3	Shenzhen	Unknown	No external support
10140020	Bachelor's degree	30	30,000–40,000	2	5, 3	Chongqing	Unknown	Mother in-law helped but her daughters mostly relied on her
10150020	Vocational senior secondary school	32	2000	1	6	Chongqing	Unknown	No external support
10250020	Bachelor's degree	30	3000–4000	1	4	Harbin	13,000–16,000	Parents in-law helped after the respondent returns to labor market after the maternity leave and she relied on herself during the maternal leave
10260020	Bachelor's degree	32	Unknown	1	2	Wuhan	Unknown	Mother in-law

### Abbreviations

CNNIC	The China Internet Network Information Center
SOE	State-owned enterprise
V5-2 level	In a company that recruited mothers as sellers and stratified them into different levels based on their total sales and the size of their customer base, "V5-2" referred to the second level of the VIP 5 classification

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### Author contributions

Hong Zhang was involved in the qualitative data collection, development of the theoretical framework and writing of the findings section. Xintuantuan Sun participated in the data collection and contributed to the writing of literature review. Ziyao Ding also contributed to the qualitative data collection and conducted qualitative coding of the interview scripts.

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