

Exploring the Influence of MCN Agencies on Content Creation by Short-Video Influencers Among Chinese College Students

Zhaoyong Cao¹, Syed Agil Shekh Alsagoff¹, Norliana Hashim¹

¹Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia

Correspondence: Zhaoyong Cao, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia.

Received: May 29, 2025

Accepted: July 10, 2025

Online Published: July 15, 2025

doi:10.11114/smc.v13i4.7731

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v13i4.7731>

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the complex influence of Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) on content creation by Chinese college student influencers on short video platforms, with TikTok as the primary focus. Through depth interviews with ten purposefully sampled student influencers affiliated with MCNs, the study uncovers how these networks shape content strategies, enhance audience engagement, and guide career paths. Employing a qualitative research paradigm, the study elicits rich, contextualized data on the subtle ways MCNs impact the content creation process. Findings reveal that MCNs play a crucial role in determining content themes, improving production quality, and facilitating marketing opportunities. However, concerns about creative control and long-term career sustainability also emerge. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between MCNs and content creators in China's digital media landscape, highlighting both opportunities and challenges for college student influencers. The insights provided are vital for researchers, policymakers, and industry stakeholders to foster a more equitable and sustainable environment for content creators in the evolving short video ecosystem.

Keywords: Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs), TikTok, Chinese college students, short-video influencers, content creation, influencer marketing, authenticity, digital labor

1. Introduction

The proliferation of short-video platforms, notably TikTok, has transformed global media landscapes, particularly influencing younger demographics (Weimann & Masri, 2020). This shift has elevated college students to influential digital content creators. These young influencers leverage relatability and niche expertise to build substantial followings, transforming online personas into powerful brands (Abidin, 2018). Their authentic and creative content fosters digital intimacy and social influence among peers (Zhang, 2024). This burgeoning influence has attracted Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs), which function as key intermediaries in the content ecosystem by professionalizing and monetizing creator output (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

MCNs operate as talent agencies for the digital age, providing influencers with resources such as content strategy guidance, production support, cross-promotion opportunities, and, crucially, brand partnerships (De Veirman et al., 2017). For college student influencers, MCN affiliation can offer a pathway to enhanced visibility, increased revenue streams, and a more professionalized approach to content creation. However, this relationship is often fraught with complexities and potential tensions. While MCNs can empower influencers, they also exert considerable influence over content direction, potentially leading to a homogenization of content and a compromise on creative autonomy (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). This dynamic raises critical questions about the evolving nature of authenticity, creative control, and the commodification of personal expression in the age of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017).

This study is situated within the burgeoning field of influencer marketing research, which has witnessed exponential growth in recent years (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). While existing scholarship has explored various aspects of influencer culture, including the construction of online personas (Marwick, 2013), the dynamics of audience engagement (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), and the economic structures underpinning influencer marketing (Duffy, 2017), there remains a paucity of research specifically examining the influence of MCNs on the creative practices of college student influencers within the unique socio-cultural context of China. This study aims to bridge this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of how MCNs shape the content creation processes, audience engagement strategies, and long-term

career trajectories of Chinese college student influencers on TikTok.

Furthermore, this research contributes to broader theoretical debates within communication and media studies, particularly concerning the platformization of culture (Helmond, 2015), the rise of algorithmic curation (Bucher, 2018), and the evolving power dynamics between platforms, content creators, and audiences (van Dijck et al., 2018). By focusing on the specific case of TikTok and its relationship with MCNs and college student influencers, this study offers insights into the interplay between global digital trends and local cultural contexts, highlighting the unique ways in which platform affordances and institutional structures shape the production and consumption of digital content in contemporary China.

To achieve these objectives, this study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposively sampled group of Chinese college student influencers affiliated with MCNs on TikTok. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the lived experiences, motivations, and strategic decision-making processes of these young creators, providing rich, contextualized data that illuminates the complex dynamics at play (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). The study seeks to answer the following key research questions: (1) How do MCNs influence the content creation processes of Chinese college student influencers on TikTok, particularly in terms of topic selection, format, and style? (2) What strategies do these influencers employ to navigate the often-conflicting demands of MCNs, audience expectations, and their own creative aspirations? (3) How does MCN affiliation impact the perceived authenticity and credibility of college student influencers among their followers? (4) What are the long-term implications of MCN involvement for the professional development and career pathways of these young creators?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to generate novel insights into the evolving relationship between MCNs and a key segment of the influencer population in China. The findings will not only contribute to academic understanding of the influencer economy and its impact on digital content creation but also offer practical implications for MCNs, policymakers, and young content creators navigating the increasingly complex landscape of the global attention economy.

2. Literature Review

This study on the influence of Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) on content creation by Chinese college student influencers on short-video platforms like TikTok is situated within a rich and rapidly evolving body of literature spanning influencer marketing, platform studies, digital labor, and the platformization of culture in the Chinese context. This literature review will synthesize key themes and debates within these fields, highlighting the theoretical and empirical contributions of existing research while identifying gaps that the current study aims to address.

2.1 *The Rise of Influencer Marketing and the Emergence of MCNs*

Influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful force in the digital economy, transforming traditional advertising and marketing practices (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Early research in this area focused on identifying the characteristics of influential individuals in online social networks (Watts & Dodds, 2007) and exploring the mechanisms through which they exert influence over consumer behavior (Brown & Hayes, 2015). With the rise of social media platforms, scholarship has shifted towards understanding the dynamics of influence within specific platform contexts, examining the role of platform affordances, algorithmic curation, and audience engagement in shaping influencer power (Abidin, 2016).

Within this landscape, MCNs have emerged as key intermediaries, providing a range of services to influencers, including content strategy, production support, audience development, and brand partnerships (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). De Veirman et al. (2017) highlight the role of MCNs in professionalizing influencer marketing, creating economies of scale and facilitating the integration of influencer content into broader marketing campaigns. However, the growing influence of MCNs has also raised concerns about the potential for commercial pressures to compromise the authenticity and creative autonomy of influencers (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

2.2 *Platformization of Culture and the Chinese Digital Landscape*

The rise of platforms like TikTok and TikTok has been accompanied by a growing body of research exploring the "platformization" of culture (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). This perspective emphasizes the increasing power of digital platforms to shape the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural content, creating new forms of cultural participation and expression while also raising concerns about the concentration of power in the hands of platform owners (van Dijck et al., 2018).

In the Chinese context, the platformization of culture is intertwined with unique socio-political and economic factors. China's distinctive internet governance regime, characterized by content controls and a preference for domestic platforms, has created a unique digital landscape (MacKinnon, 2011). Platforms like TikTok have become major players in this landscape, shaping not only entertainment and consumption patterns but also public discourse and social interactions (Zhang, 2021). Studies have documented the ways that these platforms are used for self-expression, community building,

and social activism, while also highlighting the challenges posed by censorship and surveillance (Yang, 2009).

2.3 Digital Labor, Authenticity, and the Commodification of Self

The rise of influencer culture has brought renewed attention to the concept of digital labor, with scholars examining the ways in which online content creation blurs the lines between work and leisure, production and consumption (Duffy, 2017). Influencers are often seen as embodying the ideals of "aspirational labor," pursuing their passions while simultaneously generating economic value for platforms and brands (Duffy & Hund, 2015). This has led to debates about the exploitation of digital labor, particularly in the context of the precarious and often uncompensated work performed by aspiring influencers (Abidin, 2016).

Central to the appeal of influencers is the perception of authenticity, which is often seen as a key factor in building trust and rapport with audiences (Audrezet et al., 2020). However, the commercialization of influencer culture, particularly through MCN affiliation, has raised questions about the extent to which authenticity can be maintained in the face of commercial pressures (Khamis et al., 2017). Scholars have explored the various strategies that influencers employ to navigate this tension, including disclosing sponsored content, strategically curating their online personas, and engaging in "calculated authenticity" (Enli, 2015).

2.4 College Student Influencers: A Unique Demographic

While the broader literature on influencer marketing and MCNs provides valuable context, there is a notable gap in research specifically focusing on college student influencers. This demographic represents a unique segment of the influencer population, characterized by their age, educational background, social context, and particular motivations for engaging in content creation (Zhu, 2024). College students often possess a deep understanding of youth culture and trends, enabling them to create content that resonates strongly with their peers. Their involvement in influencer activities may be driven by a variety of factors, including the desire for self-expression, social recognition, peer influence, and the potential for financial gain (Huang & Sun, 2023).

2.5 Research Gap and Contribution of the Current Study

Despite the growing body of research on influencer marketing and the platformization of culture, there remains a need for in-depth studies examining the specific influence of MCNs on the content creation practices of Chinese college student influencers. This study aims to address this gap by providing a nuanced analysis of how MCNs shape the creative processes, audience engagement strategies, and career trajectories of these young creators within the unique context of TikTok. By employing qualitative research methods, this study will generate rich, contextualized insights into the lived experiences and strategic decision-making processes of college student influencers, contributing to a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics between platforms, MCNs, and content creators in the Chinese digital landscape.

This study will contribute to existing literature by: (1) providing empirical evidence on the specific ways in which MCNs influence the content creation practices of college student influencers on TikTok; (2) exploring the strategies that these influencers employ to navigate the tensions between creative autonomy, commercial pressures, and audience expectations; (3) analyzing the impact of MCN affiliation on the perceived authenticity and credibility of college student influencers; and (4) examining the long-term implications of MCN involvement for the professional development and career pathways of these young creators.

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the multifaceted influence of MCN agencies on the content creation practices of Chinese college student influencers on TikTok. Qualitative research is well-suited to investigating complex social phenomena, allowing for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Specifically, this study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews as its primary data collection method. This method provides the flexibility to explore emerging themes and delve into the nuances of individual experiences while maintaining a consistent framework for comparison across participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

3.1 Participants and Recruitment

The study sample consisted of 10 Chinese college student influencers who met the following criteria: (1) currently enrolled in a Chinese college; (2) actively creating and publishing content on TikTok; (3) affiliated with an MCN agency; and (4) have a minimum of 10,000 followers on TikTok. This follower threshold was chosen to ensure that participants had achieved a certain level of visibility and engagement on the platform.

Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit participants who could provide rich and diverse perspectives on the research topic (Patton, 2015). Recruitment efforts involved contacting MCN agencies operating in China and leveraging the researchers' personal networks within the Chinese influencer community. Potential participants were initially screened based on the aforementioned criteria. Those who met the criteria were provided with a detailed information

sheet outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted via video conferencing software (Tencent Meeting) between [Start Date] and [End Date]. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the native language of the participants. An interview guide was developed based on the research questions and existing literature, covering topics such as the influencers' motivations for creating content, their relationship with their MCN, the influence of the MCN on their content creation process, their strategies for audience engagement, and their perceptions of authenticity and commercialization.

The interview guide served as a flexible framework, allowing for probing and follow-up questions to explore emergent themes and gain deeper insights into participants' experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data, following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This iterative process involved: (1) familiarizing ourselves with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts; (2) generating initial codes by systematically identifying key features of the data; (3) searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes; (4) reviewing themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data; (5) defining and naming themes, developing a detailed understanding of each theme and its significance; and (6) producing the report, weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts.

To enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the analysis, several strategies were employed. First, two researchers independently coded a subset of the transcripts and then compared their coding to ensure consistency and identify any discrepancies. Second, member checking was conducted by sharing the preliminary findings with participants to validate the interpretations and ensure they accurately reflected their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Third, a detailed audit trail was maintained, documenting all decisions made during the data analysis process.

4. Result

This study delves into the intricate and evolving relationship between Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) and Chinese college student influencers, a significant demographic within the burgeoning influencer economy on the short-video platform TikTok. Employing a qualitative research design, the study analyzes data from in-depth interviews with ten influencers affiliated with various MCNs, uncovering the nuanced power dynamics and strategic negotiations inherent in this relationship. Four principal themes emerge from this analysis, encapsulating the core findings: (1) MCNs' Influence on Content Strategy and Production; (2) Navigating Authenticity and Commercialization; (3) Audience Engagement and Community Building; and (4) Career Aspirations and the Professionalization of Influencing. These themes, further illuminated by direct quotes from participants, provide a rich, contextualized understanding of the lived experiences of Chinese college student influencers within the dynamic MCN ecosystem.

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Followers	Content Niche	MCN Agency	Contract Length (Years)
CYY	Female	20	251K	Comedy/Vlogs	SLM	1
TJX	Male	22	405K	Food/Cooking	SET	2
LRY	Female	21	183K	Beauty/Makeup	CNK	0.5
CYF	Male	23	355K	Travel Vlogs	EC	3
FYW	Female	19	128K	Educational (History)	KHB	1.5
YFZ	Male	20	81K	Gaming/Comedy	FTC	1
WJY	Female	22	454K	Fashion/Lifestyle	TSI	4
CYX	Male	21	306k	Music/Dance	MRB	2.5
YMX	Female	23	67k	DIY/Crafts	CCN	1
ZYK	Male	20	203k	Fitness/Health	WNW	2

Figure 1. Basic Information of the Interviewees

4.1 Theme 1: MCNs' Influence on Content Strategy and Production

This theme examines the substantial influence that Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) exert over the content strategy and production processes of Chinese college student influencers affiliated with the short-video platform TikTok. The interviews revealed that MCNs wield considerable power in shaping the creative output of these influencers, with the intensity of this influence ranging from providing broad, advisory suggestions to imposing strict control over specific content themes, formats, and even the granular details of scripts. This spectrum of control has significant implications for the autonomy, creative expression, and overall experiences of these young content creators.

The data indicate that a primary driver of MCN influence is the imperative to maximize audience engagement and commercial viability within the highly competitive landscape of TikTok. CYY, a comedy vlogger associated with SLM, provided a compelling example of this dynamic. She described how her MCN actively guides her content creation to align with trending topics and platform-specific challenges, often superseding her personal comedic style and preferences. As she explained, "Initially, I created videos based on funny incidents from my daily life... However, my agent at SLM stressed the importance of following TikTok trends to expand my audience... They provide me with a weekly list of trending hashtags and challenges... Sometimes it's enjoyable, but often it feels contrived. For example, last week they insisted I participate in the 'spicy noodle challenge,' even though I dislike spicy food. I did it anyway because they claimed it would generate significant views." (CYY, personal communication, October 12, 2024). This account illustrates the tension that can arise between an influencer's desire for authentic self-expression and the commercial pressures exerted by MCNs, often driven by platform algorithms and perceived audience preferences.

TJX, a food influencer affiliated with SET, offered insights into a more structured and tightly controlled content creation environment. His MCN's approach exemplifies a production model where the influencer functions less as an independent creator and more as a performer within a pre-defined framework. "SET has a specialized team that meticulously plans my content calendar," TJX stated. "They determine the dishes I should cook, the ingredients I should use, and even the way I present the food on camera. For some videos, they even provide a detailed script that I'm expected to follow... While this approach is helpful in terms of time management, it sometimes feels like I'm just an actor reciting lines..." (TJX, personal communication, October 13, 2024). This level of control raises questions about the authenticity of the content produced and the potential for influencer burnout when personal creativity is stifled.

Conversely, FYW, an educational content creator specializing in Chinese history, described a more collaborative and less restrictive relationship with her MCN, KHB. "KHB affords me a considerable degree of autonomy in selecting my topics," FYW shared. "They respect my passion for history and trust my judgment in creating content that is both informative and engaging... They do offer suggestions and feedback, which I appreciate, but ultimately, they allow me to make the final decisions. They also provide access to resources that help improve the overall quality of my videos..." (FYW, personal communication, October 26, 2024). This example demonstrates that some MCNs may prioritize the unique expertise and passions of their influencers, fostering a more collaborative environment.

These contrasting experiences highlight the diverse ways in which MCNs influence content creation on TikTok, revealing a complex interplay of commercial interests, platform demands, and individual creative aspirations. The varying degrees of autonomy afforded to influencers across different MCNs suggest that the influencer-MCN relationship is a dynamic and evolving construct, shaped by a multitude of factors.

4.2 Theme 2: Navigating Authenticity and Commercialization

This theme explicates the intricate and often precarious balance that Chinese college student influencers on TikTok must strike between maintaining authenticity and pursuing commercial opportunities. The interviews revealed that the tension between these two often-competing forces is a central concern for influencers, significantly shaping their content creation strategies and relationships with their audiences. MCNs, acting as intermediaries and facilitators of brand deals, play a pivotal role in this dynamic, often creating a complex interplay between creative autonomy, commercial pressures, and the perceived authenticity of the influencer.

LRY, a beauty influencer, articulated the challenges of navigating this terrain, expressing her concerns about the potential impact of sponsored content on her credibility and the trust she has cultivated with her audience. As she explained, "I try to be very selective about the brands I collaborate with, as I only want to promote products that I genuinely like and use in my daily life. I feel a strong sense of responsibility to my followers, and I don't want to jeopardize the trust they've placed in me." (LRY, personal communication, October 19, 2024). However, she also acknowledged the pressures exerted by her MCN, CNK, to accept brand deals that might not perfectly align with her personal preferences or standards. "They present it as a good opportunity for exposure and revenue, which is understandable from a business perspective, but I worry that my followers will perceive me as inauthentic or a 'sell-out' if I promote products I don't truly believe in. There was this one instance where I promoted a skincare product that my MCN strongly recommended, but I didn't really like the product. My followers left numerous negative comments,

accusing me of being dishonest and misleading them. It was a difficult experience, and it made me even more cautious about the sponsorships I accept." (LRY, personal communication, October 19, 2024). This account highlights the potential for MCNs to prioritize commercial opportunities over the influencer's authentic voice, potentially damaging the influencer's credibility and relationship with their audience.

WJY, a fashion and lifestyle influencer affiliated with TSI, offered a contrasting perspective, detailing her proactive strategy for seamlessly integrating sponsored content into her regular content to minimize audience backlash and maintain a sense of authenticity. "Having been with TSI for four years, I've had the opportunity to collaborate with some amazing brands," she shared. "I make a conscious effort to integrate sponsored content organically into my vlogs, such as incorporating a sponsored outfit into my 'day in the life' segments, rather than creating separate, standalone videos that are obviously advertisements. I believe my followers appreciate that I'm not constantly bombarding them with blatant advertisements that disrupt their viewing experience." (WJY, personal communication, November 19, 2024). Furthermore, WJY emphasized her commitment to thoroughly testing products before recommending them to her followers: "I also make it a point to thoroughly test the product for an extended period before recommending it, as I feel a strong sense of responsibility to be truthful to my followers. It's a delicate balancing act, trying to maintain authenticity while also pursuing commercial opportunities, but I believe it's possible to do both successfully." (WJY, personal communication, November 2, 2024). This approach suggests that influencers can develop strategies to mitigate the tension between authenticity and commercialization, potentially fostering a more sustainable and trust-based relationship with their audience.

These contrasting experiences underscore the complexities of navigating the commercial landscape of influencer marketing on TikTok. The data suggest that influencers must carefully weigh the potential benefits of brand deals against the risks of compromising their perceived authenticity, a crucial factor in maintaining audience trust and engagement. The role of MCNs in this process is multifaceted, as they can both facilitate lucrative opportunities and exert pressure to prioritize commercial interests, potentially creating ethical dilemmas for influencers.

4.3 Theme 3: Audience Engagement and Community Building

This theme examines the role of MCNs in shaping how Chinese college student influencers on TikTok interact with their audiences and cultivate a sense of community. The interviews revealed that MCNs exert varying degrees of influence on influencers' audience engagement strategies, with some actively promoting engagement while others indirectly discouraging it through demanding content production schedules. This dynamic highlights the complex interplay between commercial imperatives, platform algorithms, and the desire to foster authentic connections with followers.

CYF, a travel vlogger affiliated with EC, provided a compelling example of an MCN that prioritizes audience engagement and community building. He described how his MCN actively encourages influencers to cultivate strong relationships with their followers, viewing them as an integral part of the influencer's success. As CYF explained, "EC consistently encourages us to treat our followers as friends and build genuine relationships with them. They advise us to actively respond to comments, answer questions, and even organize online and offline meetups. They believe that cultivating a loyal and engaged community is crucial for long-term success and sustainability." (CYF, personal communication, October 20, 2024). He further elaborated on the personal benefits of this approach: "I've actually formed some close friendships through my TikTok community, which has been an incredibly rewarding and unexpected aspect of this experience. It's made the whole process feel more meaningful and less like a purely transactional endeavor." (CYF, personal communication, October 20, 2024). This suggests that certain MCNs recognize the value of fostering authentic connections between influencers and their audiences, potentially leading to increased audience loyalty and a more positive brand image.

Conversely, YFZ, a gaming influencer affiliated with FTC, articulated the challenges of balancing audience engagement with the demanding content production schedules often imposed by MCNs. His experience highlights a potential downside of the relentless pursuit of content volume, driven by platform algorithms and commercial pressures. "FTC constantly pushes me to increase my video output, insisting that it's the key to remaining relevant and visible on TikTok's fast-paced platform," YFZ shared. "However, this leaves me with very little time or energy to genuinely engage with my followers. I feel guilty because I know they appreciate it when I respond to their comments or host live Q&A sessions, but I simply can't keep up with the demanding content schedule imposed by my MCN. It's frustrating because I want to connect with my audience, but I'm constantly being pulled in different directions." (YFZ, personal communication, October 27, 2024). This account underscores the potential for MCNs to prioritize content quantity over quality engagement, potentially leading to influencer burnout and a diminished sense of connection with their audience.

These contrasting perspectives reveal the multifaceted and sometimes contradictory role of MCNs in shaping

influencer-audience interactions. While some MCNs actively encourage and facilitate community building, others may inadvertently hinder it by prioritizing content volume and algorithmic visibility. This tension highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the factors that influence MCN strategies and their impact on influencer-audience relationships. Further research could explore the long-term effects of these different approaches on audience loyalty, influencer well-being, and the overall sustainability of the influencer ecosystem. It would be particularly valuable to investigate how influencers themselves navigate these competing demands and negotiate their own strategies for audience engagement within the constraints and opportunities presented by their MCN affiliations.

4.4 Theme 4: Career Aspirations and the Professionalization of Influencing

This theme investigates the significant role of MCN affiliation in shaping the career aspirations and professional development trajectories of Chinese college student influencers on TikTok. The interviews revealed that MCNs are often perceived as instrumental in facilitating the transition from amateur content creator to professional influencer, providing valuable resources, training, industry connections, and opportunities for career advancement. However, the extent to which influencers view influencing as a viable long-term career path varies considerably.

CYX, a music and dance influencer affiliated with MRB, exemplifies the perspective of those who view their MCN as a springboard to a broader career within the entertainment industry. He described how his MCN has provided him with opportunities that extend beyond TikTok: "MRB has opened up numerous opportunities for me that I wouldn't have had otherwise. They've helped me refine my dancing skills through professional coaching, connected me with other musicians and performers, and even secured me gigs at local events and festivals." (CYX, personal communication, November 3, 2024). He further articulated his long-term aspirations: "My ultimate ambition is to become a professional dancer or choreographer, and I believe my experience with the MCN is providing me with a substantial advantage and a solid foundation for achieving that goal." (CYX, personal communication, November 3, 2024). This perspective highlights the role of MCNs in facilitating the professionalization of influencing, providing a pathway for influencers to leverage their online presence into broader career opportunities.

ZYK, a fitness influencer affiliated with WNW, similarly sees his MCN affiliation as a crucial stepping stone towards establishing himself as a recognized authority in the health and wellness industry. "WNW has been instrumental in helping me build a strong personal brand and establish credibility in the fitness space," ZYK explained. "They've provided me with training on nutrition and exercise science, and they've assisted me in creating a series of workout videos that have gained considerable popularity and positive feedback." (ZYK, personal communication, November 17, 2024). He further elaborated on his entrepreneurial aspirations: "My long-term goal is to open my own gym or fitness studio, and I believe my experience as an influencer, facilitated and supported by the MCN, is providing me with the necessary expertise, audience base, and industry connections to make that happen." (ZYK, personal communication, November 17, 2024). This perspective underscores the role of MCNs in fostering the development of specialized skills and knowledge, enabling influencers to pursue careers beyond content creation.

YMX, a DIY and crafts influencer affiliated with CCN, offered a contrasting perspective, expressing a more pragmatic and less influencer-centric career outlook. While acknowledging the benefits of her MCN affiliation, she views influencing as a temporary endeavor rather than a long-term career path. "CCN primarily helps me connect with brands for promoting DIY and craft products," YMX shared. "While I appreciate the opportunities and income it provides, I don't see influencing as a viable long-term career path for me. The competition is incredibly intense, trends change rapidly, and the industry is inherently unstable." (YMX, personal communication, November 10, 2024). She further explained her future plans: "I'm studying design in college, and I hope to find a job related to my major after graduation. For me, influencing is more of a part-time endeavor to earn extra money and gain some experience while I'm still in school." (YMX, personal communication, November 10, 2024). This perspective highlights the precarious nature of the influencer industry.

These diverse perspectives demonstrate the complex relationship between MCN affiliation, career aspirations, and the professionalization of influencing. While some influencers view MCNs as essential partners in their pursuit of long-term careers, others see them as temporary support systems for short-term financial gain. This variance underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of MCNs in shaping the career trajectories of young influencers.

These findings offer a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between MCNs, content creators, and the evolving digital landscape in China, specifically within the context of TikTok. The study illuminates the multifaceted influence of MCNs on the content creation practices, audience engagement strategies, and career trajectories of Chinese college student influencers. While MCNs provide valuable resources and professionalization opportunities, they also introduce pressures that can impinge upon creative autonomy and authenticity. Further research is warranted to corroborate these findings, employing larger and more diverse samples encompassing influencers from various

platforms and content niches. Longitudinal studies are particularly needed to examine the long-term implications of MCN affiliation on influencer career paths and the evolving power dynamics between platforms, MCNs, and creators, especially in light of shifting platform governance, algorithmic changes, and audience preferences. These insights provide a critical foundation for future scholarly inquiry into the burgeoning field of influencer marketing and its broader socio-cultural implications within China's unique digital media ecosystem. The study contributes to the field of communication by highlighting how a rising industry is being shaped by multiple stakeholders.

5. Discussion

This study explored the multifaceted influence of Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) on the content creation practices of Chinese college student influencers on the short-video platform TikTok. The findings reveal a complex interplay between MCNs, influencers, and the platform itself, highlighting the evolving dynamics of the influencer economy in China's unique digital landscape. This discussion will analyze the key findings in relation to existing literature, address the study's limitations, and propose directions for future research.

One of the central findings of this study is the significant influence MCNs exert over content strategy and production. This influence ranges from providing broad guidelines to exercising strict control over content themes, formats, and even scripts. This finding resonates with previous research on the role of intermediaries in the creative industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2019), which has documented the tensions between creative autonomy and commercial pressures. The study extends this literature by demonstrating how these tensions manifest within the specific context of the Chinese influencer economy, where MCNs play a particularly powerful role (Liu & Lv, 2023). The varying degrees of control exerted by different MCNs, as illustrated by the experiences of CYY, TJX, and FYW, suggest that the influencer-MCN relationship is a dynamic and evolving construct, shaped by factors such as the MCN's business model, the influencer's content niche, and the platform's algorithmic preferences.

The study also highlighted the challenges influencers face in navigating the tension between authenticity and commercialization. This finding aligns with previous research on influencer marketing, which has emphasized the importance of perceived authenticity in building trust and rapport with audiences (Audrezet et al., 2020). The experiences of LRY and WJY demonstrate the strategies influencers employ to manage this tension, such as selective brand collaboration and seamless integration of sponsored content. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how authenticity is negotiated and performed in the context of influencer marketing, particularly within the collectivist cultural context of China, where social harmony and face-saving are highly valued (Xia et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the study revealed the varying role of MCNs in shaping influencer-audience interactions. While some MCNs, like EC, actively encourage community building, others, like FTC, prioritize content quantity over audience engagement. This finding is consistent with research on the platformization of culture (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), which highlights how platform algorithms and commercial pressures can shape the production and consumption of digital content. The study extends this literature by demonstrating how MCNs mediate the relationship between influencers and platforms, potentially amplifying the pressures to conform to algorithmic preferences.

Finally, the study underscored the role of MCN affiliation in shaping the career aspirations of influencers. The contrasting perspectives of CYX, ZYK, and YMX highlight the diverse ways in which influencers perceive the long-term value of influencing and the role of MCNs in their professional development. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on the gig economy and the professionalization of online personas (Gandini, 2016). The study suggests that while some influencers view MCNs as a springboard to broader career opportunities, others see them as a temporary support system for short-term financial gain. This highlights the need for further research on the long-term career trajectories of influencers and the sustainability of the influencer economy.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the influence of MCNs on Chinese college student influencers, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The small sample size and focus on a specific demographic limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, including influencers from different platforms, content niches, and age groups. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term impact of MCN affiliation on influencer career paths and the evolving power dynamics within the influencer ecosystem. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts would also enhance our understanding of the global influencer phenomenon.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on influencer marketing and the platformization of culture. It provides a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between MCNs, influencers, and platforms in China's unique digital landscape. The findings underscore the need for ongoing critical examination of the influencer economy and its implications for content creators, audiences, and the broader media environment.

6. Conclusion

This study investigates Multi-Channel Networks' (MCNs) multifaceted influence on Chinese college student influencers within TikTok's ecosystem. Findings reveal MCNs exert significant control over content creation, ranging from strategic guidance to granular oversight of themes, formats, and scripts. Driven by commercial imperatives and algorithmic pressures, this influence frequently conflicts with creators' authentic self-expression. Variable autonomy levels among influencers (e.g., CYY, TJX, FYW) demonstrate how MCN business models, platform algorithms, and content niches dynamically shape these professional relationships within China's unique digital landscape.

The study further identifies critical tensions between authenticity maintenance and commercialization. MCN-facilitated sponsored content risks compromising perceived authenticity and eroding audience trust. However, influencers demonstrate strategic agency through selective brand collaborations and seamless ad integration (e.g., LRY, WJY), navigating commercial demands while preserving credibility. These practices provide nuanced insights into authenticity performance within China's distinct cultural context, where social harmony and face-saving significantly influence self-presentation strategies.

MCNs differentially mediate creator-audience relationships through contrasting operational philosophies. While entities like EC actively foster community building, others (e.g., FTC) prioritize content volume over meaningful engagement. This divergence may precipitate influencer burnout and diminished audience connections, highlighting how algorithmic optimization and commercial pressures can undermine relational authenticity. Consequently, the findings advocate for holistic approaches valuing sustainable creator-audience relationships beyond quantitative engagement metrics.

Finally, MCN affiliation diversely shapes professional trajectories and career perceptions. Contrasting influencer perspectives (CYX, ZYK, YMX) reveal MCNs functioning either as essential career accelerators in influencing/related fields or as temporary support systems for financial stabilization/skill acquisition. This dichotomy underscores intermediaries' pivotal role in configuring digital-era career pathways and necessitates deeper examination of platform-driven work sustainability. Collectively, these findings illuminate complex power dynamics within China's evolving influencer economy while offering practical insights for stakeholders navigating this ecosystem.

6.1 Implications and Future Directions

This study's findings critically inform understanding of the influencer economy, platformization of culture, and digital labor futures. They underscore power dynamics between platforms, MCNs, and creators—particularly concerning creative autonomy, authentic expression, and influencer well-being. As the industry matures, MCNs must adopt ethical, sustainable practices prioritizing creators' long-term interests and authentic audience engagement. Our analysis of Chinese college student influencers on TikTok reveals these dynamics within a culturally specific context, highlighting broader socio-cultural implications for digital content ecosystems.

Future research should investigate MCNs' influence across diverse platforms and cultural contexts using larger, more representative samples. Longitudinal studies are essential to examine long-term career impacts and evolving power structures. Further inquiry must also incorporate audience perspectives on MCN-mediated content authenticity. This study establishes a foundation for such work while addressing the blurred boundaries between content creation, marketing, and entertainment. A nuanced understanding of these forces remains crucial for navigating digital age opportunities and challenges.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge all support and organizational assistance provided to me during my research journey.

Authors contributions

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Abidin, C. (2016). "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?": Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2), 2056305116641342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641342>
- Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Audrezet, A., De Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J. G. (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 557-569. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.008>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brown, D., & Hayes, N. (2015). *Influencer marketing: Who really influences your customers?*. Elsevier/Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Bucher, T. (2018). *If... then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford college Press.
- Campbell, C., & Farrell, J. R. (2020). More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. *Business Horizons*, 63(4), 469-479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.03.003>
- Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (2019). *Social media entertainment: The new intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* (Vol. 7). NYU Press.
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798-828.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Sage Publications.
- DiCicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B. F. (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical Education*, 40(4), 314-321. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x>
- Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. Yale college Press.
- Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2015). "Having it all" on social media: Entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 2056305115604337. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115604337>
- Enli, G. (2015). *Mediated authenticity: How the media constructs reality*. Peter Lang.
- Gandini, A. (2016). *The reputation economy: Understanding knowledge work in digital society*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Helmond, A. (2015). The platformization of the web: Making web data platform ready. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 2056305115603080. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080>
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2019). *The cultural industries* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Huang, H. P., & Sun, S. C. (2023). Dilemmas, reflections, and pathways of value guidance for college student influencer communities. *The Party Building and Ideological Education in Schools*, 23(4), 67-69. <https://doi.org/10.19865/j.cnki.xxdj.2023.04.020>

- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191-208.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2017). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Sage Publications.
- Liu, Q., & Lv, X. (2023). Research on Internet celebrity economy and MCN management mechanisms. *Media*, 2023(3), 86-89. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1009-9263.2023.03.030>
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58-73.
- MacKinnon, R. (2012). *Consent of the networked: The worldwide struggle for internet freedom*. Basic Books.
- Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. Yale college Press.
- Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society*, 20(11), 4275-4292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. Sage Publications.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Sage.
- Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Polity Press.
- Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & De Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford college Press.
- Watts, D. J., & Dodds, P. S. (2007). Influentials, networks, and public opinion formation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(4), 441-458. <https://doi.org/10.1086/518527>
- Weimann, G., & Masri, N. (2020). Research note: Spreading hate on TikTok. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 46(5), 752-765. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1780027>
- Xia, Q., Guo, W. Z., Lv, X. Q., & Meng, S. (2020). A study on the living conditions and development models of college student internet celebrities. *Media Forum*, 3(21), 8-9. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.2096-5079.2020.21.005>
- Yang, G. (2009). *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. Columbia college Press.
- Zhang, L. (2024). The misplacement and value reconstruction of the communication role of "college student online celebrities": An empirical analysis based on 119 "college student online celebrities" on the TikTok platform. *Journal of Chongqing Three Gorges College*, 40(4), 119-128. <https://doi.org/10.13743/j.cnki.issn.1009-8135.2024.04.004>
- Zhang, Z. (2021). Infrastructuralization of Tik Tok: Transformation, power relationships, and platformization of video entertainment in China. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(2), 219-236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720939452>
- Zhu, L. (2024). Expectation and contrast: Role misalignment and value reconstruction in the communication of college student influencers. *Journal of Jinling Institute of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 38(4), 82-86. <https://doi.org/10.16515/j.cnki.32-1745/c.2024.04.01>
- Zulli, D., & Zulli, D. J. (2020). Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform. *New Media & Society*, 24(8), 1872-1890. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820983603>