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MANUFACTURING INFLUENCERS: THE REVOLUTIONARY ROLES OF MCNs (MULTI-CHANNEL NETWORKS) IN THE PLATFORM ECONOMY

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Introduction

This study examines how MCNs (Multi-Channel Networks) intervene in the platform economy by manufacturing influencers. Previous studies have explored the emergence of influencers and creators from various perspectives, including platformization (Lin & de Kloet, 2019), creative labor (Duffy, 2017), and algorithmic power (Bishop, 2020). These works highlight the precarity and commercialization of creative work on digital platforms. However, little attention has been paid to another crucial player – MCNs which incubate and train influencers on an industrial scale. MCNs are firms and organizations that collaborate with influencers to facilitate the production, promotion, and monetization of creative content (Cunningham et al., 2016). They serve not only as incubators for micro-entrepreneurs and influencers looking to establish their businesses, but also as a key intermediary between influencers and other stakeholders on platforms.

Drawing on the theory of cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984) and creative labor (Duffy & Hund, 2015), this study investigates how MCNs construct and shape China's platform economy. We focus on China because, unlike the recent decline of MCNs on Western platforms, Chinese MCNs have proliferated since 2015 and become the major actor in the platform economy. Today, more than 90% of the top influencers on Chinese platforms have collaborated with MCNs. Nevertheless, hardly any work has addressed the role of MCNs in China's platform economy. This study combines in-depth interviews with documented lawsuits to explore the following two research questions: How do MCNs engage with the platform economy (RQ1)? What are the relationships between MCNs and influencers (RQ2)?

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Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three groups of scholarship to investigate the role of MCNs. First, platform studies have revealed the precarity of creative labor (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017), as well as platform dependence (Nieborg & Poell, 2018) and algorithmic curation (Bishop, 2020). Yet, much less work has been done on exploring how institutional players like MCNs affect the cultural production on platforms. In fact, MCNs are increasingly partnering with influencers on platforms like YouTube to transform amateur videos into professional content that can be monetized (Kim, 2012). Along with the pressure from algorithms and platforms, an increasing number of influencers have to deal with the benefits and challenges brought by MCNs, as the latter not only shapes how influencers engage with their daily work but also determines whether they can commodify their creative work (Cunningham et al., 2016).

Second, media industry studies provide new ways of understanding MCNs. This body of research examines institutional players involved in cultural production, with a focus on media agents and firms (Havens & Lotz, 2012). These actors, such as talent agents and media buyers, serve as cultural intermediaries to mediate the relationship between the production and consumption of media content (Lobato, 2016; McFall, 2002). Moreover, the emphasis on the microlevel practice also allows scholars to explore how particular actors affect the industry (Havens et al., 2009). Yet, previous literature in this field focuses mainly on traditional media industry (e.g., television), whereas little is known about how MCNs engage with the digital media sector.

Third, prior research on cultural production has explored the ways in which amateur users leverage digital media to provide content, such as amateurism (Abidin, 2016), self-branding (Khamis et al., 2017), participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), and vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2006). These works emphasize the amateurism and hobbyism of influencers and the empowerment of digital media. However, the development of digital platforms has enhanced the commercialization and professionalization of amateur creation, thereby shifting previous aspirants into entrepreneurs and influencers (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Duffy & Hund, 2015). In fact, MCNs are emerging rapidly in the transformation from user-generated content (UGC) to professional-generated content (PGC) on platforms (Craig & Cunningham, 2019; Kim, 2012).

Data and Methods

We conducted in-depth interviews with twelve influencers and five MCN employees to explore the research questions. Influencers were recruited through a snowballing sampling approach: we first contacted two influencers who ended their MCN contracts and then built connections with other influencers. For MCN employees, we relied on researchers' personal networks to recruit participants. During the interviews, we paid particular attention to the collaboration and tension between MCNs and influencers.

Moreover, the study relied on the official database *China Judgment Online* to gather lawsuits between MCNs and influencers. A total of 88 adjudication decision documents were retrieved, ranging from 2015 to 2022. Next, we conducted thematic analysis to explore the key information in the lawsuit documents, such as case type, appellants,

applied law, judgment, and causes of action. We identified the plaintiffs and defendants in each legal document and then examined evidence provided by the two sides, as well as legal decisions.

Findings

The findings suggest that MCNs significantly shape the platform economy through three strategies: manufacturing influencers, spreading industry lore, and exploiting creativity. First, we find that MCNs play the intermediary role by connecting influencers with other platform stakeholders, such as advertisers, brands, and end-users. MCNs support influencers with various services including topic selection, content production and distribution, fan engagement, and monetization. They could even determine the type of influencers and how influencers present themselves online. As such, MCNs set the parameters and circumstances under which influencers can be manufactured, professionalized, and monetized. This suggests that content creation has shifted from enthusiastic endeavors to industrialized and manufactured labors.

Furthermore, while MCNs seek to professionalize influencers, they also exert control over creativity by disciplining aspiring influencers with values, and standards of the platform economy. This means that MCNs can establish the norms and expectations of cultural production on platforms, and in turn, nudge influencers to provide standardized content. For instance, they could shape the gender, age, appearance, performance, and other characteristics of influencers. As a result, MCNs constitute the industry lore within which knowledge and expectations are generated and circulated.

In addition, we demonstrate that MCNs are inherently featured by instability and uncertainty, meaning that they rely heavily on the business models and technical features offered by platforms. While influencers are usually in vulnerable positions to be exploited by MCNs during the collaborations, MCNs suffer risks when influencers choose to terminate the contracts.

To conclude, this study reveals that MCNs have deeply engaged in the platform economy by manufacturing influencers. On one hand, MCNs help established influencers maintain their success and reduce the risk of creativity while exploiting the labor of aspirants who struggle to enter the platform economy. As such, they constitute a power imbalance by providing business for successful influencers and increasing precarity for ordinary influencers. On the other hand, MCNs continue to expand their business scopes to meet the needs of various stakeholders, mainly platforms, advertisers, and brands. Consequently, MCNs can facilitate the relationship between these actors, industrialize aspiring influencers, and determine who can participate in creative labor.

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