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WHEN INDUSTRY LORE DOESN'T WORK: EXPLORING MCN'S LIMITED INTERMEDIARY ROLES IN PROMOTIONAL CULTURE

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Introduction

Originating as supplementary firms that operate in and around YouTube's advertising infrastructure, Multichannel Networks (MCNs) have become an unseen infrastructure shaping platform-based cultural production (Lobato, 2016; Craig and Cunningham, 2019; Hutchison, 2023). Evolving with what Craig and Cunningham (2019) called "the new screen ecology", MCNs gradually extended their business models to adapt to the proliferated monetization schemes of social media platforms used for marketing and advertising (Edwards, 2022; M. Liang, 2022). This unique position between platforms and content creators has stimulated scholarly interest in theorizing MCNs as a renewed form of cultural intermediaries.

Many scholars (Lobato, 2016; Craig and Cunningham, 2019; Hutchison, 2023; F. Liang and Ji, 2024) position MCNs in the research tradition of cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984). At the core of cultural intermediaries' work is symbolic production, in the sense of framing what products, services, and celebrities are legitimate through various marketing and promotional techniques and the construction of markets (Negus, 2002; Maguire and Matthews, 2012). MCNs fulfil the classic intermediary function of providing technical, promotional and advertising services in exchange for a commission like some older middlemen professions, such as advertising agencies or media buyers (Lobato, 2016; Craig and Cunningham, 2019). While these activities of MCNs present an extension, remix, and repackage of already existing media works, scholars also rightfully reminded us that the profound difference lies in MCNs' automated and scalable nature rooted in social media platforms' data-driven logic (Lobato, 2016; M. Liang, 2022; Hutchinson, 2023).

Lobato (2016, 350) aptly pointed out the emergence of MCNs represents "an opportunity to revisit some elements of the theory base around intermediaries and

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update it for the platform economy". Nonetheless, the platform economy is not monolithic. To account for the heterogeneous modes of platform economy in a global context, Steinberg, Zhang and Mukherjee (2024) advocate for a pluralization framework on *platform capitalisms* to better grasp the multiple effects of platformization of cultural production. This article aims to answer one research question: what is the role of MCNs in the process of platformization in China?

Tracking the Formation of MCNs in the Chinese Internet History

While platform capitalism in China is often researched in close relation with the rise of Chinese tech-companies like Tencent and Alibaba and their political and economic impact, there is little research done around MCNs as part of the para-industry operating around these platforms.

When tracing the development of MCNs in China, some studies refer it back to, and compare it with the prototype originated from YouTube in the US (M. Liang, 2022; F. Liang and Ji, 2024). Meng Liang (2022) traces the root of the MCN phenomenon in China to the establishment of Papi Tube founded by the internet celebrity Papi Jiang in 2015 and argues that Chinese MCNs emerged from a liberalizing economy distinct from large, monopolized media entities in the US. These studies present us with valuable insight on a reciprocal relationship between content creators and MCNs in China, but they allude a universalized platformization process by making reference to YouTube. I argue, the formation of MCNs in China needs to be situated back into the local historical context.

Particularly, I argue, the proliferation of MCNs has been closely associated with the development of livestreaming industry in China (Z.Ye 2023). The predecessor of MCNs in China were guilds (*gonghui*), which is a synonym for labor union with a fundamentally different meaning. Guilds originally appeared in China in the late 1990s as voluntary organizations of MMO (massively multiplayer online) gamers, yet they have undergone rapid commercialization and transitioned into brokerage firms covering diverse activities including gold-farming, game-marketing and development, and game-tournament commentary (L. Zhang and Fung 2019). The hype of online gaming and showroom livestreaming in mid-2010s in China attracted many people to join livestreaming platforms (Yu 2018; Z.Ye 2023). Responding to this phenomenon, guilds became mediators of livestreaming platforms, fulfilling the role to train and manage individual streamers, and institutionally monetized of female streamers' gendered performativity via platforms' virtual gifting (Liu et al. 2021).

However, with e-commerce livestreaming gone mainstream in 2018, many guilds pivoted to a new business strategy of e-commerce monetization (Craig, Lin and Cunningham 2019; Z.Ye, 2023; Su and Kaye 2023). By then, the boundaries between guilds and MCNs were blurred and even disappeared, and many guilds rebranded themselves into MCNs. In the field of e-commerce, MCNs play a crucial role in maintaining a sustainable relationship between influencers, advertisers and the platforms (Liang 2022; Su and Kaye 2023).

The shifting industrial lore and MCN's limited intermediary roles

Inspired by Caldwell's (2008) production culture approach that relies on media practitioners' meaning-making to "find and articulate examples of critical theory embedded within the everyday of workers' experience" (ibid, 4), this research focuses on practitioner' discourses about the intermediary roles of MCNs in China. The "industry lore" (Havens 2014) about MCNs' intermediary roles were generated from 15 in-depth interviews with practitioners in the sector of e-commerce livestreaming. These trade stories and narratives were critically examined in the analysis, contextualising with a three-month participatory observation in a MCN institution (pseudonymised as W company) in Guangzhou, Southern China.

E-commerce livestreaming will be successful if you manage 人 (people), 货 (product), and 场 (place) correctly — this has become the most prominent industrial lore, repeated by many of my research participants. While 人 (people) refer to livestreamers and their assistants who function as shopping advisers, presenting products in livestreams, those who worked for repetitive communication with retailers and arrangement of logistics were rendered invisible. 货 (products) are at the core of e-commerce livestreaming activities, covering a wide range from daily household supplies, beauty and cosmetic products to clothing. 场 (place) has two folds of meanings: On the one hand, it means the physical space containing technical devices for conducting e-commerce livestreaming; on the other hand, it means the platform environment affording such practice.

However, in the fieldwork, I discovered that navigating the complex networks of people, products, and platforms as digital marketplaces, MCNs faced a precarious middleman position— their commercial activities were restricted and trapped by the industrial lore adhering closely to the platform logics of visibility and commodification. Within the three months of my fieldwork (December 2021 to March 2022), W company has changed its organizational structure three times to adapt to its constantly updating business strategies. At the end, W company rebranded itself into a marketing agency to help local brands deal with e-commerce livestreaming sales. As reflected in the findings, the boundary of what constitutes MCNs' work in China is flexible and constantly adapting to the evolvement of the industrial lore. The industrial lore resulted in a dual reinforcement: top streamers enjoy exclusive deals and long-term collaboration with brands, attracting more customers to their livestreaming channels, and established brands with more budgets for marketing are more likely to be seen in popular livestreaming channels. Accordingly, specific rules of conduct and standards of e-commerce livestreaming practices are further consolidated to the degree that it is extremely difficult for small-scale MCNs to follow or breakthrough.

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