

Exploring the Motives and Expectations of Chinese University Students as Short Video Internet Celebrities towards Collaboration with MCN Agencies

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i2/24493>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i2/24493

Published Date: 26 February 2025

Abstract

This study explores the motives and expectations of Chinese university students who collaborate with Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) as short video internet celebrities. Drawing on in-depth interviews with ten student influencers, this qualitative research reveals that students are motivated by professional growth, access to resources, increased visibility, and monetization opportunities. However, they also face challenges such as content control, revenue sharing transparency, and workload management. The findings highlight the need for clear communication and negotiation between influencers and MCNs to ensure equitable outcomes. This study contributes to the understanding of the dynamics between digital media, youth culture, and commercial interests, with implications for universities, MCNs, and policymakers.

Keywords: Chinese University Students, Short Video Internet Celebrities, MCN Collaboration, Motives, Expectations, Challenges

Introduction

The advent of short video applications has profoundly transformed the manner in which individuals consume and disseminate digital content, particularly via mobile devices. This phenomenon originated in the United States, with Viddy emerging as a pioneering short video platform in April 2011 (Li, 2017). The rapid globalization of this innovation was particularly evident when China entered the 4G era in December 2013, enabling the instantaneous sharing of short videos and significantly accelerating the pace of information exchange. Consequently, a multitude of short video applications emerged in China, marking the dawn of a new digital media era (Liang, 2019).

The proliferation of short video platforms in China has been nothing short of remarkable. By December 2023, the nation's internet population had reached 10.92 billion, an increase of 24.8 million from the previous year, with internet penetration standing at 77.5%. Notably, mobile internet users accounted for 10.91 billion, representing a mobile internet penetration rate of 99.9% (CINIC, 2023). Within this expansive digital ecosystem, short video users have emerged as a dominant force, numbering 10.53 billion and accounting for 96.4% of all internet users in China. This represents a growth of 41.45 million users compared to the previous year, highlighting the extraordinary capacity of short videos to attract new users, which now surpasses that of instant messaging services (CIAPSA, 2023).

The central role of short videos in Chinese digital life is further underscored by their average daily usage time of 168 minutes, surpassing all other applications (CIAPSA, 2023). In contrast, comprehensive video platforms average 120 minutes of daily use, ranking second since 2020. Among the myriad of short video platforms, apps such as Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) and Kuaishou have seamlessly integrated into daily life. Douyin, in particular, has experienced explosive growth since 2018, becoming the most downloaded social media app in multiple global markets (Zhu, 2024; SensorTower, 2019).

The convergence of short videos with social media functionality has created a vibrant environment where users can not only share content but also engage in deep interactions with one another. This dynamic has led to the ascendancy of influencer culture, with individuals attaining fame and fortune through their short video creations. In China, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced, with college students emerging as a significant force within the influencer community. By the end of 2020, Douyin had amassed over 26 million college student users, accounting for nearly 80% of the total college student population in China. These students have collectively generated over 311 trillion video views, 118.4 billion likes, and 2.7 billion shares, highlighting their substantial impact on the platform (Huang & Sun, 2022).

The rise of student influencers has brought both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it provides a platform for students to showcase their talents, build personal brands, and even earn a living. On the other hand, it poses significant challenges to academic performance, dormitory management, and personal safety. The demands of maintaining an online presence often conflict with academic responsibilities, leading to difficulties in balancing the two. Furthermore, the commercialization of dormitories and the potential for unsafe online interactions present additional concerns for universities and students (Ye, Wang & Song, 2016; Hu, 2017). These challenges underscore the need for a deeper understanding of the motivations, expectations, and experiences of college student influencers.

In this rapidly evolving landscape, Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) have emerged as pivotal players, facilitating content creation, promotion, and monetization for influencers, including college student influencers. MCNs, which originated on YouTube in 2009 and entered the Chinese market in 2013, have experienced exponential growth in number, from just 160 in 2015 to over 25,400 in 2023 (Zhou, 2020; TOPKLOUT, 2024). Despite the prevalence of these partnerships, there remains a notable dearth of research exploring the motivations and expectations of college student influencers collaborating with MCNs. This lack of research is

particularly concerning given the significant impact of these interactions on digital media, youth culture, and commercial interests.

To address this gap, this study employs a qualitative research approach to delve into the motivations, expectations, and challenges faced by college student influencers and MCNs within the Chinese short video industry. Through in-depth interviews, this research aims to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the evolving interplay between digital media, youth culture, and commercial interests in the contemporary Chinese context. By doing so, this study contributes to the existing literature on digital media and influencer culture, offering insights into the complex dynamics of this rapidly expanding industry. Furthermore, the findings of this study have implications for universities, MCNs, and policymakers, highlighting the need for supportive frameworks and regulations to ensure the well-being and academic success of college student influencers.

Literature Review

The ascendancy of short video platforms in China has profoundly altered the media landscape, ushering in novel opportunities for content creators and cultivating a distinctive internet celebrity culture. Among this burgeoning group of creators, Chinese university students stand out as a notable cohort, frequently partnering with Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) to amplify their visibility and capitalize on their content. This literature review delves into the motivations and expectations of Chinese university students who embark on careers as short video internet celebrities when collaborating with MCN agencies. By consolidating and analyzing existing research, this review aims to offer a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon and pinpoint research gaps that the present study intends to fill.

The Emergence of Short Video Platforms and Internet Celebrities in China

In recent years, China has witnessed an exponential rise in short video platforms, exemplified by Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), Kuaishou, and Bilibili. These platforms have not only transformed content consumption habits but have also paved the way for content creators to ascend to internet fame. According to several studies (Shen & Wang, 2020; Guo et al., 2019; Jiang, 2019; Si et al., 2024), short video platforms have become an indispensable aspect of daily life for many Chinese individuals, particularly the younger demographics.

The simplicity of content creation and dissemination, juxtaposed with the allure of fame and financial gains, has attracted a substantial number of university students to the realm of short video content creation (Quan, 2023). This trend is indicative of a broader shift towards digital media consumption and the democratization of content creation.

Early research by Hong & Liang (2018) highlighted the transformative potential of short video platforms in China, emphasizing their role in facilitating the rise of internet celebrities. These platforms provide a low-barrier entry point for aspiring creators, enabling them to showcase their talents and reach a wide audience. As the popularity of short videos soared, so did the number of internet celebrities, with university students constituting a significant portion of this group (Xia et al., 2020).

MCN Agencies: Role and Function

MCN agencies occupy a central role in the ecosystem of short video platforms, offering a myriad of support services to content creators. These agencies specialize in content creation,

marketing, distribution, and monetization (Zhang & Tong, 2024). For university student influencers, partnering with MCN agencies can unlock access to valuable resources, expertise, and an expanded audience, thereby catalyzing their growth and success (Du & Dai, 2024). MCNs often provide mentorship, training, and networking opportunities that are crucial for the professional development of young creators (Zhang & Tong, 2024).

However, the collaboration between university student influencers and MCN agencies is fraught with complexities. As Xia et al. (2020) noted, these collaborations frequently involve intricate contractual arrangements and revenue-sharing models that can be challenging to navigate. The power dynamics between content creators and MCNs have also been a subject of scrutiny, with concerns raised about the potential for exploitation and unfair terms (Chen, 2023).

Motives and Expectations of University Student Influencers

The motivations driving university student influencers to engage in short video content creation are diverse and multifaceted. Chen & Sun. (2023) identified personal interest, self-expression, social recognition, and monetary rewards as the primary impetus. These motivations align with broader trends in digital media use, where individuals seek to connect, share, and express themselves through online platforms (Boyd, 2008).

In terms of their expectations from MCN agencies, university student influencers anticipate professional guidance, access to resources, and increased visibility (Weng, 2023). They also hope for assistance in navigating the complexities of the industry, such as content copyright, brand collaborations, and audience engagement (Zhang, 2021). However, there is a dearth of in-depth research that specifically examines these motives and expectations in the context of Chinese university student influencers. This lack of focused inquiry leaves unaddressed questions about their unique needs, concerns, and aspirations within the short video industry.

Challenges and Opportunities in Collaboration

While collaboration with MCN agencies presents numerous advantages, it also poses significant challenges for university student influencers. Contractual agreements, revenue-sharing models, creative control, and long-term career development are the key challenges (Sohu News, 2024). These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that many university student influencers lack the legal and business acumen to negotiate favorable terms (Xia et al., 2020).

Understanding these challenges is paramount for developing effective strategies to enhance the collaboration experience and ensure sustainable growth for both parties. Research by Ma (2012) on university-startup collaborations offers valuable insights into fostering supportive environments that promote innovation and mutual benefit. Similarly, studies on the psychology of entrepreneurship (e.g., Shane & Venkataraman, 2000) can provide a framework for understanding the motivations and decision-making processes of university student influencers as they navigate the complexities of the short video industry.

Gaps and Research Questions

Despite the growing corpus of research on short video platforms, internet celebrities, and MCN agencies, significant gaps remain in our understanding of the specific motives and

expectations of Chinese university student influencers towards collaboration with MCN agencies. This study aims to bridge these gaps by addressing the following research questions: What are the primary motives and expectations of Chinese university student influencers when considering collaboration with MCN agencies in the short video industry?

What specific challenges do they encounter in this collaboration, and how do they perceive and navigate these challenges?

By answering these questions, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on digital media, internet celebrities, and entrepreneurship, while also providing practical insights for university student influencers, MCN agencies, and policymakers.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to delve deeply into the present situation and challenges within China's burgeoning short video industry. Qualitative research is particularly advantageous for uncovering the underlying meanings, viewpoints, and lived experiences of participants, thereby offering rich contextual data that quantitative approaches may not adequately capture (Creswell, 2013). This methodological choice allows for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play within the industry.

The primary method of data collection for this study was in-depth interviews, conducted using a semi-structured format. This approach utilized open-ended questions to elicit detailed narratives and personal insights from the participants (Silverman, 2016). The interviews were designed to be exploratory and conversational, allowing participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words. The aim of these interviews was to gather rich, descriptive data that would illuminate the experiences, challenges, and perceptions of short video influencers, with a specific focus on college students who are active in this field.

To ensure the selection of participants who could provide the most relevant and insightful information pertaining to the research objectives, purposeful sampling was employed. This non-probability sampling technique allowed for the deliberate selection of individuals who possessed the necessary characteristics and experiences to contribute to the study (Patton, 2015). The sample comprised 10 college student short video influencers, a group that was chosen due to their dynamic and influential presence within the industry. As key stakeholders, they offered unique perspectives on the industry's current trends, challenges, and opportunities.

The decision to conduct interviews with 10 participants was grounded in the principle of data saturation. This principle posits that after a certain number of interviews, no new significant information or themes will emerge (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). To determine the appropriate number of interviews, the complexity of the research topic and the homogeneity of the sample were considered (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). In this study, interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved, with each interview lasting between 30 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were conducted online using Tencent Conference or WeChat Video, which allowed for flexibility and convenience for both the researcher and participants.

The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The transcribed data was then analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that allows for the identification and interpretation of patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach enabled the researcher to systematically organize and analyze the data, uncovering the key insights and narratives that emerged from the interviews.

By employing a qualitative research design with in-depth interviews and purposeful sampling, this study was able to gain a rich and nuanced understanding of the experiences, challenges, and perceptions of college student short video influencers. The use of data saturation ensured that the study was comprehensive and that no significant information was overlooked, while the thematic analysis provided a structured and systematic approach to analyzing the data. Overall, this methodological approach allowed for a deep and meaningful exploration of the short video industry in China, contributing to the academic and practical understanding of this rapidly evolving field.

Results

To delve into the intricate dynamics surrounding Chinese university students' motives and expectations when collaborating with Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) in the short video industry, this study conducted in-depth interviews with ten student influencers. These interviews aimed to uncover the primary drivers behind their decisions to partner with MCNs, their expectations from these collaborations, and the challenges they encounter along the way. This section presents the findings, structured around the two core research questions: (1) What are the primary motives and expectations of Chinese university student influencers when considering collaboration with MCN agencies? and (2) What specific challenges do they encounter in this collaboration, and how do they perceive and navigate these challenges?

Figure 1

Basic Information of the Interviewee

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Followers	Short Video Niche
SLZ	Male	20	22.3K	Comedy Videos
TJX	Female	22	53.2K	Food
LRY	Female	21	15.4K	Beauty & Makeup
CYF	Male	23	45.5K	Travel & Tourism
FYW	Female	20	5.3K	Educational Content
WJY	Female	22	30.5K	Lifestyle Vlogs

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Followers	Short Video Niche
CYX	Male	21	25.8K	Fashion & Style
CH	Male	23	0.52M	Gaming
LSY	Female	20	75.4K	DIY & Crafts
SYW	Male	22	0.33M	Tech Reviews

Professional Growth and Resource Access

One of the primary motivations driving Chinese university students, who are short video internet celebrities, to collaborate with MCN (Multi-Channel Network) agencies is the pursuit of professional growth and access to an array of resources that can elevate their content creation prowess. This aspiration is deeply rooted in the desire to enhance both the quality and reach of their content, thereby fostering a more substantial online presence.

SLZ, a comedy video creator, elaborated on this motive during the interview: "I've always been passionate about making people laugh through my videos, but I realized that to truly stand out, I needed more than just raw talent. I wanted to take my comedy videos to the next level, and I felt like an MCN could provide me with the resources and guidance to do that. They have a wealth of experience in the industry, and I thought I could learn invaluable skills from them, such as advanced video editing techniques and strategies for engaging with my audience more effectively."

Similarly, TJX, a food influencer, shared her perspective on the allure of MCN collaboration: "As a food blogger, I'm always on the lookout for ways to improve my content and reach a wider audience. I was particularly attracted to the idea of getting access to better equipment, state-of-the-art editing software, and even potential collaborations with other influencers. An MCN seemed like the most efficient way to fast-track my growth and turn my passion for food into a sustainable career. I envisioned myself learning from industry experts and gaining exposure to opportunities that I wouldn't have access to otherwise."

Consistent with these sentiments, student influencers generally expected MCNs to offer comprehensive training programs in content creation, video editing, and social media marketing. They anticipated that these agencies would equip them with the knowledge and tools necessary to produce high-quality content that resonates with their target audience. Furthermore, influencers looked forward to gaining access to exclusive events, brand collaborations, and monetization opportunities, all of which are crucial for expanding their reach and solidifying their position in the competitive world of short video content creation. These expectations reflect a keen understanding of the value that MCNs can bring to their professional development and highlight the strategic nature of their decision to collaborate with such agencies.

Increased Visibility and Audience Reach

A notable motive driving Chinese university students, who have established themselves as short video internet celebrities, to collaborate with MCN (Multi-Channel Network) agencies is the potential for significantly increased visibility and a broader audience reach. This is largely facilitated through the promotional power and extensive networking capabilities of MCNs, which can propel content creators to new heights of fame and influence.

LRY, a beauty and makeup influencer, shared her enthusiasm for the opportunities presented by MCNs: "I've always dreamed of reaching a wider audience and sharing my passion for beauty and makeup with more people. When I learned about MCNs, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to make that dream a reality. Being part of an MCN means my content could be featured on their platforms, and possibly even on other big channels. This kind of exposure is invaluable, and I'm excited about the prospect of expanding my audience through these channels."

CYF, a travel and tourism influencer, echoed similar sentiments: "For me, it's all about getting my content seen by as many people as possible who are interested in travel. MCNs have a lot of connections in the industry, and they know how to promote content effectively. By collaborating with an MCN, I'm hoping to tap into their network and reach a wider audience. This will not only help me grow my follower count but also increase engagement rates, which is crucial for maintaining a vibrant and active community around my content."

The expectations among these influencers regarding audience growth are understandably high. They anticipate significant increases in their follower counts, as well as enhanced engagement rates, as a direct result of their collaboration with MCNs. This optimism reflects a deep understanding of the power of MCNs in amplifying content and expanding its reach, making such collaborations a highly attractive prospect for aspiring internet celebrities.

Monetization and Business Opportunities

The prospect of monetizing their content and exploring diverse business opportunities emerged as a pivotal factor motivating Chinese university students to collaborate with MCN (Multi-Channel Network) agencies. This was evident in the interviews conducted with student influencers, who highlighted the financial incentives as a significant driver.

FYW, a creator focusing on educational content, elaborated on his motivations: "I've always wanted to monetize my videos, and I recognized that partnering with an MCN could be the key. They possess extensive connections with various brands and have the expertise to negotiate more favorable deals on my behalf. This collaboration would not only provide financial stability but also elevate my content to a wider audience." His sentiments underscore the importance of MCNs in facilitating lucrative brand partnerships and enhancing content reach.

Similarly, WJY, who specializes in lifestyle vlogs, shared her perspective: "For me, collaborating with an MCN agency represented a pathway to transform my passion into a viable business. I was eager to delve into brand partnerships, sponsored content, and other

avenues to monetize my channel effectively. The MCN's industry knowledge and resources seemed indispensable in navigating the complexities of the influencer marketing landscape and maximizing my earnings potential." Her comments emphasize the strategic role MCNs play in helping influencers navigate the business aspect of content creation and leverage their platforms for financial gain.

Furthermore, influencers uniformly expected MCNs to offer comprehensive support in negotiating contracts, managing brand collaborations, and optimizing their revenue streams from content creation. This reliance on MCNs highlights their perceived value as intermediaries that can bridge the gap between influencers and brands, ensuring mutually beneficial partnerships and sustainable growth in the competitive digital space. In summary, the allure of monetization and the business prospects presented by MCN collaborations are critical factors influencing Chinese university students' decisions to become short video internet celebrities.

Challenges Encountered in Collaborations with MCNs

Despite the allure of increased exposure, resources, and monetization opportunities, Chinese university student influencers encountered a myriad of challenges in their collaborations with Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs).

Challenges Encountered: Content Control and Creative Freedom

One of the most prominently cited challenges faced by Chinese university student influencers in their collaborations with Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) is the potential loss of content control and creative freedom. This concern was echoed by numerous participants, who emphasized the importance of maintaining their unique voice and creative vision in the content they produce.

CYX, a fashion and style influencer, expressed her apprehensions about relinquishing control over her content. She stated, "When I first considered collaborating with an MCN, my biggest fear was that they would start dictating every aspect of my content creation process. I've always valued my creative freedom and the ability to express myself in my own unique way. The thought of losing that autonomy was really daunting. I didn't want to become just another faceless creator churning out content that didn't reflect my personal style or vision."

Similarly, CH, a gaming influencer, shared his experiences with content control issues in his collaboration with an MCN. He explained, "While the MCN has provided me with valuable resources and support, there have been times when they've suggested content ideas that just didn't align with my interests or the direction I wanted to take my channel. It's been a constant balancing act between accommodating their suggestions and staying true to what I want to create. I've had to learn to navigate these situations carefully, ensuring that my content still feels authentic and resonates with my audience. It's not always easy, but it's crucial for maintaining my credibility and personal brand."

CH's comments highlight the tension that exists between influencers and MCNs regarding content control. While MCNs offer resources and expertise that can help influencers grow their audience and monetize their content, they may also have different ideas about the direction the content should take. This can lead to conflicts and challenges for influencers

who are passionate about their creative vision and want to maintain control over the content they produce.

In summary, the potential loss of content control and creative freedom is a significant challenge faced by Chinese university student influencers in their collaborations with MCNs. As demonstrated by the experiences of CYX and CH, influencers value their creative autonomy and are often reluctant to relinquish control over their content. This challenge underscores the need for clear communication and negotiation between influencers and MCNs to ensure that both parties' interests are aligned and that the content produced remains authentic and resonates with the target audience.

Challenges Encountered: Revenue Sharing and Transparency

A notable challenge that emerged from the interviews with Chinese university student influencers collaborating with Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) is the issue of revenue sharing and transparency in financial arrangements. This concern was prevalent among influencers, who emphasized the importance of clear and fair financial dealings in their collaborations.

LSY, a DIY and crafts influencer, shared her frustrations with the lack of transparency in revenue sharing. She stated, "When I first started collaborating with an MCN, it was really hard to get a clear picture of how much money I was making from each project. The revenue sharing terms weren't always explicitly outlined, and I found myself constantly having to ask for more details. It was frustrating because I felt like I should have had a clearer understanding of my earnings from the outset."

Similarly, SYW, a tech reviews influencer, echoed LSY's sentiments about the need for greater transparency. He explained, "I wish there was more openness on the financial side of things. Sometimes, it felt like I was completely in the dark about how much I was earning and how that amount was being calculated. It's important for influencers to know exactly where their money is coming from and how it's being distributed. Without that transparency, it's hard to trust that you're being treated fairly."

In response to these concerns, many influencers have taken proactive steps to ensure greater transparency in their financial dealings with MCNs. This includes seeking out detailed contracts that clearly outline revenue sharing arrangements, regularly reviewing their financial statements to ensure accuracy, and advocating for more openness and communication from their MCN partners.

One influencer, in particular, elaborated on their approach to addressing these challenges. They explained, "I made it a point to negotiate a detailed contract with my MCN that clearly spells out how revenue is shared and calculated. I also review my financial statements regularly to make sure everything is in order. If I ever have any questions or concerns, I don't hesitate to reach out to my MCN and ask for clarification. It's important to me that I have a clear understanding of my finances and that I'm being treated fairly in my collaborations."

In conclusion, revenue sharing and transparency in financial arrangements are significant concerns for Chinese university student influencers collaborating with MCNs. Influencers like LSY and SYW have highlighted the need for clear and fair financial dealings, and many have taken proactive steps to ensure greater transparency in their collaborations. These efforts underscore the importance of open communication and mutual trust between influencers and MCNs in fostering successful and sustainable partnerships.

Challenges Encountered: Workload Management and Time Constraints

A prominent challenge faced by Chinese university student influencers collaborating with Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) is the intricate balance between their academic responsibilities and the additional workload of content creation. This juggling act poses significant time constraints, often leading to stress and difficulty in prioritizing tasks.

SLZ, a comedy video influencer, shared his struggles with managing time effectively. He explained, "It was incredibly tough to manage my time between attending classes, studying, and creating content for the MCN. There were times when I had to make tough decisions, prioritizing either my academics or my content creation, and it was really stressful. I often found myself staying up late to finish assignments or sacrificing social activities to meet deadlines."

Similarly, CYF, a travel and tourism influencer, highlighted the time-consuming nature of her content creation process. She stated, "Traveling for content and filming takes up a substantial amount of time. I had to be extremely organized and plan every aspect of my trips around my school schedule. It was challenging to ensure that I didn't fall behind in my studies while also producing high-quality content for my audience. Sometimes, I felt like I was constantly on the go, trying to keep up with both my academic and influencer responsibilities."

To navigate these challenges, influencers have developed various time management strategies. One common approach is scheduling content creation sessions during breaks or weekends, when academic pressures are relatively lower. Prioritizing academic deadlines is another crucial strategy, ensuring that influencers do not neglect their primary responsibility as students. Additionally, some influencers have learned to delegate tasks when possible, leveraging the support of friends, family, or team members to help with content creation and management.

Elaborating on her strategies, CYF shared, "I started using a digital calendar to keep track of all my commitments, both academic and related to my influencer work. I would allocate specific time slots for filming, editing, and studying. Sometimes, I would even prepare my lecture notes or readings during long travel commutes. It was all about finding a balance and making the most of the time I had. Although it was challenging, I learned a lot about time management and prioritization in the process."

In conclusion, workload management and time constraints present a significant challenge for Chinese university student influencers collaborating with MCNs. Influencers like SLZ and CYF have highlighted the difficulties in balancing academic responsibilities with content creation demands. To cope with these challenges, influencers have adopted various time management strategies, such as scheduling, prioritizing, and delegating tasks, showcasing their resilience and adaptability in navigating the complexities of being both students and internet celebrities.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight several key motivations and expectations of Chinese university students who are short video internet celebrities in their collaborations with MCN

(Multi-Channel Network) agencies. These motivations primarily revolve around professional growth and resource access, increased visibility and audience reach, as well as monetization and business opportunities.

Firstly, the pursuit of professional growth and access to resources emerges as a dominant motive. Student influencers recognize the value of MCNs in providing advanced training programs, state-of-the-art equipment, and access to industry experts, which can significantly enhance their content creation prowess and elevate their online presence (Brodie et al., 2019). This finding resonates with previous research that underscores the importance of professional development and support networks in the careers of content creators (Abidin, 2018). The strategic decision to collaborate with MCNs thus reflects a keen understanding among student influencers of the resources and opportunities that these agencies can offer. Secondly, the potential for increased visibility and audience reach is another significant driver of collaboration. MCNs' promotional power and extensive networking capabilities are seen as vital in amplifying content and expanding its reach, which is crucial for aspiring internet celebrities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This finding aligns with literature on the role of intermediaries in the content creation industry, where they act as gatekeepers and amplifiers, helping content creators gain exposure and build their audience (Gillespie, 2018). The optimism among student influencers regarding the growth in their follower counts and engagement rates underscores the allure of MCNs in amplifying their online presence.

Moreover, the prospect of monetization and business opportunities is a pivotal factor motivating Chinese university students to collaborate with MCNs. The financial incentives and access to brand partnerships provided by MCNs are seen as essential in transforming passions into viable businesses (Burgess & Green, 2018). This finding echoes research on the commercialization of content creation, where intermediaries play a crucial role in facilitating lucrative brand collaborations and optimizing revenue streams (Zhang & Tong, 2024). The reliance of student influencers on MCNs in navigating the complexities of influencer marketing underscores their perceived value as intermediaries that can bridge the gap between influencers and brands.

However, despite these benefits, collaborations with MCNs are not without challenges. One prominent challenge is the potential loss of content control and creative freedom. Student influencers value their creative autonomy and are often reluctant to relinquish control over their content (Xia et al., 2020). This finding highlights the need for clear communication and negotiation between influencers and MCNs to ensure that both parties' interests are aligned and that the content produced remains authentic and resonates with the target audience.

Furthermore, revenue sharing and transparency in financial arrangements emerge as significant concerns. Student influencers emphasize the importance of clear and fair financial dealings in their collaborations with MCNs (Hsu & Lu, 2004). The need for greater transparency underscores the importance of open communication and mutual trust between influencers and MCNs in fostering successful and sustainable partnerships.

Lastly, workload management and time constraints pose a significant challenge for student influencers. Balancing academic responsibilities with content creation demands is often stressful and time-consuming (Hu, 2017). To cope with these challenges, influencers have

adopted various time management strategies, showcasing their resilience and adaptability in navigating the complexities of being both students and internet celebrities.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the motivations and expectations of Chinese university student influencers towards collaboration with MCN agencies, it is not without limitations. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the study relies primarily on qualitative data from interviews, which may be subject to biases and self-reporting errors. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample, as well as the incorporation of quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could explore the long-term outcomes of collaborations between student influencers and MCN agencies. This would involve tracking the career trajectories of influencers over an extended period to assess the impact of their collaborations on their professional growth, audience reach, and monetization opportunities. Additionally, future studies could investigate the dynamics of power and control in these collaborations, particularly the extent to which influencers are able to maintain their creative autonomy and negotiate favorable terms with MCNs. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in the commercialization of content creation and the role of intermediaries in this process.

Conclusion

This study has offered a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the motives and expectations of Chinese university students who engage as short video internet celebrities in their collaborations with Multi-Channel Networks (MCN) agencies. By employing a qualitative research design and conducting in-depth interviews with ten student influencers, we have shed light on the multifaceted dynamics that underpin these collaborations.

Our findings highlight that the decision to collaborate with MCN agencies is driven by a complex interplay of factors. Foremost among these is the pursuit of professional growth and access to resources. The students interviewed in this study recognized the value of MCN agencies in providing advanced training programs, state-of-the-art equipment, and access to industry experts, which can significantly enhance their content creation prowess and elevate their online presence. This finding aligns with the broader literature on the role of intermediaries in supporting the professional development of content creators.

Furthermore, our results reveal that students also collaborate with MCN agencies in the hope of achieving increased visibility and audience reach. The promotional power and extensive networking capabilities of MCNs are seen as vital in amplifying content and expanding its reach, which is crucial for aspiring internet celebrities. This finding underscores the importance of intermediaries in facilitating the distribution and dissemination of content in the digital age.

In terms of expectations, students anticipate a range of benefits from their collaborations with MCN agencies. These include professional guidance, access to resources, and increased

monetization opportunities. However, they also express concerns about maintaining creative control and autonomy in the content creation process. This tension between support and control is a recurring theme in the literature on digital labor, where the exploitation of content creators by platforms and intermediaries has been a point of contention. Our study highlights the need for MCN agencies to adopt more collaborative and mutually beneficial models that respect the creative integrity of their partners.

In the discussion section, we explored how these findings contribute to existing theories on social media influence, celebrity culture, and youth empowerment. By highlighting the agency and aspirations of university students as short video internet celebrities, we challenge stereotypes that portray them as passive consumers of digital media. Instead, we argue that they are active agents shaping the digital landscape through their content creation and collaborations.

The implications of this study extend beyond academia. For policy makers and industry stakeholders, our findings provide valuable insights into the needs and aspirations of this emerging demographic. By addressing their concerns and supporting their growth, MCN agencies can foster a more sustainable and equitable digital media ecosystem. For educators, our research underscores the importance of integrating digital media literacy and entrepreneurship into curricula, empowering students to navigate the complexities of the digital age.

This study provides valuable insights into the motivations and expectations of Chinese university students who are short video internet celebrities collaborating with Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs). It contributes to a deeper understanding of influencer behavior and motivations by specifically focusing on this unique demographic within a specific cultural and educational context. The research also sheds light on the complexities of these collaborations, examining the power dynamics, contractual arrangements, and creative control issues that arise. Furthermore, it bridges the fields of digital media studies, youth culture studies, and entrepreneurship by examining the students' motivations to monetize their content and build personal brands.

The findings have practical implications for universities, emphasizing the need to understand and address the challenges faced by student influencers in balancing academic responsibilities with content creation demands. The study also provides valuable insights for MCN agencies, highlighting the importance of clear communication, transparency, and fair financial dealings in collaborations. Moreover, it has implications for policymakers, underscoring the need for regulations and frameworks that protect the rights and well-being of student influencers in the digital media industry. Overall, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics between student influencers and MCN agencies, offering valuable theoretical and practical implications for various stakeholders.

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