INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT

OPEN ACCESS JOURNAL

Vol 14, Issue 4, (2025) E-ISSN: 2226-6348

# From Perception to Practice: How Chinese University Student Short-form Video Influencers' Perceptions of MCNs Shape Their digital labor and Career Trajectories

Zhaoyong Cao, Syed Agil Shekh Alsagoff, Norliana Hashim

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

Corresponding Author Email: gs58105@student.upm.edu.my

**DOI Link:** http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i4/26876

***Published Online:*** 16 November 2025

**Abstract**

Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) have emerged as powerful yet ambivalent intermediaries in the platform economy, acting as both 'enablers' and 'disciplinarians' for creators. This tension is particularly acute for university student influencers, who navigate the precarious intersection of digital labor and educational pressures. While existing literature examines MCNs' structural power, it remains unclear how creators' subjective perceptions of MCNs mediate this power. This article argues that perception is not a passive outcome but an active mediating mechanism that translates institutional forces into concrete labor practices. Based on 15 in-depth interviews and two focus groups (N=25) with Chinese university student influencers, the study identifies three dominant perceptual frameworks: the MCN as (1) an 'Enabling Partner,' leading to the internalization of discipline; (2) a 'Controlling Boss,' fostering alienation and resistance; and (3) a 'Short-Term Springboard,' enabling strategic leveraging of resources. We demonstrate how these divergent perceptions systematically shape digital labor practices (alignment vs. resistance vs. risk-hedging) and subsequent career trajectories (professionalization vs. exit vs. entrepreneurship). The paper's primary contribution is the development of a 'Perceived Empowerment-Discipline' model, advancing digital labor theory by specifying the process through which subjective perception shapes agency within platformed infrastructures.

**Keywords:** Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs), Digital Labor, Platform Economy, Influencers, Perception, Career Trajectories, China

The global short-form video industry has expanded rapidly under the combined impetus of algorithmic recommendation, mobile infrastructures, and maturing platform ecologies, generating a transnational content consumption system represented by TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels (Liang & Ji, 2024; Cotter, 2019; Kitchin, 2017). In China, the commercial rollout of 5G, platform-level subsidy schemes, and the consolidation of monetization chains have enabled platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou to become the core of young people's everyday media experience (Liang & Ji, 2024). China's short-form video

users have exceeded 1 billion, with young people accounting for nearly 70 percent of the user base (QuestMobile, 2023). Their media use is profoundly reshaping the allocation of digital attention, cultural taste, and identity practices. Against this backdrop, university students—emerging as a new cohort of content producers—are actively using diverse content formats to build cultural expression and imagine future careers.

Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs), as pivotal intermediaries, intervene deeply in the creator ecology by offering content training, commercial matchmaking, data analytics, and traffic support (Burgess & Green, 2018). Through bargaining power and contractual mechanisms, MCNs decisively affect creators' production rhythms and professional identifications (Zhang & Tong, 2024). Yet the role of MCNs is inherently tension-ridden: they are at once "enablers," reducing transaction costs and fostering professionalization, and "disciplinarians," exerting invisible discipline through data-based assessments and algorithmic logics (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

This tension is especially salient for university student creators. They simultaneously occupy the dual positions of "student" and "digital laborer," and must navigate among academic pressure, labor market uncertainty, and the platform-based attention economy (Abidin, 2018). In this process, university students interpret MCN arrangements through multiple meaning frameworks; the influence of MCNs thus exceeds the level of contractual relations and extends to the construction of creative norms, work ethics, and even imagined career trajectories.

Although existing research has explored the industrial functions of MCNs (Cunningham & Craig, 2017) and the algorithmic logic of platforms (Hou, 2019), one crucial question remains insufficiently addressed: How do creators' subjective perceptions of MCNs—functioning as a mediating mechanism—come into being? And how are such perceptions concretely translated into differentiated digital labor practices and divergent career pathways?

Current scholarship tends to treat MCNs as objective structural forces, overlooking how creators—especially university students who are highly mobile and malleable—make sense of, negotiate, and even resist the institutionalized influence of MCNs through processes of meaning construction.

To address this gap, this study proposes an explanatory chain that runs from "perception" to "practice and future." We argue that university student creators' perceptions of MCNs are not passively received but are actively constructed meaning frameworks. The central argument of this study is that university student creators hold at least three prototypical perception frameworks toward MCNs: "Enabling Partner," "Controlling Boss," and "Short-Term Springboard." These differentiated logics of perception—rather than the MCNs' objective service portfolios—are the key variables that predict their content strategies, labor investments, and decisions regarding whether to treat content creation as a long-term career.

Theoretically, this study integrates Empowerment Theory (to explore the tension between empowerment and discipline) (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995), Symbolic Interactionism (to explain processes of meaning construction) (Blumer, 1969), and Media Ecology (to situate platform and institutional environments) (Postman, 1970). Methodologically, the study

adopts a qualitative strategy—combining in-depth interviews with focus group discussions—to illuminate how university students negotiate subjectivity and practice in digital labor settings. The study aims to enrich the socio-cultural understanding of platform intermediation and to supplement digital labor research with a focus on subjective perception and affective dimensions.

*Short-form Video Influencers and MCNs: Symbiosis and Tension*

MCNs first emerged in the YouTube ecosystem as "infrastructural intermediaries" connecting platforms and creators (Cunningham, Craig, & Silver, 2016). In China, MCNs have evolved into integrated "content–traffic–commerce" hubs incorporating training, operations, supply chains, and livestream e-commerce, thereby assuming gatekeeping roles in manufacturing influencers and handling creator matrices (Liang & Ji, 2024).

The triangular relationship among platforms, MCNs, and creators is marked by tension. On the one hand, MCNs provide resource-based empowerment; on the other, they conduct granular monitoring of creators' labor processes through contracts, KPI indicators, and revenue-sharing schemes (Cunningham & Craig, 2017). In an algorithm-driven attention competition, creators often have to adopt the "visibility game" strategies jointly prescribed by MCNs and platforms (Cotter, 2019; Bishop, 2019), which further deepens their dependence on institutional logics.

However, how this duality—empowerment vs. discipline—is subjectively Perceived by creators, and how such perception, in turn, reshapes labor practices, remains an underdeveloped area. Here, "perception" is not a mere derivative of objective institutions; it is a meaning-making process embedded in interactional settings and jointly shaped by symbols, experience, and affect.

*Digital Labor and the Career Development of Young Influencers*

The concept of digital labor reveals how productive activities by users and creators are capitalized by platforms (Terranova, 2000; Fuchs, 2014). Influencer labor is typically informal, de-bordered, emotionally intensive, and self-branding oriented (Duffy, 2017). Creators constantly negotiate between "authenticity" and "commercialization" (Cunningham & Craig, 2017).

Among university students, digital labor is further overlaid with academic constraints and uncertainties of transitional identity. The concept of "hope labor" (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) is particularly useful for explaining why university student cohorts, despite academic and career uncertainty, remain willing to accept MCNs' performance promises and "growth narratives," exchanging current unpaid or low-paid input for potential future opportunities. This implies that university student influencers' career development is not a linear accumulation but rather a series of stage-based bifurcations formed through multi-dimensional negotiations across affect, meaning, and resources under structural tensions.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study proposes an integrated theoretical framework that connects "macro institutions – micro perceptions – practice outcomes."

*Reconstructing Empowerment Theory: From "Objective Empowerment" to "Perceived Empowerment–discipline"*

Classical Empowerment Theory emphasizes the enhancement of resources, agency, and sense of control (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995). However, in MCN contexts, empowerment and discipline are two sides of the same coin. Crucially, university student short-form video influencers do not accept this tension passively; instead, they interpret it subjectively. When the MCN is Perceived as a "partner," its suggestions are internalized as capacity building; when it is Perceived as a "boss," the contract is experienced as external control; when it is Perceived as a "springboard," individuals seek to secure short-term gains with minimal dependence. Hence, this study reconstructs Empowerment Theory from "objective resource provision" to a dynamic relationship of "Perceived Empowerment–discipline" to explain how different perception types trigger differentiated labor strategies.

*Symbolic Interactionism: The Construction of MCN Perception*

Symbolic Interactionism posits that meaning is generated in interaction (Blumer, 1969). In MCN settings, contract texts, data dashboards, SOP scripts, and performance scoreboards are all socially meaningful symbols. In their day-to-day interactions with agents and peers, university student short-form video influencers constantly interpret these symbols; within community narratives of "algorithmic gossip" (Bishop, 2019) and "visibility games" (Cotter, 2019), they gradually form cognitive maps of MCNs. This meaning construction determines how they position MCNs and assess risks, thereby shaping subsequent practice choices.

*Media Ecology: Contextualizing China's Short-form Video Ecosystem*

Media Ecology stresses the co-evolution of media, technology, and culture (Scolari, 2012; van Dijck, 2013). In China's short-form video ecosystem, algorithmic power (Kitchin, 2017), MCN intermediation (Liang & Ji, 2024), and state regulation (Cyberspace Administration of China [CAC], 2022) constitute a triple structure. Situating micro-level "perception–interaction" processes within this macro-ecology helps explain why university student short-form video influencers form divergent perceptions of MCNs at different stages and, on that basis, adopt distinct labor and career strategies.

*Research Questions*

Based on the literature and the above theoretical framework, this study focuses on the following core questions:

*RQ1:* How do university student short-form video influencers, through symbolic interaction with MCNs, construct their cognitive maps of MCNs?

*RQ2:* How do these three MCN perception types respectively shape university student short-form video influencers' digital labor practices (content strategies, interactional patterns, commercial decisions) and future career trajectories?

**Participants and Sampling**

The target population of this study is university students (junior college, undergraduate, and graduate) currently enrolled in Mainland China who continuously produce content on platforms such as Douyin, possess ≥10,000 followers, and have collaborated with, are negotiating with, or have previously signed with an MCN.

We employed purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961). This strategy is conducive to reaching groups with heterogeneous experience and relatively high sensitivity regarding commercial cooperation (Guest et al., 2006).

The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, that is, interviews continued until "no new information or themes were observed." We drew on the empirical benchmark provided by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), which suggests that for a clearly targeted and relatively homogeneous group, 12 in-depth interviews (IDIs) are sufficient to achieve thematic saturation. Accordingly, this study first set N = 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews (60–90 minutes each) as the baseline for obtaining deep individual perceptions.

Guest et al. (2006) also note that when research aims to assess variation between distinct groups or when sample heterogeneity is relatively high, a larger sample is needed. Because this study intends to compare creators with different MCN experiences ("signed" vs. "unsigned/terminated") in terms of perception and practice, we adopted a stratified design. To efficiently capture "shared experience" and "group norms" within these subgroups, we conducted two focus group discussions (FGs) in addition to the 15 interviews (each group with 6–8 participants, 13 in total):

Group 1: Creators already signed with an MCN (n = 6)

Group 2: Creators not signed or already terminated (n = 7)

This design responds to Guest et al.'s (2006) recommendation for larger samples when comparing heterogeneous groups and, through methodological triangulation (in-depth interviews for individual depth, focus groups for group interaction), ensures comprehensiveness of the data.

The final sample (25 unique individuals) achieved the heterogeneity required by purposive sampling in terms of gender, stage of study, disciplinary background, and MCN experience.

**Data Collection**

This study combined semi-structured in-depth interviews with focus group discussions for data collection.

*Semi-Structured in-Depth Interviews*

The interview guide was structured around three core dimensions:

MCN perception: including metaphorical understandings of the MCN role (e.g., "partner" or "boss"), interpretations of contract terms, SOP processes, and data metrics;

Digital labor practice: covering the full process from topic selection and content production to algorithmic coping and commercialization decisions;

Career trajectory construction: focusing on renewal/termination decisions, career planning, and shifts in identity.

The guide was refined through two rounds of pilot testing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). All interviews were conducted after obtaining informed consent, audio-recorded in full, and transcribed verbatim. To adhere to research ethics, all personal identifiers and MCN names were anonymized (Orb et al., 2001).

*Focus Group Discussions*

FGs followed the stratified logic in Section 3.2 (signed vs. unsigned/terminated) and aimed to elicit group dynamics and peer debate (Kitzinger, 1994). Discussion topics centered on the "platform–MCN–individual" triadic negotiation, shared experiences of algorithmic uncertainty, contract negotiation strategies, and exit barriers, so as to capture processes of meaning negotiation and construction in specific interactional settings.

*Data Analysis*

This study adopted Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) as the overarching analytical framework and combined it with the Constant Comparative Method (CCM) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as the core analytic technique to ensure systematicity and depth.

The analysis began with immersive familiarization with the data. The research team repeatedly read all interview and focus group transcripts and wrote analytic memos to maintain sensitivity to context and to record preliminary reflexive insights (Nowell et al., 2017).

We then entered an iterative coding cycle. At the initial stage, we employed open coding to label meaning units close to the data (e.g., "treating the MCN as a springboard," "assessment sheets squeezing creativity"). As coding progressed, we used the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to conduct systematic comparisons across cases and across groups (signed vs. unsigned) to identify patterns of similarity and difference. Through the logic of axial coding (Boeije, 2002), fragmented open codes were aggregated into higher-order conceptual categories (e.g., "resources for visibility," "internalized discipline," "contractual bargaining").

Finally, guided by the RTA framework (Braun & Clarke, 2019), these conceptual categories were further integrated around the research questions to construct three core, dominant themes—that is, the three perception types. The endpoint of the analysis was not mere thematic listing, but the construction of an explanatory process model with "perception → practice → trajectory" as the main line, weaving together chains of evidence to reveal the dynamics of their emergence.

**Rigor and Trustworthiness**

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, we followed the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and implemented the following strategies:

**Credibility.** We adopted a threefold strategy to ensure that the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences and meanings. First, through member checking, we fed back to selected key participants the summary of the "three perception types" to confirm the adequacy of interpretation (Birt et al., 2016). Second, the research team conducted regular peer debriefings to discuss points of divergence in coding and to ensure coding consistency and conceptual clarity. Third, we carried out negative case analysis, systematically searching the data for evidence contradicting dominant perception frameworks (e.g., the "Enabling Partner"), so as to refine and delineate theme boundaries.

**Transferability.** The study does not seek statistical generalization but rather theoretical transferability. By providing thick description of the research context (e.g., China's short-form

video ecology, students' status) and of typical cases in the findings, we enable readers to judge to what extent the study's model (e.g., the "perception–practice" chain) applies to other settings.

**Dependability.** To ensure stability and replicability of the research process, we built a clear audit trail (Nowell et al., 2017). As described in Section 3.4, every analytic decision node—from interview transcription and open coding to theme construction—was carefully documented (e.g., analytic memos), allowing external reviewers to trace the full logical chain from raw data to conclusions.

**Confirmability.** To minimize the impact of researcher bias on data interpretation, we practiced reflexivity throughout (Berger, 2015). By maintaining a reflexivity journal, the researchers continually examined their own prior positions regarding platform labor, MCN roles, and university student cohorts, and reflected on how these positions might influence analysis and presentation, thereby ensuring that conclusions were derived to the greatest extent from the data themselves.

The analysis revealed three dominant MCN perception types and showed how they systematically lead to different labor practices and career trajectories.

*Three Dominant Perceptual Constellations of MCNs*

The data demonstrate that MCNs, as organizations characterized by institutional tension (coexistence of empowerment and discipline), are interpreted by university student creators through three dominant cognitive frameworks. These perception constellations are not objective reflections but actively constructed meaning systems formed in interaction. They directly determine how creators define the role of MCNs and provide rationales for subsequent labor practices.

*Type A: "The Enabling Partner" – Internalized discipline and Professionalism*

The core feature of this perception is the active internalization of MCN organizational discipline (SOPs, KPIs, data reviews) as a mechanism of professional capacity building. These creators do not ignore discipline; rather, they regard compliance as a necessary path to professionalization—as a "scaffolding for growth" rather than a "cage of constraint." In this framework, the MCN's professionalism (e.g., topic selection, brand matching) is highly recognized, and the data dashboard is understood as a "self-improvement console."

"What they (the MCN) gave me was a 'methodology.' They broke content down step by step. When I followed it, the data became more stable." (P04, female, beauty)

"Our weekly meeting is like a review class. KPIs are not pressure meters but navigation charts. I know how to adjust my topics for next week." (P13, male, knowledge/science communication)

"If I treat the SOP as a training routine and follow the tempo, I actually waste less time on blind trial-and-error." (P09, female, third-year undergraduate, lifestyle)

"The data panel is like a control deck—you know which lever to push to raise the completion rate." (P03, male, fourth-year undergraduate, e-commerce/live commerce)

"We decomposed KPIs into 'learning indicators,' such as A/B coverage and review quality. That lowered the pressure but made progress more tangible." (FG1-3, focus group, signed)

*Type B: "The Controlling Boss" – Alienated Labor and Impaired Subjectivity*

This perception treats the MCN as an external controller that compresses personal expression. Here, the MCN's "professional suggestions" are equated with "the mouthpiece of platform algorithms"; individual expression is subordinated to data performance, resulting in feelings of alienation in digital labor. Creators under this perception stress the one-sidedness of contracts, the rigidity of review, and the erosion of authenticity by "viral logics."

"Two trending videos a week—one for commerce, one for brand—like punching a card; but I just wanted to make more campus documentaries." (P02, female, campus vlog, terminated)

"Once the traffic-light on the dashboard turns red or yellow, we have to change thumbnails or titles… The agent says, 'this is the platform's taste,' and it's hard to argue." (P11, male, sports)

"Topic choice was locked into templates; my style was flattened, and only 'recommendable' content was left." (P01, male, second-year undergraduate, gaming)

"So-called 'advice' basically means 'do it the way the platform wants.' Creation becomes a performance of KPIs." (P10, female, first-year master's, beauty)

"Review is like a red-line fence—you have to learn to walk around it even when you didn't intend to violate anything." (FG1-2, focus group, signed)

*Type C: "The Short-Term Springboard" – Instrumental Rationality and Strategic Agency*

This perception demonstrates a strong strategic agency. These creators neither fully internalize discipline nor fully experience alienation. Instead, they adopt an instrumental rationality, treating the MCN as a resource pool and "internship base" to be leveraged. They selectively utilize MCN resources (traffic boosts, supply chains, procedural experience) while proactively avoiding risks of deep binding. This is a transactional relationship aimed at short-term gains and skill acquisition.

"I treat it like an 'internship': once I learn supply chain and pricing, I exit." (P14, female, performing arts)

"I'll join a major sales campaign first to test the real level of traffic boost, then decide whether to sign." (FG2-4, focus group, unsigned)

"I'll use their resources to push a new product. Once the traffic is validated, I go back to my own tempo." (P08, male, fourth-year undergraduate, digital/tech)

"Once I've learned the pricing system and contract essentials, I prefer project-based work, which is freer." (P06, female, first-year in vocational college, performing arts)

"We only bind short-term during big campaigns; at other times, everyone does their own thing—no long contract lock-in." (FG2-2, focus group, unsigned)

**From Perception to Digital Labor Practices: Three Modes of Translation**

Different MCN perception frameworks are systematically translated into three distinct digital labor practice patterns. Here, subjective perception functions as a mediating mechanism that converts how creators position MCNs into concrete action rules and labor investment strategies.

*Type A (Enabling Partner) → Process-oriented Refinement*

Creators who Perceive MCNs as partners tend to actively align with organizational processes. They are inclined to accept MCN topic banks and scheduling frameworks and treat them as professional training. They actively participate in the "visibility game," for example,

conducting A/B tests to improve narrative performance and data outcomes (Cotter, 2019). In terms of interaction, they maintain high-frequency communication with agents (weekly meetings, reviews), and their iteration is driven by "question lists." Their labor investment is thus more planned; KPIs are seen as constructive feedback, and emotional exhaustion is lower.

"I'll first run a 'standard version' to secure the baseline, then add my personal voice—this way the fluctuation is smaller." (P05, female, first-year undergraduate, campus vlog)

"In review meetings, they give advice based on the conversion funnel, and the next week I test separately for hook and retention." (FG1-4, focus group, signed)

*Type B (Controlling Boss) → Performative Compliance and Covert Resistance*

Creators under this perception practice under tension. In content strategy, they display performative compliance: in chasing trends and template-based production, they experience the squeezing-out of originality. This compliance is accompanied by high emotional exhaustion. Their labor input becomes passive time accumulation, often leading to "stall periods" or even "stop-updating" as forms of covert resistance. Their interaction with MCNs is more command–execution oriented; conflicts frequently erupt around contract interpretation, ownership of raw footage, and other areas where subjectivity is compromised.

"I was revising drafts until midnight and still had class the next day—doing this long-term makes you want to lie flat (quit)." (FG1-5, focus group, signed)

"To keep the KPIs stable, I chased trends so much I lost my distinctiveness—followers said 'you look like other accounts now.'" (P07, male, third-year undergraduate, sports)

"Clauses on material ownership are unsettling—after you leave, can you still use your own raw footage?" (FG1-6, focus group, signed)

*Type C (Short-Term Springboard) → Strategic Leveraging and Risk Hedging*

This group presents the most flexible practices. In content strategy, they selectively absorb MCN operational techniques but firmly retain narrative sovereignty, treating MCN procedural know-how as transferable, reusable assets (e.g., supplier contact lists). Their interactional pattern is point-to-point collaboration with weak ties, leveraging MCN resources only at critical nodes (e.g., major campaigns). Their labor input is highly elastic—they explicitly prioritize studies and adopt multi-platform layouts (e.g., Bilibili, Xiaohongshu) to hedge against risks arising from dependence on a single MCN or platform.

"I only take their workflow and supplier directory; for daily content I set the pace myself." (P15, female, second-year master's, knowledge/science communication)

"I use their resources for node-based campaigns, then return to long-term content polishing." (FG2-5, focus group, unsigned)

**From perception to Career Trajectories: Forming Three Path Dependencies**

The analysis further shows that short-term digital labor practices eventually settle into long-term career bifurcations. Here, subjective perception acts as the initial shaping force of path dependency: creators' early positioning of MCNs has a lasting effect on how they imagine and plan their future professional identities.

*Type A (Enabling Partner) → Professionalization and Organizational Encapsulation*

Creators Perceiving MCNs as partners tend to pursue vertical professionalization within the MCN's organizational framework. They show high renewal intentions, hoping to obtain

brand-upgrading opportunities and cross-category incubation through deep binding. Their identity moves smoothly from "student creator" to "MCN-affiliated KOL/content producer," realizing organizational internalization. As P13 put it:

"My next step is to secure steady quarterly big deals. The MCN is negotiating an annual framework. I'm willing to spend a year pushing for professionalization." (P13, male, knowledge/science communication)

"If there's a stable annual framework and training ladder, I'll make team-building my first goal after graduation." (FG1-1, focus group, signed)

*Type B (Controlling Boss) → Intermittent Development and Identity Retreat*

Creators Perceiving MCNs as bosses tend toward dis-attachment in their career planning. To reclaim subjectivity encroached upon by MCNs (via contracts and KPIs), they prefer shorter contracts or flexible project-based collaboration. This is not only a shift in work mode, but also an identity retreat: they proactively downgrade the priority of content creation, re-assert their "student-first" identity, and treat digital labor as a stage-based side occupation to recuperate after emotional exhaustion. P02's decision is a case in point:

"(After terminating) I first switched to project-based work—I didn't want to be shackled by 'weekly updates' anymore." (P02, female, campus vlog, terminated)

"Project-based work gives me 'breathing space' so I can put my thesis and well-being first." (FG2-7, focus group, unsigned)

*Type C (Short-Term Springboard) → Entrepreneurial Autonomy and Dual-Tracking*

Creators Perceiving MCNs as springboards show the strongest entrepreneurial orientation. They favor short orders and resource exchanges; their career bifurcation unfolds along two clear paths: (1) studio-ization, i.e., using procedural experience learned from the MCN to establish independent studios; and (2) dual-tracking, i.e., using influencer experience as a "door opener" to pursue further studies or enter conventional employment (e.g., brand side). Throughout, they prioritize their student/entrepreneur identity and maintain a clear instrumental distance from the "influencer" label.

"I'll first register as an individual business and pull in two classmates during the summer to run a small studio." (P12, male, photography/studio preparation)

"I'm running two tracks in parallel: content for cash flow, and the CV for academic/corporate entry." (FG2-3, focus group, unsigned)

"Further study comes first, but I keep updating so the platform doesn't mark me 'silent.'" (FG2-6, focus group, unsigned)

"Studio-ization starts with a two-person team, taking short projects to practice workflows; once the toolchain is stable, we expand." (FG2-1, focus group, unsigned)

This study's central finding—namely, that university student short-form video influencers hold three dominant perception types toward MCNs ("Enabling Partner," "Controlling Boss," and "Short-Term Springboard"), and that these perceptions systematically lead to differentiated labor practices and career bifurcations—offers a new theoretical lens for understanding platform intermediation, digital labor, and youth career development. This section discusses the study's theoretical contributions, practical implications, and limitations.

**Theoretical Contributions**

The core theoretical contribution of this study lies in revealing subjective perception as the mediating mechanism between institutional structures (platform–MCN) and individual practice (digital labor – career trajectories).

First, the study reconstructs Empowerment Theory in the field of digital labor (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995). We shift the focus of "empowerment" from MCNs' "objective resource provision" to creators' dynamic model of Perceived Empowerment–discipline. The study shows how the same organizational techniques (e.g., KPIs, SOPs)—as paradoxical arrangements in platform labor where empowerment and discipline coexist (Cunningham & Craig, 2019)—can, through different perception pathways, produce differential agency outcomes (enhancement/resistance/circumvention).

Second, the study applies Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) to research on platform intermediation, revealing how such perceptions are formed. We demonstrate that "contracts," "performance dashboards," and "SOPs" are not neutral tools but symbolic fields continually re-interpreted through agent discourse, peer experience, and "algorithmic gossip" (Bishop, 2019). Creators' interpretive chains—for example, "template = safety" or "review = de-personalization"—directly lead to differentiated practices, providing evidence for the micro-practical foundations of agency.

Finally, the study embeds subjective perception into China's platformized ecology (Scolari, 2012; van Dijck, 2013). We show that creators' micro-level meaning construction is, in fact, a localized response to the triple macro structure of algorithmic power (Kitchin, 2017), MCN gatekeeping (Liang & Ji, 2024), and regulatory culture (CAC, 2022). This extends platform economy research on the complexity of MCNs as intermediaries.

Taken together, the "perception → action rules → career bifurcation" process model proposed here opens the "perception black box" and bridges the theoretical disjuncture between the perception layer, mechanism layer, and outcome layer in existing literature.

**Practical Implications**

The findings carry tangible implications for MCN organizations, university student creators, and platform/policy actors:

For MCNs: The study shows that "one-size-fits-all" management can easily generate "Controlling Boss" perceptions, which in turn trigger resistance and contract termination. MCNs should tailor operations according to creators' perception types (partner/boss/springboard), for example, through tiered training, flexible KPIs, and project-based contracts. By introducing transparent contracts and co-creative review mechanisms, MCNs can intentionally steer the relationship toward "Enabling Partner," thereby reducing the sense of being controlled.

For university student creators: The study highlights the importance of "perception self-check." Creators should clarify their own positioning and develop an assetization mindset—that is, regardless of perception type, they should treat MCN-acquired experiences (workflows, templates, networks) as transferable assets. Furthermore, multi-platform layouts

for risk diversification are an effective strategy to convert hope labor (Duffy, 2017) into verifiable capabilities.

For platforms and policymakers: Platforms should improve the explainability of algorithms and review rules to reduce "algorithmic gossip" and panic-based compliance caused by information asymmetry. Platforms can also provide standardized tools for project-based revenue sharing to reduce creators' over-dependence on MCNs. At the policy level, continued promotion of standardized contract templates and the provision of social protection and grievance mechanisms for young digital laborers are needed (CAC, 2022).

**Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations. First, as a qualitative study based on purposive and snowball sampling, the conclusions prioritize mechanism-based explanation (transferability) rather than statistical generalization. Second, the study is cross-sectional, making it difficult to capture the dynamic drift of individual perceptions under rapidly changing platform rules.

Future research could proceed in several directions. First, a mixed-methods design can be adopted to develop an "MCN perception Scale" based on this study's typology and to test the "perception → practice → trajectory" pathway longitudinally, including stage effects. Second, cross-cultural comparative studies (e.g., comparing China's Douyin with overseas TikTok/YouTube MCN ecologies) can help examine how regulatory and cultural ecologies systematically shape creator perceptions. Finally, to overcome the single-perspective limitation, future studies should employ multi-sited fieldwork and incorporate the perspectives of MCN agents, brand advertisers, and platform operators to achieve mechanism triangulation (Poell et al., 2019; Plantin et al., 2018).

Focusing on Chinese university student short-form video influencers, this study identifies three dominant perception constellations toward MCNs—"Enabling Partner," "Controlling Boss," and "Short-Term Springboard." The core claim is that it is these perception types, rather than the MCNs' objective institutional arrangements per se, that systematically shape creators' digital labor practices and their subsequent career bifurcations.

The key theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating the mediating role of subjective perception. The study shows that the institutional power of MCNs does not act on creators in a deterministic manner; instead, it must pass through the mediating layer of perception to become effective. Accordingly, the study develops a Perceived Empowerment–discipline dynamic model and validates the process chain of "perception → action rules → career bifurcation." This finding bridges the theoretical gap in existing scholarship between macro-institutional analysis and micro-agentic practice.

As the platform economy continues to reshape youth employment patterns, the findings have important practical significance. Understanding how this group—bearing the dual identities of "student" and "digital laborer"—constructs meaning offers a crucial entry point for grasping the future evolution of digital labor and for designing more targeted platform governance policies.

**References**

Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online*. Emerald Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78756-076-520181008

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research, 15*(2), 219–234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475

Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C., & Walter, F. (2016). Member checking: A tool to enhance trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation? *Qualitative Health Research, 26*(13), 1802–1811. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870

Bishop, S. (2019). Managing visibility on YouTube through algorithmic gossip. *New Media & Society, 21*(11–12), 2589–2606. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819854731

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. University of California Press.

Boeije, H. (2002). A purposeful approach to the constant comparative method in the analysis of qualitative interviews. *Quality & Quantity, 36*(4), 391–409. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020909529486

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2018). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.

Carter, N., Bryant-Lukosius, D., DiCenso, A., Blythe, J., & Neville, A. J. (2014). The use of triangulation in qualitative research. *Oncology Nursing Forum, 41*(5), 545–547. https://doi.org/10.1188/14.ONF.545-547

Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society, 21*(4), 895–913. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (2017). Being "really real" on YouTube: Authenticity, community and brand culture in social media entertainment. *Media International Australia, 164*(1), 71–81. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X17709098

Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (2019). *Social media entertainment: The new intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York University Press.

Cunningham, S., Craig, D., & Silver, J. (2016). YouTube, multichannel networks and the accelerated evolution of the new screen ecology. *Convergence, 22*(4), 376–391. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856516641620

Cyberspace Administration of China. (2022). *Provisions on the administration of algorithm-generated recommendations for internet information services*. https://www.cac.gov.cn/2022-01/04/c_1642894606364259.htm

Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. Yale University Press.

Fuchs, C. (2014). *Social media: A critical introduction*. SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446270066

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.

Goodman, L. A. (1961). Snowball sampling. *The Annals of Mathematical Statistics, 32*(1), 148–170. https://doi.org/10.1214/aoms/1177705148

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903

Hou, M. (2019). Social media celebrity and the institutionalization of YouTube. *Convergence, 25*(3), 534–553. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517750368

Kitchin, R. (2017). Thinking critically about and researching algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society, 20*(1), 14–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154087

Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness, 16*(1), 103–121. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.ep11347023

Kuehn, K., & Corrigan, T. F. (2013). Hope Labor: The role of employment prospects in online social production. *The Political Economy of Communication, 1*(1). https://polecom.org/index.php/polecom/article/view/9

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). SAGE.

Liang, F., & Ji, L. (2024). Manufacturing influencers: The gatekeeping roles of MCNs (multi-channel networks) in cultural production. *Information, Communication & Society, 27*(12), 2297–2313. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2396614

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.

Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research, 26*(13), 1753–1760. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444

Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual Review of Sociology, 22*, 129–152. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.129

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 33*(1), 93–96. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1547-5069.2001.00093.x

Plantin, J.-C., Lagoze, C., Edwards, P. N., & Sandvig, C. (2018). Infrastructure studies meet platform studies in the age of Google and Facebook. *New Media & Society, 20*(1), 293–310. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816661553

Poell, T., Nieborg, D. B., & van Dijck, J. (2019). Platformisation. *Internet Policy Review, 8*(4). https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1425

Postman, N. (1970). The ecology of media. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics, 27*(1), 11–22.

QuestMobile. (2023). *2023 China mobile internet report*. QuestMobile Industry Report.

Rappaport, J. (1987). Terms of empowerment/exemplars of prevention: Toward a theory for community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 15*(2), 121–148. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00919275

Scolari, C. A. (2012). Media ecology: Exploring the metaphor to expand the theory. *Communication Theory, 22*(2), 204–225. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2012.01404.x

Sun, Y., & Zeng, J. (2023). Youth, platform labor and aspirational entrepreneurship in Chinese short video platforms. *Convergence, 29*(6), 1568–1585. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221145354

Terranova, T. (2000). Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy. *Social Text, 18*(2), 33–58. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-18-2_63-33

van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199970773.001.0001

Zhang, W., & Tong, T. (2024). Contesting the intermediary power: How Chinese MCNs interact with platforms, creators, and advertisers. *Media, Culture & Society, 46*(5), 1027–1044. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437241229306