
**When the amateurs are getting professional: How social media users
perceive MCN-affiliation disclosure and its influence on influencers
and branded content evaluations**

Abstract

China's leading social media influencer (hereafter referred to as influencer) Jiaqi Li amassed a gross merchandise volume of 9.5 billion yuan on the first day of the 2023 Taobao "double 11" online shopping festival through live commerce. He could not have achieved this without the help of his affiliated multi-channel network (MCN) company MeiOne. An MCN is an entity or organization that cooperates with influencers to produce professionalized content and help with the monetization of influencer activities by connecting influencers with advertisers and platforms (Lobato, 2016). The MCN market size in China has rocketed in recent years and it is estimated to reach 54 billion yuan in 2023 (Statista, 2023).

The industry of MCNs thrived in the "Wild West" without many restrictions until it became one of the foci of the "Qinglang" action (i.e., a serial action aiming to maintain a healthy Internet environment) initiated by the Chinese government. Specifically, the Cyberspace Administration of China required that social media platforms should disclose influencers' affiliation with MCNs on influencers' profile pages in 2022. Social media platforms such as Weibo (a Twitter-like platform) and Douyin (Chinese TikTok) have implemented this disclosure recently (see Appendix). In this vein, followers are now exposed to the formerly invisible and unnoticed professionalization happening backstage.

As cultural intermediaries connecting brands with consumers (Johnstone & Lindh, 2022), influencers go through a process of "self-professionalization". In this process, they strive to internalize the market logic in their content production and approach their audience in more strategic ways to appeal to marketers, but at the same time strive to maintain authenticity (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). Authenticity is an important component of influencer success (Kapitan et al., 2022) and influencers tend to benefit from overall higher perceptions of authenticity in their communications

(Audrezet et al., 2020). However, affiliating with an MCN may threaten authenticity as MCNs intervene in content creation and persona presentation. Some MCNs even make up grievous scripts for influencer content to attract traffic.

Different from a sponsorship disclosure that only reveals the advertising nature of a specific sponsored post, the MCN-affiliation disclosure could signal that the influencer is professionalized and has a professional team behind them to help with content creation, especially brand-related content. The MCN-affiliation disclosure could potentially serve as an empowering tool that helps consumers detect covert ads, while it could also fundamentally challenge the perceived authenticity and credibility of influencers.

To the best of the author's knowledge, no previous research has been done to explore the effects of MCN-affiliation disclosure given its novelty. As MCN-affiliation disclosure may affect influencers' perceived authenticity, this study takes authenticity management as the theoretical framework. Adopting a qualitative approach, this study aims to explore 1) how social media users perceive the meaning and purpose of MCN-affiliation disclosure, 2) whether and how MCN-affiliation disclosure affects' perceived authenticity and credibility of influencers, and 3) how social media users evaluate an influencer's branded content (either sponsored or not) considering the MCN-affiliation disclosure. To this end, in-depth interviews will be conducted among individuals who 1) are above 18 years old, 2) use Chinese social media platforms that implement MCN-affiliation disclosures, and 3) follow influencers whom they have followed for over 3 months. Qualitative data will be collected in the coming months and will be presented at the conference. As MCN-affiliation disclosure is an explicit signal of influencer professionalization accessible for consumers, this study will contribute to the literature on influencer professionalization by adding insights from the consumer perspective, answering the call of Stoldt et al. (2019) that audience perspectives are needed to understand the social impact of this shift.

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Appendix

MCN-affiliation disclosure on Weibo

