

## **The Industrialization of Digital Entrepreneurship: The Case of Beauty Influencers in China’s Multichannel Networks Economy**

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With the rise of multichannel networks (MCNs), China’s influencer economy has developed along a highly industrialized trajectory. This article examines that process through the case of MCN-affiliated beauty influencers on Weibo. Drawing on a mixed-methods study of 17,629 posts from the top 100 beauty influencers, combining topic modeling with qualitative textual analysis, we identify 4 patterned domains of content production: commercial promotion, beauty professionalism, performative everydayness, and community engagement. Across these domains, we further trace three interrelated practices of industrialized entrepreneurship: scripted selfhood, industrialized intimacy, and commercial orchestration. These findings demonstrate how self-presentation, audience engagement, and content production are systematically manufactured through MCN mechanisms, platform logics, and commercial cycles, turning intimacy and self-expression into replicable resources for monetization. By centering the Chinese context, this study extends prior influencer scholarship by demonstrating how MCN-driven industrialization materializes in everyday influencer practices. It further advances a conceptual account of industrialized influencer labor, in which creativity, authenticity, and intimacy are institutionally structured and reproduced at scale.

*Keywords: social media influencers, digital entrepreneurship, influencer culture, multichannel networks (MCNs), creator economy, Chinese beauty influencers*

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Influencers—individuals who cultivate visibility and credibility on social media platforms to shape consumer culture and monetize audience relationships—play an increasingly central role in a country’s digital economy (Abidin & Guo, 2023). Over the past decade, China has emerged as one of the world’s most expansive and institutionally organized influencer economies, distinguished by the prominent role of multichannel networks (MCNs). Gardner and Lehnert (2016) define MCNs as “any entity or organization that partners with content creators or directly produces a variety of distinctive content and works to perform business and marketing functions” (p. 294). In China, MCNs have evolved beyond supportive intermediaries to become powerful institutional actors that coordinate influencer labor at scale. By 2022, more than 40,000 MCNs were operating nationwide, with MCN-managed creators generating over 60% of total traffic on major platforms, highlighting the central role of MCNs in organizing influencer labor in China (iiMedia Research, 2023; Xin et al., 2021). As a result, MCNs have become a focal point for capital investment and platform alliances, deeply embedded in the infrastructures that organize content production, monetization, and visibility within China’s platform economy (Han, 2021).

This process of institutionalization fundamentally reshapes the nature of influencer entrepreneurship in China. Previous scholarship has documented the increasing industrialization of MCN systems (Ye, 2025), highlighting MCNs’ gatekeeping power over creators’ access to resources (Liang & Ji, 2024) and their imposition of content production (Liang, 2022; Sun, 2024). Under these sweeping industrial arrangements, many Chinese influencers, as Xin et al. (2021) observe, now “opt to be incorporated and enter the ‘factory’ as workers” (p. 14), embedded within MCN-managed workflows that standardize both content production and audience engagement strategies. At the same time, MCNs intensify commercial imperatives by enforcing branding standards designed to maximize platform compatibility and advertiser appeal (Sun, 2023). Together, these interventions dilute the individuality once central to influencer culture, placing influencers under growing pressure to produce market-optimized content.

Within this increasingly industrialized landscape, Chinese beauty influencers constitute a particularly revealing case. Known for their expertise in cosmetics, skin care, and personal style, they were among the earliest groups in China to commercialize online visibility (Guan, 2021). From beauty bloggers on Douban and Baidu Tieba in the mid-2000s, to Weibo microcelebrities such as Zhang Dayi in the early 2010s, and later to livestreaming icons like Li Jiaqi in the late 2010s, beauty influencers have consistently stood at the forefront of influencer culture and commercial monetization on social media (Liao, 2019; Sun, 2023). At the same time, the beauty sector is among the most heavily institutionalized by MCNs. By the early 2020s, over 70% of top-performing beauty and fashion influencers were affiliated with MCNs, which collectively control a substantial share of content traffic and e-commerce conversion in this domain (iiMedia Research, 2023). This dual positioning—both as pioneers who helped define influencer culture and as one of the most MCN-dominated sectors—renders beauty influencers an ideal empirical site for examining how MCN-led industrialization reshapes influencer labor and content production in practice.

Despite growing scholarly attention to influencers and MCNs, important gaps remain in how influencer labor is conceptualized and empirically examined. Much of the existing influencer labor literature—particularly research centered on U.S. and European contexts and Silicon Valley-based

platforms such as YouTube and Instagram—approaches influencer work through the lenses of individual entrepreneurship, self-branding, and platform governance (e.g., Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2017; Hund, 2023). Although this scholarship has produced critical insights into labor precarity, it is less equipped to account for contexts in which influencer labor is further institutionalized through third-party organizations that actively organize content production, monetization strategies, and audience engagement. Moreover, research on Chinese MCNs has examined their intermediary power, including their gatekeeping roles, influence over influencer careers, and involvement in platform governance (e.g., Liang & Ji, 2024; Ye, 2025; Zhang & Ma, 2023). However, most of this work conceptualizes MCNs at the structural level, offering limited empirical insight into how MCN-centered industrialization becomes visible in the everyday content that influencers produce. This leaves an important empirical gap between analyses of MCN organization and the cultural products generated under MCN-managed conditions. We still know relatively little about how MCN-driven forms of coordination and standardization materialize in influencers' self-presentation, audience engagement, and commercial practices.

This study addresses this gap by examining beauty influencer content on Weibo as an empirical entry point for analyzing the industrialization of influencer labor in China. Using a twofold methodology that combines computational content analysis and qualitative inquiry, we examine how MCN affiliation organizes influencer content production and labor practices at scale. Rather than treating MCNs as external institutional actors, we trace their influence through patterned features of influencer output itself. Our analysis shows that under the dominance of MCNs, influencer labor is increasingly organized as an industrialized mode of production rather than a form of individualized entrepreneurship. MCN affiliation generates systematic standardization in influencer content, reshaping self-presentation, audience engagement, and intimacy into predictable and monetizable forms. Specifically, we identify three interrelated practices—scripted selfhood, strategic intimacy, and commercial orchestration—through which influencer labor is industrially structured. By centering the Chinese context, this study extends prior influencer scholarship by demonstrating how MCN-driven industrialization materializes in everyday influencer practices and advances a conceptual account of industrialized influencer labor, in which creativity, authenticity, and intimacy are institutionally structured and reproduced at scale.

### **MCNs and the Industrialization of Influencer Labor in China**

Early social media content creation was largely driven by amateurs who used platforms such as YouTube, Weibo, and later Instagram to share personal experiences, hobbies, and everyday life. These creators built audiences through self-expression and niche interests, cultivating personal brands and affective ties with followers in relatively informal and decentralized environments (Hund, 2023). As platforms matured and social media marketing expanded, however, influencer culture increasingly shifted from a space of individual experimentation to a competitive, metric-driven economy structured by visibility, engagement, and monetization (Duffy et al., 2021). While this transformation has taken different institutional forms across national contexts, a key force reshaping influencer labor in China has been the rise of MCNs. Unlike in most Euro-American platform contexts, where platforms themselves remain the primary coordinating actors, MCNs in China have introduced an industrial-scale model of content production and management, fundamentally reorganizing how influencer labor is managed and monetized (Zhang & Tong, 2024).

Originating in the United States around 2009, MCNs gained early momentum by leveraging the rapid growth of YouTube, offering creators support with monetization, audience expansion, and brand partnerships (Flynn, 2019). This model, however, proved short-lived as platforms developed their own scalable, automated creator-management tools. As Craig et al. (2021) observe, platforms “elbowed them out of the way with automated and low-touch management services, like YouTube’s Creator Academy” (p. 125), rendering MCNs largely obsolete in the U.S. market. In contrast, the trajectory of MCNs in China has been markedly different. Rather than declining, MCNs have become central institutional actors within China’s influencer economy. According to Liang (2022), early MCN-like organizations emerged in the livestreaming sector in the early 2010s, initially taking the form of streamer-organized “gaming guilds” that coordinated resources, visibility, and mutual support. As platforms expanded rapidly during the mid-2010s, these informal collectives evolved into professionalized organizations, giving rise to China’s first generation of MCNs. Over time, MCNs diversified into a wide range of formats, including e-commerce guilds, livestreaming agencies, and talent management firms, reflecting their deep integration into China’s platform economy (Zhang & Tong, 2024).

Crucially, the rise of MCNs in China has been driven not only by platform expansion but also by structural features of the market itself. Limited direct contact between advertisers and creators has created conditions in which intermediary organizations assume a decisive coordinating role (Xin et al., 2021). As Han (2021) argues, MCNs function as “a critical intermediary which progressively fills—and institutionalizes—the space between different types of dominant platforms” (pp. 6–7). Operating through a triangular business model that links platforms, influencers, and e-commerce infrastructures, MCNs leverage influencers’ content and audience relationships to facilitate monetization. More importantly, this intermediary position enables MCNs to standardize production processes across platforms, thereby consolidating their organizational power and control over influencer labor (Ye, 2025).

While MCNs are often celebrated for professionalizing China’s influencer economy, existing scholarship increasingly highlights the tensions embedded in this model, particularly between monetization and standardization, on the one hand, and creativity and autonomy on the other. Since the mid-2010s, the rapid expansion of MCNs has produced a “professionalized and institutionalized process” that fundamentally alters the nature of creative work (Guo, 2022, p. 304). As Liang and Ji (2024) note, MCNs are effectively “manufacturing influencers” through processes of influencer incubation and content optimization (p. 2307). The rise of MCNs has reorganized China’s influencer economy in ways that significantly reshape influencers’ labor conditions. Rather than MCNs supporting independent entrepreneurial creativity, scholars increasingly emphasize their expanding intermediary power (Zhang & Tong, 2024), their gatekeeping role in shaping content production and circulation (Liang & Ji, 2024), and the intensification of workloads and performance pressures imposed on creators (Sun, 2024). Building on this line of research, recent interventions describe digital creators’ growing structural dependence on MCNs using terms such as “tethered labor” (Liang, 2025) and “governed creativity” (Sun, 2025). Together, this body of literature points to a central tension in China’s MCN-driven influencer economy: The very mechanisms that enable large-scale coordination and monetization also standardize creative practice, narrowing the space for autonomy and reconfiguring influencer labor into increasingly regulated forms.

### ***The Rise of Chinese Beauty Influencers***

With the expansion of digital commerce and the widespread adoption of social media, China has fostered a thriving ecosystem of beauty influencers. Known for their expertise in cosmetics, skin care, and personal style, these figures first emerged as online beauty creators and have undergone significant transformation over the past two decades. According to Guan (2021), the earliest generation appeared in the mid-2000s through blogs and forums such as Douban and Baidu Tieba, where users shared makeup tips and product reviews within relatively intimate online communities. The early 2010s marked a pivotal shift, as platforms such as Weibo and Youku enabled more interactive and visual content, while the rapid growth of e-commerce through Taobao and Tmall reshaped the commercial possibilities of online creation (Liao, 2019). Increasingly, they functioned explicitly as influencers, playing a central role in shaping online discourse and consumer trends. As Abidin (2018) describes, these figures began to act as influencers or “microcelebrities,” individuals who gain recognition on blogs and social media through a careful narration of their everyday lives, on which paid advertorials are premised (p. 92).

Influencers have long circulated as aspirational figures in both popular discourse and scholarly discussions, often imagined as highly individualized cultural workers driven by self-expression and entrepreneurial ambition. In influencer economies studied primarily in Euro-American contexts, particularly those centered on Silicon Valley-based platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, themes of precarity, risk, and exploitation have been central to analyses of influencer labor (e.g., Abidin, 2018; Bishop, 2018; Duffy, 2017; Hund, 2023). This body of scholarship critically documents how influencer work unfolds under conditions of economic uncertainty, capturing the situation of workers compelled to “[manage] the self in conditions of radical uncertainty” (Gill, 2010, p. 290). The prevalence of unpaid and invisible labor, coupled with unstable and unpredictable incomes, is well documented within influencer economies. Algorithmic control and platform dominance further intensify these conditions, shaping which content becomes visible, valuable, and monetizable and deepening the precarity experienced by influencers (Bishop, 2018). As Duffy et al. (2021) note, the pursuit of quantifiable visibility has become “a prerequisite for career success within platformized cultural industries, making these metrics the central axis of power and resource exchange—in the form of sponsorships, brand deals, collaborations, and more” (p. 3). Taken together, this scholarship shows that influencer labor is deeply entangled with audience expectations, platform governance, and market imperatives, requiring the strategic curation of online personas through self-branding and relationship management to convert social capital into economic value.

Chinese beauty influencers navigate many of these same dynamics. As Liao (2019) observes, they “[share] many similarities with . . . YouTube personas and Instagirls who choreograph their activities for self-branding, promotion, and visibility” in pursuit of growth and monetization (p. 3). In a similar vein, Chinese beauty influencers engage in strategic self-branding, cultivate audience relationships, and translate visibility into economic value. Beauty influencers also offer a revealing case for examining how influencer labor becomes industrialized within China’s platform economy. As one of the earliest and most visible influencer groups, they have consistently stood at the forefront of platform innovation, audience engagement, and commercial monetization. Their content is often framed as relatable and everyday—anchored in beauty routines, consumption practices, and lifestyle advice—which makes them especially

effective at combining visibility labor, relational intimacy, and consumer culture (Guan, 2021). This combination positions beauty influencers as a paradigmatic site for analyzing how influencer practices are systematically organized and professionalized. Moreover, the beauty sector is among the most heavily institutionalized by MCNs, placing beauty influencers at the center of China's industrialized influencer economy (TopKlout, 2024). Focusing on this group thus offers a critical vantage point for analyzing how MCN affiliation reshapes content production, audience engagement, and labor strategies.

Existing research has largely examined MCNs as organizational actors, paying less attention to influencer content as an empirical site through which industrialized labor arrangements can be observed. Building on this work, this study shifts analytical focus from MCNs as institutions to the patterned content produced under MCN-managed conditions. Although prior research has established MCNs as powerful intermediaries in China's influencer economy, how their organizational logics materialize in everyday influencer production remains underexplored. Beauty influencers provide a particularly revealing empirical site for addressing this gap. As one of the earliest, most commercialized, and most MCN-dominated influencer groups in China, their content is closely intertwined with platform commerce and deeply embedded in brand collaborations, making it especially sensitive to industrial discipline. Examining beauty influencer content, therefore, allows us to observe how MCN-centered industrialization becomes visible in influencer output itself. Accordingly, we examine beauty influencer content on Weibo as an entry point for analyzing the industrialization of influencer labor in China. By analyzing large-scale patterns in influencer content, we trace how industrial coordination and commercial imperatives are expressed through influencers' work. We ask the following:

*RQ: Which kinds of content do MCN-affiliated beauty influencers produce on Weibo, and how is this content patterned under an industrialized mode of production?*

### **Methods**

To achieve a nuanced understanding of the entrepreneurial practices of 100 top-tier Chinese beauty influencers, we employed a twofold methodology encompassing computational content analysis and qualitative analysis.

### **Data Collection**

The data set was constructed using a publicly released list of the top 100 influential beauty bloggers on Weibo in 2022 (Weibo, 2022). Importantly, all influencers included in this ranking were professionally managed by MCNs at the time of data collection, as the ranking was generated through Weibo's official collaboration with MCN organizations. As such, inclusion in the ranking presupposes participation in MCN-organized influencer programs and reflects professionalized, institutionally embedded influencer status.

Using the Weibo API (Weibo Open Platform, 2025), we collected all original posts published by these influencers between January 1 and December 31, 2022. Our data collection methodology aimed to capture digital interactions and entrepreneurial practices essential for understanding digital entrepreneurship among beauty bloggers. The data set encompasses 17,629 posts, including textual

content, images, videos, posting times, retweet counts, and like counts. All data collection and analysis procedures were conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines. The study used publicly available data from Weibo, and all content was anonymized to protect user privacy; individual posts are cited as personal communications with date only, with usernames withheld.

### **Computational Content Analysis**

We employed topic modeling techniques to extract meaningful patterns from the corpus of 17,629 posts. Specifically, we used the latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) algorithm, a probabilistic model that represents documents as mixtures of latent topics, each modeled as a distribution over words, inferred from the observed text (Blei, 2012). This approach enabled us to identify underlying themes in beauty bloggers' entrepreneurial practices.

The Chinese text underwent segmentation using the Jieba library (<https://github.com/fxsjy/jieba>) and stopword removal using a publicly accessible dictionary (<https://github.com/goto456/stopwords>) to reduce noise and enhance pattern identification (Sarica & Luo, 2024). Through multiple iterations, we obtained an optimal model comprising 17 topics. Following the hierarchical clustering and silhouette analysis methodology outlined in Muthusami et al. (2024), we applied agglomerative clustering and similarity analysis to the 17 initial LDA topics, merging related topics and reducing them into 10 refined and coherent categories. These were further categorized into five thematic frames based on keyword analysis. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Extracted Topics, Keywords, and Example Post References.**

Category Code	Content Category	Original Topic No.	Original Topic Name	Example Keywords	<i>n</i> (%)
A	Commercial promotion	2	Shopping & e-commerce	link, beauty, livestream, deal, 618, PR	773 (6.94)
		6	Product recommendation	product, recommendation, unboxing, sharing, trending	1,185 (10.64)
		7	Gifts & perfume	perfume, gift, sharing, favorite, Qixi	1,407 (12.63)
		8	Festive campaigns	New Year, spring festival, gift box, together, beauty	968 (8.69)
B	Beauty professionalism	9	Skin care products	skin care, serum, product, usage, recommendation	900 (8.08)
		0	Makeup & beauty	makeup look, cosmetics, styling, color, summer	889 (7.98)
		1	Skin care &	skin care, skin, skin	1,030 (9.25)

			wellness	hydration, essence, effect	
C	Performative everydayness	3	Fashion outings	& outfit of the day (OOTD), spring/summer, stay-home, diary, vlog	920 (8.26)
		4	Daily life	plog, life, record, weekend, joy	1,015 (9.11)
D	Community engagement	5	Giveaways interaction	& interaction, giveaway, fans, comment, thanks	2,049 (18.40)

*Note.* Percentages are calculated based on the total number of posts in the clean corpus ( $N = 11,136$ ). The full text of example posts is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2. Example Posts by Topic (Corresponding to Table 1).**

Topic No.	Topic Name	Example Post
2	Shopping & e-commerce	Egg lovers who enjoy soft-boiled eggs, this is your chance! Take advantage of the #88MembersFestival# and stock up on Saint D'Leo sterile eggs—no fishy smell and super delicious. Even a kitchen newbie like me loves them! Just open Taobao/Tmall on your phone and search for: Super Single Product. The promotional price is a great deal. #88MembersFestivalSuperHighlights# (personal communication, August 11, 2022)
6	Product recommendation	👉 All top picks! My 2021 Favorite Makeup Collection! The annual roundup of my most-used makeup products is here haha 🙌~Out of countless great items, the ones I keep going back to are always these. So this year's favorite makeup products are truly my ultimate soulmates. Not only does the list include bestselling cult classics, but also some hidden niche gems that are absolutely amazing! All in all, I could love them every single day, month after month, year after year, forever ~ (personal communication, January 22, 2022)
7	Gifts & perfume	【 Super Satisfying Gift Unboxing   #TheGiftIWantMostAtYearEnd# 】 ☆ Limited-edition skincare, makeup, and perfume gift sets—surprises one after another! ☆ A brand got so creative they actually sent me a drum?! ☆ All kinds of dreamy collab gift boxes hitting right at my girly heart. After saving up two months' worth of PR gifts 📺, I'm so happy it even cured my toothache. Today I'm unboxing them all with you piggies—endless fun and joy 😊 #Unboxing# #DouDou_Babe[SuperTopic]# DouDou_Babe's Weibo Video—Giveaway details. (personal communication, November 25, 2022)
8	Festive campaigns	【New Year's Lucky Makeup】 The ultimate retro diva vibes! Be the one who catches everyone's eye at first glance in the crowd.

Topic No.	Topic Name	Example Post
9	Skin care Products	<p>Special New Year project   Elegant, textured, dazzlingly beautiful, vintage yet eye-catching 🗒️ Even ordinary girls can become the center of attention at parties.</p> <p>The key is having that refined, high-quality skin texture!! I go for a soft-matte foundation—natural, long-lasting, and looking even more beautiful as the night goes on.</p> <p>This time, from base makeup to eye makeup, lipstick, and styling, everything is super worth referencing! No matter what occasion you're attending this New Year, you'll be totally confident 😊 (personal communication, January 26, 2022)</p> <p><b>【 Treasure Digger   DouZai's Morning Skincare Channel 】</b></p> <p>Welcome to DouZai's morning skincare channel! Recently, golden miner DouZai has dug up quite a few hidden gems 📸</p> <p>Here's a full routine to help you build that hydrated, dewy winter skin:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Amino acid cleansing mousse—refreshing to wash, cleans without stripping</li> <li>◆ High-performance mask comparable to repair essence—moisturizing and restorative</li> <li>◆ Rich yet lightweight reishi essence oil—nourishing without heaviness</li> <li>◆ "Cabbage" cream—boosts skin metabolism and helps fight early aging</li> </ul> <p>#SkincareSharing #ChineseSkincare (personal communication, December 14, 2022)</p>
0	Makeup & beauty	<p><b>【 Romantic Autumn Vibes   Sheer Pink-Gold Camera-Ready Makeup 】</b></p> <p>This makeup tutorial is full of happiness vibes 💕 You can enjoy the beautiful makeup looks while also learning the techniques.</p> <p>Sneak peek highlights:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ The right way to use concealer—the texture is just amazing on the skin!</li> <li>◆ A little reveal of my hidden eyeshadow collection—they're so pretty I almost don't want to use them!</li> <li>◆ A lip crayon that creates a glass-like lip effect—perfect for adding to your fall/winter lipstick wishlist!</li> </ul> <p>#Hourglass #MakeupSharing (personal communication, October 22, 2022)</p>
1	Skin care & wellness	<p><b>How to Care for Your Skin Before and After Skin Treatments!</b></p> <p>As a 25+ girl, in recent years I've started trying some more advanced skin management projects—like the 7D Ultherapy I shared with you not long ago. Although this is a non-invasive light-based anti-aging treatment, the principle is always "break down first, then rebuild." That's why pre- and post-treatment skin repair is extremely important—it's the key to ensuring results! After all, if repair isn't done well, everything goes to waste~ (personal communication, May 27, 2022)</p>
3	Fashion & outings	<p>Collecting summer romance 📷 Photos my husband took of me on our date.</p> <p>How is everyone planning to spend Qixi Festival next month?</p>

Topic No.	Topic Name	Example Post
4	Daily life	<p>#CaptureSummerVibes #MySummerOOTD #PlogBloggerDiary# (personal communication, July 29, 2022)</p> <hr/> <p>Mini PLOG   Weekly Fragments 🌀 <b>DAILY</b></p> <p>♪...♥ Bits and pieces of everyday life. Daily life itself may be plain, but it's up to us to add the flavor~</p> <p>#PlogBloggerDiary# ♡ #DailyMakeup# (personal communication, April 24, 2022)</p>
5	Giveaways & interaction	<p>#XieAWEN[SuperTopic]# November Fan Interaction Ranking Giveaway is here👉</p> <p>Congrats to the TOP 1-TOP 10 babies🎁📺 Prizes will be arranged one by one🌟</p> <p>Same rules as always: from the likes on this post, I'll pick 3 more cuties to win milk tea📺</p> <p>Let's all work hard together in the last month of 2022📺 (personal communication, December 5, 2022)</p>

*Note.* Example posts are translated from original Chinese Weibo posts. To protect user identities, verbatim posts are cited as personal communications and are not included in the reference list.

### **Qualitative Textual Analysis**

To complement the macro-level insights generated by topic modeling, we conducted a qualitative textual analysis of Weibo posts authored by beauty influencers affiliated with MCNs. In this phase, we move from identifying which topics are prevalent to exploring how influencers perform entrepreneurial labor, manage authenticity, and engage their audiences within the MCN-dominated influencer economy. We aimed to uncover the discursive strategies and self-presentation to offer a richer, more contextualized interpretation of how influencers' content production is enacted under industrialized conditions. We employed purposive sampling to select a subset of posts that are representative of the five key thematic frames identified through topic modeling. From each thematic cluster, we selected 50 posts based on relevance, engagement level, and content richness, resulting in a total of 250 posts for qualitative analysis. This sampling strategy ensured variation across different content types while maintaining thematic coherence, allowing us to capture a diverse range of influencer practices.

For data analysis, we employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), using a collaborative and inductive approach to identify patterns in how influencers perform digital entrepreneurship under MCN-driven conditions. This approach was selected for its flexibility and emphasis on meaning making, allowing us to interpret both explicit content and underlying discursive patterns. Our analysis proceeded in several stages. First, we familiarized ourselves with the data set through repeated close readings of the selected posts to develop an overall sense of tone, narrative style, and content structure. Next, we generated preliminary codes related to influencer practices such as self-branding, audience interaction, commercialization, and expressions of authenticity. These initial codes were informed

by both established concepts from the literature, such as relational labor (Baym, 2015) and communicative intimacies (Abidin, 2015), and inductive observations grounded in the data set. Through multiple rounds of reading the data, we identified broader themes through an iterative process of constant comparison, focusing on recurring patterns in how influencers manage self-presentation, audience engagement, and commercial imperatives under MCN affiliation. Throughout the process, we engaged in reflexive memo writing to document analytic decisions and interrogate our own positionalities, ensuring transparency and critical awareness in our interpretive work. In the sections that follow, we present the key themes that emerged from this analysis.

## Results

### *Quantitative Results*

Based on LDA topic modeling, we analyzed 17,629 Weibo posts. From these unstructured texts, four major themes were identified: commercial promotion, beauty professionalism, performative everydayness, and community engagement (see Table 1). Overall, the findings suggest Chinese beauty influencers have shifted away from individualized self-entrepreneurship and now operate within a highly patterned, industrialized framework, functioning as an integral part of the apparatus that drives China's social media influencer marketing on Weibo.

#### *Commercial Promotion*

Commercial promotion emerged as the most prevalent content category in our data set ( $n = 7033$ ; 38.90%; topics 2, 6, 7, and 8), encompassing posts related to product endorsements, brand collaborations, affiliate links, livestream promotions, and seasonal shopping campaigns. Lexical patterns reveal a strong promotional orientation, with frequent use of platform-specific references (e.g., Taobao, JD.com, Tmall), shopping festival markers (e.g., 618, Double Eleven), and urgency-inducing phrases such as "here come the benefits" (福利来啦) or "hurry to buy" (抓紧抢购). These messages were often embedded in celebratory, affectively charged language, combining exclamatory punctuation, emoji clusters, and high-engagement hashtags (e.g., #shoppingfestival [#购物节]).

A notable pattern is the heavy clustering of posts around major e-commerce events such as 618, Double Eleven, and Qixi Festival, indicating alignment with China's national sales calendar and platform-led promotional cycles. This reflects what Li and Abidin (2025) term the "nesting" of influencer activity within overlapping commercial schedules, or "promotional temporalities," in which platforms define shopping festivals and temporal frameworks that reshape how both users and cultural producers experience time. Through strategically timed nudges—such as multiple sales rounds, staggered discount releases, and pre-announced flash deals—platforms create artificial urgency, foster anticipation, and sustain cyclical engagement. In this environment, influencer activity is not merely coincidental, but structured by platform-generated temporal rhythms that dictate when, how, and in what tone promotional content appears. Within this system, MCNs function as commercial intermediaries that synchronize influencer output with both brand and platform priorities, coordinating product pushes to fit within preset promotional arcs. Platforms reinforce this synchrony by curating campaign-linked hashtags and rewarding

participation with algorithmic boosts—for example, elevating tags such as “#Double Eleven Must-Buy List” (#双十一必买清单) to trending status during shopping festivals. The result, as our data show, is that influencers’ Weibo feeds become saturated with promotional content during these periods, reflecting their incorporation into a broader industrialized marketing apparatus where platforms, MCNs, and influencers operate in tandem to reproduce the commercial rhythms of China’s digital marketplace.

### *Beauty Professionalism*

A notable departure from earlier depictions of influencers as informal, amateur, or purely personal content creators is the emergence of what we term “beauty professionalism” ( $n = 2,819$ ; 25.31%; topics 0, 1, 9). Unlike the casual and lifestyle-oriented self-presentations described in much of the existing literature, Chinese beauty influencers increasingly position themselves as professional authorities in beauty knowledge. Posts in this category project technical expertise, showcasing advanced makeup techniques, delivering detailed product reviews, and offering evidence-based advice on skin care. Influencers frequently adopt an instructional tone, demonstrating application methods, analyzing product textures, reviewing ingredient lists, or comparing product suitability across different skin types. High-frequency keywords such as “ingredients” (成分), “improve complexion” (改善肤色), and “repair the skin barrier” (修复屏障) indicate a discourse grounded in professional skin care terminology rather than casual consumer talk.

This emphasis on technical know-how highlights how professionalism has become a strategic brand asset. By cultivating the image of informed expertise, influencers enhance their credibility, foster audience trust, and differentiate themselves in an increasingly saturated marketplace. Professional authority, in this sense, is not merely about personal brand positioning but also constitutes a monetizable resource within China’s industrialized beauty economy. Importantly, this professional discourse is closely entwined with commercial and algorithmic logics. The language often mirrors brand-driven advertising keywords such as “anti-aging” (抗老), “gentle repair” (温和修护), and “intensive hydration” (强效保湿), aligning content with marketing strategies and consumer search habits. This vocabulary not only mirrors the advertising lexicon promoted by skin care and cosmetics brands but also aligns with Weibo’s algorithmic priorities, which privilege content framed as commercially relevant and product-oriented. For influencers, adopting such terms enhances both algorithmic visibility and perceived professional authority, reinforcing their marketability within the influencer economy. The rise of beauty professionalism thus illustrates how influencer content is increasingly shaped by industrial coordination. What appears as self-driven expertise is in fact coproduced through brand partnerships, MCN guidance, and platform recommendation systems.

### *Community Engagement*

Community engagement accounted for a substantial share of our data set ( $n = 2,049$ ; 18.40%; topic 5), encompassing posts that sustained follower relationships through interactive and reward-based practices such as giveaways, anniversary posts, and real-time interaction prompts. Notably, influencers frequently addressed followers with affectionate nicknames like “darling/babe” (宝子) and expressed

gratitude in phrases such as “thank you for being with me all the way” (感谢一路陪伴). Interactive hooks like “repost to enter giveaway” (转发抽奖) or “winner announcement” (幸运儿公布) invited participation and were often tied to follower milestones, seasonal festivals, or platform-driven events.

While the tone remains personal and affective, many of these posts were closely timed with e-commerce promotions, brand campaigns, or platform events. For instance, posts announcing “Fan Festival Giveaway” (粉丝节抽奖) or celebrating follower anniversaries often appeared in the lead-up to major shopping festivals such as Double Eleven or 618. This suggests follower interaction is largely coordinated alongside broader commercial activities. Community-building activities therefore operate as strategic tools: Giveaways and milestone celebrations not only stimulate participation but also maintain loyalty that can be converted into commercial value. This alignment reflects the influence of the MCN model, where influencers work within content calendars and campaign timelines that integrate community maintenance with promotional objectives. Affectionate language and public gratitude may frame influencers as emotionally invested in their followers, but within MCN workflows, such intimacy is routinized, standardized, and actively encouraged as part of audience-retention strategies.

#### *Performative Everydayness*

Performative everydayness accounted for 1,935 posts, representing 17.37% of our data set (topics 3 and 4). High-frequency keywords included “OOTD,” “plog,” “vlog,” “everyday” (日常), “life” (生活), “makeup look” (妆容), and “taking pictures” (拍照), along with seasonal markers such as “spring day” (春日) and “summer day” (夏日). Lexical patterns point to a focus on curated depictions of daily routines, leisure activities, and personal styling. Thematic clusters coalesced around three dominant strands: (1) fashion and beauty routines, such as daily outfit coordination and makeup looks; (2) lifestyle vignettes, including cafe visits, travel snapshots, and home decor; and (3) vlog-style posts, narrating fragments of everyday life, from casual shopping trips to weekend outings. Posts across these clusters often employed positive descriptors (e.g., “simple,” “fresh,” “happy”) and emphasized strong visual appeal.

While these posts appear to capture spontaneous lifestyle moments, their highly standardized formats indicate a curated and reproducible form of everydayness. We use the term “performative everydayness” to describe this mode of influencer content, in which daily life—routines, leisure, and personal styling—is staged as a carefully orchestrated performance rather than a candid self-disclosure. Although the “everyday” is framed to signal authenticity and relatability, in the Chinese MCN-driven influencer economy, it is systematically shaped by industrialized production logics. For influencers, performative everydayness serves several strategic functions. First, it provides a flexible vehicle for subtle brand integration: Product placements can be seamlessly embedded into an OOTD post or a “weekend cafe plog” without disrupting the aesthetic flow, making the format highly commercially versatile. Second, its relatability strengthens audience connection. By presenting content that feels reproducible—such as simple styling tips or accessible leisure activities— influencers create a sense of “realness” that encourages imitation, participation, and engagement. Finally, the emphasis on polished visuals and seasonal aesthetics—cherry blossom picnics in spring, beach outings in summer—produces content that is not only

visually appealing but also algorithmically privileged, as platforms tend to privilege visually appealing, shareable media content.

### ***Qualitative Findings***

Our qualitative analysis draws on a purposive sample of 250 posts selected from the full 2022 data set. Posts were sampled across the calendar year, including routine posting periods as well as peak commercial moments such as 618 and Double Eleven, allowing us to examine both everyday and campaign-driven content. The analysis shows that influencer entrepreneurship among MCN-affiliated beauty influencers is increasingly structured by MCN coordination, platform logics, and market imperatives. The individualized, informal modes of self-presentation emphasized in earlier scholarship are far less visible; instead, influencer practices appear highly standardized and aligned with industrialized production frameworks. Echoing the patterns identified in our quantitative analysis, we identified three defining features of entrepreneurial practice among MCN-affiliated beauty influencers: (1) scripted selfhood, (2) industrialized intimacy, and (3) commercial orchestration through platform and brand alignment.

#### *Scripted Selfhood*

Quantitatively, the performative everydayness and beauty professionalism categories exhibited high posting frequency and stylized formats. Echoing this, our qualitative analysis shows that influencers' self-presentations—framed as spontaneous, personal, and “authentic”—are in fact tightly routinized. Across our qualitative data set, beauty influencer content was overwhelmingly characterized by routinized formats and standardized self-presentation, with only minor stylistic variations across posts. For example, diary-like captions such as “Bare-faced today” or “Feeling a bit tired this morning” frequently accompanied casual selfies or short videos and followed predictable narrative and visual patterns (personal communication, April 17, 2022; personal communication, September 5, 2022). These posts were typically embedded within standardized content grids, maintaining consistent color palettes, framing, and posting rhythms. In more than half of the sampled posts, such diary-style updates appeared alongside other recurring formats within the same account, suggesting deliberate rotation rather than ad hoc self-expression.

What emerges from these patterns is not merely the scripting of posts, but the scripting of the self. Influencers are cultivated into recognizable persona types with consistent personality traits (e.g., cheerful, aspirational, sisterly), emotional registers (e.g., warm, upbeat, never confrontational), and life scripts (hardworking beauty enthusiast, caring older sister, relatable girl next door). These scripted selves are reinforced through standardized visual styles, catchphrases, and recurring scenarios. For instance, two influencers posted “morning skincare routine” videos within the same week in March 2022 to promote the same skin care brand (personal communication, March 3, 2022; personal communication, March 9, 2022). Both videos opened with a fatigue-related hook (e.g., “Woke up feeling so tired today”), transitioned into a step-by-step product demonstration filmed in the bathroom mirror, and concluded with an upbeat sign-off directing viewers to a linked product page (personal communication, March 10, 2022). Notably, even specific phrasing, background music, and camera angles remained highly consistent across these

sponsored uploads, despite being posted by different influencers. Such similarities suggest content was produced within shared stylistic and commercial guidelines, rather than shaped solely by individual creative choices. Through these repeated patterns, influencer personas become increasingly interchangeable, characterized less by distinctive self-expression than by adherence to recognizable and market-safe templates.

We use the term “scripted selfhood” to capture this process of transforming the influencer into a standardized, brand-safe persona. The high degree of repetition in influencers’ content grids and style guidelines is not simply the result of personal stylistic preference or organic adaptation to audience tastes. Rather, it reflects the MCN business model of manufacturing influencers as standardized cultural products (Liang & Li, 2024). MCNs provide content grids, scripting guidelines, and visual templates that routinize workflows across entire influencer portfolios. In this system, the influencer’s “self” becomes a marketable asset: engineered to be positive, polished, and consistently reproducible across multiple accounts. The implications of scripted selfhood are twofold. On the one hand, it delivers predictability and commercial reliability: Consistent personas facilitate audience recognition, maintain brand trust, and align with sponsorship expectations, ensuring steady monetization. On the other hand, this process homogenizes output and narrows creative autonomy. Individual voices become harder to distinguish in an already saturated market, and the repetition of templated selves risks creating an aesthetic convergence that audiences may eventually perceive as formulaic. In short, scripted selfhood illustrates how the MCN model industrializes not only content, but the very performance of identity—turning the influencer’s self into an institutionalized commodity.

### *Strategic Intimacy*

Echoing our quantitative findings, the qualitative analysis shows that influencers’ audience engagement is highly affective, relying on intimate language, emotionally charged expressions, and performative closeness to cultivate parasocial bonds. Across our qualitative data set, virtually all influencers consistently employed affectionate forms of address, such as “babies,” “my sisters,” or “my darlings,” combined with playful banter, seasonal well-wishes, and references to shared emotional experiences. In addition, a substantial proportion of posts relied on disclosive intimacy, in which influencers shared behind-the-scenes glimpses of daily life, personal updates, or emotionally salient experiences such as pregnancy journeys, health concerns, or relationship milestones. Together, affective address and personal disclosure constituted the dominant mode of audience engagement across the majority of posts in our qualitative sample. Within influencer industries, such disclosures have long functioned as tools for self-branding: Intimate, affect-laden storytelling facilitates what Baym (2015) conceptualizes as relational labor, namely the ongoing work of sustaining perceived closeness with audiences. In the MCN context, however, intimacy not only serves relational purposes but is also systematically organized as a performative asset oriented toward monetization. What appears as spontaneous emotional sharing is frequently embedded within promotional logics and commercial messaging. One influencer, for example, marked her wedding anniversary with the following caption:

I can’t believe it’s already been two years since I married Wu Ge 🐼❤️🍝😁! We celebrated over the weekend with way too much food—feeling so happy! (ps: My

darlings, I hope you all find your special someone soon. May you have warm hands to hold this winter 🧤 #motd #girlsdayout). (personal communication, December 5, 2022)

At first, this post appears to be a candid celebration, yet embedded within the caption was a direct link to the influencer's wedding makeup tutorial and an affiliated product page. Across our qualitative sample, similar affective-commercial pairings were highly prevalent. Posts marking birthdays, pet adoptions, health updates, and other personal milestones were routinely accompanied by product tags, discount codes, or purchase links, indicating a consistent coupling of emotional disclosure and commercial intent. For example, Lancôme cosmetics appeared repeatedly across different influencers' affective storytelling, featured in posts describing skin care routines during illness or incorporated into celebratory posts marking birthdays and other personal milestones. Despite variation in narrative context, these posts followed a remarkably similar affective arc: an emotionally engaging hook, a brief personal anecdote, and a seamless pivot to a product recommendation or shopping link. Our data show that influencers consistently drew on reusable affective templates that could be flexibly adapted to different life events. The frequency and consistency of these affective-commercial pivots suggest they constitute a normative mode of audience engagement rather than an incidental stylistic choice.

This dynamic aligns with what Abidin (2015) terms "commercial intimacies," where emotional exchanges are motivated by underlying commercial interests yet sustained through the performance of closeness. Social media platforms inherently cultivate environments "where intimacy sells" (Glatt, 2023, p. 425), and within China's industrialized influencer economy, this logic is further intensified through the MCN ecosystem. What appears to be organic emotional outreach is often the result of manufactured intimacy: modular scripts tested against engagement metrics, refined through iteration, and deployed across multiple campaigns. Within this system, intimacy is no longer the spontaneous outcome of reciprocal interaction but a pre-engineered component of content strategy for driving consumption. The result is a form of manufactured closeness that, while emotionally resonant for followers, is carefully engineered to serve the commercial architectures of the influencer economy.

### *Commercial Orchestration*

Quantitatively, the commercial promotion category showed clear temporal clustering around major e-commerce events such as 618, Double Eleven, and Qixi Festival. This pattern was echoed in the qualitative sample through the recurring alignment of posting time, phrasing, hashtags, and product recommendations across multiple influencers. During major sales periods, nearly all influencers in our qualitative sample participated in platform-led promotional campaigns, with posts concentrated within tightly compressed 24–48-hour windows. These posts are often followed by a three-phase rhythm: prelaunch teasers (e.g., "Don't miss tonight at 8 PM"), peak-day urgency messages (e.g., "Only 48 hours left!"), and aftersales follow-ups framed as care (e.g., "Make sure to patch test before using, sisters"; personal communication, June 15, 2022; personal communication, August 1, 2022; personal communication, November 8, 2022).

Across accounts, we observed striking similarities in wording, emoji use, and promotional framing. For example, during Double Eleven 2022, nearly all influencers in our qualitative sample

participated in promotional campaigns, commonly combining the hashtag #Double11MustBuyList, countdown emojis, and parallel discount phrasing such as “lowest price of the year” and “stock up before midnight” (personal communication, November 9, 2022; personal communication, November 10, 2022). In several cases, influencers promoting different brands nonetheless used the same temporal language, visual cues, and hashtag structures promoted by Weibo, indicating coordination beyond individual branding decisions. Despite variation in brand identity, these posts followed highly comparable narrative structures: an urgency-driven opening, a brief personal endorsement, and a clear call to action directing followers to platform-linked purchase pages. Taken together, these near-identical arcs suggest commercial content is not organized independently by individual influencers, but is shaped through coordinated promotional schedules and standardized messaging frameworks. Such synchronization points to the role of MCNs, working in conjunction with platforms and brands, in orchestrating the timing and structure of influencer output.

We conceptualize this pattern as commercial orchestration: the systematic structuring of influencer content so that its timing and messaging are aligned with overarching commercial imperatives, including national e-commerce sales cycles, platform-level campaigns, and brand strategies. This orchestration operates through interconnected mechanisms involving platforms, MCNs, and brands, but MCNs play a central coordinating role in translating these imperatives into standardized influencer output. Platforms first set and amplify the promotional tempo by curating campaign-specific hashtags and rewarding participating posts with algorithmic boosts, thereby funneling visibility toward sales-oriented content during peak consumption periods. For example, during Double Eleven, Weibo elevated campaign-linked hashtags such as #Double11MustBuyList to its trending lists, incentivizing influencers to adopt them in exchange for heightened reach. This creates a feedback loop in which adherence to platform-defined promotional calendars is reinforced through visibility and engagement rewards.

At the same time, MCNs function as commercial intermediaries that bridge brand and platform demands with influencer output (Han, 2021). While our data set cannot directly observe MCN directives, prior research shows that MCNs frequently act as campaign aggregators, clustering their influencer portfolios around synchronized promotional schedules to maximize collective visibility and bargaining leverage (Li & Abidin, 2025). In practice, MCNs provide content optimization resources, including templates, sample scripts, preproduced product imagery, and recommended posting schedules, that ensure consistency across multiple influencer accounts during key sales periods (Sun, 2024). Taken together, these dynamics show how platforms, brands, and MCNs operate in concert, positioning influencers as integrated agents within a tightly choreographed commercial ecosystem.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study examined the industrialization of digital entrepreneurship through the case of beauty influencers operating within China’s MCN-centered influencer economy. Combining computational content analysis of 17,629 Weibo posts with qualitative analysis of representative samples, we demonstrated that influencer production in this context is highly patterned and institutionally coordinated. Quantitatively, four dominant content themes—commercial promotion, beauty professionalism, performative everydayness, and community engagement—revealed a field structured by repetition, timing, and commercial alignment.

Qualitatively, we showed that influencer entrepreneurship is enacted through three interrelated practices: scripted selfhood, strategic intimacy, and commercial orchestration. Together, these findings indicate that influencer labor in China is less an expression of individualized creativity than the outcome of coordinated production shaped by MCNs, platform logics, and market imperatives.

By situating influencer labor within China's MCN ecosystem, this study advances existing debates on influencer labor studies in two key ways. First, it empirically demonstrates a form of industrialized influencer labor under MCN management, in which authenticity, intimacy, and selfhood are not merely performed, but systematically organized and reproduced at scale. Rather than treating influencer entrepreneurship as a flexible or individualized mode of work, our findings show how influencer labor practices are standardized, routinized, and synchronized through institutional infrastructures. The heavy clustering of posts around major promotional events such as 618 and Double Eleven, the routinization of giveaways, and the ubiquity of selling-oriented content illustrate how self-expression and affective engagement are increasingly folded into platform-driven cycles of promotion and consumption. In this sense, MCN-affiliated influencer labor comes to resemble industrial labor, reorganized into predictable and monetizable formats calibrated for commercial conversion. This contribution extends existing critical scholarship on influencer precarity and platform governance by specifying how organizational intermediaries actively structure creative practice itself, transforming creativity, intimacy, and selfhood into coordinated inputs within an industrialized system of content production.

Second, this study provides empirical grounding for scholarship that has theorized MCNs as powerful intermediaries within China's influencer economy. While prior research has emphasized MCNs' gatekeeping roles, intermediary power, and influence over monetization strategies, our analysis extends this work by showing how these organizational arrangements become visible in influencer content itself. Synchronized posting rhythms, shared affective templates, and near-identical promotional arcs across accounts point to coordination beyond the level of individual influencers. Taken together, these patterns indicate that MCNs do not merely facilitate influencer work, but actively transform influencer activity into a collectively orchestrated commercial system.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that content standardization on social media platforms is not produced by MCNs alone. Across diverse platform contexts, influencers routinely adapt their practices in response to algorithmic imaginaries, performance metrics, and peer imitation—dynamics well documented in influencer labor studies beyond China. However, the patterned synchrony observed in our data—across timing, narrative structure, affective framing, and promotional messaging—suggests a level of coordination that exceeds what algorithmic adaptation or individual strategic behavior alone would likely produce. Rather than emerging organically from individual strategy, this standardization is actively organized through MCNs, which translate platform incentives and commercial demands into shared templates, synchronized promotional schedules, and routinized content strategies. In this way, MCNs amplify platform and market pressures into structured production regimes that enable standardization at scale.

In closing, we acknowledge that our analysis is limited to the visible outcomes of Weibo feeds and cannot fully capture the backstage negotiations among influencers, MCNs, and brands. In addition, our

focus on beauty influencers does not encompass the full diversity of China's influencer industries across other verticals or platforms (e.g., Douyin, Xiaohongshu). Future research could extend this approach across platforms and content sectors, compare trajectories of influencer industrialization across national contexts, and further examine how audiences perceive and respond to scripted selfhood and commercialized intimacy under industrialized conditions.

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