

Research on the Development Dilemma of "Creator Economy" on Social Media Applications among Chinese University Students

Yining Mao*

Aquinas International Academy, Ontario, CA 91761, USA

Abstract. This paper focuses on a blank in the research on the development dilemma of social media creators' economy mainly targeting current college students, presents interviews with college student content creators, analyzes the reasons, discusses the potential impact of future technological factors and policy support which has important practical significance for the full employment and industry development of future college student creators. In response to the difficulty of achieving equal rewards, the original author's copyright protection and the platform's discourse power summarize the ways to solve the development dilemma of creators' economy in social media applications for college students which the country should strengthen the governance of the internet environment and internet chaos, formulate laws and regulations on the copyright of internet works, regulate the management of internet platforms and the operation of creators and social media platforms should establish a strict verification mechanism to verify the reliability of the content and works published on the platform, enhance the protection of original works and high-quality authors, crackdown on infringers, and prohibit access to the network.

1 Introduction

With the rapid development of the digital age, the widespread application of new social media has given rise to a new economic model, namely the creator economy. The creator economy is a new economic model where creators earn income by creating digital content with the assistance of internet platforms. In the era of Web 2.0, the mature development of websites and applications has allowed more users to participate in internet content creation. Empowered by content platforms and creation tools, the scale of internet content creators continues to grow. At this stage, internet content creators mainly distribute their created content through social media platforms, accumulate fans, and generate revenue through brand sponsorships, advertising revenue sharing, subscription payments, and other models.

In China, more and more people are joining the army of content creators on platforms such as TikTok and Xiaohongshu. The creator economy has gradually shifted from text-based

* Corresponding author: heyu@ldy.edu.rs

creation to a significant emphasis on short videos and live streaming. Taking the example of the booming short video live streaming in recent years, according to the statistical report on the development of China's Internet by the China Internet Network Information Center, by the end of 2022, the scale of short video users in China reached 1.012 billion, with a high user penetration rate of 94.8%. By the end of 2023, the total number of short video accounts on the entire network in China reached 1.55 billion, with 15.08 million professional anchors. "Live streaming +" has injected new vitality into multiple industries. In a survey on "What do contemporary college students care most about in terms of employment?", 61.6% of the surveyed university students stated that they would consider becoming "Internet celebrities for live streaming" after graduation. Short video live streaming has also become an important new channel for contemporary university graduates' employment. In July 2024, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of China officially announced the inclusion of new professions such as online anchors in the Chinese national occupational classification, confirming the occupational identity of online anchors for the first time. It is foreseeable that the social media content creation market will continue to grow in the future, the talent gap will continue to widen, and the supply-demand matching relationship between the industry and the group of university graduates entering the workforce is expected to be continuously reinforced. For university students, this means more development opportunities.

However, the 80/20 rule is quite evident in the social media creator industry, with industry development reports showing that 95.2% of practitioners in the social media content creator industry earn monthly incomes below 5000 yuan, with only 0.4% of practitioners earning over 100,000 yuan per month. This issue is also very prominent among college student creators, with 59% of respondents failing to monetize their content.

This paper focuses on college student social media creators, analyzes the development dilemma of the "creator economy" for college students, and discusses the potential impact of future technological factors and policy support which has important practical significance for the full employment and industry development of future college student creators.

2 Literature review

With the rise of the creator economy, in recent years, experts and scholars have conducted numerous studies on the creator economy of new social media, proposing some difficulties and development considerations encountered by creators. Wang Deng believes that as "Internet natives," college students have strong learning and acceptance abilities for new things, and can easily learn the "tricks" of various social media, but they lack the ability to discern information, their initiative and constructive in media use is not strong, either [1]. Zhiqiang Hao and other authors pointed out that some college student creators lack understanding of content creation in current short video entrepreneurial projects, originality, and unique styles, resulting in mediocre project content and economic benefits not meeting expectations [2]. It is found that while a majority of creators view audience interactions favorably, nearly every creator could recall at least one incident of hate and harassment, and attacks are a regular occurrence for one in three creators. As a result of hate and harassment, creators report self-censoring their content and leaving platforms [3]. Apart from the income having a significant gap with expectations, the development of the creator economy faces many other challenges. Jiao Wang and Chun Du pointed out that although short video platforms generally show a benign development trend, issues such as content quality, copyright protection, algorithm mechanisms, and entertainment properties are restricting industry development [4]. Yuting Cai and Xin Luo analyze that in China, from Weibo, WeChat official account, Toutiao to Douyin, Kuaishou, there has always been "chaos in content creation" in the development of "self-media," where practitioners vary in quality, and the rationality and value rationality of content creation tools are in an unstable state [5].

Author Meng Shi proposed that although China's Internet companies have a strong development momentum, the industry as a whole is still in the early stage of development, and policies regarding personal information protection and cybersecurity still need improvement. Its globalization development is also influenced by international geopolitics. For example, TikTok's success is not only due to the support of the recommendation algorithm and accurate user profiling but also because this set of operating rules can be realized in China's legal system, while in the United States, it is considered an industry monopoly and infringement. In 2019, the United States began reviewing TikTok on the grounds of collecting user data and threatening national security. In 2020, India issued a ban prohibiting 59 Chinese apps including TikTok. In February of the same year, European consumer groups complained about TikTok for violating EU consumer laws [6]. Some studies have found that Creators invest time and energy not only in creating content but also in self-branding and networking across different platforms, often exposing their private lives to establish and maintain intimacy with audiences, in the hope of gaining popularity and reputation, that is, of increasing their social capital [6]. Many creators are willing to accept precarious conditions as long as the promise of "making it" remains at least somewhat believable [7]. Some scholars also argue that as a social media platform that relies entirely on user-shared content to operate, Xiaohongshu APP has experienced a dynamic process from unconscious exploitation of users as "audience equals commodity" to compensated exploitation of users with labor willingness, ultimately becoming "digital labor" and showing weak resistance consciousness [8].

How to solve the dilemma and problems of creator economy development in current social media applications for college students, some views proposed by experts and scholars are worth learning from. H. Bhargava shows that revenue sharing is (only partly) a tug of war between the platform and creators because a moderate sharing formula strengthens the overall ecosystem and profits of all participants. However, revenue-sharing tensions indicate a need to extend the one-rate-for-all creators approach with richer revenue-sharing arrangements that can better accommodate heterogeneity among creators [9]. Creators rely on a variety of tools and coping strategies to contend with attacks. Moderation at keeping them safe from attacks. Reporting was seen as the least effective and moderation tools as the most effective [3]. Scholars have taken TikTok as an example of a short video platform with a high market share to demonstrate that the overall monetization situation of current content creators is poor, with problems including a single monetization channel, high monetization threshold, lack of commercial functions of MCN agencies, lack of commercial guidance for content creators, lack of verticality of content creators, and uneven overall monetization situation. They propose ideas such as opening up new content monetization channels, empowering MCN for content monetization, and strengthening communication between content creators and other industries for monetization [10].

In the field of creator economy, many scholars have conducted research, but there is still a blank in the research on the development dilemma of social media creators' economy mainly targeting current college students. This paper contacts some college student creators to understand the practical problems encountered by college students in using social media for creation and development, summarizes the ways to solve the development dilemma of creators' economy in social media applications for college students, in order to enrich the research results related to "development of college students' creator economy on social media".

3 Methodology

This paper presents interviews with college student content creators, including those using platforms such as TikTok, Xiaohongshu, and Kuaishou, summarizes key aspects of the

investigation, designs the research plan, and pays attention to privacy protection and ethical procedures during the interview process to minimize harm.

This study utilized the summer vacation period of Chinese university students in July and August to conduct on-site interviews with recognized and recruited university student creators offline. The main focus was on interviewing 3 creators from Chinese universities who are active on three social media platforms: TikTok, Xiaohongshu, and Kuaishou. Before the interviews, the questions and objectives to be explored in this study were clarified. The questions included the creators' age, gender, start time of creation, platforms for creation, content of creation, years of creation, average monthly income, the biggest challenge encountered during the creation process, the ways or means adopted to solve problems encountered, problems that have been solved, problems that have not been solved for a long time, new problems arising with the development of media and technology, how platforms should enhance targeted management, what policy support the country should provide, and the outlook for the future of social media creators' economy. Then the author organized and analyzed the interview data, focusing on key issues, and searching for associations, commonalities, and individualities.

4 Results

Through interviews, the first challenge in the development of the "creator economy" in social media applications for college students is that most creators find it difficult to achieve equal rewards. Interviewee A mentioned that she mainly writes various English learning notes on Xiaohongshu, but the click-through rate is not ideal, which fails to attract advertisers and cooperation opportunities, leading to lower and unstable overall income, so the controllability of content benefits for creators is low.

The second dilemma is that the creator's information is not protected, and the original author's copyright is often infringed upon by the unauthorized reproduction of works. Respondent B, a music college student, posts his original music works on the TikTok platform and performs live singing. By showcasing his talent and original works, he attracts more and more attention and fans, as well as opportunities for advertising cooperation and brand sponsorship provided by the platform, achieving economic independence. However, the problem of his songs being commercially interpreted by other platforms or bloggers to attract traffic is very common, even though he and the platform have already prominently stated that unauthorized use of original works is not permitted.

The third dilemma is that the platform's discourse power is significantly stronger than other roles in the current student creator economy, including the platform's algorithm black box, the high dependence on content distribution for intelligent recommendations and ranking, and the issue of information silos. For example, creator C, a graduate student majoring in computer science, shares his computer learning experience, computer application skills, and live answers to fans' various computer software applications and hardware maintenance issues on the Kuaishou live platform. In addition to the appeal of the content itself, the platform's use of big data analysis plays a more crucial role in recommending and attracting potential audiences to the creator's work. At the same time, the constant adjustment and changes in platform rules also increase creators' uncertainty and distress.

5 Discussion

Given the three dilemmas of contemporary university students' social media application creators' economy reflected in the above interview, this paper further analyzes the reasons and attempts to propose measures to address the issues.

The main reasons for the problems of low traffic, low and unstable income are as follows: first, the content created has a strong similarity and lack of high quality, the creators or content do not have unique styles that can make them stand out among many similar creators and become "internet celebrities." Second, platforms such as Xiaohongshu currently have limited monetization channels, mainly relying on advertising and partnership promotions, the limited channels make the income sources of creators relatively single. Third, the consumers' proactive support for creators, is insufficient, especially for high-quality and niche content. For example, some consumers do not want their favorite creators to be widely discovered, leading to a vicious cycle. Lastly, there is an insufficient supply of education in schools for college students in social media creation and entrepreneurship and training channels from official sources. There is still a gap between the reality trend of the data-driven, integrated, platform-based, and intelligent communication industry and the education in news communication in China, with obvious disconnection between education and industry.

For such problems, this paper proposes three coping strategies. First, creators themselves need to continuously improve their creative ability and quality, attract more users who are genuinely interested in the content, gain more followers' attention and stable traffic. Second, creators should actively expand offline activities, increase influence, seek cooperation, launch their own branded products, and broaden monetization channels. Additionally, government regulatory departments and social media platforms should introduce more incentive policies to attract and support college students in developing the creator economy, providing cash and traffic for college student creators, platforms and schools should provide systematic training and growth courses for college student creators, offer more brand collaboration opportunities, marketing and promotional opportunities.

The issue of college student creators having their original works infringed upon can be attributed to several reasons. Firstly, the fierce competition and low entry barriers on social media short video and live streaming platforms have led to a mix of qualities among creators, with many low-quality hosts stealing others' creations in order to gain more traffic. Secondly, the insufficient crackdown on websites engaging in infringement activities in the current online environment has led to incomplete governance of the infringement of others' original works. Moreover, the laws and regulations protecting the works of online and social media creators in the country are not yet sound.

In response to this issue, this paper proposes three strategies. Firstly, the country should strengthen the governance of the internet environment and internet chaos, formulate laws and regulations on the copyright of internet works, regulate the management of internet platforms and the operation of creators, shut down websites engaged in infringement activities, govern websites providing infringing link services, and clean up the online environment. Secondly, social media platforms should establish a strict verification mechanism to verify the reliability of the content and work published on the platform, enhance the protection of original works and high-quality authors, crack down on infringers, and prohibit access to the network. Thirdly, creators should enhance their awareness of protecting their rights. During the creative process, keep proof of the creation process of the work, do not casually share their original works on poorly managed internet platforms, regularly clean computer viruses, and prevent malicious infringement by search engine websites providing infringement services.

Regarding the strong influence of platform discourse and the constraints on the development of college student creators' economy, there are mainly two reasons. On the one hand, currently, college student creators mainly rely on fixed online platforms for content dissemination through social media. With the development of internet technology, platforms have further strengthened their control over content. Creators find it difficult to have enough freedom to establish rules that suit their own situations. They need to highly conform to the constantly changing platform rules in order to sustain development, even if it may not align

with their own situations, thus affecting the freedom and innovation of the creators' economy. On the other hand, in the process of promoting the development of college student creators' economy, there is a lack of comprehensive regulatory rules to limit the strong control of platforms, ensuring fair competition and protecting the rights and interests of creators' earnings.

As for this issue, this paper proposes three measures. First, seek a more equal and open collaboration model to enhance the controllability of content benefits, creators' rights, and freedom. This includes the tokenization of digital content, limiting the unlimited duplication and distribution of underlying content, and enhancing the scarcity of digital creativity. Through the value attributes of tokens, consumers can directly benefit from the growth of creators. Second, provide creators with partial ownership of content production and dissemination through DAOs, breaking the central position of distribution platforms in the creator economy. Third, enrich content production tools for general individual creators, enhance the liquidity and activity of the creator economy. This includes introducing revenue-sharing functions and editable economic models, allowing all creators above the contribution chain to benefit, providing a potential optimization strategy for enhancing collaboration among creators, reducing vicious competition, and ensuring a more reasonable distribution of income.

6 Conclusion

College students in the development of the creator economy on social media applications face issues such as unstable income, lack of protection of original rights, and being controlled by platform power. However, due to the unique professional advantages of college student creators, high-quality creative content, and high-quality live presentations, it is recommended that the country and social media platforms introduce more incentive policies to attract and support college students in developing the creator economy. This includes providing cash and traffic, offering systematic training and growth courses, providing more brand cooperation opportunities, and marketing and promotion opportunities. Furthermore, by focusing on creators, reorganizing the underlying logic of distribution platforms, and expanding from indirect payment models to direct payments, we can improve the maturity of the supply and demand sides of the content creation market, and encourage more accounts to have independent investment value and initiative. In addition, the formation of DAOs decentralized autonomous organizations, adopting a cooperation model that redistributes power between creators, platforms, and consumers, with platforms returning to intermediary roles, and other participants jointly participating in operations. Under the trend of decentralized, co-building, and co-creation platforms, each content creator is expected to receive a more fair distribution of profits, thereby incentivizing them, creating a positive creative atmosphere, and driving the continuous growth of the creator economy for college students on social media applications.

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