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Constructing Career Values in Influencer Culture: A Qualitative Case Study of Wang Buran

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Abstract. Becoming an influencer is increasingly seen as a possible career choice, especially among young people. Yet what is most visible on social media is often fame, income, and popularity, while the work, responsibility, and uncertainty behind such success receive less attention. This study explores how career values are shaped within influencer culture by taking Chinese content creator Wang Buran as a qualitative case. Drawing on publicly available short videos, livestream materials, interviews, and media reports published between 2022 and 2026, the analysis focuses on three main dimensions of career value construction. One dimension concerns professional competence, which can be seen in Wang Buran's filming skills and the distinctive content style he has developed over time. Another is social responsibility, as his long-term involvement in public welfare shows how professional success can also be connected with wider social concerns. His career experience further presents success as something gradually built through persistence, setbacks, and continuous self-improvement, rather than achieved at a single moment. However, his experience also indicates that individual effort does not occur independently of the wider platform environment, where unequal opportunities and conditions continue to exist. From this case, influencer success can therefore be understood as more than simply becoming famous; it also involves professional ability, a sense of responsibility, and sustained effort over time.

Keywords: influencer culture, career values, qualitative case study, professional identity, Wang Buran

1. Introduction

As digital platforms are widely used in daily life, internet influencers gain public popularity and influence by sharing content on social media, which can be classified as professional content production internet celebrity, appearance-based internet celebrities, and celebrity-type internet celebrities [1]. The booming influencer economy has further boosted their social impact. They now serve as influential cultural icons, especially for job seekers under severe employment pressure and facing various career choices. The development of internet celebrities allows career values inherent in influencer culture to be displayed through social media, and this has gradually become a social issue attracting considerable attention in academic circles. Survey data indicate the growing attractiveness of influencer-related careers among young people: In a post 1995 employment outlook

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survey released by Xinhua Net in China, 54% of the "post95" stated that the most appealing emerging occupation is Internet celebrity. There is a sharp contrast between Generation Z and other generation [2]. This career interest is not exclusive to internet users in China.

Previous studies have examined the links between the influencer economy, media cultivation effects, and entrepreneurial intentions. However, the majority of current research focuses on surface-level behavioral outcomes such as career choice or entrepreneurial behavior, while paying less attention to the symbolic construction of career values. Given this gap, it is necessary to examine how career values concerning success, professional competence, responsibility, and occupational development are constructed within influencer culture.

Against this background, this research adopts a qualitative case study approach centering on the digital content creator Wang Buran. The research explores three core analytical dimensions: his distinct personal style, long-term public welfare practices and persistent endeavor om his career. His persistent endeavor traces his growth from an ordinary online creator to a top-tier influencer, recording the hardships and continual striving throughout his career development. His public image, shaped across short videos and live streaming, builds a grounded, sincere personal persona recognized widely by public. He also does charity outside content creation, embodying the social obligations shouldered by internet celebrities. In a publicly available video interview recorded during a hearing-impaired children assistance program in January 2025, Wang Buran stated that "Having tens of millions of followers brings me not merely income and fame, but more importantly, a heavy sense of responsibility."His public statements also repeatedly associate influencer visibility with social responsibility and public welfare. Wang Buran was selected because of his high public visibility, distinctive content style, sustained charitable engagement, and well-documented career trajectory.

Accordingly, this study asks: How are career values constructed through Wang Buran's public image, digital content, social practices, and career narrative?

2. Literature review

2.1. The dual expression of values in influencer culture

Influencer culture presents a dual model of career development. On the one hand, it increases the visibility of creative, flexible, and non-traditional career paths [3]. On the other hand, highly visible cases of sudden fame may construct unrealistic images of effortless success. Public welfare practices further complicate this picture by associating influencer visibility with social contribution [4, 5].

Both media coverage and scholarly work have highlighted this duality. The article mentions that influencer economy expands people' career horizons and provides diversified, flexible, and interest-driven entrepreneurial paths beyond traditional employment [5]. What's more, another article argues that donations from influencers raise public awareness of charitable causes and the urgency of giving, inspiring more anonymous donations [6]. But the Paper states that negative value orientation which originates from internet celebrities undermines social morality and social responsibility. It pursues fame through improper means and notorious repute, blindly craves popularity, regards interests as the basic motivation for social behaviors, prioritizes profits above all else, and advocates getting rich overnight [7]. Such representations may shape how influencer-related career success is perceived.

Xiang and Wang note that more than 40 percent of the students maintain a relatively rational and moderate attitude rather than blindly admiring influencers [5]. This finding suggests that audiences

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are not passive consumers of media messages and that influencer-related career values are interpreted in contested rather than uniform ways.

While charitable practices present a positive dimension of influencer culture and some audiences maintain relatively rational attitudes toward influencer success, there remains a considerable contrast between idealized career aspirations and the realities of the industry.

2.2. The Matthew Effect in the internet celebrity economy

Media creates a symbolic world of low obstacles, high revenue, and liberty that produces an illusionary picture of careers in the minds of job seekers and is contrary to the real situation in the industry. According to The Paper, it is noted that even though the industry creates a lot of jobs, more than 95 percent of full-time streamers are low-income earners who compete fiercely [8].

The truth is that the industry has the Matthew Effect: the leading streamers receive the majority of the resources and the rest are small streamers with very low earnings, large burdens of work, and occupational stress. Huang further points out that the apparent freedom associated with influencer culture is still shaped by algorithmic and commercial logics, which affect how visibility and success are produced on digital platforms [9]. As the internet celebrity industry has gradually matured, the growing involvement of MCN institutions and capital intervention has also changed the conditions under which influencers develop their careers. Talented influencers who receive institutional support may have access to professional operations, refined packaging, and more resources for content production, while grassroots internet celebrities without a team or established background often face greater difficulty in gaining visibility and standing out in an increasingly competitive environment. This difference also means that the income of internet celebrities cannot be explained entirely by individual effort or ability, as it is influenced by a range of social and structural conditions. In a similar way, Christin and Lu show that influencer compensation is shaped not only by individual popularity and creative ability, but also by broader structural and institutional inequalities [10]. Taken together, these studies question the common view of influencer work as a low-entry, high-reward occupation, showing instead that this type of work continues to involve considerable instability, competitive pressure, and unequal opportunities [2, 8, 11].

2.3. Internet celebrity characteristics and the construction of career success models

From Gerbner's cultivation perspective, repeated exposure to particular forms of media representation can gradually shape how audiences understand and make sense of social reality [12]. As observed by Xu et al., streamers build their career influence and commercial success relying on credibility, professional competence, social presence and personal charisma, and these qualities make them highly persuasive role models for general audiences [13]. Meanwhile, Wu's research reveals that digital media surroundings shape people's entrepreneurial intentions via individual attitudes, perceived social norms and self-control cognition [14].

Different from traditional career paths marked by gradual promotion secured through long-term tenure, internet celebrity culture has forged an innovative occupational development mode featuring creativity, autonomy and accidental rapid fame. Li and Kong show that some young livestreamers construct an "entrepreneurial self" by treating livestreaming as an alternative occupational pathway [15]. According to prior academic research, audiences yearn for the influencer profession while acknowledging personal charm and content creation ability as essential success conditions. Compared with stable traditional careers like civil service that require long-term skill accumulation

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and institutional loyalty, this emerging career mode values creativity, independence and personal individuality.

Liu and Ji describe a "visibility bias" in influencer culture: platforms foreground a small number of successful creators while obscuring long-term preparation, teamwork, unstable income, and industry competition [16]. This gap between visible success and hidden labor provides an important context for interpreting Wang Buran's career narrative.

2.4. Gap

Existing studies have examined influencer traits, commercial performance, career intentions, and platform structures, but fewer studies have explored how career values are organized within the public image and career narrative of an individual influencer. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative case study of Wang Buran.

3. Methodology

3.1. Case selection

This study adopts purposive case-selection strategy to select Wang Buran as the research case for exploring how Chinese internet celebrities construct professional values through short-video and live-streaming narratives. Wang Buran is a well-known content creator and live streamer active across major Chinese social-media platforms. As of August 2026, Wang Buran had approximately 10.8 million followers on Douyin, alongside substantial fan bases on Xiaohongshu, Kuaishou and Weibo, forming cross-platform public influence. He has been covered and positively evaluated by mainstream domestic media reports for producing positive-value-oriented content and participating in public-welfare activities, which provides abundant publicly available textual and audiovisual materials for qualitative analysis. In recent years, he has also attended several industry award ceremonies for live-stream creators, indicating a certain level of recognition within the domestic creator ecosystem.

Given the nature of a single-case study, the findings from Wang Buran's case are not intended to represent all Chinese internet-celebrity creators. Instead, he is treated as an information-rich critical case whose career experience offers useful material for examining how professional values are presented and developed within influencer culture. By looking closely at his content practices and career experience, this paper explores the underlying narrative logics involved in the construction of professional values among internet celebrities, while providing a useful reference for comparison with similar cases in future research.

3.2. Data collection

The materials used in this study were all publicly accessible and focused on Wang Buran, including short videos, livestream records, public interviews, and mainstream-media reports collected between 2022 and 2026. The final dataset contained 20 short videos, 5 livestream excerpts, 5 public interviews, and 10 mainstream-media reports. Materials were included when they provided relevant information about Wang Buran's professional skills and content creation, public-welfare practices, or career development, as these areas were closely related to the focus of this study. To ensure that the data remained appropriate for academic analysis, all materials were collected from publicly

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accessible platforms, official accounts, or mainstream-media sources, and no private or confidential information was used.

3.3. Coding procedure

Table 1. Coding framework for career value construction in Wang Buran's influencer narrative

Overarching Theme	Descriptive Code	Example from Publicly Available Materials
Professional competence	Reflection on creator occupational risks; emphasis on content quality; self-improvement in performing creation	"Few people can succeed in this industry; content creation demands sustained self-improvement and rational understanding of occupational risks"(I3)
Social responsibility	Public-welfare participation; care for vulnerable groups; delivering positive social messages	"Participate in volunteer activities and devote energy to caring for children with hearing impairment and stray-animal rescue"(N6)
Long-term persistence	Persistent content output; tolerance for industry pressure; long-term commitment to creator identity	"Endure irregular schedules and platform pressure, and keep producing content despite occupational burnout" (L2)

Note: V = short video; L = livestream; I = public interview; N = news report. All examples are drawn from the publicly available materials included in the dataset.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Professionalizing influencer success:distinct personal style and excellent filming skills

Wang Buran has developed a recognizable content-creation style and relatively mature filming skills, which constitute an important dimension of his professional identity as an influencer.

Wang Buran has developed mature, aesthetically refined scene transition techniques, forming a fixed and distinctive content positioning and These techniques have gradually developed into a distinctive and recognizable element of his content style. For example, one representative video filmed at Luoyang White Horse Temple had received approximately 1.24 million likes at the time of data collection. The video begins with a close-up of Wang Buran standing quietly in front of a Buddha statue at White Horse Temple. As he gently touches the base of the statue, the camera gradually pans upward and slightly fades before moving to a medium shot that places him beside the statue against the surrounding temple scenery. Rather than relying on complex visual effects, the video shows his stylistic advantage through smooth scene switching, gentle camera movement, and a calm form of emotional expression, which together give the scene a natural and coherent visual rhythm. Another representative video, which had received more than 5 million likes at the time of data collection, shows similar features in a more developed form. Its seamless, music-aligned transitions work together with balanced lighting and scenic framing to create an immersive yet relaxed mood. Along with his understated but vivid youthful style, these visual choices gradually form a distinctive and recognizable content identity, while the high level of platform engagement also indicates the strong audience response generated by this style.

4.2. Moralizing influencer work:long-term public welfare practices

Public-welfare engagement has been a long-term part of Wang Buran's career rather than an occasional activity. His continued and relatively down-to-earth participation in these practices has

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helped shape a positive professional image, while also connecting influencer work with social responsibility and a broader sense of moral legitimacy.

Over the years, Wang Buran has participated in different forms of public welfare, including supporting the employment of autistic youth, assisting hearing-impaired children, funding stray animal rescue, donating to post-disaster reconstruction, and supporting public welfare projects initiated by other influencers. One example is the "Sound of Love" fundraiser. According to the publicly available project materials included in the dataset, the project attracted nearly 5,700 participants and raised approximately 226,000 yuan, providing support for the rehabilitation training of 226 hearing-impaired children. These figures also show that his public-welfare practices have involved not only personal participation but also the mobilization of wider public support.

His continued involvement in public welfare has gradually made social responsibility a recognizable part of Wang Buran's professional identity. Influencer success, in his case, is reflected not only through visibility and economic achievement, but also through the way public influence can be used to contribute to society and take responsibility for others. These public-welfare practices give his professional image a broader meaning, as the career value presented through his work goes beyond individual achievement and includes a continuing concern for wider social needs.

4.3. Temporalizing success: persistent endeavor contributes to career breakthrough and fame growth

Long-term perseverance has remained an important theme throughout Wang Buran's career development. During the early stages of his career, he experienced a long period of limited recognition, even though he continued to release different types of videos and take part in live-streaming. The lack of attention was accompanied by other pressures, as he sometimes faced mockery, insults, and negative comments from viewers and other live-streamers during his broadcasts. His career choice was also difficult for some family members and friends to understand, since live-streaming and short-video production were not widely regarded as stable or promising career paths at the time. These doubts from people around him, together with the limited income he earned at the beginning, made his early career particularly difficult.

Even under these circumstances, Wang Buran continued producing content rather than giving up this career path. Over time, he worked on improving his filming skills and experimented with different creative styles, while gradually adjusting the direction of his content in response to the public's changing aesthetic demands. This process did not bring immediate success, but it allowed him to develop his creative abilities through continued practice and adaptation. His experience therefore presents career development as a gradual process in which persistence is closely connected with learning, adjustment, and the continuous improvement of professional skills. His dance work "Golden and Beautiful Marriage" was a representative work that reached one million likes for the first time. This viral video immediately made him famous and helped him spread quickly across the internet. He has been transformed into a well-known internet celebrity after going viral from an unknown corner of society.

This growth narrative shows that career success develops over time rather than coming as an immediate result. Wang Buran's early setbacks, limited income, repeated experimentation, and later breakthrough together reflect a gradual process of career development, in which persistence and continuous self-improvement become important career values.

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5. Discussion

5.1. Professional skills and unique style: redefining career success

One important dimension emerging from the case is professional competence. Wang Buran's distinctive visual style and filming techniques show that influencer success can involve specialized creative skills rather than depending mainly on appearance or accidental popularity. A similar point can be found in the study by Xu et al. [13], which identifies professional competence, credibility, social presence, and personal charisma as important factors related to streamer performance. In Wang Buran's case, these qualities can be observed in his everyday content practices and, through continued content creation, gradually become part of a recognizable professional identity.

Professional competence can also be seen as an important career value in Wang Buran's public image and everyday content practices. His career experience shows that influencer success does not depend only on appearance, luck, or a sudden rise in popularity. It is also closely related to the gradual development of professional skills, practical capabilities, and a recognizable personal style over time. In his content creation, technical expertise and practical ability are directly reflected in the production of distinctive content, while sustainable personal credibility helps maintain the continuity of his professional identity. These qualities are not developed at once but are gradually accumulated and strengthened through continued practice, making them more important to long-term career development than superficial fame alone.

This finding is generally consistent with existing discussions of influencer characteristics and career success models, particularly the role of technical competence and consistent personal positioning in building a recognizable professional identity and maintaining professional sustainability. Wang Buran's case also adds another perspective to the understanding of career success, showing that distinctiveness and professional expertise can develop together even within a non-traditional career path.

5.2. Long-term charitable engagement: legitimizing influencer occupation with social value

This finding draws attention to a more positive dimension of influencer culture that has received relatively limited discussion in existing research. Much of the current literature has focused on its possible negative effects on people's cognition and career cognition, particularly concerns related to materialism, fame seeking, and distorted career expectations, while the positive values that may also emerge from influencer culture have received less attention in mainstream studies. Contrary to the common idea that the job of an influencer is merely about making money and entertaining, this study has found that, over time, Wang Buran's long-term public-welfare practices present influencer work as involving not only entertainment and economic activity but also social responsibility and public contribution. In addition, this finding shows that the influencer profession serves the dual purpose of self-actualization and social contribution. In this sense, the case expands the meaning of influencer career success from self-actualization and economic achievement to a combination of personal development and social contribution.

This finding further answers the research question by showing how social responsibility becomes incorporated into the professional identity represented by Wang Buran. His sustained charitable activities construct influencer work as a potentially legitimate form of professional activity that can include public service, support for vulnerable groups, and the communication of socially responsible values.

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Therefore, according to Tang's view, donations made by influencers can raise public awareness of charitable causes and promote a sense of urgency to give, thus motivating more anonymous donations [6], as shown in the literature review. Wang Buran has taken part in various grassroots charity activities and has publicly encouraged followers to participate in public welfare, further incorporating social responsibility into his influencer identity. Wang Buran's case therefore represents a model in which professional achievement and social contribution coexist, broadening the value dimensions associated with influencer work.

5.3. Arduous creation experience: disillusioning the myth of effortless celebrity

The above finding shows that achieving success in life is not straightforward, and to reach one's goals over a long period of time, enduring perseverance and the ability to withstand loneliness must be developed. It breaks the misleading impression that influencers gain fame effortlessly by mere appearance or good fortune. Wang Buran only gained widespread recognition after a long period of neglect, external doubts and a small income for many years, but he continued to create and improve himself. His trajectory therefore presents perseverance as an important condition for career development, although perseverance alone cannot guarantee success in the highly unequal influencer economy.

This finding also responds to the research question by showing how persistence and continuous self-improvement are incorporated into Wang Buran's career narrative as desirable professional values. In this narrative, diligence, pressure resistance, and continuous self-improvement are positioned against the pursuit of quick success and instant rewards. Wang Buran had a small income for many years in his early life, and this is a typical case of the Matthew effect. Through continuous effort and self-improvement, he eventually stood out and became one of the more visible influencers in the field. Wang Buran's perseverance played a vital role in his career development, yet individual efforts alone cannot fully account for his success. Research conducted by Christin and Lu [10] corroborates this viewpoint: internet celebrities' earnings are not determined solely by their follower counts and creative capabilities, and various external social factors including race, gender and social class exert a substantial impact on creators' commercial quotation and actual income, which reveals a stark disconnect between the industry's idealized income benchmarks and real market conditions [10]. This pattern is also in line with the industry statistics discussed in the literature review, which show considerable income inequality among full-time streamers [8]. Wang Buran's experience therefore offers a more complicated picture of influencer career development. His personal narrative places considerable emphasis on persistence, self-improvement, and long-term commitment, but these individual qualities do not operate independently of the environment in which influencer work takes place. Differences in access to visibility, resources, and income continue to shape the opportunities available to creators within broader platform and market structures. In this sense, his case moves beyond the idea that becoming an influencer is an easy path to fame, while also questioning the assumption that hard work by itself will necessarily lead to success. Career development is instead shown as a process shaped by both continued individual effort and the wider conditions surrounding influencer work.

6. Conclusion

Influencer culture has made success more visible than ever before. A viral video, millions of followers, and commercial opportunities can all be displayed on a screen, while the years of practice, uncertainty, pressure, and repeated failure behind them are much easier to overlook. Wang

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Buran's story is meaningful precisely because it reveals both sides of this picture. His career is built not only on visibility, but also on professional skills, sustained effort, and an attempt to connect personal influence with responsibility toward others.

Perhaps this is where the discussion of career values becomes more meaningful. In a media environment that often celebrates quick success, a more lasting understanding of work may still return to some simple things: developing an ability that cannot easily be replaced, taking responsibility for the influence one has, and remaining patient with a career that may not immediately offer recognition. Wang Buran represents only one possible path, not a model that everyone can or should follow. Yet his case allows us to see that behind the changing forms of work, some questions remain unchanged: What makes a career worth pursuing, and what kind of person do we hope to become through our work?

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