



The Silencing Effect? Examining the Effect of Real-Name Verification on Social Media Influencers' Public Engagement

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Research Question and Hypothesis

Research Question and Hypothesis

Introduction: The Real Name Verification for Mega Influencers on Weibo in China

Weibo's Real Name Verification policy mandates the disclosure of real names for influencers with a follower count exceeding 500,000. Although the concept of real name verification is not novel, the current iteration, referred to as front real name verification, represents a significant departure from previous practices.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Information Privacy and Online Disclosure

The Privacy Calculus Theory (PCT) delineates the cost-benefit analysis individuals undertake when considering information disclosure (Culnan & Armstrong, 1999; Margulis, 2003). Initially developed within the e-commerce domain, where users divulge personal data such as names and addresses to service providers in exchange for tailored online services (Dinev & Hart, 2006), PCT posits that individuals are reticent to disclose information when the perceived costs of privacy infringement outweigh the anticipated benefits. Conversely, they are more inclined to disclose when the benefits are perceived as outweighing the risks.

Research Question and Hypothesis

We hypothesize that the diminished anonymity resulting from for real-name verification may discourage users from participating in public discourse. Consequently, in accordance with the Privacy Calculus Theory, influencers may opt to shift their focus towards content categories that are perceived as less risky.

Hypothesis 1: After undergoing real-name verification, influencers will generally decrease the number of posts related to public discourses.

Hypothesis 2: Following verification, influencers will increase their number of posts concerning entertainment topics.

Hypothesis 3: Following verification, influencers will increase their number of posts concerning international issues.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The Hawthorne Effect and The Chilling Effect

Influencers may perceive an augmented level of scrutiny, as this policy establishes a direct link between their online identity and their offline identity. With this heightened awareness, individuals may modify their behaviours when posting content.

Hypothesis 4: When influencers opt to publish content related to societal issues, they are more inclined to employ a positive rather than a negative tone in their discourse.

Hypothesis 5: When influencers opt to publish content related to entertainment issues, they are more inclined to employ a positive rather than a negative tone in their discourse.

Hypothesis 6: When influencers opt to publish content related to foreign countries, the posts sentiment remained the same.



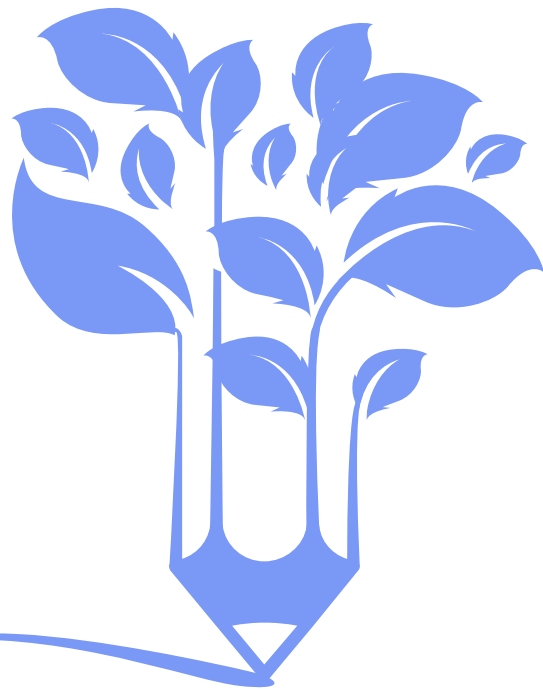
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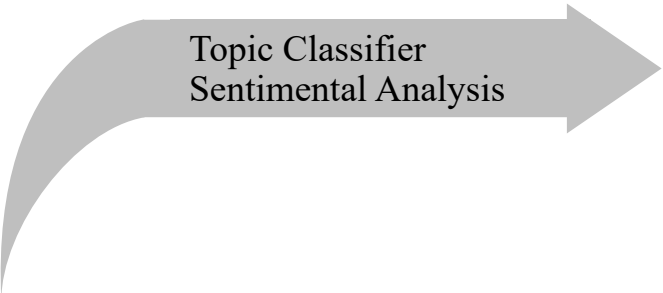
Methodology

Data Collection

1. We initiated our research by compiling a cohort of influential users, commencing with the “V Influential List” compiled monthly by Weibo. From a pool of 11 distinct categories, we meticulously selected 660 individuals.
2. we categorized the influencers into two groups: those with a follower count exceeding 500,000, serving as the treatment group, and those with a follower count below this threshold, constituting the control group.



Data Analysis



Topic Classifier
Sentimental Analysis

Weibo content was categorized into three categories: Public Discourse, Entertainment and International Affairs. To categorize the Weibo posts, we employed the Chinese pre-trained BERT WWM.

We utilized the snowNLP toolkit to perform sentiment analysis on each Weibo post.

Data Analysis



DID Analysis

The study estimated the association between implementation of real name policies and the number of different topics of post through a difference-in-differences analysis.

Data Analysis

DID Analysis

For our primary analysis, we estimated a linear regression DiD model, incorporating user fixed effects (μ), and controlled for the number of followers (N), the type of influencer (X), and the interaction of treat (real name verified is coded as 1 and non-verified as 0) and post (September is coded as 0 and January as 1). The coefficient β_1 of this interaction term measures the influence of the real-name policy on influencers. The regression model is specified as follows:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 Treat \times Post + \beta_2 X + \beta_3 N + \beta_4 Treat + \beta_5 Post + \mu + \varepsilon$$



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Findings

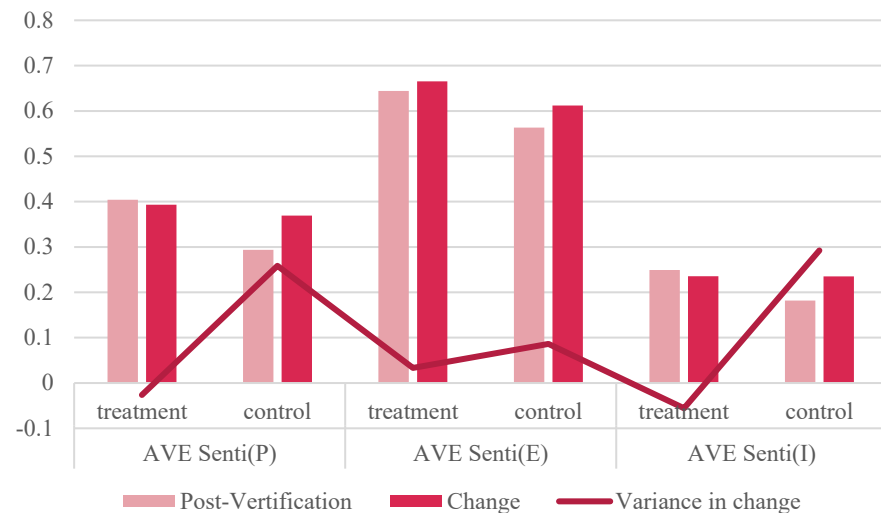
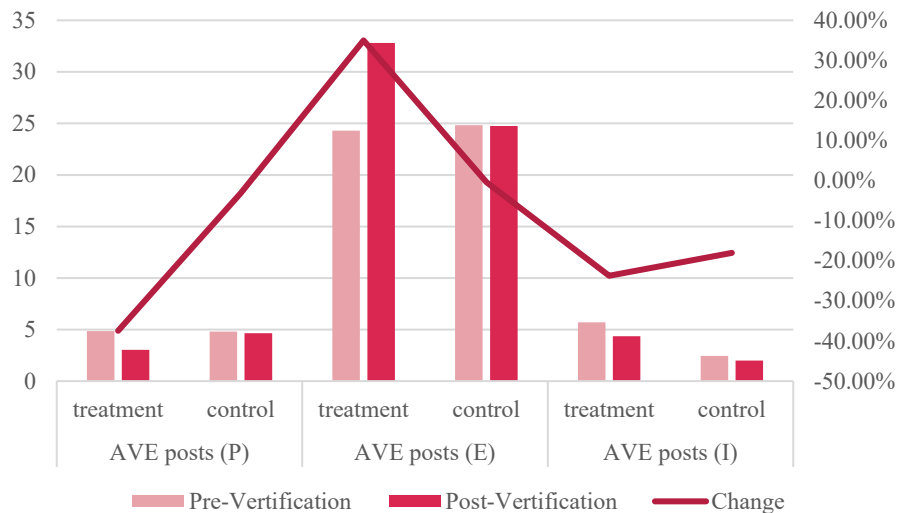


Fig 1. Average values of the Independent Variables

Table 1. Difference in Differences (DiD) Analysis

Variable	N (P)	N (E)	N (I)	S(P)	S (E)	S (I)
Interaction	-1.6685*	8.5936*	-0.9129	-0.0864*	-0.0851***	-0.0671
Followers	-2.527e-07 ***	- 7.99e-07 **	-5.599e-07 ***	-1.03e-07***	-3.908e-07	-1.474e-07***
Type	-0.3157***	0.0444	-0.406**	-0.0216*	0.0059***	-0.0134***
User effect	0.0025***-	-0.0076	-0.0038	-0.0002***	-0.0001***	-6.95E-05
Treat	0.4618	0.9994	4.4198**	0.1116***	0.1136***	0.1008***
Post	-0.148	-0.088	-0.44	*0.0758	0.1064***	0.0532

Please note that the asterisks (*), (**) and (***) denote statistical significance levels, *P<0.05 ** P<0.01 ***P<0.001. The numbers are unstandardized coefficients.

N(P) represents the number of posts for each individual per month related to public matters. S(P) represents the average sentiment of posts for each individual per month related to public matters.

Table 2. Regression Results for 11 Type of Influencers

The Influencer Type	N (P)	S (P)	S (E)
Military Influencer	-11.3307**		
Gaming Influencer	-2.6595*		
Historical Influencer	-2.7905*		
Legal Influencer	-4.0100*		
Historical Influencer		-0.3926**	
Humorous Influencer		-0.3063*	
Legal Influencer		-0.1838*	
Local Influencer			-0.7329***
Financial Influencer			-0.2077**

The military influencer notably reduced their engagement with public discourse posts following the display of the verified label on their homepage. Historical, humorous, and legal influencer types displayed a propensity to employ a more negative tone in their public matter posts.

Please note that the asterisks (*), (**) and (***) denote statistical significance levels, * $P < 0.05$ ** $P < 0.01$ *** $P < 0.001$. The table only displays the statically significant results, with numbers representing unstandardized coefficients. N(P) represents the number of posts for each individual per month related to public matters. S(P) represents the average sentiment of posts for each individual per month related to public matters.

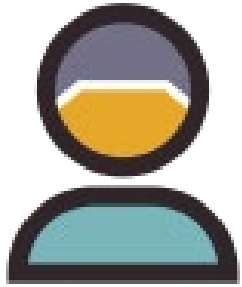
Findings

1. Our findings reveal substantial changes in public engagement both before and after the policy's introduction. We observed a surge in the number of posts related to entertainment following the real-name policy's implementation.
2. The sentiment expressed in posts concerning public discourse and entertainment slightly decreased post-policy implementation. .

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Conclusion



Flexible Users?

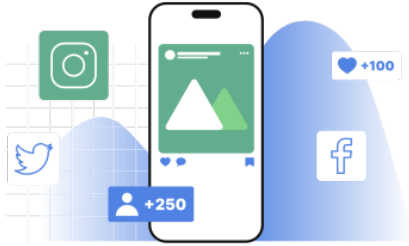
Contrary to the findings of Lee (2018), who observed strategic message crafting to avoid detection, our study suggests that influencers do not necessarily modify the tone of their content to align with the party's requirements.

They reveal that influencers, as rational economic actors, do not act on their instinct to exercise free speech but also do not flexibly employ multiple maneuvers to disguise their true opinions.

Differentiated Silences

The impact of the real-name policy on various types of influencers is not uniform.

This phenomenon, which we term "Differentiated Silences," represents a novel mechanism of information control, directly resulting in self-censorship. By selectively influencing the posting behaviors of different types of influencers, the real-name policy effectively filters and curates the dissemination of information, favoring certain narratives and perspectives over others.





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