



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 15, Issue 04, 2026: 13-23

Article Received: 23-06-2026

Accepted: 04-07-2026

Available Online: 17-07-2026

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v15i4.2718>

Screening the vernacular: Algorithmic empathy, co-presence, and publicness on Chinese social media

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of digital vernacular creativity on Chinese social media represents a significant shift from elite institutional art toward screen-based visual practices. This paper interrogates the construction of 'aesthetic publicness' through the dual, interlocking mechanisms of 'empathy' and 'co-presence'. Utilizing empirical visual case studies and longitudinal content analysis tracked to 2026, it investigates how ordinary users and digital creators transform individualized, lived experiences into shared affective symbols. The findings demonstrate that while empathy renders personal narratives universally perceptible, technological co-presence consolidates these individual affects into collective rituals via real-time algorithmic interaction. Concurrently, the study critiques systemic frictions within this ecosystem, notably algorithmic polarization, interface-driven flattening, and datafied aesthetic alienation. Ultimately, this research offers a culturally situated critical framework for understanding how grassroots agency negotiates power asymmetries and reclaims visibility within contemporary 'Digital China'.

Keywords: Aesthetic Publicness; Vernacular Creativity; Empathy; Co-presence; Grassroots Agency.

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1. From 'Phenomenon Naming' to 'Theoretical Proposition': The rise of digital vernacular art

In recent years, the rapid proliferation of 'digital vernacular art' (originally conceptualised as 'new mass literature and art') has emerged as an inescapable phenomenon shaping contemporary China's cultural and visual landscape. Driven by digital technologies such as the mobile internet, artificial intelligence, and short-video platforms, ordinary citizens have participated in artistic creation, production, and dissemination on an expanding scale, contributing to cultural democratisation. Today, this phenomenon has transitioned beyond the narrow definitions of artistic creation or reception; rather, it has transformed into a novel 'living state,' signifying a profound societal shift characterised by the aestheticisation of everyday life and the everydayisation of art (Zhuo 2025: 84).

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As the theorization of this digital vernacular art deepens, the analytical focus must shift from surface-level descriptions to an interrogation of its intrinsic values and deep-seated impacts. In an era where ‘everyone is a creator,’ how can digital vernacular practices transcend the shackles of generalised emotional venting and algorithmic traffic racing to construct a form of ‘aesthetic publicness’ capable of forging social consensus and nurturing the spirit of the times?

Aesthetic publicness in this context is not the detached, disinterested aesthetic judgement of classical Western aesthetics; instead, it refers to a dynamic, open, and socially cohesive space of shared meaning formed through emotional resonance and negotiation within the digital media landscape. Drawing from Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the public sphere historically functioned as a mediatory space between the private realm (civil society) and public authority (the state), where citizens engaged in rational-critical debate to form public opinion (Habermas 1999: 35–40). Similarly, Hannah Arendt’s theory of the public space emphasises political action as the foundation for human freedom and a common world (Arendt 1999: 52–55).

It is crucial to distinguish ‘aesthetic publicness’ from established conceptualizations of digital collectivities. Unlike danah boyd’s ‘networked publics,’ which primarily focus on the structural affordances of architecture (persistence, searchability, replicability), aesthetic publicness emphasizes the organic, bodily, and sensory synchronization of users within these structures. Furthermore, while Zizi Papacharissi’s seminal concept of ‘affective publics’ delineates how streams of sentiment mobilize political alignment and ambient awareness, it often treats affect as an open-ended, politically oriented driver. Aesthetic publicness, conversely, anchors this affect within concrete vernacular cultural production, artistic co-creation, and shared visual poetics. It shifts the analytical focus from purely political ‘connective action’ to a collaborative, culturally situated negotiation of meaning, demonstrating how aesthetic judgment itself becomes the connective tissue of the digital sphere.

However, the generation of publicness within contemporary Chinese social media has deviated from Habermas’s rational-critical ideal, relying instead on affective resonance and instantaneous interaction. Building upon these theories, this study focuses on the aesthetic dimension of emotion and communication, defining ‘aesthetic publicness’ as a sensible community with social integration potential, dynamically generated through affective synchronisation and meaning negotiation within digital media ecosystems.

To fully grasp the mechanics of this shift, it is imperative to interweave contemporary digital media and aesthetic theory. Lev Manovich’s foundational exploration of ‘software society’ suggests that platform interfaces and data architectures are not merely transparent conduits, but the primary cognitive filters that shape contemporary human perception. Within ‘Digital China,’ this computational logic dictates that publicness is no longer anchored in physical or static text-based arenas, but rather within the highly fluid, hyper-interactive visual architectures of mobile applications.

Furthermore, as Boris Groys suggests, the internet has effectively inverted the traditional socio-cultural functions of the institutional art museum; instead of presenting finished masterpieces to a detached, contemplative public, digital interfaces transform the private, vernacular lives of ordinary individuals into an ongoing, hyper-curated aesthetic exhibition. Consequently, the production of aesthetic publicness on Chinese social media operates as a massive, decentralized, real-time performance. In this space, the conventional boundaries separating private subjects from public exhibitions are increasingly blurred, prompting a theoretical framework that accounts for how raw affect, rather than purely detached rational discourse, aggregates public sentiment.

Furthermore, ‘empathy’ and ‘co-presence’ serve as the twin keys to unlocking the mechanism of this aesthetic publicness. Empathy, as a dialogic capacity to understand the other, operates in a spiral progression across different contexts and eras, allowing individuals to pursue universality while maintaining their unique qualities (Liu 2023: 38). On an ontological level, Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Mitsein* (Being-with) reveals that existing with others is an inherent structure of human existence (cited in Zhao 2019: 376). Within the digital arena of Chinese social media, the connotation of ‘co-presence’ is translated from this transcendental structure into an empirically verifiable, technologically mediated state of interactive presence.

In this space, creators, audiences, platform algorithms, and bullet-screen (danmu) comments coexist and interact in real time. The meaning of the artwork is fluidly generated through continuous feedback, appropriation, and reproduction, thereby forging a dynamic, open ‘aesthetic communicative

space'. This study aims to deconstruct the operational mechanisms of empathy and co-presence as core drivers of aesthetic publicness, confront their structural contradictions, and explore pathways for sustainable development, thereby advancing critical inquiries into the art of Chinese social media.

2. Historical trajectories and contemporary newness: the generative context of Chinese social media art

The 'newness' of this digital vernacular art must be scrutinised through the dual lenses of historical depth and contemporary coordinates. Its emergence is the combined result of technological revolutions, structural societal changes, cultural-psychological transformations, and national macro-contexts. To clarify the object of study, Table 1 delineates the core differences between digital vernacular art, traditional popular culture, and early internet art:

Table 1.

Comparative analysis of digital vernacular art and related concepts.

Dimensions	Traditional Popular Culture (e.g., 1980s-90s Martial Arts Novels, Pop Music)	Early Internet Art (e.g., BBS Fiction, Blog Literature)	Digital Vernacular Art (e.g., Short-Video Narratives, Micro-Dramas, Interactive Web Literature)
Creative Subject	Professional or semi-professional creators (writers, musicians).	Online web novelists and bloggers, still retaining an elite character.	Universal participation (delivery riders, farmers, labourer-poets as core creators).
Media & Platforms	Traditional media (books, cassettes, TV) with centralised distribution channels.	PC internet, forums, and literary websites, where interactivity begins to emerge.	Dominated by mobile internet and smart platforms (Douyin, Kuaishou, Bilibili, Yuewen) with deeply embedded algorithms.
Production Mechanisms	Author-dominated, editor-filtered, one-way dissemination.	Author-dominated with reader comment feedback; bi-directional interactivity enhanced.	Platform-based, data-driven, and interactively co-created; artwork meanings fluidly generate post-release via <i>danmu</i> , comments, and user-generated secondary creations (<i>erchuang</i>).
Aesthetic Paradigm	Pursuing legendary narratives and universal emotions, still influenced by classical storytelling.	Extending traditional paradigms with freer themes and more distinct internet styles.	'Poetics of Everyday Life' (vernacular poetics); everyday fragments and personal moments are aestheticised, pursuing instantaneous resonance and emotional value.
Publicness Pathway	Forming an 'imagined community' through mass reading/viewing.	Forming interest-based groups (<i>quyuan</i>) through online community discussions.	Forming a real-time, fluid, and participatory 'virtual aesthetic community' via empathetic triggers and digital co-presence.

China's exploration of mass culture has historically progressed through a complex interplay between enlightenment discourse and market drivers. Although the intellectual liberation movement of the 1980s harbored intentions of a cultural renaissance reminiscent of a 'New May Fourth,' it remained largely confined to elite intellectual circles and failed to deeply penetrate the masses. A critical turning point occurred after the establishment of the socialist market economy model in 1992, which shifted cultural production from institutional frameworks to the social marketplace, rapidly accelerating commercialisation and popularisation. During this era, the widespread circulation of martial arts novels and Hong Kong/Taiwan pop hits marked the moment when artistic expressions leaped out of academic circles and integrated into the everyday consumption practices of the general public (Yu 2025: 86–91).

This deep historical trajectory reveals that widespread cultural participation in China has always been fundamentally contingent upon the shifting materiality of the country's communication infrastructure. The transition from the elite-dominated print capitalism of the early twentieth century to the state-regulated broadcast media networks of the late socialist era enforced a highly centralised model of cultural visibility. Even the initial marketisation wave of the 1990s, while drastically democratising public consumption, left the fundamental means of artistic production securely within the hands of institutional gatekeepers.

The radical break offered by the contemporary social media landscape lies not merely in an expansion of content choices, but in the substantial decentralisation of the creative apparatus. By deploying the smartphone as a high-definition recording studio and a global distribution node, the contemporary vernacular subject frequently bypasses traditional institutional validation, rewriting the visual economy from the societal margins.

In the current era, internet advancements, big data infrastructures, and generative artificial intelligence have catalysed deep innovations in artistic forms and vastly expanded creative spaces. As emphasised in macro-cultural discourses, the strategic development of big data and AI architectures has explicitly broadened the space of literature and art. Entering this new epoch, the spatiotemporal coordinates of art have undergone a fundamental displacement.

On one hand, the vertical screen interface has reconstructed visual grammar, where 'instant feedback' mechanisms embed real-time audience reactions into the text itself, while live-streaming technologies erase the physical distance between the stage and the backstage, dissolving established artistic boundaries. On the other hand, the primary site of meaning-making has migrated from traditional stages or static texts to real-time interactive interfaces, such as comment sections and bullet-screen pools. In this process, instantaneous synchronisation in the temporal dimension and liquid fluidity in aesthetic attributes have become the core defining characteristics that distinguish digital vernacular art from all prior forms.

3. Methodology

To empirically evaluate the dual mechanisms of empathy and co-presence in constructing aesthetic publicness, this study adopts a mixed-methods research design. By combining qualitative textual-visual (close reading) with quantitative directed content analysis, this approach captures both the structural aesthetics of digital vernacular art and the computational, behavioral dynamics of its audience reception.

A. Case Selection and Sampling Strategy

This study employs a purposive sampling strategy to select five landmark cultural cases on Chinese social media spanning from 2022 to early 2026: (1) Wang Jibing's courier poetry (Douyin/Weibo), (2) Li Ziqi's pastoral vlogs (YouTube/Douyin), (3) the viral short video 'How My Second Uncle Cured My Mental Illness After I Returned to the Village for Three Days' (hereafter 'Erjiu', Bilibili), (4) Zhu Xinyan's philosophical short videos (Douyin), and (5) G.E.M.'s transmedia project 'Revelation' (Douban/QQ Music).

These cases were selected based on three criteria: maximum variation in creative subjects (from grassroots laborers to elite celebrities), platform heterogeneity (Bilibili, Douyin, Douban), and high affective density (each generating substantial cross-platform public discourse). Together, they represent the complete lifecycle and structural friction of contemporary digital vernacular art.

B. Data Collection and Processing

While qualitative visual grammar and narrative analyses were performed across all five cases, a bounded, high-density dataset was compiled specifically for the 'Erjiu' video on Bilibili to quantitatively map the real-time formation of digital co-presence. Using a Python-based web scraper via the Bilibili Application Programming Interface (API), the study captured user-generated metadata within a strict 72-hour window following the video's release on July 25, 2022.

The raw dataset comprised the chronological timeline of the first 1,000 bullet screens (danmu) and the top 500 pinned/most-liked comments, capturing the immediate, unmediated affective reactions of the virtual community. After removing blank entries, pure emoji spam, and duplicate posts, the final refined analytical sample consisted of exactly 1,000 danmu units and 500 discursive comment text blocks.

For the qualitative dimensions of the study, the visual analysis of short-video content follows Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's visual grammar framework, systematically decoding spatial staging, compositional salience, camera proximity, and color saturation (such as the deliberate low-saturation palettes in Li Ziqi's vlogs and the jarring handheld cuts in the 'Erjiu' video). To substantiate the longitudinal claims regarding 'Digital China,' the research conducted continuous virtual ethnography and digital archiving from July 2022 to February 2026. This extended temporal window allowed the study to track the evolving life cycle of platform discourses, capturing the shift from immediate algorithmic hyper-visibility to subsequent user-generated secondary interpretations (erchuang) and eventual institutional assimilation across different cultural moments.

C. Coding Scheme and Inter-Coder Reliability

A directed content analysis framework was developed to operationalize the psychological and communicative dimensions of 'co-presence'. Drawing from contemporary audience reception theories, the text units (danmu and comments) were coded into three mutually exclusive categories:

1. Instantaneous Emotional Venting (Affective Catharsis): Defined as immediate, visceral, and unreflective emotional outpourings, characterized by exclamations, expressions of grief, empathy, or weeping (e.g., 'crying uncontrollably,' 'so deeply moved').
2. Ideological Alignment (Structural Resonance): Defined as text that explicitly links the individual narrative to macro socio-political discourses, generational identities, class solidarity, or institutional praise (e.g., 'paying tribute to the resilience of ordinary Chinese people').
3. Deep Cultural Reflection (Critical Engagement): Defined as analytical, interpretive, or biographical text where users engage in historical contextualization, question artistic representation, or contribute extended self-narratives and familial trajectories to debate the existential meaning of suffering.

To ensure empirical rigor, two independent bilingual coders manually evaluated the entire sample of 1,500 text units using a detailed coding protocol. An initial pilot coding of 10% of the dataset was conducted to resolve interpretive ambiguities. The final inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, yielding an overall $\kappa = 0.84$ (with $\kappa = 0.87$ for danmu and $\kappa = 0.81$ for comments), indicating a high level of coding consensus well above the acceptable institutional threshold for publication.

To visualize the theoretical mechanism of this study, Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationships among empathy, co-presence, algorithmic mediation, and user agency.

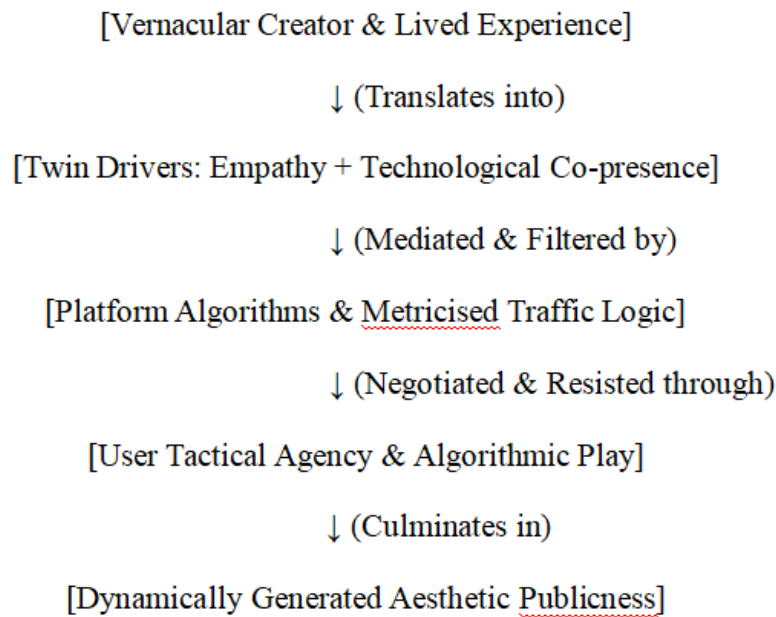


Figure 1: The Conceptual Model of Aesthetic Publicness

As shown in the model, the construction of publicness is a dynamic, multi-layered circuit. Raw grassroots affect acts as the primary input, which is amplified by empathy and co-presence, filtered through platform capitalism, and ultimately negotiated by user agency to reclaim digital visibility.

4. Empathy and co-presence: The dual mechanisms of aesthetic publicness

How is the aesthetic publicness of digital vernacular art dynamically generated within the cultural field constructed by social media? The answer points to the intertwined dual mechanisms of 'empathy' and 'co-presence'.

A. Empathy: From Individual Expression to Collective Affective Symbols

In the context of digital vernacular art, the mechanism of empathy undergoes a fundamental transformation that departs from its classical philosophical definitions. While traditional artistic resonance historically relied on the delayed and indirect 'imagined communities' fostered by classical narratives, the activation of empathy on contemporary social media platforms operates through an instantaneous, bottom-up circuit.

Take the viral poetry of delivery rider Wang Jibing as an example. In his work *The Man Racing Against Time* (Gan Shijian de Ren), he writes:

"Catching wind out of the air / Catching knives out of the wind / Catching fire out of bones / Catching water out of fire / The man racing against time has no seasons / Only one station and the next."

The dense juxtaposition of evocative metaphors not only mirrors the precarious survival of gig-economy labourers but also elevates generalised hardship into a collective affective symbol of modern labour rhythms. A digital content and frequency analysis of the Douyin comment section under this poem reveals that terms such as 'authentic,' 'moved to tears,' and 'mirroring myself' appear with high frequency. This resonance is no longer a one-way path of being 'touched'; rather, it is a mutual validation: the marginalised everyday life is witnessed, visually and textually represented, and granted aesthetic legitimacy on screen.

Similarly, the global resonance of Li Ziqi's videos does not stem from a raw, unmediated documentation of rural life. Textual and narrative analysis shows that her visual language follows a disciplined affective coding pattern. Through precise audio-visual arrangements, rhythmic montage editing, and time-lapse photography, she constructs a fluid Yijing (aesthetic landscape/artistic conception) where everyday life intersects with natural rhythms. This enables absent 'others' to

experience the holistic essence of traditional Chinese aesthetics (Li and Lyu 2025: 166–173). This visual grammar creates an aesthetic utopia of ‘poetic dwelling,’ triggering a collective nostalgia among modern urbanised subjects. The essence of such empathy lies in transforming generalised bodily memories or cultural imaginations into shared affective symbols—a practice of translating absence into presence that constitutes the core logic of empathetic mechanisms on Chinese platforms.

From a cinematic perspective, Li Ziqi’s visual aesthetic deliberately resists the hyper-saturated, fast-paced style characteristic of typical commercial short videos. Her compositions frequently utilize a shallow depth of field, rendering the rural landscape into a soft focus dominated by low-saturation earth tones and muted greens. This visual technique creates an immediate atmospheric distancing effect, effectively insulating the rural setting from the harsh, high-contrast clarity of urban industrialization. Furthermore, rather than relying on artificial studio setups, her work prioritizes natural sunlight filtering through wooden lattices to construct an intimate, pastoral space that invites nostalgic contemplation.

This spatial staging is structurally reinforced by a deliberate alteration of temporal perception, primarily achieved through time-lapse photography. By compressing the months-long growth cycle of an agricultural plant into a seamless, lyrical ten-second sequence, the text strategically replaces the frantic, disjointed time of modern platform surfing with the cyclical temporality of nature. Consequently, the vertical smartphone screen functions as a digital canvas that elevates mundane physical labor into a compelling visual spectacle. This temporal and spatial orchestration successfully transforms individualized viewing into a shared, meditative empathetic engagement across urban audiences.

B. Co-presence: Aesthetic Communication in the Digital Arena

While empathy addresses how individuals are affectively triggered, the mechanism of co-presence explains how these connections are structurally sustained. Within digital spaces, this co-presence manifests as a technologically mediated state of aesthetic presence characterized by virtual-real entanglement, affective projection, and bodily extension (Jin and Liu 2025: 52–59).

For instance, following the viral explosion of the video *How My Second Uncle Cured My Mental Illness After I Returned to the Village for Three Days* (Erjiu) on Bilibili, an empirical content coding analysis of the first 1,000 danmu and 500 comments within 72 hours of its release revealed distinct layers of affective engagement. Among them, 65% represented instantaneous emotional venting (e.g., ‘deeply moved,’ ‘crying’), 25% expressed ideological alignment (e.g., ‘paying tribute to greatness’), and 10% engaged in deep cultural reflection. In the comment sections, discussions formed a progressive hierarchy moving from ‘narratives of suffering’ to ‘the meaning of ordinary life’ and ‘historical reflections,’ with users sharing personal family trajectories in a ‘resonance chain’.

Furthermore, ordinary users actively engaged in secondary user-generated creation (erchuang). As of February 2026, related erchuang videos on Bilibili exceeded 3,000, accumulating over 250 million views (Xia 2023). This ‘digital co-presence’ forms a virtual aesthetic community that is no longer a static interest group (quyuan), but a dynamic, open, and participatory space for aesthetic communication.

Subsequent live-streaming interactions by creators further pushed this co-presence from asynchronous to synchronous, achieving peaks of 150,000 concurrent users and 500,000 danmu interactions. This instantaneity intensifies the experience of shared presence and deepens affective ties, proving that co-presence not only stimulates emotional expression but actively catalyses continuous cultural reproduction.

In stark, dialectical contrast to the polished, pristine pastoralism of Li Ziqi, the visual syntax of the Erjiu video adopts a raw, uncompromising docu-aesthetic that directly mirrors the structural precarity of China’s contemporary rural hinterlands. The cinematography here is dominated by handheld camera movements, where minor bodily shakes and sudden, unpolished pans communicate a sense of unmediated, found-footage authenticity to the digital consumer. The spatial composition frequently frames the protagonist against crumbling brick walls, rusted agricultural machinery, and monochromatic, washed-out winter skies, utilising a heavy grey-dominated colour palette that visually reinforces the narrative themes of physical aging and societal abandonment.

Rather than relying on smooth cinematic transitions, the editing structure employs abrupt, jerky cuts that explicitly mimic the fractured physical movements of Erjiu’s disabled body, translating his

concrete material struggle into a formal, structural element of the visual text itself. The screen text and rapid voiceover do not merely narrate; they operate as a graphical and sonic overlay that punctures the visual bleakness, creating a tense, ironic juxtaposition between the narrator's deadpan delivery and the raw reality captured by the lens. This calculated aesthetic of visual imperfection converts the specific hardships of a single village into a compelling visual narrative of grassroots resilience, binding the co-present community through a shared confrontation with reality.

C. The Coupling Mechanism: From Individual Affect to Collective Rituals

Empathy and co-presence operate as a mutually reinforcing, coupled mechanism, wherein empathy provides the initial affective momentum for structural co-presence. As demonstrated by Chen Chaohua's early promotion of Wang Jibing's poetry, a simple text screenshot shared on Weibo could aggregate over 10,000 retweets within two hours, rapidly expanding into a cross-platform topic with 20 million views (He 2025: 118–122).

Conversely, co-presence provides a structured arena for empathy to ferment. In the case of the traditional metalwork creator 'Caishuqian de Caiqian,' who spent three months recreating the Chinese Space Station using traditional gold and silver craftsmanship, high-frequency danmu phrases included 'recording my presence here' and 'reserved by CCTV.' 'Insiders' who followed the account aligned their attention to validate the video's immense value through dense danmu displays, which in turn guided first-time viewers to immediately grasp the aesthetic 'weight' of the content and join the interaction (Zhang et al. 2025: 146–156). Under the sweeping presence of danmu, self-narratives in comment sections, and massive user-generated remakes, individual emotional waves are rapidly condensed into a performative resonance, culminating in a collective 'affective ritual'.

Compared to Habermas's rational-critical public sphere, the aesthetic publicness generated by the art of Chinese social media relies more heavily on affective resonance and ritualistic participation. This does not represent a negation of classical theory, but an expansion of publicness under digital media materialities. Empathy acts as the portal into the public space, while co-presence sustains its vitality. The coupling of the two transforms digital vernacular art into a dynamically generated, continuously negotiated community of affect and meaning.

5. Affective consumption and community fragmentation: The structural dilemmas of aesthetic publicness

However, the generation of aesthetic publicness via Chinese social media is not without structural friction. Within the operations of empathy and co-presence, a series of inherent dilemmas have increasingly surfaced.

A. The Superficiality of Empathy: The Flattening of Affective Depth by Algorithmic Logic

Driven by data structures and traffic logic, platform algorithms frequently commodify content with empathetic potential, reducing deep human connection into highly replicable 'emotional flashpoints' or 'traffic hooks'.

An illustrative example is the viral phenomenon of Zhu Xinyan, known as the 'Poetic Auntie' (Shiyi Niangniang), in early 2026. Empirical analysis of her short-video dissemination reveals that within the Douyin hashtag '#ZhuXinyan,' the vast majority of videos merely extract the most affectively charged, epigrammatic fragments of her narration (e.g., 'The dumplings are neatly arranged, the longing is long and continuous, and mother is endlessly nagging' or 'Life is largely like this, you get through it, and gradually colour appears') (Ren 2026), juxtaposing them with comforting everyday visuals and ambient background music. Only a negligible fraction of videos engage in a full recitation of her texts or deep critical analysis of her creative philosophy.

The nuanced philosophical insights into the folds of everyday life present in Zhu's original texts are thus flattened into a superficial 'Poetic Auntie' label. When empathy is positioned as a commodified emotional asset for rapid consumption, the potential for deep social consensus that aesthetic publicness aims to foster is often constrained.

This radical flattening of empathetic depth is deeply rooted in the material configuration of the platform interface itself—specifically, the continuous vertical 'swiping' architecture of short-video applications. The endless vertical scroll tends to foster fragmented user attention, where visual content must trigger an immediate visceral response within the first three seconds to survive the platform's

continuous filtering mechanisms. This fifteen-second economy mandates a structural abbreviation of visual and narrative complexity. Complex cultural practitioners like Zhu Xinyan are systematically stripped of their historical, local, and existential specificity; their lived bodily wrinkles are smoothed out by automated filters, and their poetic expressions are standardised into interchangeable background soundtracks for rapid capital consumption. The interface frequently transforms the complex realities of human suffering into a stream of affective commodities, rendering sustained public dialogue increasingly difficult to maintain.

B. The Fragmentation of Co-presence: Algorithmic Recommendation and the Weakening of Publicness

The visibility of content on social media platforms heavily prioritises ‘algorithmic value,’ utilising complex mathematical profiling to match users with highly customised content. This algorithmic distribution naturally filters out divergent perspectives, creating rigid ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers’ (Fu et al. 2023: 50–62). From the perspective of media materiality, the intersection of platform traffic allocation and user-preference modelling solidifies community barriers, drastically increasing the cost of cross-boundary dialogue. This fragmentation directly dilutes the ‘public’ dimension of aesthetic publicness, locking diverse subcultures into a state of disjointed, insular co-existence where they celebrate their own tastes without achieving mutual translation.

Worse still, this structural fragmentation frequently breeds extreme polarisation. Tracking discussions around works like *Pegasus 3* (Feichi Rensheng 3) and *Galaxy Dream* (Xinghe Rumeng) shows that interpretive gaps between different digital circles are widening. Discussions rapidly devolve from aesthetic critiques into rigid ideological standoffs; during peak controversy periods, the proportion of ‘flame wars,’ tribal posturing, and ad hominem attacks within comment sections escalates significantly. When spaces of digital co-presence degenerate into ideological battlegrounds, the rational-critical potential of aesthetic publicness is severely suppressed.

As Jean-Paul Sartre noted in his critique of Heidegger, the essence of relations between consciousnesses is not a prior, harmonious ‘co-presence’ (Mitsein), but is inherently fraught with tension and conflict (cited in Zhao 2019: 376–381). A healthy aesthetic publicness, therefore, must not pursue a superficial consensus amidst digital noise, but must seek a dynamically negotiated coexistence that respects ‘alterity’.

C. The Myth of Co-creation: Data Alienation and Distorted Aesthetic Evaluation

The participatory ‘co-creation’ mechanisms of Chinese social media have effectively collapsed the traditional binary between artistic production and consumption, yet they simultaneously introduce profound crises regarding aesthetic standards. In an ecosystem where quantified metrics are culturally reified as signs of public validation, platform data like views and likes often override intrinsic artistic and social value.

This risk of alienation is evident in the market reception of G.E.M.’s (Deng Zhiqian) transmedia project *Revelation* (Qishi Lu). Market tracking from early 2026 shows that leveraging the star’s cross-media celebrity capital, the deluxe collector’s edition sold over 200,000 copies on its first day, instantly topping multiple e-commerce charts (Shao 2026). However, longitudinal analysis of its Douban reviews reveals that the standard edition aimed at the general public has stagnated at a mediocre score of just over 6.0, forming a stark contrast with its commercial traffic.

When mass co-creation degenerates into algorithmic complicity, the generation of aesthetic value faces deep systemic alienation: the meaning of an artwork is no longer determined by its capacity to provoke authentic affect, but by its capacity to win quantitative platform games. Behind this distortion lies the logic of platform capitalism, which financializes user affect into metricized traffic assets, effectively hijacking aesthetic value with data indicators.

Under the strict operations of platform capitalism, this hyper-metricisation poses a significant challenge to traditional qualitative aesthetic standards. When purely quantitative symbols—such as an automated ‘like’ count, a share ratio, or a click-through rate—are reified as the sole legitimate arbiters of cultural and artistic excellence, the qualitative depth of aesthetic judgement can be substantially undermined. Users are systematically and subtly conditioned to behave as digital algorithmic nodes, performing uncompensated data-boosting labour (datian) under the guise of democratic, participatory co-creation.

The artwork's autonomy as a site of spiritual or contemplative engagement faces significant challenges; instead, it is transformed into an interactive interface designed to extract user engagement and monetise emotional data assets. The aesthetic publicness generated within this ecosystem is therefore deeply compromised, haunted by a pervasive data alienation where the grassroots community's raw creative agency is continuously captured, quantified, and converted into corporate platform capital.

However, this datafied alienation does not imply the total eradication of grassroots subjectivity. In alignment with Michel de Certeau's theory of everyday tactics, ordinary users continuously cultivate spaces of counter-agency and resistance within the algorithmic grid. Rather than functioning as passive digital nodes, users frequently engage in 'algorithmic play'—employing ironic danmu subversions, deliberately manipulating platform interactions to distort recommendation metrics, and utilizing secondary creations (erchuang) to hijack corporate cultural assets for subversive, localized meanings. This ongoing tactical negotiation underscores that aesthetic publicness remains an uncompleted, highly contested battlefield. Platform capitalism may capture affect, but the vernacular subject perpetually devises creative detours to reclaim visibility and performative agency.

6. Conclusion

The sustainable development of digital vernacular art ultimately relies on its close proximity to society, reality, and the everyday experiences of ordinary people—ensuring that the public remains the true subject of artistic practice. While adhering to the critical standards of historical, popular, artistic, and aesthetic dimensions, theory must continuously innovate to respond to emerging artistic realities, thereby safeguarding a lasting artistic vitality and establishing a resilient space for public dialogue (Gu 2025: 68–74).

The rise of digital vernacular art stands as a significant development within contemporary Chinese digital culture. Through its expansive vision of universal creativity, it honors the aesthetic promise of 'coming from the people, returning to the people,' while opening up new pathways for publicness via the dual mechanisms of empathy and co-presence. In doing so, it directly responds to and expands classical public sphere theories. While Habermas's bourgeois public sphere was anchored in elite rational-critical debate, the aesthetic publicness of Chinese social media utilises empathy as its portal and co-presence as its arena, carving out new modes of shared meaning amidst the ongoing tensions between affect and intellect, the individual and the collective.

Ultimately, this critical inquiry suggests that the vernacular art emerging from Chinese social media spaces cannot be fully understood or adequately evaluated using either purely Western-centric media frameworks or traditional, elitist Eurocentric art histories. It urgently demands an integrated, culturally specific methodology that treats platform materiality, algorithmic distribution architectures, and vernacular affect as an inseparable, codependent triad. Only by analyzing how code and emotion interlock can we decipher the true political economy of the vertical screen.

Nevertheless, this aesthetic publicness is not a static, completed utopia, but an ongoing process characterised by structural tensions. How to unleash the radical potential of affective connectivity on these platforms without sacrificing deep textual meaning and public rationality remains a vital and enduring inquiry for the art and aesthetics of Chinese social media.

The authors received no specific grant from any public, commercial or not-for-profit agency to aid in the research or writing of this article.

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