Digital Platforms as Creative Intermediaries: Algorithmic Mediation, Cultural Visibility, and the Case of Li Ziqi

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Abstract. Social media is increasingly becoming a necessary infrastructure in the digital age, organising cultural production and visibility. Within this context, this paper examines how digital platforms operate as intermediaries that reshape the relationships between creators, audiences, and cultural value. Drawing on theories of cultural and creative intermediaries, the study explores how platform-based systems transform processes of cultural mediation. The analysis integrates approaches to self-presentation and frameworks concerning algorithmic visibility, focusing on how the affordances and constraints of platform algorithms shape both opportunities and limitations for cultural expression. Drawing on the case of the Chinese video creator Li Ziqi, the paper examines how cultural identities are constructed within the recommendation algorithms of major video-sharing platforms. The findings show that Li Ziqi's visual style and narrative strategies align with platform expectations for immersive, aesthetically engaging content while simultaneously offering an alternative to accelerated algorithmic temporalities by highlighting authenticity, craftsmanship, and a slower life rhythm. This dual negotiation illustrates the paradoxical nature of platforms as both facilitators and regulators of creative visibility, revealing how cultural agency can still be exercised within algorithmically governed environments. Overall, the study contributes to broader sociological understandings of digital cultural mediation and offers new insights into how creative labour navigates visibility in platformised creative economies.

Keywords: Platformisation, Creative Intermediaries, Algorithmic Visibility, Cultural Mediation, Li Ziqi, Self-Presentation.

1. Introduction

In the modern age of digitization, social networking sites have taken on a central role in cultural communication and socialization. The Digital 2025 Global Overview Report published by DataReportal states that the number of active social media users worldwide exceeds 5.24 billion, representing approximately 63.9 percent of the global population (Kemp, 2025). The emergence of platforms like Douyin and YouTube has decentralized cultural communication. These digital infrastructures lower the marginal cost of online access, reproduction, and distribution to almost zero, allowing a wide range of user cohorts to interact with the greatest deal of efficiency and create potent network effects (Bacache-Beauvallet and Bourreau, 2020).

Such technological forces have also changed the traditional viewing of the one-way forms of communication and introduced participatory media where the audiences are slowly becoming not the mere receivers of information but rather active creators of meaning creating a mode of cultural participation that is participatory and re-creative (Mandiberg, 2012). This means that the social media networks have ceased being simply the technology but have formed extremely essential structures of coordinating cultural activities and social interaction.

In light of this change, it is more critical to discern the sociological consequences of platform-based cultural production. Nevertheless, the emergence of digital media does not imply the extinction of intermediaries. Rather, with the changing platform logics, these roles grew and developed to be what could be termed as creative intermediaries. Not only do such intermediaries keep playing the role of bridging creators and audiences or markets, but they also develop more and more new roles of education, cultural preservation, and empowerment (Comunian, Hracs, and England, 2021).

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Although other researchers have already researched influencer activities in the context of self-branding (Duffy, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2012) and investigated how algorithmic technologies and recommendation systems can dictate what kind of information is depicted (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014), the process of platform functioning as an active cultural intermediary is not thoroughly discussed systematically. This gap is important in addressing the issue of the distribution and negotiation of digital cultural power.

This paper concentrates on the theme of platforms as creative intermediaries, with a sociological consideration of the way digital platforms play with the structure of cultural communication. To begin with, it implements the idea of cultural intermediaries introduced by Bourdieu (1984) into the digital environment and examines the theory of creative intermediaries proposed by Comunian, Hracs and England (2021) to conceptualize platforms as not only technological infrastructures but as major force influencing the relationship between creative labour and cultural visibility in the contemporary cultural production. Simultaneously, it uses the findings of Bucher (2018) about the algorithmic visibility and the argument presented by Kincaid (2010) according to which platforms tend to rank influencers by their affinity, weight, and time decay.

To a greater extent, the presented research uses a mixture of the case study and theoretical examination, Li Ziqi, a Chinese influencer, as the main case study. The study is conducted by conducting a systematic review of the current scholarly literature and an analysis of the Li Ziqi example of global cultural communication practices on the YouTube platform and her video themes, viewer engagement, and identity formation through the prism of algorithmic visibility and traffic logic.

The final aim of the research is to unveil how Li Ziqi signs and scripts the self and cultural identity in negotiating the site of the platform as the creative mediator and shedding light on the larger processes of digital platforms to create cultural value, visibility, and agency in modern society.

2. literature review

2.1. Platforms as Intermediaries in Cultural Production

In classical forms of cultural communication, said Bourdieu (1984), cultural intermediaries like publishers and museum curators were instrumental in determining the taste and value judgements by choosing and releasing artistic and cultural products through the judgment of aesthetics. This would subsequently be broadened in future work on the concept of the so-called gatekeepers, i.e., the individuals who take up strategic locations in the cultural production system and link creative producers and their audiences (Foster and Ocejo, 2015). Nevertheless, due to the progress of digitalisation and the evolution of creative economy policies, the old logic of cultural mediation which is based on the selection of values has been reformulated. As it has been noted by scholars, the role of taste-makers or gatekeepers is no longer the only role that intermediaries in creative and cultural spheres can have; they also acquire other roles of community building, resource brokerage, and knowledge sharing (Jakob and van Heur, 2015; Merkel, 2021). This change represents the transformation of the mediatory role to the one of creative mediating towards a shift in perspective on evaluating values to the work of supportive and empowering. The trade motivation of modern creative intermediaries, to which Comunian, Hracs, and England (2021) refer, is further diversified and includes education, preservation of culture, and social empowerment. Their scope has entered a new dimension of mediating creators and markets into a necessary engine of the sustainable growth of creative ecosystems.

2.2. Algorithmic Visibility and Platform Governance

Doyle (2020) claims that platform logics have continued to disrupt the traditional linear process of creation-aggregation-distribution. The users have ceased being passive recipients of content but now co-producers and members of the dissemination process through their interaction. In the meantime, platforms make use of algorithmic regimes that can accomplish two tasks of content

aggregation and visibility regulation, becoming pivotal agents that can produce creative value into the market value. Besides, the digital platform algorithm systems dictate the content the users will see on their news feed as they calculate variables, i.e., affinity, weight, and time decay (Bucher 2012). Such algorithmic decisions about the relevancy or value of particular content is not limited to a given platform but is inherent in the wider workings of social media visibility, including Facebook EdgeRank and Tik Tok For You Page as well as YouTube recommendation algorithms. Through this, platforms reshape the regimes of cultural presentation as using technological logics. Moreover, as Sadoon and Yusof (2017) observe, algorithms on YouTube not only specify the appearance of the content, but also influence the dynamics and prioritization of information flow as they are also based on the interaction patterns and frequency of behavior of users. Thus, algorithms are not instruments of content presentation, but they can be considered mediating structures that separate and shuffle cultural material with pre-determined judgment and ranking systems of relevance.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that this algorithm-based mediating mechanism is not particularly neutral. In the logic of visibility, as Beer (2017) believes, certain social and commercial interests not only determine the sequence of cultural distribution but also reproduce the unequal exposure to content. In addition to this, creators should be considered as having the opportunity to participate in such strategic activities, as manipulating their upload times, controlling how often they interact with a system, or even cross-platform distribution, to actively fit into the logic of the algorithms when they have learned its logic, improving their visibility prospects (Gillespie, 2014). Thus, the position of the platform as a creative mediator must be interpreted as dynamic and paradoxical; on the one hand, the creators are offered in the platform increased chances to be visible, whereas on the other hand, the platform limits the scope of cultural expression by imposing itself as inaccessible in other ways. Meanwhile, researchers have also indicated that algorithmic dissemination is not only shaping the ways of distribution of visibility, but it also defines the frames within which cultural meanings are created and perceived (Cotter et al., 2022). Therefore, the sociological significance of familiarizing oneself with the role of platforms algorithms in cultural communication is immense when it comes to evaluating the way of how creators can negotiate visibility and cultural identity within the entire digital ecosystem in the global environment. Based on these theoretical arguments, the current paper uses these concepts to explore how Li Ziqi negotiates with platform logics, builds cultural visibility, and engages with algorithmic mediation, thereby providing an empirical prism through which to view the changing role of platforms as creative intermediaries.

2.3. How Influencer's Self-Narratives and Identity Performances in Digital Culture

In order to study control further in the application to the situations, in this research, the author uses a case study of Chinese video producer Li Ziqi to analyze the cultural exposure she creates and reaches around the world within the framework of an algorithmic algorithm in the context of YouTube. Being the most-subscribed Chinese YouTuber based in Chinese mainland, Li Ziqi uses the rural Chinese lifestyle and artisanship as the major theme in her videos. She narrates about Chinese food culture and stretches to the scenes of daily life; clothes, food, home, and the tools, tending to include the symbols of seasonal celebrations, folk feasts, and classical style (Xin and Ye, 2020). Being based on craftsmanship and pastoral work, this visual narrative not only provides aesthetic imagery of traditional Chinese culture but also offers a representative example to help communicate how digital environments mediate cultural communication in the globalized world.

3. Analytical framework

3.1. Mechanisms of Algorithmic Filtering and Ranking

The main factor that defines cultural visibility now inside the content ecosystem of digital platforms is algorithmic mechanisms. As illustrated in the Figure 1, platform algorithms are usually performed in a two-funnel filtering and ranking mechanism. To begin with, the algorithm uses evidence of user history, search history, and interest profile to select a subset of what could be

possibly relevant videos out of a library of millions. Thereupon, it prioritizes these candidate videos in accordance with the indices of click-through rate, engagement rate, and watch time, finally showing the best-ranked content to users (Covington et al., 2016). It is a process that demonstrates the logic of the platform with relevance and interaction: not only the extent of matchmaking between the content and the user preferences but also the dynamically limited position in the display list depending on the activity of the audience in relation to the business goals.

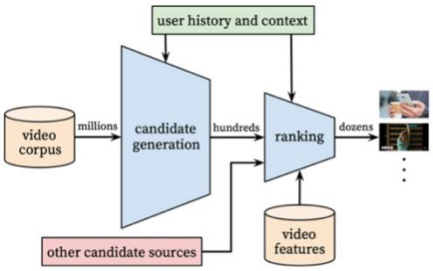


Figure 1: Recommendation system funnel.

Simultaneously, the calculation of visibility provided by the algorithm is not arbitrary, but rather it is constructed around a collection of unspoken social and technical norms. According to Kincaid (2010), user relationships and content activity are usually measured using variables like affinity, weight and time decay by the platforms, and this way get to define what is considered to be valuable interaction and information. This content filtering algorithm contributes to interactivity as one of the most important determinants of content visibility. Bucher (2012) further notes that comments and shares should have heightened weight, respectively in terms of high engagement behaviors and such weights tend to skew depending on the commercial orientation of the given platform. As an illustration, where certain topics are to be promoted, or advertising features should be advertised, the networks can give higher ranking to interactions that would be congruent with such commercial goals in their ranking systems.

In the framework of this structure, when creators would like to ensure that their videos stand out on a platform with the abundance of content, they should proactively realign their creative paradigm according to the filtering logic of the platform. According to Bishop (2019), Gillespie (2014) notes that content creators whose work should be deemed to be relevant by the system and get to audiences, should become strategic creators, structured in a way that helps them be more easily recognizable by algorithms, and recommendable by others, increasing their visibility. In the meantime, it is the platformisation process, that has also strengthened this logic. According to Nieborg and Poell (2018), platformisation entails anchoring the expression of creators into the logics of commercial platform functionality and operation, where creators must continuously adapt the circumstances in algorithmically circumscribed glazes to vie over exposure and traffic resource.

3.2. Applying the Framework: Li Ziqi's Negotiation with Platform Logics

However, doing away with the agency of creators does not remove the intermediating force of algorithms. Although the structural force of platform logics shapes the content rhythm and patterns of interaction, creators are still able to rebrand their visibility through tactical self-narration and re-contextualization by culture. The creative practice of Li Ziqi is an attractive analytical prism to examine the simultaneous co-existence of adaptation and resistance in algorithmic culture.

Being executed in the environment where algorithms follow the principle of prioritizing engagement and watch time as the key indicators, the visual production created by Li Ziqi shows a high level of internalization of the mechanism of the platform mediation. By meticulously crafted scenes of manual work, delicate color schemes as well and quiet sound systems, she creates a utopian vision of the Eastern pastoral. Her work makes a profound immersion, both in visual and emotional circumstances (Zeng and Shi, 2020). This sluggish form of narration twice stands in contrast to the speed with which information is normally consumed by platform users and is also successful at

improving the two most important metrics preferred by algorithmic systems, watch time, and engagement rate.

Meanwhile, the visual language of Li Ziqi retains much of the openness and ambiguity, which makes her videos look as though they were left unfinished. The traits of the cool media (McLuhan, 1994) identified in his media theory include the sign of incompleteness of information and extension of sensory involvement that promotes the involvement of the audience in the meaning-making process. Cao (2025) also explains that this feature is reflected in the narrative style used by Li Ziqi, where open-ended visual expression the author encourages the audience to provide their interpretation and emotional reactions in the comment section and seeks to turn the viewers into active participants in the meaning-making process. This participatory pattern of communication is not only compatible with the algorithmic demand to consume highly interactive content but will also transformally re-use the platform mechanisms and make algorithmic logic itself the cultural resource that allows facilitation of the cross-cultural dialogue.

The content that Li Ziqi has made has benefited the infrastructure of the global dissemination of YouTube as a means of storytelling, but it has passed through local narration to global communication (Zhao, 2025). The story of her success shows the dual role of the platforms as both creative intermediaries; on the one hand, there are channels according to which the content flows; on the other hand, it offers creators the possibility to realize cultural meanings and restructure value all through the mechanism of the platform itself. In this way, the creative practice of Li Ziqi can be seen as a strategic adjustment to the systems of algorithms, as well as active employment of digital intermediation to develop social interaction and cross-cultural communication.

The creative habit of Li Ziqi does not entirely adhere to the platform algorithm of logic. She is not as concerned with frequent updates and commercial integrations as many other content creators, whose work focuses on non-commercial narratives and genuineness of manual work, seeking to downplay the consumerism and instantaneous aspect that the platform tends to support. She frequently takes prolonged periods to develop her videos, and many of them are published with a long break between issues, lasting several months. It is important to note that her comeback video succeeded in fulfilling incredible viewership and gaining massive attention even after a three-year absence due to commercial differences (Huang, 2025).

This effect proves the fact that, aesthetically, she manages to go against the algorithm by which the high-frequency content keeps being uploaded and the user remains constantly active; whereas, on the content, she continues to focus on continuity of nature, time, and craftsmanship, creating a sort of anti-platform rhythm as a form of cultural practice. In the meantime, platform mechanisms, via visibility rankings and recommendation systems, not only make or break whether what is visible is seen but are also strongly involved in the re-creation of meaning, and so have a profound role in the reception and interpretation of cultural expressions (Gillespie, 2018).

The kind of resistance that is negotiated is reflected in the work of Li Ziqi. Although it is consistent with the logic behind platform dissemination, she also reasserts cultural value and the importance of artisanal labor, opposing the utilitarian rhythm of algorithmic cultural production. By doing so, her artistic act reveals the power of the cultural subjectivity to transform the mediating force of platforms in part to provide new understandings of the possibilities of cultural autonomy in the digital age.

4. Conclusions

This study has shown that digital platforms are mediatory creative systems whereby algorithmic designs both constrain and facilitate cultural making. The analysis of the case of Li Ziqi supports the idea that platform mechanisms, which are constructed by the metrics of visibility, engagement, and retention, are actively remaking the rhythm, structure, and distribution of cultural expression. However, creators are not inactive onlookers: through a tactful approach to navigating and redefining algorithmic indications, creators can cut spaces of agency and generate cultural significance that both fits the platform's anticipations and slightly disrupts them. The results show that the creative practice

of Li Ziqi represents such a two-fold movement of adaptation and resistance. In being the first to take on the immersive aesthetic popular among recommendation systems, she is widening her international presence; in continuing her non-commercial, slow, and artisanal narrative mode, she is disrupting the system preference on speed and quantity. The negotiated equilibrium highlights a more general theoretical point: algorithms are not just technical filters but sociocultural infrastructures, which are engaged in the reproduction of value, identity and meaning. Her example, therefore, sheds light on the rehearsal of cultural autonomy in the context of algorithmicized space, and creators can remake platform logics into re-defining visible spaces and re-conceptualizing the cultural presence. The participants of this work have a wider implication to the research in the field of platforms, which requires scholars to start focusing on the micro negotiation by which creators reconfigure algorithmic governance, instead of just internalizing it. The analysis can add a bit more sophistication to the discussion of global cultural flows being mediated by digital ecologies by pre-empting the interaction between technological structures and cultural subjectivity. Future studies need to go beyond this example to determine how producers in various non-Western situations move through the infrastructural inequalities of global platform capitalism. This kind of work can enhance knowledge about how cultural actors, who are at uneven sites of power, reconstruct algorithmic terrains and construct new forms of visibility, autonomy, and transnational communication.

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