

Emotions, social circles, and platform collusion: a study of youth subcultures in short video contexts

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Abstract. Short video platforms have become deeply embedded in the daily lives of young people, reshaping the production and dissemination of youth subcultures. Based on three rounds of semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study invited young participants to share short videos they are interested in and discuss why they like them, how they interact with them, and whether they share them. Data were analyzed using a three-level coding process. The findings indicate that youth subcultures are not driven by a single factor but are generated through the combined effects of emotional arousal, social circle interactions, and platform rules: algorithms reinforce emotional preferences, symbolic practices construct social circle identities, and platforms along with capital further promote the transformation and absorption of emotional value. The study demonstrates that in the short video era, the formation of youth subcultures exhibits a coexisting mechanism of emotionalization, social circle formation, and platformization.

Keywords: youth subculture, short video, emotional cultivation, social circles, platform collusion

1. Introduction

According to the 56th *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* (CNNIC), the number of short video users has reached 1.085 billion, accounting for 95.1% of the total internet population, with youth users representing a particularly prominent share and showing a significant increase in daily usage time. As short video platforms become deeply embedded in the daily lives of contemporary youth, the logic of youth subculture production and dissemination has undergone a profound transformation—from offline community cultures that were "niche, slow, and resistant" to platform-driven, flow-oriented cultures that are "mainstream, instantaneous, and symbiotic." For example, a simple dance move can be turned into a template and rapidly propagated through platform traffic, enabling millions of users to participate and generate large amounts of homogeneous content without any prior dance experience. Such phenomena reflect the structural reshaping of contemporary youth in terms of emotional composition, value orientation, and identity formation.

Existing studies have mostly analyzed emotions, social circles, and platforms as isolated factors, failing to reveal how these three elements interact within short video contexts. This study overcomes the limitation of single-dimension analysis by proposing an "emotion–social circle–platform" collusion framework to explore the following core questions: (1) How do platform algorithms perceive, drive, and consolidate youth

emotional preferences? (2) How do young people construct social circles for identity recognition based on emotional preferences through symbolic practices? (3) How do platforms and capital convert emotional value into economic value through the establishment of rules? This study employs a qualitative research approach, inviting young users to share short videos of interest and engaging them in discussions around "why they like them," "how they interact with them," and "whether they share them." The discussion content is analyzed using three-level coding to reveal the mechanisms through which emotions, social circles, and platforms jointly shape youth subcultures in the short video era. The findings aim to provide a robust theoretical basis for guiding the healthy development of youth subcultures and constructing responsible platform governance models.

2. Literature review and analytical framework

2.1. Youth subcultures on short video platforms

In recent years, short video platforms have become important arenas for the practice and dissemination of youth subcultures. Existing research primarily focuses on the production mechanisms of short videos, their cultural representations, and interactions with mainstream culture. At the level of production mechanisms, scholars generally argue that the technical affordances of short videos, combined with the "imitable layering" mechanism, drive the stratified dissemination of youth subcultures. Young audiences can elicit emotional resonance and achieve emotional release through imitation behaviors in a short period of time. This process allows youth to fulfill psychological needs for attention and recognition, further promoting the layered propagation of short videos within youth subcultures [1]. Interactive rituals such as bullet comments (danmu) and derivative content creation effectively build virtual communities, reinforcing internal group identification and boundaries among youth [2]. At the level of cultural representation, research primarily examines how youth subcultures construct, express, and negotiate individual and group identities through visual symbols and stylized practices [3]. Core topics include analyzing how youth actively create or appropriate specific visual symbols and combine them into distinct styles, and how these styles serve the deep psychological and social needs of young individuals. These styles function as external markers of youth subcultural groups while also representing an internal system of meaning and discursive practice [4]. Such research demonstrates that youth subcultures are not merely entertainment or trend-following, but complex cultural practices in which symbolic production is used to confer meaning and construct identity. Regarding interactions with mainstream culture, studies find that youth subcultures and mainstream culture exhibit a complex, "interembedded and symbiotic" dynamic [5]. The two mutually penetrate and shape each other. Mainstream culture guides subcultures through strategies such as "cuteness transformation" and selective incorporation—for example, softening dominant ideologies via anthropomorphized visual symbols or adopting internet slang in mainstream media to resonate with youth aesthetics, thereby eliciting empathy and identification. Conversely, subcultures are also co-opted by commercial capital or engage in ritualized resistance. The distinctive styles and symbols of youth subcultures can be quickly identified by the market and commodified, while some subcultures deconstruct authority through parody and satire [6].

2.2. From "domestication" to "reverse domestication": systematic shaping of youth emotions by platforms

Traditional domestication theory refers to the process by which individuals incorporate media technologies into daily life to serve their own needs [7, 8]. Short video platforms, however, exhibit features of "reverse

domestication," actively shaping user emotions. First, platforms intervene in users' emotional cognition through "algorithmic symbolization," transforming technical black boxes into perceivable emotional cues via mechanisms such as "likes" and "follows." This reshapes users' understanding of social relationships and emotional feedback, thereby enhancing the platform's capacity to perceive and manipulate emotions [9]. Second, short video platforms employ "template emotionalization" strategies, offering standardized creative templates such as popular effects and trending audio to embed specific emotional content—nostalgia, anxiety, etc.—into users' creations. This guides user expression toward homogenization and standardization, forming so-called "emotional cocoons" [10]. Finally, platforms capitalize on emotions by converting the emotional resonance and social capital generated during circle interactions into economic capital through live streaming rewards, video-based sales, and other mechanisms [11]. As a result, on short video platforms, contemporary youth emotions are transformed from private experiences into producible and extractable platform assets.

2.3. Layered existence: emotional communities and discursive segmentation in youth subcultures

Social circles are aggregations of people connected through specific relational patterns maintained by emotions, interests, or shared benefits [12]. Under the combined influence of the technological architecture of short video platforms and social dynamics, youth online interactions exhibit a pronounced "layered" characteristic, manifested in freedoms of choice, independent identities, niche content, and distinctive modes of expression [13]. In terms of formation mechanisms, youth construct social circles based on interest-driven voluntary selection. Circles rely on unique internal symbols and discourses (such as insider slang and memes) to establish recognition and boundaries, ultimately forming "emotional communities" [14]. Such discursive practices not only facilitate shared meaning and emotional resonance within youth groups but also create clear distinctions from outsiders [15]. Specifically, within circles, continuous interaction and emotional investment generate emotional communities. Members' emotions circulate and amplify within relatively closed spaces, often leading to "echo chamber effects" and group polarization [16]. At the same time, barriers arise between circles due to differences in discourse and values, occasionally producing hierarchies of disdain and conflict [17]. This inward cohesion and outward exclusion make circles a crucial basis for youth emotional mobilization and social participation, but they also carry risks of information narrowing and societal fragmentation.

2.4. Platform logic: the trinity of technical affordances, algorithmic recommendation, and capital

The shaping of youth emotions and the rise of circle culture are deeply embedded in the operational logic of short video platforms. Technical affordances provide the groundwork for circle aggregation, with platforms offering easy editing tools and convenient social channels that facilitate group formation and interaction. Algorithmic recommendation solidifies user preferences and circle boundaries through the continuous push of homogeneous content, defining an "emotional traffic code" that guides content creators to produce large volumes of content aligned with user emotions, thereby influencing subcultural development [18]. The logic of capital completes the cycle of extraction by commodifying emotions and circle culture, cultivating circle leaders, generating consumption hotspots, and steering fans toward spending—transforming youth emotional engagement into tangible economic behavior.

In summary, in the short video era, youth emotions, circle culture, and platform logic form a profound "collusion." Platforms domesticate emotions and cultivate circles through technological architecture; circle culture provides platforms with stable user engagement and rich opportunities for capital conversion; youth gain emotional satisfaction and identity recognition within circles, yet their feelings and behaviors are

simultaneously regulated and exploited by platform logic. This collusive relationship produces multiple challenges: at the individual level, risks include "information cocoons" and cognitive narrowing, emotional polarization and loss of rationality, and social isolation and identity fragmentation; at the societal level, consensus is difficult to achieve, public opinion is fragmented, and the transmission of mainstream values is hindered [19]. Recognizing this complex collusive structure highlights the need to explore feasible guidance and governance strategies—an urgent direction for contemporary research.

3. Research design

3.1. Research method

This study primarily adopts a qualitative approach, using semi-structured in-depth interviews as the core data collection method. The interview transcripts were systematically coded and analyzed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo 12.

3.2. Data collection

The participants were young individuals who use short video platforms frequently in their daily lives, covering both urban and rural areas and including students as well as working professionals. During the interviews, participants were first asked to share videos they found interesting, followed by discussions centered on three questions: "Why do you like it?", "How do you interact with it?", and "Do you share it?". A total of three rounds of interviews were conducted.

3.3. Data analysis

During the open coding phase, the original interview texts were broken down line by line and labeled, generating initial concepts such as "stress relief," "finding like-minded people in the comment section," "perceiving content homogeneity," and "realizing that different groups see completely different content." In the axial coding phase, the numerous initial concepts were categorized, compared, and integrated, ultimately forming core categories including emotional arousal and psychological comfort, personalized preferences for creators, content ethics and value judgments, circle construction and symbolic interaction, algorithmic power and information cocoons, and group identity and peer pressure. In the selective coding phase, six overarching categories were identified: emotional arousal and psychological comfort, algorithmic power and circle consolidation, circle interaction and identity recognition, content ethics and value judgment, online experience and offline practice, and media dependency and life reconstruction. These categories collectively informed the construction of an integrated analytical framework for understanding the formation of youth subcultures on short video platforms.

4. Research findings: the collusive mechanism of emotion, social circles, and platforms

4.1. The "emotion–algorithm" perceptual drive mechanism: precisely stimulating and solidifying youth subcultural needs

Algorithms anchor youth interests with precision through an "emotion recognition–preference locking" process. Specifically, short video platforms track both explicit data, such as likes and comments, and implicit

data, such as watch duration and interaction patterns, to sensitively identify users' emotional states. The core logic of algorithmic recommendation has evolved from simple "information matching" to "emotional adaptation." For instance, when young users scroll through "food indulgence" videos late at night, or seek "healing" or "stress-relief" content under pressure, these behaviors are captured by the algorithm and incorporated into the user profile, ensuring the continued delivery of related content.

"We often say 'the account has been trained,' meaning the platform will push content I like based on my interests (fb-7)." "At first, my phone (short video account) didn't have that many mukbang videos, but after browsing for a while, suddenly there were a lot more (wxw-3)."

Emotional experiences strengthen subcultural content engagement through "instant gratification–emotional dependency." The immediacy of short videos perfectly aligns with young users' desire for immediate feedback and emotional release. Whether it is the "relaxing" sensation elicited by the "Tianjin Grandpa Diving" video or the emotional resonance triggered by family-themed content, these videos deliver instant affective impact. Such efficient emotional supply makes scrolling short videos a habitual choice for youth to regulate mood, combat boredom, and seek solace. This dependence leads to the perception that "I don't know what to do if I don't scroll videos," forming a feedback loop of "emotional reinforcement–cognitive narrowing."

"Sometimes when I don't know what to do, I just take out my phone and scroll... it doesn't waste time because these videos are so short (cqh-8)." "I feel the most relaxed every day is lying down and watching short videos after work; I don't have to think about anything (lft-4)."

Algorithms continuously push content aligned with youth emotional preferences, and users repeatedly experience similar emotions. This repeated exposure may subtly influence their cognitive frameworks. Emotion and algorithm collude here: for adolescents whose worldviews are not fully formed, this process not only consolidates their interest circles but may also make them more susceptible to emotional logic when making judgments. Moreover, emotions are no longer incidental outcomes of content consumption; they are deliberately designed to attract and retain users, thereby building a stable emotional audience for specific subcultural content

"For the popular IP on short videos, we purchase products through e-commerce channels (zyl-5)." "I now realize I've been somewhat influenced... in daily life, I unconsciously use some 'memes,' which sometimes offend others or leave them confused; I feel embarrassed, but I just can't stop (zfy-19)."

In summary, algorithms precisely anchor youth interests through emotion recognition, capturing both explicit and implicit user data to continually deliver content aligned with emotional preferences. Emotional experiences generate dependency through instant gratification. Repeated exposure to similar affective content creates a feedback loop of "emotional reinforcement–cognitive narrowing," which not only consolidates interest circles but may also influence cognitive frameworks and value judgments.

4.2. The "circle–symbol" identity construction mechanism: internal cohesion and boundary production in youth subcultural communities

Social circles establish internal identity and social barriers through a combination of "symbolic encryption and interactive rituals." Traditional circle-based identification relies on openly declared value positions or fixed social statuses, whereas in the short video era, youth circle identity emerges from the ability to comprehend implicit "cultural codes." The core of youth subcultural circles is a symbolic system that outsiders find difficult to understand; only those who grasp this system can enter the circle. Entry into a given circle grants the individual the circle-specific "cultural capital" and interpretive authority.

"Only people who play this game understand this meme (zdz-2)." "What's going on in the comment section today? Why can't I understand it (yn-34)?"

Circle-based identity produces strong feelings of belonging and identity superiority. Members of the same circle continually confirm their shared interests and emotional alignment through ritualized interactions, such as "continuing dialogues," "playing with memes in the comments," or "purchasing and displaying peripheral merchandise," thereby engaging in "cultural reproduction" and reinforcing group cohesion. Such interactions not only reproduce the circle's cultural framework but also elevate the "comments" and "bullet screen" areas from simple feedback channels into central "squares" for emotional resonance and identity performance within youth subcultural communities.

"I passed through Xiaobei, protected and forgiven for all mistakes at age 10; through Xiaoguo, leaving home for the first time and swearing to make my mark at 20; through Xiucui, forced to take off the Confucian gown at 24; through Laobai, full of ideas but lacking skills, willing to work as a horse for overtime pay at 25; and now I walk the path of Laoxing, destined to be completely replaced by the young (nwy-16)."

Emotional needs are fulfilled and elevated through "circle belonging—emotional compensation." In modern society, young people have a strong demand for belonging and recognition. This sense of belonging itself constitutes a powerful emotional value, motivating youth to "pay for emotional value," with consumption behaviors directly reinforcing their community identity. Youth subcultural circles provide a low-threshold, high-resonance "virtual community," where shared interests enable rapid formation of online or even offline friendships, creating a "small world of one's own." Recognition within the circle and minor moments of happiness offer psychological compensation to individuals frustrated in academics or work.

"So we may be more inclined to pay for our own emotions (lg-23)." "When attending offline meetups, I carefully prepare materials and exchange them with others (xy-31)." "They are my best friends; I share many thoughts only with them (zl-7)."

Within circles, a tension exists between "conformity pressure and individuality suppression." To maintain circle identity and avoid social exclusion, individuals often experience significant pressure to conform. This pressure can diminish individual uniqueness, producing a homogenization trend in which "everyone moves in the same direction." Circles thus provide belonging while simultaneously generating new forms of internal normative constraint.

"When everyone around me buys it, I feel I must buy it too, or I'll be excluded (yx-29)." "If I don't bring materials to share with others, I feel embarrassed, as if I'm not being considerate enough because everyone else prepared carefully while I freeload (zxx-20)."

In summary, youth subcultural circles construct internal identity and social barriers through "symbolic encryption and interactive rituals." The symbolic system, opaque to outsiders, functions as an entry threshold, while members confirm shared identity by playing with memes or displaying peripheral merchandise. Circles provide emotional compensation satisfying youths' need for recognition, yet conformity pressures within circles may suppress individual uniqueness, producing homogeneity.

4.3. The "platform—capital" ecological shaping mechanism: rule-making and value incorporation in youth subcultural development

Platforms shape youth subcultural trends through a combination of "traffic logic and algorithmic rules." The ultimate goal of platforms is user retention and commercial monetization, making "traffic supremacy" their core operational principle. Features such as algorithmic recommendations, trending charts, and challenge competitions are all designed around traffic allocation. Whether a youth subcultural phenomenon—such as a particular "meme" or stylistic trend—can transition from niche to mainstream depends largely on its alignment with the platform's traffic logic. Youth users actively "study the algorithm" to obtain the "traffic code," reflecting that some youth subcultural production originates from the platform's performance-driven logic.

"I saw many people using this effect with high likes, so I wanted to try it too—what if my video suddenly goes viral (lyy-38)?" "This video ranked first on Douyin's trending list. Many people followed the trend, and those videos got high traffic, while others remained ordinary with low views (ydx-6)."

Capital completes the commercial incorporation of youth subculture through "demand commodification and emotional closure." Capital can acutely perceive youths' emotional and identity needs within circles and rapidly translate them into marketable goods and services. From Labubu blind boxes enabling "emotional projection" to Guofeng-style makeup fostering "aesthetic identification," as well as various IP collaborations, youth subcultural symbols are continuously materialized as consumable products. Platforms then leverage algorithms to precisely push these products to labeled target circle users, forming a seamless commercial loop: "emotional recognition → product creation → algorithmic push → consumption satisfaction."

"So many people might buy these blind boxes just for the emotional satisfaction (sdl-41)." "Jellycat is just too cute! I gritted my teeth and had to buy it home—it's trending everywhere online (lds-51)."

Meanwhile, mainstream culture engages with youth subculture through "soft collaboration and value guidance." Facing rapidly developing and highly dynamic youth subcultures, official media and government institutions have shifted from previous exclusionary attitudes to actively "participating in meme culture." This type of "collaboration" confers a certain legitimacy upon youth subculture, functioning as an advanced form of incorporation: it channels youth toward trajectories aligned with mainstream values, thereby mitigating potential antagonism.

"Post-2000s are starting to create content professionally? Official media seems to have figured out how to leverage traffic (ln-63)." "Just asking—are official accounts really this abstract now (zl-76)?"

In summary, platforms establish cultural trends through traffic logic and algorithmic rules, with youth actively exploring "traffic codes" to gain attention. Capital commodifies circle-based emotional demands, forming a commercial loop of "emotional recognition → product creation → algorithmic push → consumption satisfaction." Mainstream culture interacts with youth subculture via "soft collaboration" to guide value orientations, subtly aligning youth participation with prevailing societal norms.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that youth subculture on short-video platforms emerges under the drive of the "emotion–algorithm" mechanism, consolidates through "circle–symbol" interactions, and is shaped and incorporated under the governance of "platform–capital" rules. Emotion provides the initial impetus and user stickiness; circles supply the core meaning and sense of belonging; and platforms establish the ultimate rules for survival and evolution. These three elements do not exist in isolation but constitute an interdependent, mutually reinforcing collusion system: algorithms amplify emotion to gather circles, circles produce symbols to reinforce emotion, and platforms leverage capital and traffic to transform both emotion and symbols into manageable productive and consumptive forces. Understanding this collusive mechanism helps deepen insights into the formation of youth subculture in the short-video era, guiding its healthy development and supporting the construction of responsible platform governance models.

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