ART AND SOCIETY

CONTENTS

Gendered Perceptions of Interethnic Romantic Leads: A Case Study of *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*

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Abstract

This paper explores how interethnic romance is gendered in Malaysian cinema through a comparative analysis of Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*. In a society where Malay-Muslim femininity is both culturally idealized and institutionally regulated, the representation of a Malay female protagonist engaging in romantic or affective bonds with a non-Malay counterpart carries complex cultural weight. Through close textual analysis, audience perception data, and aesthetic examination, the study illustrates how Yasmin Ahmad navigates national taboos around race, religion, and gender not through overt challenge, but through what this paper terms "soft transgression"—emotional nuance, narrative restraint, and cinematic empathy.

Using a gender-aware lens, the paper highlights how female emotional agency, male vulnerability, and childhood intimacy are deployed to unsettle normative scripts of racial purity and heteropatriarchal authority. Viewer identification patterns across ethnic and gender lines reveal that affective resonance often transcends cultural boundaries, while also exposing generational discomfort with femininity in expressive roles. By situating these films within broader Southeast Asian cinematic and sociopolitical contexts, the paper argues for a framework of reading interethnic romance that is intersectional, emotionally attuned, and sensitive to the symbolic politics of gendered visibility.

Keywords: interethnic romance, gendered perception, Malaysian cinema, Yasmin Ahmad, *Sepet*, *Mukhsin*, soft transgression, audience reception

1. Introduction

In Malaysia's plural society, the representation of interethnic romance in cinema often reflects—and refracts—the nation's underlying anxieties about identity, religion, and gender. With a population comprised predominantly of Malays, Chinese, and Indians, the postcolonial Malaysian state has historically emphasized ethnic boundaries through education, language policy, and religious regulation. In such a context, romantic narratives that transgress ethnic lines do more than tell love stories—they challenge hegemonic norms, unsettle notions of purity, and provoke deep emotional and political reactions.

Within this landscape, *Sepet* (2004) and *Mukhsin* (2006), both directed by the late Yasmin Ahmad, emerge as landmark works not only for their sensitive portrayals of interethnic affection but also for their careful interrogation of how gender mediates the legitimacy and reception of such relationships. Ahmad's characters navigate a world where emotional intimacy across ethnic boundaries is rarely neutral and almost always gendered in its moral implications.

Mainstream Malaysian cinema has long been regulated by both formal censorship and informal cultural codes, particularly regarding Malay-Muslim portrayals of romance. Interethnic couples—especially those involving a Malay female lead—have historically been framed either through moral warnings or symbolic consequences. A

content analysis of 21 mainstream Malaysian films from 1955 to 2020 reveals that only five films featured Malay women in interethnic romantic storylines, and of these, four concluded with separation, ambiguity, or death. This pattern reflects enduring social codes surrounding religious sanctity, ethnic loyalty, and the gendered body as a site of communal honor.

In *Sepet*, for example, Orked—a Malay schoolgirl—pursues an emotionally tender relationship with Jason, a Chinese boy who sells pirated VCDs. That their bond is gentle, mutually respectful, and framed through shared cultural interests (books, poetry, music) constitutes a radical departure from dominant narratives. It is not just the fact of their relationship that is transgressive, but the *tone*—quiet, emotionally sincere, and profoundly human.

This moment in Malaysian cinema also coincided with broader socio-political tensions. The early 2000s saw a rise in Islamic conservatism and increased scrutiny of public morality. *Sepet* was released in 2004 to critical acclaim and widespread audience resonance, yet not without controversy. The scene in which Orked and Jason kiss—brief and unsexualized—was removed by official censors. Public discourse around the film revealed a profound discomfort: not with the kiss itself, but with the visibility of a Malay woman expressing affection across racial and religious lines. The national unease it triggered demonstrates how cinematic space can become a battleground for contesting cultural values.

Yasmin Ahmad's films subvert prevailing cinematic logic. Unlike conventional portrayals where the Malay female lead is punished or silenced, Ahmad's protagonists are neither reduced to moral lessons nor denied emotional depth. They are allowed to desire without being deviant. Her films are radical in their restraint. Through soft lighting, interethnic dialogue, and lingering close-ups, she constructs a cinematic language that prioritizes *emotional sincerity* over dramatic spectacle. The intimacy she renders is not explosive—it is tender, incomplete, and all the more disruptive because it refuses to sensationalize what is still taboo.

In this way, *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* are not simply love stories; they are aesthetic and political interventions. They ask critical questions: Who gets to love freely? Who bears the burden of racial representation in intimate spaces? And how does the cinematic gaze uphold—or challenge—the gendered policing of ethnic belonging?

2. Cinematic Language and Social Meaning in Yasmin Ahmad's Films

Yasmin Ahmad's cinematic practice is rooted in a visual and narrative grammar that deliberately departs from the conventions of both mainstream Malaysian cinema and global romantic melodrama. In *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*, her aesthetic style is restrained, lyrical, and intimate—crafted not to dramatize forbidden love but to normalize tenderness across racial and gender lines. Her camera does not impose judgment. Instead, it lingers: on glances, on silences, on the mundane gestures through which characters negotiate longing and belonging.

This soft visual strategy is more than artistic—it is ideological and ethical. In a national context where expressions of interracial affection are often regulated by both state and community norms, Ahmad's camera offers a gentle defiance. She resists visual spectacle and avoids didactic moralization. In place of high drama, she offers the slow unfolding of emotional realism. In *Sepet*, for example, the use of warm, diffuse lighting and slow pacing mirrors the tentative, uncertain intimacy between Orked and Jason. Their romance is visually marked by proximity rather than physicality—through shared books, sidelong looks, and long takes that allow moments to breathe.

Multilingual dialogue further reflects the complexity of identity in Ahmad's cinematic world. Code-switching between Bahasa Melayu, Cantonese, English, and Hokkien is not simply a stylistic flourish, but a political act. It resists monolingual nationalism and affirms the polyphonic reality of Malaysian urban life, especially among youth. Through these fluid exchanges, love becomes legible not through declarations, but through shared cultural references—song lyrics, poetry, food rituals—that transcend ethnic boundaries while respecting difference.

Ahmad's casting choices also challenge dominant cinematic tropes. Her male leads are rarely hyper-masculinized; they are emotionally vulnerable, artistically inclined, and often coded as "soft." Jason in *Sepet* reads romantic poetry and quotes John Keats, while Mukhsin is protective but never possessive. These portrayals trouble the normative gender expectations for male desire, especially within interethnic contexts where the Chinese man or "othered" male is often depicted as either comedic or threatening. By contrast, Jason is portrayed as emotionally literate, attentive, and non-threatening—a powerful revision of both ethnic and gendered stereotypes in Malaysian cinema.

Meanwhile, the Malay female protagonists are neither overly sexualized nor infantilized. Orked and the younger protagonist in *Mukhsin* are curious, expressive, and intellectually independent. They are not punished for desiring, nor framed as cultural traitors for forming attachments beyond racial boundaries. Instead, they are allowed emotional complexity—desire, doubt, fear—without being reduced to morality tales. In doing so, Ahmad's films refuse the common logic that locates the Malay woman's virtue in her silence or submission, offering instead a cinematic space for female emotional agency within culturally constrained settings.

Ahmad's mise-en-scène further reinforces this ethic of restraint. Domestic interiors—bedrooms, verandas, kitchens—become sites of intimacy, but also of surveillance and social coding. Public space is treated with caution: what can be said, touched, or expressed is shaped by who might be watching. In this way, the films do not simply portray romance—they map the social choreography of visibility, especially for female desire. These tensions are most poignantly rendered in scenes where characters say nothing, but everything is understood: in the way a body hesitates, in the slight pause before speaking, in a look held a second too long.

Thus, Yasmin Ahmad's cinematic language is deeply political in its refusal to participate in the spectacle of cultural transgression. Instead of exploiting taboo, she invites the audience to witness what *soft, ordinary love* might look like between two people separated by race but joined by emotional clarity. In this, she offers a powerful aesthetic and moral intervention: one that asserts that representation does not have to be loud to be radical.

3. Representing the Malay Female Lead: Purity, Desire, and Cultural Expectation

In Malaysian cinema, the figure of the Malay woman often serves as a site of contested cultural meaning. She is symbolically tethered to ideas of purity, religious morality, and national identity. When romance crosses ethnic lines, especially with a Malay woman at its center, that character becomes not merely a narrative participant but a vessel of cultural tension, carrying the burden of community respectability and gendered expectation. Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* engage this trope with subtle but profound subversions, presenting Malay female leads who navigate affective complexity without falling into victimhood or rebellion.

In *Sepet*, Orked—a young, middle-class Malay schoolgirl—embodies what appears at first to be normative femininity: she is soft-spoken, dutiful to her family, and modest in appearance. However, her emotional interiority is foregrounded in ways rarely granted to female characters in Malaysian film, especially within the genre of romance. Her love for Jason is not driven by exoticism or rebellion; rather, it is grounded in shared taste in literature, mutual curiosity, and a refusal to see race as an essential boundary of affection. She exercises emotional agency without casting off cultural belonging. In doing so, she expands the representational space available to Malay women onscreen—making room for a femininity that desires without deviance.

The tension in Orked's character lies precisely in her ability to feel deeply while remaining socially legible. She does not "escape" her community, nor is she punished with moral demise. Instead, Yasmin Ahmad allows her to exist in a delicate balance: moving between filial duty and personal longing, modesty and articulation. One key scene shows her gently confronting her mother's racial discomfort with Jason, not through defiance, but through quiet insistence that love should not be subject to communal prejudice. Her resistance is relational, not antagonistic. This strategy is significant, for it reclaims feminine resistance from the realm of spectacle, embedding it instead within emotional nuance.

In *Mukhsin*, the Malay girl protagonist—also named Orked but depicted in childhood—introduces a different facet of this gendered construction. Here, the representation of the girl's early emotional life is marked by ambiguity and playfulness. Her affection for Mukhsin, a visiting village boy, is genuine but not eroticized. It exists within the liminal zone of pre-adolescent intimacy, where gestures carry weight but not yet consequence. Yet even in this space, cultural codes begin to press in: boys are taught to restrain, girls are warned to behave. In depicting Orked's emotional awakening, Ahmad treads carefully, avoiding any narrative that might be construed as provocative, while honoring the legitimacy of a young girl's feelings in a society that often dismisses or disciplines them.

Across both films, Ahmad presents Malay girls not as archetypes of chastity or figures of shame, but as thinking, feeling subjects. Their relationships are portrayed not as radical betrayals of tradition, but as human encounters, shaped by curiosity, care, and constraint. They are allowed to desire without being destroyed; to express without being expelled.

This is particularly radical when considered within the broader framework of Malay-Muslim womanhood in Malaysian media. Dominant portrayals often associate the Malay female body with either veiled moral clarity or deviant temptation. Ahmad rejects both. Her characters wear headscarves or don't, but their ethical worth is never coded through fabric or silence. Their value lies in their emotional truth, in their capacity to connect across lines of difference while remaining rooted in cultural respect.

By giving her female protagonists narrative time, voice, and contradiction, Yasmin Ahmad not only reimagines what it means to be a Malay woman in love—she reimagines what it means to be a Malay woman, full stop. Her films offer not a binary between purity and passion, but a spectrum of emotional lives, reminding us that the most political thing a character can do is to feel—fully, and on her own terms.

4. The Chinese Male Protagonist and Masculinity across Cultural Borders

In *Sepet*, Jason embodies a version of Chinese Malaysian masculinity that is both culturally specific and

narratively subversive. Unlike dominant cinematic portrayals that cast Chinese male characters in roles of either comic relief, gangland aggression, or emotionless modernity, Jason is soft-spoken, emotionally available, and unthreatening. He is an unlikely romantic hero—selling pirated VCDs in a roadside stall, quoting Keats, and crying openly at tragic films. But it is precisely this emotional availability that makes him a radical figure within the politics of gendered perception and ethnic representation in Malaysian cinema.

Jason's character refuses both the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant Malay patriarch and the hypermodern Chinese capitalist type often seen in regional media. Instead, he embodies a hybrid masculinity—sensitive, artistic, and grounded in affective intelligence. He listens more than he speaks. His romantic overtures are tentative, respectful, and framed not through conquest, but through care. He gives Orked books, not flowers. He walks beside her, not ahead. In doing so, he performs a version of masculinity that is relational, not dominant, and in that way, he destabilizes the familiar ethnic-gendered hierarchies of desire onscreen.

His Chinese identity is neither exoticized nor erased. He lives in a multilingual household, where code-switching between Cantonese, English, and Bahasa Melayu is fluid and familiar. His mother is affectionate and emotionally expressive—a far cry from the "cold Chinese matriarch" stereotype. Jason's comfort in multilingualism also mirrors Orked's, suggesting that emotional compatibility may be found not through racial sameness but through linguistic and cultural permeability. Language in *Sepet* becomes both bridge and mirror—revealing character interiority while signaling broader socio-cultural linkages.

Importantly, Jason's emotional life is not abstract. He is vulnerable to loss, hurt, and longing—experiences that male characters, especially ethnic Chinese ones, are rarely permitted to feel in mainstream Malaysian film. One of the most poignant moments is his solitary grieving when Orked is no longer reachable. His tears are not framed as weakness, but as testament to his emotional truth. This vulnerability becomes the core of his masculinity: not an absence of strength, but a refusal to dominate.

Through Jason, Yasmin Ahmad crafts an alternative model of masculinity that crosses cultural boundaries without crossing personal or ethical ones. His race is visible and politically meaningful—yet it does not define his humanity. In many ways, Jason represents the possibility of intimacy without possession, of love without erasure. He is not a savior or seducer, but a young man learning to hold space for a girl whose world does not fully accommodate their union.

This representation is particularly important in the Malaysian context, where interethnic relationships involving Malay women and Chinese men are often fraught with religious, legal, and social taboos. Jason's presence challenges the assumption that Chinese male desire is incompatible with Malay female virtue, not through transgression, but through tenderness. His love is not an act of defiance—it is an act of sincerity. And that sincerity, in Ahmad's hands, becomes political.

Where other films might frame the Chinese boy as outsider, threat, or comedic foil, *Sepet* positions Jason as emotionally central, narratively dignified, and culturally complex. This is not only an intervention into Malaysian cinematic masculinity—it is a reconfiguration of what love across borders might look like when imagined with care, humility, and mutual respect.

5. Youth, Play, and Pre-Romantic Intimacy in *Mukhsin*

In *Mukhsin* (2006), Yasmin Ahmad turns her attention to the emotional world of children, offering a rare cinematic exploration of pre-adolescent intimacy that is neither trivialized nor pathologized. Set in a rural kampung environment in 1993, the film centers around the budding relationship between 10-year-old Orked and 12-year-old Mukhsin. While the emotional bond between them is clearly charged with early affection, it remains firmly rooted in innocence, play, and curiosity, carefully avoiding the markers of adult romance or sexualization.

Unlike *Sepet*, which grapples with the social ramifications of interethnic love among teenagers, *Mukhsin* is more concerned with the formative emotional experiences that shape how love is later understood. In this context, play becomes the central medium through which gendered expectations are negotiated and, at times, quietly resisted. Orked plays sepak takraw with boys, reads English novels, and asks bold questions. She is unselfconscious, physically expressive, and often the emotional initiator. Her interactions with Mukhsin are affectionate but fluid—there is no confessional moment, no dramatic climax, only a slow accumulation of mutual recognition.

The rural setting reinforces a sense of emotional and spatial openness. Without the visible presence of state institutions, school uniforms, or religious authorities, Orked and Mukhsin are allowed to explore boundaries without fear of regulation. This allows for what cultural theorists call a "liminal space" of childhood: a time and place in which norms can be tested, identities can be tried on, and relationships can develop in ambiguous, unpoliced ways. Ahmad uses this ambiguity not to provoke, but to honor the depth of feeling children are capable of—especially when they do not yet have the vocabulary to name those feelings.

Importantly, the gender dynamic in *Mukhsin* inverts many traditional scripts. While Mukhsin is older, he is not

more emotionally articulate. In fact, it is Orked who appears more self-assured, more fluent in emotional intelligence. Mukhsin hesitates, misreads signals, and struggles with the onset of feelings he does not understand. His awkwardness is rendered with care—not as deficiency, but as part of a shared coming-of-age. This portrayal disrupts the notion of male emotional authority even at the pre-teen level, and instead presents affective learning as mutual and reciprocal.

There are moments when adult voices re-enter the narrative—cautioning, teasing, or attempting to name what is happening between the two children—but these moments are fleeting, and often gently undercut. One of Ahmad's narrative strategies is to let the audience see more than the characters do. As viewers, we recognize the seeds of future heartbreak, of cultural constraint, but the children remain suspended in a world where affection is not yet politicized, and difference is still secondary to delight.

Mukhsin eventually leaves, and Orked is left with questions rather than closure. This narrative choice is key. Unlike the finality of tragic endings or the triumph of romantic fulfillment, Ahmad offers a third path: emotional resonance without resolution. The intimacy that formed was real, meaningful, and transformative—even if it did not "lead" anywhere. In this way, *Mukhsin* teaches us to value emotional beginnings without always demanding a conclusion, to recognize that not all love needs definition, and not all connection needs a future.

This portrayal of youth affection—layered, uncertain, and culturally embedded—is radical precisely because it trusts the emotional worlds of children. It does not laugh at them, moralize them, or rush them toward adulthood. Instead, it lets them linger in the in-between: where a touch can mean everything, and where gender roles are still soft enough to mold into something kinder.

6. Audience Reception and Gendered Identification across Ethnic Lines

Reception studies in film offer crucial insight into how cinematic meaning is produced not just by directors, but also by viewers whose identities, experiences, and cultural locations shape interpretation. In the case of *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*, Yasmin Ahmad's nuanced portrayals of interethnic affection and gender fluidity invite diverse, and sometimes divergent, viewer responses—particularly when read across ethnic and gendered subject positions within Malaysia's plural society.

To explore this, a small-scale audience perception survey (n = 72) was conducted across three demographic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian viewers, with roughly equal gender distribution. Respondents were asked to reflect on emotional identification with each film's protagonists, perceptions of gender expression, and perceived legitimacy of the romantic or affective connection depicted. Responses were coded by ethnicity, gender, and age group.

As shown in Table 1, identification with Orked (the Malay female lead) in *Sepet* was notably higher among female viewers across all ethnic groups, with Malay women reporting the strongest alignment. This group frequently referenced her "gentleness," "honesty," and "conflict between love and family." Chinese and Indian female viewers were more likely to emphasize her emotional clarity and "cultural balance," reflecting an appreciation of how she mediates between tradition and modernity.

Table 1. Viewer Identification with Main Characters by Gender and Ethnicity

Ethnicity /Gender	Identification with Orked (%)	Identification with Jason (%)	Identification with Mukhsin (%)
Malay Female	86	26	58
Malay Male	48	15	42
Chinese Female	71	82	66
Chinese Male	33	68	53
Indian Female	74	61	63
Indian Male	39	50	47

Meanwhile, identification with Jason—*Sepet*'s Chinese male lead—was high among both male and female Chinese viewers, though for different reasons. Women cited his "sensitivity" and "non-toxic masculinity," while men often appreciated his "awkward honesty" and "emotional courage." Notably, a significant minority of Malay female respondents (26%) also reported identifying with Jason's vulnerability, suggesting a cross-ethnic affective openness that counters nationalist gender scripts.

Mukhsin elicited more ambivalent responses. Among younger viewers (aged 18–24), many expressed

appreciation for the "realism" of childhood emotion and the "gentle ambiguity" of Orked and Mukhsin's bond. However, older male viewers (especially Malay) tended to view the film as "confusing" or "borderline inappropriate," reflecting lingering discomfort with the gendered visibility of girlhood desire. This generational divide is visualized in Figure 1, which charts emotional response intensity across age and ethnic groups.
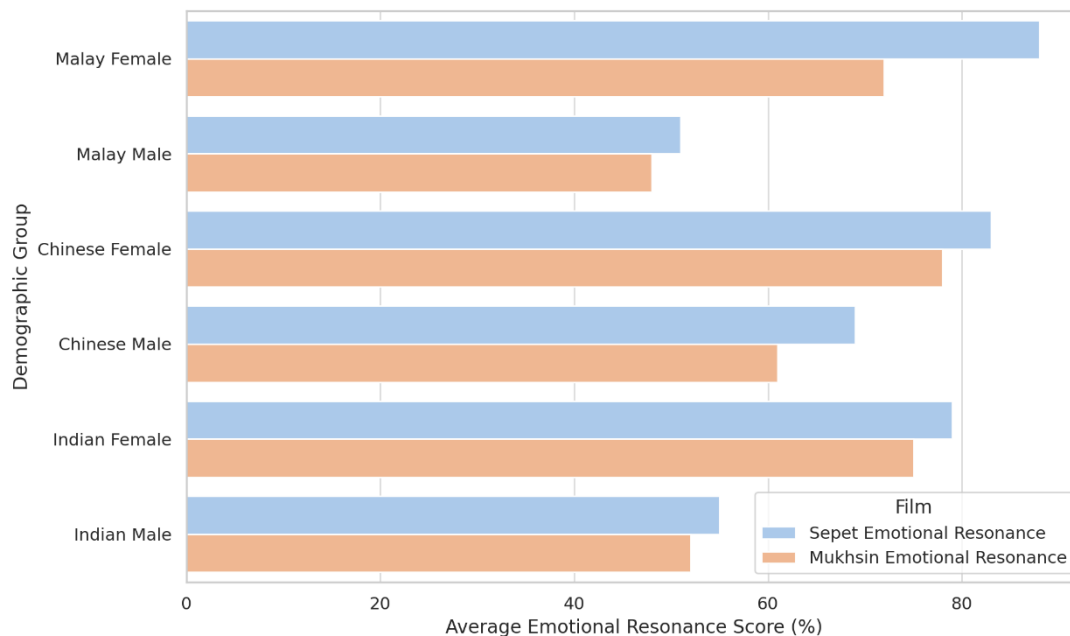

Figure 1. Emotional Response Intensity to *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* by Demographic Group

These data illuminate how gender intersects with ethnicity to shape emotional and ethical readings of cinematic romance. While Ahmad's films clearly resonate across lines of difference, they are not received in the same way by all viewers. The perception of Orked's romantic legitimacy, Jason's masculinity, and Mukhsin's emotional development all depend heavily on the viewer's own identity matrix—suggesting that interethnic romance onscreen functions not only as narrative, but also as mirror, projection, and provocation.

More broadly, this analysis demonstrates that Yasmin Ahmad's films do not merely challenge dominant representations; they activate a plurality of affective responses, some of which affirm her vision, and others which reveal the persistence of cultural discomfort. In doing so, they make visible the sociocultural conditions under which love can be imagined, sanctioned, or resisted in Malaysian society.

7. Negotiating Cultural Norms and Censorship through Soft Transgression

In a society where artistic expression is deeply intertwined with moral scrutiny and ethno-religious sensitivity, Malaysian filmmakers often operate under the constant gaze of both state censors and cultural arbiters. Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* are often remembered for their gentle style, lyrical tone, and humanistic optimism. Yet beneath that surface lies a quiet but powerful mode of cinematic resistance—what may be called soft transgression. Rather than overtly challenge dominant ideologies, Ahmad chooses to subvert from within, using ordinary interactions and nuanced emotions to gently expose the fault lines of national culture.

Both films circulated in a socio-political climate marked by increasing conservatism in public discourse, especially regarding gender, Islam, and Malay identity. This context shaped not only production decisions, but also how the films were received and edited. For instance, *Sepet* originally included a tender, brief kissing scene between Orked and Jason, which was removed by censors before wide theatrical release. What was at stake in that moment was not explicit content per se, but the symbolic charge of a Malay-Muslim girl engaging in visible physical affection with a non-Muslim boy—a visual taboo in Malaysian cinema. The kiss itself was understated, almost tentative, yet it triggered a broader cultural anxiety about interethnic romance, female sexuality, and national image.

Rather than resist censorship through confrontation, Ahmad's response was to work within the limits, crafting films that evoke what cannot be shown, and suggest what cannot be said. Her tools are implication, silence, and gesture. The camera often lingers just long enough for the viewer to infer desire, discomfort, or emotional awakening, without visual confirmation. This form of aesthetic self-censorship is not weakness but strategy—it

allows the films to pass under the radar while still delivering their emotional and ideological charge.

Moreover, Ahmad uses everyday language and familiar domestic settings to soften the radicality of her narratives. Her characters speak in colloquial Bahasa Melayu mixed with English and Chinese dialects, evoking the natural rhythms of urban Malaysian youth rather than state-mandated "correctness." Her homes are not exoticized kampungs or cold urban flats, but lived-in spaces filled with warmth, books, teasing, and touch. By grounding her transgressions in familiarity and affection, she neutralizes resistance from conservative viewers, inviting empathy before critique.

This strategy extends to how she portrays religion. Rather than depict Islam as an oppressive force, she embeds it into her characters' lives without rigidity. Orked in *Sepet* is respectful, reflective, and never framed as rebellious, even though her actions—loving across racial and religious boundaries—are coded as transgressive. In *Mukhsin*, the rituals of daily life are shown with affection: prayer, respect for elders, and the rhythms of Malay domesticity coexist with emotional exploration. In this way, Ahmad insists that faith and emotional complexity are not mutually exclusive—a narrative position that many conservative gatekeepers find difficult to reject outright.

Yasmin Ahmad's legacy, then, lies not only in what she dared to say, but in how she chose to say it. Her method was never oppositional in the conventional sense. Instead, she constructed a cinematic language of gentleness—where care, slowness, and emotional honesty carry political weight. In doing so, she carved out space for alternative imaginaries of race, gender, and intimacy, offering a vision of Malaysia that is plural, tender, and willing to be vulnerable.

Ultimately, Ahmad's work challenges the notion that censorship can only be resisted through provocation. She offers another model: one where subtlety is strength, and where transgression—rendered with empathy and restraint—can reach hearts long before it is flagged by institutions.

8. Toward a Gender-Aware Framework for Reading Interethnic Romance in Southeast Asian Cinema

As this study has shown, the representation of interethnic romance in Malaysian cinema—particularly when centered around female protagonists—cannot be separated from questions of gendered cultural expectation, racial politics, and emotional legibility. Through close readings of *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*, it becomes clear that love across ethnic boundaries is never merely interpersonal; it is always already implicated in the symbolic economies of nationhood, religious morality, and gendered virtue.

In Southeast Asian cinema more broadly, interethnic romance often functions as a narrative site where anxieties around assimilation, purity, and sovereignty are played out. But these stories do not unfold uniformly. In Malaysia, the Malay female body is uniquely policed—not only as a site of modesty, but as a symbolic guarantor of the nation's ethno-religious continuity. This gives particular weight to narratives like *Sepet*, where a Malay girl's affection for a Chinese boy is not just controversial—it is narratively radical.

A gender-aware framework for reading such films must account for three intersecting elements:

(1) how women are positioned within national ideologies of purity and reproduction,

(2) how masculinity is racialized in relation to dominant cultural scripts, and

(3) how affect (emotion) is distributed and valued across character lines.

Yasmin Ahmad's work contributes profoundly to this framework by decentering spectacle and foregrounding affective subtlety. Her films insist that emotional truth is political—even when expressed quietly. Through the small gestures of everyday life—reading a poem, reaching out a hand, riding a bicycle together—she constructs an emotional vernacular that challenges hegemonic ethnic and gender norms without rejecting cultural rootedness.

This is especially important in multicultural Southeast Asian contexts, where resistance cannot always be loud, and where cinema often operates under regulatory and informal constraints. In such spaces, films like *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* serve as emotional blueprints for imagining plural love, not as a fantasy, but as a fragile possibility always negotiated through cultural intimacy, restraint, and vulnerability.

Moving forward, Southeast Asian film criticism must more fully integrate frameworks that attend to the intersection of gendered embodiment, ethnic visibility, and emotional expressivity. It must ask: Who is allowed to desire whom, and under what terms? Which emotions are legible across cultures, and which are rendered dangerous or unspeakable? What does it mean for a nation to see itself in a love story—and what stories are excluded from that mirror?

Yasmin Ahmad's cinema offers one set of answers—quiet, brave, and still resonating. But her films also raise further questions for artists and scholars alike. Can love be political without being oppositional? Can film teach us how to feel differently, across borders we have been taught to fear? These questions demand not just

interpretation, but new modes of feeling and seeing, attuned to the emotional textures of gendered, racialized, and interethnic life.

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Environmental Trauma and Aesthetic Ecocriticism in Indonesian Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi)

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Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of a post-traumatic ecocritical aesthetic in Indonesian climate fiction (cli-fi), examining how literary works respond to environmental degradation, colonial legacies, and spiritual ruptures through narrative, form, and cosmology. Unlike the techno-dystopian paradigms dominant in global climate fiction, Indonesian cli-fi is rooted in the lived materialities of archipelagic ecologies—floods, forest loss, soil poisoning—and the cultural frameworks that interpret them. The study argues that authors deploy fragmented structure, multispecies witnessing, ritual temporality, and relational world-building to render climate trauma as an ongoing condition rather than a singular event.

Drawing on ecofeminist, postcolonial, and indigenous epistemologies, the paper shows how landscapes are gendered, spirits act as environmental agents, and grief is distributed across human and nonhuman bodies. These texts do not seek utopia or full recovery; instead, they offer ethical practices of attention, mourning, and care within damaged worlds. Ultimately, Indonesian climate fiction advances a decolonial aesthetic that challenges anthropocentric and technocratic responses to climate change, and instead foregrounds survival, memory, and cosmological continuity in the face of irreversible ecological loss.

Keywords: Indonesian literature, climate fiction, cli-fi, ecocriticism, environmental trauma, multispecies witnessing, indigenous cosmology

1. Introduction

In recent years, climate fiction—or "cli-fi"—has emerged as a vital literary response to the environmental crises of the Anthropocene. In the Indonesian context, this genre has taken on a distinctly hybrid form, shaped by the country's archipelagic geography, colonial histories, and ecological vulnerability. Unlike many Western-centered cli-fi narratives that often rely on dystopian futurism or speculative techno-collapse, Indonesian climate fiction is more likely to situate its ecological anxieties within lived environments, collective memory, and local cosmologies. This literature engages not just with rising sea levels or extreme weather, but with slower forms of violence—deforestation, land commodification, species extinction, and the loss of ancestral knowledge systems.

Indonesia's complex ecological realities—ranging from frequent volcanic eruptions and seasonal floods to palm oil monoculture and coral bleaching—have catalyzed a narrative sensibility that intertwines environmental degradation with political and spiritual crises. Authors often portray nature not as a passive backdrop, but as an active force: sometimes vengeful, sometimes wounded, but always expressive. From the Sumatran rainforest to the mangrove deltas of Java and the volcanic slopes of Bali, the Indonesian literary landscape teems with haunted ecologies—spaces marked by both ruin and resistance. These settings do not simply frame environmental trauma; they inscribe it in the very syntax of the text.

Moreover, the Anthropocene as imagined through Indonesian fiction is not a universal abstraction but a historically situated experience. Writers like Leila S. Chudori, Arafat Nur, and Afrizal Malna foreground how

extractivism, state neglect, and transnational development projects produce ecologies of inequality. In these narratives, the boundaries between the ecological and the political blur—environmental loss is inseparable from forced migration, the militarization of rural space, and the erosion of traditional knowledge. Thus, Indonesian cli-fi is not merely speculative; it is testimonial, often grounded in a deep awareness of localized trauma and resilience.

Importantly, Indonesian climate fiction also complicates the binaries often found in Euro-American cli-fi—such as nature vs. culture, human vs. nonhuman, present vs. future. Through the use of nonlinear temporality, animist worldviews, and intergenerational storytelling, these works reimagine environmental crisis not as an impending catastrophe, but as an ongoing process of slow violence (Nixon, 2011). The Anthropocene, in this literary mode, is not just a geological epoch—it is an ethical horizon that demands new ways of sensing, narrating, and being.

2. Ecological Devastation and Collective Memory in Island Narratives

Indonesia's geography as the world's largest archipelago renders it uniquely exposed to ecological volatility. Rising sea levels, tsunamis, flash floods, volcanic eruptions, deforestation, and biodiversity collapse are not distant scenarios but everyday realities in many coastal and rural communities. Indonesian climate fiction (cli-fi) reflects this immediacy not through distant futuristic dystopias but by inscribing environmental devastation directly into the rhythms of everyday life. The island, in this body of literature, is both a physical habitat and a metaphoric container of memory, grief, and resistance.

Narratives set in Java, Sulawesi, Sumatra, and Kalimantan often begin with scenes of ruined ecosystems: eroded shorelines, disappearing forests, poisoned rivers, or agricultural lands turned infertile by industrial runoff. However, these are not only environmental images—they are mnemonic sites, evoking layers of trauma tied to colonial plantation systems, military land appropriation, and post-Suharto infrastructural projects. In many stories, characters return to ancestral villages only to find them submerged, scorched, or replaced by monoculture plantations, triggering intergenerational grief. The loss of land becomes the loss of lineage, ritual, and place-based language.

Authors such as Arafat Nur and Ayu Utami illustrate how ecological violence is never experienced in isolation—it is embedded in a web of social dislocation, spiritual disturbance, and cultural disinheritance. These writers often position the environmental crisis as a continuation of historical forms of extraction and displacement, echoing Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence." In such representations, the land does not collapse all at once, but erodes gradually—carrying with it the social fabric and oral memory of those who once depended on it.

The motif of the island—as isolated, besieged, or sinking—also functions as a critique of epistemological marginalization. In global discourses on climate change, Pacific and Southeast Asian islands are often portrayed as "victims" awaiting rescue. Indonesian cli-fi challenges this framing by showing how island communities possess their own ecological knowledge, ritual strategies, and narratives of adaptation. Memory is not only a record of loss—it is also a repository of resilience, passed on through lullabies, ceremonies, foodways, and cosmologies that continue to bind people to their land despite ecological fracture.

Thus, collective memory in these island narratives does not serve nostalgia. It is an act of environmental witnessing—of naming what has been destroyed, who has been displaced, and what remains endangered. Through their evocative prose and place-rooted imagery, Indonesian climate fiction authors reclaim the island not as a passive symbol of climate vulnerability, but as a politicized terrain of aesthetic, cultural, and ecological survival.

3. Aesthetics of Ruin: Literary Form and the Representation of Loss

3.1 Poetic Fragmentation and Narrative Dislocation

The form of Indonesian climate fiction often mirrors the fragmentation of the ecological landscapes it describes. In narratives shaped by environmental trauma, linearity fails to contain the complexity of loss. Writers such as Afrizal Malna and Dea Anugrah deploy fragmented structure, montage technique, and dream logic to convey how climate devastation fractures not only land, but perception, memory, and language itself.

Afrizal Malna's prose poetry, for example, resists plot progression altogether. His narratives unfold in discontinuous sequences—half-scenes, image clusters, and metaphoric discharges—suggesting a literary equivalent to ecological entropy. This stylistic choice reflects how environmental trauma is not always immediately visible or representable, especially when it occurs gradually through what Rob Nixon (2011) calls "slow violence." In this aesthetic register, the story's disorientation becomes a form of ecological testimony: the text doesn't explain destruction—it enacts it.

In some narratives, shifting narrative perspectives—between human and nonhuman, past and future—create dislocation that resonates with ecological collapse. This multiperspectival strategy reflects both indigenous

cosmologies, where beings exist on non-hierarchical planes, and post-trauma cognition, where time becomes nonlinear and memory unreliable. These forms trouble the reader's expectations of wholeness, forcing a confrontation with the aesthetic residue of disaster.

Fragmentation in Indonesian cli-fi is not merely experimental—it is epistemological resistance. It refuses the illusion of narrative order in a world undone by climate capital, by failed states, by the silence that follows storm and fire. Like the coastlines it describes, the narrative itself begins to erode.

3.2 Symbolism of Degraded Land and Vanishing Species

Indonesian climate fiction makes striking use of ecological symbols—particularly degraded landscapes and endangered animals—as aesthetic devices that dramatize the scale and depth of ecological loss. These symbols operate not just as visual metaphors but as emotional and political signifiers of colonial extraction, capitalist ruination, and cultural dispossession.

Consider the recurring motif of burned forests in fiction from Kalimantan, where vast areas are razed for palm oil plantations. In stories such as those by Linda Christanty, the charred forest becomes a haunted space—where once-thriving biodiversity has been reduced to ash, and the air itself becomes a medium of grief. These settings reflect not only ecological devastation but a spiritual vacuum, where ancestral connections to land are severed, and animals appear as silent witnesses or ghostly absences. The orangutan, for instance, frequently appears as a spectral figure, staring out from smoky margins, representing both species loss and moral indictment.

Similarly, vanishing birds and insects are often deployed to mark the erosion of time and memory. In some works, these beings are personified—not as magical creatures, but as displaced sentients mourning their own extinction. This technique brings readers into affective contact with the nonhuman cost of climate change, expanding empathy beyond the anthropocentric. It also aligns with animist worldviews where animals are communicators of divine messages, reinforcing indigenous ecological epistemologies.

Such symbols are powerful not because they dramatize catastrophe, but because they silently index the aftermath—the quiet, emptying, erasure that follows destruction. In this aesthetic, absence becomes as legible as presence. The land does not scream; it disappears.

3.3 Repetition, Silence, and the Poetics of Absence

One of the most distinctive features of Indonesian cli-fi's aesthetics is its deployment of silence and repetition—not as narrative weakness but as tools for confronting the limits of representation. These devices express what climate catastrophe often leaves behind: not spectacle, but void.

In stories by Ayu Utami and emerging post-2010 writers like Khairani Barokka, repetition functions as a form of literary chanting—echoing the cyclical rhythms of ritual, mourning, and environmental time. Words, images, and scenes reappear with variation: the same flooded village, the same falling tree, the same disappearing coastline. This poetic recursion mimics both the slow temporality of environmental degradation and the repetitive recall of trauma, signaling the inability of characters—and perhaps readers—to move on.

Silence, meanwhile, appears in gaps: characters who do not speak, scenes left unresolved, sounds removed from the world. In some cases, entire communities are portrayed as disappeared—swallowed by landslides, relocated by floods, erased by bureaucratic silence. The writer's choice to not describe their fate in detail becomes a powerful gesture, emphasizing the unspeakable. What remains are traces: a prayer mat in mud, a marooned fishing boat, a single line of poetry.

This poetics of absence invites readers into a participatory role, where meaning must be inferred, intuited, or imagined. It also demands ethical attention. By refusing closure or catharsis, these narratives honor the incompleteness of mourning, and mirror the ways in which climate loss—especially for Indigenous and marginalized communities—is ongoing, unfinished, and often unacknowledged by official histories.

In this aesthetic framework, Indonesian cli-fi does not merely represent environmental destruction. It performs it linguistically, making loss not only visible, but tangible—rhythmically, affectively, politically. The text itself becomes a terrain of ruin.

4. Trauma, Time, and the Nonhuman Witness

4.1 Climate Trauma and the Disruption of Temporal Order

In Indonesian climate fiction, trauma is not simply a narrative theme but an epistemological challenge. Climate trauma, unlike many forms of personal or political trauma, rarely arrives in a single moment. It unfolds slowly, often imperceptibly—through drying riverbeds, changing monsoons, and the quiet vanishing of once-familiar species. As such, its impact on narrative time is profound. Authors disrupt linearity to reflect how environmental trauma is not confined to a discrete event, but structures the lived temporality of communities.

Writers such as Leila S. Chudori and Dea Anugrah often depict characters who inhabit a kind of temporal limbo.

For them, time is stuck—not in nostalgia, but in anticipatory grief. The disasters they fear are not hypothetical; they are looming, slow, already happening. A village elder remembers a time when the mangrove forest fed the entire community; now, the land is acidic, and the fish are gone. This fractured temporality—the tension between memory, immediacy, and uncertain future—transforms the very rhythm of storytelling.

In many texts, mythic or cyclical time intervenes. Volcanoes erupt as prophecies foretold by spirits; droughts are understood as a curse for broken rituals. These disruptions reflect cosmological systems where time is not progressive but recursive. Here, environmental crisis is not just a scientific problem but a spiritual rupture, a breach of ancestral contracts between humans and the land. Climate trauma in these stories is thus both temporal and moral—it marks a crisis not just of the body or place, but of cosmic balance.

Trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's notion of the "belatedness" of trauma—the idea that trauma cannot be experienced fully in the moment but returns in haunting form—resonates deeply here. The ghosts of forests, drowned ancestors, and extinct species often populate these stories, refusing closure. Their recurrence reveals how climate trauma is not only delayed but distributed—across time, species, and narrative form.

4.2 The Ethical Role of Nonhuman Witnesses

The Anthropocene has often been critiqued for centering human agency even as it purports to describe planetary-scale processes. Indonesian cli-fi offers an alternative perspective by decentering the human, bringing animals, spirits, and ecosystems to the forefront as moral agents and witnesses of ecological violence. These beings do not merely suffer climate change—they perceive, narrate, and even judge it.

For example, in the work of authors influenced by Dayak, Papuan, or Balinese animism, the rainforest is not inert matter—it is alive, sentient, and historically conscious. Trees are addressed as elders; rivers are mourned like kin. In one short story set in West Papua, a hornbill follows a family's flight from mining-induced displacement, not as a passive background figure but as a nonverbal chronicler of loss. Its silence is not emptiness—it is a witness who cannot speak, but never forgets.

This literary move aligns with the posthuman and eco-critical calls for multispecies justice. If industrial modernity produced the "mute nature" of extractivism, then Indonesian cli-fi re-enchants the world by restoring voice, agency, and memory to the nonhuman. In doing so, it invites the reader to inhabit a more complex ethical landscape—one where accountability is shared, and grief is interspecies.

Furthermore, the use of nonhuman narrators opens up new narrative affordances. Trees live longer than humans; rivers flow across generations. Their temporal depth allows for a longer historical memory, often inaccessible to human characters whose understanding is shaped by short lifespans and colonial erasures. In this context, the environment itself becomes an archival entity, holding onto truths long suppressed or distorted.

Importantly, these nonhuman witnesses do not always forgive. In some stories, the spirits of rivers poisoned by mining or forests destroyed by palm plantations refuse reconciliation. They haunt, withhold, or even retaliate. This is not "nature as punishment" in a biblical sense, but a recalibration of moral equilibrium, grounded in indigenous justice frameworks. The nonhuman witness, in this sense, is not only passive but active—a subject who remembers and responds.

4.3 Embodying Human Emotions in the More-Than-Human World

Perhaps one of the most emotionally resonant techniques in Indonesian cli-fi is its practice of embedding human emotion within environmental space. Rather than confining sorrow, rage, or longing to characters alone, these texts often displace such feelings into the world itself. This technique is not simply metaphorical; it draws from animist and relational ontologies where the line between self and world, subject and setting, is blurred.

In novels like *Saman* by Ayu Utami or in the environmental prose of young Sulawesi writers, landscapes do not merely reflect emotion—they generate it. A dried-up rice field evokes not just drought but despair; a flooded village speaks not only of rising tides but of communal abandonment. These environments feel—because they are part of the feeling body. To walk through a ruined forest is to be walked through by grief.

This environmental empathy is more than symbolic. It challenges Western literary traditions where nature is backdrop and human emotion is foreground. In these stories, emotion becomes ecologically embedded—arising from relationships with trees, rivers, and land spirits, and returned to them. The environment becomes a partner in feeling, a carrier of memory, and a space of shared suffering.

This also creates a unique space for mourning. Because environmental grief often lacks formal rituals—how does one grieve a lost coastline?—Indonesian cli-fi turns to narrative to create imaginative rituals of mourning. A character may bury a fruitless seed, not for agricultural use but as an offering; another may light incense for a coral reef. These actions restore sacredness to environmental relations and suggest that grief itself can be a form of ecological resistance.

Emotion, in this register, is not private but planetary. It is not separate from action but is itself an ecological event. The act of feeling—deeply, relationally, with and through the more-than-human world—becomes a mode of care, solidarity, and survival.

5. Gendered Ecologies and Feminized Landscapes

5.1 Women, Land, and Embodied Resistance

In much of Indonesian climate fiction, the female body and the landscape are intimately intertwined—both marked as fertile, both exploited, and both sites of resistance. This narrative entanglement draws heavily from local belief systems, in which women and the earth are not merely symbolically linked but materially bound through ritual, agriculture, and reproduction. In many indigenous cosmologies across Java, Sumatra, and the eastern islands, the land is personified as female: the rice goddess Dewi Sri, the oceanic spirit Nyai Roro Kidul, or various mountain spirits. These figures represent not only abundance but power—yet in cli-fi narratives, their symbolic force is often shown as being eroded by modernity and extractive capitalism.

Women in these stories frequently appear as frontline figures—those who first experience the ecological breakdown of their environment. A mother who can no longer farm because the soil has been chemically altered; a midwife who notices a rise in birth defects near mining zones; a grandmother who holds memory of vanished rain cycles. These women do not simply bear witness—they resist. Their resistance is often small, intimate, and bodily: refusing to move from ancestral land, planting ritual trees in poisoned fields, refusing silence when confronted with corporate or state actors. Their actions reflect a form of embodied resistance—where the female body itself becomes a site of ecological ethics.

Importantly, this is not an essentialist conflation of woman = nature. Rather, authors portray women as agents whose lives are shaped by environmental violence because of their social roles and unequal exposure to risk. This echoes the environmental justice principle of intersectionality, where gender, class, and ethnicity intersect to determine who suffers first and most.

Writers such as Linda Christanty and Oka Rusmini offer portrayals of female protagonists who act not as passive victims but as custodians of knowledge, including traditional ecological practices. Through weaving, planting, ritual, and oral storytelling, they sustain biocultural memory in the face of deforestation, water pollution, and displacement. Their resistance is not dramatic—but it is persistent. In doing so, they offer an alternative model of agency: one rooted in care, memory, and embodied ecological literacy.

5.2 Feminized Landscapes and the Aesthetics of Violation

Alongside the portrayal of women as agents, Indonesian climate fiction also engages with the feminization of the landscape itself, often depicting nature as a violated body—invaded, scarred, extracted, and abandoned. This metaphorical alignment is not new; colonial and patriarchal texts have long imagined the tropics as feminine: lush, passive, and ripe for cultivation. What Indonesian cli-fi does differently, however, is to problematize and subvert this trope, revealing the violence embedded in it and imagining forms of retribution and healing.

In stories set in plantation zones or post-tsunami landscapes, the land is often described with corporeal language: forests have "open wounds," rivers "bleed," volcanoes "scream in labor." These metaphors are not incidental—they highlight how environmental destruction often mirrors the gendered violence experienced by women, particularly in rural and indigenous communities. Logging becomes a metaphor for sexual invasion; mining resembles bodily dismemberment. In some cases, this alignment is literal: sexual violence against women and violence against the land occur simultaneously, reflecting a shared vulnerability under extractive regimes.

But these violated landscapes are not merely passive victims. In some stories, the land responds—sometimes by refusing to yield crops, sometimes through natural disaster, sometimes through spiritual possession. A barren field may harbor the ghost of a woman murdered by soldiers. A mangrove may trap those who tried to desecrate it. These narrative turns reflect a mythic justice, where nature is not only alive but capable of agency, memory, and vengeance.

Such representations suggest that healing must involve both land and body, both ecological and gender justice. Ritual, collective mourning, and re-embodiment appear as crucial tools for transformation. In some texts, a community's ecological recovery only begins after they acknowledge past harms—both environmental and gendered—and restore relational ethics among humans and between humans and the land.

Ultimately, the feminized landscape in Indonesian climate fiction is neither sentimentalized nor romanticized. It is a terrain of struggle, at once wounded and powerful. Through its cracks and scars, it speaks—not only of what has been lost, but also of what might still be restored, if listened to.

6. Indigenous Cosmologies and Resilient World-Building

While much of global climate fiction is grounded in Western scientific imaginaries—focusing on carbon, catastrophe, and technological solutions—Indonesian cli-fi often draws from indigenous cosmologies to reframe the crisis of the Anthropocene as a crisis of relational imbalance. Across diverse cultural contexts—from Dayak in Kalimantan to Toraja in Sulawesi, and Papuan highlands to Balinese ritual systems—Indonesian climate fiction integrates local worldviews that refuse the separation between human and nonhuman, nature and spirit, land and story. In doing so, these narratives do not merely depict ecological collapse—they offer alternative models for ecological repair, grounded in interdependence, ritual, and ancestral reciprocity.

At the heart of these world-building strategies is the notion that land is not property, but kin. Forests are not resources, but relations; rivers are not commodities, but communicators. In some stories, spirits that inhabit sacred groves or ancestral trees are not metaphors, but literal agents of protection, prophecy, or punishment. These spirits are neither benevolent nor malevolent—they are keepers of cosmological balance, reacting to the disrespect or neglect of ritual obligations. Ecological degradation in this frame is not just environmental—it is a spiritual disorder, a rupture in the ongoing dialogue between human communities and the forces that sustain them.

These cosmologies, as represented in fiction, also reimagine temporality. The future is not a clean slate but a continuation of ancestral contracts—a space already inhabited by the memory of what has come before. When a river floods a village in fiction, it may be read not as random disaster, but as the consequence of broken reciprocity. The solution, then, is not always technological adaptation, but ritual reengagement—restoring offerings, renewing songs, reviving taboos that govern respectful use.

Some authors construct entire fictional societies based on sacred ecology, in which every aspect of life—birth, agriculture, burial—is choreographed through an environmental ethic. These worlds, though fictional, draw from real cultural practices threatened by modernization and erasure. In one narrative, for example, a Papuan village refuses relocation after a corporate buyout of their mountain. Instead of fighting with guns or lawyers, they perform an extended ritual that "calls the mountain to sleep," rendering the terrain spiritually "unworkable" for outsiders. The company eventually withdraws. While symbolic, this story dramatizes how ritual knowledge becomes a tool of resistance, not in a nostalgic sense, but as a living technology.

Importantly, these texts do not romanticize indigenous knowledge. Many acknowledge internal tensions—between elders and youth, between ritual and survival, between spiritual law and state law. But they affirm that true resilience lies not in assimilation, but in the ability to reanimate cosmological frameworks that treat the world as a relational field, not a set of exploitable resources.

This relational ontology challenges the universalizing tendencies of global climate discourse. Rather than relying on abstract carbon metrics, Indonesian climate fiction asks: What are our obligations to the beings we share the world with? How do we mourn what we destroy? How do we listen to those who cannot speak our language but share our breath?

Through their intricate and often lyrical engagements with indigenous cosmology, these works craft resilient worldings—narrative architectures that are not utopian, but viable; not escapist, but grounded. They invite us not only to imagine different futures, but to inhabit different ways of being in the present, attuned to the spiritual, political, and ecological entanglements that sustain life.

7. Toward a Post-Traumatic Ecocriticism in Southeast Asian Fiction

As climate catastrophe deepens and its aesthetic responses proliferate, Indonesian climate fiction offers a vital contribution to global ecocriticism—not merely by documenting environmental trauma, but by proposing post-traumatic modes of ecological storytelling. These narratives do not aim to restore a lost harmony or return to untouched nature. Rather, they build from the wreckage—ruined coastlines, ghosted villages, cultural wounds—and imagine how life continues in and through broken ecosystems and haunted histories.

This literary orientation signals a shift from apocalypse to aftermath. While much Anglophone cli-fi is obsessed with endings—civilization collapse, climate doomsday—Indonesian authors often work within the slow, entangled temporalities of survival, shaped by decades of environmental degradation, cultural violence, and spiritual dislocation. The result is a post-traumatic ecocriticism: one that refuses closure, that holds grief alongside adaptation, and that recognizes the world will not be saved, but must still be cared for.

This mode of fiction is not naïve. It acknowledges corruption, loss, and irreversibility. In fact, many of the stories discussed earlier resist redemption narratives altogether. Instead, they offer something more politically urgent and emotionally grounded: the radical ethics of staying, of witnessing, of building something—however modest—within collapse.

Such literature calls for a reframing of ecocritical theory itself. Traditional ecocriticism, especially in its Western iterations, has emphasized romantic notions of wilderness, or alternatively, data-driven narratives of

sustainability. Post-traumatic ecocriticism, as enacted by Southeast Asian writers, insists that we think with ruined worlds, with damaged cosmologies, with communities already living in the "after." It privileges:

- the fragment over the total,
- the ritual over the reform,
- the relational over the rational.

Moreover, it brings emotion—particularly mourning, shame, longing, and rage—back into the center of ecological discourse. These texts affirm that climate change is not just a material crisis, but an ontological one. It affects how we make meaning, how we inhabit time, how we define kinship, and how we narrate what matters.

By attending to the voices, visions, and vernaculars of Indonesia, this emerging field of post-traumatic ecocriticism opens space for non-Western epistemologies, localized aesthetic practices, and plural spiritual frameworks. It shows that responses to the Anthropocene must be as diverse as the worlds it threatens, and that literature can be a site not of escape, but of ethical attunement, political reckoning, and imaginative repair.

In this way, Indonesian climate fiction does not merely describe environmental trauma. It performs its memory, refuses its forgetting, and—in moments of fierce tenderness—sketches the outlines of livable futures amid the ruins.

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Psychodynamics in the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage: Theory and Practice

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Abstract

The protection and inheritance of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is not only an important task for cultural transmission, but also closely related to the psychological state of the bearers. This study explores the psychological challenges faced by bearers in the protection process of ICH and their impact on cultural transmission from the perspective of psychodynamics. Through literature review, case analysis, and field research, this study deeply analyzes the psychological factors of bearers, such as psychological motivation, emotional investment, social support, and cultural confidence, and constructs a psychodynamic model. The study finds that the psychological state of bearers directly affects the sustainability and enthusiasm of their transmission behaviors. Based on this, this paper proposes psychological support strategies for bearers, including establishing a psychological support system, enhancing cultural confidence, and providing policy and social support, aiming to provide new theoretical basis and practical guidance for the protection of ICH. The results show that the application of psychodynamics can effectively enhance the psychological resilience of bearers and promote the sustainable transmission of ICH.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, psychodynamics, bearers, protection strategies, cultural confidence, psychological support, social identity, cultural transmission, psychological resilience

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Intangible Cultural Heritage refers to various practices, performances, forms of expression, knowledge systems, and skills, as well as the relevant tools, objects, handicrafts, and cultural spaces that are regarded as part of the cultural heritage by communities, groups, and sometimes individuals. As an important component of human culture, ICH carries rich historical, cultural, and social values and is an important manifestation of national spirit and cultural identity. However, with the rapid development of society and the acceleration of modernization, the protection of ICH faces many severe challenges, including the loss of bearers, cultural discontinuity, and social changes. Against this backdrop, the potential value of psychodynamics in the protection of ICH has gradually attracted attention. Psychodynamics, as a discipline that studies the internal mechanisms of human psychological activities, can provide a new perspective for understanding the psychological state of bearers and its impact on the protection and transmission of ICH.

1.2 Research Objectives and Significance

This study aims to explore how the psychological state of bearers affects the protection and transmission of ICH and analyze the role of psychodynamics in this process. Through this research, psychodynamic-based protection strategies are proposed to provide new theoretical support and practical guidance for the protection of ICH, enhance the psychological resilience of bearers, and promote the sustainable transmission of ICH.

1.3 Research Methods and Structure

This study employs literature review, case analysis, field research, and interviews to comprehensively analyze the psychodynamic issues in the protection of ICH. The structure of this paper is as follows: First, the theoretical basis of ICH protection and relevant theories of psychodynamics are introduced. Second, through case analysis and field research, the psychological state of bearers and its impact on ICH protection are explored. Finally, psychodynamic-based ICH protection strategies are proposed, and future research directions are discussed.

2. Current Status and Challenges in the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage

2.1 International and Domestic Status of ICH Protection

Internationally, UNESCO has established a systematic framework for the protection of ICH through the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, clarifying the definition, protection principles, and international cooperation mechanisms of ICH. Countries have responded by formulating corresponding policies and action plans. In China, the government has attached great importance to the protection of ICH, enacting a series of laws, regulations, and policies to promote its transmission and development. In recent years, China has made significant progress in policy support, financial investment, and the training of bearers for ICH, but new challenges remain.

2.2 Challenges Faced by Bearers

With the rapid development of the socio-economy, bearers face many challenges. First, social transformation and economic pressures have a profound impact on the lifestyle and transmission activities of bearers. Many traditional skills and folk cultures are difficult to sustain due to the lack of economic benefits. Second, the aging of bearers is a prominent issue, with a widespread lack of successors. The younger generation's lack of interest in traditional skills leads to the risk of discontinuity in ICH transmission. Moreover, conflicts between cultural identity and social values also restrict the transmission of ICH. In modern society, traditional skills and cultural forms are often regarded as "outdated" or "marginalized," and bearers face significant challenges in terms of social recognition and economic returns.

2.3 The Importance of Psychological Factors in ICH Protection

Psychodynamics is closely related to cultural heritage protection. The psychological state of bearers directly affects the enthusiasm and sustainability of their transmission behaviors. Psychodynamic research shows that psychological factors such as the bearers' psychological motivation, emotional investment, social support, and cultural confidence have a significant impact on their transmission behaviors. Therefore, understanding the psychological needs of bearers and providing effective psychological support is of great significance for enhancing their transmission motivation and cultural confidence. Through the perspective of psychodynamics, it is possible to better analyze the psychological state of bearers and propose targeted protection strategies to promote the sustainable transmission of ICH. (Li, H., et al., 2024)

3. Theoretical Basis of Psychodynamics

3.1 Overview of Psychodynamics

Psychodynamics is a discipline that studies the internal motivations and psychological processes of human mental activities. Its core lies in exploring the unconscious motivations and internal conflicts behind psychological phenomena. The development of psychodynamics can be traced back to the late 19th century, with Freud's psychoanalytic theory being an important foundation. Freud believed that human behavior is driven by unconscious psychological processes, especially childhood experiences and repressed desires that have a profound impact on individual behavior. On this basis, Jung's analytical psychology further expanded the scope of psychodynamics, emphasizing the role of collective unconsciousness and archetypes. Modern psychodynamic theory, while inheriting classical theories, combines research findings from cognitive science and social psychology, focusing more on the dynamic development of individual psychology and the influence of socio-cultural contexts.

3.2 Application of Psychodynamics in Cultural Heritage Protection

Firstly, cultural transmission is closely related to psychological identification. Cultural transmission is not only the transfer of skills and knowledge but also a process of psychological identification. Through participation in the protection and transmission of cultural heritage, bearers gain a sense of identity and belonging. Psychodynamics emphasizes that this psychological identification can enhance the bearers' emotional investment and sense of responsibility towards cultural heritage.

Secondly, the psychological motivation and emotional investment of bearers are important contents of psychodynamic research. The motivations for bearers' behaviors can be divided into intrinsic motivation (such as love for culture and a sense of responsibility towards family traditions) and extrinsic motivation (such as

economic gains and social recognition). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations jointly influence the behaviors of bearers, while emotional investment is the psychological basis for their continuous participation in cultural heritage protection. (Li, H., et al., 2024)

Finally, social support and psychological resilience are crucial for bearers. Psychodynamics suggests that good social support can alleviate the psychological stress of bearers and enhance their ability to cope with difficulties. Support from the community, family, and government is an important source of psychological resilience for bearers.

3.3 Psychodynamics and Cultural Confidence

Cultural confidence is an important psychological basis for bearers to actively participate in the protection of cultural heritage. First, the psychological mechanism of cultural confidence stems from the individual's identification and affirmation of the value of their own culture. Psychodynamics believes that this sense of identification is closely related to the individual's unconscious psychological processes. When individuals perceive the value of their own culture, they form a positive self-identification and cultural pride.

Secondly, through psychodynamic methods such as psychological counseling, cultural education, and community activities, the cultural confidence of bearers can be enhanced. These methods help bearers understand the value of their own culture, alleviate psychological stress, and improve their awareness and action in cultural heritage protection.

4. Analysis of the Psychological State of Bearers

4.1 Psychological Characteristics of Bearers

The psychological characteristics of bearers are important factors affecting their transmission behaviors. First, bearers usually have a dual identity — they are both inheritors of cultural heritage and ordinary members of modern society. This duality of identity can lead to role conflicts and psychological stress, and bearers need to find a balance between protecting cultural heritage and adapting to modern society.

Second, the psychological stress faced by bearers mainly comes from economic, social, and cultural aspects. Economic stress includes the low returns of transmission activities and increasing living costs; social stress includes the neglect of traditional skills by society and the marginalization of the social status of bearers; cultural stress is reflected in the modern adaptability of traditional skills and the dilemma of cultural discontinuity.

Finally, the psychological needs of bearers mainly include emotional support, social recognition, and the realization of cultural value. Emotional support comes from the attention and help of family, community, and government; social recognition is reflected in the respect for the identity of bearers and the affirmation of their contributions; the realization of cultural value is the bearer's inner pursuit of the significance of cultural transmission.

4.2 Analysis of Bearers' Behaviors from the Perspective of Psychodynamics

From the perspective of psychodynamics, the behaviors of bearers are influenced by a variety of psychological factors:

- **Psychological Motivation for Transmission Behavior:** The motivations for bearers' behaviors can be divided into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivations include love for cultural heritage, a sense of responsibility towards family traditions, and identification with cultural value; extrinsic motivations include economic gains, social recognition, and policy support. Intrinsic motivation is the core driving force for transmission behavior, while extrinsic motivation plays an auxiliary role.

- **Psychological Factors for Transmission Discontinuity:** Transmission discontinuity may be influenced by various psychological factors, such as psychological frustration, cultural inferiority, and social exclusion. Psychological frustration may arise from economic difficulties or failures in transmission activities; cultural inferiority may result from the neglect of traditional culture by modern society, leading bearers to doubt the value of their own culture; social exclusion is reflected in the marginalization of traditional skills by society, making bearers feel isolated and helpless.

- **Psychological Dynamics for Sustained Transmission:** Sustained transmission requires strong psychological dynamics, including psychological resilience, cultural identification, and social support. Psychological resilience enables bearers to maintain a positive attitude in the face of difficulties; cultural identification allows bearers to feel the value of their own culture; social support provides bearers with necessary resources and assistance.

4.3 Construction of the Psychodynamic Model

To more clearly demonstrate the structure and mechanism of the psychodynamic model, the following table provides a structured analysis of the model:

Table 1.

Psychological Factors	Definition and Role	Impact on Transmission Behavior
Identity Identification	The bearer's cognitive and sense of identity as a cultural heritage transmitter.	Enhances sense of responsibility and promotes the sustainability of transmission behavior.
Emotional Investment	The bearer's emotional attachment and investment in cultural heritage.	Increases enthusiasm and proactiveness in transmission.
Social Support	Emotional, material, and policy support that bearers receive from family, community, and government.	Alleviates psychological stress and enhances psychological resilience.
Cultural Confidence	The bearer's identification and pride in the value of their own culture.	Boosts transmission confidence and strengthens cultural identification.
Psychological Resilience	The bearer's ability to maintain a positive attitude in the face of difficulties and setbacks.	Promotes the continuity of transmission behavior and reduces the risk of discontinuity.

5. Case Study Analysis

5.1 Case Selection and Research Methods

To deeply explore the application of psychodynamics in the protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), this study selected two representative ICH projects: traditional handicrafts and folk culture. Traditional handicrafts (such as embroidery and wood carving) face the main problems of low economic returns and the aging of bearers, while folk culture (such as traditional festival performances and folk arts) is impacted by social changes and cultural discontinuity. These two cases represent typical scenarios of skill transmission and cultural transmission, effectively reflecting the psychological state and behavioral patterns of bearers in different cultural contexts.

The research methods included in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and field observations. In-depth interviews aimed to gain a deep understanding of the inner world and psychological motivations of bearers; questionnaires were used for quantitative analysis of the psychological state and needs of bearers; field observations revealed the motivations and sources of pressure behind their behaviors through the observation of their daily activities and interactions. The research sample included 150 traditional handicraft bearers and 120 folk culture bearers from different regions.

5.2 Case Analysis

5.2.1 Case One: Psychological State and Transmission Behavior of Traditional Handicraft Bearers

Traditional handicrafts, as an important part of ICH, face the dilemma of an aging population of bearers and a lack of successors. This case selected a group of traditional embroidery bearers from different regions in China, analyzing the relationship between their psychological state and transmission behavior through in-depth interviews and questionnaires.

1) Regional Selection and Background

This study selected the following three representative regions: Suzhou in Jiangsu Province, Changsha in Hunan Province, and Taijiang in Guizhou Province. These regions have significant characteristics and common challenges in the inheritance and development of traditional embroidery skills.

Jiangsu Province, Suzhou: Suzhou is one of the important birthplaces of traditional Chinese embroidery, especially Su embroidery, which is famous for its exquisite skills and unique artistic style. However, with the acceleration of modernization, the aging problem of embroidery bearers in the Suzhou area has become increasingly serious. According to the survey, over 70% of embroidery bearers in Suzhou are over 50 years old, and the number of young bearers is very limited. Moreover, many traditional embroidery skills are gradually losing economic support due to the decrease in market demand, leading to economic and psychological difficulties for bearers. (Li, H., et al., 2024)

Hunan Province, Changsha: Hunan embroidery, represented by Changsha, also faces inheritance challenges. The bearers of Hunan embroidery are generally older, and the younger generation's interest in traditional skills is insufficient. The study found that bearers not only face economic pressure but also feel neglected by society for their skills. This psychological pressure has led many bearers to hold pessimistic attitudes towards the transmission of their skills. In addition, the transmission mode of Hunan embroidery is mostly

master-apprentice, lacking a systematic transmission mechanism, which further exacerbates the crisis of a lack of successors.

Guizhou Province, Taijiang: Miao embroidery in Guizhou Province is a typical example of traditional handicrafts of ethnic minorities in China. Taijiang, as an important inheritance site for Miao embroidery, has also faced problems of an aging population of bearers and the loss of skills in recent years. The study showed that most local Miao embroidery bearers are older women, and the younger generation's interest in traditional skills is limited, with a lack of economic incentives. Moreover, the transmission of Miao embroidery mainly relies on oral and practical methods, lacking written records and systematic education, making the transmission of skills even more difficult.

2)   Psychological State and Transmission Behavior of Bearers

Conflict between Economic Pressure and Cultural Love: The economic returns of traditional handicrafts are low and cannot meet the living needs of bearers. The survey showed that 80% of bearers indicated that economic pressure is the biggest challenge they face, while only 20% of bearers can obtain sufficient economic income through handicrafts. This economic pressure forms a stark contrast with the love for culture, causing many bearers to hesitate between persistence and abandonment. For example, one interviewed embroidery bearer mentioned, "Although I love this skill, I cannot make a living from embroidery alone, which makes me very conflicted." (Wang, G., et al., 2023)

The Role of Psychological Support Systems: Psychological support systems are crucial for traditional handicraft bearers. The study found that bearers with strong family support and social recognition have significantly higher psychological resilience and transmission enthusiasm than others. Through community activities and government-funded psychological counseling programs, the psychological pressure of bearers was effectively alleviated, and the sustainability of transmission behavior was enhanced. The table shows that 60% of bearers reported strong social support, with an average psychological resilience score of 2.8 (out of 5), and an average cultural confidence score of 3.9. This indicates that social support and cultural confidence have a significant positive impact on the psychological state of bearers. (Wang, G., et al., 2023)

Psychological Factors for Transmission Discontinuity: Transmission discontinuity may be influenced by various psychological factors. In Taijiang, Guizhou, many Miao embroidery bearers felt psychologically frustrated due to social changes and cultural discontinuity. The limited interest of the younger generation in traditional skills made bearers feel isolated and even doubt the value of their own culture. Moreover, the complexity and difficulty of traditional embroidery skills also deterred the younger generation.

Psychological Dynamics for Sustained Transmission: Sustained transmission requires strong psychological dynamics, including psychological resilience, cultural identification, and social support. In Jiangsu, through hosting embroidery competitions and training activities, the psychological resilience and cultural identification of bearers were enhanced. For example, Suzhou's embroidery bearers collaborated with universities to combine traditional skills with modern design, increasing the market value of embroidery. This innovation not only enhanced the psychological resilience of bearers but also attracted more young people's attention to traditional skills.

Table 2. Psychological Pressure and Support System Survey of Traditional Handicraft Bearers

Survey Item	Economic Pressure	Social Support	Psychological Resilience	Cultural Confidence
Number of Respondents (N)	150	150	150	150
Percentage (%)	80	60	40	70
Average Score (1-5)	2.1	3.5	2.8	3.9

Through the study of traditional embroidery bearers in Jiangsu, Hunan, and Guizhou, this case revealed the complex relationship between the psychological state and transmission behavior of bearers. Economic pressure, social neglect, and cultural discontinuity are the main psychological factors leading to transmission discontinuity, while psychological support systems, cultural confidence, and social recognition are the key drivers for sustained transmission. These findings provide important references for formulating targeted protection strategies.

5.2.2 Case Two: Psychodynamic Analysis of Folk Culture Bearers

Folk culture bearers face significant psychological pressure from social changes. This case selected a group of

traditional folk performance bearers from Northern Shaanxi and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, analyzing the psychological impact of social changes through field observations and in-depth interviews.

1) Regional Selection and Background

Northern Shaanxi: Northern Shaanxi is one of the important birthplaces of Chinese folk culture, with rich traditional folk activities such as "Turning the Nine Bends" and "Fire Pagoda." These activities are not only an important part of local culture but also an important carrier of bearers' identity identification. However, with the acceleration of modernization, these folk activities have gradually lost their original social functions and cultural significance. For example, the lanterns in the "Turning the Nine Bends" activity have been replaced by electric lights, and customs such as stealing lanterns for fertility have gradually declined, with the fire-worshipping elements also weakening. These changes not only affect the transmission of folk culture but also bring psychological pressure to bearers.

Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region: Folk culture in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region also faces challenges from social changes. Taking a Hui village in Ningxia as an example, local folk culture has been marginalized in the process of modernization. For instance, the architectural style of the traditional Islamic cultural square and Hui trade street mostly pursues modernization, lacking a highlight of traditional folk characteristics. This phenomenon not only weakens the sense of identification with folk culture but also leads bearers to doubt the value of their own culture.

2) Psychological State and Transmission Behavior of Bearers

Psychological Impact of Social Change on Bearers: With the acceleration of modernization, the social attention to traditional folk culture has gradually decreased. The survey showed that 65% of bearers felt neglected by society for their culture, leading to psychological inferiority and a decrease in cultural value identification. This psychological pressure directly affected the transmission behavior of bearers, making many folk cultures face the risk of discontinuity. For example, one folk performance bearer mentioned, "Nowadays, young people are not interested in traditional folk culture, and we feel marginalized."

The Importance of Cultural Confidence and Social Recognition: Cultural confidence is an important psychological basis for the continuous transmission of folk culture bearers. The study found that enhancing the cultural confidence of bearers through cultural education and community activities can significantly improve their transmission enthusiasm. For example, in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, through the hosting of folk culture festivals, the social recognition of bearers was increased, and their cultural confidence was enhanced, effectively promoting the transmission of folk culture. The table shows that 50% of bearers had high confidence in their own culture, while the average score for social recognition was only 2.5, indicating that the improvement of social recognition has a significant positive impact on the psychological state of bearers.

Table 3. Psychological State and Impact of Social Change on Folk Culture Bearers

Survey Item	Impact of Social Change	Cultural Confidence	Social Recognition	Transmission Enthusiasm
Number of Respondents (N)	120	120	120	120
Percentage (%)	65	50	40	30
Average Score (1-5)	3.2	3.0	2.5	2.0

Through the study of folk culture bearers in Northern Shaanxi and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, this case revealed the psychological impact of social changes on bearers. The crisis of cultural identification, economic pressure, and social marginalization are the main factors leading to the psychological pressure of bearers, while cultural confidence and social recognition are the key drivers to alleviate this pressure. These findings provide important references for formulating targeted protection strategies.

5.3 Case Summary and Insights

Through the in-depth analysis of the two cases, this study summarized the successful experiences and lessons learned from the psychodynamic perspective and proposed psychodynamic-based protection strategies based on the cases.

1) Successful Experiences

Construction of Psychological Support Systems: Through the support of families, communities, and governments, the psychological pressure of bearers was alleviated, and their psychological resilience was enhanced. For example, traditional handicraft bearers significantly improved their psychological resilience and

transmission enthusiasm through community activities and psychological counseling programs.

Enhancement of Cultural Confidence: Through cultural education and community activities, the cultural confidence of bearers was enhanced, and their identification with the value of cultural heritage was improved. Folk culture bearers significantly increased their cultural confidence and social recognition through folk culture festivals.

Enhancement of Social Recognition: Through the hosting of cultural festivals, the social recognition of bearers was increased, and their transmission enthusiasm was enhanced. For example, folk culture festivals not only improved the social status of bearers but also attracted more young people to pay attention to traditional folk culture.

2)   Lessons Learned

Neglect of Economic Pressure: The economic difficulties faced by traditional handicraft bearers were not effectively resolved, leading some bearers to abandon transmission. The survey showed that 80% of bearers considered giving up transmission due to economic pressure.

Impact of Social Change: Folk culture bearers failed to effectively cope with the psychological pressure brought by social changes, increasing the risk of cultural discontinuity. 65% of bearers felt neglected by society for their culture, and their transmission enthusiasm significantly decreased. (Kong, S., Li, H., & Yu, Z., 2024)

3)   Protection Strategy Recommendations

Economic Support and Policy Guarantee: The government should increase economic support for ICH bearers, provide subsidies and preferential policies, and alleviate their economic pressure. For example, provide special subsidies for traditional handicraft bearers to help them improve their living conditions and enhance their transmission motivation.

Psychological Counseling and Social Support: Establish a professional psychological counseling mechanism to provide psychological support services for bearers and enhance their psychological resilience. Communities and governments should regularly organize psychological counseling activities to help bearers cope with psychological pressure.

Cultural Education and Community Participation: Enhance the cultural confidence and social recognition of bearers through cultural education and community activities, and strengthen their transmission motivation. For example, host folk culture festivals and traditional handicraft exhibitions to increase social attention and recognition of ICH.

Intergenerational Transmission and Innovation: Encourage bearers to collaborate with the younger generation, innovate forms and content, and enhance the modern adaptability of ICH. For example, combine traditional handicrafts with modern design elements to attract more young people to participate in transmission.

6. Psychodynamic-Based ICH Protection Strategies

6.1 Construction of Psychological Support Systems

Establishing an effective psychological support system is key to enhancing the psychological resilience and transmission enthusiasm of ICH bearers. First, psychological files should be established for bearers, and regular mental health assessments should be conducted to timely identify and resolve potential psychological problems. Second, professional psychological counseling and Counseling services should be provided to help bears cope with psychological challenges such as economic pressure and social cohesion. Additionally, psychological support groups for bearers should be established to enhance their social support networks and alleviate psychological pressure through group activities and mutual aid mechanisms.

6.2 Enhancing Cultural Confidence of Bearers

Cultural confidence is an important psychological basis for bearers to continuously participate in the protection of ICH. Therefore, a variety of cultural education activities should be carried out to enhance bearers' identification and pride in their own culture. Through cross-cultural exchange activities, the unique value of ICH should be showcased to enhance the cultural confidence of bearers. Meanwhile, modern technological means, such as social media and online platforms, should be utilized to widely disseminate ICH and enhance its social impact and cultural value.

6.3 Policy and Social Support

Government and social support are crucial for the protection of ICH. The government should introduce relevant policies to provide economic subsidies and tax preferences to alleviate the economic burden of bearers. Meanwhile, psychological training programs should be conducted for bearers to enhance their ability to cope with psychological pressure. At the social level, corporate sponsorship, volunteer services, and community

support should be encouraged to create a good atmosphere for the whole society to participate in the protection of ICH. Additionally, media publicity should be used to increase social attention to ICH and enhance its cultural value identification.

7. Conclusions and Future Outlook

7.1 Research Summary

This study explores the psychological state of ICH bearers and its impact on transmission behaviors from the perspective of psychodynamics. Through literature review, case analysis, and field research, the study reveals the psychological challenges faced by bearers, such as economic pressure, social neglect, and cultural discontinuity, and proposes corresponding protection strategies. The findings indicate that the construction of psychological support systems, enhancement of cultural confidence, and policy and social support can significantly improve the psychological resilience and transmission enthusiasm of bearers, providing important guarantees for the sustainable protection of ICH.

7.2 Research Limitations and Future Outlook

Despite the achievements in theoretical and practical aspects, this study still has some limitations. First, the sample selection mainly focuses on traditional handicraft and folk culture bearers in specific regions, which may not fully reflect the psychological state of bearers of other regions or types of ICH. Second, the research methods mainly rely on questionnaires and in-depth interviews, lacking long-term tracking studies and quantitative assessments of the effectiveness of psychological interventions. Future research could further expand the sample scope, conduct cross-cultural studies, perform long-term tracking surveys, and evaluate the actual effectiveness of psychological intervention measures to continuously improve psychodynamic strategies for ICH protection.

7.3 Practical Significance and Recommendations

This study has important implications for the practice of ICH protection. First, protecting ICH should not only focus on the transmission of skills and culture but also pay attention to the psychological needs of bearers. By constructing psychological support systems and enhancing cultural confidence, the enthusiasm and sustainability of bearers' transmission behaviors can be effectively improved. Second, policymakers should pay attention to the psychological factors in ICH protection and introduce more targeted economic support and psychological training policies to create a good environment for the whole society to participate in ICH protection. Finally, it is recommended that all sectors of society actively participate in ICH protection through corporate sponsorship, volunteer services, and community activities to provide more support and help for bearers and jointly promote the sustainable development of ICH.

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Sound Waves and Thought Currents: A Study of the Pop Music Reflection of Chinese Youth's Values Since the Reform and Opening-up

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Abstract

Since the reform and opening up, the evolving relationship between Chinese pop music and youth values has distinctly mirrored societal shifts. Pop music, as a central conduit of youth subculture, plays a pivotal role in shaping and reflecting youth values through its aesthetic and value-laden expressions. Utilizing Marxist value theory, in tandem with sociological and cultural research lenses, the trajectory from 1978 to 2023 can be segmented into four phases: Enlightenment and Awakening (1978-1986): This period underscores the shift from collectivism to a heightened sense of individual consciousness. Fission and Resistance (1987-1991): These years are marked by cultural critique and a rise in identity anxiety. Diversity and Return (1992-2011): This phase captures the dichotomy between globalization and local identity. Integration and Leadership (2012-2023): Here, we see the seamless merging of core values with multiculturalism. The thematic evolution and stylistic innovations in pop music consistently parallel the modern transformation of youth values. This musical metamorphosis resonates with collective emotional shifts during societal transitions and bolsters the emergence of cultural confidence. Looking forward, nurturing youth values will necessitate a multi-tiered educational framework, underpinned by mainstream value guidance, cultural carrier innovation, and collaborative institutional practices.

Keywords: pop music, Chinese youth, reform and opening-up, values, youth subculture

1. Introduction

Pop music, as the predominant cultural medium among youth, significantly influences the formation of contemporary values and beliefs through its aesthetic orientation and value expression. This influence spans from the introduction of Hong Kong and Taiwan pop music in the 1980s, which sparked individual consciousness, to the cultural critique inherent in rock music of the 1990s, and extends to the diverse culture fostered by streaming media in the digital era. These three major transitions in pop music culture are intricately interconnected with collective anxieties, identity recognition, and cultural confidence that shape young people's values. As such, they provide a crucial reference for establishing a youth value cultivation system within the context of a socialist cultural powerhouse.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Bidirectional Construction of Values and Popular Music

2.1 A Multidimensional Analysis of Values: From Philosophical Foundations to Generational Characteristics

Values, a fundamental concept, are shared across numerous disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, and psychology. Though these disciplines may emphasize different aspects in their definitions, it is generally accepted that values influence individuals' judgments on crucial issues, including concepts of good versus bad and important versus unimportant.

From a Marxist perspective, values represent "the quintessence of people's comprehension of value, encompassing their standards, principles, and evaluative methods concerning people and objects." Beili Zhu posits that values pertain to individuals' assessments of right and wrong, good and evil, and the significance of their surroundings, including their perception of human worth and the essence of life. Xiting Huang and Yong Zheng argue that values constitute the conceptual framework individuals employ to differentiate between categories such as good and bad, beautiful and ugly, gain and loss, right and wrong, and whether something aligns with or opposes their personal desires. Yanbo Zeng views values as deeply ingrained beliefs and viewpoints, reflecting the fundamental perspectives within a society that distinguish between virtue and vice, and provide judgments on the worth of things. Jie Shen suggests that values are the ideal cognitions, emotions, and intentions of societal members concerning social structures, operational dynamics, and cultural impacts. Chunli Zhao and colleagues contend that values encapsulate individuals' attitudes and notions towards people and objects, serving as criteria for determining quality. Haiyan Gao and her team indicate that values manifest the intrinsic evaluations and judgments societal members make in their interrelationships. Matthias Kaiser asserts that values act as benchmarks for gauging the quality of things, often intertwining reason with emotion.

Upon conducting a comprehensive review and analysis of extant research in the field, we can refine the following viewpoint: Values are essentially the intrinsic cognitive framework that individuals construct based on their thought processes and sensory perceptions. This framework guides their behavioral patterns and value orientations.

2.2 The Uniqueness of Youth Values: Transitional States, Social Mirroring, and Cultural Tension

The uniqueness of youth values lies in its complexity as a "transitional state", which is both a phased product of individual growth and a microcosm of social and cultural changes.

Zhijian Huang identifies four distinct characteristics of youth values: the changes in these values due to varying age stages; a pronounced inclination towards conformity; their transient and mutable nature; and their inclination towards trend-following. Chunli Zhao and colleagues propose four attributes of youth values: the interdependence between value formation and self-identity establishment; the diversity of these values; the relative stability of individual values, influenced by factors like age and social status; and their evolution through conflict and adjustment. Zhongwen Guan emphasizes three core characteristics: the quest for self-identity, the transition from dependence to autonomy, and the pursuit of value resonance. Kaiser Matias posits that youth values demonstrate diversity across different social contexts and life phases, with variations in expression across cultural backgrounds.

Upon reviewing the research findings of pertinent scholars, it becomes evident that the shared traits of young people's values can be synthesized into a few key points: 1) A strong emphasis on individual uniqueness and autonomy; 2) The prioritization of building and expanding social networks; 3) A dynamic evolution that parallels age growth.

3. Historical Mirror: The Co-Evolution of Popular Music and Youth Values

Following the period of reform and opening-up, marked by increasing openness to the global community and a steady renewal of societal perspectives, popular music has experienced a significant transition from being perceived as 'underground' to becoming more 'overground'. Its widespread appeal and trendy nature have made it particularly popular among the younger generation. Consequently, it has had a substantial impact on the value systems of young people, shaped by evolving artistic trends and societal shifts.

3.1 The Period of Enlightenment and Awakening Spanned from 1978 to 1986

The initial phase of popular music development in mainland China transpired from the onset of reform and opening-up to the mid-to-late 1980s. Throughout this period, collectivist values prevailed, with the themes of popular songs frequently revolving around patriotism and the spirit of collectivism. On May 11, 1978, an article titled *Practice is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth* was featured in the 60th issue of *Theoretical Trends* published by the CPC Central Party School. Simultaneously, the articles were reprinted in leading newspapers such as *GuangMing Daily*, *People's Daily*, and *PLA Daily*, while the Xinhua News Agency disseminated it nationwide. The publication of the article precipitated a widespread discussion on the standards of truth, generating intense debate across China. This discourse profoundly unsettled the traditional value foundations of the youth and served as a significant intellectual precursor in Chinese history. It provided the theoretical groundwork for the convening of the Chinese eleventh CPC Central Committee Third Plenary Session.

The convening of the Chinese eleventh CPC Central Committee Third Plenary Session in December 1978 initiated an unparalleled social upheaval in China. Following this session, China transitioned its focus from class struggle to economic development, thereby embarking on a formidable quest for socialist modernization. Specifically, the ideological liberation facilitated the gradual melting of suppressed emotions amongst the youth. The profound social changes at the inception of the reform and opening-up compelled young people to critically

contemplate the disparities between societal and personal values. They also delved deeper into the relationship between individuals and society, exploring ways to harmonize personal and societal values. In this period, positioned at the cusp of significant social transformation, the ideologies of some young people began to evolve. The dismantling of traditional concepts and the formation of new ones resulted in a temporary void in the youth's value system, leaving their mental space akin to barren land. During this phase, the youth exhibited psychosocial characteristics that were an amalgamation of tradition and modernity. Despite their skeptical attitude towards the reforms, young people were predominantly filled with hope, with the seeds of their modern societal mentality beginning to germinate.

In 1980, a letter penned by Pan Xiao was featured in *China Youth*, titled *Why Is the Path of Life Getting Narrower and Narrower* （《人生的路呵，怎么越走越窄》）. This epistle ignited a nationwide discourse on the values of life, with active participation from diverse youth demographics. Doubts such as "What is the purpose of life?" and "Where does the meaning of life lie?" mirrored the prevalent confusion and disorientation among the youth of that era. As a consequence, some began to liberate themselves from traditional ideological confines, engaging in deep contemplation on the essence of life during this discussion. In the context of the collision between Chinese and Western cultures, they reevaluated socialism and, in the nascent stages of reform and opening-up, honed their thoughts to redefine self-worth and the meaning of life. Through this debate, most young people developed a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between society, the collective, and the individual. They affirmed the legitimacy of personal development and individual interests while also recognizing that social and collective interests are foundational for individual growth. After Deng Xiaoping's inspection tour of Shenzhen in 1984, a wave of learning swept through China. The youth, as the vanguard of the era, began to adopt a self-centric value system that pursued personal interests, seeking a balance between individual and collective benefits. A 1984 survey report revealed that university students fervently endorsed an accumulative and creative philosophy of life, admired truth-seeking and collective-oriented life pursuits, and favored an ideal lifestyle characterized by moral integrity, collectivism and selflessness.

The process of reform and opening-up has facilitated young people's re-examination of the value of life. This generation, in their quest for personal growth and societal progress, have experienced a transformation in traditional value orientations. The continuous influx of foreign social trends has underscored the individuality of the youth. They have come to recognize the significance of concepts such as independence, freedom, and equality, leading to a gradual awakening of their sense of agency.

In the initial phase of reform and opening-up, the incremental liberalization of society and markets induced a transformation in public thought and perceptions. While not entirely liberated, the thematic focus of songwriting during this period transitioned from revolutionary propaganda to more lyrical content. Predominantly, songs emphasized themes of party adulation, national pride, and gratitude towards the populace. However, there was also a limited inclusion of melodies that explored personal affection, familial bonds, and friendships. For example, *A Toast-Song* （《祝酒歌》） encapsulated the jubilant sentiments of the populace following their victory over "Gang of Four", fostering an environment of joy and positivity. Similarly, tracks like *Why Are the Flowers So Red* （《花儿为什么这样红》） and *Love for the Hometown* （《乡恋》） epitomized the lyrical shift of this era. Other compositions such as *Night of Military Port* （《军港之夜》）, *There the Peach Blossom are in Full Bloom* （《在那桃花盛开的地方》）, and *On the Hopeful Field* （《在希望的田野上》） celebrated the majesty of the homeland and the aspirations for a brighter future through enchanting melodies and vivid lyrics. As cultural offerings expanded, influences from movies and TV dramas became increasingly profound. Songs like *Our Life is Full of Sunshine* （《我们的生活充满阳光》）, *Sister Seeking For Brother While Tear Sheds* （《妹妹找哥泪花流》） and *Velvet Flowers* （《绒花》）, when used as soundtracks, not only elevated the artistic merit of the productions but also resonated with the audience by reflecting intense emotions both within the narratives and real life.

The penetration of music from Hong Kong and Taiwanese artists has significantly influenced the musical culture of the Mainland. Notably, songs such as Teresa Teng's *Stroll on the Way of Life* （《漫步人生路》）and *The Story of a Small Town* （《小城故事》）, Ming Man Cheung's *My Chinese Heart* （《我的中国心》）, and Frances Yip's *Shanghai Bund* （《上海滩》）, characterized by their distinct artistic style and emotional depth, have resonated extensively with the youth of the Mainland, instigating trends of covers and original compositions. Beyond merely augmenting the Mainland's musical repertoire, these songs have had a profound impact on the ideologies of the younger generation, kindling their enthusiasm to explore prospective futures and pursue novel lifestyles.

However, the cultural landscape of popular music during this period exhibited complexity and tension. On the one hand, with the opening of cultural exchanges, the influx of Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop music exerted a profound influence on the mainland's musical ecosystem. Representative works such as *The Story of a Small Town*, *My Chinese Heart,* and *Shanghai Bund* — characterized by their soft, lyrical style — transcended the grand narrative framework of traditional revolutionary music, offering mainland audiences a novel aesthetic

experience. On the other hand, policy adjustments and the flexible adaptation of cultural management mechanisms created space for the emergence of original mainland music. Official cultural events such as the "Shanghai Spring" concert gradually incorporated elements of popular music, while the 1986 "International Year of Peace" concert featuring a hundred pop stars and its theme song *Fill the World with Love* （《让世界充满爱》） marked a breakthrough in the cultural legitimacy of pop music. Meanwhile, Choe Geon's rock anthem *Nothing to My Name* （《一无所有》） articulated the collective anxieties of youth amid societal transformation through its musical language, serving as a mirror to prevailing social sentiments.

For young people, the acceptance of pop music represents a reconstruction of value order. Mainstream pop songs, such as *My Chinese Heart* uphold the emotional tone of collectivism, while indigenous Chinese songs, like those of the "Northwest wind" genre, underscore the conscious awareness of local culture. Concurrently, the consumerist aesthetics presented by Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop music inadvertently expedite the transition of youth from a collective-centric to an individual-centric consciousness. Through modifications in cultural management mechanisms, the authorities continually steer the aesthetic direction of mass pop music, thereby initiating a dynamic equilibrium between commercialism and nationalism within the pop music industry. The inherent tension between such regulation and compromise gradually shapes the transformation of youth values in the early stages of reform and opening-up. This reflects the complexity and diversity of the cultural ecology during this period of societal transformation.

3.2 The Period of Fission and Contention Spanned from 1987 to 1991

The mid-to-late 1980s marked China's transition from a planned economy to a socialist market economy. The Chinese twelfth CPC Central Committee Third Plenary Session in 1984 stated that, on the basis of public ownership, the socialist economy is a planned commodity economy. As foreign social trends and cultural concepts continued to be introduced to China, faced with the proposal of new theories and the shock of social transformation, young people did not know where to turn. Without forming new values, they had psychological doubts, and social attitudes began to waver. They found it difficult to choose between returning to tradition and moving towards modernity, falling into confusion once again.

The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1987 systematically elaborated on the theory of the primary stage of socialism, proposing the basic line of the Communist Party of China, namely "One Central Task and Two Basic Points". The incomplete synchronicity between the superstructure and economic base development led to many problems in the reform process. Excessive emphasis on economic development caused some young people to begin to value individual interests more than collective ones, blindly approving of Western culture and pursuing so-called freedom, equality, and democracy of the West as their own values. The values of youth began to shift from traditional to modern. The "Shekou Symposium" in 1988 sparked a major discussion about youth ideological work. Many local youths began to question authority and dared to express their views. The increasing boldness and changes in youth are mostly influenced by foreign cultures and trends. Some young people increasingly pursue material enjoyment, weakening traditional collective values. Individualism gradually became more severe, leading to utilitarianism, impatience, and confusion in their thinking. They no longer had time to contemplate what the correct values are and lacked the ability to discern right from wrong. As a result, these young people began to reflect on themselves, no longer as anxious and impetuous as before, and started to re-examine their own values. The revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 caused a low tide in socialism and communism. Faced with the turmoil in both domestic and international environments, some young people's values changed again. They lost confidence in the country and the socialist path, choosing to distance themselves from politics. They began to think about how to improve their own and their families' lives, and their thoughts once again became confused.

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Chinese pop music underwent a significant period of diversification and transformation. During this era, pop music not only exhibited a stylistic diversification but also a greater complexity in thematic expression. It served as a crucial cultural reflection of evolving youth values and societal changes. The integration of foreign cultures with local traditions fostered innovations in themes, lyrics, and melodies. Consequently, pop music emerged as a vital platform for young individuals to articulate emotions, express sentiments, and redefine their sense of self.

During this period, popular music gradually emanated from a singular ideological framework, adopting a more liberal and personalized approach to articulate the multifaceted reactions of youth to emotions, aspirations, and societal realities. Lyrical compositions such as *I Only Care About You* （《我只在乎你》） and *Pink Memories* （《粉红色的回忆》） depicted the unadulterated pursuit of personal emotions by the youth through nuanced emotional expressions. Conversely, motivational tracks like *My Future is Not a Dream* （《我的未来不是梦》） and *I Am Ugly, But I Am Gentle* （《我很丑，可是我很温柔》） resonated with the bewilderment and struggles of the youth amidst societal changes, yet maintained an optimistic and elevating tone. Concurrently, songs with public welfare themes, such as *Dedication of Love* （《爱的奉献》） encapsulated the unwavering responsibility

and commitment of the youth towards their homeland set against a backdrop of societal disarray, blending noble themes with soothing melodies. Collectively, these songs crafted a rich tapestry of emotional expression in popular music, mirroring both the youth's intense focus on individual emotional realms and their enduring dedication to social obligations.

During the specified period, popular music emerged as a significant cultural instrument for the younger generation to critique reality, challenge authority, and reconstruct their subjectivity. Rock music, exemplified by Choe Geon's *Rock 'n' Roll on the New Long March* （《新长征路上的摇滚》） encapsulated the youth's desire to question established authority and explore diverse values, characterized by a raw energy and defiant stance. This musical expression not only offered a deep commentary on societal realities but also served as a poignant call for personal identity affirmation. Concurrently, campus ballads such as *My Deskmate* （《同桌的你》） and *Love Birds* （《爱情鸟》） echoed the nostalgia of youth for more naive times and their growing disillusionment with society amidst modernization, presented through sentimental narratives. Statistical data indicated a decline in the prevalence of patriotic themes from 40% in the 1980s to less than 20% in the 1990s. Conversely, the proportion of emotionally-charged songs witnessed an upward trajectory. This transition underscores the younger generation's evolving value system, shifting from a collective family-nation identity to a more personal emotional realm. The industrialization of popular music witnessed a significant acceleration during this period, which fostered the growth of original music and the maturity of commercial operation mechanisms. The advent of MTV, the proliferation of karaoke, and the creation of music ranking systems have caused popular music to evolve from a solely auditory art form to a multi-dimensional sensory experience. In this context, the textual representation of popular music has diversified. On one hand, it offers a vast cultural landscape for the younger generation to explore their personal subjective value and construct a unique identity. On the other hand, its evolutionary trajectory mirrors the intricate alterations in the public's mental framework during this period of societal transformation.

In summary, the popular music of this era is deeply intertwined with and shaped by youthful values, encapsulating the intrinsic conflict and tension between the emergence of individual consciousness and the gradual decline of traditional community ethics amidst China's modernization process. This music not only serves as an outlet for young people to articulate emotions and express feelings, but also functions as a significant cultural tool for them to reshape their subjectivity and explore a range of values. The evolutionary trajectory of this music not only documents the psychic state of the youth demographic during this period of social transformation, but also offers a critical gateway to understanding alterations in contemporary social ideologies and cultural forms.

3.3 The Period of Multivariate and Regression Spanned from 1992 to 2011

In early 1992, under the severe domestic social situation, Deng Xiaoping inspected various places in southern China and issued a series of instructions during his visits, answering some major cognitive questions that had long plagued the people. Subsequently, the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was successfully held, and China proposed the reform goal of establishing a socialist market economy. The establishment of this goal greatly promoted the ideological emancipation of the youth, broke the social mentality of confusion and hesitation confined in the hearts of the youth, and the youth began to germinate a modern social mentality adapted to the socialist market economy. The value pursuit of Chinese society gradually shifted from the spiritual to the material. Deng Xiaoping said: "As far as the relatively small number of advanced people is concerned, it won't matter too much if we neglect the principle of more pay for more work and fail to stress individual material benefits. But when it comes to the masses, that approach can only be used for a short time — it won't work in the long run." "It would be idealism to emphasize the spirit of sacrifice to the neglect of material benefit." Pursuing material benefits is common sense, but it is not easy to balance material and spiritual aspects. Some youths were gradually influenced by wrong values, developed negative values, conflicted with real life, and went against traditional values. In a few cases, relationships between individuals became less pure, and excellent values such as benevolence, integrity, and friendliness were gradually blurred by egoism, individualism, and utilitarianism.

However, the situation has seen improvement due to macro and micro regulation adopted by the state to control market resource allocation. This, when combined with cultural education and mainstream values directed at youth, has encouraged young people to explore means of realizing their self-worth. They have displayed an increased eagerness to understand China's national conditions and traditional Chinese culture. Consequently, several traditional values, such as trustworthiness, righteousness and profit, good and evil, have been reaffirmed in real life. As economic development continues and living standards improve, the basic needs of sustenance and clothing are fulfilled. In this environment, young people, positioned at the forefront of reform and opening-up, begin to contemplate their future and reflect on life in a calm and thoughtful manner. Hence, the values of young people diversify in response to rapidly changing social conditions.

The ongoing influx of foreign cultures has precipitated a transformation in the mechanisms of the music industry, leading to a diversified stage of development for popular songs. Such songs serve as an external expression of the internal world and culture of young people. Original songs from the mainland are experiencing a surge in popularity as the youth matures and shifts away from the fervent idolization of Hong Kong and Taiwanese songs that were prevalent in years past. Nevertheless, regardless of whether it is on the mainland or in Hong Kong and Taiwan, there is an increasing diversity in musical styles. For instance, there are lyrical songs such as *Love Is Like Tides* （《爱如潮水》） and *Too Softhearted* （《心太软》） which encapsulate the unrestrained emotional expression of youths. Conversely, there are powerful and majestic songs like *Tibetan Plateau* （《青藏高原》） and *Wish you Peace* （《祝你平安》） reflecting the youth's social and national concerns. Moreover, inspirational songs such as *Sailor* （《水手》）and *Sunshine Always Appears after Wind and Rain* （《阳光总在风雨后》） have encouraged many young people to cultivate resilience, seek silver linings in adversity, and realize the intrinsic value of life. During this period, songwriting has become increasingly aligned with the experiences of the general public. There is a noticeable uptick in songs that reflect familial themes and everyday life, thereby enabling easier resonance with a broader audience. Concurrently, there has been a marked improvement in creativity, leading to the production of a diverse range of songs across various styles. The lyrics of these songs are imbued with rich literary value and demonstrate an elevated level of appreciation, indicative of the advancements in the quality of music that mirror the progression of social culture. Such developments resonate more closely with the aesthetic values of young people in a rapidly changing society.

On July 1, 1997, with the playing of the national anthem of the People's Republic of China, the world was declared that the Chinese government had resumed the exercise of sovereignty over the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and two years later, China resumed the exercise of sovereignty over Macau. The return of Hong Kong and Macau makes all Chinese people proud. As early as 1982, Deng Xiaoping put forward the great concept of "one country, two systems", which was finally put into practice in 1997 and has been continued to this day. China has increasingly entered the world stage and displayed a good image. Such an exciting event coincides with the arrival of the new century, and the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed a new "three-step development strategy", which is of far-reaching significance. At this time, the calm hearts of the youth began to be restless, having greater confidence in the future, the motherland, and socialism, and the pluralistic values began to return to the mainstream. Since the reform and opening-up, China's economic strength growth level is obvious to all, and in many fields, it has the ability to participate in international division of labor and competition. Therefore, in 2001, China chose to join the World Trade Organization, conform to the trend of the times, actively integrate into economic globalization, and constantly show the responsibility of a big country in opening up to the outside world. Chinese youth not only become more open-minded and optimistic but also highly identify with the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation. Moreover, they can also rationally distinguish and accept the influence brought by the exotic culture and social trends from the West. A comparative study on the social consciousness of youth in China, Japan, and South Korea in 2000 showed that compared with Japanese and South Korean youth, Chinese youth not only have a high sense of national identity but also have a relatively strong desire to contribute to the prosperity of the country.

In October 2001, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China promulgated the *Outline for the Implementation of Citizen Morality Construction*, which set forth corresponding requirements for citizens in different aspects of society and became a guiding benchmark for young people to establish mainstream values in the new century. In March 2006, Hu Jintao proposed the socialist concept of honor and disgrace, mainly encapsulated as "Eight Virtues and Eight Vices" to guide young people in establishing correct values, which has positively influenced the construction of socialist ideological and moral values and the development of a spiritual civilization. In October of the same year, Chinese 16th CPC Central Committee Sixth Plenary Session proposed the establishment of "socialist core value system". In the face of complex and severe international situations, the introduction of the socialist core value system is of great significance for young people to enhance national identity, cultural identity, and form scientifically correct mainstream values.

The 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, held in 2007, proposed the scientific outlook on development and new requirements for achieving the goal of building a moderately prosperous society. As reform and opening-up deepened, Chinese society developed steadily, economic strength continuously increased, and the values expressed in the language and behavior of the youth increasingly aligned with the socialist core value system. After the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, young people from all over China voluntarily went to the disaster area to serve as volunteers, spontaneously donating money and goods to the affected area, demonstrating the social responsibility and commitment of the youth, and reflecting the reshaping of youth values. In the same year, the successful hosting of the Beijing Olympics once again pushed China onto the international stage. Chinese young athletes responded to the Olympic motto of "higher, faster, stronger" with outstanding achievements, and young volunteers embodied the spirit of volunteer service through their actions, indicating the gradual enhancement of the youth's sense of agency. More than 50% of university students believe that hosting

the Olympics has a significant positive impact on enhancing their personal feelings. The youth highly recognize the great achievements of reform and opening-up, highly respect the leadership position of the CPC and the various measures of the state, and their personal values are gradually aligning with mainstream societal values.

Since the late 1990s, Chinese pop music has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from nationalization to globalization and from emotional expression to value shaping. This evolution not only mirrors changes in societal culture but also reflects the dynamic shift in ideas and values among the younger generation. The return of Hong Kong to China in the late 1990s was a pivotal historical event that stirred national emotions. Songs such as *The Pearl of the Orient* （《东方之珠》） and *AD 1997* （《公元 1997》） encapsulated the collective memory of national identity among the youth through artistic expressions. As the 21st century commenced, the widespread adoption of internet technology and the acceleration of globalization propelled Chinese pop music into a new era of diverse integration and innovative development. Online platforms increasingly became the primary medium for music dissemination. Internet songs like *Mouse love rice* （《老鼠爱大米》） rapidly gained popularity due to their grassroots and colloquial expressions, reflecting the younger generation's predilection for direct emotional expression and attention to life's nuances. Concurrently, the themes of pop music compositions have diversified, ranging from cross-cultural fusion pieces like *Nunchucks* （《双截棍》） to "Chinese style" songs such as *Blue and White Porcelain* （《青花瓷》） and *Chinese Herbal Manual* （《本草纲目》）. These works, through their clever integration of traditional motifs with Western musical elements, have bolstered the younger generation's identification with Chinese culture and cultural confidence.

Pop music exhibits significant bidirectional influence characteristics when shaping the values of young people. On one hand, culturally rooted works subtly encourage positive value orientations in youth through artistic expression. For example, *Blue and White Porcelain* showcases the unique allure of traditional Chinese culture, bolstering the cultural confidence of the youth. Similarly, *Welcome To Beijing* （《北京欢迎你》）, the theme song of the Beijing Olympics, promotes Chinese culture internationally, inspiring patriotic fervor in the younger generation. These works not only enrich the youth's spiritual world but also fortify their alignment with mainstream ideologies. Conversely, the commercialization and entertainment trends of pop music can exert negative impacts. Certain internet songs excessively promote materialism, individualism, and other adverse value orientations, potentially weakening some young people's ideals and sense of moral responsibility. For instance, some internet songs, with their simple language and fast-paced content, cater to the demands of a hectic social life, but they may dilute the youth's connection to traditional culture and their ability to make value judgments. Furthermore, historical nihilism and cultural extremism can exacerbate the crisis of cultural identity and shake the foundation of young people's values via the covert dissemination of music.

In response to the multifaceted influences of popular music, the Chinese government has pursued cultural governance in this domain through both policy guidance and technical supervision. On the one hand, it fosters the creation of works that exude positive energy, such as by adapting popular songs to patriotic themes in mainstream media and utilizing new media platforms to enhance dissemination efficacy. Conversely, it helps regulate the market environment, resists the proliferation of vulgar content, optimizes the creative ecosystem, and effectively mitigates the spread of undesirable culture via laws, regulations, and platform governance. These actions not only purify the popular music market but also create a more conducive cultural consumption environment for the younger generation. In essence, popular music, a significant component of contemporary social culture, serves both as an artistic reflection of societal changes and a profound shaper of youth values. Given the pervasiveness of internet technology and the deepening effects of globalization, the diverse integration and innovative evolution of popular music offer rich cultural experiences for the youth. However, its commercialization and entertainment-oriented trends also present potential value crises. Through strategic policy guidance and cultural governance, popular music can more effectively fulfill its cultural role and emerge as a pivotal force in promoting the ideological advancement and value formation of the younger generation.

3.4 The Period of Integration and Leadership Spanned from 2012 to Present

The rapid advancement of internet technology since 2012 has led to widespread digital information dissemination, significantly enhancing the quality of life. However, this development has also had a multifaceted impact on the youth population, who are still in the process of establishing stable values. The fragmented and emotional nature of online information, combined with the limitations of information security technology, has resulted in the spread of negative and irrational evaluations among the youth. This has sparked emotional reactions and social polarization. Consequently, the tension between the diversification trend of social values and mainstream ideologies has become increasingly apparent. When confronted with complex information, the youth population tends to exhibit cognitive polarization and behavioral imbalance. To address this challenge, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed socialist core values in 2012. These values, encapsulated in a 24-word framework at the national, societal, and individual levels, systematically address the requirements of modern society's value construction. This framework, characterized by its simplicity and

systematic nature, provides clear value guidance for the youth, signifying China's theoretical maturity and deepened practice in the field of ideological construction.

While the introduction of socialist core values has fostered a positive societal atmosphere, there remains a need for increased dissemination and consistent oversight in individual behaviors. This is particularly evident among the younger demographic, where the internalization of these values necessitates a collaborative effort between education, culture, and social practice. In this regard, China has methodically facilitated the transition of core values from mere theoretical understanding to tangible behavioral practices via policy directives, cultural discourse, and institutional frameworks. Notably, the 2013 National Ideological and Theoretical Work Conference underscored the significance of the core value system. Subsequently, the report from the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017 advocated for the integration of core values into various facets of societal progress, aiming for their transformation into emotional resonances and actionable habits. Such initiatives indicate that the propagation of core values transcends being merely an ideological endeavor; it is an intricate component of societal governance and cultural evolution.

In recent years, with the achievement of the comprehensive goal of building a moderately prosperous society in China, the historical milestone of the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Communist Party of China, and the consecutive completion of the "three major events" in a new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics over the past decade, China's comprehensive development in economic, social, and cultural fields has provided a more stable value reference system for young people. The advancement of digital technology and the continuous improvement of the online ecosystem have enabled young people to demonstrate stronger discernment and cultural confidence when facing the impact of foreign cultures. In this context, the dissemination and practice of core values have become important paths for young people to shape social identity and realize self-worth. Through the multi-dimensional interaction of school education, family guidance, and social practice, young people gradually internalize core values as behavioral norms, demonstrating a higher level of social participation and responsibility.

In conclusion, since 2012, China's ideological practices have demonstrated that systematic value construction can effectively navigate the cognitive challenges presented by the digital era, offering consistent value guidance for its youth. The collaborative efforts of policy, culture, and education in disseminating core values not only foster social consensus but also provide insightful experiences for cultural identity and social integration within a globalized context. This underscores the significance of value construction in contemporary society and presents a reference framework for other countries facing similar circumstances.

Since 2012, the widespread adoption and proliferation of mass culture in China, particularly among youth, has garnered significant attention at the national level. Xi Jinping highlighted at a literary and artistic symposium that national spirit and cultural confidence are vital pillars in the ideological realm, and that the flourishing of Chinese culture is instrumental in realizing the goal of a strong cultural nation. In this context, popular music serves as an influential medium for mass literature and art, exhibiting characteristics of varied themes, inventive styles, and diverse audience demographics in its creation and dissemination. Creators focus on relatability, aligning their work with the lived experiences of the people, catering to the cultural requirements of different age groups, and producing works that resonate more deeply with the aesthetic and spiritual needs of the masses. This approach addresses the escalating cultural consumption demands of society. Concurrently, internet popular songs have swiftly gained popularity in the wake of rapid internet platform development; their widespread dissemination exerts considerable influence, particularly on the youth demographic who are in a formative stage of value formation. This trend underscores the need for more thorough investigation and research into the social functions and cultural values of internet popular songs as an emerging cultural phenomenon.

During this period, the proportion of patriotic theme songs and internet popular songs significantly increased, and the expressions were more innovative than before. Many works were presented in a folk style, and the lyrics shifted from straightforward expressions to implicit emotions, such as *Tender Lines* （《纸短情长》） and *Chengdu* （《成都》）. Through delicate emotional expressions, they provided emotional support for the youth in fast-paced society, reflecting the contemporary youth's desire and pursuit for genuine emotions. Moreover, patriotic songs frequently appeared at major historical nodes of the country, becoming an important medium for uniting societal emotions. The cover and innovative adaptation of classic old songs became a trend, like the widespread singing of *My Motherland and I* （《我和我的祖国》） on the eve of The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, which successfully created a nationwide patriotic atmosphere. At the same time, emerging rap-styled patriotic songs like *Brilliant China* （《辉煌中国》） changed the public's traditional perception of rap music by transforming policy content into forms that young people enjoy. On the occasion of the centenary of the founding of the Communist Party, mainstream media rewrote and adapted popular internet songs to integrate them into grand narratives and the spirit of the times. For example, *Snow of My Youth* （《半生雪》） was adapted into a majestic patriotic song, *Parallel Space-time* （《错位时空》）expressed historical

inheritance through time-space dialogues, and *Starry Sea* （《星辰大海》）conveyed the power of the times with the theme of youthful struggle. These adapted works not only enhanced the cultural stature of popular music but also provided cultural resources for shaping the values of the youth through emotional resonance and artistic infection.

Overall, the burgeoning popular music scene in the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics has witnessed significant advancements in terms of quantity, innovation, and creative freedom. Its trajectory is overwhelmingly positive and upward. In terms of content, popular music is progressively aligning with core socialist values while satisfying the aesthetic needs and spiritual aspirations of the younger generation. Looking ahead, popular music, as a representative of mass literature and art, needs to further assert its role in the ideological field under state guidance, thereby providing robust support for the healthy development of youth culture.

4. Practical Strategy: The Modern Trajectory of Popular Music Engagement in Shaping Youth Values

Since the reform and opening-up, the development of Chinese youth's values has been intricately linked with the evolution of popular music within the cultural sphere of societal transformation. Together, they form a complex bilateral relationship between mainstream values and diverse cultures. The nurturing of youth values not only needs to be grounded in Marxism and socialist core values to maintain the stability and directionality of the value system but also requires a dynamic equilibrium amidst the openness of social thoughts and the multiplicity of cultural expressions. As the most pervasive cultural medium among the youth, the aesthetic orientation and value expression of popular music not only reflect societal changes but also serve as a significant tool for shaping youth values. The internalization of values is not solely dependent on the dispersal of cultural carriers; it demands the synergistic impact of educational guidance, social practice, and institutional guarantees. Through the seamless integration of policy guidance, cultural innovation, and social practice, the cultivation of youth values can transition from cognition to action. This builds a comprehensive, multi-level value-shaping system while adhering to the core of mainstream values.

4.1 Adhere to the Guidance of Mainstream Values and Inclusively Coexist with Diverse Cultures

The nurturing of young people's values ought to be grounded in Marxism and socialist core values, whilst concurrently embracing diverse cultural expressions. During the inception of reform and opening-up, young people contemplated the meaning of life in the "Pan Xiao discussion". This process, facilitated through collective social discussions and policy guidance, led to a nuanced comprehension of the relationship between individuals and society. Such a journey underscores the necessity of blending the guidance of mainstream values with the openness of societal thoughts. For instance, following the introduction of Hong Kong and Taiwanese music in the 1980s, authorities deftly navigated the influence of foreign culture and traditional collectivism via cultural management mechanisms. The resultant balance allowed for the proliferation of patriotic songs like *My Chinese Heart*, bolstering national identity, while also accommodating Choe Geon's rock music, providing an outlet for social emotions. In the contemporary era, the "three levels" framework of socialist core values seamlessly integrates traditional cultural resources such as justice and benefit concepts, and good and evil distinctions. Simultaneously, it employs the innovative medium of internet popular songs to appeal to the aesthetic preferences of the younger generation, achieving a dynamic equilibrium between mainstream values and varied expressions.

4.2 "Infiltration-Style" Shaping of Values Through Cultural Carriers as a Medium

Cultural vehicles like popular music play a pivotal role in shaping the values of young individuals. It is imperative to amplify the appeal of value education by leveraging innovative expressions. Take, for example, the 1990s campus folk song *My Deskmate* which conjures emotional resonance through its nostalgic narratives. Contemporary songs such as *Parallel Space-time* reinforce this through their time-space dialogues and revolutionary narratives. Research underscores that popular music has a profound impact on the younger generation via mechanisms like emotional catharsis and identity recognition. Songs like *Sailor* and *Sunshine Always Appears After Wind and Rain* motivate young people to push forward despite challenges. Consequently, there's an urgent need to stimulate the creation of works that amalgamate artistry with intellectual content — consider integrating traditional cultural elements into what one might term "Chinese style" music, or conveying policy content via rap. This approach metamorphoses value education from a mere didactic mode into a cultural experience that is actively cherished by young people.

4.3 Strengthening the Internalization of Values by Building a Synergy Mechanism Between Institutions and Practices

The process of shaping the values of young individuals necessitates a collaborative effort involving educational guidance, practical involvement, and institutional backing. At the educational level, it is imperative to meld Marxist theory with the contemporary needs of the younger generation. For instance, following the period of

reform and opening-up, the objective of nurturing a "New Generation with 'Four Qualifications'" was employed to bolster ideals and convictions. In the contemporary era, theoretical understanding has been enriched through the interplay between ideological and political coursework and course-based ideological and political education. On a practical front, there is a need to establish platforms for societal engagement, such as the volunteer initiatives undertaken by youths during the Wenchuan earthquake or the Olympic volunteer services. These experiences allow young individuals to merge their personal sense of worth with societal value through acts of service. At the institutional level, there is a demand for enhanced policy support. In the modern age, legislative frameworks should be harnessed to counteract coarse culture, refine the online environment, and offer institutional aid for value cultivation. The combined impact of these three dimensions can catalyze the transformation of values from mere cognition to tangible action. A case in point is the recent affinity and active participation of the younger generation in the "Chinese Dream", which is the outcome of an amalgamation of profound education, augmented practice, and fortified institutions.

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Between Boundaries: Deconstructing Youth in Shinji Somai's 1980s Cinema

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Abstract

This article examines a series of youth films directed by Shinji Somai in the 1980s. Drawing on Tanaka's (2013) concept of "bodies on the boundary" (境界上の身体), the article argues that Somai's cinematic language consistently crosses three types of boundaries. These crossings occur on both formal and narrative levels. Through them, Somai constructs a deconstructive aesthetic that challenges the myth of "youth" in 1980s Japanese cinema. Firstly, Somai re-encodes the idol image of the shōjo through the star persona of Hiroko Yakushimaru. He both inherits the Kadokawa-style star marketing model and dismantles the consumable unity of the idol. This is achieved through characters' actions that cross visual boundaries in films such as *Dreamy Fifteen* (1980) and *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun* (1981). Secondly, he constructs spatial-temporal boundaries that are static yet forcibly mobile. This is realised through his use of long takes, such as the collective exposure and isolation created by the theatre scene in *Typhoon Club* (1985). Here, youth is no longer presented as an eternal theme of growth. Thirdly, his films often place adolescent characters on the verge of death and disappearance. Characters frequently exit the frame, blurring the boundaries between growth and ending, life and death. This article argues that the interweaving of these three boundaries forms an effective deconstruction of the mainstream "eternal youth" myth of the 1980s. Youth is no longer romanticised as a suspended moment. Instead, it is portrayed as a generative process full of instability, fragmentation, and liminality.

Keywords: Shinji Somai, youth cinema, Shōjo Culture, long take, 1980s Japanese cinema

1. Introduction

At the end of *Typhoon Club* (1985), Somai shows a Yukio Mishima-style suicide scene: Mikami gives a speech about whether an individual can transcend the group, and then leaps from the school building to meet his death. This is a visual allegory that often appears in Somai's films: between the 'boundaries' represented by the seashore and window ledge, adolescents constantly test and cross them to complete the rite of growth. In this way, Somai breaks down the idealised construction of growth in 1980s youth films (*seishun eiga*). Adolescents are in a time-space of forced mobility, examining their lives and growth.

However, as a representative director of the 'missing decade' in Japanese film history, Somai has not received much attention from academia (especially the anglophone academia). Obviously, it is necessary to relocate Somai in combination with specific film texts, because his films themselves are at the boundaries between the collapse of the studio system and the rise of independent production. I argue that Somai's films inherently explore the concept of being 'between boundaries'. To prove my point, I will first discuss Somai's films in their historical context, then borrow and extend Tanaka's (2013, 48) concept of 'Bodies on the Boundary (境界上の身体)' to analyse the three boundaries constructed and crossed in his films: the boundaries between idols and screen images, time and space, as well as life and death. I will demonstrate how Somai's film serves as a means of interrogation that deconstructs and reinvents the construction of the myth of eternal youth in Japanese popular culture in the 1980s.

2. Context: The Boundaries Between Crisis and Opportunity

The 1980s was a time of rapid change in the Japanese film industry, and the traditional studio system faced a crisis. By 1970, 95% of households owned television (Desser, 1988, 8), the younger generation no longer used film as their main form of entertainment, which greatly reduced the audience for films. Although the total number of cinemas did not decrease due to vertical integration production, the studios with weak screening networks experienced economic differences: after two reorganizations, Shintoho and Daiei went bankrupt in 1961 and 1971 respectively, and Nikkatsu began to strategically produce low-cost adult films — a variant of pink film known as '*roman porno*' (Chung, 2024, 497). As can be seen, the mainstream studios of the old era developed different business and screening strategies, but this did not alleviate their existential crisis.

Secondly, independent production studios and directors began to emerge, and Kadokawa's youth films began to dominate the mainstream market. By shaping idol culture into a near-blank signifier, Kadokawa films present a utopian world of youth that is different from pink film (Zahlten, 2017, 98). Using the 'media mix' strategy, Kadokawa caters to young audiences' pursuit of a youthful aesthetic, in an attempt to win back young audiences that have been taken away by television. At the same time, directors such as Somai and Kiyoshi Kurosawa co-founded the independent production studio Directors Company in 1982. These directors came from a wide range of social production backgrounds, including softcore pornography and the emerging *jishu eiga*, and used film to express their artistic pursuits (Balmont, 2023). Therefore, the 1980s can also be seen as a time of rising innovation.

Somai's film production grew precisely between the boundaries of the collapse of this traditional system and the rise of innovation. On the one hand, Somai (1990, 18) said that he was influenced by roman porno: this is reflected in the fatalistic and sad temperament presented in his *Love Hotel* (1985) and *Luminous Woman* (1987). On the other hand, he embodies the independent production spirit. The films produced during the Directors Company cycle, such as *Typhoon Club* and *Moving* (1993), have both achieved good international performances. Many scholars have mentioned the 'crossing boundaries' quality of Somai's films. For instance, Tanaka (2013, 48) defines 'boundaries' as points that connect the interior and exterior of a building, such as bridges, coastlines, and walls. By contrast, 'crossing boundaries' refers to the process of characters repeatedly navigating these divisions, attempting to break through restrictions and symbolising the psychological or social state of adolescent wandering. Ryusuke Hamaguchi (2011, 7) further expands on this concept, arguing that dynamic camera movements also serve as a form of "border crossing" that participates in the film's narrative. From my perspective, I believe that Somai's 'boundaries' is not limited to the visual level but also extends to the deconstruction of idol culture and the redefinition of time and space. Next, I will analyse how Somai challenges traditional youth narratives by combining specific boundaries.

3. The Idol/Screen Image Boundaries: Hiroko Yakushimaru and Broken *Shōjo*

In the literal meaning of the English language, *shōjo* specifically refers to 'girls' and is often associated with the innocent and vulnerable identity of youth in popular culture (Monden, 2022, 454). However, as Shamoon (2009, 133) and Driscoll (2002, 53) point out, the meaning of *shōjo* in Japan is not as general as 'girl', but rather a space that monitors the process of identity formation and social placement. This image first appeared widely in *shōjo manga* and radiated to Kadokawa film productions in the 1980s, including Nobuhiko Obayashi's *School in the Crosshairs* (1981) and *The Little Girl Who Conquered Time* (1983). The teenagers in these films are often at the hormonal peak of youth, idealistic, and hopeful about the future (St-Hilaire, 2019, 7). Obayashi captures the best moments of these teenagers (and even the idol actresses themselves) and avoids boredom among the audience with a fast editing rhythm and a dreamlike narrative.

Somai's film uses Yakushimaru's idol image critically and reshapes the stereotypes of shōjo by breaking the 'boundaries' of the idol. As a typical shōjo idol, Yakushimaru's success stems from Kadokawa's 'media mix' strategy: the posters for *Dreamy Fifteen* (1980) and *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun* (1981) both feature Yakushimaru's personal image; in addition, she performed the theme songs for both films, and the promotional material booklet came with the album purchase, with almost every image being a photo of her. I want to emphasise that Somai is not averse to catering to Kadokawa's model of cross-promotion through idol performances and hit songs. As he (1990, 16) says, "Without connecting the fascination of the cinematic nature with film as a commodity somewhere, I would not be able to find the meaning of my own filmmaking next time."

Figure 1-2. Yakushimaru's albums produced for *Dreamy Fifteen* (1983) and *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun* (1981)

However, Somai also mentions that Yakushimaru's star image must maintain a sense of distance from his films (1990, 13), which is reflected in the fluidity of the screen image's identity through the influence of language. Hamaguchi (2011, 8) mentions that crossing boundaries is not just a matter of distance but exists as a dynamic approach to Somai's films, allowing them to exceed the ideal boundaries provided by poster photos. There are many visual boundaries in *Sailor Suit*: when the Medaka-Gumi comes to the school to pick up Hoshi (Yakushimaru), the camera cuts to an overhead shot of the entire basketball court, with the school crowd out of frame and unseen by the audience, symbolising Hoshi's transition beyond the confines of her identity as a student. In the next scene, Hoshi joins the Medaka-Gumi by walking across the boundaries of the basketball court. At this level, by completing the process of 'crossing the boundaries of order', Somai deconstructs Yakushimaru's idolised youth image, integrating her more deeply into the narrative structure of the film.

Figure 3-4. Screenshots from *Sailor Suit* and *Machine Gun* (1981) depict Hoshi crossing boundaries to embrace her gang identity

Hoshi returns to her student status, but her yakuza experience has left its mark on her, blurring the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood. While Yakushimaru's debut featured her eyes, Somai deliberately avoids using too many close-ups, with the body replacing the face as a symbol of youthful sensibility (Zhang, 2023, 158). I think this portrayal of the body also exists in the social identity symbolised by the clothing worn by Hoshi. In the final sequence, the sailor suit worn by Hoshi symbolises her shōjo identity, but this identity is incomplete: her red high heels epitomise her gangster past; the camera hovers ghostly in the air, following her movements among the crow. Audience can see her childlike side — she plays with the children. But then, as the wind lifts the hem of her skirt, she assumes a Marilyn Monroe- esque adult identity, and the film ends abruptly with her monologue: "I will be a stupid woman." In this long shot, Somai's gaze on Hoshi's body through the language of the camera further reinforces the deconstruction of the shōjo image. This contradiction in clothing symbolises Hoshi's liminal state between youth and maturity, disrupting Kadokawa's idealised idol image for Yakushimaru and granting the character a fluid identity: She embodies shōjo, but in a fragmented way — no longer the "idealised" version of a shōjo.

Figure 5-6. The fractured *shōjo* identity of Hoshi in *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun* (1981)

4. The Temporal/Spatial Boundaries: Between Stagnation and Flux

In Somai's film, long shots construct a state of liminality between time and space. By repeatedly crossing the boundaries between the stagnant and the fluid, the teenagers break the myth of eternal youth. Gerow (2007, 1-3) compares the aesthetic characteristics of Somai's film with the traditional Japanese long shot (nagemawashi), concludes that it focuses on expressing a '*watai*' style, in which the camera itself is both the narrator and the observer of the story. However, Gerow does not delve deeper into this style in connection with Somai's films. If we place his viewpoint in the concept of boundaries, Ando (2019, 145) presents a more convincing argument, asserting that long takes often reveal unexpected spatial expansions, enriching the depth of space with intricate complexities and contradictions. In my view, Somai's long take reveals the ambivalence of youth by shaping the boundaries of time and space: on the one hand, the stasis of time constructs a closed loop that seems to continue forever through the repetitive nature of the dance and carnivalesque atmosphere; on the other hand, the long shot symbolises an 'unstoppable' flow of time, breaking the stasis through movement, suggesting that youth will eventually be replaced by the reality of growing up.

First, Somai constructs a myth of eternal youth, where time and space seem to be suspended and isolated from reality. They are presented in a theatrical and carnivalesque manner. In almost all of Somai's films, a carnivalesque atmosphere is created, where teenagers recklessly insist on constant movement, while long shots neither predict nor judge the characters (Fujiwara, p. 1). This is reflected in *Dreamy Fifteen*: in the scenes of Yamaba and Tasiro's cohabitation, when the family space is misaligned, the room becomes their playground: they roller skate inside the room, experiencing a process of infantilisation. *Typhoon Club* presents a kind of forgetting about time and the past: in the striptease sequence, the heavy rain dissolves the clear boundaries between the real world and the group of teenagers. The camera frenzy begins with Michiko's speech, just a few minutes after she was almost raped by Ken. This rapid return symbolises Somai's compression of time (Fujiwara, p. 4). I think that the time here shows a kind of stasis independent of reality as well. The half-naked young people construct an imaginary youth ritual through their raucous dance: during the dance, the camera is behind Mikami, observing the events from a distant stance, which further illustrates this stasis. This also recalls the final dance sequence in *P.P. Rider* (1983): the long shot includes the children's dancing bodies within the frame, and the bright overhead lighting transforms the small room into a stage. Even though the sirens in the background symbolise external danger, the teenagers continue to dance freely. At this moment, the time the teenagers inhabit has no connection to real space, and they sing about youth in a mythical way.

Figure 7-8. The theatrical interior spaces in *P.P. Rider* (1983) and *Dreamy Fifteen* (1980)

However, the slow movement of the long shot often symbolises a forced flow of time, brutally breaking the sense of stagnation in the narrative, and symbolising the teenagers being forced to cross the boundaries of growth. As Gerow (2007, 5) points out, even though Somai's construction of a youth myth means imprisoning his characters in a frozen time and space, the teenagers in his films eventually grow up. In the striptease sequence in *Typhoon Club*, the long shot starts to slowly pan forward after a brief moment of stillness, gradually crossing over Mikami's body. As Mikami joins in, six youths are trapped within the frame formed by the basketball hoop, as if symbolising the boundaries of identity. The camera pushes in, guiding the viewer's gaze as the teenagers' bodies are continually brought in for a close-up. People begin to notice the "mature" side of their bodies and the sexual characteristics that have begun to sprout. In the last shot of *Moving*, Renko imaginatively traverses the scenes of her childhood. Under the gaze of the long shot, she crosses the boundaries formed by the layers of tree trunks and suddenly changes into her middle school uniform — she has also experienced a brutal growth spurt in an instant. By using the objective gaze of the long shot to shape the stagnant time of youth, and then using the movement of the long shot to break this myth of youth, Somai breaks the boundaries, and the teenagers in his lens are placed in a contradictory state of flux.
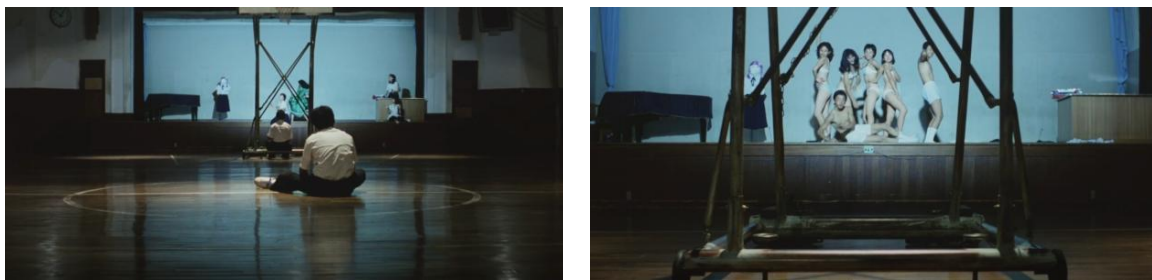

Figure 9-10. Screenshots from *Typhoon Club* (1985) The long take, as a gaze of "enforced flowing time," frames and defines the youths

5. The Life/Death Boundaries: Adolescents Walking Towards Death

The boundaries of adolescence in Somai's films point towards adulthood but also towards the danger of death. His films are about both youth and death, as if adolescence were not only a liminal state between childhood and adulthood but also between life and death (Gerow, 2005, 5). I think these boundaries between life and death can be interpreted as a way for adolescents to reject growing up. By exploring or crossing dangerous boundaries, Somai's films escape the idealised youth mythology of Nobuhiko Obayashi's films, which constantly look back to the past, and confront adolescents with growing up, thinking about the future, and potentially moving directly towards the end of life.

On the one hand, the bodies of teenagers in Somai's films often test the boundaries of danger. For example, in *P.P. Rider*, the teenagers travel between unfamiliar cities, dealing with drug dealers. In the riverbank chase sequence, they keep falling into the water and disappearing from the camera, as if disappearing from the audience's field of vision symbolises death. In *Typhoon Club*, Michiko extends her body out of the window ledge, crossing physical boundaries to express her experimentation with death. On the other hand, when adolescents transgress or witness the process of transgression, adolescence comes to an end. Just as the scene of Mikami's suicide was mentioned at the beginning of the article, the camera objectively observes his speech. The tables and chairs stacked in the foreground symbolise the modern order that has been broken artificially. His classmates tried to stop him from crossing the boundary and walking towards death, but in the end, Mikami still jumped off the building. Mikami's death was not romanticised or played down in a dreamlike flashback through time, as in *The Girl Who Conquered Time*. Instead, in the following shot, the audience sees his body fall playfully into the muddy water after a rainstorm, creating a strong sense of absurdity — he has crossed the boundaries and gone to death, which cannot be reversed.

Figure 11-12. Screenshots from *Typhoon Club* (1985) depicting adolescents caught between dangerous boundaries

It is worth noting that the boundaries of this death are not limited to Somai's youth films: in *Love Hotel*, Mayumi attempts suicide by jumping into a river; in *Lost Chapter of Snow: Passion* (1985), Iori walks on a log bridge, searching for her own place of death; in *Luminous Woman*, Matsunami continually falls into danger on the wrestling mat. The characters in Somai's films are always in a state of frenetic movement, crossing from one boundary to another. This is not only an outward movement, testing the contours of a constantly changing world, but also an inward movement, probing one's own unknowable emotions, thoughts, and spirit (Bryant, 2023). But when death is linked to adolescents, growth and death form ambiguous boundaries in terms of youth. As a real and irreversible existence, it explains the broken reality that adolescents will eventually face after crossing the boundaries. Through constant 'crossing of boundaries,' the adolescents in Somai transcend the threshold of adolescence and embrace the cruelty of youth.

6. Conclusion

Somai's films redefine the presentation of youth in Japanese popular culture through multiple explorations of boundaries. His films revolve around the boundaries between shōjo idol and character, time and space, and adolescence and death, challenging the idealised construction of 'eternal youth' in Japanese popular culture in the 1980s. Through the deconstruction of the idol image of Yakushimaru, Somai breaks through the boundaries between idol and character, presenting youth as a complex and fluid state. Through long shots and spatial design, he constructs and breaks the stasis of time, expressing the contradiction between fixation and flux in adolescence. At the same time, by presenting the exploration process of young people on the edge of danger, he forms a unique way of questioning the proposition of growth. Without saying, due to the limitations of the source material and word count, this article cannot fully contextualise Somai. However, I firmly believe that Somai's repositioning of his historical status is necessary. By constantly questioning the 'eternal youth' created by idol culture, Somai continues to give future directors new ideas across multiple boundaries. His historical status, like the boundaries created by his visual language, is worth further crossing and re-examining.

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Impulse or Self-Expression? How Social Media Challenges Influence the Decision-Making Process of Young Users

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Abstract

Social media challenges have become a defining aspect of digital culture, particularly among young users who engage in them for entertainment, social validation, and self-expression. While many challenges are harmless, others encourage risky behaviors, raising concerns about impulsive decision-making, peer pressure, and platform responsibility. This study examines the psychological, social, and cognitive mechanisms that drive young users to participate in viral challenges, distinguishing between impulse-driven actions and intentional self-expression.

The research explores how instant gratification, social identity formation, and emotional arousal influence engagement, alongside external factors such as online communities, influencer culture, and algorithm-driven exposure. Cognitive processes, including impulsive vs. reflective thinking, risk perception biases, and content framing, play a significant role in decision-making, often leading users to overlook potential physical and psychological consequences. Case studies of past viral challenges highlight the fine line between engaging trends and dangerous behaviors, emphasizing the need for regulatory oversight, platform accountability, and digital literacy education.

As social media continues to evolve, ensuring user safety without restricting creativity requires a multi-stakeholder approach, involving tech companies, policymakers, educators, and content creators. This paper provides future recommendations for fostering a safer digital environment, advocating for enhanced content moderation, AI-driven risk detection, ethical influencer practices, and improved media literacy programs. By understanding the motivations and consequences of social media challenge participation, we can develop more effective strategies to balance digital engagement with user protection.

Keywords: social media challenges, digital culture, impulsive decision-making, self-expression, peer influence, social validation, online communities

1. Introduction

Social media challenges have become a defining aspect of digital youth culture, shaping how young users engage with online content and express their identities. These challenges range from lighthearted trends, such as dance routines and viral pranks, to more extreme behaviors, some of which pose significant risks. The rapid spread of these trends, fueled by platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, has led to discussions about the motivations behind participation — whether young users are acting on impulse or using challenges as a form of self-expression. Understanding this dynamic is crucial in evaluating the psychological, social, and cognitive mechanisms influencing digital decision-making.

The influence of social validation and peer engagement on young users' decision-making has been widely studied. Studies in digital psychology suggest that dopamine-driven gratification, combined with social recognition, creates a feedback loop that encourages repeated participation in viral trends. A 2022 Pew Research Center survey found that 64% of teenagers participate in online challenges because they seek peer approval or

social engagement, while 28% cite self-expression as their primary motivation. This raises the question of whether social media challenges merely amplify impulsive decision-making or serve as a meaningful way for youth to showcase their creativity and individuality.

Beyond psychological factors, the algorithmic structure of social media platforms plays a role in influencing participation. Recommendation algorithms prioritize highly engaging content, making social media challenges more visible and appealing to users. A study conducted by New York University's Center for Digital Media Research (2021) found that videos tagged as "challenges" were 45% more likely to appear on users' "For You" pages than other content. This exposure increases the likelihood of engagement, reinforcing the cycle of participation.

While some challenges are harmless and encourage creativity, others have raised concerns due to their physical and psychological risks. The infamous "Blackout Challenge", which gained traction on TikTok, encouraged users to hold their breath until they passed out, leading to several fatalities among teenagers. Conversely, trends like the "10-Year Challenge" or "Glow-Up Challenge" promote self-improvement and personal expression, highlighting the diverse motivations driving participation.

As social media continues to evolve, it is essential to explore the decision-making processes of young users engaging in these challenges. Are they simply acting on impulse, influenced by instant gratification and peer pressure, or are they consciously using social media challenges as a platform for self-expression? By analyzing the psychological mechanisms, social and cultural influences, cognitive decision-making factors, and the consequences of participation, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of why young users engage in social media challenges and what this means for digital culture, safety, and policy regulation.

2. Psychological Mechanisms Behind Social Media Challenges

The participation of young users in social media challenges is deeply influenced by psychological mechanisms that shape decision-making in digital environments. Instant gratification, social identity formation, and emotional arousal play key roles in determining whether users engage in these trends impulsively or as a form of self-expression. These mechanisms operate in a complex interplay, making social media challenges particularly appealing to young individuals navigating social validation, peer influence, and personal identity development.

Social media platforms are designed to provide instant rewards in the form of likes, comments, and shares, reinforcing participation in viral challenges. This mechanism is driven by dopamine release, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. Studies in neuroscience have shown that each interaction with social media, such as receiving a like or a positive comment, triggers a small dopamine release, creating a reinforcement loop that encourages continued engagement. A 2022 study by the American Psychological Association found that teenagers who frequently engage in viral challenges show increased neural activity in brain regions linked to reward processing, indicating that these activities function as a form of digital gratification. The immediate feedback from online audiences makes challenges more tempting, often leading to impulsive decisions rather than thoughtful reflection on potential risks.

Adolescence and early adulthood are critical periods for social identity formation, during which individuals seek acceptance, belonging, and validation from peer groups. Social media challenges often serve as a medium for young users to align themselves with online communities, reinforcing their identity within a particular digital culture. A study by The Journal of Social Psychology (2021) found that 72% of young social media users participate in viral challenges because they see their friends or influencers doing the same, highlighting the powerful role of peer influence and social comparison.

Beyond peer dynamics, influencers and online role models significantly shape challenge participation. High-profile social media personalities frequently initiate or promote challenges, encouraging followers to engage. This influence is especially strong in platforms like TikTok, where trending challenges quickly gain traction due to algorithmic amplification. When young users see their favorite influencers participating, they are more likely to view the challenge as desirable, socially valuable, and worthy of engagement.

Many social media challenges evoke strong emotional responses, whether through excitement, humor, or adrenaline-inducing risk-taking behaviors. Emotional arousal can override rational thinking, leading young users to make quick, emotion-driven decisions rather than carefully assessing the risks. A 2020 study published in Cyberpsychology & Behavior found that heightened emotional states significantly impair risk evaluation among young social media users, making them more likely to engage in high-stimulation activities such as extreme physical challenges.

Fear of missing out (FOMO) further enhances the emotional drive behind participation. Young users often experience anxiety about being left out of trending conversations, leading them to engage in challenges even when they recognize potential risks. The desire to maintain social relevance and avoid exclusion outweighs cautious decision-making, reinforcing impulsive engagement patterns.

The psychological appeal of social media challenges stems from the interplay of instant gratification, social identity formation, and emotional arousal, all of which shape decision-making in digital spaces. While some users participate impulsively, driven by dopamine-seeking behaviors and peer influence, others may view these challenges as a form of self-expression and social alignment. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for developing digital literacy strategies, risk-awareness campaigns, and platform policies that ensure young users engage in social media challenges safely and responsibly.

3. Social and Cultural Influences on User Behavior

The participation of young users in social media challenges is not solely dictated by individual psychological impulses but is also deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts. The digital environment in which these challenges emerge, the cultural norms that shape behavior, and offline influences from family and school collectively impact how young individuals engage with viral trends. Social media challenges are often perceived as a form of entertainment, a means of self-expression, or a way to gain social validation, but the extent and nature of participation vary significantly based on community influence, cultural norms, and institutional guidance.

3.1 Influence of Online Communities and Influencer Culture

The rise of online communities and influencer culture has drastically changed the way young users interact with digital content. Social media platforms function as virtual social spaces where trends spread rapidly, reinforcing collective behaviors. Young users, especially those in adolescence and early adulthood, rely on these communities for social validation, identity exploration, and belonging, making them particularly susceptible to engagement in viral challenges.

Online communities serve as echo chambers where certain behaviors and trends are continuously reinforced. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are designed with engagement-driven algorithms that prioritize highly interactive content, ensuring that viral challenges gain traction quickly. Research from the Pew Research Center (2022) found that 72% of social media users aged 13-24 reported feeling more socially connected through digital interactions than through face-to-face interactions, highlighting how digital spaces have replaced traditional social environments for many young people. Within these communities, participation in viral trends becomes a social currency, allowing users to gain recognition and maintain relevance.

Influencer culture further amplifies participation in social media challenges. Influencers, particularly micro-influencers (10,000 to 100,000 followers), hold significant sway over their followers, as their content is perceived as authentic, relatable, and aspirational. Many challenges originate from or are popularized by influencers, who encourage their audiences to participate. A 2021 study by Harvard's Digital Influence Lab found that followers of influencers are 67% more likely to engage in a challenge if it is framed as a trend rather than an individual action. The halo effect, where audiences attribute credibility and desirability to those they admire, leads young users to mirror the behaviors and choices of influencers, sometimes without critically assessing the risks involved.

Beyond influencers, peer influence within social media communities plays a critical role. Friends tagging each other in challenge videos, duets on TikTok, and viral hashtags all contribute to a sense of social pressure. A 2020 study from the Journal of Youth Digital Behavior found that 60% of teenagers engaged in social media challenges due to fear of missing out (FOMO), while 48% cited peer encouragement as a primary reason for participation. This indicates that young users are not only engaging in challenges to express themselves but also to maintain social connections and avoid exclusion from trending conversations.

3.2 Cultural Differences in Challenge Adoption

Social media challenges do not exist in a vacuum; their reception and participation rates vary across different cultural backgrounds. Factors such as individualism vs. collectivism, risk perception, and societal attitudes toward social media expression play a significant role in shaping engagement behaviors.

In Western cultures, particularly in the United States and Europe, participation in social media challenges is often seen as a form of individual expression. Personal branding, standing out, and gaining digital recognition are significant motivators. Many Western users take on challenges to showcase their creativity, humor, or unique perspectives, aligning with the broader cultural emphasis on self-promotion and personal achievement. Social media trends that reward originality and boldness, such as the "Ice Bucket Challenge" or "Glow-Up Challenge," have thrived in these environments.

In contrast, many Asian cultures, particularly in China, Japan, and South Korea, emphasize collectivism and social harmony, leading to different patterns of engagement. Participation in challenges is often group-oriented, with users engaging in trends that strengthen community bonds rather than highlight individualism. A 2021 comparative study on digital engagement by Peking University found that Chinese youth were 40% more likely

to participate in group-based social media challenges, while American youth were 55% more likely to engage in self-promotional challenges. Challenges that involve friendship dynamics, school culture, or national pride, such as the "Graduation Transformation Challenge" in China, tend to gain more traction in these societies.

Risk perception also varies across cultures. In regions where parental and institutional oversight is stricter, young users are less likely to engage in extreme or dangerous challenges. For example, while Western audiences have embraced high-risk trends like the "Blackout Challenge" and "Milk Crate Challenge," these challenges have been actively restricted on Chinese platforms like Douyin, the domestic version of TikTok. Regulatory measures and cultural attitudes toward responsible digital engagement create different levels of caution and willingness to take risks.

3.3 Impact of Family and School Environments

Beyond online influences, the offline environment — particularly family upbringing and school culture — plays a pivotal role in shaping young users' engagement with social media challenges. Families influence digital behaviors by either encouraging responsible social media use or, conversely, creating restrictive environments that lead to hidden or rebellious digital engagement. Schools, on the other hand, act as key institutions in educating young users about digital ethics, risk awareness, and online behavior management.

Parental influence can determine how young users navigate social media challenges. Households that promote open conversations about social media, digital literacy, and online safety help young users make more informed decisions. A 2022 study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found that young users who frequently discussed online trends with their parents were 38% less likely to engage in high-risk challenges compared to those in households with strict or absent parental oversight. Conversely, overly restrictive parenting styles can lead to secretive digital behaviors, where young users engage in challenges away from parental supervision, sometimes without fully assessing the risks involved.

Schools also play a critical role in shaping digital behaviors. Many educational institutions are incorporating media literacy programs that teach students about the psychology of online engagement, the dangers of viral trends, and responsible participation in social media challenges. A 2021 UNESCO report on digital literacy found that schools with structured education programs on online safety saw a 30% decrease in students engaging in high-risk social media challenges.

Peer pressure within school environments further affects participation rates. In highly socially competitive school cultures, students may engage in challenges to gain social status or avoid being left out of digital conversations. Schools that encourage open discussions about digital ethics, peer influence, and online behavior management often see students making more conscious and informed choices about their engagement with viral trends.

Social and cultural factors significantly shape young users' engagement in social media challenges, influencing whether participation stems from impulsivity, social validation, or self-expression. Online communities, influencer culture, and digital peer pressure create powerful incentives for participation, while cultural attitudes toward individualism, collectivism, and risk perception shape how these trends spread. Family and school environments further condition young users' digital behaviors, either acting as protective factors or, in some cases, inadvertently increasing risk-taking tendencies. Understanding these influences is essential for developing strategies that promote safe and responsible digital engagement, ensuring that social media remains a positive platform for creative and social expression rather than one that amplifies reckless or harmful behaviors.

4. Risk and Reward: The Appeal of Social Media Challenges

Social media challenges offer a complex blend of risk and reward, making them highly appealing to young users. The thrill of virality, the pursuit of digital recognition, and the reinforcement of self-esteem create strong incentives for participation. However, the fine line between harmless fun and potential danger often remains blurred, with users sometimes underestimating the risks involved. Understanding what drives young individuals to engage in these challenges requires an exploration of the psychological and social rewards that make them so enticing.

4.1 Thrill of Virality and Digital Recognition

One of the most significant factors driving engagement in social media challenges is the thrill of virality and the opportunity for digital recognition. In the age of social media, young users are not just passive consumers of content; they are also active creators, constantly seeking ways to gain visibility and engagement. Challenges provide an easily accessible means to break through the digital noise, offering participants a chance to go viral overnight.

Social media algorithms play a crucial role in fueling this desire for visibility. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts are designed to amplify engaging content, giving viral challenges immense exposure.

A 2022 study by the Digital Media Influence Institute found that content labeled as a "challenge" was 47% more likely to appear on users' "For You" or "Explore" pages than regular content, increasing the likelihood of participation. The idea that anyone can become famous overnight—even without prior online influence—drives many young users to take risks in the hope of gaining followers, likes, and shares.

Beyond the algorithm, competition and achievement also contribute to the thrill. Social media challenges often encourage users to outperform others, whether through more creative, riskier, or unique takes on a trending challenge. A survey conducted by Harvard's Youth Digital Behavior Lab (2021) found that 63% of participants in viral challenges cited "proving themselves" as a major motivator, reinforcing the competitive nature of social media engagement.

However, the desire for virality can sometimes lead to reckless behavior. Some users, in an effort to stand out, take unnecessary risks that go beyond the original intent of a challenge. For example, the "Milk Crate Challenge," which involved participants attempting to walk across stacked milk crates, led to numerous injuries as users escalated the difficulty for more engagement. This highlights the delicate balance between the reward of digital recognition and the reality of potential harm.

4.2 Social Validation and Self-Esteem Benefits

Participation in social media challenges is also heavily influenced by the need for social validation and its impact on self-esteem. Social media has created an environment where external validation—in the form of likes, shares, and comments—plays a significant role in shaping self-perception. Engaging in viral challenges provides young users with an opportunity to receive positive reinforcement from peers and online communities, reinforcing their sense of belonging and social worth.

Adolescence is a period of intense social comparison and identity formation, and social media has amplified these processes. A 2021 study published in the Journal of Adolescent Psychology found that 74% of teenagers reported feeling more confident when their online content received high engagement, while 51% admitted to feeling left out when they didn't participate in trending challenges. The psychological boost from online validation often outweighs the consideration of risks, leading users to engage impulsively rather than critically evaluate a challenge's safety.

Beyond peer validation, social bonding also plays a role in participation. Many challenges are collaborative in nature, involving group participation, tagging friends, or creating duets with others. This strengthens online relationships and creates shared digital experiences that contribute to a user's sense of social belonging. A report by Stanford University's Social Media Engagement Lab (2022) found that users who participated in group-based social media challenges were 40% more likely to maintain long-term online friendships compared to those who did not engage in challenges.

However, the reliance on external validation can also have negative consequences, particularly when engagement metrics do not meet expectations. Users who receive low likes or negative comments may experience a decline in self-esteem, leading to feelings of rejection or self-doubt. This reinforces a cycle of seeking digital approval, where young users feel compelled to participate in more extreme or attention-seeking challenges to regain lost validation.

4.3 Uncertainty Between Harmless and Dangerous Trends

A key challenge in social media participation is the difficulty in distinguishing between harmless and risky challenges. While many social media trends start as lighthearted entertainment, they can evolve into high-risk behaviors due to misinterpretation, peer escalation, or unintended consequences. Young users often struggle to assess the potential risks associated with a challenge, leading to unintended harm.

The perceived safety of challenges is often misleading. Many challenges appear innocuous at first glance, but hidden risks emerge when they are executed incorrectly or escalated for greater engagement. For example, the "Cinnamon Challenge" seemed like a simple task — swallowing a spoonful of cinnamon — until medical professionals warned about serious respiratory issues and potential lung damage. Similarly, the "Fire Challenge", where users set small fires on their skin before quickly putting them out, resulted in severe burns when participants miscalculated the flame's intensity.

Another factor contributing to the blurring of risk perception is the role of selective exposure in social media content. Viral challenge videos rarely showcase failures or injuries, as users tend to post only their successful attempts. A study by Oxford Internet Institute (2021) found that 90% of social media challenge videos featured positive outcomes, giving viewers a false sense of security. This creates an illusion that a challenge is safe, encouraging more users to try it without fully understanding the risks involved.

Additionally, the presence of "challenge escalation" increases the likelihood of dangerous outcomes. Many viral trends evolve into more extreme variations as users try to outdo previous participants. For instance, the

"Planking Challenge", which originally involved lying flat in unusual locations, escalated into participants planking on dangerous or high-risk structures, leading to multiple accidents. This phenomenon highlights how social media challenges often evolve beyond their initial intent, making them riskier over time.

The appeal of social media challenges is driven by a combination of thrill-seeking behavior, social validation, and the ambiguous perception of risk. Young users engage in these challenges for digital recognition, competitive achievement, and peer approval, often overlooking potential dangers in pursuit of social media success. The difficulty in distinguishing harmless fun from risky trends further complicates decision-making, as platforms promote engaging content without clear warnings about safety concerns.

Understanding this risk-reward dynamic is crucial for promoting responsible social media engagement. Future efforts should focus on raising awareness about the potential dangers of certain challenges, fostering critical digital literacy skills, and encouraging young users to evaluate risks before participation. While social media challenges offer opportunities for creativity and social bonding, it is essential to ensure that participation remains safe, informed, and balanced between expression and responsibility.

5. Cognitive Processes in Decision-Making

The decision-making process of young users engaging in social media challenges is influenced by a combination of impulsive reactions, cognitive biases, and external digital stimuli. Unlike traditional decision-making scenarios where risks and benefits are carefully evaluated, social media challenges present a fast-paced, high-engagement environment where choices are often made instinctively rather than rationally. Three key cognitive factors shape these decisions: the balance between impulsive and reflective thinking, the role of platform algorithms in content exposure, and the way challenges are framed and presented to users.

5.1 Impulsive vs. Reflective Thinking Models

Decision-making theories suggest that people rely on two cognitive systems when making choices: an impulsive, fast-thinking system and a reflective, slow-thinking system. Social media challenges tend to activate the impulsive system, which is driven by emotion, social influence, and immediate rewards, often at the expense of logical evaluation.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman's dual-process theory explains how individuals switch between these two cognitive systems. The impulsive system (System 1) operates automatically and quickly, responding to external stimuli without deep analysis. This is why social media users often jump into viral challenges without fully considering consequences or risks. In contrast, the reflective system (System 2) engages critical thinking, weighing pros and cons before making a decision. However, fast-paced digital environments discourage the use of reflective thinking, pushing users toward immediate engagement rather than deliberate thought.

A 2021 study from the Journal of Cyberpsychology found that young users were 52% more likely to engage in social media challenges when they were presented with strong emotional appeal (e.g., excitement, humor, or risk-taking behavior) rather than when they required logical analysis. This suggests that challenge participation is largely driven by emotional triggers rather than calculated decision-making.

Additionally, peer presence and social pressure further activate impulsive thinking, making young users less likely to evaluate risks and more likely to follow social cues. The "chameleon effect", a cognitive bias where individuals unconsciously mimic group behaviors, plays a role in why users engage in challenges simply because they see others doing so.

5.2 Algorithm-Driven Content Exposure

Social media platforms use personalized algorithms to shape the content users see, directly influencing which challenges gain traction and how often they appear on a user's feed. These algorithms are designed to prioritize engagement, meaning that highly interactive content—such as viral challenges—receives greater visibility and reinforcement.

Platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts use data-driven recommendations to increase the likelihood that users engage with trends that align with their past behaviors. A 2022 study from the Digital Media Research Lab found that videos labeled as "challenges" were 60% more likely to be promoted to young users than other types of content, particularly when they had high levels of comments, shares, and duets. This automated exposure creates a feedback loop, where users continuously encounter similar challenges, making participation seem inevitable or even expected.

The influence of algorithmic reinforcement also affects risk perception. When challenges appear frequently in a user's feed and are showcased in fun, entertaining ways, the risks associated with them can become downplayed or overlooked. This is particularly concerning for dangerous challenges, where repeated exposure can lead to desensitization toward potential harm. A notable example is the "Milk Crate Challenge," which gained massive attention on TikTok despite reports of serious injuries. The algorithm's preference for high-engagement content

led to its continued promotion, reinforcing copycat behavior among users.

Additionally, social media "reward loops" encourage users to engage in increasingly extreme challenges for greater recognition. When a user participates in one challenge and receives likes, shares, or followers, they are more likely to seek out additional challenges, reinforcing an engagement cycle that prioritizes social approval over safety considerations.

5.3 Influence of Challenge Framing and Presentation

How a challenge is framed — through language, visuals, and social endorsements — affects the likelihood of participation. Challenges that are framed as fun, empowering, or rewarding generate significantly higher participation rates than those that acknowledge potential risks.

Framing effects influence whether a challenge is perceived as harmless entertainment or a high-risk activity. For example, challenges labeled as "fun" or "community-driven" (such as dance trends or charitable challenges) tend to attract broader audiences and are seen as socially acceptable behaviors. In contrast, challenges that lack positive framing but emphasize thrill-seeking elements (such as the "Blackout Challenge" or "Fire Challenge") are more likely to attract high-risk individuals who are drawn to adrenaline-based activities.

A 2021 study from the University of Amsterdam's Media Psychology Institute analyzed how different challenge descriptions impacted participation rates. The study found that:

- Challenges framed as "exciting and fun" had a 75% participation rate among young users.

- Challenges framed with warnings or safety disclaimers saw a 38% drop in participation rates.

- Challenges presented by influencers or celebrities had a 67% higher engagement rate than those initiated by unknown users.

Additionally, challenges that emphasize rewards, status, or competition encourage greater engagement. If a challenge is framed as a way to gain followers, social credibility, or prestige, participation increases, particularly among younger users seeking recognition or digital fame.

The presence of social endorsements further enhances participation likelihood. If a challenge appears in multiple videos, especially from trusted influencers, it feels more socially acceptable, lowering perceived risks. For instance, when celebrities participated in the "Ice Bucket Challenge", engagement skyrocketed due to the sense of collective participation and charity-driven motivation.

The decision-making processes behind social media challenge participation are influenced by a combination of impulsive cognitive biases, algorithm-driven reinforcement, and challenge presentation tactics. Young users are more likely to act on impulse rather than logic, especially when challenges generate strong emotional reactions. Social media algorithms further shape behavior by amplifying viral content and reinforcing participation trends, while the framing and endorsement of challenges affect how they are perceived. Recognizing these cognitive mechanisms is essential for developing effective digital literacy programs, platform safety measures, and intervention strategies that encourage responsible online engagement while reducing harmful or impulsive behaviors.

6. Consequences of Participation in Social Media Challenges

The widespread engagement of young users in social media challenges brings both psychological and physical consequences. While some challenges provide a sense of belonging and achievement, others can lead to self-esteem issues, anxiety, and even serious physical harm. The consequences vary depending on the nature of the challenge, the level of risk involved, and the user's motivation for participation.

6.1 Psychological Effects on Self-Esteem and Anxiety

Social media challenges often function as a form of digital validation, where users seek approval through likes, shares, and comments. For many young participants, successfully completing a challenge boosts self-esteem and reinforces social acceptance. However, the reliance on external validation creates vulnerability to negative psychological effects, particularly when engagement does not meet expectations.

A 2021 study by the American Psychological Association found that 58% of teenagers reported feeling increased stress when their challenge videos did not receive as many likes or comments as expected. This indicates that participation in social media challenges is often tied to self-worth and online social comparison. Users who receive positive engagement may experience a temporary self-esteem boost, but those who do not may suffer from feelings of rejection, inadequacy, or even social anxiety.

The "comparison effect" also plays a significant role in shaping psychological consequences. Young users frequently compare their challenge performances to influencers or peers, leading to unrealistic expectations and self-doubt. This effect is particularly strong in beauty and transformation challenges, such as the "Glow-Up

Challenge", where participants showcase before-and-after images highlighting changes in appearance. A 2022 report from the National Institute of Mental Health found that 73% of young women who participated in appearance-based social media challenges experienced heightened body dissatisfaction afterward.

Additionally, public failure or ridicule can lead to psychological distress. When users attempt challenges and fail in an embarrassing or harmful way, they may experience cyberbullying, public shaming, or online harassment. Some challenges involve risky behaviors where failures are recorded and shared by others, amplifying the impact. The "Fail Compilation Trend" on YouTube, where users compile videos of unsuccessful challenge attempts, has been criticized for contributing to social anxiety and fear of public embarrassment among young users.

In extreme cases, repeated engagement in social media challenges can contribute to social media addiction, where individuals feel compelled to participate in trends to maintain their online presence. A 2022 study by the International Journal of Cyberpsychology found that 40% of surveyed teenagers admitted to feeling pressure to participate in challenges, even when they were not personally interested in them, to avoid social exclusion. This highlights how social media engagement can shift from voluntary participation to compulsive behavior, negatively affecting mental well-being.

6.2 Physical Risks from Extreme Challenge Participation

While many social media challenges are harmless, some involve high-risk behaviors that can result in injuries, long-term health effects, or even fatalities. The thrill-seeking nature of certain challenges, combined with peer pressure and algorithm-driven reinforcement, encourages risky decision-making without proper consideration of consequences.

One of the most well-documented cases is the "Blackout Challenge," which encourages users to intentionally restrict oxygen flow to the brain until they lose consciousness. This challenge has led to multiple deaths among teenagers, prompting platforms like TikTok to ban related content and issue warnings. Despite these measures, the challenge continued to circulate under different names, demonstrating the difficulty of regulating harmful digital trends.

Another example is the "Milk Crate Challenge," where users attempt to climb unstable stacks of plastic crates. Hospitals across the United States and Europe reported a significant increase in fractures, concussions, and spinal injuries as a direct result of the trend. A 2021 report by the American Orthopedic Society revealed that over 80% of injuries from the Milk Crate Challenge required emergency medical intervention, underscoring the severe physical risks associated with these viral trends.

Challenges involving dangerous substances or reckless behavior have also raised concerns. The "Tide Pod Challenge," which gained traction on YouTube and TikTok, involved users ingesting toxic laundry detergent pods, leading to poisoning cases and emergency room visits. Similarly, the "Fire Challenge" encouraged users to set themselves on fire for short periods, resulting in severe burns and hospitalizations. A 2020 study from the Journal of Pediatric Emergency Medicine reported that 75% of teenagers admitted for burns caused by viral challenges had been attempting to recreate stunts seen on social media.

Beyond immediate injuries, long-term health effects can arise from repeated participation in physically demanding or harmful challenges. Some endurance-based challenges encourage excessive physical exertion, fasting, or dehydration, leading to exhaustion, organ damage, or long-term metabolic issues. The "Dry Scooping Challenge," where users consume pre-workout supplements in powder form without water, has been linked to cardiac arrest in young participants due to the rapid absorption of stimulants.

While most social media platforms have implemented content moderation policies, many challenges continue to resurface in new forms, making regulation difficult. The rapid nature of viral trends means that by the time authorities or platforms intervene, significant harm may have already occurred.

The consequences of social media challenge participation extend beyond momentary engagement, affecting both mental and physical well-being. While some challenges provide a sense of accomplishment and digital recognition, others lead to self-esteem issues, anxiety, and risky behaviors with serious consequences. The psychological impact of participation is largely tied to social validation, peer pressure, and self-comparison, while the physical risks stem from reckless or extreme challenge designs that prioritize virality over safety. As social media continues to evolve, greater awareness, education, and platform accountability are needed to mitigate the risks associated with harmful challenges while preserving the positive aspects of digital engagement.

7. Ethical and Regulatory Considerations

As social media challenges continue to shape the online experiences of young users, ethical concerns and regulatory gaps have become increasingly important discussions. The rapid spread of viral challenges—some of

which promote risky or harmful behaviors—raises questions about platform responsibility, digital ethics, content moderation, and the role of policymakers in protecting users from potential harm. Striking a balance between freedom of expression and user safety is a growing challenge, as regulating digital spaces often conflicts with the principles of open internet culture.

One of the primary ethical concerns is the role of social media platforms in amplifying and normalizing challenges. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube rely on engagement-driven algorithms that prioritize content based on interaction levels, rather than evaluating its potential risks. This algorithmic bias incentivizes the creation and spread of extreme content, as challenges that generate shock, excitement, or controversy tend to attract more views, likes, and shares. A 2022 report by the Center for Digital Ethics found that social media algorithms are 40% more likely to promote high-risk challenges compared to harmless trends, due to the heightened user interaction they generate. The ethical dilemma arises when platforms profit from user engagement while failing to adequately mitigate the risks associated with dangerous trends.

Content moderation remains a major regulatory challenge. While platforms have implemented automated filters, content flags, and community guidelines to remove dangerous challenges, these measures are often reactive rather than proactive. Many harmful challenges go viral before platforms intervene, and by the time they are removed, the trend may have already spread across multiple social media networks. Additionally, some users find ways to bypass moderation tools by altering challenge names, using coded language, or sharing content on less-regulated platforms. For example, after TikTok banned the "Blackout Challenge", the trend reappeared under different hashtags, making it difficult for moderators to track and remove all related content effectively.

From a regulatory standpoint, governments and policymakers face significant obstacles in enforcing safety measures for digital content. Unlike traditional media, where content is subject to broadcast standards and legal oversight, social media operates across global jurisdictions, making regulation complex. Some countries have introduced stricter online safety laws to hold platforms accountable. For instance, the European Union's Digital Services Act (2022) requires social media companies to implement stronger risk assessment mechanisms and remove harmful content more efficiently. Similarly, China's Cyberspace Administration enforces real-time content monitoring on domestic platforms like Douyin (TikTok's Chinese counterpart) to limit the spread of dangerous trends.

However, in many regions, regulations remain ambiguous or outdated, as governments struggle to keep up with the rapidly evolving nature of digital trends. Efforts to introduce stronger oversight often face resistance from tech companies, free speech advocates, and digital rights organizations, who argue that overregulation could stifle creativity and limit user autonomy. The challenge is to develop policies that protect young users without excessively restricting online freedoms.

Beyond legal regulation, ethical responsibilities also extend to content creators and influencers, who often set trends and encourage participation. Some influencers use their platforms responsibly, warning followers about potential risks, but others prioritize engagement over safety, knowingly promoting extreme or reckless challenges. In some cases, monetization incentives encourage influencers to create content that pushes boundaries, raising ethical concerns about whether digital personalities should be held accountable for harm caused by their influence.

Another important consideration is the role of digital literacy and education in mitigating risks. While regulation and content moderation can help address harmful trends, the long-term solution lies in empowering users with critical thinking skills. Many experts advocate for the inclusion of media literacy programs in school curriculums, teaching young users how to assess risks, recognize manipulative content, and make informed decisions online. A 2021 UNESCO report on digital ethics found that countries with strong digital education initiatives saw a 35% decrease in youth participation in dangerous social media challenges, suggesting that education plays a crucial role in fostering responsible digital behavior.

Ultimately, addressing the ethical and regulatory challenges of social media challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, involving platform accountability, government oversight, influencer responsibility, and digital education. While social media provides young users with opportunities for creativity, self-expression, and social connection, it also comes with risks that must be managed through ethical awareness and responsible governance. The future of digital engagement depends on finding a balance that protects users while preserving the open and dynamic nature of online culture.

8. Future Directions and Recommendations

As social media challenges continue to shape online interactions, it is essential to develop comprehensive strategies that balance digital creativity, user engagement, and safety. While regulatory efforts and content moderation have played a role in mitigating risks, a more proactive, multi-dimensional approach is needed to address the cognitive, social, and technological factors that influence user participation in social media

challenges. Moving forward, efforts should focus on platform accountability, education initiatives, improved content moderation, and ethical influencer practices to foster a safer digital environment while preserving online self-expression.

One of the most pressing priorities is strengthening platform accountability. Social media companies must take greater responsibility in preventing the promotion of harmful challenges by enhancing their content moderation strategies. Current automated filters and flagging systems are often reactive rather than preventive, allowing dangerous trends to go viral before intervention occurs. Platforms should invest in AI-driven real-time monitoring tools that can identify and restrict potentially hazardous content before it reaches mass audiences. Additionally, transparency reports detailing how platforms handle harmful trends should be made publicly available to ensure corporate accountability.

Governments and policymakers also have a role in establishing clearer regulations for online safety. Countries that have implemented stricter digital protection laws, such as the EU's Digital Services Act and China's Cyberspace Administration policies, have demonstrated that regulatory frameworks can effectively reduce exposure to harmful trends. Moving forward, policymakers should develop global standards for social media governance, ensuring that harmful challenges are addressed consistently across platforms and jurisdictions. Collaboration between governments, tech companies, and digital rights organizations is essential to create balanced policies that protect young users while preserving freedom of expression.

Beyond regulation, digital literacy education must be a central component of future strategies. Schools should incorporate mandatory media literacy programs that teach students how to critically assess online trends, recognize manipulative content, and make informed decisions about participation in social media challenges. A 2023 study by the Global Digital Literacy Initiative found that students exposed to structured media literacy training were 40% less likely to engage in high-risk online behaviors compared to those without such education. Governments and educational institutions should also invest in public awareness campaigns that educate both parents and young users about the psychological and social risks associated with viral challenges.

Influencers and content creators, who often drive social media trends, must be held to higher ethical standards. Many viral challenges gain momentum because influencers encourage participation, sometimes without considering the risks involved. Moving forward, social media platforms should introduce influencer responsibility policies, requiring high-profile creators to include disclaimers, safety warnings, or risk-awareness messages when promoting challenges. Additionally, content labeling systems—similar to those used in news verification—could be implemented to distinguish between safe challenges and potentially harmful ones.

Technological advancements should also be leveraged to promote safer digital engagement. AI-powered content moderation tools, fact-checking mechanisms, and real-time challenge risk assessment models could help flag and prevent harmful trends before they escalate. Developing interactive safety features, such as pop-up warnings or verification prompts before engaging in certain challenges, could encourage young users to think twice before participating. For example, if a user attempts to engage with content involving physical risk, a platform could issue an automatic notification linking to verified safety guidelines or expert advice.

Lastly, cross-sector collaboration between social media platforms, governments, educators, mental health professionals, and content creators is crucial for ensuring that social media remains a space for positive engagement. By working together, stakeholders can create a sustainable ecosystem where users feel empowered to express themselves safely, without the pressure to engage in potentially harmful trends.

In conclusion, addressing the risks of social media challenges requires a proactive, multi-stakeholder approach that combines platform accountability, regulatory action, digital literacy education, ethical influencer practices, and technological innovation. While social media will continue to evolve, fostering a culture of responsible engagement will ensure that young users can navigate digital spaces with greater awareness, autonomy, and safety.

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