

## CONTENTS

- Do the Preferences of Women Differ? Female Representation in Parliament and the Composition of Government Expenditure** 1-12

Giyoh Gideon Nginyu

- Research on Multi-Dimensional Presentation and In-depth Experience of Cultural Heritage Driven by XR Technology** 13-17

Zijing Lu

- Corset Revival and the Feminist Reframing of Restrictive Dress in Vintage Fashion Communities** 18-25

Amelia Fairchild

- How the Instant Gratification Design of Dating Apps in Korea Creates False Expectations of Romantic Communication** 26-33

Minseo K. Jang

- Motherhood as Method: Chinese Feminism and Gendered Resistance in the Works of Yu Hong and He Chengyao** 34-44

Qinlin Wei

- The Artistic Editing of Ambient Sound and the Construction of Emotional Tension in Urban Vlogs** 45-53

Xin Zhou, Pengsong Gao

# Do the Preferences of Women Differ? Female Representation in Parliament and the Composition of Government Expenditure

Giyoh Gideon Nginyu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Higher Institute for Professionalism and Excellence, The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

Correspondence: Giyoh Gideon Nginyu, Higher Institute for Professionalism and Excellence, The University of Bamenda, Cameroon.

doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2025.05.001

## Abstract

The individual preferences of the elected may influence the decomposition of public spending since policy commitment is not always feasible. This paper investigates if the proportion of female representation in parliament affects the composition of government spending. To attain this objective, we analysed the effect of female representation in parliament on preferences expressed by the proportion of each and every component of government expenditure using a system-GMM estimation technique with data from 126 countries of the world. Our results revile that, women representation in parliament increases expenditure on education, government consumption and health expenditures and on the other hand, female representation in parliament decreases military as well as research and development expenditures.

**Keywords:** female representation, parliament, government expenditure

## 1. Introduction

Do all the groups in the society need to be represented in parliament for collective interest to be realised? Even though, the answer is yes, it is not the case in real life situation. If political representation is a necessity for collective interest, it can be assumed that the elected should at least to an extent, represent the population. Women compared to men are often under-represented in in the parliament and therefore their interest seems not always taken into consideration. Increasing the number of females in parliament is justified by the fact that it is just to have equal proportions of males and female in parliament with respect to their respective total population and for every once interest to be taken into consideration. It has been shown in the literature that, women have a different approach toward politics (Debski & Jetter, 2015; Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Dollar et al., 2001; Goetz, 2007; Halder, 2004; Paxton & Kunovich, 2003; Rivas, 2013; Swamy et al., 2001; Thomas, 1991; Itzkovitch-Malka & Oshri, 2024; Valsangiacomo, 2021; Bello Hutt, 2022). Their election into parliament in a larger number may therefore probably change the policies as their preferences differ from those of men (Svaleryd et al., 2002; Levitt, 1996). Increasing the number of females in parliament have been a critical issue in many countries and have therefore employed different strategies like quotas on the minimum number of women in parliament with the aim of increasing female number of females in parliament (Ellerby, 2011).

As parliamentary representation is nowadays a vital issue throughout the world, many countries (developing and developed), are struggling to increase the number of females in parliament. Despite numerous barriers, a number of countries have achieved significant advancement by adopting special measures and techniques such as quotas and reserved seats in political parties as well as in the parliament (Halder, 2004). Gender quota policies aimed at increasing the number of females in political office, now exist in many countries. While gender quota policies tend to emphasise on the minimum number of females in government in many countries, it has led to a shift not only in the political agenda but also in the gender consciousness of female representatives (Ellerby, 2011).

Empowerment of women as a key element to achieving gender equality has therefore nowadays, been a fashionable act in almost all parts of the world. It is among the Millennium Development Goals (Sharma & Varma, 2016). Female representation in parliament is therefore the best way to remove the challenges of gender inequality in human development, and therefore increasing the ability of females to shape their lives by creating a sort of equality with men. Empowerment of females gives power to women to have control over the circumstances of their lives and to participate in the policy choice of their society. Empowerment of women is therefore critical not only for their own welfare but also for the development of the society as a whole (Sharma & Varma, 2016).

Gender disabilities and discrimination have been on a decline in the world in recent years. Women constitute approximately 50% of the world's population, but their representation in policymaking has always been minimal. On average, according to data from the World Development Indicators, women constituted only around 12.73 per cent of representatives in parliaments across the world in 1990, with around 49.68 per cent of the world's population. The last decades have witnessed by an increasing number of females in parliament. In 2018, for example, the percentage of female representation in parliament across the world rose to around 23.97 percent, with around 49.58 percent of the world's population. As far as social status is concerned, they are not always treated like men in most aspects of life (Hazarika, 2011). The goal of women's empowerment is to equalise the status and rights with those of men.

In this article, we examine the effect female representation in parliament on composition of government expenditure in some selected countries around the world. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows; Section 2 presents a brief literature on female representation in parliament, Section 3 describes the data to be use, Section 4 presents the empirical evidence and Section 5 conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

The preferences of males and do differ significantly (Svaleryd et al., 2002). Theoretically, there is no clear answer as to whether gender is of importance for policy choices. When the voters delegate policy choices to the elected who are who make policy choices based their self-interest and not enforcement campaign promises, there will be an agency problem between the voted and the voters (Persson et al., 2000). The voters can discipline the political agents (the voted) and if the office holder wishes to remain in office the voters can hold the elected for policy choices (Ferejohn, 1986). Nevertheless, the elected usually have some discretionary power over policy choices. It is therefore possible that elected preferences influence policy choices. In other word, the bargaining power of a group of politicians with similar preferences (male or females) will therefore affect the allocation and reallocation of resources (Mauro, 1998).

Levitt (1996) demonstrated in a study of the U.S senators that, personal preferences have a significant impact on senators voting patterns in the Congress. In the same light, other studies have demonstrated that gender is also an indicator of policy preferences. Female representatives tend to be more liberal than their male counterparts and are usually more probable to express concerns regarding social policy issues (Thomas, 1991; Seltzer et al., 1997).

Svaleryd et al. (2002) investigated if female representation in the local councils in Sweden influences the pattern the local public expenditure. It was found that male and female preferences differ. Specifically female representatives, compared to male representatives, prefer more spending on childcare relative to elderly care.

In the same line, Dezs'o and Ross (2012) investigated if female representation in top management improves firm performance. They found that female representation in top management improves firm performance but only to the extent that a firm's strategy is focused on innovation, in which context the informational and social benefits of gender diversity and the behaviors associated with women in management are likely to be especially important for managerial task perform. Besley and Case (2003) find that female representation increased spending on family assistance and strengthens child support.

The has been a series of studies to investigate the effect of women's empowerment on corruption (Dollar et al., 2001; Swamy et al., 2001; Goetz, 2007; Mocan, 2008; Rivas, 2013; Debski & Jetter, 2015). Most, if not all, of these studies confirm that there is a positive link between the involvement of women in society and the control of corruption. Mauro (1998) also found that corruption affect the composition of government expenditures.

This empirical evidence makes us believe that the is likely a relationship that exists between female representation in parliament and the composition of public expenditures. This paper investigates whether the proportion of female representation in parliament affects the composition of government expenditure, which is a gap in the literature. We try to broaden the research on the determinants of the composition of public expenditures by examining the impact of the proportion of women in parliaments.

## 3. Methodology

In order to investigate the possible differences in preferences across gender, we employed a dataset on the preferences expressed by the proportion of female elected representatives in parliament across different countries. The study focuses on educational, health, general government consumption, military, and research and development expenditures. There are three key reasons for using these sectors; Firstly, they constitute the lion's share of all government expenditures across almost every country. Secondly, the availability of data is good, and lastly, they are key determinants of economic growth and human development.

This paper uses data from WGI<sup>1</sup> and WDI for 126 countries. The institutional dataset from WGIs was assembled by Kaufmann et al. (2009). Several variables were used from this data source; Control of Corruption which measures the degree to which public power is used for private benefits, Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism (PS) which measures the likelihood of political instability including terrorism, Rule of Law (RL) which measures the extent to which agents have confidence in the rules of society, Regulatory Quality (RQ) which measures the ability of the government to formulate and implement good policies and regulations that permit and promote private sector development, Government Effectiveness (GE) measures the quality of public services and the degree of its independence from political pressures, Voice and Accountability (VA) which measures the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government. All variables from WGI range from approximately -2.5 (weak) to 2.5 (strong) governance performance. Current health expenditure measures the level of current health expenditures expressed as a percentage of GDP. General government consumption expenditure includes all government current expenditures for purchases of goods and services expressed as a percentage of GDP. General government expenditure measures the level of educational expenditures expressed as a percentage of GDP. Military expenditure includes all current and capital expenditures on the armed forces expressed as a percentage of GDP. Research and development expenditure includes all expenditures on Research and development as a percentage of GDP.

The analytical framework of this study is based on a model in which the different types of expenditures will be the dependent variable and the women's empowerment, which is measured by the proportion of women in parliament to the total number of representatives in the parliament with the remainder of the variables mentioned above as control variables. To estimate the aforementioned model, the system-GMM estimation technique is employed. The motivation for using a system-GMM is found by Arellano and Bond (1991), Blundell and Bond (1998), and later in Levine, Loayza, and Beck (2000), who provided the motivation for using the GMM to study the relationship between variables. GMM controls for the simultaneity from the explanatory variables and the lag of the endogenous variables (Nginyu et al, 2025).

There are numerous methods of dynamic panel estimation, among which we have GMM, difference-GMM and system-GMM. Consistent with Arellano and Bond (1991), the first difference-GMM involves taking, for each period, the first difference of the equation to remove the individuals' specific effects. We are going to apply the two GMMs to better understand the results of our study, since the result of an estimation can change with respect to the estimation method used. The over-identifying restriction test does not check the validity of instruments, but rather it checks whether all instruments identify the same set of parameters. If the probability is not significant, it implies the instruments are valid, where (null hypothesis)  $H_0$  supports the perspective that instruments are valid, while  $H_1$  (alternative hypothesis) supports the view that instruments are not valid.

#### 4. Results

In this section, we present, the empirically the relationship between female representation in parliament and the repartition of government expenditure. It finds that women representation in parliament increases expenditure on education, health and general government consumption expenditures and on the other hand, female representation in parliament decreases military as well as research and development expenditures.

Table 1. Female representation in parliament and the composition of government expenditure

VARIABLES	Health expenditures	Government Consumption expenditures	Educational expenditures	Military expenditures	Research and Development expenditures
L.Health expenditures	0.906*** (0.0258)				
Proportion of seats held by Women in the Parliament	0.00621** (0.00243)	0.0322*** (0.000625)	0.0142*** (0.00471)	-0.00333*** (3.85e-05)	-0.00116*** (3.04e-06)

<sup>1</sup> The indicators from WGIs were constructed assembled by?

L.Government		0.717***			
Consumption expenditures		(0.000370)			
L.Educational			0.632***		
Expenditures			(0.0827)		
L.Military				0.889***	
expenditures				(7.09e-05)	
L.Research and					1.043***
Development expenditures					(1.95e-05)
Constant	0.537***	4.086***	1.435***	0.268***	-0.00579***
	(0.132)	(0.0138)	(0.334)	(0.000603)	(2.23e-05)
Observations	2,745	3,050	1,662	2,803	1,347
Number of Countries	185	173	171	162	108
F_p	0	0	0	0	0
F	1342	2.303e+06	56.51	8.680e+07	1.440e+09
hansenp	0.262	1	1	1	1
hansen	177.2	172.6	167.1	161.7	106.4
sarganp	0	0	0	0	0
sargan	2971	4309	2041	3247	1514
ar2p	0.334	0.663	0.761	0.129	0.0579
ar2	-0.967	0.436	0.304	1.520	-1.897
ar1p	5.80e-11	0.00806	0.000360	0.108	1.65e-06
ar1	-6.549	-2.649	-3.568	-1.605	-4.792

Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Source: computed by the author.

#### 4.1 Baseline Model

Table 1 presents the effect of female representation on the repartition of government expenditures expenditure. It finds that female representation in parliament increases expenditure on education, health and general government consumption expenditures and on the other hand, female representation in parliament decreases military as well as research and development expenditures. The sign of the coefficient is stable, and the relationship also remains significant when estimated through widely-used robust regression techniques and when modifying the sample from one region to the other. Table 1 provides direct visual evidence that this result is not driven by a small group of countries by taking a good number of countries into the sample.

Table 2. Female representation in parliament and general health expenditure

VARIABLES	Health expenditures	Health expenditures	Health expenditures	Health expenditures	Health expenditures	Health expenditures	Health expenditures
L.Health expenditures	0.878*** (0.0348)	0.865*** (0.00161)	0.916*** (0.00220)	0.916*** (0.00154)	0.930*** (0.00238)	0.919*** (0.00178)	0.910*** (0.00220)
Proportion of seats held by Women in the Parliament	0.00363 (0.00445)	0.00415*** (0.000441)	0.00276*** (0.000511)	0.00215*** (0.000521)	0.00499*** (0.000329)	0.00303*** (0.000527)	0.00181*** (0.000401)
Remittance	-0.00862 (0.0168)	-0.000553 (0.00137)	-0.00763*** (0.00245)	-0.00463** (0.00183)		-0.00973*** (0.00184)	0.00306** (0.00130)
Inflation	-0.0577***	-0.0551***	-0.0345***	-0.0286***		-0.0308***	-0.0274***

	(0.00839)	(0.000551)	(0.000514)	(0.000578)		(0.000577)	(0.000473)
Foreign direct investment	0.00347	0.00218***	0.000390*	0.000607		0.000216	-0.000360
	(0.00390)	(0.000325)	(0.000213)	(0.000442)		(0.000267)	(0.000307)
Control of Corruption		0.0342***					
		(0.00438)					
Regulatory Quality			0.00834				
			(0.00904)				
Role of Law				0.0540***			
				(0.0104)			
Political Stability					0.0967***		
					(0.00764)		
Government Effectiveness						-0.000773	
						(0.00998)	
Voice of Accountability							0.0944***
							(0.00924)
Constant	1.157***	1.187***	0.798***	0.764***	0.431***	0.763***	0.772***
	(0.196)	(0.0137)	(0.0156)	(0.0122)	(0.0134)	(0.0182)	(0.0123)
Observations	1,772	1,772	1,772	1,772	1,877	1,772	1,772
Number of Countrycode	122	122	122	122	126	122	122
F_p	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
F	600.8	113064	222974	133837	150418	75332	104215
hansenp	0.994	0.998	1	1	1	1	1
hansen_df	163	164	313	313	313	313	313
hansen	120.9	117.5	119.0	120.5	124.3	119.1	120.7
sarganp	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
sar_df	163	164	313	313	313	313	313
sargan	1308	1366	1709	1785	1941	1756	1811
ar2p	0.224	0.235	0.333	0.362	0.566	0.350	0.367
ar2	-1.216	-1.189	-0.968	-0.912	-0.574	-0.935	-0.902
ar1p	1.46e-06	5.37e-07	1.04e-07	1.09e-07	2.60e-07	9.95e-08	1.18e-07
ar1	-4.817	-5.013	-5.320	-5.311	-5.150	-5.328	-5.297

Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Source: computed by the author.

This is also a point of interest since general government final consumption expenditures is not productive and therefore should be discouraged since it is likely not to improve economic growth. We have also found evidence of a positive, significant, and robust relationship between female representation in parliament and government expenditure on education, which is also a point for concern. Previous literature has also shown that educational attainment is an important determinant of economic growth (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2010; Eggoh et al., 2015; Denison, 1966; Benos & Zotou, 2014; Lau et al., 1993).

However, female representation in parliament to have a negative, significant, and robust effect on military

expenditures. Previous literature has shown that military expenditures have a negative effect of economic growth (Abu-Bader & Abu-Qarn, 2003; Pieroni, 2009; Cappelen et al., 1984) though there have been some contradictory results (Yildirim et al., 2005), on the other hand, Alptekin and Levine (2012) and Dunne and Tian (2015) demonstrated that this relationship is non-linear.

#### 4.2 Robustness and Other Considerations

Table 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 reports the results obtained by re-investigating the effect of female representation in parliament and health expenditure, general government final, educational expenditure, expenditure, military expenditure and research development expenditure while adding other variables (control) in other to check the robustness of our results. The results also demonstrate other important factors that female preference. Our result is consistent with results of the baseline model.

Table 3. Female representation in parliament and general government final expenditure

VARIABLES	Government Consumption expenditures	Government Consumption expenditures	Government Consumption expenditures	Government Consumption expenditures	Government Consumption expenditures	Government Consumption expenditures	Government Consumption expenditures
L.Government	0.837***	0.866***	0.882***	0.865***	0.865***	0.866***	0.873***
Consumption expenditures	(0.000536)	(0.000462)	(0.000573)	(0.000345)	(0.000339)	(0.000473)	(0.000475)
Proportion of seats held by	0.0139***	0.0151***	0.0110***	0.00970***	0.00801***	0.00637***	0.0168***
Women in the Parliament	(0.00102)	(0.00110)	(0.000686)	(0.000590)	(0.000747)	(0.000676)	(0.000813)
Remittance	0.0953***	0.0318***	0.0175***	0.0462***	0.0297***	0.0358***	0.0359***
	(0.00378)	(0.00372)	(0.00427)	(0.00341)	(0.00227)	(0.00336)	(0.00340)
Inflation	-0.120***	-0.0980***	-0.101***	-0.130***	-0.128***	-0.0945***	-0.0992***
	(0.000602)	(0.000336)	(0.000652)	(0.000304)	(0.000308)	(0.000470)	(0.000387)
Foreign direct investment	-0.0304***	-0.00961***	-0.00838***	-0.0214***	-0.0223***	-0.0174***	-0.0113***
	(0.000485)	(0.000769)	(0.000710)	(0.000576)	(0.000675)	(0.000782)	(0.000865)
Control of Corruption		-0.145***					
		(0.0243)					
Regulatory Quality			-0.182***				
			(0.0238)				
Role of Law				-0.117***			
				(0.0188)			
Political Stability					-0.0749***		
					(0.0186)		
Government Effectiveness						0.118***	
						(0.0184)	
Voice of Accountability							-0.247***
							(0.0142)
Constant	3.026***	2.512***	2.386***	2.866***	2.920***	2.679***	2.386***
	(0.0164)	(0.0215)	(0.0246)	(0.0220)	(0.0130)	(0.0218)	(0.0233)
Observations	1,694	1,694	1,694	1,694	1,694	1,694	1,694

Number of Countrycode	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
F_p	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
F	2.402e+06	2.170e+06	1.261e+06	8.397e+06	3.333e+06	3.071e+06	4.473e+06
hansenp	0.997	1	1	0.997	0.997	1	1
hansen	118.4	118.0	118.1	118.5	118.0	118.2	118.1
sarganp	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
sargan	1578	1682	1655	1539	1546	1684	1663
ar2p	0.269	0.594	0.608	0.342	0.345	0.521	0.567
ar2	-1.105	-0.533	-0.513	-0.950	-0.944	-0.642	-0.572
ar1p	0.128	0.138	0.138	0.127	0.128	0.138	0.138
ar1	-1.523	-1.483	-1.484	-1.525	-1.523	-1.483	-1.483

Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Source: computed by the author.

This paper presents evidence of a positive, significant and robust relationship between female representation in parliament and government expenditure on health, which is a reason for concern, since previous literature has shown that health is an important determinant of economic growth (Mayer, 2001; Bloom et al., 2004; Eggoh et al., 2015). In the same light, we also found female representation in parliament to have a positive, significant, and robust effect on general government final consumption expenditures. This point is also supported by the literature in corruption since military expenditures promote corruption and hinder development (Gupta et al., 2001; Akçay, 2006; Aizenman & Glick, 2006). Female representation in parliament has also been demonstrated to have a negative, significant, and robust effect. This seems to be detrimental to economic development since it has been proven to be the motor of economic development.

A potential policy implication might be that it would be desirable to encourage female representation in parliament to improve the composition of their expenditure by increasing the share of those spending categories that are less susceptible to corruption more productive. It should be recommended that the women parliamentarians should take into consideration not only their preferences but they should they should reduce their attitude toward general government final consumption expenditures since it is not productive. They should also increase research and development expenditure since it is the motor of an economy. It guarantees economic growth through technical progress.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper investigates if the proportion of female representation in parliament affects the composition of government expenditure. Theoretically, the individual preferences of elected representatives may impact public expenditure since full policy commitment is not feasible. To empirically address this issue, I analyze the effect of female representation in parliament on preferences expressed by the proportion of each and every component of government expenditure using a system GMM estimation technique with data from to across 126 countries of the world. Our results revile that, women representation in parliament increases expenditure on education, health and general government final consumption expenditures and on the other hand, female representation in parliament decreases military as well as research and development expenditures. This paper encourages increase female representation in parliament but recommended to reduce expenditures on general government final consumption since it is not productive and increase research and development expenditures which generate and guarantee long run growth through technical progress.

Table 4. Female representation in parliament and educational expenditure

VARIABLES	Educational expenditures	Educational expenditures	Educational expenditures	Educational expenditures	Educational expenditures	Educational expenditures	Educational expenditures
Educational expenditures	0.618*** (0.0577)	0.526*** (0.00228)	0.696*** (0.00752)	0.553*** (0.00560)	0.543*** (0.00453)	0.721*** (0.00456)	0.570*** (0.00479)
Proportion of	0.0213***	0.0144***	0.0116***	0.0198***	0.0158***	0.0109***	0.0180***



seats held by							
Women in the Parliament	(0.00503)	(0.000231)	(0.000411)	(0.000521)	(0.000521)	(0.000160)	(0.000482)
Remittance	0.0253	0.0547***	0.0279***	0.0412***	0.0533***	0.0155***	0.0356***
	(0.0190)	(0.00182)	(0.00249)	(0.00224)	(0.00295)	(0.00108)	(0.00304)
Inflation	-0.0330***	-0.0278***	-0.0221***	-0.0268***	-0.0282***	-0.0260***	-0.0293***
	(0.00900)	(0.000406)	(0.000473)	(0.000524)	(0.000579)	(0.000321)	(0.000667)
Foreign direct investment	0.00345	0.000378*	-0.000747***	0.00114***	0.00179***	0.00239***	0.00164***
	(0.00401)	(0.000201)	(0.000253)	(0.000170)	(0.000132)	(0.000225)	(0.000153)
Control of Corruption		0.301***					
		(0.00490)					
Regulatory Quality			0.144***				
			(0.00508)				
Role of Law				0.193***			
				(0.00834)			
Political Stability					0.281***		
					(0.00286)		
Government Effectiveness						0.157***	
						(0.00291)	
Voice of Accountability							0.185***
							(0.00553)
Constant	1.468***	1.856***	1.192***	1.654***	1.726***	1.176***	1.650***
	(0.270)	(0.0148)	(0.0398)	(0.0274)	(0.0267)	(0.0248)	(0.0305)
Observations	1,073	1,073	1,073	1,073	1,073	1,073	1,073
Number of Countrycode	111	111	111	111	111	111	111
F_p	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
F	62.39	440877	37308	31867	1.113e+06	424072	229257
hansenp	1.000	1.000	1	1.000	1.000	1	1.000
hansen	105.5	104.7	99.91	106.5	107.2	105.9	101.4
sarganp	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
sargan	975.1	1036	1077	1040	1042	1029	1024
ar2p	0.266	0.226	0.506	0.256	0.216	0.433	0.236
ar2	-1.112	-1.212	-0.666	-1.136	-1.237	-0.784	-1.185
ar1p	9.88e-05	5.10e-05	1.20e-05	3.16e-05	4.51e-05	2.50e-05	3.34e-05
ar1	-3.894	-4.051	-4.377	-4.162	-4.080	-4.214	-4.149

Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Table 5. Female representation in parliament and military expenditure

VARIABLES	Military expenditures	Military expenditures	Military expenditures	Military expenditures	Military expenditures	Military expenditures	Military expenditures
-----------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

L.Military expenditures	0.913*** (0.000677)	0.869*** (0.00104)	0.869*** (0.00158)	0.868*** (0.00118)	0.913*** (0.00172)	0.904*** (0.00152)	0.869*** (0.000400)
Proportion of seats held by Women in the Parliament	-0.00747*** (7.60e-05)	-0.0201*** (0.000347)	-0.0197*** (0.000308)	-0.0185*** (0.000282)	-0.00700*** (0.000328)	-0.00906*** (0.000199)	-0.00407*** (0.000160)
Remittance	0.00930*** (0.000554)	-0.00844*** (0.00101)	-0.00778*** (0.00143)	-0.00288*** (0.000996)	-0.0114*** (0.00131)	0.00109 (0.000931)	-0.00871*** (0.000417)
Inflation	-0.0409*** (9.36e-05)	-0.0433*** (0.000188)	-0.0434*** (0.000248)	-0.0433*** (0.000125)	-0.0269*** (0.000184)	-0.0253*** (0.000218)	-0.0450*** (0.000220)
Foreign direct investment	-0.00537*** (0.000164)	-0.00206*** (0.000229)	-0.00254*** (0.000195)	-0.00356*** (0.000218)	-0.000732*** (0.000197)	-0.000405** (0.000166)	-0.00169*** (0.000108)
Control of Corruption		-0.408*** (0.0113)					
Regulatory Quality			-0.368*** (0.00469)				
Role of Law				-0.329*** (0.00678)			
Political Stability					-0.128*** (0.00944)		
Government Effectiveness						-0.113*** (0.00568)	
Voice of Accountability							-0.185*** (0.00137)
Constant	0.542*** (0.00162)	0.946*** (0.00834)	0.957*** (0.00850)	0.957*** (0.00782)	0.508*** (0.0133)	0.483*** (0.00735)	0.651*** (0.00507)
Observations	1,691	1,733	1,733	1,733	1,733	1,733	1,691
Number of Countries	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
F_p	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
F	738762	181129	219456	307607	212353	335923	1.812e+06
hansenp	0.998	0.998	0.998	0.998	1	1	0.998
hansen	116.3	113.7	113.9	113.2	115.2	112.7	116.7
sarganp	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
sargan	1083	1023	1009	1027	1522	1566	979.6
ar2p	0.739	0.923	0.926	0.939	0.539	0.486	0.546
ar2	-0.333	0.0969	0.0933	0.0766	0.614	0.697	-0.604
ar1p	0.000427	0.000496	0.000554	0.000484	0.00239	0.00251	0.000348
ar1	-3.523	-3.483	-3.453	-3.490	-3.037	-3.022	-3.577

Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Source: computed by author.

Table 6. Female representation in parliament and research and development expenditure

VARIABLES	Research and development expenditures	Research and development expenditures	Research and development expenditures	Research and development expenditures	Research and development expenditures	Research and development expenditures	Research and development expenditures
L.Research and development expenditures	0.947*** (0.000958)	0.924*** (0.0341)	0.892*** (0.00169)	0.962*** (0.00236)	0.905*** (0.000583)	0.980*** (0.00104)	0.979*** (0.00128)
Proportion of seats held by Women in the Parliament	-0.000237*** (6.02e-05)	-0.000967 (0.00109)	-0.00101*** (6.81e-05)	-0.000245* (0.000145)	-0.00131*** (2.01e-05)	-0.000343*** (8.01e-05)	-0.000138 (8.47e-05)
Remittance	-0.0254*** (0.000519)	-0.0223* (0.0119)	-0.0200*** (0.000473)	-0.00770*** (0.00100)	-0.0194*** (0.000437)	-0.00397*** (0.000376)	-0.00431*** (0.000400)
Inflation	-0.00627*** (8.66e-05)	-0.00579** (0.00253)	-0.00433*** (7.60e-05)	-0.00151*** (0.000124)	-0.00498*** (1.83e-05)	-0.00212*** (0.000116)	-0.00209*** (7.41e-05)
Foreign direct investment	-0.000473*** (9.59e-06)	-0.000716 (0.000610)	-0.00118*** (9.39e-06)	-0.000323*** (2.37e-05)	-0.000993*** (6.99e-06)	-0.000542*** (4.29e-05)	-0.000233*** (1.79e-05)
Control of Corruption		0.0418 (0.0281)					
Regulatory Quality			0.0906*** (0.00153)				
Role of Law				0.0362*** (0.00268)			
Political Stability					0.0822*** (0.000665)		
Government Effectiveness						0.0208*** (0.00163)	
Voice of Accountability							0.0107*** (0.00118)
Constant	0.172*** (0.00221)	0.185*** (0.0532)	0.187*** (0.00238)	0.0662*** (0.00316)	0.176*** (0.00164)	0.0614*** (0.00101)	0.0542*** (0.00141)
Observations	985	985	985	985	985	985	985
Number of Countrycode	88	88	88	88	88	88	88
F_p	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
F	1.340e+07	1312	884855	947561	1.040e+07	2.045e+06	8.424e+06
sig2	0.00784	0.00755	0.00713	0.00682	0.00733	0.00699	0.00698
hansenp	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
hansen	80.20	80.60	78.94	84.69	82.31	80.52	80.22
sarganp	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

sargan	930.3	960.4	996.2	1143	979.9	1130	1145
ar2p	0.305	0.233	0.215	0.229	0.201	0.247	0.292
ar2	-1.025	-1.192	-1.239	-1.204	-1.278	-1.159	-1.054
ar1p	5.62e-05	9.35e-05	4.82e-05	3.23e-05	3.81e-05	3.17e-05	3.37e-05
ar1	-4.028	-3.907	-4.064	-4.156	-4.119	-4.161	-4.147

Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Source: computed by author.

## References

- Abu-Bader, S. and Abu-Qarn, A. S., (2003). Government expenditures, military spending and economic growth: causality evidence from Egypt, Israel, and Syria. *Journal of Policy Modeling*, 25(67), 567–583.
- Aizenman, J. and Glick, R., (2006). Military expenditure, threats, and growth. *Journal of International Trade & Economic Development*, 15(2), 129–155.
- Akçay, S., (2006). Corruption and human development. *Cato J.*, 26, 29.
- Alptekin, A. and Levine, P., (2012). Military expenditure and economic growth: A meta-analysis. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 28(4), 636–650.
- Bello Hutt, D., (2022). Rule of law and political representation. *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 14(1), 1-25.
- Benos, N. and Zotou, S., (2014). Education and economic growth: A meta-regression analysis. *World Development*, 64, 669–689.
- Besley, T. and Case, A., (2003). Political institutions and policy choices: evidence from the united states. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 41(1), 7–73.
- Bloom, D. E., Canning, D., and Sevilla, J., (2004). The effect of health on economic growth: a production function approach. *World development*, 32(1), 1–13.
- Cappelen, °A., Gleditsch, N. P., and Bjerkholt, O., (1984). Military spending and economic growth in the OECD countries. *Journal of peace Research*, 21(4), 361–373.
- Debski, J. and Jetter, M., (2015). Gender and corruption: a reassessment.
- Denison, E. F., (1966). Measuring the contribution of education to economic growth. *The Economics of Education*, 202–260. Springer.
- Devlin, C. and Elgie, R., (2008). The effect of increased women’s representation in parliament: The case of Rwanda. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61(2), 237–254.
- Dezsö, C. L. and Ross, D. G., (2012). Does female representation in top management improve firm performance? A panel data investigation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 33(9), 1072–1089.
- Dollar, D., Fisman, R., and Gatti, R., (2001). Are women really the “fairer” sex? Corruption and women in government. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 46(4), 423–429.
- Dunne, J. P. and Tian, N., (2015). Military expenditure, economic growth and heterogeneity. *Defence and Peace Economics*, 26(1), 15–31.
- Eggoh, J., Houeninvo, H., and Sossou, G.-A., (2015). Education, health and economic growth in African countries. *Journal of Economic Development*, 40(1), 93.
- Ellerby, K., (2011). Quotas for women in politics: Gender and candidate selection reform worldwide by mona Lena Krook. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 32(2), 164–166.
- Ferejohn, J., (1986). Incumbent performance and electoral control. *Public choice*, pp. 5–25.
- Giorgio d’Agostino, J. Paul Dunne, Luca Pieroni, (2016). Government spending, corruption and economic growth. *World Development*, 84, 190–205.
- Goetz, A. M., (2007). Political cleaners: Women as the new anti-corruption force? *Development and Change*, 38(1), 87–105.
- Gupta, S., De Mello, L., and Sharan, R., (2001). Corruption and military spending. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 17(4), 749–777.
- Halder, N., (2004). Female representation in parliament: A case study from Bangladesh. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 6, 27–63.

- Hanushek, E. A. and Woessmann, L., (2010). Education and economic growth. *Economics of education*, 60–67.
- Hazarika, D., (2011). Women empowerment in India: A brief discussion. *International Journal of Educational Planning & Administration*, 1(3), 199–202.
- Itzkovitch-Malka, R., & Oshri, O., (2024). The Weight on Her Shoulders: Marginalization of Women Legislators in Parliaments and Substantive Representation of Women. *British Journal of Political Science*, 54(4), 1340-1361.
- Kaufmann, D., Kraay, A., and Mastruzzi, M., (2009). *Governance matters VIII: Aggregate and individual governance indicators 1996-2008*. The World Bank.
- Lau, L. J., Jamison, D. T., Liu, S.-C., and Rivkin, S., (1993). Education and economic growth some cross-sectional evidence from Brazil. *Journal of development economics*, 41(1), 45–70.
- Levitt, S. D., (1996). How do senators vote? Disentangling the role of voter preferences, party affiliation, and senator ideology. *The American Economic Review*, 425–441.
- Mauro, P., (1998). Corruption and the composition of government expenditure. *Journal of Public Economics*, 69(2), 263–279.
- Mayer, D., (2001). The long-term impact of health on economic growth in Latin America. *World development*, 29(6), 1025–1033.
- Mocan, N., (2008). What determines corruption? International evidence from microdata. *Economic Inquiry*, 46(4), 493–510.
- Nginyu, G. G., Fonchamnyo, D. C., Epo, B. N., & Asongu, S. A., (2025). The effects of institutional quality and biocapacity on inclusive human development in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Applied Social Science*, 19367244251327997.
- Paxton, P. and Kunovich, S., (2003). Women's political representation: The importance of ideology. *Social Forces*, 82(1), 87–113.
- Persson, T., Roland, G., and Tabellini, G., (2000). Comparative politics and public finance. *Journal of Political Economy*, 108(6), 1121–1161.
- Pironi, L., (2009). Military expenditure and economic growth. *Defence and Peace Economics*, 20(4), 327–339.
- Rivas, M. F., (2013). An experiment on corruption and gender. *Bulletin of Economic Research*, 65(1), 10–42.
- Seltzer, R. A., Newman, J., and Leighton, M. V., (1997). *Sex as a political variable: Women as candidates and voters in US elections*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Sharma, P. and Varma, S. K., (2016). Women empowerment through entrepreneurial activities of self-help groups. *Indian Research Journal of extension education*, 8(1), 46–51.
- Svaleryd, H. et al., (2002). *Female representation: Is it important for policy decisions?* Univ., Department of Economics.
- Swamy, A., Knack, S., Lee, Y., and Azfar, O., (2001). Gender and corruption. *Journal of development economics*, 64(1), 25–55.
- Thomas, S., (1991). The impact of women on state legislative policies. *The Journal of Politics*, 53(4), 958–976.
- Valsangiacomo, C., (2021). Political representation in liquid democracy. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 3, 591853.
- Yildirim, J., Sezgin, S., and Ocal, N., (2005). Military expenditure and economic growth in middle Eastern countries: A dynamic panel data analysis. *Defence and Peace Economics*, 16(4), 283–295.

## Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

# Research on Multi-Dimensional Presentation and In-depth Experience of Cultural Heritage Driven by XR Technology

Zijing Lu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Johns Hopkins University, United States

Correspondence: Zijing Lu, Johns Hopkins University, United States.

doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2025.05.002

## Abstract

This paper takes extended reality (XR) technology as the core to explore its application logic and practical paths in the multi-dimensional presentation and in-depth experience of cultural heritage. Based on the immersive, interactive and multimodal fusion characteristics of XR technology, it is proposed to achieve digital translation of cultural heritage through spatial reconstruction, dynamic narrative and cross-media fusion, and to construct a deep experience paradigm through emotional resonance, educational dissemination and social collaboration. Based on the above theoretical analysis, combined with actual cases, an analysis of the reality of multi-dimensional presentation of cultural heritage is conducted. The case study shows that XR technology not only breaks through the temporal and spatial limitations of traditional display, but also activates the contemporary value of cultural heritage through the integration of virtual and real. In response to the shortcomings of existing research, it is pointed out that technology empowerment needs to balance the expression of cultural connotations and the boundaries of technological innovation. In the future, it is necessary to explore the collaborative application of artificial intelligence and the metaverse to promote the paradigm shift of cultural heritage from “preservation” to “activation”.

**Keywords:** XR technology, culture-driven, cultural heritage, multi-dimensional presentation, deep experience

## 1. Introduction

At present, many cultural heritage institutions around the world are attempting to integrate XR technology into their conservation and dissemination practices. For instance, the Palace Museum uses VR technology to recreate scenes of court life, and the Dunhuang Academy uses AR technology to analyze the details of mural art. These explorations have initially verified the feasibility of technology empowerment. However, most of the existing research focuses on the path of technology implementation, but lacks theoretical integration on how it can systematically serve the multi-dimensional presentation and in-depth experience of cultural heritage. In addition, issues such as the risk of cultural distortion in the application of technology, ethical boundaries of user experience, and sustainable operation models still need to be further explored.

## 2. The Importance of Applying XR Technology to the Protection and Inheritance of Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage, as the core carrier of the collective memory and identity of human civilization, is facing unprecedented challenges in its protection and inheritance. Under the double impact of globalization and rapid urbanization, material cultural heritage is vanishing at an accelerated pace due to natural erosion, man-made destruction or developmental damage; Intangible cultural heritage is gradually losing its vitality due to intergenerational transmission breaks and changes in cultural ecology. According to a UNESCO report, about one-third of the world's cultural heritage is in an endangered state, and traditional conservation methods, mainly physical restoration and static display, are limited by physical space, financial costs and technical bottlenecks, making it difficult to systematically address the fragmentation, isolation and vitality of cultural heritage. Under

this traditional approach to protection and inheritance, the public's perception of cultural heritage is generally at the level of "passive viewing", lacking deep participation and emotional resonance, resulting in a gap in the intergenerational transmission of cultural identity. Against this backdrop, exploring the digital protection and living inheritance paths of cultural heritage has become a major issue that needs to be addressed urgently in the global cultural field.

The rapid development of extended reality (XR) technologies — including virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR) — provides revolutionary tools for the creative transformation of cultural heritage. By constructing interactive Spaces that blend the virtual and the real, XR technology breaks through the temporal and spatial limitations of the physical world, allowing cultural heritage to be presented in multi-dimensional, dynamic and immersive forms. The potential of XR is reflected in three aspects: First, high-precision restoration and scene reconstruction, with 3D modeling, laser scanning and real-time rendering, can create millimeter-level digital twins of cultural heritage, restoring its historical appearance and details; Second, Multi-sensory interaction and narrative innovation, through haptic feedback, spatial audio and gesture recognition technologies, users can "touch" the texture of cultural relics, "listen" to the echoes of history and actively participate in the narrative. In recent years, the application of XR technology in the cultural field has shifted from experimental exploration to large-scale implementation. According to a survey by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), more than 60 percent of cultural institutions worldwide have incorporated XR technology into their digital transformation strategies, indicating that it will become a core driver for the protection and dissemination of cultural heritage.

### **3. Multi-Dimensional Presentation Strategies for Cultural Heritage Driven by XR Technology**

The multi-dimensional presentation of cultural heritage is the core path for XR technology to empower cultural protection and dissemination, with the core goal of reconstructing the temporal and spatial attributes and narrative logic of cultural symbols through technology. This process needs to be carried out around three dimensions: spatial reconstruction and scene restoration, dynamic narrative and interaction design, cross-media content integration, to form an organic unity of technology, content and experience.

#### *3.1 Spatial Reconstruction and Scene Restoration*

3D modeling and digital twin technology is based on laser scanning, photogrammetry and algorithmic generation technology, through which cultural heritage can be transformed into digital models with centimeter-level precision, using real-time rendering engines to simulate dynamic light and shadow and physical properties. Cultural heritage elements such as the dougong structure of ancient buildings, the brushstrokes and textures of murals, and the material textures of cultural relics can all be restored through polygonal meshes and material mapping techniques to form interactive "digital twins". This process not only breaks the physical limitations of users' access to cultural heritage, but also gives life to historical scenes through parametric adjustment of seasonal changes and the alternation of day and night, allowing users to observe the morphological evolution of cultural heritage in different temporal and spatial dimensions.

XR technology embeds users in virtual scenes through spatial positioning and motion tracking technology to help users achieve a "body presence" roaming experience. In terms of narrative design, XR technology can use spatio-temporal anchors to associate historical events, character stories with spatial nodes, forming a narrative chain of "scene triggering - information unlocking". For instance, when a user walks through a digitally restored Song Dynasty market, they can trigger conversations with vendors, watch folk performances, or even participate in virtual festivals by touching virtual stalls. This gamified experience reduces the heaviness of cultural heritage presentation and instead allows the user to view it with a relaxed and pleasant mindset. It enables users to build a three-dimensional understanding of history and culture through time travel.

#### *3.2 Dynamic Narrative and Interaction Design*

The presentation of cultural heritage driven by XR technology should not be limited to linear statements, but should stimulate active participation and meaning construction through dynamic narrative and interaction design. XR can capture users' actions, language and decision-making behaviors and adjust the narrative path accordingly. For example, in a virtual archaeological scene, XR technology allows users to choose different excavation tools or exploration directions, which will trigger differentiated artifact discoveries and plot developments; In the experience of intangible cultural heritage skills, XR technology helps users improve the precision of operations, adjust the sequence of operations, and design the form of the finished product and the ending of the story based on their own choices. This branching narrative design breaks the passivity of traditional displays, making users co-creators of the meaning of cultural heritage. The presentation of cultural heritage by XR technology relies on the synergistic stimulation of multiple sensory channels. On the visual level, it restores the details of cultural scenes through high-resolution rendering and dynamic light and shadow technology; On the auditory level, spatial audio technology is used to locate sound sources and simulate

environmental sound effects, presenting sounds that touch the heart, such as the bells of ancient temples and the hustle and bustle of the city. At the tactile level, devices such as force feedback gloves and vibrating vests are used to simulate the tactile and physical interaction of materials, and to simulate more concrete elements such as the resistance of carved stone and the softness of textiles. This multi-sensory interactive presentation method not only enhances the user's sense of reality in the experience of cultural heritage, but also helps users to immerse themselves in the scene through the user's sensory compensation mechanism, which helps to attract new users, achieve the wide dissemination of cultural heritage, create explosive dissemination effects, and expand the audience boundaries of cultural heritage.

### *3.3 Cross-Media Convergence of Content*

The application of XR technology helps the presentation of cultural heritage to break through the limitations of a single medium and achieve the expansion of information dimensions and the enhancement of narrative depth through cross-media content integration. XR scenes can serve as an integrated platform for multi-media content, transforming documents such as ancient texts and oral history records into interactive 3D annotation layers, embedding video materials such as documentaries and animations into specific perspectives of virtual scenes, and binding audio guides with spatial nodes to form an "what you see is what you hear" interpretation system. For example, in a digital museum, when a user clicks on a pattern on the surface of a bronze ware, it can simultaneously trigger expert explanations, casting process animations, and textual interpretations of inscriptions, enabling the immediate association of multi-dimensional knowledge and reorganizing it into an organic whole through a non-linear narrative structure. For example, using graph database technology to build a semantic network of cultural symbols, starting from an artifact or a legend, to help users associate and jump, and explore the knowledge graph; Or use gamification mechanisms such as puzzle tasks, achievement systems, etc., to guide users to independently piece together information fragments and form an overall understanding of cultural heritage in the process of exploration. This design respects the complexity of cultural knowledge while lowering the cognitive threshold through technical logic.

## **4. The Realization Path of the Deep Experience of Cultural Heritage**

The deep experience of cultural heritage is the core goal of XR technology in empowering cultural dissemination. The core lies in the construction of immersive, interactive and social cultural fields through technology, enabling users to internalize and pass on cultural values through emotional resonance, knowledge construction and group participation. This process needs to be carried out around three paths: emotional resonance and cultural identity, educational function and knowledge dissemination, social attribute and group participation, forming an organic unity of technology empowerment, content innovation and group interaction.

### *4.1 Emotional Resonance and Cultural Identity*

Emotional resonance is the foundation of cultural identity, and XR technology transforms abstract cultural values into perceptible emotional experiences through role-playing and situational simulation and symbolic meaning enhancement of cultural symbols. Through avatars and scene immersion technology, users engage in cultural narratives from a "first-person perspective". For example, in a virtual historical setting, users can play the roles of ancient artisans and literati, participate in the creation of cultural heritage by simulating the making of pottery, writing poetry, etc., and understand the emotional value embodied behind the work. Users can also participate in the decision-making process with the support formed by technology to understand the context of ancient productive forces and production relations. How individuals respond to natural disasters, handle social relations, and experience the survival wisdom and emotional world of cultural groups. The scenario simulations created by XR technology can also be combined with the impact of seasonal changes on farming, the competition for resources in war scenarios, etc., enabling users to understand the survival logic and collective memory behind cultural symbols in the process of solving virtual problems, thereby stimulating deep emotional resonance.

### *4.2 Enhancement of the Symbolic Meaning of Cultural Symbols in XR*

XR technology can highlight the metaphorical and spiritual core of cultural symbols through deconstruction and recombination of symbols. For example, XR technology transforms traditional patterns into interactive 3D models, allowing users to observe the abstraction process from original totems to auspicious patterns through gesture manipulation and trigger associated mythological stories and philosophical ideas. Using spatial audio technology to recreate sound symbols such as chime bells and hymns in a virtual sacrificial scene, simulating the ritual of the sacred space through sound field positioning and frequency changes, and enhancing the awe and identification with cultural symbols. In addition, the XR can guide users to understand the social function and symbolic system of the symbols through the wearing rules of specific costumes in the ritual scene. Under this interactive experience, the user's understanding of cultural heritage goes beyond the physical level and becomes a profound emotional experience. The user is no longer a spectator or appreciator of cultural heritage, but has the opportunity to become a creator or witness of cultural heritage. This experience can bring a profound soul impact



to the user. It enables users to deeply understand the value of cultural heritage for the inheritance of human civilization and its reference significance for the current conflicts and contradictions in life, thereby integrating the thoughts and inspirations brought by cultural heritage into their own production and life, forming the recreation of cultural heritage and truly realizing the dissemination value of cultural heritage.

#### *4.3 The Application of XR Technology in the Field of Educational Communication*

Deep experiences need to balance the accuracy and fun of knowledge transmission. XR technology achieves innovative upgrades in educational functions through interactive learning modules and gamified design, explanations of historical context and scientific value. XR technology can break down cultural heritage knowledge into interactive “knowledge units” and promote active learning through gamification mechanisms. For example, in a virtual archaeological scenario, users need to operate virtual tools such as brushes, Luoyang shovels, etc. to complete the task of cleaning and classifying artifacts, and the system gives real-time feedback based on the user’s operation accuracy and logical sequence; In the experience of intangible cultural heritage skills, the system designs a “challenge mode”, such as completing the drawing of a specified pattern and meeting the craftsmanship standards, to unlock achievements and receive cultural MEDALS and background stories. In addition, the system can introduce an AI dialogue system that simulates historical figures or expert roles, allowing users to debate cultural issues and deepen their understanding through dynamic dialogue. XR technology can place cultural heritage in a macroscopic historical coordinate system through spatio-temporal visualization technology. For example, adding a timeline interface allows users to drag sliders to observe the entire process from the origin to the evolution of a certain cultural phenomenon, better understand the operation of cultural heritages with obvious temporal attributes such as the evolution of bronze vessel patterns and the inheritance of architectural styles, and simultaneously trigger explanations of related historical events; By using 3D anatomical models and data visualization technology, reveal the scientific value of cultural relics, and transform abstract scientific principles into intuitive visual demonstrations. This “macro narrative + micro analysis” design helps users build a systematic understanding of cultural heritage.

#### *4.4 Social Attributes and Group Engagement*

The in-depth experience of cultural heritage needs to rely on group interaction to achieve meaning sharing. XR technology builds a social network for cultural participation through the collaborative mechanism of multi-user collaborative experience and cultural discussions and secondary creation in virtual communities. Cultural presentation venues such as museums should leverage XR technology to enable multiple users to collaborate in real time in the same virtual space to jointly complete cultural tasks. For example, in virtual reconstruction projects, users can divide tasks such as measurement, transportation, and design, and work collaboratively through gesture recognition and voice communication to restore historical buildings or artifacts; In virtual festival events, users can form teams to participate in folk activities such as dragon dance and opera, and use motion capture technology to synchronize and coordinate group movements. The collaboration mechanism can also introduce team points, time-limited challenges, etc., to stimulate users’ enthusiasm for participation and sense of collective honor. The XR platform can serve as a social venue for cultural discussions, allowing users to gather in digital museum halls, historical scene restoration areas, etc. through avatars to engage in real-time discussions about cultural heritage or hold online lectures; The platform also provides secondary creation tools such as 3D modeling software and animation production interfaces, encourages users to create virtual clothing and digital artworks based on cultural materials, and uses NFT technology for rights confirmation and trading. For example, users can apply their own designed traditional patterns to virtual clothing or shoot creative short films in historical scenes, forming a closed-loop ecosystem of “experience – creation – share”. In addition, communities can establish user-generated content (UGC) incentive mechanisms, select quality works through expert reviews and public voting, and promote the continuous output of cultural innovation.

### **5. Conclusions**

The dissemination of cultural heritage based on XR technology presents new challenges and opportunities. Driven by technology dissemination and innovation, XR technology has facilitated a transformation in the way culture is disseminated by creating interactive scenarios, reinforcing cultural symbols, and enhancing spatio-temporal visualization. With the support of technology, the linear narrative of cultural dissemination breaks through static limitations and enhances interactivity, allowing users to gain a deeper understanding of the logic of cultural symbols, deepen their understanding of cultural heritage, and internalize cultural heritage as their own emotional cognition. This way of communication can further inspire users’ empathy for cultural groups, facilitate the formation of emotional connections among users, help users explore more diverse cultural heritage content in the cognitive and social dimensions, and form more effective cultural heritage communication strategies.

### **References**

- Jiao Chaoyue, (2024). Exploring the innovative practice of XR immersive Fusion News short drama: A Case Study of “Shu Dao Cui Yun: Two Thousand Years of Seeing a Tree as a Face”. *Home Theater Technology*, (20), 80-82.
- Li Yunlong & Liu Yuancheng, (2025). Application of XR virtual-reality fusion technology in ultra-high-definition evening party production. *Broadcasting and Television Technology*, 52(01), 29-33.
- Lin Zhiyu, (2025). Design of Smart Exhibition Hall System Based on 5G Cloud XR technology. *Electronic Products World*, 32(03), 49-52.
- Liu Xiulan, (2024). Innovation and Practice of XR Scene Generation based on AI technology. *Radio and Television Networks*, 31(07), 38-40.
- Liu Zheng, Zhang Jiesen, (2024). Immersive Communication and poetic Narrative: Digital Performance empowered by XR technology. *Science Communication*, 16(20), 11-15.
- Peng Yuyuan, Wang Xinyu, Xu Lin, (2025). Research on Festival Experience Design Strategies under Metaverse Technology: A Case Study of the Ziyuan River Lantern Festival. *Science and Technology & Innovation*, (06), 172-175.
- Qiao Zhengxin, Si Xiaoxia, (2024). Virtual City imagery construction: Embodied Cognition and Aesthetic consciousness of New Quality Productivity XR Technology. *New Media Research*, 10(17), 23-27+36.
- Wang Songheng, (2025). From the Aesthetic Interpretation of the Chinese Nation to the Narrative of Film and Television - Technical Application and Narrative Design of XR Virtual Production. *Da Guan (Forum)*, (03), 63-65.
- Wu Jiangbo, (2024). Research on the Design of media installations in Nixing Pottery Museum Based on XR technology. *Ceramic Science and Art*, 58(06), 92-94.
- Ye Xiaxian, (2024). Technology, Embodiment and Fusion: On China’s First XR Digital Drama Macbeth. *Journal of Xinjiang Arts Institute*, 22(04), 47-53.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

# Corset Revival and the Feminist Reframing of Restrictive Dress in Vintage Fashion Communities

Amelia Fairchild<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom

Correspondence: Amelia Fairchild, University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom.

doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2025.05.003

## Abstract

This paper explores the contemporary revival of the corset within vintage fashion communities and its complex relationship with feminist thought. Once condemned as a symbol of patriarchal oppression and bodily restriction, the corset has been reinterpreted by modern wearers as a tool of aesthetic agency, self-expression, and identity formation. Through a critical examination of historical narratives, digital fashion subcultures, and intersectional feminist discourse, the study analyzes how the corset functions simultaneously as a site of historical memory and contemporary resistance. Drawing on theories of body politics, feminist historiography, and subcultural style, the paper demonstrates that corset-wearing today is deeply contextual and politically plural—shaped by the overlapping forces of gender, race, class, disability, and queerness. It concludes that vintage fashion communities serve as key catalysts for this reclamation, transforming restrictive dress from a symbol of conformity into one of empowerment and feminist reimagination.

**Keywords:** corset revival, vintage fashion communities, body politics, intersectionality

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the corset has undergone a remarkable transformation in cultural meaning and social perception. Once vilified by feminist scholars as a symbol of patriarchal domination—used to discipline and contain women’s bodies into narrowly defined ideals of beauty and propriety—the corset is now enjoying a nuanced revival. This resurgence is most visible in vintage fashion communities, where enthusiasts and creators engage in historically informed practices of dress while actively reinterpreting the garment’s legacy. What was once synonymous with female restriction is now celebrated for its craftsmanship, aesthetic appeal, and capacity for empowering bodily self-expression.

This shift reflects broader changes in feminist discourse, particularly in the transition from second-wave to third- and fourth-wave feminism. While second-wave feminists of the 1970s saw the corset as an oppressive tool—a manifestation of Simone de Beauvoir’s “second sex” in physical form—contemporary feminists are increasingly drawn to its subversive potential. Informed by postmodernism and intersectionality, many argue that the corset can be reclaimed as an instrument of agency, one that allows women and gender-diverse individuals to play with historical aesthetics, construct curated identities, and assert control over how their bodies are shaped and perceived.

The corset’s revival also signals a tension between embodiment and representation. Within online vintage communities, corset wearers document their practices in visual formats that blend historical fidelity with personal creativity. This not only generates visibility for diverse body types and identities often excluded from mainstream fashion but also positions corsetry as a method of engaging with the past in ways that are both affective and political. For many, the act of wearing a corset is not about conformity to outdated standards, but about accessing a form of sartorial self-determination—where the very medium of restriction becomes a site of

resistance and reinterpretation.

The resurgence intersects with cultural nostalgia, anti-fast fashion sentiment, and maker culture. DIY corset-making and historical costuming reflect a desire for slower, more intentional relationships with dress, grounded in an ethic of care, sustainability, and community education. The corset thus becomes a material conduit for broader critiques of contemporary capitalism and fashion homogeneity, while simultaneously opening space for embodied feminist storytelling. By reframing the corset within this cultural and political landscape, vintage fashion communities offer a powerful counter-narrative to dominant readings of restrictive dress. Their practices illustrate how garments laden with problematic histories can be recontextualized—not to erase those histories, but to complicate them and assert alternative meanings. In doing so, the corset transforms from a symbol of constraint into one of crafted identity, aesthetic agency, and embodied feminist politics.

## 2. The Corset's Historical Burden

The corset's history is a tapestry of cultural symbolism, bodily regulation, and contested meanings that reflect changing ideas about femininity, discipline, and social order. While precursors to the corset can be traced as far back as Minoan Crete, the garment emerged in its more recognizable form in 16th-century Western Europe, initially as a stiffened bodice known as the "stay." Designed to flatten the bust and emphasize a conical torso, early corsets were associated with aristocratic status and moral decorum. Over time, they evolved into more rigid and highly structured undergarments that molded the torso to increasingly exaggerated silhouettes, reflecting aesthetic ideals that varied by era—be it the Elizabethan columnar body or the Victorian hourglass.



Figure 1. Worchester Corset Co. 1893

<https://clickamericana.com/topics/beauty-fashion/vintage-clothing/victorian-corsets>



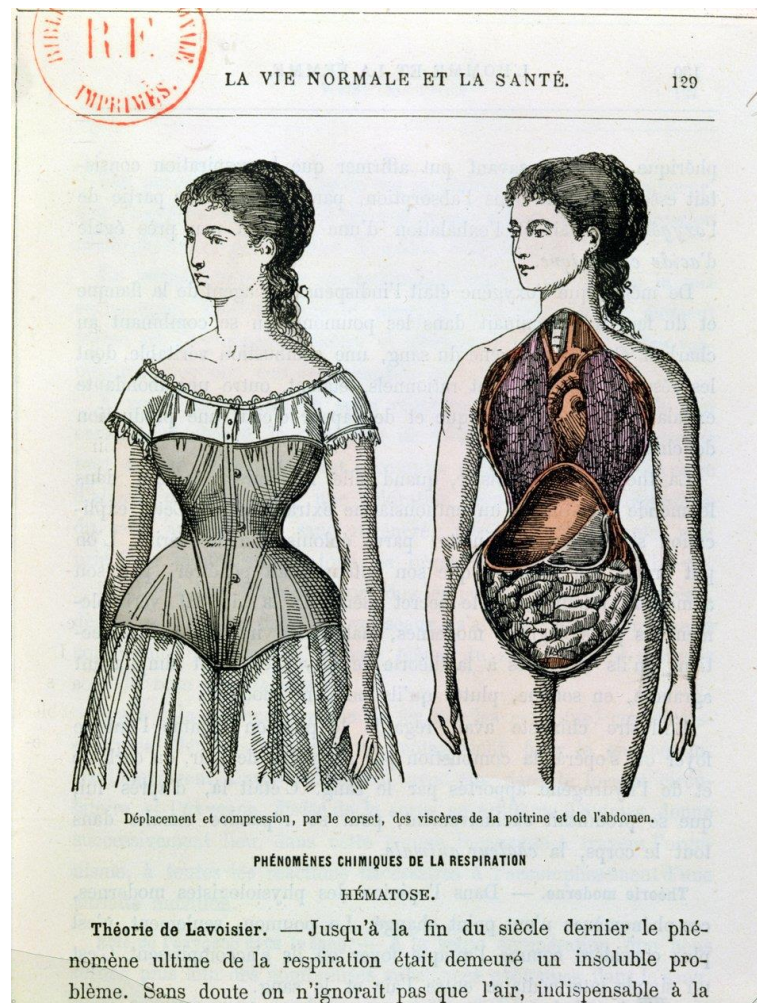


Figure 2. The Harmful Effects of the Corset, illustration from *La Vie Normale et la Santé* by Dr. Jules Rengade (b. 1841), c. 1880. French School. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France. Distributed by Bridgeman Images.

By the 19th century, corsetry reached its most constrictive form during the Victorian and Edwardian periods, when tightlacing became a widespread practice among women, particularly in upper-class and bourgeois contexts. The “wasp waist” silhouette—achieved through the reduction of the natural waist to as little as 18 inches—was seen as a marker of beauty, virtue, and civility. Yet, this fashionable ideal was not without consequence. Medical professionals of the time began raising alarms about the health impacts of corsetry, linking it to respiratory issues, fainting spells, misaligned organs, and even fertility complications. These warnings fueled both popular and professional debates, making the corset a lightning rod for broader anxieties about the female body and its role in society. Feminist critiques of the corset crystallized during the first wave of feminism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in the writings of activists such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and members of the Rational Dress Society. Phelps famously exhorted women to “burn the corsets!” as a symbolic rejection of male domination and bodily oppression. These reform movements contended that the corset not only harmed women’s health but also functioned as a tool of patriarchy—imposing an idealized femininity that rendered women fragile, decorative, and physically constrained. The Rational Dress Movement advocated for looser, more practical clothing that allowed greater freedom of movement and expression, aiming to liberate the female body from aesthetic coercion.

Second-wave feminists in the 1960s and 70s echoed and expanded upon these earlier condemnations. Within this framework, the corset became emblematic of the male gaze and the disciplining of female desire. Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and Michel Foucault’s theories of biopower, scholars and activists critiqued the corset as part of a broader regime of bodily surveillance—one that internalized societal control through fashion. In this reading, the corset was less a garment than a manifestation of gendered power, regulating not only how women appeared, but how they moved, breathed, and felt.

The corset’s symbolism extended beyond gender into the domains of class and race. In colonial contexts, corsetry was exported as part of “civilizing” missions, with indigenous women often encouraged or forced to

adopt Western dress standards. Meanwhile, working-class women and women of color were typically excluded from or critiqued for corsetry practices, reinforcing notions of racialized and classed respectability. Thus, the corset operated not just as a personal item of dress but as a technology of normativity and exclusion—marking who was deemed respectable, desirable, and properly feminine. Understanding this burden is essential not only for acknowledging the historical realities of the corset but also for making sense of its contemporary revival. The corset's legacy is undeniably complex: it is at once a site of subjugation and beauty, discipline and creativity, conformity and resistance. Any present-day engagement with corsetry—particularly through feminist or vintage lenses—must reckon with this fraught inheritance.

### 3. Reclamation and Resistance

The contemporary revival of corsetry within vintage and retro fashion circles reflects a complex cultural negotiation with the past—one that challenges conventional feminist readings of the corset as inherently oppressive. This revival is not a passive adoption of an antiquated aesthetic but a deliberate, often performative act of reclamation that transforms the corset from an emblem of patriarchal control into a medium of feminist self-expression and political resistance. Unlike their historical counterparts who were often compelled by fashion norms and social obligations, today's corset-wearers are choosing the garment freely, frequently in defiance of mainstream beauty standards. This shift from imposition to intention is foundational to the act of reclamation. It aligns with postfeminist frameworks, which emphasize choice, individuality, and empowerment through self-styling. In this context, the corset is not worn to appease societal ideals but to articulate a specific identity—whether that be nostalgic, defiant, glamorous, queer, or historically literate.



Figure 3. "Tartan corset" by dunikowski is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

In vintage fashion communities, the use of corsets often exemplifies what scholars refer to as "aesthetic agency"—a term that captures the power to construct and perform one's identity through style. Platforms such as

Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube serve as digital stages where wearers perform this agency. Here, corsets are not merely worn; they are styled, narrated, and politicized. Influencers often contextualize their outfits with hashtags like #HistoricalAccuracy, #FeministFashion, or #QueerVintage, signaling that their sartorial choices are also acts of discourse. This aesthetic agency is also embodied. The corset, after all, reshapes the body—visibly and tangibly. For some, this offers gender-affirming value. Nonbinary and trans individuals sometimes use corsets to sculpt silhouettes that align more closely with their gender identity. Others wear them as a reclamation of sensuality, reasserting control over bodies that have been policed or shamed. In each case, the garment becomes a conduit for bodily autonomy—a wearable assertion of the right to choose how one's form appears and feels.

Reclamation is not only about wearing corsets but also making them. The rise of DIY corsetry has reconnected many to the skills and labor historically associated with women's work—sewing, fitting, tailoring. This re-engagement with craft positions the corset not just as a finished product but as the result of a process involving knowledge, time, and embodied expertise. Communities such as Reddit's r/HistoricalCostuming, YouTube creators like Bernadette Banner, and digital pattern collectives facilitate the sharing of techniques and historical research, democratizing access to what was once elite knowledge. This reclamation of sartorial labor parallels feminist calls to value domestic and textile work, which have long been marginalized in both academic and economic discourse. In turning to the corset, vintage fashion practitioners reassert the cultural and intellectual worth of traditionally feminized craft, challenging the binaries between fashion and art, utility and expression.

Nonetheless, this act of reclamation is not universally accessible or unproblematic. The corset's revival is entangled in issues of class, race, and body politics. Corset-wearing, particularly when oriented around Eurocentric historical aesthetics, often privileges certain body types and beauty ideals—slim waists, hourglass silhouettes, and pale skin. As such, BIPOC participants, fat activists, and disabled wearers have voiced critiques about exclusion and fetishization within the vintage community. Some seek to decolonize corsetry by incorporating non-Western textile practices or by deliberately modifying Eurocentric silhouettes to fit diverse bodies and narratives. Resistance, then, is not a singular gesture but a spectrum of practices—from reclaiming sensuality to disrupting norms of historiographical whiteness. Many creators use corsets in subversive mashups that blend period fashion with punk, goth, or queer aesthetics, asserting that the garment need not be frozen in time but can be reanimated to serve present-day emancipatory aims.

Through aesthetic experimentation, historical engagement, and bodily performance, the corset's revival illustrates how restrictive dress can be reframed as liberatory. Far from signaling submission, today's corset-wearers assert complex and often contradictory identities—feminist, queer, nostalgic, resistant—demonstrating that the act of dressing is not just personal but political, not just retrospective but revolutionary.

#### **4. Body Politics and Intersectionality**

To fully grasp the feminist reclamation of the corset, one must engage with the concept of intersectionality—a framework introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw to articulate how overlapping identities such as race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality shape distinct experiences of oppression and privilege. The act of wearing a corset, and the meanings ascribed to it, differ significantly across these lines. For some, corsetry is a source of empowerment and aesthetic pleasure; for others, it remains a site of exclusion, racialization, or bodily discipline. The corset cannot be reclaimed meaningfully without acknowledging how its histories and revivals are mediated by these intersecting systems of power.

##### *4.1 Corsets and Medicalized Bodies*

Contrary to the view that corsets are uniformly restrictive, contemporary wearers often cite physical and psychological benefits. For individuals with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, scoliosis, or chronic back pain, corsets can provide crucial spinal support, acting as adaptive devices that stabilize the body. In such contexts, the corset functions as a therapeutic garment—a technology of care rather than control. Similarly, many trans and nonbinary individuals use corsets as gender-affirming tools to shape or soften body contours in ways that align with their identities. This use is not about adhering to rigid beauty standards, but about navigating dysphoria and asserting bodily coherence in the face of social erasure. Yet these medicalized or therapeutic uses of corsetry remain underrepresented in mainstream fashion discourse, which tends to frame corset-wearing in binary terms—either as fashion fetish or feminist transgression. Recognizing corsetry's role in chronic illness and gender affirmation complicates this binary and challenges assumptions about who wears corsets and why.

##### *4.2 Race, Respectability, and Historical Violence*

The corset's historical baggage is not distributed evenly. Within colonial and postcolonial contexts, corsets were used as tools of racial assimilation. European colonizers often imposed corsetry on Indigenous and colonized women as part of so-called "civilizing missions," treating the garment as a marker of European modernity and

moral superiority. As historian Tressie McMillan Cottom and others have noted, beauty standards—and by extension, dress codes—have long been racialized, constructed in ways that devalue and other Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies. In the contemporary vintage fashion scene, these dynamics persist. The aesthetics of historical dress, often centered around Victorian and Edwardian styles, tend to foreground Eurocentric silhouettes and beauty norms that exclude non-white histories and bodies. BIPOC vintage enthusiasts have pointed to both subtle and overt gatekeeping in online communities, where authenticity is policed through racialized lenses. The act of wearing a corset thus takes on different implications for a Black woman navigating histories of hypersexualization and regulation of Black femininity, or for a Latina creator challenging Anglo-European fashion narratives that erase Indigenous textile heritage.

#### *4.3 Fat Politics and Size Inclusivity*

Corsets also intersect with fat politics in complex ways. Historically, corsets were marketed as tools to discipline and minimize the female body, reinforcing thinness as a virtue. Contemporary reclamation, however, has created space for fat and plus-size individuals to assert body autonomy through corsetry. Some wear corsets to challenge the idea that fat bodies should be hidden or minimized; others appreciate the structured support and tailored feel corsets can provide. Nevertheless, many vintage fashion patterns and commercial corset brands remain biased toward smaller body types. Custom corset makers and fat activists have stepped in to address these gaps, emphasizing size inclusivity and body positivity. Makers like Dark Garden and independent sewists on Etsy are expanding the narrative of corsetry to include bodies historically deemed unfit for glamour or period fashion. Through this work, corsetry becomes not only an aesthetic but a political tool—one that asserts the visibility and dignity of marginalized bodies.

#### *4.4 Gender and Queer Fashion Practices*

Corsets also play a central role in queer fashion practices. In drag culture, corsets are used to exaggerate curves, perform hyper-femininity, or destabilize binary gender norms. In queer historical reenactment and cosplay, corsets allow wearers to play with time, gender, and identity simultaneously. These practices draw upon what José Esteban Muñoz calls “disidentification”—a mode of queer resistance that involves repurposing cultural objects in ways that both acknowledge and subvert their original meanings. For queer wearers, corsetry can be an act of defiance against cisheteronormative expectations of how bodies should appear and behave. In these spaces, the corset becomes not a tool of restriction, but of transformation—of becoming, exaggerating, or queering the body in ways that resist assimilation.

Understanding the corset through the lens of body politics and intersectionality reveals its polyvalent nature: it is at once a historical artifact, a cultural battleground, and a site of personal meaning. Its revival in vintage fashion communities is thus neither uniformly liberatory nor simply regressive. Rather, it is mediated by race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality—factors that shape how the corset is worn, perceived, and politicized. The feminist reframing of restrictive dress must reckon with these layers to move beyond simplistic binaries of oppression and liberation. Only then can corsetry function as a truly inclusive and nuanced medium of self-expression.

### **5. Community as Catalyst**

The contemporary revival and feminist recontextualization of the corset would not be possible without the vital role of community. Both digital and physical vintage fashion communities act as critical incubators of reinterpretation, where wearers, makers, and scholars co-create new meanings around restrictive dress. These spaces—ranging from online forums to TikTok niches, YouTube channels to local historical reenactment circles—enable more than aesthetic appreciation; they serve as participatory pedagogies, political laboratories, and affective networks where histories are challenged, identities are affirmed, and styles are reimagined.

Community engagement transforms the corset from a static object of fashion history into a living, evolving text. Through pattern reconstruction, archival research, and historical costuming, members actively *make* history rather than merely consume it. This shift from passive to active engagement aligns with feminist historiographic interventions that critique male-dominated academic narratives. Communities like Foundations Revealed, Costube (Costume YouTube), and historical sewing Discord servers provide accessible platforms where knowledge circulates horizontally rather than hierarchically. In these communities, historical accuracy is often balanced with personal expression and ethical considerations. Participants regularly debate the implications of re-creating garments associated with colonialism, class oppression, or racialized norms. These conversations reflect a deepened historical consciousness—a recognition that to wear a corset is to engage with the political weight of the past, and to choose how that past is carried forward.

These spaces also exemplify what bell hooks terms “engaged pedagogy”—a mode of learning that emphasizes mutuality, experience, and empowerment. Corset makers often teach others how to draft patterns, adjust fit for non-normative bodies, or interpret Victorian sewing manuals. This knowledge-sharing is not only technical but political: it enables marginalized individuals to reclaim agency over their bodies and historical narratives. Digital



tutorials, livestreams, and blog posts replace the gatekeeping of formal design schools or elite costume archives. A YouTube video on drafting a corset for a plus-size body or a Reddit thread about binding techniques for trans wearers becomes an act of feminist instruction. In this way, community functions as both educator and witness—supporting members in processes of transformation, resistance, and self-recognition.

Vintage fashion communities, particularly those engaged in alternative aesthetics (gothic, steampunk, cottagecore, dark academia), also draw upon subcultural resistance. The corset becomes a symbol of subversion—a means to disrupt the homogeneity of contemporary fast fashion, capitalist consumerism, and patriarchal fashion norms. Inspired by Dick Hebdige's theory of subculture as "style as resistance," corset-wearers often juxtapose historical silhouettes with punk aesthetics or queer styling, creating hybrid forms that reject both mainstream femininity and mainstream feminism. This bricolage signals more than aesthetic defiance; it indexes a refusal to comply with historical amnesia. These stylings are layered with memory, rebellion, and narrative. They turn the corset into a "palimpsest garment"—a material surface inscribed with multiple, sometimes conflicting, cultural meanings.

Community is also an emotional architecture. For many participants, especially those excluded from dominant fashion spaces due to body size, gender identity, disability, or race, these communities offer a rare sense of belonging. Comment sections on corset tutorials often feature gratitude, vulnerability, and support: people thanking creators for helping them feel beautiful, valid, or strong. This emotional labor—performed through encouragement, mentorship, and visibility—compensates for the alienation felt in mainstream fashion discourse, which continues to marginalize non-conforming bodies. Importantly, these interactions generate what Lauren Berlant might call "affective publics"—emotional collectives formed through shared desires, frustrations, and aesthetic experiences. The corset, in this context, becomes a nexus around which these affective economies gather, transform, and endure.

The communities that surround corsetry are not simply fan spaces or hobbyist groups; they are dynamic zones of cultural production, feminist reimagination, and intersectional resistance. They foster not only aesthetic experimentation but also ethical reflection, political critique, and collective healing. As catalysts for reclamation, these communities ensure that the corset is not a relic of oppression but a conversation in motion—continuously rewritten by those who dare to wear the past differently.

## 6. Conclusion

The revival of the corset in vintage fashion communities is emblematic of a broader cultural and feminist shift: a refusal to accept inherited binaries of oppression and liberation, modesty and sexuality, history and progress. Instead, it reflects a contemporary moment in which restrictive dress is not merely worn but *reinterpreted*, not merely inherited but *remade*. The corset—long seen as the ultimate emblem of patriarchal control—has been re-sutured with new meanings, emerging as a site of resistance, reclamation, and reinvention.

This transformation is not superficial; it is political and epistemological. It calls into question linear feminist narratives that cast certain garments, aesthetics, or eras as either regressive or liberatory. As third- and fourth-wave feminists have argued, empowerment is not universal but contextual—it is shaped by who wears the garment, why, how, and under what conditions. A corset laced voluntarily by a queer creator affirming their identity holds radically different meaning than one imposed through colonial or patriarchal mandates. This contextual nuance is essential if feminism is to remain relevant in a pluralistic, global, and digitally interconnected world.

The corset revival compels us to reconsider how historical memory operates through fashion. Rather than dismiss the corset as an outdated symbol of bodily constraint, vintage fashion communities treat it as an archive of embodied knowledge—a relic that can be excavated, studied, and transformed. This process reclaims history not as a fixed narrative but as a material and wearable text open to reinterpretation. Wearing a corset becomes an act of archival engagement: it honors labor, invokes lineage, and foregrounds the agency of those who have been historically silenced in both fashion and feminist canons.

The feminist reframing of the corset is also inextricable from the spaces in which it unfolds. Digital communities have democratized historical fashion, allowing wearers to form affective and pedagogical networks that are grounded in shared aesthetics but energized by difference. These communities are not utopian—they reproduce exclusions and hierarchies—but they also foster alternative models of fashion discourse, ones that value slow craft over fast fashion, embodiment over abstraction, and multiplicity over monolith. They remind us that style can be both playful and political, rooted in pleasure and criticality alike.

The corset's reemergence in feminist fashion dialogues underscores a critical truth: that restriction and empowerment are not always opposites. In some cases, the act of embracing a historically restrictive garment becomes a paradoxical form of liberation—a way to confront the past on one's own terms, to reclaim control over one's body and narrative. Through this act, the corset sheds its singular symbolic weight and becomes a

polyvalent artifact—one capable of carrying the contradictions, desires, and resistances of those who wear it today. To study the corset's revival is to study how fashion can serve as both memory and method, archive and aspiration. It is a reminder that feminist politics live not only in protests or polemics but also in stitches, silhouettes, and communities that dare to dream otherwise.

## References

- Banner, B., (n.d.). Bernadette Banner on Historical Fashion and Corset-Making.
- Breward, C., (1995). *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress*. Manchester University Press.
- Butler, J., (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Click Americana., (2021, January 14). *Victorian corsets: What they were like & how women used to wear them*. Click Americana. <https://clickamericana.com/topics/beauty-fashion/vintage-clothing/victorian-corsets>
- Crenshaw, K., (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Cunningham, P. A., (2003). *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850–1920: Politics, Health, and Art*. Kent State University Press.
- Dunikowski, (2009). *Corset design*. Flickr. <https://openverse.org/image/8753256f-326e-4d4c-b93c-9ef6c72f7394>
- Entwistle, J., (2000). *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*. Polity Press.
- French School., (c. 1880). *The harmful effects of the corset*. In J. Rengade, *La vie normale et la santé*. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Distributed by Bridgeman Images via Meisterdrucke. <https://www.meisterdrucke.uk/fine-art-prints/French-School/420578/The-Harmful-Effects-of-the-Corset,-illustration-from-La-Vie-Normale-et-la-Sante-by-Dr-Jules-Rengade-%28b.1841%29-c.1880.html>
- Geczy, A. & Karaminas, V., (2017). *Fashion and Masculinities in Popular Culture*. Routledge.
- Steele, V., (2001). *The Corset: A Cultural History*. Yale University Press.
- Summers, L., (2001). *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Berg Publishers.
- Wilson, E., (1985). *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. University of California Press.

## Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

# How the Instant Gratification Design of Dating Apps in Korea Creates False Expectations of Romantic Communication

Minseo K. Jang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chung-Ang University, Seoul, South Korea

Correspondence: Minseo K. Jang, Chung-Ang University, Seoul, South Korea.

doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2025.05.004

## Abstract

This paper explores how the instant gratification design of dating apps in South Korea shapes false expectations of romantic communication. Through analysis of app mechanics, user behaviors, and cultural context, the study demonstrates how swiping interfaces, gamified feedback systems, and hyper-responsive messaging environments accelerate emotional engagement while undermining sustainable connection. Drawing from contemporary Korean social norms, the paper examines how platform logic clashes with traditional expectations of pacing, discretion, and gender roles in romantic initiation. It argues that the resulting cultural friction not only fosters ghosting and communication fatigue but also reframes intimacy as a performance governed by algorithmic tempo rather than relational depth. The study concludes by proposing a reimagined model of digital intimacy that prioritizes emotional continuity, intentional design, and hybrid relational literacy.

**Keywords:** dating apps, instant gratification, South Korea, emotional acceleration, ghosting, digital intimacy, gamification, romantic communication, platform culture, hybrid courtship norms

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, South Korea has witnessed a rapid and widespread adoption of mobile dating applications, fundamentally altering how young adults initiate and negotiate romantic relationships. Fueled by the proliferation of smartphones, high-speed internet infrastructure, and a tech-savvy millennial and Gen Z population, the dating app industry in Korea has grown into a normalized social space for meeting potential partners. As of 2022, over 60% of single adults in their twenties and thirties reported having used at least one dating app, according to a survey by Gallup Korea (2022), highlighting how online-mediated intimacy is no longer peripheral but central to contemporary romantic culture.

This shift is not occurring in a cultural vacuum. South Korea's demographic landscape—marked by delayed marriage, declining birth rates, and high youth unemployment—has complicated traditional paths to partnership and family formation. In this context, dating apps emerge not just as a convenience, but as a compensatory tool amid reduced offline social opportunities. Young people face long work hours, academic pressures, and a shrinking number of institutional spaces (such as universities or workplaces) that once facilitated organic encounters. Digital platforms offer a low-effort, high-efficiency solution for initiating contact in a society where public expressions of romantic interest are often restrained by etiquette, hierarchy, and gendered expectations.

Unlike Western markets, where Tinder-style casual dating dominates the narrative, the Korean dating app ecosystem is characterized by platform specialization and sociocultural sensitivity. Apps such as *Amanda*, *NoonDate*, and *DangYeonSi* market themselves not merely as matchmaking services but as personality-based, serious dating spaces, often incorporating filters such as education level, income bracket, and even astrological compatibility. While some global apps like Tinder and Bumble have established footholds, they are often perceived—especially by older users—as more aligned with casual or sexual encounters and thus culturally

ambiguous.

Despite the growing normalization of app-based dating, social stigma still lingers. Many users, particularly women, express discomfort in publicly disclosing their use of such platforms, citing fears of being perceived as desperate or morally lax. This creates a paradox where dating apps are both ubiquitous and discreetly used—high in functional visibility, but low in social legitimacy. This tension between usage and acceptance contributes to an unstable communicative space in which users oscillate between digital openness and emotional caution.

As dating apps become a dominant site of romantic initiation in South Korea, they bring with them new temporalities, emotional logics, and communicative expectations. These changes are not just technical; they are deeply cultural, reshaping how intimacy is imagined, performed, and experienced. The subsequent sections of this paper examine how the instant gratification design of these platforms interacts with local cultural norms to create false expectations of romantic communication—expectations that often lead to misalignment, disappointment, and disillusionment in app-based relational dynamics.

## 2. Instant Gratification Logic in App Interface Design

### 2.1 Design for Speed: Match, Chat, Exit

Dating apps in South Korea are deliberately structured around the principle of minimal friction and maximal immediacy. From the moment a user logs in, the architecture of most platforms is designed to reduce decision time and accelerate interaction. A standard user journey—profile swipe, match confirmation, and chat initiation—can be completed in under 30 seconds. This streamlined process is not merely technical but ideological: it constructs romantic connection as something quickly accessible and low-risk, eroding the notion that relationship-building requires sustained effort or contextual nuance.

Unlike traditional social introductions, which often involve layered cues, social vetting, or in-person chemistry, app-based matching substitutes these with binary gestures: swipe right or left, tap to like, send a pre-written icebreaker. These actions are optimized for reaction over reflection, encouraging users to prioritize first-glance judgments over relational depth. In platforms like *Amanda*, speed is gamified through ranking systems and visual ratings, pushing users to act quickly and competitively. The logic is not “get to know someone,” but rather “match now, decide later”—a deferral of intimacy masked as immediacy.

Moreover, many apps deploy algorithmic suggestions based on activity frequency, meaning that users who swipe more often or respond more quickly are rewarded with increased visibility. This creates a feedback loop in which fast responses are perceived not only as socially rewarding but algorithmically necessary, reinforcing a culture of urgency that privileges instant engagement over thoughtful interaction.

### 2.2 Interface Cues that Prioritize Response Over Reflection

Interface elements—colors, alerts, message previews, and push notifications—are central to how users experience and interpret romantic interactions. In Korean dating apps, visual cues are carefully designed to stimulate immediate emotional attention. For example, matches are typically highlighted in bright, urgent colors (red or yellow), and unread messages are marked with blinking icons or countdown timers that subtly signal a “window of opportunity” is closing. These design elements nudge users toward reactive behavior, embedding the idea that failing to respond promptly may result in the loss of a potential partner.

In apps like *NoonDate*, users are shown only a limited number of matches per day, but those matches expire if not acted upon quickly. This artificial scarcity induces anticipatory anxiety, leading users to engage even when they may not be fully interested. Other apps, such as *DangYeonSi*, notify users of profile views or “likes received” in real time, fostering a sense of continuous audience presence that pressures users to remain responsive and available.

These mechanisms mirror broader trends in attention economy platforms, where immediacy becomes both a norm and a metric of value. In the context of dating, however, this logic distorts communicative expectations. Users begin to equate romantic interest with speed and volume of messaging, rather than content, consistency, or shared values. When a potential match does not respond within hours—or even minutes—this is often read not as a product of daily life rhythms, but as a sign of disinterest, rejection, or disrespect.

Ultimately, these interface cues promote a form of “communication urgency bias,” where users come to expect that meaningful romantic gestures will occur in real-time or not at all. This shortens the attention span for emotional development and fosters premature disappointment, setting the stage for the cycles of ghosting and rapid disconnection that characterize much of app-based dating in Korea.

## 3. Gamification, Swiping, and the Psychology of Quick Reward

### 3.1 Swipe Culture and the Illusion of Infinite Choice

The swipe mechanic—now synonymous with mobile dating—functions as a deceptively simple interface gesture that conceals a deep psychological architecture. In Korean dating apps, as in many global platforms, users are presented with an endless scroll of profiles, each requiring a split-second decision. The act of swiping becomes less about deliberate selection and more about reflexive engagement, producing a behavior pattern akin to slot-machine gambling.

This illusion of infinite choice is particularly potent in South Korea’s hyper-connected, image-conscious dating culture. Users are inundated with carefully curated profile pictures, edited bios, and aesthetic indicators of status (such as educational background or job titles). The abundance of options creates a paradox of desirability: the more one swipes, the more one assumes there is always someone “better” just one scroll away. This fosters a transactional mindset in which potential partners are evaluated rapidly and discarded with equal speed.

To better understand how users engage with these platforms, recent data from Korean user behavior studies offers valuable insight:

Table 1. User Engagement Patterns on Korean Dating Apps

Engagement Metric	Observed Behavior
Average Daily App Sessions	Users open dating apps approximately 6–8 times per day.
Average Session Duration	Each session lasts about 5–10 minutes.
Response Time Expectation	70% of users expect replies within 30 minutes of sending a message.
Match-to-Conversation Rate	Only 25% of matches lead to a conversation beyond initial greetings.
Conversation Continuation	Less than 10% of conversations persist beyond three exchanges.

Source: Adapted from user behavior studies in South Korea, 2022.

These figures reveal a clear pattern of high-frequency, low-investment engagement. The majority of interactions are short-lived, and users expect almost real-time feedback, reinforcing the notion that romantic communication should be as instant and frictionless as the match itself. In this setting, a match becomes a dopamine hit, not a commitment to dialogue.

Over time, habitual swiping cultivates a form of romantic detachment, where users become more focused on the process of matching than the outcome of connection. A 2021 Korean behavioral survey found that less than one in ten matches results in sustained interaction beyond three exchanges, reflecting how the swiping interface encourages superficial accumulation over emotional investment.

### 3.2 Variable Reward Systems and Digital Craving Loops

Central to the addictive pull of dating apps is the use of variable reward schedules, a psychological strategy drawn from behavioral conditioning theory. Unlike fixed feedback systems, variable schedules offer intermittent, unpredictable rewards—sometimes a match, sometimes a message, often nothing. This unpredictability creates a feedback loop that keeps users engaged: each swipe or app login holds the possibility of a gratifying interaction, but never guarantees it.

Apps like *Amanda* amplify this mechanism by gamifying social validation. Users receive scores based on how attractive they are rated by other users, and this score affects their visibility within the app. The more one is liked, the more one is shown to others, incentivizing both strategic photo curation and frequent engagement. Similarly, *NoonDate* uses randomized daily matches delivered at set times, creating a ritualized anticipation effect that mimics the suspense of lottery draws.

The psychological effect is what scholars describe as “compulsive checking behavior”—users return to the app not because they are seeking meaningful connection, but because they are chasing the next emotional spike. The reward, in many cases, is not conversation or relationship, but the internal validation of being seen, liked, or chosen. This can result in emotional burnout, attention fragmentation, and a distorted sense of one’s relational value, as affirmation becomes numerically quantified and externally dependent.

The gamification of digital dating thus reorients the romantic experience from exploration and reciprocity to performance and reward-seeking. Users begin to prioritize metrics—match counts, scores, responses—over emotional resonance or shared intention, contributing to the very misalignment in communication and expectation this paper seeks to interrogate.

## 4. Temporal Compression and Emotional Acceleration in Digital Romance

### 4.1 Fast-Track Intimacy: From Match to Oversharing

In app-based dating environments, particularly within South Korea's high-speed digital ecosystem, romantic communication is increasingly shaped by compressed timelines. The transition from "match" to emotionally intimate exchange often occurs within hours, not weeks. Users are encouraged—implicitly through interface design and explicitly through social norms—to initiate conversations quickly, disclose personal preferences early, and demonstrate emotional investment with minimal delay.

This phenomenon, often described as "fast-track intimacy," refers to the rapid escalation of disclosure and sentiment typically spread across longer courtship stages in traditional offline dating. In platforms like *DangYeonSi* and *NoonDate*, where curated matches are delivered with time limits, users frequently exchange emotionally charged messages—such as trauma references, family expectations, or ideal relationship goals—within the first day of contact. Such early vulnerability can foster a false sense of closeness, bypassing the gradual trust-building processes that form the foundation of durable intimacy.

A qualitative study conducted by the Korea Institute of Social Communication (2021) found that over 58% of respondents felt "uncomfortably close" to matches after just a few days of chatting, with many citing pressure to escalate the tone of emotional engagement to sustain interest. This acceleration, while stimulating, often leaves users vulnerable to emotional whiplash when communication abruptly halts—resulting in cycles of rapid attachment followed by disengagement.

#### 4.2 Emotional Intensity Without Relational Foundation

The illusion of emotional closeness fostered by digital immediacy often lacks the relational infrastructure necessary to sustain real connection. While users may feel seen, heard, or desired through intense early exchanges, such intensity is frequently untethered from shared experiences, mutual obligations, or embodied presence. This produces a form of disembodied intimacy—emotionally vivid but structurally hollow.

In Korean dating culture, where historically courtship has involved formal stages, family vetting, and respectful pacing, this new form of emotional velocity introduces cognitive dissonance. Users are simultaneously drawn to the thrill of digital closeness and skeptical of its authenticity. A participant in a Seoul-based interview series described this paradox: "We talked every night for a week like we were in love, then he disappeared. It felt real, but also... like nothing."

The app environment amplifies this volatility. Matches are easy to obtain but hard to sustain. Emotional exchanges often occur in parallel with others—users chat with multiple matches simultaneously, unconsciously diluting the perceived uniqueness of any single connection. When intimacy arises in this saturated, competitive field, it is more likely to be experienced as transactional performance than relational development.

Ultimately, emotional acceleration in app-based dating generates expectations of instant emotional reciprocity, which—when unmet—lead to disappointment disproportionate to the actual relationship stage. In this way, temporal compression not only reshapes how intimacy begins but also how it fails, destabilizing the emotional equilibrium of app users and reinforcing the cycles of hope and disillusionment embedded in platform-based romance.

### 5. Constructing Expectations: Perceived Availability and Effortless Connection

#### 5.1 24/7 Access and the Myth of Instant Emotional Availability

One of the most powerful illusions embedded in dating apps—especially within South Korea's hyper-connected society—is the perception that potential partners are constantly available, both physically and emotionally. The combination of push notifications, real-time status indicators (such as "online now" or "last seen"), and message previews constructs a social environment in which romantic attention is imagined as instantly retrievable—a resource one can summon on demand.

This 24/7 presence illusion is particularly potent in a country where mobile penetration exceeds 95% and messaging response times are socially monitored, not just by friends but by romantic partners. In such contexts, the failure to respond promptly to a match's message—even by a few hours—can be interpreted not as circumstantial unavailability but as emotional disinterest or disrespect. As one user from Daegu put it in an online forum: "If someone doesn't reply within the day, it's over. You assume they've moved on to someone else."

This dynamic is further complicated by read receipts, typing indicators, and delivery confirmations, which collectively transform romantic communication into a space of microsurveillance. Users not only expect quick replies, they expect evidence of attentiveness. Any deviation from this norm—delayed messaging, slower tone, lack of emotive punctuation—can generate confusion or anxiety, especially in the early stages of a fragile digital connection.

The result is a profound shift in emotional expectations. App users begin to conflate availability with affection, speed with sincerity, and presence with priority. A person who replies quickly is deemed more invested; one who

replies late is assumed to be “half-interested” or “playing games.” Over time, these expectations erode the patience and resilience traditionally associated with relationship-building, replacing them with a “now or never” mentality.

Yet ironically, this constant connection does not foster greater intimacy—it often leads to burnout, emotional misalignment, and premature disengagement. In an effort to be perpetually reachable, users become less emotionally grounded, more performative in their interactions, and ultimately more prone to disappear when expectations—shaped not by relational development but by platform rhythm—are inevitably unmet.

Thus, what begins as technological accessibility transforms into a false emotional contract, one where every response—or lack thereof—is read through a lens of hyper-availability and distorted commitment. This system primes users to expect too much, too soon, and to disengage too quickly when those expectations are not fulfilled.

## **6. Communication Disillusionment: From Rapid Match to Emotional Drop-Off**

### *6.1 High-Frequency Messaging, Low-Stakes Engagement*

In the initial hours or days following a match, dating app users often engage in rapid-fire exchanges that simulate relational momentum. Emojis, playful banter, inside jokes, and even late-night text threads can unfold in a matter of hours. This high-frequency messaging creates an atmosphere of simulated intimacy, giving the impression that emotional reciprocity is developing naturally. However, in most cases, the stakes of such communication remain remarkably low.

Unlike offline dating, where time, effort, and environment moderate the pacing of emotional involvement, app-based exchanges offer instant, mobile, and uninterrupted access to the other person. These exchanges often occur while multitasking—during a commute, between work meetings, or late at night—resulting in fragmented attention and performative dialogue. The low cost of engagement means that users can effortlessly initiate, maintain, or abandon conversations without significant emotional consequence.

This leads to a disconnect between emotional rhythm and relational substance. For example, two users might share detailed personal anecdotes within 24 hours of matching—about childhood, trauma, or even romantic preferences—yet neither party feels compelled to follow through with in-person plans or longer-term interaction. As the initial high wears off, the reality sets in: little context has been built, and little obligation exists to continue.

A study by Choi & Kim (2022) on app-based dating behavior in Seoul revealed that over 55% of users had “deep conversations” with a match in the first three days, but fewer than 18% met those matches offline. This hypertextual overinvestment followed by behavioral withdrawal underscores a key pattern: emotional openness has become decoupled from commitment. What appears as early bonding is often a form of low-resistance disclosure, enabled and encouraged by digital space.

Eventually, many users begin to anticipate abandonment, even as they engage enthusiastically. This creates a fragile communication style: fast, flattering, and emotionally vivid—but ultimately cautious and replaceable.

### *6.2 The Normalization of Ghosting and Narrative Breakage*

Ghosting is often treated in dating discourse as a personal slight or moral failure. Yet in the context of Korean dating apps, it is better understood as an algorithmic and structural phenomenon, deeply tied to the logic of platform design. When matches are made frequently and attention is limited, users come to accept silence as a built-in feature, not a disruption.

Platform mechanics reinforce this normalization. Apps provide no friction to exit, no social feedback mechanisms for disengagement, and no reputational consequences for disappearing. Unlike in real-life interactions—where awkwardness, mutual acquaintances, or social norms require some form of closure—digital environments erase the need for accountability. In fact, the very design of “swipe and forget” interfaces makes ghosting feel procedural, almost polite compared to confrontation.

In user interviews conducted in Busan (2021), many participants expressed the view that ghosting is “better than awkward honesty” or “just how things are.” For younger users, particularly in their early 20s, ghosting had become not only acceptable but expected—a natural endpoint to conversations that no longer felt exciting or promising.

This normalization has broader psychological implications. When ghosting becomes routine, users develop narrative fatigue—the sense that every romantic storyline will end before it truly begins. This can produce emotional numbness, over-self-protection, or defensive disinterest. Instead of building toward continuity, each new conversation is implicitly temporary, often treated like a “mini-episode” in a wider series of trial interactions.

Worse, the lack of closure inhibits emotional learning. When a user is ghosted, they are left with no interpretive material—no feedback, no debriefing, no way to understand what went wrong or whether anything did. This leads to internalized ambiguity, where users second-guess their tone, timing, or even desirability.

Over time, ghosting doesn't just end conversations—it reconfigures the way users approach communication itself. Many begin to withhold emotional investment, use generic templates when chatting, or develop “ghost before being ghosted” strategies. This produces a system of mutually anticipated withdrawal, in which emotional sincerity is rare, guarded, or delayed past the point of potential connection.

In sum, communication disillusionment on Korean dating apps is not the result of poor etiquette or generational immaturity alone—it is the logical outcome of immediacy-driven platforms, gamified attention, and a scarcity of social accountability mechanisms. As matches become moments, and moments are forgotten without explanation, digital romantic life becomes characterized less by heartbreak than by fatigue—less by rejection than by persistent emotional ambiguity.

## **7. Cultural Friction: Traditional Courtship Norms vs. App-Based Interaction**

### *7.1 Respect, Ambiguity, and Hierarchy in Korean Romantic Scripts*

South Korean romantic culture has historically emphasized relational ambiguity, slow escalation, and social harmony—values that stand in contrast to the blunt immediacy of dating apps. Traditional courtship often unfolds within semi-formal contexts such as university clubs, workplaces, or blind dates (소개팅), where interactions are moderated by shared networks, etiquette expectations, and a mutually understood rhythm of emotional pacing.

In these settings, hierarchical positioning and face-saving are crucial. Younger individuals often defer to older partners, and expressions of interest are tempered by subtle cues and ambiguity to avoid direct rejection or social awkwardness. This contrasts starkly with app-based dating, which encourages directness, profile-based self-promotion, and rapid signaling of intent.

The cultural friction arises when app users import these traditional expectations—such as waiting for the other to initiate, avoiding forwardness, or reading emotional nuance—into a platform designed for speed, clarity, and self-disclosure. For example, a user who delays response out of modesty or indecision may be perceived as disinterested or dismissive. Conversely, one who communicates with Western-style assertiveness may be seen as “too much” or lacking subtlety.

This misalignment leads to frequent misreadings of tone and intent. Emotional codes that are valid offline (e.g., playing hard to get, deferring direct emotional language) lose their effectiveness or are misunderstood entirely online, where brevity and speed dominate the communicative register.

### *7.2 Gendered Misinterpretations in Hyper-Responsive Contexts*

App-based dating in South Korea does not occur in a gender-neutral space. Rather, it is embedded within deeply encoded expectations around male initiative and female selectivity—expectations that are both challenged and reinforced by app environments.

On one hand, dating apps offer women more control over selection and visibility, allowing them to curate profiles and choose when and with whom to engage. This shift undermines older norms in which women were expected to wait passively for male attention. On the other hand, these same platforms can amplify gendered anxieties. For instance, when women do initiate contact or express strong interest early on, they are sometimes perceived—especially by more traditionally minded male users—as overly assertive or even morally ambiguous.

Men, conversely, may feel pressured to perform as confident, financially stable, and emotionally available, even when these expectations are misaligned with their own life circumstances. The gap between presentation and capacity can lead to defensive behavior, withdrawal, or resentment when women do not reciprocate attention in the ways expected.

A study by Cho (2021) on gender signaling in Korean dating apps found that men were significantly more likely to report frustration about being “left on read,” interpreting silence as disrespect, while women more frequently reported discomfort with aggressive or repetitive messaging. These differing interpretations stem from a clash between platform norms (instant engagement) and cultural scripts (reserved, role-based interaction).

This dissonance produces a communicative space that is overcoded with expectation and undercoded with empathy, where gender performances often reinforce miscommunication and emotional misalignment.

### *7.3 Familial and Social Anxiety Around “Casual” Platforms*

Despite their mainstream usage, dating apps in South Korea remain partially stigmatized—especially among older generations. Romantic relationships are still closely tied to marriage prospects and family honor, and the idea of meeting a serious partner “through an app” is often viewed with suspicion, or even disdain, by parents



and elders.

This intergenerational anxiety exerts psychological pressure on young adults navigating digital intimacy. Many users experience a double consciousness: one identity that is experimental and expressive within the app space, and another that is conservative and approval-seeking offline. This duality creates internal conflict—especially for women—who must negotiate between digital autonomy and social respectability.

To mitigate stigma, users often downplay their app usage in family or peer settings, refer to app matches ambiguously (“a friend I met through a study group”), or resist emotionally committing to someone perceived as incompatible with parental expectations. This filtering, however, often occurs after emotional investment has already begun, contributing to cycles of attachment followed by abrupt withdrawal—fueled not by lack of affection, but by social constraints.

In extreme cases, the social illegitimacy of app-originating relationships may deter users from pursuing them seriously at all. The result is a cultural logic where dating apps are seen as places for “experience” rather than “real relationships,” reinforcing the very instability and disillusionment the platforms seek to resolve.

## 8. Reimagining Digital Intimacy in a Hyper-Responsive Ecosystem

The rise of dating apps in South Korea has not only altered the mechanics of romantic connection—it has reshaped the tempo, tone, and terrain of intimacy itself. Within the hyper-responsive, gamified architecture of these platforms, romantic communication has become faster, more volatile, and more fragile. What once unfolded gradually through mutual acquaintances, social vetting, and embodied interaction now occurs through frictionless swipes, immediate notifications, and highly compressed emotional timelines.

Yet as this paper has shown, such transformation comes at a cost. Users are drawn into cycles of accelerated engagement and abrupt detachment, guided more by platform logics than personal rhythms. Ghosting becomes common not due to cruelty, but due to communicative fatigue. Emotional vulnerability is expressed early but not always received with reciprocity. The boundary between accessibility and expectation collapses, creating a climate of constant partial connection and persistent disillusionment.

If intimacy is to survive—and thrive—in such an environment, it must be reimagined beyond immediacy. Digital design must shift from rewarding mere interaction volume toward facilitating emotional depth, pacing, and narrative continuity. App interfaces could introduce gentle friction: delayed messaging options, reflective prompts, or systems that reward conversational consistency over swiping frequency. Rather than treating human connection as a product to be optimized, platforms could recalibrate to treat it as a relational process to be supported.

At a cultural level, South Korea’s romantic ecosystem is at a crossroads. Younger generations are increasingly comfortable expressing affection and desire through digital means, yet they remain tethered to traditional relational scripts—scripts that value discretion, emotional ambiguity, and family legitimacy. Bridging this divide requires not simply abandoning tradition or resisting technology, but developing hybrid relational literacies that combine digital fluency with emotional intentionality.

Such literacies would help users recognize that the affordances of dating apps—speed, availability, convenience—are tools, not truths. A message sent quickly is not inherently sincere; a delayed reply is not necessarily disinterest. Intimacy in the digital age must be read generously, allowing room for imperfection, pacing, and difference.

Ultimately, the question is not whether dating apps can produce meaningful connection, but whether we can collectively design, interpret, and inhabit these spaces in ways that resist their most extractive tendencies. Romantic communication in Korea—like elsewhere—is being rewritten by code. The task now is to ensure that the scripts we write through our thumbs still leave space for the heart.

## References

- Cho, H., (2021). Gender performance and affective signaling in South Korean dating apps. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 31(5), 518–536.
- Choi, Y., & Kim, J., (2022). Emotional labor and digital dating: Korean youth navigating love in app-mediated environments. *Korean Journal of Media Studies*, 36(1), 44–67.
- Gallup Korea, (2022). *Attitudes toward mobile dating and relationship trends in young adults*. Seoul, South Korea.
- Korea Data Research, (2022). Digital dating behavior survey: Frequency, retention, and platform preference. Retrieved from [internal archive].
- Korea Institute of Social Communication, (2021). Love, like, and leave: The lifecycle of romantic dialogue on Korean dating apps. Seoul: KISC Reports.

Lee, H., & Lee, S. Y., (2021). Swipe fatigue and romantic burnout: Psychological effects of dating app overuse. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 24(3), 183–189.

### **Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

# Motherhood as Method: Chinese Feminism and Gendered Resistance in the Works of Yu Hong and He Chengyao

Qinlin Wei<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Correspondence: Qinlin Wei, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom.

doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2025.05.005

## Abstract

This article explores how contemporary Chinese women artists Yu Hong and He Chengyao engage with the concept of motherhood as both a cultural construct and a critical strategy. By situating their practices within the historical trajectories of Confucian ethics, Maoist gender policy, and neoliberal maternalism, the paper argues that their art articulates a form of ‘Chinese feminism’ shaped by socio-political constraints and localised resistance. Through case studies of Yu’s introspective *Witness to Growth* series and He’s visceral performance *99 Needles*, the essay demonstrates how maternal imagery is mobilised not to idealise but to question and redefine female subjectivity. While eschewing overt feminist labels, their work subverts dominant narratives of motherhood, challenging state control, patriarchy, and censorship. In doing so, Yu and He carve out a unique feminist voice that merges personal memory, bodily experience, and visual politics within the Chinese context.

**Keywords:** Chinese feminism, maternal imagery, gendered resistance, performance art, visual censorship

## 1. Introduction

Standing before the giant figure of Louise Bourgeois’ *Maman*, one cannot help but be appalled and disturbed by the paradoxes of motherhood—its strength and vulnerability, its protective and nurturing role.<sup>1</sup> This most impactful maternal totem in contemporary art is like a prism, reflecting artists’ multidimensional interpretations of motherhood in different cultural contexts. In China, motherhood is not only characterised by personal experience but also by deeply rooted socio-political ideologies.<sup>2</sup> Here, Chinese women artists like Yu Hong and He Chengyao critically explore the intersection of maternal identity and state power, employing their art to negotiate between traditional historical norms and contemporary feminist agendas.

The conflict between state maternalism and individual motherhood has long shaped gender expectations in China.<sup>3</sup> Confucianism built maternal virtue as the linchpin of family and social order.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Maoist policy reimagined women as icons of socialist maternalism, disempowering their bodily agency under the name

---

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Margaret Burge, (2005). *Disagreeable Objects: The Sculptural Strategies of Louise Bourgeois* (PhD diss., University College London), 154.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua A. Hubbard, (2018). The ‘Torch of Motherly Love’: Women and Maternalist Politics in Late Nationalist China. *Twentieth-Century China*, 43(3), 254.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Sybilla Green Dorros, (1978). The Status of Women in the People’s Republic of China. *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspective on Asia*, 16, 1.

of gender equality.<sup>1</sup> Also, the maternal ideal did not disappear with China's economic reforms—it was reimagined by neoliberal consumer culture, producing new maternalism discourses that continue to govern women's roles today.<sup>2</sup> For Angela McRobbie, maternalism is a social control mechanism, idealising motherhood through narratives of self-sacrifice and objectification.<sup>3</sup>

As Zhu and Xiao argue, Chinese feminism is a pluralistic discourse that stems from local ideological and cultural conditions.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Western feminist artists, who can intervene in political criticism, Chinese female artists are denied the right to speak directly on 'grand narratives', such as politics, war, philosophy, and other themes.<sup>5</sup> For example, in China's 85 New Wave art movement, male artists' 'rational paintings' were imbued with enlightenment ideas, while the works of female artists during the same period were often neglected.<sup>6</sup> This gendered media hierarchy further limited the space for Chinese contemporary female artists to express themselves, forcing them to struggle in a more coded visual language. This essay argues that while Yu and He may not explicitly identify as feminists due to socio-political constraints, their works constitute a localized form of 'Chinese feminism' by engaging with gender, motherhood, and state power through subversive artistic strategies. To contextualize this, the essay first examines how maternal identity has been historically constructed in China, followed by an analysis of Yu and He's case studies, ultimately positioning them within the broader discourse of 'Chinese feminism'.

## 2. Historical Background

Confucianism has historically shaped women's roles within the family, elevating **motherly virtue** to a core social ethic and positioning it as essential for maintaining family lineage and social stability.<sup>7</sup> This moralised maternal role also confines women to a narrative of self-sacrifice, as the *Admonitions for Women* 女诫 state that a woman's righteousness lies in obedience.<sup>8</sup> Mothers' individual needs are suppressed, and their value is dependent on their children's achievements and the family's reputation.<sup>9</sup>

While gender policies during the Mao era promoted formal equality under the slogan 'Women can hold up half the sky,' they incorporated women into the power structures of both the state and the family through dual discipline.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, the state pushed women into the public sphere under the banner of collective labour, yet through the de-gendered image of 'iron girls,' the female body was erased into an abstract symbol of national construction.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, motherhood in the private sphere was strategically re-empowered as a national duty under the 'glorious mother' policy, which included fertility as a population growth target, transforming women's reproductive capacity into a state resource.<sup>12</sup> As feminist scholar Tina Mai Chen argues, women under socialist feminism became state-defined symbols of liberation rather than autonomous individuals.<sup>13</sup>

After the Reform and Opening-up period, the transition to a market-driven economy and globalisation generated

<sup>1</sup> Jinhua, Dai, (2002). "A Dilemma or Breakout?" in *Women, Nation, and Feminism*, ed. Shuxin Chen and Dai Jinhua (Beijing: Zhongyang Bianyi Chubanshe), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Angela McRobbie, (November 12, 2013). Feminism, the Family and the New 'Mediated' Maternalism. *New Formations*, 80(80), 136.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Shuqin Cui, (2023). Female and Feminism: A Historical Overview of Women and Art in China. *MODOS: Revista de História da Arte*, 7(2), 302.

<sup>5</sup> Wenyan Ma, (October 19, 2024). Chineseness and Gender Studies of Collectives in 85 New Movement. *And Others: The Gendered Politics and Practices of Art Collective*, <https://artcollectives.org/chineseness-and-gender-studies-of-collectives-in-85-new-movement/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Dorros, (1978). The Status of Women in the People's Republic of China, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Sherin Wing, (November 1, 2003). Technology, Commentary and the Admonitions for Women. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(1), 60.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Cui, (2023). *Female and Feminism*, 310.

<sup>11</sup> Cui, (2023). *Female and Feminism*, 314.

<sup>12</sup> Weiwei Cao, (2015). Exploring 'Glorious Motherhood' in Chinese Abortion Law and Policy. *Feminist Legal Studies*, 23(3), 295.

<sup>13</sup> Tina Mai Chen, (August 2003). Female Icons, Feminist Iconography? Socialist Rhetoric and Women's Agency in 1950s China. *Gender & History*, 15(2), 291.

new contradictions in gender roles, particularly in the arts, media, and consumer culture.<sup>1</sup> Motherhood, which was once framed as a collective socialist duty, has been commodified under neoliberalism—manifesting in the expansion of the mother-baby market with the further commercialisation of female reproductive identity.<sup>2</sup> This shift reflects a broader dilemma for contemporary women artists: while they have gained greater visibility in the art world, their bodies, identities, and narratives continue to be shaped by both capitalist market forces and residual patriarchal structures.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the commodification of motherhood, women artists today face institutional barriers, market exclusion, and political censorship.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Western female artists, who can directly engage in political activism, Chinese female artists must abide by the state's strict regulations.<sup>5</sup> These regulations further limit explicit critiques of gender inequality. For example, artworks that touch on sexuality or domestic violence are often censored or banned from public display.<sup>6</sup> The repression of women even extends beyond art—in 2018, the media *Feminist Voices*, which advocated for gender equality, was shut down.<sup>7</sup> This reflects the state's broader repression of feminist discourse. As a result, artists such as Yu and He must adopt more subtle forms of resistance that challenge gender norms to cope with political censorship without facing direct repression.

Under historical and political pressures, contemporary female artists seek new spaces for expression. Yu's paintings deeply explore the complexity of the maternal identity. At the same time, He's body performance directly faces the social stigmatisation of the image of a 'crazy mother', questioning the social construction of motherhood with the extreme experience of the individual body. Their works break the sacred imagination of motherhood and reveal the power game and the multiplicity of personal experience. In this context, 'Chinese feminist' art is not simply a copy of the Western model but has formed a unique and critical force profoundly shaped by local history and social reality. In particular, the discussion about motherhood has become an essential perspective for female artists to challenge gender norms and resist cultural oppression. Through the artistic expression of motherhood, they redefine female subjectivity in a 'Chinese feminist' way.

### 3. Case Studies

Yu Hong is a leading contemporary Chinese female artist recognised for her exploration of everyday female experiences and memories.<sup>8</sup> Though she does not openly identify as a feminist, her engagement with feminist discourse is unmistakable.<sup>9</sup> She is among the 32 women artists featured in Luise Guest's book *Half the Sky: Conversations with Women Artists in China* (2016), a project dedicated to increasing visibility for Chinese female artists.<sup>10</sup> Yu also paid tribute to a fellow female artist through her painting *She—Artist, Xiao Lu* (2005) (Figure 1), which depicts the performance artist Xiao Lu, known for her infamous 1989 gallery shooting incident swiftly censored by the state.<sup>11</sup> Yu explores female autonomy through this dialogue while carefully avoiding the state's political 'red lines'—achieved through her maternal perspective.

<sup>1</sup> Daria Berg and Giorgio Strafella, (2024). Author, Artist, Actress: China's New Women Cultural Entrepreneurs. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 53(2), 179.

<sup>2</sup> Hubbard, (2018). *The 'Torch of Motherly Love'*, 254.

<sup>3</sup> Griselda Pollock, (2014). Painting, Feminism, History, in *Looking Back to the Future*. London: Routledge, 141.

<sup>4</sup> Ziyao Wang, (2025). Censorship and Female Identity in Contemporary China. PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>8</sup> Zhen Gong, (2023). Interpreting Yu Hong's Mother-Child Themed Paintings from a Maternal Perspective. Master diss., Jiangsu University, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Tate, (November 7, 2013). Yu Hong 喻红. Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/tate-research-centre-asia/women-artists-contemporary-china/yu-hong>.

<sup>10</sup> Luise Guest, (July 20, 2020). How Women Artists Are Navigating China's Complex Feminist Landscape. NüVoices, <https://nuvoices.com/2020/07/20/how-women-artists-are-navigating-chinas-complex-feminist-landscape/>.

<sup>11</sup> Guest, (2020). How Women Artists Are Navigating China's Complex Feminist Landscape.



Figure 1. Yu Hong, *She – Artist, Xiao Lu*, c.2005, private collection.

Given this context, how do contemporary female artists present ‘Chinese feminism’ through a maternal perspective? Yu’s *Witness to Growth* series offers a compelling response, positioning maternalism as a personal narrative reflecting broader social change.<sup>1</sup> This lifelong autobiographical project, which began in the 1990s, centres the experience of mother and daughter in a visual narrative. It challenges the singular, stereotypical image of the mother and further redefines the subjectivity of women.<sup>2</sup>

Yu combines photography and painting, echoing Roland Barthes’ idea that photography repeats the irreproducible.<sup>3</sup> However, unlike Barthes, who emphasises photography’s realism, Yu reconstructs reality with emotional and symbolic depth, challenging the passive nature of photographic representation.<sup>4</sup> For example, in 1994, *Yu Hong Twenty-Eight Years Old; Liu Wa Was Born* (Figure 2), she reinforces the gaze of mother and daughter towards the outside world. This deliberate composition subverts the conventional photographic mode of ‘being viewed,’ instead foregrounding female subjectivity and positioning motherhood as an agentic rather than an objectified experience. Yu’s use of hazy, layered brushwork in the background, softens the documentary realism of photography, transforming it into a subjective, dreamlike reflection on motherhood. This painterly effect challenges the authority of photographic truth, positioning maternal identity as fluid and evolving.



Figure 2. Yu Hong, *Witness to Growth Series: 1994, Yu Hong Twenty-Eight Years Old; Liu Wa Was Born*, c. 2001, Beijing, East Modern Art Center.

<sup>1</sup> Gong, (2023). *Interpreting Yu Hong’s Mother-Child-Themed Paintings*, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Sasha Su-Ling Welland, (September, 2003). Special Issue: Women Artists’ Cruel/Loving Bodies. *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 2(5), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

The combination with a *People's Daily* page on the left indicates that in the 1990s, as China's market economy deepened, women transitioned from their Mao-era role as 'labour pioneers' back to domestic spheres, encountering new forms of gender discipline shaped by consumerism and globalisation.<sup>1</sup> In this context, Yu's choice, which visually narrates her childbearing experience, is a political act—one that redefines women's subjectivity during times of social transformation.

In this series of works, Yu also includes images of her own childhood with those of her daughter at the same age, further illustrating the evolution of motherhood in changing times. In *Yu Hong, Two Years Old* (Figure 3), she wears a doll-like dress with two commemorative medals of Chairman Mao on her chest, symbolizing the Cultural Revolution's ideological presence in everyday life.<sup>2</sup> The painting, rendered in black and white, emphasises the starkness of the era. Yu holds her mother's hand with an innocent smile, seemingly oblivious to the turbulent political climate. In contrast, her mother's facial expression conveys a solemn, almost apprehensive demeanour, embodying the weight of societal expectations and political uncertainties of the time. This contrast between the child's carefree innocence and the mother's subdued gravity implicitly underscores the cultural revolution's broader political and emotional tensions, a period marked by ideological fervour and personal sacrifices.<sup>3</sup> Decades later, in *Liu Wa at Two Years Old* (Figure 4), as a mother, Yu revisits this maternal relationship, now as a mother herself. She is depicted sitting quietly on a sofa, gazing into the distance—a posture suggesting contemplation and a sense of detachment from the ideological burdens that once defined her childhood. Her daughter, Liu Wa, is at ease, leaning on a plush crimson cushion while wearing a bright red skirt. The striking use of red—a colour that once symbolised revolutionary zeal and collective struggle—now serves a different function.<sup>4</sup> Instead of embodying ideological intensity, it transforms into a warm, comforting presence, symbolising a new generation's relative freedom from political turmoil. Through these two works, Yu reveals the changing roles and perceptions of motherhood across generations and prompts reflection on the intersection of personal memory and political change. The shift from black and white to colour, from solemnity to relaxation, and from political insignia to personal comfort encapsulates the transformation of Chinese society—where the echoes of the past remain present but no longer dictate the lives of the younger generation.



Figure 3. Yu Hong, *Witness to Growth Series: Yu Hong Two Years Old*, c. 1999–2002, Beijing, East Modern Art Center.

<sup>1</sup> S. Bernard Thomas, (2020). *Labor and the Chinese Revolution: Class Strategies and Contradictions of Chinese Communism, 1928–1948*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 258.

<sup>2</sup> Welland, *Special Issue*, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Welland, *Special Issue*, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.





Figure 4. Yu Hong, *Witness to Growth Series: Thirty Years Old in 1996 (Liu Wa, Two Years Old)* (detail), c. 1996, Beijing, East Modern Art Center.

Rather than aligning with Western feminist frameworks—such as Julia Kristeva’s critique of the ‘patriarchal construction of maternal discourse’—Yu avoids both idealising and negating motherhood.<sup>1</sup> Instead, she reveals its complexity at the intersection of personal experience and socio-historical transition. Her maternal figure functions as a ‘witness’ or ‘companion’, marking a ‘maternal spectator perspective’ that stands in contrast to the grand, detached, and rationalised narratives frequently found in male-authored representations.<sup>2</sup> This maternal gaze, rooted in emotional depth and introspection, provides an alternative epistemological mode through which personal memory and social history are interwoven.

Through *Witness to Growth*, Yu documents maternal experience as a site of both personal introspection and ideological reflection. Maternalism becomes a strategic visual language—one that enables her to explore gender politics with subtlety while navigating the constraints of censorship. In doing so, she articulates a form of ‘Chinese feminism’ that both resists and adapts to structural boundaries.

Unlike Yu, who reclaims female subjectivity through gentle intergenerational parent-child documentation, He Chengyao takes a more radical approach through nudity. After her performance *Opening the Great Wall* (Figure 5) was censored by the state due to her public nudity, He strategically integrated nudity with maternal imagery.<sup>3</sup> By aligning her work with the culturally accepted association between motherhood and the female body, she found a way to address themes of bodily autonomy and social stigma. Her works *Mother and I* (2001) and *99 Needles* (2005) are two representative examples exploring the complexity of motherhood — one seeks to repair, and the other seeks to deconstruct.

<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, (1988). The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva. *Hypatia*, 3(3), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Gong, (2023). *Interpreting Yu Hong’s Mother-Child-Themed Paintings*, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Tate, (November 20, 2013). He Chengyao 何成瑶. Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/tate-research-centre-asia/women-artists-contemporary-china/he-chengyao>.





Figure 5. He Chengyao, *Opening the Great Wall*, c. 2001, performance, Great Wall of China, Beijing.

He's mother had faced ostracisation for giving birth out of wedlock and later struggled with mental illness, leading to a lifetime of social exclusion.<sup>1</sup> As a child, He wrestled with feelings of shame and denial about this past.<sup>2</sup> However, *Mother and I* become a turning point—rather than distancing herself, she reclaims this relationship through art. *Mother and I* (2001) (Figure 6) is a striking photographic piece capturing an intimate yet unsettling moment between He and her mother. In the image, He removes her shirt, stands behind her half-naked mother, and embraces her—marking the first time they were photographed together.<sup>3</sup> This simple yet powerful act dissolves both physical and emotional barriers, directly confronting the social stigmas surrounding female mental illness and the marginalization of women who fall outside traditional family structures in Chinese society.<sup>4</sup> Her nudity in the photograph is not meant to shock the audience but to challenge inherited trauma and redefine maternal bonds on her terms.<sup>5</sup> The piece ultimately symbolises her transformation from a daughter burdened by familial shame to a woman embracing her understanding of motherhood.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 6. He Chengyao, *Mother and Me*, c. 2001, performance, Rongchang County, Chongqing.

<sup>1</sup> Eva Kit-Wah Man, (2019). *Bodies in China: Philosophy, Aesthetics, Gender, and Politics*. The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 90.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>3</sup> Brooklyn Museum, (2024). *Feminist Art*, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/zh-CN/areas/22>.

<sup>4</sup> Man, *Bodies in China*, 91.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

If *Mother and I* is a restoration of motherhood, *99 Needles* should be considered a deconstruction of motherhood. In this extreme performance art, He had 99 acupuncture needles inserted into her body, including her face (Figure 7). This painful act is not only a reproduction of individual trauma but also a critique of the myth of maternalism in Chinese society. He herself says this work is ‘dedicated to my mother who has suffered so much’.<sup>1</sup> As a child, she witnessed soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army tying her mother to a doorway and stabbing her body with silver needles under the guise of ‘curing’ her.<sup>2</sup> Her mother’s agonised howls, filled with horror and helplessness, left an indelible mark on her memory.<sup>3</sup> This traumatic experience became He’s ‘physical nightmare’ and later inspired *99 Needles*.<sup>4</sup> Through the visceral depiction of pain in her own body, the artist exposes the suffering of motherhood under state control. Acupuncture, originally a healing practice in traditional Chinese medicine, is transformed in her work into an instrument of trauma. The precise placement of acupuncture needles across He’s body creates an unsettling symmetry, visually reinforcing the tension between healing and suffering, state control and bodily agency. Her choice of ‘99’ further deepens the work’s metaphorical complexity. By drawing on traditional Chinese culture, where nine is the most significant single-digit number and shares the pronunciation of *jiǔ* (久), meaning ‘long-lasting,’ this connection underscores the profound and enduring damage inflicted on motherhood by institutional violence.<sup>5</sup> This paradoxical numerical symbolism strengthens the work’s dual role: an intensely personal narrative and a broader critique of systemic gender oppression.



Figure 7. He Chengyao, *99 Needles*, c. 2002, performance.

<sup>1</sup> Welland, *Special Issue*, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> K. Wilkinson, ed., (2008). *Signs and Symbols*. New York: Dorling Kindersley, 295.

Motherhood in China is idealised yet disciplines women to fit societal roles.<sup>1</sup> *99 Needles* confronts this myth by revealing women's suffering in motherhood and transforming the private experience into a public issue through the act of self-harm. This is very different from how *Mother and I* attempt to rebuild the mother-daughter relationship — the former is repairing, the latter is tearing, and together they form He's two narratives of motherhood: intimacy and alienation, healing and resistance.

Critics have debated the nature of He's performance art, questioning whether her extreme performances serve as structured feminist critiques or function more as a personal catharsis.<sup>2</sup> Yet, her works should be understood within the Chinese socio-political context, where direct feminist activism remains constrained.<sup>3</sup> By using her own body as a site of resistance, He reclaims agency within a system that has historically silenced women's narratives.<sup>4</sup> The revolutionary slogan 'Women can hold up half the sky' emphasised women's emancipation in the realm of productivity but neglected to mention that the state apparatus still controls women's reproductive rights.<sup>5</sup> *99 Needles* alludes to this violent structure of institutional control through the persistence of performance art: her body is subjected to hours of needling, echoing the long-lasting violence over female bodies. If Yu's works still attempt to construct female subjectivity within the myth of motherhood, *99 Needles* destroys this myth and brings motherhood back to the actual political arena.

In the globalised context of contemporary art, *99 Needles* becomes a representative Chinese performance art response to international radical feminist art.<sup>6</sup> Artists such as Marina Abramović have challenged the boundaries of femininity through endurance-based body experiments, while Tracey Emin has used personal trauma to expose the political dimensions of the female experience.<sup>7</sup> However, He's work remains distinctly rooted in its historical and cultural context, navigating the tensions between China's socialist legacy, Confucian ethics, and political censorship. This makes *99 Needles* an exploration of motherhood and a multifaceted confrontation with the female body, state power, and cultural politics. Using her own body, she radically dismantles traditional maternal narratives, transforming motherhood from a passive vessel of societal expectations into an active site of resistance. The silver needles in her skin form a striking visual statement—a warning monument proclaiming the female body is no longer a blank canvas for state control but a force of revolution that demands recognition.

Yu and He adopt **contrasting yet complementary strategies** in their art. Yu's approach is **subtle and introspective**, navigating censorship within personal and historical narratives. In contrast, He engages in **radical bodily performance**, directly confronting the political violence. Whether they can be classified as 'feminists' needs to be viewed dialectically in context. On the one hand, there is no doubt that their creations are distinctly feminist: They pay attention to women's experiences, question patriarchal structures, and seek to express women's subjectivity, all of which are in line with the core spirit of feminist art.<sup>8</sup> He was selected for the 'Global Feminism' exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York and is regarded by the international art world as one of the representatives of 'Chinese feminist' artists.<sup>9</sup> Although Yu's approach to gender issues is modest, her paintings speak for women and expand the scope of 'Chinese feminist' art. On the other hand, the label 'Chinese feminist' is not easily recognised or claimed in the local context. As He herself said, 'Feminism is a remote topic in the country where I live. China is always a male-dominated world .....'<sup>10</sup> Many female artists in China avoid publicly identifying themselves as 'feminists' due to social sensitivities or a desire not to be labelled.<sup>11</sup> However, this does not mean their work lacks feminist intent. Yu and He have chosen to advance the feminist agenda in a way that is consistent with the local cultural context: in the name of maternalism, but act as a feminist. It can be said that they embody 'Chinese feminism': without radical claims, they profoundly challenge and change the inherent ideas about women and motherhood in their works.<sup>12</sup> Their creations belong to

<sup>1</sup> Wing, (2003). *Technology, Commentary and the Admonitions for Women*, 60.

<sup>2</sup> Sasha Su-Ling Welland, (2018). *Experimental Beijing*. Duke University Press, 210.

<sup>3</sup> Welland, *Experimental Beijing*, 210.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Xueping Zhong, (2010). Women Can Hold Up Half the Sky, in *Words and Their Stories*. Leiden: Brill, 227.

<sup>6</sup> Welland, *Experimental Beijing*, 230.

<sup>7</sup> Kwan Kiu Leung, (2018). Uncompromising Female Aesthetic Subjectivity. PhD diss., Royal College of Art, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Leung, Uncompromising Female Aesthetic Subjectivity, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Man, *Bodies in China*, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Man, *Bodies in China*, 98.

<sup>11</sup> Jia Tan, (2023). *Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China*, vol. 30. New York: NYU Press, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Tani Barlow, (2004). *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 361.

the universal dialogue of feminism but also come from the unique response of the Chinese context. This dual identity enriches the face of global feminism and gives the title ‘Chinese feminists’ a different vitality.

In conclusion, Yu and He can be considered ‘Chinese feminists’ because of their deep engagement in feminist critiques of **gender, motherhood, and state control**. Their art challenges patriarchal structures much like Western feminist artists but through **coded and contextually specific strategies shaped by censorship and cultural constraints**. As such, they function as feminist artists **within the Chinese socio-political landscape**, demonstrating that feminist art does not require explicit declarations to be impactful.

Yu and He’s artistic practice uses **motherhood as a method rather than an essence—neither romanticising it as ‘divine’ nor denying its cultural significance**. Instead, they transform it into a critical lens to reveal **how power disciplines women through family, childbirth, and bodily autonomy**. In doing so, their art carves out a **third path that challenges gender norms within the cracks of the system**. Rather than seeking grand political statements, their work demonstrates that **‘Chinese feminism’ evolves through adaptation and resilience**.

## References

- Barlow, Tani, (2004). *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berg, Daria, and Giorgio Strafella, (2024). Author, Artist, Actress: China’s New Women Cultural Entrepreneurs. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 53(2), 167–190.
- Blanchard, Lara C. W., (May-August 2023). Defining a Female Subjectivity: Gendered Gazes and Feminist Reinterpretations in the Art of Cui Xiuwen and Yu Hong. *MODOS: Revista de História da Arte*, 7(2), 178–180.
- Brooklyn Museum, (2024). *Feminist Art*. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/zh-CN/areas/22>.
- Burge, Catherine Margaret, (2005). *Disagreeable Objects: The Sculptural Strategies of Louise Bourgeois*. PhD diss., University College London.
- Butler, Judith, (1988). The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva. *Hypatia*, 3(3), 104–118.
- Cao, Weiwei, (2015). Exploring ‘Glorious Motherhood’ in Chinese Abortion Law and Policy. *Feminist Legal Studies*, 23(3), 295–318.
- Chen, Tina Mai, (August 2003). Female Icons, Feminist Iconography? Socialist Rhetoric and Women’s Agency in 1950s China. *Gender & History*, 15(2), 268–95.
- Cui, Shuqin, (May-August 2023). Female and Feminism: A Historical Overview of Women and Art in China. *MODOS: Revista de História da Arte*, 7(2), 301–334.
- Dai, Jinhua, (2002). A Dilemma or Breakout? In *Women, Nation, and Feminism*, edited by Shuxin Chen and Jinhua Dai. Beijing: Zhongyang Bianyi Chubanshe.
- Ding, Ruilan, (2023). The Multidimensional Interpretation of Contemporary Art as an Organism. *Art and Design Review*, 11, 207–215.
- Dorros, Sybilla Green, (1978). The Status of Women in the People’s Republic of China. *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspective on Asia*, 16, 1–50.
- Engster, Daniel, and Maurice Hamington, eds., (2015). *Care Ethics and Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Flavel, Sarah, and Brad Hall, (2020). State Maternalism: Rethinking Anarchist Readings of the Daodejing. *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 19, 353–369.
- Goh, Wei Hao, (August 1, 2023). It Does Not Run in the Family: Chinese Performance Art and the Queering of the Confucian Family. *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 10(1), 65–83.
- Gong, Zhen, (2023). Interpreting Yu Hong’s Mother-Child-Themed Paintings from a Maternal Perspective. Master’s diss., Jiangsu University.
- Guest, Luise, (July 20, 2020). How Women Artists Are Navigating China’s Complex Feminist Landscape. NüVoices. <https://nuvoices.com/2020/07/20/how-women-artists-are-navigating-chinas-complex-feminist-landscape/>.
- Hubbard, Joshua A., (October 2018). The ‘Torch of Motherly Love’: Women and Maternalist Politics in Late Nationalist China. *Twentieth-Century China*, 43(3), 251–269.
- Kharchenkova, Svetlana., (2024). High Art on a Mug: Art Merchandise in China’s Contemporary Art Market. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 27(4), 629–647.
- Klausen, Susanne, (Fall 2013). Birth in Transition: Medicalisation, Gender Politics, and Changing Perceptions of

- Childbirth in the United States and Late Imperial China. *Journal of Women's History*, 25(3), 239–248.
- Kristof, Nicholas D., and Sheryl WuDunn, (2010). *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. First Vintage Books edition. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc..
- Lazzari, Laura, and Nathalie Ségeral, eds., (2021). *Trauma and Motherhood in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. Cham: Springer Nature.
- Leung, Kwan Kiu, (2018). Uncompromising Female Aesthetic Subjectivity. PhD diss., Royal College of Art.
- Ma, Wenyan, (October 19, 2024). Chineseness and Gender Studies of Collectives in 85 New Movement. *And Others: The Gendered Politics and Practices of Art Collective*. <https://artcollectives.org/chineseness-and-gender-studies-of-collectives-in-85-new-movement/>.
- Man, Eva Kit-Wah, (2019). *Bodies in China: Philosophy, Aesthetics, Gender, and Politics*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- McRobbie, Angela, (November 12, 2013). Feminism, the Family and the New 'Mediated' Maternalism. *New Formations*, 80(80), 119–37.
- Min, Chuqi, (2022). Sinofemcentrism and Its Manifestations in Art: Yu Hong, Cui Xiuwen, and Xiang Jing. Master's thesis, University of Texas at Austin.
- Pollock, Griselda, (2014). Painting, Feminism, History. In *Looking Back to the Future*, 138–76. London: Routledge.
- Sasha Su-Ling Welland, (2018). *Experimental Beijing*. Duke University Press.
- Shen, Q. B., (2007). *Pain in Soul—Performance Art and Video Works by He Chengyao*. Shanghai: Shanghai Zhengda Museum of Modern Art.
- Tan, Jia, (2023). *Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China*. Vol. 30. New York: NYU Press.
- Tate, (November 20, 2013). He Chengyao 何成瑶. *Tate*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/tate-research-centre-asia/women-artists-contemporary-china/he-chengyao>.
- Tate, (November 7, 2013). Yu Hong 喻红. *Tate*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/tate-research-centre-asia/women-artists-contemporary-china/yu-hong>.
- Thomas, S. Bernard, (2020). *Labor and the Chinese Revolution: Class Strategies and Contradictions of Chinese Communism, 1928–1948*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Wang, Ziyao, (2025). Censorship and Female Identity in Contemporary China. PhD diss., University of Glasgow.
- Welland, Sasha Su-Ling, (September 2003). Special Issue: Women Artists' Cruel/Loving Bodies. *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 2(5).
- Wenzel, Christian Helmut, (April 2009). Review of *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics*, by François Jullien. *Philosophy East and West*, 59(2), 240–243. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/261972>.
- Wilkinson, K., ed., (2008). *Signs and Symbols*. New York: Dorling Kindersley.
- Wing, Sherun, (2003). Technology, Commentary and the Admonitions for Women. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(1), 42–66.
- Zhong, Xueping, (2010). Women Can Hold Up Half the Sky. In *Words and Their Stories*, 227–247. Leiden: Brill.

## Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

# The Artistic Editing of Ambient Sound and the Construction of Emotional Tension in Urban Vlogs

Xin Zhou<sup>1</sup> & Pengsong Gao<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nanchang University, Jiangxi, China

Correspondence: Xin Zhou, Nanchang University, Jiangxi, China.

doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2025.05.006

## Abstract

This paper explores the aesthetic, emotional, and narrative roles of ambient sound in urban vlogs, situating this practice within broader East Asian media cultures and global soundscape theory. Through a multi-faceted analysis that integrates case studies, cross-cultural comparison, and theoretical synthesis, the study reveals how vloggers in China transform everyday soundscapes—such as the clatter of street vendors, the murmur of public spaces, and the textures of weather—into immersive emotional experiences. Ambient sound is not merely a background element in these vlogs; it functions as a powerful narrative device that shapes viewer engagement, evokes nostalgia, and constructs sensory spaces that bridge individual memory and collective identity. Drawing upon frameworks from soundscape theory, emotional geography, and multimodal narrative, the paper demonstrates how ambient sound editing in vlogs reflects a unique form of sonic poetics: a blending of cultural memory, personal storytelling, and aesthetic curation that extends beyond visual storytelling alone. The analysis highlights the participatory dynamic of audience reception, showing how viewers interpret, respond to, and emotionally connect with these curated soundscapes. Ultimately, the study positions ambient sound in vlogs as a key site for understanding contemporary digital storytelling, emotional engagement, and the evolving relationship between sound, space, and culture.

**Keywords:** ambient sound, vlogs, soundscape theory, emotional geography, multimodal narrative, audience reception

## 1. Introduction

Urban vlogs have rapidly emerged as an evocative medium at the intersection of digital culture, personal expression, and collective urban memory. These vlogs, widely distributed on platforms such as Bilibili, Douyin, and Weibo, are not merely visual diaries; they are complex multimodal texts that reflect the rhythms, contradictions, and atmospheres of rapidly evolving metropolises such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Wuhan. Within this emerging genre, ambient sound has evolved into a critical aesthetic and affective tool, used not only to enrich spatial realism but to create emotionally charged narratives that resonate deeply with viewers navigating similar urban experiences. Sound in vlogs—particularly ambient audio like street chatter, subway rumble, bicycle bells, or sudden silence—functions on both a literal and symbolic level. The editing of this soundscape shapes mood, guides audience perception, and articulates a narrative tension that is often more affective than plot-driven. Unlike traditional film scoring, which relies on composed music to evoke emotion, vloggers in urban China often embrace diegetic sound: real-world, environmental audio captured or constructed to mirror psychological states or urban anxieties. This conscious manipulation transforms ambient noise into an artistic medium of emotional storytelling.

As China's urbanization accelerates and social fabric becomes increasingly mediated by digital platforms, vlogs serve as both an archive of everyday experience and a performative expression of urban subjectivity. Drawing from theories of digital media aesthetics, soundscape studies, and emotional geography, this essay examines how



ambient sound editing in vlogs contributes to the construction of emotional tension. This includes the ways vloggers modulate tempo, isolate noise, layer resonance, or oscillate between cacophony and silence to dramatize urban isolation, nostalgia, excitement, or alienation. The study also situates this practice within broader East Asian ambient media traditions, highlighting how sonic atmosphere becomes a tool for both identity construction and emotional catharsis. This inquiry not only deepens our understanding of vlog-based narrative aesthetics but also explores how ambient sound editing functions as a creative response to the lived complexity of contemporary cities. Through a close examination of vlog samples, sound theory, and cultural analysis, this essay argues that ambient sound is not mere background—but a dynamic, edited foreground that animates and intensifies the emotional lifeworld of the digital urban flâneur.

## 2. Ambient Sound as a Narrative Device

In the realm of urban vlogs, ambient sound transcends its traditional role as mere background noise, emerging as a pivotal narrative element that shapes viewers' emotional and cognitive engagement. Vloggers meticulously capture and manipulate environmental sounds—ranging from the rhythmic clatter of Mahjong tiles in a Chengdu teahouse to the distant hum of traffic in Shanghai—to construct immersive soundscapes that reflect the complexities of urban life in contemporary China. This section delves into the multifaceted role of ambient sound in vlogs, exploring how it functions as a narrative device that conveys emotion, constructs space, and engages with socio-cultural discourses.

### 2.1 *The Role of Environmental Audio: From Documentation to Emotional Poetics*

Ambient sound in vlogs serves not only to document the sonic environment but also to evoke emotional responses and convey nuanced narratives. Drawing upon R. Murray Schafer's concept of the "soundscape," vloggers curate auditory experiences that encapsulate the cultural, social, and historical specificities of place. For instance, the juxtaposition of traditional instruments like the erhu or guzheng with the background hum of high-speed trains symbolizes the tension between heritage and modernity, prompting introspection and evoking a sensory memoryscape that transcends visual storytelling alone.

These ambient sounds function as sonic metaphors for broader social phenomena: the anxiety of urbanization is encoded in the ceaseless drone of traffic; the fragility of interpersonal connections is mirrored in the fleeting strains of an old pop ballad heard from a passing bicycle radio; the endurance of cultural identity is expressed in the persistent, though faint, echoes of folk melodies in crowded public squares. The vlogger, then, becomes an emotional cartographer, mapping not only the geography of the city but also the emotional undercurrents that flow beneath its surface.

### 2.2 *The Rhythmic Editing of Sound: Sonic Pacing, Tension, and Emotional Flow*

Editing ambient sound is an art of temporal and emotional modulation. Vloggers engage in sonic sculpting—intensifying, prolonging, or silencing specific sounds to guide audience attention, evoke affect, and structure narrative flow. This is not unlike film sound design, yet vloggers adapt these techniques to the unique affordances of vlogging: episodic formats, first-person perspectives, and an intimate proximity to everyday life.

For example, in capturing the chaotic vibrancy of a morning market, a vlogger might amplify the sharp crack of a cleaver slicing through pork, the rhythmic bargaining of a fishmonger, and the clatter of plastic bags—all mixed into a dense sonic texture that conveys urgency and sensory overload. In contrast, they may transition abruptly to a shot of an empty stairwell, where the only audible sound is the faint hum of an air conditioner. This sonic contrast—from density to sparsity—serves as a rhythmic breath, a moment of pause that allows viewers to reflect, recalibrate, and emotionally reset. Such modulation of acoustic density mirrors what Michel Chion describes as "empathetic sound"—sound that directly aligns with the emotional tone of the visual narrative.

Silence, too, plays a crucial narrative role. In the soundscape of vlogs, sudden silences—such as the moment after a subway train departs or the lull between raindrops during a downpour—function as negative space, emphasizing absence, isolation, or unresolved tension. These sonic voids create emotional punctuation marks, signaling shifts in mood or perspective and encouraging viewers to linger in a moment of introspection. Vloggers frequently employ micro-synchronization of sound with image—matching the rhythm of footsteps to scene cuts, or aligning the revving of a scooter with a camera pan—to achieve affective resonance. This rhythmic alignment transforms vlogs into multimodal essays, blending the documentary gaze with poetic subjectivity. The audience is drawn into a felt experience, where sound guides not only what is seen but how it is emotionally processed.

### 2.3 *Ambient Sound as Subtle Activism: Claiming the Right to Be Heard*

Beyond aesthetics, the ambient soundscapes curated by vloggers often carry implicit socio-political critique. In an urban landscape increasingly shaped by surveillance, standardization, and commercial homogenization, the decision to foreground local dialects, vernacular music, and unfiltered street noise is an act of acoustic resistance.

By amplifying the messy, unpredictable, and diverse sounds of the city—sounds that are often sanitized or erased in state media representations—vloggers reclaim the right to be heard in a rapidly transforming urban environment. In this sense, ambient sound becomes a site of memory, identity, and subtle defiance. The small, everyday noises—children playing in alleyways, the hawking of street vendors, the whistle of a kettle in a communal kitchen—become archives of the ordinary, countering the grand narratives of progress and control. These sounds, carefully curated and edited, offer a counterpoint to the spectacle of modernity, reminding viewers of the human, intimate, and affective textures that persist beneath the city's surface.

#### *2.4 Exemplifying the Narrative Power of Ambient Sound*

To illustrate the theoretical concepts discussed, we can examine specific case studies of urban vlogs that effectively utilize ambient sound as a narrative device. *Midnight Noodles in Chengdu*: In one vlog, the creator documents a late-night visit to a noodle stall in Chengdu. The ambient sounds—the sizzling of oil, the clatter of bowls, the murmur of patrons—are prominently featured, creating an immersive atmosphere that transports viewers to the scene. The vlogger employs minimal narration, allowing the sounds to convey the warmth and vitality of the nocturnal food culture. The rhythmic editing of these sounds, synchronized with the visual pacing, enhances the sensory experience and evokes a sense of comfort and nostalgia. *Morning Commute in Beijing*: The vlog captures the experience of commuting during rush hour in Beijing. The ambient sounds—train announcements, footsteps, conversations—are layered to reflect the bustling energy and underlying tension of the urban environment. The vlogger strategically uses moments of silence, such as the pause between train arrivals, to highlight the contrast between movement and stillness, crowd and solitude. This sonic narrative mirrors the emotional fluctuations of the commuter experience, from anticipation to fatigue. *Rainy Afternoon in Suzhou Gardens*: In a vlog, the creator explores a traditional garden in Suzhou during a rainstorm. The ambient sounds—raindrops on leaves, distant thunder, the rustle of bamboo—are meticulously recorded and edited to emphasize the tranquility and introspection associated with the setting. The vlogger's use of binaural recording techniques enhances the spatial realism of the soundscape, inviting viewers into a meditative state. This approach aligns with the aesthetic principles of garden design, where sound plays a crucial role in shaping the sensory experience.

#### *2.5 Soundscapes and Chinese Aesthetics*

The use of ambient sound in vlogs is deeply rooted in cultural aesthetics and philosophies. Traditional Chinese art forms, such as landscape painting and poetry, emphasize the harmony between humans and nature, often evoking sensory experiences through imagery and rhythm. This sensibility extends to the auditory realm, where sounds are not merely background elements but integral components of the aesthetic experience. The concept of “jing”, meaning “realm” or “state,” is central to Chinese artistic expression. In vlogging, ambient sound contributes to the creation of a “jing” by immersing viewers in a specific sensory and emotional environment. For instance, the sound of rain in a garden scene evokes a contemplative mood, aligning with the Daoist appreciation for natural cycles and tranquility. The integration of ambient sound reflects the Confucian value of “li”, or ritual propriety, by acknowledging and respecting the sonic characteristics of a place. By carefully capturing and presenting these sounds, vloggers demonstrate reverence for the cultural and historical significance embedded in the urban soundscape.

Ambient sound in Chinese urban vlogs functions as a powerful narrative device that enriches storytelling by conveying emotion, constructing space, and engaging with cultural discourses. Through meticulous recording and editing, vloggers transform everyday sounds into immersive soundscapes that resonate with viewers on multiple levels. These practices not only enhance the aesthetic quality of vlogs but also contribute to the preservation and appreciation of China's diverse urban environments. As digital media continues to evolve, the role of ambient sound in narrative construction will likely expand, offering new opportunities for creative expression and cultural engagement. Future research could explore the impact of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality and spatial audio, on the production and consumption of ambient soundscapes in digital storytelling.

### **3. Emotional Tension and Urban Experience**

In the rapidly urbanizing landscapes of contemporary China, the sensory experiences of city dwellers are in constant flux. Among these sensory modalities, sound plays a pivotal role in shaping the emotional and psychological landscapes of urban life. Vloggers, as chroniclers of everyday experiences, have increasingly harnessed ambient sound as a narrative device to convey the complexities of urban existence. This section explores how ambient sound in vlogs constructs emotional tension and reflects the multifaceted urban experience, drawing upon theoretical frameworks from sound studies, urban sociology, and cultural geography.

#### *3.1 The Soundscape of Urban China*

The concept of the “soundscape,” as introduced by R. Murray Schafer, refers to the acoustic environment as



perceived by humans. Schafer distinguishes between “hi-fi” soundscapes, characterized by clarity and low ambient noise, and “lo-fi” soundscapes, marked by high levels of ambient noise and reduced acoustic clarity. urban environments often exemplify the latter, with dense populations and incessant construction contributing to a cacophonous auditory backdrop.

However, vloggers selectively curate these soundscapes, emphasizing certain sounds while muting others to craft a particular emotional narrative. This practice aligns with the notion of “affective atmospheres,” which refers to the shared, spatially distributed feelings that permeate social life. By manipulating ambient sound, vloggers create affective atmospheres that resonate with viewers, evoking emotions ranging from nostalgia to anxiety.

### 3.2 *Sonic Cartographies of the Chinese City*

The emotional tension constructed through ambient sound in urban vlogs cannot be dissociated from the complex spatial contradictions of China’s post-socialist urbanization. Vloggers navigate a fragmented urban fabric—where the glitter of glass-clad skyscrapers towers over crumbling hutongs, where high-speed trains rush past rusting factory districts, and where mega-malls coexist with ancestral temples. These physical juxtapositions create acoustic dissonances: the heavy bass of a nightclub bleeding into the quiet chime of a Buddhist bell, the metallic clank of construction equipment merging with the crackle of fireworks during Spring Festival. Vloggers capture these sounds not as passive observers, but as curators of urban atmospheres, selectively foregrounding or muting them in post-production to construct emotional landscapes.

The editing of ambient sound mediates the relationship between external space and internal feeling. For example, in a scene where a vlogger walks alone down a rain-slicked alley in Beijing, the rhythmic amplification of footsteps—each echo stretching into a soft reverb—creates a sense of isolation, magnifying the emptiness of the surrounding environment. The distant wail of a siren, layered subtly under the ambient track, introduces an element of unease, evoking both the literal presence of authority and the psychological undercurrent of urban surveillance.

The persistent hum of a public address system in a Shenzhen metro station may seem mundane, but when emphasized through selective editing—its flat, impersonal cadence rising just above the surrounding chatter—it becomes a symbol of systemic control and the erasure of individuality. This practice of sonic framing allows vloggers to transform ordinary sounds into emotionally charged cues, turning everyday spaces into affective micro-dramas that reflect broader tensions: between freedom and regulation, nostalgia and progress, intimacy and alienation.

These choices contribute to what cultural geographers call “affective atmospheres”—the shared, spatially distributed feelings that permeate social life. The compressed rush of motorbikes, the faint strains of a love song leaking from a convenience store, the sudden hush after a burst of fireworks—all these sounds become emotional textures woven into the fabric of urban experience. Through careful sound design, vloggers invite viewers to *feel* the city: the claustrophobia of crowded subway cars, the melancholy of twilight streets, the thrill of bustling night markets. Each auditory decision, from the softening of background noise to the insertion of an isolated soundbite, is a brushstroke in the emotional portrait of the city.

### 3.3 *Sonic Remembrance in Post-Traumatic Urbanism*

In cities marked by collective trauma—such as Wuhan in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown—ambient sound assumes an even greater psychological and symbolic significance. Here, soundscapes are not only tools of narrative tension but also mediums of healing, resilience, and cultural continuity. W. Zhang documents how vloggers in Wuhan reintroduced familiar sounds into their videos as a way of reclaiming public space and rebuilding collective memory. The click of bicycle bells, once muted during the eerie quiet of lockdown, now rings louder, symbolizing a return to normalcy. The sizzle of street food stalls, the rhythmic cadence of tai chi music in parks, and the chatter of vendors hawking fruit become not just sound effects but auditory testaments to survival and resilience.

This sonic nostalgia is carefully crafted through editing. Vloggers often enhance certain sounds—raising their volume slightly, adding subtle reverb, or looping them briefly to create a lingering presence—thus transforming mundane noises into sonic monuments. These soundscapes become memory-objects, connecting viewers to a shared emotional past. When audiences hear the faint strains of a familiar pop song drifting from a café in Wuhan or the murmur of elderly neighbors gossiping outside a convenience store, they are not just recalling a specific scene; they are participating in a ritual of collective healing, re-weaving the broken threads of daily life into a tapestry of belonging.

This affective work resonates with anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s concept of “ordinary affects”—the subtle, often overlooked feelings that circulate in everyday environments. Through ambient sound, vloggers amplify these affects, allowing moments of tenderness, loss, hope, or anxiety to surface within the flow of visual narrative. The result is an emotional landscape that is both personal and collective, where viewers can feel the

weight of urban alienation but also the warmth of shared resilience.

Ambient sound in vlogs often blurs the line between documentary and affective fiction. For instance, a vlogger may overlay the sound of a crackling vinyl record over footage of a modern shopping mall, creating a temporal dissonance that evokes longing for a slower, analog past in the face of hyper-consumerist modernity. Or they might add soft, echoing footsteps to a scene of an empty street at dawn, imbuing the silence with a sense of quiet anticipation or existential uncertainty. These aesthetic choices are not random; they are emotional scripts that guide viewers through the complex, often contradictory feelings that define contemporary urban life.

The editing of ambient sound in vlogs is not just a technical layer of production—it is a deeply affective practice that transforms raw sensory material into narratives of place, memory, and emotion. It is a form of sonic storytelling that captures the emotional aftershocks of rapid urban change and offers viewers a space for reflection, empathy, and collective identification.

#### 4. Comparative and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

The use of ambient sound as a narrative and affective tool in vlogs is part of a broader East Asian media ecology shaped by cultural aesthetics, historical traditions, and technological advancements. To fully understand the significance of ambient sound editing in vlogs, we must compare it with parallel practices in Japanese, Korean, and other global media cultures. This comparative lens illuminates how soundscapes are not just a backdrop but a rich emotional layer that conveys mood, memory, and atmosphere.

##### 4.1 East Asian Aesthetic Lineages

Japanese ambient media, especially its connection to concepts like wabi-sabi and ma, emphasizes natural soundscapes: rain on rooftops, waves lapping against the shore, birdsong in a quiet forest. These sounds, often presented in continuous loops, create a meditative, introspective atmosphere. The Japanese aesthetic leans toward creating tranquil soundscapes that evoke timelessness and serenity.

By contrast, vlogs embrace a sonic realism deeply embedded in the rhythms of urban life. While natural elements like the rustling of leaves or the trickle of a river may appear, they are often juxtaposed with the vibrancy of city soundscapes: the crackle of a street food wok, the rhythmic clatter of Mahjong tiles, the gentle murmur of dialects in a market, or the faint melodies of traditional instruments woven into the hum of modernity. These sounds do not merely document but evoke the tension between heritage and change, community and individuality.

Table 1.

Aspect	Japanese Ambient	Chinese Vlogs
Dominant Sounds	Rain, wind, nature, subtle reverb	Street vendors, traffic, traditional instruments
Emotional Register	Calm, introspective, nostalgic	Vibrant, bittersweet, layered
Aesthetic Principle	Wabi-sabi, Ma, nature	Sonic realism, urban immersion, cultural memory
Editing Technique	Long loops, minimal cuts	Rhythmic pacing, layering, contrasts

##### 4.2 Sound as Emotional Archive

Ambient sound in Chinese vlogs is often an emotional archive: it connects viewers to sensory memories of place, season, and shared experiences. A recording of bicycles rattling over cobblestones may evoke summer evenings in a small alley; the buzz of cicadas calls forth the heat of a July afternoon. Vloggers consciously select and emphasize these sounds—sometimes isolating them, sometimes layering them—to create a sonic tapestry that invites the audience into a shared affective space.

This differs from Japanese ambient streams, where the goal is often to cultivate a universal sense of calm. Chinese vlogs, in contrast, are more specific and textured: they do not aim to blur time and space but to situate the viewer in a precise moment, whether it is the bustle of a Lunar New Year market, the echo of footsteps on an old stone bridge, or the soft chatter of a family dinner.

Korean ASMR culture, known for its precise sound design (the crackle of paper, the fizz of a soda can), shares some aesthetic overlap but often centers on controlled, stylized sound events. Chinese vlogs, by contrast, embrace ambient imperfection: overlapping voices, the uneven rhythm of daily life, the unpredictable textures of weather and street sounds.

##### 4.3 Layered Storytelling: Ambient Sound within Multimedia Narratives

Chinese vlogs rarely present ambient sound in isolation. It is woven into a multimedia canvas: slow-motion shots

of lanterns swaying in the wind; close-ups of food sizzling on a grill; poetic captions in flowing script; the soft strains of a guzheng rising beneath the sound of rain. This layering creates an experience that is not purely visual or auditory but multisensory.

For example, a scene of an old woman tending her garden may feature the rustle of leaves, the gentle clinking of her tools, and a whispered narration reflecting on the passage of time. The viewer is immersed not just in an image but in a felt atmosphere, where sound evokes emotion, time, and place.

Table 2.

Modal Layer	Chinese Vlogs
Visual	Cityscapes, nature, food, daily rituals
Ambient Sound	Urban noise, traditional music, environmental textures
Text	Poetry, reflections, cultural idioms
Music	Folk instruments, electronic beats, nostalgic melodies

#### 4.4 Cross-Cultural Flow and Global Resonance

While rooted in local cultures, Chinese vlogs resonate with global audiences, in part due to the universality of sound as a medium of emotional expression. Viewers from different cultures may not understand a dialect spoken in a market, but they will recognize the emotional tenor of laughter, the gentle hum of a quiet evening, or the shared hush of a first snowfall. At the same time, Chinese vlogs contribute to a global conversation about sound and mood: they draw on cinematic techniques (sound bridges, fades, sudden silences), ASMR practices (close-up audio, binaural recording), and digital aesthetics (looped textures, sound overlays). The result is a hybrid soundscape: a blend of the hyperlocal and the transnational, where a rainstorm in Hangzhou or a festival in Chengdu becomes part of a shared digital sound archive.

Ambient sound in Chinese vlogs functions as a sonic poetics—a way of feeling and remembering, of situating oneself in the flow of daily life, of sensing the tension between the fleeting and the enduring. Through their sound editing practices, vloggers invite viewers into a world that is at once immediate and timeless, particular and universal. This practice reflects a broader East Asian aesthetic sensibility: an appreciation for the ephemeral, for small moments, for the beauty of imperfection. At the same time, it speaks to the global potential of sound as a medium: a way to bridge cultures, evoke shared emotions, and create immersive emotional landscapes in the digital age.

#### 5. Ambient Sound in Scholarly Frameworks

While the aesthetic and emotional power of ambient sound in vlogs has been explored through case studies and cross-cultural analysis, it is crucial to contextualize these practices within broader theoretical frameworks. This section synthesizes key concepts from sound studies, cultural geography, media anthropology, and narrative theory, positioning this study within a multi-disciplinary discourse.

At the foundation lies R. Murray Schafer's concept of the soundscape: the total acoustic environment as perceived by humans. Schafer distinguishes between hi-fi and lo-fi soundscapes—an urban street in Chengdu, with overlapping traffic noise, dialects, and vendor calls, exemplifies a lo-fi environment where sounds compete and blend. Vloggers, through artistic editing, engage in a form of acoustic ecology, selectively amplifying or muting elements to curate an emotional experience. This resonates with Schafer's idea of the "schizophonia"—the separation of sound from its source in modern media culture. Vlogs, by re-contextualizing ambient sounds, often dislocate them from their original time and space, transforming them into emotional cues and narrative devices.

Building upon Schafer, sound geography (Rodaway, 1994) suggests that sound is not merely a sensory experience but a spatial one. In vlogs, ambient sound becomes a tool of spatial narration: the echo of footsteps in a narrow alley conveys confinement; the distant murmur of a festival creates a sense of community; the isolated clang of a closing gate evokes finality. The vlogger, by manipulating these spatial sound cues, invites viewers to inhabit a sonic map of the urban environment, constructing emotional geographies that mirror the lived experience of Chinese cities.

Emotional geography (Anderson, 2009) emphasizes how emotions are spatially embedded. The nostalgia evoked by the crackle of an old radio in a vlog, or the sense of serenity elicited by the sound of flowing water in a garden, illustrates how ambient sound is not neutral—it is a carrier of collective memory and emotional resonance. Vlogs use sound to articulate feelings of belonging, loss, or curiosity, translating the textures of

everyday life into shared emotional experiences.

The concept of multimodal narrative (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) highlights how meaning in media emerges from the interplay of multiple semiotic modes. In Chinese vlogs, ambient sound interacts dynamically with visuals (e.g., neon-lit streets), text (e.g., poetic captions), and music (e.g., traditional melodies). This layering of modalities enriches the narrative, creating immersive affective environments where sound guides emotional interpretation, anchors spatial awareness, and deepens the sensory impact of visual storytelling.

Finally, the theory of affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009; Bissell, 2010) underscores how sound contributes to the emotional texture of a space. Vloggers do not merely record places; they design atmospheres through sound: the bustle of a wet market conveys vitality, while the muffled hush of a library scene evokes introspection. By editing ambient sound, they sculpt felt spaces, shaping how viewers perceive and emotionally engage with the urban world.

Incorporating these theoretical perspectives allows for a richer interpretation of ambient sound editing in vlogs. It situates the practice not only as an artistic technique but as a form of emotional cartography, cultural storytelling, and sensory immersion. This synthesis sets the stage for the concluding reflections on how these soundscapes resonate within and beyond cultural boundaries.

## 6. Audience Reception and Interpretation

While much of this study has focused on the artistic strategies employed by vloggers in constructing ambient soundscapes, it is equally important to examine how audiences perceive, interpret, and emotionally engage with these sound environments. This section draws upon audience comments, viewer responses, and content analysis to understand the affective impact of ambient sound on viewers and how these sonic elements contribute to the broader appeal of vlogs.

### 6.1 Sensory Engagement

Audience comments on platforms like Bilibili and Xiaohongshu frequently highlight the immersive power of sound in vlogs. Viewers often describe a sense of “being there,” evoked by the precise layering of ambient sounds such as the crackling of oil in a street stall or the rustling of leaves in an alley. Comments like “I could almost smell the food through the sound!” or “This rain sound brings back memories of my childhood summers” illustrate how ambient sound stimulates multi-sensory engagement, blurring the line between viewing and experiencing. These responses suggest that ambient sound serves as a form of emotional transportation—a conduit that allows viewers to imaginatively inhabit the spaces depicted in vlogs. The gentle clink of chopsticks in a noodle shop, the soft patter of rain on tiled roofs, or the distant hum of a city bus become not just background details but emotional triggers, sparking nostalgia, curiosity, or even longing in viewers.

### 6.2 Emotional Labels in Audience Discourse

Content analysis of viewer comments reveals recurring emotional descriptors attached to specific soundscapes. Words such as “nostalgic,” “healing,” “soothing,” and “warm” appear frequently in response to vlogs that feature gentle, familiar sounds like the clink of teacups or the distant chatter of markets. Conversely, vlogs with dense, chaotic soundscapes—such as crowded urban streets—elicit emotions like “exciting,” “anxious,” or “alive.” This pattern suggests that ambient sound not only reflects the emotional tone of a vlog but also shapes the audience’s affective interpretation of place and narrative.

Table 3.

Sound Element	Emotional Response (from Audience Comments)
Rainfall on rooftops	Calm, nostalgic, comforting
Street vendors shouting	Lively, dynamic, community-centered
Metro announcements	Hectic, tense, overwhelming
Crackle of a fire	Cozy, warm, home-like
Footsteps in an alleyway	Lonely, reflective, melancholic

These associations indicate that viewers not only passively consume vlogs but actively interpret and internalize ambient sound as part of their personal affective landscapes.

### 6.3 The Participatory Aesthetic: Viewer as Co-Author

Audience responses also reflect a participatory aesthetic, where viewers co-construct meaning through comments, suggestions, and personal associations. For example, a viewer might write, “This sound reminds me

of my hometown,” while another might overlay their own recording or create a remix using the vlog’s ambient track. These interactions extend the affective resonance of the vlog beyond the creator’s intent, demonstrating how ambient sound fosters shared emotional worlds in digital spaces. Some creators even solicit feedback, asking viewers how a certain sound made them feel or inviting suggestions for future sound-focused vlogs. This dialogic process blurs the boundary between content creator and audience, transforming ambient sound from a passive narrative layer into a collaborative affective medium.

By incorporating audience reception into the analysis, we complete the interpretive loop of production—text—reception. Ambient sound in vlogs is not merely an artistic device; it becomes a collaborative emotional field, where creators and audiences together engage in shared listening, remembering, and feeling. This participatory dynamic highlights the importance of considering not just the creation but also the reception and circulation of ambient sound in the evolving aesthetics of digital media. Understanding how audiences respond to these sounds opens new avenues for research into cross-cultural affect, media literacy, and the evolving role of sound in global digital storytelling. Future studies might investigate how ambient sound influences viewer retention, emotional identification, and the broader cultural resonance of vlogs in a transnational media landscape.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has examined the narrative and affective role of ambient sound in urban vlogs, revealing its centrality in shaping emotional tension, constructing sensory space, and expressing cultural memory. Through a multi-layered analysis of aesthetic lineage, sound as emotional archive, multimodal storytelling, theoretical synthesis, and audience reception, we find that ambient sound operates not merely as background noise, but as an intentional and nuanced narrative tool that deepens viewer immersion and affective resonance.

Vloggers engage in a sophisticated practice of sonic curation. Drawing from a uniquely East Asian aesthetic sensibility while responding to the contemporary dynamics of urban life, they transform ordinary soundscapes into rich emotional textures. Unlike the minimalist loops common in Japanese ambient media or the polished clarity of Western ASMR, the ambient sounds in vlogs embrace realism, complexity, and hybridity—fusing dialects, environmental noise, and music into an emotionally compelling sound environment.

Ambient sound in vlogs intersects with frameworks of soundscape theory, emotional geography, and multimodal narrative. It enables what we have called “sonic storytelling”—a process through which vloggers construct place, evoke mood, and stimulate memory not through words alone, but through rhythm, tone, and atmosphere. By embedding viewers into the felt world of urban China, these vlogs produce not only a visual document of the city, but a deeply affective sonic archive. The audience, as demonstrated through reception analysis, is not a passive listener. Viewer comments often describe emotional triggers—nostalgia, calm, warmth, melancholy—attached to specific auditory cues. The ambient sound becomes a shared affective field through which creators and audiences collectively experience, recall, and reinterpret the emotional weight of everyday environments.

Ambient sound should be seen not as a supporting feature of vlog production, but as a central mechanism of storytelling. It is a modality of digital authorship that allows vloggers to express not just where they are, but how it feels to be there. Future research may further explore the algorithmic and technological dimensions of sound in digital media: how platforms shape sound visibility, how spatial audio (3D/VR) might extend sonic immersion, and how machine learning tools affect the aesthetics of vlog editing. But at the core, the study of ambient sound in vlogs reminds us of something profoundly human: that we listen not only to hear, but to remember, to feel, and to connect.

## References

- Anderson, B., (2009). Affective atmospheres. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2(2), 77-81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2009.08.005>
- Bissell, D., (2010). Passenger mobilities: Affective atmospheres and the sociality of public transport. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28(2), 270-289. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d3909>
- Dancyger, K., (2018). *The technique of film and video editing: History, theory, and practice*. Taylor & Francis.
- Gao, W., Tian, Y., Huang, T., & Yang, Q., (2010). Vlogging: A survey of videoblogging technology on the web. *Proceedings of the 18th ACM International Conference on Multimedia*, 1-10. DOI:10.1145/1749603.1749606
- Hua, X. S., Lu, L., & Zhang, H. J., (2004). Optimization-based automated home video editing system. *IEEE Transactions on Multimedia*, 6(2), 190-202.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T., (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. London: Arnold Publishers.

- Lin, J. C., Wei, W. L., Yang, J., & Wang, H. M., (2017). Automatic music video generation based on simultaneous soundtrack recommendation and video editing. *Proceedings of the 25th ACM International Conference on Multimedia*, 1703-1711. DOI:10.1145/3123266.3123399
- Rodaway, P., (1994). *Sensuous geographies: Body, sense, and place*. London: Routledge.
- Voci, P., (2010). *China on video: Smaller-screen realities*. Routledge.
- Wang, J., (2024). Distinctive sound design: A comparative study on audiovisual analyses of different types of “immersive” short videos. *Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 7(1), 45-58. DOI:10.53469/jsshl.2024.07(01).06
- Wang, Y., Liu, Z., & Huang, J. C., (2000). Multimedia content analysis: Using both audio and visual clues. *IEEE International Conference on Multimedia and Expo*.
- Zhang, H. M., (2024). Multimedia technologies for presenting poetry in online educational blogs: Interpreting the poems of Chinese poets in contemporary music of China. *Education and Information Technologies*, 29, 1150-1168.
- Zhang, W., (2021). *Viral Sounds: Music, Affect, Healing and Nostalgia in Wuhan*. Doctoral dissertation, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong) ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).