# ALGORITHMIC AFFECTIVE REGIMES AND PUBLIC OPINION GOVERNANCE ON DOUYIN: EVIDENCE FROM CHINA'S SHORT-VIDEO PLATFORM ECOLOGY

Meng Yuan[1*]
Narong Anurak[2]

Received 6 February 2026
Revised 30 July 2026
Accepted 31 July 2026

**Abstract**

Platformization has reshaped the logic of public communication, making short-video platforms core infrastructure for the formation of public opinion. Using Douyin as a Chinese empirical case, this study constructs a unified analytical framework of Algorithmic Affective Regimes and adopts constructivist qualitative triangulation: 10 semi-structured expert interviews, three focus groups with 24 platform users, and thematic analysis of 140 policy, platform, and academic documents.

The core findings are as follows. First, based on insiders' accounts and platform regulatory documents, Douyin's recommendation metrics (watch duration, interaction rate, completion rate) structurally reward high-arousal emotional content, producing fluid, rapidly circulating public opinion with short issue life cycles. Second, algorithmic visibility stratification compels users to perform affective labor to gain exposure, turning emotional expression into the primary mode of public participation and creating affective echo chambers. Third, unequal visibility allocation extends spiral of silence theory into an algorithmic iteration, in which marginal viewpoints face systematic suppression in circulation. Fourth, platform governance suffers from a persistent lag, caught in structural tensions among commercial algorithmic logic, state institutional regulatory duties, and users' cultural communication demands. To mitigate these contradictions, this study develops a four-dimensional collaborative governance model grounded in empirical findings: technologically value-sensitive algorithm design, cross-stakeholder institutional coordination, public algorithmic-affective media literacy, and rational affective cultural cultivation. This paper systematically defines the multidimensional structure of Algorithmic Affective Regimes, distinguishes this framework from related communication theories, and offers targeted, context-specific governance suggestions for Chinese short-video platforms. This study enriches non-

[1] Ph.D. student in Communication Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University
[2] College of Communication Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University
Email: [2] narong.an@ssru.ac.th
* Corresponding author email: s665849013@ssru.ac.th

Western platform governance research and provides a transferable Algorithmic Affective Regime framework for comparative media studies in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Algorithmic Affective Regime, Affective Publics, Visibility Politics, Short-video Platforms, Public Opinion Governance, Multi-stakeholder Platform Governance

**Introduction**

Digital platforms are now vital for shaping and disseminating public opinion. Unlike traditional media, where professional editors have significant influence over what receives public attention, platform communication relies on algorithms that continuously rank, recommend, and suppress media. These systems are not neutral intermediaries, because the design and goals of the technologies and corporations determine what users see, how issues are placed in the public domain, and what forms of expression are rewarded (van Dijck et al., 2018; Gillespie, 2018). The platformization of public communication has thus shifted some responsibility for public relevance away from public media institutions and toward computational systems.

This change is especially evident in the short video scene, which tends to prioritize personalized feeds, intense visuals, and rapid content delivery that encourage instant feelings of personal impact. In China, short video platforms have played a significant role in everyday communication and public participation, and short video users comprise a substantial majority of the Chinese internet population (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2025). On these platforms, Douyin has become a popular site for entertainment, news consumption, social discussion, and public opinion. Its recommendation system therefore has direct effects beyond the individual audience in terms of media consumption, as well as the existence and propagation of public issues.

In this process, emotion is a central driver. Previous research finds that moral-emotional content characterized by high arousal and moral emotion is more attractive for interaction and spreads broadly across the internet (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Brady et al., 2017). Papacharissi (2015) has called these digitally connected groups, organized through shared feelings, affective publics. But emotional circulation on today's platforms is not just born of users' impulsive reactions. It is also shaped by algorithmic systems that treat viewing time, completion rates, likes, comments, and shares as signals of relevance. This means that content eliciting strong emotions may receive even more exposure, generating a reinforcing loop of emotion, interaction, and recommendation.

Algorithmic recommendation also enforces unequal visibility. Some expressions not only lack equal opportunity for circulation, but users still have the right to publish content. Users, recognizing or anticipating platform preferences, may use more intense affective language, dramatic portrayals, and visual metaphors to attract attention, transforming affective expression into platform labor. Meanwhile, moderate, unstable, or peripheral views may be rendered largely invisible and partly contribute to what we can understand as an algorithmic extension of the spiral of silence (Bucher, 2012; Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Public opinion is thus not only the output of people's beliefs, but also the result of algorithmically filtered attention to rival voices.

Previous studies have explored affective publics, algorithmic power, platform governance, and visibility politics, but these topics are usually examined separately. Consequently, relatively little attention has been paid to the dynamics among algorithmic ranking, performance emotionalization, user adaptation, institutional regulation, and media practice within an inclusive public opinion environment. This gap is particularly evident in the context of Chinese short-video platforms, where the combination of commercial platform logic, state regulation, professional media use, and socially tailored expectations of public expression can restrict user experience. To address this gap, the present study proposes the Algorithmic Affective Regime, an organized system of social dynamics in which algorithms, affective expression, behavioral feedback, visibility control, and governance shape the formation of public opinion.

The study aims to clarify three specific objectives: to explore how platforms and platform algorithms shape the affective landscape and diffusion of public opinion; to examine how users of these platforms, platform operators, regulators, and media practitioners act within this algorithmic affective public-opinion environment; and to propose multi-stakeholder governance pathways that reconcile free public expression with reasoned deliberation. The study addresses three research questions: RQ1. How do platform algorithms shape the affective structure and diffusion pathways in public opinion? RQ2. How do all actors– users, platform operators, regulators, media practitioners– interact in the algorithmic, affective public-opinion ecosystem? RQ3. What multi-stakeholder collaborative governance paths can balance free public expression with rational deliberation? The study is expected to contribute theoretically by integrating affective-public, algorithmic-visibility, and platform-governance perspectives; empirically by providing evidence from Douyin within the broader context of Chinese platforms; and practically by proposing a joint governance structure for platforms, regulators, media practitioners, and users.

## Literature Review

### Public Sphere, Affective Publics, and Short-Video Communication

Classical public sphere theory emphasizes rational deliberation and consensus-building as central conditions of public communication (Habermas, 1989). However, the expansion of digital platforms has transformed public discourse into a more fragmented, networked, and emotionally driven process. In this environment, emotion is no longer treated merely as a secondary response to information, but as a constitutive force shaping public participation, collective identity, and political mobilization.

Papacharissi (2015) introduces the concept of affective publics to describe networked formations connected through shared emotions, narratives, and expressions of sentiment. These publics are often temporary, loosely organized, and activated by emotionally resonant events rather than stable institutional structures. This view corresponds with Castells's (2009)

argument that communication networks shape social power by structuring meaning and collective action.

Short-video platforms further intensify affective communication because their audiovisual format, compressed narratives, music, visual symbols, and rapid-scrolling interfaces facilitate immediate emotional responses. Research has shown that high-arousal and moral-emotional content is more likely to attract interaction and circulate widely online (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Brady et al., 2017). Nevertheless, affective-public theory alone does not fully explain how platform algorithms select and amplify emotional expression. On platforms such as Douyin, emotional circulation is shaped not only by users' feelings but also by recommendation systems that transform viewing, liking, sharing, and commenting into signals of relevance and visibility.

**Algorithmic Power, User Adaptation, and Visibility Politics**

Platforms are increasingly performing gatekeeping functions through recommendation, ranking, and moderation systems (Gillespie, 2018). These systems influence what users encounter and which issues, voices, and viewpoints remain less visible. Tufekci (2015) argues that computational systems generate social consequences precisely because their decisions operate at scale while remaining difficult for users to observe or contest.

Algorithmic power is closely tied to the commercial logic of digital platforms. User attention, emotional responses, and behavioral data are transformed into predictive resources that drive engagement and revenue generation (Zuboff, 2019). As a result, recommendation systems may favor content that retains attention and stimulates interaction, even when such content does not promote informational diversity or rational deliberation.

Users are not passive recipients of algorithmic decisions. They develop practical beliefs about how recommendation systems operate and adjust their behavior accordingly. Bucher (2018) describes these understandings as algorithmic imaginaries, while Cotter (2019) shows that content creators strategically modify their practices to compete for visibility. Users may intensify emotion, dramatize narratives, or follow dominant expressive styles because they perceive these strategies to be more compatible with algorithmic recommendation.

Visibility thus becomes a scarce, unequally distributed resource. Bucher (2012) describes this condition as a "threat of invisibility," in which users are still formally able to publish content but cannot be certain that their expression will circulate. In the context of Douyin, algorithmic recommendation operates as a form of visibility governance because it simultaneously structures attention, emotional expression, and discursive influence. Content that conforms to dominant emotional patterns may receive sustained exposure, while moderate or marginal viewpoints remain less visible.

**Toward an Algorithmic Affective Regime**

Existing literature offers important insights into affective publics, algorithmic power, visibility politics, and platformization. However, these perspectives are often examined in

isolation. Research on affective publics focuses primarily on emotion-driven user formations, while work on algorithmic power emphasizes technological selection and platform control. Visibility politics explains unequal exposure, whereas platformization addresses the broader transformation of social institutions through digital infrastructures (Papacharissi, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

To integrate these perspectives, this study employs the concept of the Algorithmic Affective Regime, defined as a platform-mediated arrangement in which recommendation systems, emotional expression, behavioral feedback, visibility allocation, commercial incentives, and institutional governance jointly shape public opinion. The framework comprises four interrelated mechanisms: algorithmic emotional amplification, user affective labor, unequal visibility allocation, and governance lag.

First, algorithmic emotional amplification occurs when emotionally engaging content generates interaction that platforms interpret as a signal of relevance, leading to further recommendations. Second, user affective labor emerges when creators and ordinary users strategically adjust their emotional expression to secure visibility and recognition. Third, visibility allocation becomes political because exposure is distributed unevenly among users, topics, and viewpoints. Finally, governance lag develops when regulatory and institutional responses fail to keep pace with the rapid circulation of emotionally amplified content.

This framework also helps explain two related outcomes. The first is fluid public opinion, which refers to rapidly shifting public attention characterized by sudden issue emergence, intense but short-lived emotional peaks, and limited sustained rational deliberation. The second is the algorithmic spiral of silence, which extends Noelle-Neumann's (1974) theory by showing how marginal viewpoints may be discouraged not only by fear of social isolation but also by expectations of algorithmic invisibility. When users perceive that their views will receive little exposure, they may reduce participation, generate fewer behavioral signals, and further reinforce the dominance of already visible opinions.

Accordingly, the Algorithmic Affective Regime offers a more comprehensive explanation of how emotion, technology, visibility, and governance interact within short-video public opinion environments. It does not replace existing theories but synthesizes them into a platform-specific framework that explains the recursive relationship between algorithmic recommendation, user adaptation, affective circulation, and institutional response.

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to develop an in-depth understanding of the complex processes through which public opinion is formed on the Douyin (China) platform, as well as the subjective experiences and meaning-making practices of the various social actors involved in this process. The research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is co-constructed through interaction, interpretation, and

symbolic systems among social actors. Rather than seeking a single objective truth, this study aims to reveal how public opinion is perceived, interpreted, and shaped by different participants within a specific technological and sociocultural context, namely China's integrated media ecology.

To achieve this objective while ensuring research credibility, methodological triangulation was employed. Three primary qualitative data sources and methods were integrated: in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document and textual analysis. This strategy allows the same phenomenon to be examined from multiple perspectives, thereby enhancing the richness, validity, and robustness of the findings through cross-verification of the data.

**Overview of Research Design and Data Collection Methods**

Table 1 presents an overview of the three principal pillars of data collection, including their implementation strategies, research objectives, and expected outputs

**Table 1.** Overview of Data Collection Methods and Research Design

| Method | Core Objective | Participant / Material Selection | Implementation Process | Data Output |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Semi-structured in-depth interviews | To acquire specialized knowledge, strategic viewpoints, and thorough assessments of the platform ecosystem | Purposive sampling was utilized to identify ten key informants (refer to Table 2) | (1) Individual interviews conducted via virtual or in-person settings, each session spanning 60-120 minutes; (2) Semi-structured interview guides emphasizing platform mechanisms, emotional dynamics, and governance complexities; (3) Sessions audio-recorded with informed consent and meticulously transcribed | Approximately 120,000 words of interview transcripts serving as the primary analytical foundation |
| Focus group discussions | To investigate meaning construction, emotional articulation, and organic dialogue dynamics among regular users within group settings | Three heterogeneous cohorts comprising 24 engaged Douyin (China) users (refer to Table 3) | (1) Facilitated group dialogues extending 90–120 minutes; (2) Contextual scenarios employed to elicit reflections on public opinion occurrences; (3) Moderated interactions promoting diverse perspectives while tracking consensus emergence and divergence | Approximately 80,000 words of focus group documentation capturing interactive exchanges and emotional resonances |

**Table 1.** Overview of Data Collection Methods and Research Design (Cont.)

| Method | Core Objective | Participant / Material Selection | Implementation Process | Data Output |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Document and policy text analysis | To situate institutional frameworks, platform regulation evolution, and scholarly discourse | A comprehensive collection of 140 documents encompassing Douyin (China) community standards, transparency reports (2019–2024), regulatory frameworks, and seminal academic publications from CNKI and Web of Science | (1) Systematic thematic content analysis to isolate governance discourses and conceptual paradigms; (2) Triangulation with interview and focus group findings to establish intertextual connections | Policy framework and governance discourse |

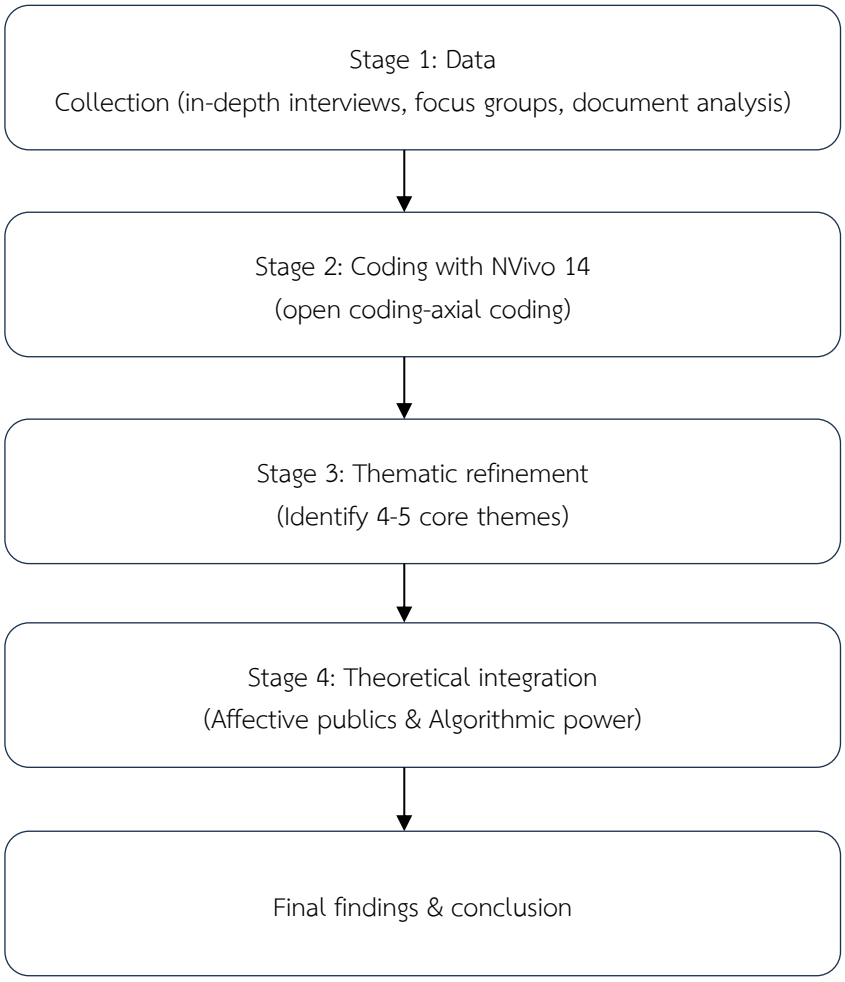


**Figure 1.** Research Process Diagram

This figure illustrates the four-stage iterative research procedure including data collection, systematic coding, thematic refinement, and theoretical integration

**Participant Selection and Composition**

**1. In-depth Interview Participants**

To ensure both depth and authority of information, interview participants were selected according to the following criteria: (1) a minimum of five years of professional experience in relevant fields; (2) direct involvement in content production, governance, research, or regulation related to the Douyin (China) platform; and (3) the ability to provide strategic and reflective insights. The composition of interview participants is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Composition of In-depth Interview Participants (N = 10)

| Code | Role Category | Position / Field | Core Experience | Interview Focus |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| E1–E3 | Academic experts | Professors in communication and sociology | Digital media research, public opinion analysis | Theoretical frameworks, ecosystem interpretation, social impact |
| E4–E5 | Platform insiders | Content safety and public policy managers | Platform rule-making, governance practice, government coordination | Algorithmic logic, governance practices, internal tensions |
| E6–E7 | Media professionals | Investigative journalists, new media editors | Public opinion reporting, fact-checking | Challenges to journalism professionalism, platform interaction |
| E8 | Government regulator | Local cyberspace administration official | Content regulation, crisis response | Regulatory perspectives, policy implementation, platform collaboration |
| E9–E10 | Industry consultants | Crisis communication and digital strategy consultants | Brand reputation management, creator operations | Practical strategies, commercialization and public interest balance |

**2. Focus Group Participants**

To capture diverse user perspectives, three focus groups were recruited based on usage intensity, demographic characteristics, and social roles.

**Table 3** Composition of Focus Groups (Total N = 24)

| Group | Participant Characteristics | Number | Recruitment Criteria | Discussion Focus |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| FG1 | University students specializing in media-related fields | 8 | Daily usage exceeding 1 hour; background in media literacy | Information assessment, emotional articulation, future aspirations |
| FG2 | Urban young professionals employed in creative industries | 8 | Daily usage surpassing 1.5 hours; both content consumers and creators | Professional impact, aesthetic exhaustion, algorithmic approaches |

**Table 3** Composition of Focus Groups (Total N = 24) (Cont.)

| Group | Participant Characteristics | Number | Recruitment Criteria | Discussion Focus |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| FG3 | Individuals with diverse social roles (educators, merchants, NGO staff, etc.) | 8 | Daily usage of over 1 hour; utilizing platform for professional and personal purposes | Practical utility, risk awareness, community bonds, civic participation |

**Data Analysis Process**

Data analysis followed a systematic, iterative process using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 14 for qualitative data management. The analytical procedure comprised four stages, as outlined in Table 4.

**Table 4** Qualitative Data Analysis Process and Procedures

| Stage | Core Task | Analytical Procedures | Output |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stage 1: Familiarization and Open Coding | Initial immersion and identification of meaning units | (1) Repeated reading of transcripts and analytic memo writing; (2) Line-by-line coding generating initial codes (e.g., "algorithmic appeasement," "emotional release," "perceived regulatory powerlessness"); (3) Open coding across all documents | Codebook containing over 500 initial codes |
| Stage 2: Thematic Clustering and Axial Coding | Identifying relationships among codes | (1) Grouping related codes; (2) Developing mid-level categories such as "algorithmic cognition and practice," "emotional labor," "visibility negotiation," and "governance tensions"; (3) Concept mapping | Network of approximately 15–20 core categories |
| Stage 3: Theme Refinement and Definition | Finalizing core analytical themes | (1) Returning to original data to evaluate representativeness; (2) Merging or removing weak themes; (3) Developing detailed definitions for each core theme | Identification of 4–5 core themes (see Chapter 4) |
| Stage 4: Integrative Analysis and Theoretical Dialogue | Linking findings with theory | (1) Selecting representative quotations; (2) Engaging with theoretical frameworks such as affective publics and algorithmic power; (3) Producing coherent analytical narratives | Completed findings and discussion sections |

Throughout the coding process, the research team maintained theoretical sensitivity to avoid premature abstraction and overgeneralization. To improve analytical transparency, the manuscript uses standardized coding chains with illustrative examples: raw participant quotation–initial open code–axial category–core thematic conclusion. Representative excerpts are presented in the findings section to demonstrate this coding procedure.

**Research Rigor and Ethical Considerations**

Several measures were implemented to ensure research credibility. First, member checking was conducted by sharing selected analytical interpretations with participants to verify their accuracy. Second, peer debriefing sessions were regularly held within the research team to discuss coding decisions and challenge potential subjective biases. Third, rich empirical quotations were incorporated into the analysis to enhance transparency and persuasiveness.

The study adhered to academic ethical standards and received formal approval from the Institutional Review Board of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. All participants provided informed consent before taking part and were informed of the purpose of the research, data usage, and their rights. Interviews and discussions were anonymized, and all identifiable information was replaced with codes or pseudonyms. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in encrypted formats accessible only to the research team.

All access to platform insiders and regulatory officials was obtained through institutional academic collaboration channels. All participant identities, work units, and identifiable personal information are fully anonymized using unique alphanumeric codes; all audio recordings and raw transcripts are encrypted and stored on password-protected research drives accessible only to the two authors.

**Supplementary Methodological Details**

(1) Semi-structured interview guides and focus group discussion prompts are attached in Appendix 1;

(2) Document inclusion criteria: All texts released between 2019–2024 directly addressing short-video algorithm rules, online public opinion governance and affective communication; irrelevant industrial marketing reports were excluded;

(3) Data saturation: The research team halted recruitment after 10 interviews and 3 focus groups, as no new core thematic codes emerged from subsequent collected data;

(4) Intercoder reliability: Two researchers independently completed open coding for 20% of all transcripts, achieving an intercoder agreement rate of 0.87; inconsistent codes were resolved via joint peer debriefing.

(5) Data collection timeline: All fieldwork (interviews and focus groups) was conducted between March and August 2025.

## Research Findings

The Operational Mechanism of the Algorithmic Affective Machine

### 1. Emotion-Prioritized Algorithmic Logic and the Emergence of Liquid Public Opinion

Drawing on insider interview narratives (E4, E5) and Douyin's official transparency documents, participants perceived that the platform's recommendation logic prioritizes engagement metrics such as viewing duration, interaction frequency, and video completion rate, creating a structural tendency to amplify high-arousal emotional content. Unlike traditional media, which prioritize informational value or public importance, algorithmic systems tend to favor content that can be immediately perceived and quickly acted upon. Emotion thus becomes a central variable driving information circulation rather than a secondary communicative element.

The analysis further shows that the circulation advantage of emotional content arises not only from user preferences but also from a feedback loop embedded in algorithmic systems. Emotional content generates rapid engagement, which the algorithm interprets as a quality signal, leading to increased amplification of visibility. This emotion–interaction–recommendation loop produces temporal compression, in which emotional diffusion occurs significantly faster than fact verification or rational deliberation.

Within this structure, public opinion increasingly exhibits liquid characteristics: rapid topic emergence, pronounced emotional peaks, and short life cycles. Public discussions struggle to develop stable interpretive frameworks because emotional dissemination often precedes the stabilization of information. Over time, this mechanism may weaken the cumulative nature of public deliberation, shifting public opinion toward immediate reaction rather than sustained negotiation.

### 2. Strategic Performance and the Normalization of Affective Labor

Users are not merely shaped by algorithms but gradually develop practical understandings of platform logic through continued use. Many participants showed a clear awareness of which types of content are more likely to be recommended and adjusted their expressive strategies accordingly. Content production thus becomes increasingly strategic.

In this process, emotional expressions are transformed into a functional communicative resource. Users intensify emotional tone, create dramatic tension, or employ affective visual symbols to enhance visibility, leading to the normalization of affective labor. Particularly in discussions of social issues, emotional expression comes to be perceived as a prerequisite for participation, while neutral or rational expressions are more likely to be overlooked.

This form of performative participation does not necessarily imply inauthenticity; rather, it reflects structural shaping by platform environments. Emotional display enables users to obtain recognition and immediate feedback, gradually rendering public participation more

symbolic and affect-driven. Focus group discussions suggest that some users engage emotionally despite limited understanding of the issues in order to avoid occupying a “silent position” within dominant public sentiment, further reinforcing the centrality of affect in the circulation of public opinion.

**3. Visibility Allocation and Algorithmic Centralization**

Closely associated with algorithmic amplification is the structural politics of visibility. Algorithmic allocations of visibility produce increasingly centralized distributions of attention, where exposure and influence are concentrated among a small number of users, topics, and content types. Although short-video platforms such as Douyin (China) maintain formal openness and low barriers to entry, the actual structure of communication introduces new forms of algorithmic centralization. Content that conforms to dominant emotional templates and platform recommendation logics is more likely to secure continuous visibility, while alternative or marginal expressions are easily overlooked or excluded. This mechanism gives rise to an algorithmic spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework helps explain how users manage their self-presentation in response to perceived algorithmic scrutiny. Burgess and Green (2018) document similar dynamics of visibility stratification on YouTube, suggesting platform-specific yet structurally comparable patterns. Over time, this dynamic consolidates algorithmic power, narrows the diversity of public discourse, and shapes a relatively homogeneous pattern of public opinion expression. The politics of visibility thus become a core dimension of platform power, structuring who can speak, what can be heard, and which voices remain permanently silenced.

**4. Governance Lag and Structural Tensions**

Governance interventions on short-video platforms typically target problematic content and extreme expressions rather than the underlying mechanisms that drive emotional amplification. Consequently, regulatory responses remain reactive and lag behind algorithmic evolution. Structural tensions persist across three interrelated dimensions: platforms' profit-driven technological logic, institutional responsibility for public order, and users' cultural adaptation needs. Existing measures – content removal, account restrictions, and technical filtering – fail to resolve the contradictions between commercial algorithms and public values. This leads to incomplete governance, recurring opinion risks, and persistent imbalances between emotional mobilization and rational deliberation. Thus, governance challenges are not isolated policy failures, but systemic frictions embedded in the Algorithmic Affective Regime.

## Discussion

The results show that opinions on Douyin are not formed solely through users’ spontaneous language or their informal interactions with peers. Rather, they emerge from a recursive relationship among algorithmic recommendation, affective engagement, visibility allocation, and institutional regulation. This is the core proposition of the Algorithmic Affective

Regime, which understands public opinion as jointly produced by technological systems, user practices, commercial incentives, and regulatory structures. In this context, emotion not only appears as a communicative factor, but also functions as an organizing principle of visibility and circulation.

First, the conclusion that recommendation metrics favor high-arousal emotional content indicates that algorithmic systems are shaping the affective structure of public opinion. Metrics such as view time, completion rates, comments, shares, and repeated interaction are used as behavioral signals to evaluate relevance across the platform. When emotionally charged content provokes rapid engagement, the algorithm treats this engagement as evidence of value and continues to promote the content. This result aligns with Berger and Milkman's (2012) finding that high-arousal emotions significantly increase the likelihood of online diffusion, and with Brady et al.'s (2017) report that moral-emotional language increases material distribution across social networks. The current study builds on these arguments by demonstrating that user-led emotional diffusion does not operate in isolation. It is structurally augmented by recommendation systems that continually transfigure affective responses into additional visibility.

This process also sheds light on the emergence of flexible public opinion. Public issues on Douyin often surge, reach dramatic emotional peaks, and disappear before a robust interpretive framework can develop. These patterns are not typical of sustained public deliberation, as emotional momentum takes precedence over fact-checking and reflective debate. Accordingly, our findings challenge the normative assumption that digital platforms inherently expand the deliberative community. Although platforms may broaden opportunities for expression, the temporal and algorithmic structures under which they operate can undermine the ongoing support needed to sustain reasoned public debate. In this sense, the results highlight a tension between Habermas’s (1989) ideal of rational deliberation and the affective, accelerated, fragmented communication context of short-video platforms.

Second, the normalization of affective labor shows that users are now actively adapting to algorithmic incentives. It was not only a matter of getting “recommended content”; participants developed a real-world sense of what these platforms were likely to reward and responded by adjusting their content to the extent they considered appropriate. This is consistent with Bucher’s (2018) notion of algorithmic imaginaries, which describes how subjects develop understandings of algorithmic systems and transform these understandings into communicative devices. It also supports Cotter’s (2019) argument about platform participation as a “visibility game,” in which users play by ambiguous rules of exposure. The importance of this observation is that it reframes emotional expression as a resource for public engagement. For example, users may heighten their tone, introduce dramatic conflict, increase emotional intensity, and engage through visual or symbolic cues to gain interaction. This

should not be taken to imply that their feelings are synthetic, of course, but it also does not mean they are necessarily artificial. Rather, their expression is shaped in the spaces of visibility and by what happens to them there – whether they perform or not.

Affective labor thus constitutes a structural adaptation to platform logic. Public participation is increasingly performative, given that visibility depends not only on the substance of an argument but also on its emotional intensity and communicative form – the form in which it is made. This process takes Papacharissi's (2015) notion of affective publics a step further. Affective publics are also known as networked formations structured around general emotions and narratives shared between people. Data collected in the present study demonstrate that these publics are also technically organized on algorithmically curated platforms. Their visibility, scale, duration, and internal hierarchy are influenced in part by recommendation systems. The study thus contributes to the notion of the algorithmic affective public, in which emotional bonding and algorithmic selection work hand in hand. The significance of this theoretical adaptation lies in the shift from emotion-driven collectivity to infrastructural mechanisms that determine which kinds of emotion become publicly consequential.

Third, the uneven visibility that emerges shows that Douyin's apparent openness does not automatically provide equal opportunities to communicate. Although users face few barriers to producing content, the algorithmic distribution of exposure concentrates attention on a small number of users, topics, and emotional formats. Gillespie (2018) argues that even when platforms do not resemble traditional media institutions, they still perform gatekeeping functions through ranking and recommendation, a conclusion supported by this study. This aligns with Bucher's (2012) notion of the "threat of invisibility," in which users are technically allowed to publish but cannot know whether their expression will reach an audience.

The findings extend visibility politics by showing that unequal exposure can create an algorithmic cycle of silence. According to Noelle-Neumann's (1974) initial theory, people with minority perspectives may refrain from speaking because they fear social isolation. On Douyin, however, silence may also arise from the expectation of algorithmic invisibility. Users may withdraw from expression when they believe they will not receive much recommendation or engagement. This silence is not an interpersonal squeeze but an institutional one, resulting from the structural allocation of attention. The algorithmic spiral of silence then perpetuates itself. Marginal views receive reduced visibility and generate fewer behavioral signals. The platform can interpret this lack of interaction as an indication of minimal relevance, which leads to even less visibility. Consequently, prevailing opinions seem more readily accepted than alternative viewpoints, which then appear socially insignificant. This process helps explain how a publicly listed platform could produce increasingly homogenized patterns of public discourse.

Fourth, what the governance lag reveals is a structural gap between the speed of algorithmic-affective circulation and the relatively slow pace of institutional response. Existing interventions often focus on removing problematic content, restricting accounts, or filtering harmful information once risks have emerged. While these measures may address isolated instances of immediate violations, they fail to engage with the underlying mechanisms that generate emotional amplification. This finding therefore supports the view that platform governance needs not rest exclusively on content control (Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018).

The governance issue arises amid tensions between three diverging logics. Platforms care about engagement, growth, and commercial sustainability, for example; regulators care about public order and social responsibility; users want to be able to participate and to be recognized for cultural expression and involvement. These goals are not always aligned. For instance, more engaging content (e.g., content that maximizes engagement) may intensify emotional conflict, while overly stringent governance may diminish expressive vitality and public participation. The challenge is not to remove emotion from public communication, but to ensure that emotional intensity is less dominant than any single criterion that determines visibility.

This study argues for a multi-stakeholder governance model rather than a platform-centered or state-centered one. Functionally, the design of value-sensitive algorithms should include indicators of informational diversity, source reliability, and excessive emotional concentration alongside engagement metrics. Institutionally, regulators, platform operators, media practitioners, researchers, and civil society actors need to build more transparent coordination mechanisms. From the user perspective, algorithmic-affective media literacy is required to help individuals understand how recommendation systems and emotional cues shape perception. Culturally, media platforms ought to foster modes of expression that retain emotional authenticity while creating greater space for reflection, disagreement, and evidence-based discussion.

**Suggestion**

The main theoretical contribution of this work is the development of the theory of the Algorithmic Affective Regime, which explains the structure, enhancement, and institutionalization of emotions through the interaction of algorithmic technologies, market incentives, user practices, and regulatory frameworks. This view differs from an instrumental one that treats algorithms as neutral conduits for selecting or transmitting content. Instead, it suggests that algorithms exert structural authority by shaping the conditions under which particular emotional expressions gain visibility, circulation, and public significance. Through this interactive process, public opinion is generated iteratively, involving emotional reactions and engagement patterns from which recommendations are extracted, and showing how increased visibility enhances and amplifies emotions in engagement.

The research also outlines a four-dimensional collaborative governance model based on the empirical tensions observed in the Douyin ecology. Technology-wise, platform algorithms could incorporate information variety, source trustworthiness, and deliberative quality alongside engagement metrics to mitigate the overrepresentation of highly arousing content. At the institutional level, regulators, platform operators, media practitioners, researchers, and relevant social agents need to establish consistent coordination mechanisms that enable earlier risk detection and more adaptive responses. At the user level, algorithmic and affective media literacy should be strengthened to help people recognize emotional manipulation, understand recommendation systems, and navigate diverse information exposure. Culture-wise, platforms and content producers have a duty to foster dialogue that is both emotionally driven and factual, so that expressive vitality is preserved while enabling more introspective and productive social discourse.

Finally, the results reveal some of the distinctive institutional features of China's platform-based public sphere. Here, platforms function not only as business models and communication infrastructures, but also as actors in social governance. Affect may thus operate as a nexus between the sources of public opinion risk and the organizational forces of collective attention, social identification, and public response. Accordingly, the governance of algorithmically mediated public opinion is a matter of institutional and cultural configuration. At the same time, it has broader comparative value within the Algorithmic Affective Regime framework because it serves as a normative guide for how different populations address the tensions between emotional expression and algorithmic visibility, and between public rationality and institutional control.

**Limitations and Future Research**

There are some limitations that we need to note. First, the study relies on qualitative data from a single platform (Douyin, China), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other short-video platforms or cultural contexts. Second, the cross-sectional design captures user experiences at a single relevant point in time, but users' emotional states on short-video platforms may change in response to unfolding sociopolitical events, as these dynamic contextual variables are difficult to regulate and control. These changes may be more effectively captured through longitudinal or diary-based methods. Third, triangulation lends credibility; however, it is difficult to observe algorithmic operations directly. Future research could adopt comparative or mixed-method approaches to further examine the Algorithmic Affective Regime across different platform environments.

**Conclusion**

This study examines public opinion formation and platform governance on Douyin (China), showing that platform-based public discourse is shaped by algorithmic visibility

allocation and affect-driven participation. Algorithmic systems structurally privilege high-arousal emotional content, accelerating its circulation while constraining deliberative space. The study introduces the concept of the Algorithmic Affective Regime to explain how algorithmic power and affective engagement function as mutually reinforcing forces in contemporary platform communication.

Governance challenges on short-video platforms stem from routine platform operations rather than isolated regulatory failures. This underscores the need for collaborative governance that integrates technological design, institutional responsibility, media literacy, and cultural adaptation. In practical terms, strengthening algorithmic and affective literacy among ordinary users is essential. Users are often unaware of how recommendation algorithms prioritize emotional content and how their engagement fuels visibility loops. Educational initiatives that help users recognize affective manipulation and seek alternative content can partially mitigate these unintended consequences. Although the analysis is grounded in the context of Chinese platforms, the theoretical framework has broader implications for understanding public communication under platformization.

Beyond the Chinese context, the theoretical framework and four-dimensional collaborative governance model proposed in this paper can serve as a reference for analyzing emotional public opinion and optimizing platform regulation on Thailand's local TikTok, providing localized solutions for research on Southeast Asian digital media governance.

## References

Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral? *Journal of Marketing Research, 49*(2), 192–205. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.10.0353

Brady, W. J., Wills, J. A., Jost, J. T., Tucker, J. A., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2017). Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *114*(28), 7313-7318. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1618923114

Bucher, T. (2012). Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *New Media & Society, 14*(7), 1164–1180. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812440159

Bucher, T. (2018). *If...then: Algorithmic power and politics.* Oxford University Press.

Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2018). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.

Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power.* Oxford University Press.

China Internet Network Information Center. (2025). *The 55th statistical report on China's internet development.* https://www.cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/202505/P020250514564119130448.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society, 21*(4), 895–913. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684

Duffy, B. E., & Meisner, C. (2023). Platform governance at the margins: Social media creators' experiences with algorithmic (in)visibility. *Media, Culture & Society, 45*(2), 285–304. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221111923

Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media.* Yale University Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* Anchor Books.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society (T. Burger & F. Lawrence, Trans.).* MIT Press.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). The spiral of silence: A theory of public opinion. *Journal of Communication, 24*(2), 43–51. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics.* Oxford University Press.

Tufekci, Z. (2015). Algorithmic harms beyond Facebook and Google: Emergent challenges of computational agency. *Colorado Technology Law Journal, 13*(2), 203–218. https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/ctlj/vol13/iss2/4

van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world.* Oxford University Press.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power.* PublicAffairs.