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Governance Challenges of Chinese Short Video Platforms

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Abstract. In recent years, short video platforms have gained unprecedented popularity. Chinese short video platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou now attract a rapidly expanding user base. These short video platforms have powerful algorithms, user-friendly content creation tools, short content, and maximize user engagement. Platform operators, creators, and users are the key stakeholders in the production and dissemination of content. In the interaction between these subjects, Chinese short video platforms pose governance issues such as labor alienation, content homogenization, and negative impacts on user mental health. These problems arise from algorithmic deficiencies, operational mechanisms, and economic motive. The research finds that driven by the attention economy, Chinese short video platforms use preference-restricting algorithms and specific mechanisms to control content and behavior, leading to multiple problems. It is necessary to address a series of issues concerning the development of short video platforms. Effective governance requires coordinated efforts from stakeholders, including platforms, creators, users, and society. When these stakeholders take effective action, it is possible to foster a healthier digital environment.

Keywords: Short Video Platforms, Digital Labor, Algorithmic Governance

1. Introduction

Globally, the digital economy is expanding rapidly. In China's digitally-transformed society, the short video platforms, such as Douyin (China's TikTok) and Kuaishou, have experienced meteoric growth, transforming the digital ecosystem worldwide. These platforms have redefined content creation, consumption, and marketing, attracting an increasing number of users and content creators. However, the rapid expansion of these platforms has also resulted in some negative consequences.

Existing research has highlighted the rise of algorithmic biases, the proliferation of superficial content, and the pressures placed on content creators, especially women, to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. Despite these concerns, few studies have analyzed the issue from the perspective of Chinese short video platforms, making it necessary to examine it in greater detail. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the question of "What issues within China's short video platforms should be addressed through governance?" Specifically, this study seeks to analyze what China's short video platforms are, which stakeholders are involved, and what problems these platforms create for these stakeholders. Additionally, it examines which characteristics of China's short video platforms contribute to the emergence of these issues and proposes governance strategies to address them.

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This paper is important because it has valuable practical and theoretical contributions. Theoretically, it takes China's short form video platforms as an example to expand the governance research on content-based digital platforms. By understanding the interaction between algorithmic and user behavior of China's short video platforms, it contributes to research on Chinese digital platform governance. Practically, the paper analyzes the negative impacts of China's short video platforms on relevant stakeholders and proposes governance recommendations. These findings can supplement the attention and evaluation of China's short video platforms, and increase calls for a healthier and fairer digital environment.

2. Chinese short video platforms

2.1. Platforms characteristics

Chinese short video platforms are unlike typical video platforms in three fundamental ways. First, they have superior technologies that curate a watch-time-centric recommendation system and recommend videos that appeal to the eyes. Second, the content is fragmented in that most of it is in 15- to 60-second formats, optimising quick consumption. Additionally, since almost anyone is able to create and post videos instantaneously on the platform, the homogeneity of the content is also a concern [1].

Unlike Western platforms such as YouTube or Instagram, Chinese short video platforms embed monetisation mechanisms—tipping, live-stream e-commerce, brand collaborations—directly into the interface. Traffic is explicitly tied to revenue through a set of traffic-reward rules that compel creators to satisfy algorithmic preferences [2].

Douyin and Kuaishou are the two most popular short video platforms in China, drawing a heterogeneous user base from every tier of city. These platforms host an eclectic mix of content—beauty tutorials, knowledge bites, lifestyle vlogs, and more. Some content on such platforms appears to promote and pursue a luxurious lifestyle.

Douyin and Kuaishou demonstrate unique characteristics. They are short video platforms based on mobile applications and focus on sharing short videos. In addition, both platforms integrate e-commerce functions directly into the user experience. Douyin and Kuaishou create a distinctive "watch-and-purchase" pathway for users. Their technical structures are designed from the user's perspective, with the primary goal of maximizing engagement. This objective is achieved through three mechanisms: segmenting and converting long videos into short clips, automatically discovering and ranking popular content, and providing user-friendly creative tools that encourage participation and content recombination.

2.2. Stakeholders of short video platforms

The stakeholders related to China's short video platforms include platform operators, creators, and users. Platform operators guide and regulate the behavior of other stakeholders through a series of mechanisms. Meanwhile, both creators and users face various challenges under the influence of the platform.

Short video creators include both regular users and professional creators, as well as a specific group of female creators who produce short videos on the platform. For female creators, digital platforms steer them into "gender-coded labor," compelling them to perform a carefully curated femininity that satisfies both algorithmic and audience expectations [3].

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Short video users exhibit diverse characteristics in terms of age, location, occupation, and personality. They usually use devices such as smartphones and iPads to access short video platforms to meet various needs. Some users become addicted to scrolling through short videos daily.

Although China's short video platforms offer benefits in terms of promoting expression and providing information, the designs and oversights of platform operators, coupled with the lack of regulation from other stakeholders, have led to some negative impacts on creators and users.

2.3. Negative impacts

On Chinese short video platforms, the interaction between platform architecture and consumer behavior leads to three negative outcomes.

The first negative impact is labor alienation. Creators—especially women—perform gender-conforming and beautifying image labor (such as beauty performances) and engage in visibility labor (such as self-branding) to gain algorithmic favor [4]. This procedure is indeed transforming innovative thinking into bland products. It is evident in the majority of the female top creators on Douyin, who follow the "white-skinned, thin" standards, that they fall into the trap of self-objectification and risk severe burnouts [5].

As for the second issue, it is the monotony present in the content. The traffic-rewarding mechanism implemented on the short video platforms leads to the misuse of incentives as it pushes the producers to keep in line with the emerging trends instead of coming up with their own [6]. The incentive mechanism will channel user'attention to mass low-quality content. The outcome is a myriad of lowbrow, reactionary content, flesh-click-bait challenges, and other misrepresentative, preformulated, uninformative, and creativity-thwarting materials flood the space.

The mental health of teenagers is also greatly impacted by the platforms. Many teenagers are affected by the images of "perfect" that are presented in short video clips. They tend to view life in the light of the polished and digitally enhanced scenes depicted in platforms. Adolescents who watch more than 2.6 hours a day are more likely to become dependent on specific content, and their pursuit of an "ideal self" may turn into physical and psychological pressure [7]. Adding to the shot videos, the young people is more susceptible to issues such as fralgmented attention span, lowered academic achievement, and increased anxiety [8]. Algorithmic amplification of idealistic body models worsens social comparison and self-esteem issues, especially among adolescent girls exposed to beauty orientation content.

Therefore, China's short video platforms have already caused a series of negative impacts on creators and users, making it necessary to investigate their underlying causes. When studying why these issues arise on China's short video platforms, it is obvious that they result from the interplay between the platforms, creators, users, and regulators. However, the more fundamental cause lies in the design and guidance of the platforms themselves.

3. Causes of the short video platform issues

During their development, Chinese short video platforms have exhibited distinct characteristics, especially regarding technology, mechanisms, and motivation. These features, reflected in content creation and dissemination, have given rise to a range of issues for both creators and users. A detailed analysis of these characteristics and their impacts is therefore warranted. Specifically, three interrelated elements jointly produce and perpetuate a self-reinforcing cycle that is detrimental to the short video platform ecosystem.

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3.1. Algorithmic deficiencies

China's short video platforms exhibit algorithmic deficiencies in their technical architecture. Platform operations are driven by algorithms that exhibit standardising tendencies in both workflow and content, generating a range of problems for creators and users.

The lack of transparency in algorithms, coupled with insufficient regulation, makes short video platforms more prone to creating information silos and generating low-quality content, which is then recommended to users, giving rise to new problems. Algorithm-driven automated recommendation systems further produce low-quality, addictive content that can impair the judgement and mental health of adolescent users in China.

In particular, the algorithms employed by these platforms have produced multiple biases, with aesthetic bias being the most pronounced. Algorithmic bias is obvious. Platform algorithms encode gendered preferences directly into their recommendation systems. On Douyin, for instance, the recommendation engine disproportionately promotes clips that adhere to a narrow standard of beauty, emphasizing specific facial features or body types. This creates a self-reinforcing loop [9]. Female creators are pressured to confine themselves to this restricted aesthetic. At the same time, most creators, chasing traffic, adopt similar tropes, further amplifying the issue.

Moreover, the algorithm entrenches content homogeneity: by uncritically catering to perceived user preferences, it structurally narrows the range of visible expression. When the algorithm identifies that a certain type of content has the potential to become popular, short video platforms will guide the creation of such topics and push these contents more actively, without fully identifying the quality of the content, thereby limiting the spread of other high-quality content.

3.2. Operational mechanisms

China's short video platforms have institutionalized operating mechanisms that cultivates and disciplines creators through traffic-based rewards, monetization strategies, and punitive measures. Yet these mechanisms have many flaws, their shortcomings lead to limited creator expression and the proliferation of low-quality content.

By leveraging monetisation strategies, Chinese short video platforms convert "behavioural traps" into revenue streams, thereby intensifying content alienation. Platforms such as Douyin continually dispense traffic-based rewards. Creators who closely follow trending templates receive handsome payouts, whereas those who pause posting are penalised. Short video platforms provide replicable templates, organize voting competitions, and offer monetary rewards to guide the direction and pace of content creation. This accelerates content production and dissemination while exacerbating homogenization and lowering overall content quality [10].

For example, the Creator Growth Program can reduce or even eliminate the earnings of accounts that stop regularly uploading content or attempt to leave mainstream algorithmic categories, such as beauty tutorials. Linking creator income to traffic, while failing to support high-quality content, can lead to unstable earnings, undermining the platform's promise to encourage diverse, free, and high-quality expression. Most creators face economic pressure, which requires them to maintain high productivity. In the process, they often prioritize visibility and income, resulting in the sacrifice of their creative independence and personal wellness.

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3.3. Economic motive

The operational logic of Chinese short video platforms is fundamentally anchored in the attention economy, whose dominant manifestation is "attention arbitrage" [11]. Specifically, the platforms' core task is to extract user attention, commercialize it, and then resell it to advertisers [12]. However, blindly attracting user attention to attract advertisers while ignoring ethical considerations exacerbates the alienation of creators' labor.

Within the attention economy, content that brings more views, longer watch time, and wider audiences is prioritized, which in turn encourages creators to imitate popular content. In this system, "beauty labor" has become one of the main strategies for grabbing scarce attention resources. While it effectively increases platform traffic, this labor simultaneously precipitates systemic self-objectification at the individual level, exacting a heavy personal toll [13]. Under the system of attention arbitrage, the majority of female short video creators are compelled to repackage themselves into increasingly standardised performances.

At the same time, short video platforms are designed for the maximization of user attention to generate economic value from subsequent engagement. On these platforms, every interaction with the system serves as feedback to optimize attention capture, which in turn drives monetization. Chinese short video platforms, like Douyin and Kuaishou, use a different strategy to keep their user's interest. They more focus on what the users want, and support the contents with the shorter worthwhile lifespan. In particular, they let even the less value but fun to watch video content mix in. Although effective, such a strategy can enhance mental and behavioral issues for users.

3.4. Systemic effects

The interaction between the algorithmic technology, operating mechanisms and economic motivation of China's short video platforms has triggered a series of problems affecting creators and users. First, algorithm-driven recommendation systems embed biases and rely on standardized content processes, leading some creators and users toward distorted behavior. Second, operational mechanisms further amplify these effects, particularly by affecting the content production process. Finally, short video platforms' pursuit of the attention economy inherently catalyzes these problems. The platform's various features do not operate independently, but rather systematically and continuously reinforce each other's negative impacts. Driven by the attention economy, the platforms use algorithms and mechanisms to control creation and dissemination, limiting the free interaction between creators and audiences. Therefore, it is necessary to study strategies adopted to optimize the governance of China's short video platforms.

4. Recommendations

To more effectively govern China's short platforms, the different sectors have to work together. For instance, beauty biases have to be recognized and addressed in algorithmic audits, and incentive strategies also have to be amended to reduce beauty content and other biases. The platforms should increase additional financial supports to reward and recognize diverse types of content [14]. It is important for creators to understand the nature of the short video platforms. "Beauty labor" should not be a single activity that female creators engage in. Users can also work together to regularly monitor the platform, to make the platform more creative through changes. Social Awareness can assist users in recognizing threats related to short videos. It is necessary to raise public awareness through activities.

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All stakeholders in society must pay attention to the risks posed by short video platforms. Stricter regulation is necessary to mitigate the addictive design of platforms. This includes the enforcement of China's Minors' Network Protection Law, with mandatory breaks and minors' usage caps [15]. The proposals must be accompanied by industry standards developed by multiple parties. Such standards aim to ensure that platforms remain innovative while mitigating their most harmful social impacts. By achieving the better balance, short video platforms can preserve their creative potential. At the same time, systemic issues can be effectively mitigated. Only when problems on short video platforms are promptly addressed can creators fully express themselves and users watch content with greater peace of mind.

5. Conclusion

This study examines Chinese short video platforms and highlights the defining features: diverse content, short duration, and algorithmic dominance. These features are closely linked to the interests of operators, creators, and users. However, the platforms are increasingly marked by labor alienation, content homogenization, and adverse effects on users' mental health. Such problems primarily arise from algorithmic deficiencies, specific operational mechanisms, and the logic of the attention-driven economy. Collectively, these dynamics shape the patterns of content production and dissemination, with negative consequences for both creators and users. Addressing these challenges requires multi-stakeholder governance: platforms should refine their algorithms, operational structures, and profit models; creators and users need to remain alert to potential risks and resist uncritical conformity, and society must enhance oversight through legal and policy. Coordinated efforts along these lines can contribute to building a healthier and more sustainable short video ecosystem in China.

This study identifies the key factors and constructs a framework that helps analyze Chinese short video platforms, thereby enriching existing research. At the same time, its findings offer new perspectives for understanding and addressing the current challenges of governing Chinese short video platforms.

However, the research still has limitations. First, although this study draws on existing literature to describe the characteristics and causes of problems on Chinese short video platforms, the findings remain preliminary, future work should use new methodologies and include more cases to deepen the analysis. Second, this study is based on the current status of Chinese short video platforms, longitudinal tracking of emerging practices is needed to capture their evolving features and the entire ecosystem. Finally, the analysis is limited to the Chinese context, comparative studies is needed to explore similarities and differences between Chinese and international short video platforms.

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