Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Social Psychology and Humanity Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.31013

Emotional Flow in Urban Interstices: A Study on the Spatial Practice and Interaction Rituals of the Guangzhou Metro's "Tree Hole"

Chenlu Jiang

Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University, Guangzhou, China
jiangchenlu2025@stu.gpnu.edu.cn

Abstract. The subway system is usually defined as Augé's "non-place" — a impersonal corridor with only a passing function. However, in Guangzhou, a special media practice known as the "tree hole" is challenging this stereotype. Why can a cold underground transportation network evolve into a warm public space? Taking Guangzhou Metro's "tree hole" as an entry point, this paper attempts to answer this question from the perspectives of spatial production and interaction ritual chains. Unlike previous studies, this paper focuses more on how atomized urban dwellers are reconnected through "embodied" presence and emotional resonance. The study finds that Guangzhou Metro's "tree hole" actually serves as the city's "emotional infrastructure." When people write civilian stories under landmarks such as "Jiahe Wanggang," the sense of alienation unique to modern cities is dissolved, replaced by a sense of identity based on geography and shared interests. This case vividly reveals that in the spatial production of modern cities, emotional communication not only has connection value but also is a key link in maintaining social solidarity.

Keywords: Emotional Communication, Spatial Production, Interaction Ritual Chains, Non-places, Guangzhou Metro

1. Introduction: reconstruction from "space of flows" to "sense of place"

In classic discourses on modern cities, the subway often presents a cold face. Whether it is Castells' "space of flows" or Augé's "non-places," the subway is portrayed as a space that devours individuality: there is only passage, no stopping; only crowds, no relationships. However, Guangzhou Metro provides a highly tense counterexample. Even amid the congestion and hustle and bustle of 8 million daily passengers, a media practice called the "tree hole" has tenaciously grown. It seems to confirm McLuhan's old saying — the medium is the extension of man. Except here, the subway extends not only the ability to move but also humanity's deep emotional needs. This raises the core concern of this paper: in an underground space that should be the most rational and efficiency-oriented, how does Guangzhou Metro's tree hole achieve this? Through what mechanisms does it transform a "non-place" filled with strangers into a "living space" with emotional depth and humanistic warmth?

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.31013

2. Theoretical framework: space, body, and ritual

This study attempts to build an analytical framework integrating media geography and microsociology to deconstruct the transformation mechanism from physical space to socially meaningful space. First, Lefebvre's perspective is adopted to examine the ontological attributes of the subway. From the perspective of "spatial production," the subway is by no means a static container poured with steel and concrete, but a dynamic field continuously restructured by social relations. As Lefebvre put it, through daily "spatial practices," people construct this underground tunnel into a "representational space" full of struggles over meaning. On this produced spatial stage, Randall Collins' "interaction ritual chains" provide a tool for capturing micro-level emotional flows. That is, how do strangers originally in a state of "civil inattention" break down barriers? The answer lies in "shared focus" [1,2]. Guangzhou Metro's tree hole precisely provides highly empathetic copy as this focus, facilitating physical presence and emotional resonance, thereby forming a temporary yet intense "emotional solidarity." Furthermore, the perspective of emotional geography runs through, helping us understand how this emotional energy does not dissipate but attaches to physical facilities, ultimately reshaping the cold subway into a "warm place" carrying profound urban memories [3,4].

3. Spatial decoding: narrative strategies and locality of Guangzhou Metro's tree hole

Unlike the subway advertisements in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, which focus more on grand narratives or commercial elite aesthetics, Guangzhou Metro's tree hole presents distinct "populism" and "local warmth." This unique textual feature is highly intertextual with Guangzhou's pragmatic and inclusive urban background, completing the cultural reconstruction of urban space through landmark metaphors and discursive resistance [5].

3.1. Landmark metaphor and collective memory: semiotic reconstruction of "Jiahe Wanggang"

In the textual system of Guangzhou Metro's tree hole, "Jiahe Wanggang" has long transcended the physical attribute of a mere transportation transfer station and been encoded as a "crossroads of youth" and an anchor of urban collective memory. As a key hub connecting the urban area, Baiyun Airport, and railway stations, this landmark is repeatedly written about in tree hole copy, carrying countless individual narratives of "separation and reunion" and "dreams and reality." From the perspective of spatial anthropology, Jiahe Wanggang has become a tense "liminal space" — it belongs neither to the place of departure nor fully to the destination, but exists in an ambiguous transitional state. Messages about Jiahe Wanggang in the tree hole often focus on the end of youth study, the breakup of couples, or the return of migrant workers to their hometowns. These highly personalized life experiences are connected through landmark symbols, awakening the collective memory of the "Guangzhou drifters" group. This kind of landmark narrative elevates atomized personal experiences (such as moving alone, working overtime late at night) into shared group experiences, thereby constructing a psychological "sense of place" in a foreign land and transforming a cold transportation node into a "place" full of warm memories [6,7].

3.2. Discursive resistance and emotional compensation: "micropolitics" of urban workers

The content production of Guangzhou Metro's tree hole has a significant "de-elitist" characteristic, serving as the "internet voice" of urban white-collar workers and migrant workers, behind which lies

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.31013

a profound logic of micro-power resistance. Under the high-intensity discipline of modern cities, subway commuting is often regarded as a tedious link between production and reproduction. The popular "crazy literature" or playful complaints in the tree hole are actually a form of micro-discursive resistance in the face of survival pressure. This way of expressing oneself — using disorderly language to resist ordered commuting discipline and irrational venting to deconstruct instrumental rationality — tears open a gap for emotional release in the highly rationalized subway space, embodying the "carnivalesque" quality described by Bakhtin. More importantly, this expression mechanism plays a role of emotional compensation. In the context of high-density spatial crowding and long commutes, individuals' sense of loneliness and alienation are infinitely amplified. The warm copy in the tree hole, whether encouraging strangers or capturing trivial moments of life, provides a substitute for emotional satisfaction, restoring the "life" texture to the mechanical commuting process centered on "livelihood" and realizing the re-appropriation of daily life alienated by capital logic [8,9].

4. Communication mechanism: embodied presence and O2O emotional cycle

The reason why Guangzhou Metro's tree hole has exerted a wide social impact lies not only in the locality of its textual content but also in its mechanism of "embodied presence" and "communication reproduction," which breaks down the boundaries between physical and digital spaces and forms a closed-loop emotional energy field.

4.1. Offline embodiment: "ritualistic interruption" in daily commuting

Taking the subway is essentially a highly stylized bodily practice. Passengers need to mechanically go through a series of processes such as entering the station, security check, swiping the card, and waiting for the train. This repetition inevitably leads to sensory dulling and indifference to the surrounding environment. However, through visual impact and emotional arousal, the subway tree hole effectively achieves a "ritualistic interruption" of this mechanical process. Due to the large number of people and short stay time in the subway space, the tree hole copy is usually designed to be concise and concise, pursuing a visual effect of "capturing the soul at a glance." This "small and beautiful" communication form is precisely adapted to the fast pace of the underground space, completing the emotional "hypodermic injection" in the moment passengers take a hasty glance. Collins emphasizes that "physical co-presence" is a prerequisite for the occurrence of interaction rituals. In the closed carriage, although passengers do not communicate with each other and are in a state of Goffman’s "civil inattention," when they collectively read a touching text, the shared physical field and the instantly resonant emotional atmosphere form a kind of "imagined co-presence." This experience of presence breaks down interpersonal alienation, temporarily incorporating originally isolated individuals into a micro-community based on emotional resonance.

4.2. Online echo: re-alignment from "atomization" to "interpretive community"

The influence of the subway tree hole does not stop at the physical space dozens of meters underground, but realizes communication reproduction through social media, constructing an "O2O" (Offline to Online) emotional cycle. Passengers take photos of the touching copy and upload them to Douyin, Weibo, or Moments. This is not only a digital record of individual emotions but also a social currency for seeking recognition. On online platforms, discussions around specific tree hole copy (such as the helplessness of working overtime, the insights of a broken relationship) quickly

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.31013

gather netizens with similar experiences, forming a new "interpretive community." In this community, originally atomized individuals complete identity confirmation and re-alignment by sharing similar life experiences. This online interaction forms a positive emotional feedback loop: offline touch is transformed into online discussion heat, and online heat in turn endows the offline space with the cultural attribute of an "internet-famous check-in spot," attracting more people to find, shoot, and share. This cycle not only expands the radiation range of emotional energy but also elevates the subway tree hole from a mere commercial advertising space to a public discussion space for urban spiritual civilization, realizing the positive construction of the social atmosphere.

5. Conclusion and discussion: emotion as urban infrastructure

The practice of Guangzhou Metro's tree hole proves that the public spaces of modern cities not only need rigid physical infrastructure but also flexible "emotional infrastructure." By redefining media functions, it shows that the subway space is not only a carrier of transportation but also a media node for urban image construction and citizens' emotional communication, with the ability to transform personal private emotions into public issues. In a granular urban society, the subway tree hole serves as an adhesive for social solidarity. Through emotional resonance, it establishes soft connections between people and between people and the city, proving that even in the most crowded and hasty cracks of modernity, communication based on humanistic care is still possible. In addition, the "populist" characteristics presented by Guangzhou Metro's tree hole — not grand, not didactic, but bending down to listen to the voices of ordinary people — this "secularized and civic-oriented" cultural sample is precisely the most vibrant footnote of Guangzhou as a city. Future urban space governance should pay more attention to the construction of such emotional dimensions, allowing the city to accommodate souls while pursuing speed.

References

[1] Collins, R. (2009). Interaction Ritual Chains. Translated by Lin Juren, et al. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
[2] McLuhan, M. (2011). Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. Translated by He Daokuan. Nanjing: Yilin Press.
[3] Wu, J. X., & Liu, X. Y. (2023). Spatial Economy Perspective on Subway Construction and Urban Spatial Structure Evolution. Acta Geographica Sinica, 78(11), 85-100.
[4] Zhang, Y. C. (2023). Technology, Body, and Mobile City: Daily Interaction and Spatial Practice in Shanghai Metro from a Mobility Perspective. Journalism Quarterly, (06), 44-54.
[5] Hong, J., Wang, Y. X., & Meng, J. (2024). A Study on Metro Station Names Disseminating Urban Culture — Taking Xi'an as an Example. Urban Construction Theory Research, (01), 293-296.
[6] Peng, X. Y., & Wang, S. N. (2023). A Brief Analysis of the Shaping of Urban Image by Wuhan Metro TV Communication. Journalism & Communication, (21), 102-104.
[7] Xie, B. (2020). Design and Implementation of Emotional Platform Based on NetEase Cloud Music. China Computer & Communication, (11), 9-10.
[8] Lefebvre, H. (1991). The Production of Space. Oxford: Blackwell.
[9] Augé, M. (1995). Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity. London: Verso.