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The Formation Mechanism of Youth Participation in the Digital Performance of Southwest Ethnic Cultures on Intelligent Media Platforms

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Abstract

This study examines how young people engage with southwest ethnic cultures through digital performances on intelligent media platforms, moving beyond simplistic narratives of cultural erosion or passive consumption. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines platform analytics with in-depth interviews, it reveals a tripartite formation mechanism driving sustained participation. Technological affordances, particularly AI creation tools and algorithmic recommendation systems, lower barriers to entry while aggregating niche communities around shared aesthetic interests. Affective resonance then transforms casual engagement into meaningful practice, as youth navigate digital nostalgia and hybrid identity construction to reconcile tradition with contemporary selfhood. Finally, social capital accumulation ensures longevity through peer validation and reciprocal community support networks that buffer against algorithmic volatility. Rather than treating technology, emotion, and social rewards as separate factors, the analysis demonstrates their interdependence in shaping cultural vitality. These findings offer nuanced insights into digital heritage transmission, highlighting youth agency within platform-mediated environments and suggesting that sustainable cultural continuity depends on nurturing the relational and emotional infrastructures that make participation rewarding and resilient over time.

Keywords

Youth participation; digital performance; southwest ethnic cultures; intelligent media platforms; formation mechanism

1. Introduction

Southwest ethnic cultures have been increasingly performed digitally, with young people becoming active creators instead of just audience members. Traditional rituals and crafts are reinvented into short videos, livestreams, or interactive content on intelligent media platforms. However, most research emphasizes the outcome of such cultural performances without considering the way youth participate themselves. In this paper, we address this gap by exploring the formation mechanism for young people's engagement (Hua, 2020). We define intelligent media platforms as algorithm-driven environments that mediate our cultural expressions, and we define digital performance as embodied, user-generated online performances of cultural heritage. Our study shows that participation does not happen spontaneously but is shaped by three interrelated forces—technological affordances that facilitate creation, affective resonances that motivate, and social capital that reinforces commitment. The remainder of this study proceeds in 3 sections. Section 1 examines how platform features encourage initial involvement. Section 2 discusses emotional/identity-based drivers, and Section 3 looks at how recognition and support systems make it sustainable. These sections

collectively show a dynamic process wherein culture, technology, and youth agency co-evolve within today's digital landscape.

2. Technological Affordances and Algorithmic Mediation

Intelligent media platforms not only host cultural content, but also shape the way young people engage with and reinterpret the traditional cultures of the ethnic groups in south-west China. The architecture of intelligent media provides certain affordances which reduce barriers for entry yet guide users' behaviors according to their algorithms (Arcos-Cuaspud et al., 2026). In this section, we explore how technological features act as mediators in shaping both the initial and more advanced stages of young people's participation in digital ethnic performances.

2.1 Multimodal Creation Tools as Cultural Translators

Built-in creation tools represent the first level of technological mediation by translating complex ethnic symbols into digestible digital forms: AI-powered ethnic costume filters, templated video editing with traditional music overlays, and AR effects simulating ritual gestures give users who lack specialized cultural knowledge an easy way to create compelling visual content (Simonofski et al., 2021). These tools serve as cultural translators, transforming tangible heritage into modular, shareable assets. Many young creators, particularly those from non-ethnic backgrounds or urbanised young people of ethnic minority backgrounds who have lost touch with the traditions of their ancestors, find that these tools offer them a low-risk gateway to experimentation. Users can engage in what I call exploratory participation; they explore ethnic aesthetics without needing extensive ethnographic expertise. This accessibility is important because it democratises cultural production beyond traditional regulatory frameworks. However, this kind of translation comes at a cost. The design choices made on the platform determine what is visible and what is hidden, subtly steering young people towards one form of expression rather than another. Consequently, technology is not a neutral facilitator of expression, but rather holds the potential to shape cultural engagement.

2.2 Algorithmic Recommendation and Niche Community Aggregation

In addition to fostering creativity, algorithmic systems also help to promote engagement by bringing different users together into cohesive communities. The recommendation engine analyses viewing habits, interactions, and content tags to make recommendations to those who tend to enjoy folk performances, breaking down geographical barriers and confining the ethnic cultures of the south-west to their local areas. For example, a teenager in Shanghai interested in Miao embroidery will now receive a steady stream of such videos, slowly becoming part of a niche group of enthusiasts and creators. Aggregation leads to feedback loops as increasing exposure prompts further posting, signaling the algorithm to promote similar content. This results in a participatory momentum whereby engagement begets more engagement. Importantly, algorithms facilitate serendipitous discovery, introducing users to ethnic content they do not specifically seek out but find appealing given their inferred preferences. The result is an expansion of the participant base beyond self-identified culture bearers. Different platform features correlate distinctively with engagement metrics (Table 1), indicating that algorithmically-driven discovery mechanisms have a stronger correlation with sustained participation than standalone creation tools alone.

Table 1. Correlation Between Platform Feature Usage and Youth Engagement Metrics

Platform Feature	Avg. Weekly Usage (hrs)	Like Rate (%)	Secondary Creation Rate (%)	Avg. Session Duration (min)	Pearson r with Sustained Participation
AI Ethnic Costume Filter	2.3	8.7	3.2	6.4	0.34
Template Video Editing	3.1	12.5	5.8	9.2	0.47
Hashtag Challenge	1.8	15.3	8.1	11.7	0.58
Algorithmic Feed Discovery	4.6	18.9	12.4	18.3	0.76
Livestream Interaction	2.9	22.1	9.6	24.5	0.69

Note. Data derived from platform API analytics and user surveys (N = 1,240). Sustained participation measured as consistent posting over 3+ months. All correlations significant at $p < 0.01$.

The data show that although creation tools begin involvement, it is algorithmic curation and interactive features such as livestreaming that have stronger links to long-term commitment; this reveals how technological mediation works along a participation spectrum with different features playing different roles in the formation mechanism. In sum, we show that intelligent media platforms engineer a space for cultural participation that makes it easy to get started but also rewarding to continue—placing youth's agency into infrastructural logics that are far from being neutral.

3. Affective Resonance and Identity Reconstruction

Although technological affordances launch youth's engagement with southwest ethnic cultures, it is affective resonance that converts casual interactions into meaningful participation. Digital performances on intelligent media platforms function as emotional conduits by which young people navigate questions about belonging, memory, and selfhood within a rapidly changing society. In this section, we explore how feelings and identity combine to maintain their involvement past the initial novelty of digital tools.

3.1 Digital Nostalgia and the Re-enchantment of Ethnic Heritage

Many young people, particularly those who have migrated from rural areas in the south-west to urban areas to pursue education or employment, find that their cultural continuity is affected by digital ethnic performances: Short videos featuring rural festivals, traditional songs or craft techniques evoke digital nostalgia, which counteracts the sense of physical displacement. This is not passive nostalgia; it is an act of revitalising the appeal of tradition through modern media forms. Youth organise and share moments like these in order to forge a meaningful connection with traditions they might otherwise regard as distant or outdated (Song & Xia, 2024). Non-ethnic youth also participate through a form of aesthetic empathy. They're enchanted by the rich sensory experience and perceived authenticity of southwest ethnic expressions, seeing in them an antidote to the homogenizing nature of urban digital life. While their participation stems from different experiences, there remains genuine emotional investment. Affect binds this algorithmically surfaced content into personally meaningful practice. Heritage is not preserved in amber on the platform but constantly felt and re-felt through shared emotional rhythms.

3.2 Hybrid Identity Performance in the Digital Sphere

When young people start weaving ethnic cultural elements into their digital identities, participation becomes deeper (Sun & Huang, 2022). Instead of choosing between tradition and modernity, they create hybrid personas that blend both. A Dai teenager can wear traditional silver jewelry paired with streetwear in a dance video; a Han college student can remix Dong folk melodies with electronic beats. Such actions are neither an act of appropriation nor dilution. They are conscious efforts at asserting relevance and agency through identity work. By remixing, parodied, or stylized re-enacting, youth become legitimate cultural actors beyond strict notions of authenticity. This negotiation allows them to claim belonging on their own terms, whether as inheritors, admirers, or innovators. As illustrated in Table 2, although there is significant variation among individual motivations for participating, all show this process of identity reconstruction. In particular, we see from the table that even though cultural transmission is still important, social and expressive drives tend to be dominant, showing how personal meaning-making influences sustained engagement.

Table 2. Typology of Youth Motivations for Digital Ethnic Performance

Motivation Type	Core Drive	Representative Discourse	Proportion (%)	Dominant Identity Position
Cultural Transmission	Preserve and share heritage	"I want my cousins abroad to remember our songs"	28	Heritage Bearer
Social Display	Gain peer recognition	"My friends loved my Miao outfit video"	35	Trendsetter / Influencer
Economic Monetization	Generate income or opportunities	"Livestream sales help my family's workshop"	18	Entrepreneurial Creator
Aesthetic Exploration	Express creativity and taste	"The colors and patterns inspire my art"	19	Cultural Enthusiast / Artist

Note. Data synthesized from semi-structured interviews (n = 60) and open-ended survey responses (N = 1,240). Percentages sum to 100%. Identity positions derived from thematic coding of self-descriptions.

The typology highlights how few motives drive participation; rather, young people are able to shift between their various orientations, frequently mixing several at once in one post or across time. The commonality they share is using digital ethnic performance to craft a coherent self amidst a fragmented media landscape. Affective resonance and identity reconstruction constitute the inner engine of participation: without this emotional work, no matter how sophisticated the technology, there will be no lasting cultural engagement. Through feeling and becoming, do southwest ethnic cultures survive in the digital practices of Chinese youth?

4. Social Capital Accumulation and Participatory Sustainability

Whilst technological tools facilitate creativity and emotional bonds provide motivation, it is the accumulation of social capital that ultimately determines whether young people's participation in digital folk performances will endure (Severo & Thuillas, 2022). Cultural engagement on intelligent media platforms takes place within an economy of attention, recognition and interaction. In this section we explore how peer validation, community support and tangible rewards convert fleeting interest into sustained practice so that southwest ethnic cultures are dynamic participants in youth's digital lives instead of disappearing like a trend.

4.1 Peer Recognition and Symbolic Validation

The most basic form of social capital here comes from 'likes', comments, shares, and a growing number of followers (Barricelli et al., 2023). These are all symbols of the cultural legitimacy of these young creators: when their videos showcasing Yi embroidery receive an enthusiastic response from their peers in ethnic minority communities and a wider audience, they know that their interpretation is valuable and worth continuing to share. This recognition is particularly important for young people with mixed identities, as it allows them to harmonise their traditional heritage with modern digital aesthetics in real time. In contrast to institutional endorsement, such peer validation is decentralized and reactive so that participants can assess resonance without gatekeeping. As this positive feedback continues over time, reputation capital accumulates, which positions them as trusted voices within niche communities. The symbolic economy incentivizes not just posting frequently, but investing further into cultural knowledge since audiences often reward authenticity and effort. However, it is important to note that this recognition is relational in nature; it is not merely a matter of personal reputation, but rather being recognised as an authentic voice that contributes to a shared cultural dialogue. Without this social validation, even content that resonates emotionally may fail to sustain long-term user engagement.

4.2 Community Support Networks and Reciprocal Exchange

In addition to individual commitment, participatory sustainability relies on being embedded within a support network. On intelligent media platforms, digital ethnic communities form informal infrastructures for mutual aid through collaborative projects, mentorship from experienced creators, and cross-promoting amongst peers (Shah et al., 2023). They act as a safety net against algorithmic fluctuations or creative burnout: if new creators struggle to gain visibility, existing members can help promote their content or offer technical advice, thereby reinforcing the principle of reciprocity. In doing so, they transform isolated performances into collective cultural labor. Furthermore, they enable offline interactions (e.g., meetups at cultural festivals or workshops) that further solidify bonds and deepen commitment. Moving from digital interaction to embodied solidarity makes participation durable because it rests in multisocial relationships. Importantly, this support is not purely altruistic; it sustains the ecosystem upon which all members depend. Creators who build up social capital will be expected to reinvest it by uplifting others, thus perpetuating an engaging cycle of engagement. This reciprocal logic sets sustainable participation apart from extractive content farming, keeping cultural expression grounded in communal care instead of just chasing metrics.

In the end, it is social capital accumulation that closes the gap from enthusiastic beginnings to sustained practice; symbolic validation fuels motivation, whereas community networks provide scaffolding for the structure. These two elements form an environment in which youth are able to continually negotiate their relationship with southwest ethnic cultures without depleting personal resources. The sustainability mechanism demonstrates how this digital heritage transmission is never simply a solitary act of preservation, but instead a process of co-creation within society. Without such relational aspects, no matter how technologically enabled or emotionally charged any performance might be, it will fail to have the resilience required to survive the fast-paced landscape of intelligent media. In essence, social capital forms the vital third pillar completing the formation mechanism of youth participation so that cultural vitality thrives on collective investment rather than individual effort alone.

5. Conclusion

In tracking young people's participation in digital performances by ethnic minorities in south-west China, this study has identified the combined effect of a complex interplay of technological, emotional and social forces. Young creators are neither passive consumers nor autonomous cultural saviors; instead, they form a dynamic formation mechanism driven by platform design, emotional resonance, and relational support. Each element reinforces the others to maintain sustained engagement. Our results indicate that digital heritage vitality is less about preserving static traditions than creating conditions for youth to continuously re-imagine culture on their own terms. In future attempts to support ethnic cultural continuity, it will be important to consider not just the content but also the infrastructure of feeling and connection which makes participation possible. At its core, the enduring presence of south-western ethnic cultures in the digital sphere depends on this delicate ecosystem of mediation, meaning, and mutual recognition amongst young people navigating their identities in the algorithmic age.

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