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ALGORITHMIC NOSTALGIA: COMMODIFYING COLONIAL MEMORY AS YOUTH LIFESTYLE ON XIAOHONGSHU IN SHANGHAI'S WUTONG DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on Shanghai's Wutong District, a historic area within the former French Concession, this study examines the recomposition and commodification of colonial urban heritage on Xiaohongshu, a leading Chinese lifestyle-sharing platform. We advance "algorithmic nostalgia" as a platform-mediated process through which recommendation algorithms filter, amplify, and circulate decontextualized colonial memory, reframing it as a consumable youth lifestyle. Guided by three questions—what multimodal features produce an aestheticized, dehistoricized ambiance; how the zhongcao mechanism (recommendation-based marketing strategy) transforms colonial memory into lifestyle commodities; and what historical consciousness and cultural imaginaries emerge from this depoliticized aestheticization—we employ a critical qualitative approach that integrates decolonial theory, mediascape theory, and algorithmic culture studies. Using critical discourse analysis and multimodal analysis, we examine a purposive sample of 20 highly engaged posts from the past year, selected for engagement and typicality (e.g., landmarks, aesthetic style, lifestyle tags); visual (filters, composition, postures) and textual elements (titles, tags, affective language) are analyzed in relation to platform recommendation logic. Preliminary findings identify three dynamics: curated authenticity constructing a hyperreal consumption space; algorithmically reinforced, homogenized nostalgia commodifying memory; and performative digital identities expressing selective cosmopolitanism that perpetuates postcolonial cultural power asymmetries. By conceptualizing "algorithmic nostalgia," the study bridges memory studies, platform studies, and decolonial critique, offering insights for heritage education, media literacy, and urban cultural policy.

Keywords: Algorithmic Nostalgia; Xiaohongshu; Colonial Memory; Urban Heritage; Postcolonialism



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1. INTRODUCTION

The so-called Wutong District in Shanghai is not an official administrative term but a popular cultural reference to the area once known as the former French Concession, spanning parts of Xuhui and Huangpu districts. Lined with Wutong trees (*Platanus x hispanica*) often called French Wutong in Chinese, the district is celebrated for its shaded boulevards, garden villas, and distinctive European charm. As a colonial heritage landscape, it embodies Shanghai's ambivalent modern memory—both a tangible reminder of China's semi-colonial past and a symbolic site for imagining its cosmopolitan identity.

In recent years, these colonial memories have been profoundly reinterpreted through contemporary digital culture. On Xiaohongshu (RED note), one of China's leading lifestyle-sharing platforms, urban youth have engaged in a large-scale rediscovery and aesthetic consumption of this "nostalgic urban landscape." Through carefully curated posts—strolling under Wutong trees, visiting cafés, or posing in front of historical villas—the act of "walking the Wutong District" has been transformed into an aspirational lifestyle: refined, leisurely, and performatively authentic.

This mediated nostalgia raises a critical question: within algorithmically driven social media environments, is the sense of nostalgia an authentic extension of history or a cultural illusion engineered by algorithmic logics?

The phenomenon is not unique to Shanghai. Many postcolonial cities face similar tensions between heritage preservation and commodification. For example, Gunsan in South Korea (Lim, 2021), the colonial towns of Goiás and Pirenópolis in Brazil (Corêa & de Lira, 2022), and the former French colony of Puducherry in southern India (Hall & Tucker, 2019) all illustrate how colonial architecture is being rebranded for tourism and lifestyle consumption. Yet, the case of Shanghai's Wutong District is distinguished by its algorithmic mediation: nostalgia here is not merely remembered or represented—it is actively shaped, ranked, and circulated by the platform's algorithmic logic.

This process intersects deeply with China's current cultural climate. On one hand, official discourse emphasizes cultural confidence and the revival of traditional Chinese heritage; on the other, popular culture continues to romanticize Western aesthetics—especially the depoliticized imagery of "European style." The aesthetic consumption of Wutong District thus provides a revealing lens through which to observe how Chinese youth negotiate identity amid globalization and localization, between historical memory and everyday experience.

Such algorithmically mediated nostalgia is both an act of affective consumption and a microcosm of the commodification of history under platform capitalism. It not only transforms heritage into lifestyle but also reshapes the collective understanding of urban memory and identity.

While numerous studies have examined colonial nostalgia (Bijl, 2013), digital memory work (Merrill, Keightley, & Daphi, 2020; Annabell, 2023), and the representation of cultural heritage on social media (Liang, Lu, & Martin, 2021), few have explored how China's distinct social media ecology—especially algorithmic recommendation systems—actively structures these nostalgic narratives. Existing research tends to focus on users'



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expressive practices while overlooking the algorithm as a non-human agent that selects, amplifies, and homogenizes cultural memory (Henriksen, 2024).

To address this gap, this study proposes the concept of Algorithmic Nostalgia, emphasizing the algorithm's role in intervening in and shaping affective narratives about historical space. Specifically, the study asks:

- How do multimodal features (visual and textual) on Xiaohongshu construct an aestheticized and de-historicized atmosphere of Wutong District?
- How does the platform's zhongcao ("content seeding") mechanism transform a space imbued with colonial memory into a consumable lifestyle commodity?
- What new forms of historical consciousness, cultural imagination, and identity negotiation emerge from this depoliticized aesthetic practice, and how do they reflect postcolonial power relations?

By theorizing algorithmic nostalgia and empirically analyzing Xiaohongshu posts about Wutong District, this paper aims to reveal how platform technologies shape the production of memory and the commodification of urban heritage in contemporary China. The findings contribute to broader discussions on digital heritage, postcolonial cultural politics, and the affective infrastructures of algorithmic media.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THEORIZING ALGORITHMIC NOSTALGIA

This study advances the concept of Algorithmic Nostalgia to describe a depoliticized affective practice toward historical spaces that is deeply mediated, shaped, and commodified by recommendation algorithms. Unlike traditional nostalgia, which is understood as an individual emotional response or a user-driven act of remembrance, algorithmic nostalgia emerges from the interaction between human users and non-human algorithms within platform infrastructures. It is a co-produced cultural construct in which emotions are quantified, circulated, and monetized.

In earlier studies of digital memory work, nostalgia has often been conceptualized as an active and participatory process of remembering. Users share, reconstruct, and remediate past experiences through digital media, thereby generating personal or collective memory (Merrill, Keightley, & Daphi, 2020; Annabell, 2023). These approaches highlight remediation and participatory memory, emphasizing user agency and creative re-interpretation. However, in today's datafied social media environment, nostalgic expression is increasingly structured and quantified by algorithmic systems rather than solely initiated by users.

Jacobsen and Beer (2021) introduced the term quantified nostalgia to describe how social media platforms convert affective expressions—such as likes, views, and shares—into measurable emotional data. Through this metricization, nostalgia becomes not merely a reflection of emotion but an operational element of platform logic, fueling algorithmic optimization and user retention. Building on this, Caliandro et al. (2024) argue that platformized consumer culture operates through algorithmic affective loops: algorithms guide users toward nostalgia-laden content, amplify its visibility, and reinforce emotional engagement through feedback mechanisms. Nostalgia is thus simultaneously



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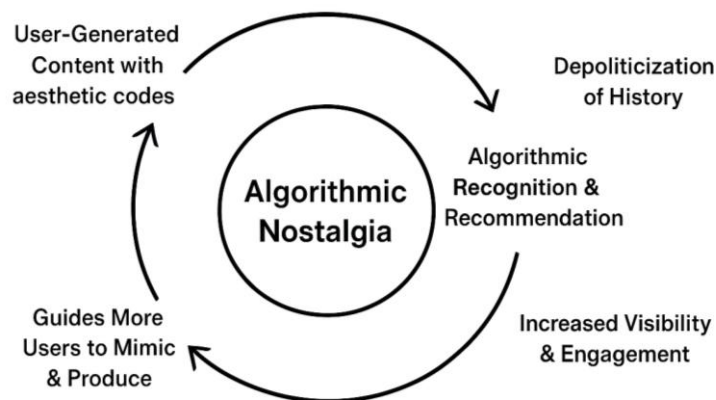
user-generated and algorithmically amplified, forming a recursive relation between affect and data.

Expanding upon these insights, this paper theorizes Algorithmic Nostalgia as a process in which algorithms not only mediate but actively produce nostalgic affect. Unlike platform nostalgia, which focuses primarily on user affective engagement, algorithmic nostalgia emphasizes non-human agency—the algorithm’s autonomous capacity to recognize, rank, and reproduce nostalgic aesthetics. Through recommendation systems, clustering, and visual homogenization (e.g., filters, color palettes, and composition patterns), algorithms create a sense of “pastness” that is detached from specific historical events yet translated into contemporary lifestyle symbols.

As illustrated in Figure 1, this process forms a self-reinforcing loop. User-generated aesthetic content is algorithmically identified and promoted, resulting in heightened visibility and engagement. The growing exposure motivates further mimetic reproduction by other users, which in turn generates new content for the platform to circulate. At its core, Algorithmic Nostalgia maintains this recursive cycle, perpetuating a depoliticized aestheticization of history.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of “Algorithmic Nostalgia”



Accordingly, algorithmic nostalgia embodies three interrelated characteristics: **Algorithmic Production Mechanism** – Nostalgia is algorithmically generated through data modeling and content aggregation, rather than being triggered solely by human intention. **Commodified Affective Function** – Nostalgia shifts from emotional recollection to a form of affective consumption that drives engagement and monetization (Caliandro et al., 2024). **Depoliticized Historical Dimension** – Under aesthetic packaging, historical complexity is filtered out, transforming memory into a visually consumable and politically neutral experience (Mandolessi, 2024).

A critical catalyst within this dynamic is the Zhongcao culture. Literally meaning “to plant grass,” Zhongcao refers to peer-to-peer practices of cultivating desire through visually curated recommendations and testimonials. On Xiaohongshu, this mechanism functions as both a marketing and affective infrastructure: it invites users to transform



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emotions into aesthetic displays and lifestyles into commodities. Within this ecology, even a colonial neighborhood can be reframed as a “desirable object” to be planted in the collective imagination.

This emotional economy aligns with the logic of what Illouz (2007) and Papacharissi (2015) describe as emotional capitalism, in which human feelings are increasingly quantified, managed, and monetized. Algorithms are trained to detect and promote emotionally charged content—nostalgia, comfort, longing—because affect is a core driver of engagement. The resonance of Wutong District’s algorithmic nostalgia lies precisely in its capacity to address the emotional needs of urban youth seeking slowness and poetic refuge in fast-paced modern life. The algorithm identifies this nostalgic affect as high-value data, seamlessly connecting it to consumption behaviors: visiting cafés, purchasing vintage-style dresses, or using specific filters and photo-editing apps.

Through this process, the nostalgic experience itself becomes the product—a commodified emotion circulating within the algorithmic economy. Algorithmic nostalgia thus reveals how digital platforms transform the act of remembering into a marketable aesthetic, where memory, affect, and consumption merge into a self-perpetuating system of cultural reproduction.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Sampling

This study adopts a qualitative multimodal content analysis focusing on user-generated posts on Xiaohongshu. Twenty representative posts were selected from searches using keywords such as “Shanghai French Concession” “Wutong District,” and “French flair.” Posts were collected between October 2024 and October 202, capturing both peak and routine engagement periods.

Sampling followed three criteria: Posts with over 1,000 interactions (likes, saves, and comments); Visual focus on colonial-era streetscapes or architecture; Authored by non-commercial users to ensure organic content.

Although the sample is relatively small, it serves as an exploratory and illustrative dataset for theorizing emerging patterns of algorithmic heritage representation.

All data were derived from publicly accessible posts. Usernames and identifiable details were anonymized in presentation and analysis. The study adheres to guidelines for ethical handling of online user-generated content (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

3.2 Analytical Procedure and Coding Scheme

This study integrates multimodal analysis with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interpret both visual and textual dimensions of Xiaohongshu posts.

For the visual layer, Kress and van Leeuwen’s framework of visual grammar (2020) was applied to code compositional structures, color tone, thematic symbols, and



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representational meanings. For the textual layer, Fairclough’s CDA approach (1995) guided the coding of thematic content, discursive strategies, and ideological orientations.

A two-step coding process was implemented. Open coding: identifying recurrent visual and linguistic features across the dataset. Axial coding: grouping codes into higher-order categories such as nostalgic aesthetics, lifestyle performativity, and algorithmic visibility.

Two coding tables were developed: Table 1 summarizes the sample distribution, while Table 2 outlines the major visual and textual coding categories.

Visual codes addressed the relationship between foreground and background, color ambience, and recurring symbols such as Wutong trees and colonial villas. Textual codes focused on keywords (e.g., nostalgia, citywalk—strolling through urban areas, retro), narrative style, and affective expression.

Inter-coder consistency was achieved through iterative comparison and discussion among researchers until consensus was reached. This produced a multimodal corpus capable of revealing how nostalgia, affect, and algorithmic visibility intersect in the everyday representation of Wutong District.

By combining discourse and visual grammar approaches, the study not only identifies aesthetic strategies of nostalgic representation but also situates them within the algorithmic logic that amplifies certain cultural memories while suppressing others.

Table 1

Sample Categorization and Statistics

Sample Category	Count	Key Features
Historical Architectural Interpretation	6	History of old buildings, backgrounds, era details
Citywalk / Spot Guide	7	Walking routes, photo spot recommendations
Artistic Shots & Filter Style	4	Strong aesthetic focus, consistent filter styles
Cross-cultural Themes	3	Blending of foreign elements (e.g., French objects) for a cosmopolitan feel



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Table 2

Visual and Textual Coding Scheme

Coding Dimension	Visual Element Examples	Textual Element Examples
Composition & Perspective	Low-angle shots of buildings, close-ups of architectural details	Narrative perspective (e.g., first-person or third-person)
Color & Lighting	Warm filters, high saturation, backlit scenes	Rhetorical metaphors, figurative descriptions
Scene & Symbols	Wutong trees, cobblestone paths, historic townhouses	Global landmarks, period-specific terms
Thematic Imagery	Period furniture, vintage fashion items	Narrative themes, e.g., nostalgia, personal identity
Discursive Strategy	-	A nostalgic-praising evaluative tone, metaphor

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Through a systematic analysis of high-engagement posts about Shangha's Wutong District on Xiaohongshu, we have identified three interconnected core dynamics that collectively constitute the practice of "algorithmic nostalgia."

4.1 Algorithmic Intensification and Homogenized Nostalgia

On Xiaohongshu, the remarkable consistency in the visual and thematic presentation of Wutong District-related content is a typical manifestation of "algorithmic homogenization." This process refers to the tendency of recommendation systems to systematically reward content that conforms to identifiable and computationally "successful" patterns, thereby promoting cultural expression convergence. Far from being a neutral technical conduit, the platform acts as a powerful "curator," whose algorithmic decisions profoundly influence which content becomes "visible" and, consequently, which is deemed desirable or aspirational (Gillespie, 2014).

The amplification effect of algorithms leads to traffic being highly concentrated in a few "viral" Instagrammable spot. These locations and camera angles are replicated repeatedly across countless posts. When the search term changes to "Wutong District portrait street photography" (as shown in Figure 3), most bloggers are depicted looking sideways at the camera or conveying a sense of movement while walking, with Wutong trees frequently appearing in the background, using light and shadow through the leaves to create an atmospheric feel. User creation exhibits a clear "formulaic" tendency: finding similar angles at the same location, striking similar poses, and pairing them with similar captions and tags. This imitation is rational, as following the "viral formula" is the most effective path to algorithmic recommendation and social validation (likes, followers).



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Figure 2

Example Interface of A Xiaohongshu Search For “Shanghai Wutong District.”

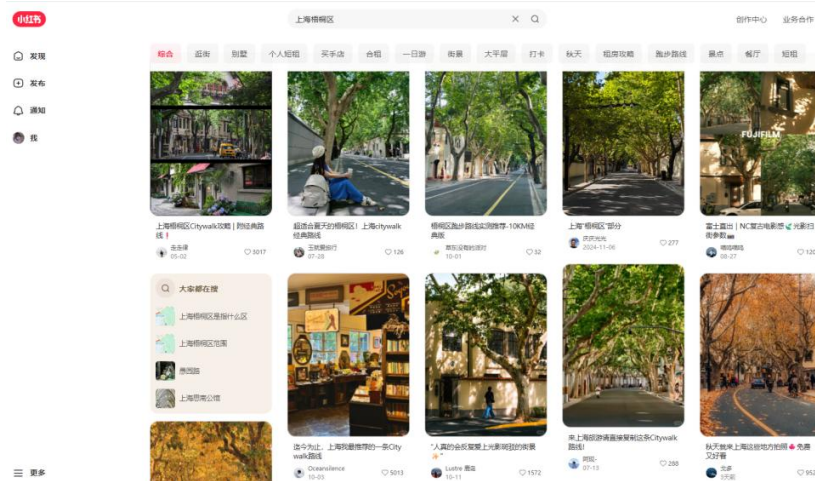
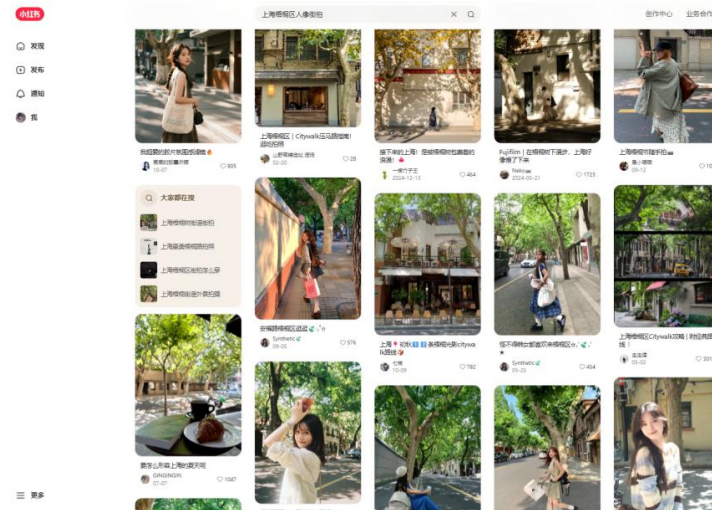


Figure 3

Example interface of a Xiaohongshu search for “Wutong District portrait street photography.”



This curatorial power follows a logic of predictability and efficiency. Algorithms are designed to “see” and “understand” the world through quantifiable metrics, reducing complex cultural tastes to “calculable” data points like likes, shares, and dwell time (Seaver, 2017). When a post gains high engagement, the algorithm marks its elements as components of a successful pattern. A positive feedback loop is thus initiated (refer to Fig. 1 in the conceptual model): the algorithm prioritizes new content with similar aesthetic and textual features for broader distribution, simultaneously signaling to other creators that imitating this pattern is the most effective strategy for gaining visibility. Consequently, creativity is subtly disciplined, and diversity is suppressed in favor of a



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dominant, platform-native aesthetic. In the context of the Wutong District, this means the messy, multi-layered history of a postcolonial space is systematically filtered out, replaced by a sanitized, aesthetically consistent digital facade optimized for algorithmic circulation.

In this process, nostalgia itself becomes commodified. What users seek is not genuine recollection or reflection on a specific historical period, but participation in and acquisition of a trendy, algorithmically endorsed nostalgic aesthetic. Visiting the Wutong District becomes a consumer act signaling personal taste and identity. Memory ceases to be introspective and personal, becoming instead outward and performative. The complex sentiments associated with colonial history are simplified into fashionable symbols of “French flair” or “Old Shanghai style,” easily acquired and displayed. This commodified nostalgia possesses thin emotional depth but holds significant value as social currency.

4.2 Curated Authenticity: The Construction of Hyperreal Consumption Space

The direct cultural consequence of the algorithmic homogenization mechanism is a form of “curated authenticity.” This concept describes an “authenticity” that is not discovered but carefully staged, edited, and performed to conform to platform aesthetics and audience expectations. It differs from the earlier concept of “staged authenticity” in tourism studies (MacCannell, 1973) because its primary reference point is no longer the “real” historical site, but its idealized digital replica. For many users, the purpose of visiting the Wutong District is no longer to experience the place itself, but to verify and reproduce the perfect digital simulacrum they have already consumed on their phone screens.

Figure 4

Comparison Between Curated Photos and the Actual Scene.



Figure 4 shows a comparison between a set of photos curated by a blogger and the actual scene. The identical shop fronts indicate the same location, yet they present two distinctly different visual states. The left image, carefully framed by the blogger to avoid crowds, trash bins, or messy wires, presents a purified, flawless streetscape, seemingly



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casually revealing French architecture, with poses creating a sense of street-side relaxation. This visual treatment aims to produce a “photogenic” authenticity, one defined not by its authenticity, but optimal visual effect on a mobile screen. In contrast, the photo shared in the comments section (right side of Figure 4) reveals the actual condition of the scene: crowded, chaotic, and interrupted by modern elements like softbox fill light for photography.

The “atmosphere” narrative in the post texts often employs highly emotional and sensory language, focusing on describing an abstract “ambiance” or “feeling.” Expressions like “French old dreams under the Wutong trees,” “Paris? No, this is Shanghai,” and “romance materialized at this moment” are commonplace. This narrative strategy reduces the complex historical space into an emotional package ready for direct “consumption.” The focus of these posts is not on introducing history, but on providing a guide on “how to feel the Wutong District.” This “curated authenticity” transforms the Wutong District from a physical place with historical depth into a hyperreal backdrop serving digital performance and emotional consumption.

4.3 Performative Digital Identity: Selective Cosmopolitanism and Postcolonial Cultural Power

On this hyperreal stage of “curated authenticity,” users perform a specific identity: “selective cosmopolitanism.” This concept refers to a posture that seemingly embraces global culture but, in practice, selectively celebrates cultural symbols already positioned as “high-class” within the global cultural hierarchy—typically those associated with the West. This performance reveals the inherent contradictions in identity construction under the dual influence of algorithmic culture and the postcolonial condition.

Figure 5

Selective Cosmopolitanism in Images.





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As seen in Figure 5, there is an intentional incorporation of international cultural elements, such as scones, coffee, baguettes, and English books, which occupy prominent positions in the frame. This illustrates the posters' inclination towards selective cosmopolitanism. Combined with the cues in Table 3, it is evident that these users construct a “self-internationalized” image by simultaneously employing cross-cultural linguistic symbols and global brand visual cues.

Table 3

Performance of Identity Through Linguistic and Visual Cues.

Cue Type	Specific Examples
Linguistic Signifiers	English words mixed in titles; names of global landmarks (e.g., Paris)
Fashion Elements	Apparel featuring international trendy brands or vintage items like classic hats and leather handbags, reflecting a global street-style aesthetic.
Aesthetic Codes	French architecture, Nordic minimalist furniture, art installations.
Narrative Discourse	Use of terms like “global vision”; references to foreign travel or media.

However, this embrace often coexists with a strong sense of local identity. The same users might share their love for domestic trendy brands or pride in traditional culture in other posts. This seemingly contradictory practice reflects a strategy of opportunistic identity construction within global cultural flows—seeking to display modernity aligned with international standards while remaining grounded in a locally situated “cultural confidence.”

Although users may be unaware, this pursuit and performance of “French flair” or European taste objectively perpetuates the “coloniality of power.” It subconsciously reinforces a cultural hierarchy wherein cultural symbols originating from former colonial metropolises remain the benchmark for “sophistication,” “taste,” and “style.” By rewarding users who successfully imitate and perform this “colonial aesthetic” with visibility, the algorithm, through its commercial logic, effectively re-confirms and reproduces this postcolonial cultural power structure in digital space. The personalized, aestheticized performances of individual users ultimately converge into a collective current that consolidates historically formed cultural inequalities.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has explored how nostalgia, memory, and identity are algorithmically mediated within the digital representations of Shanghai’s Wutong District on Xiaohongshu. Through integrating multimodal and discourse analysis, it revealed that what appears as



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spontaneous emotional expression is, in fact, structured by the logics of platform capitalism.

The proposed concept of Algorithmic Nostalgia captures this process: a recursive system in which users' emotional labor and aesthetic creativity are continuously absorbed, categorized, and reproduced by recommendation algorithms. As shown throughout the analysis, supported by Figures 2-5 and Table 3, nostalgia becomes homogenized through algorithmic amplification, authenticity is carefully staged to optimize visibility, and identity is performed through selective cosmopolitanism that reproduces postcolonial hierarchies.

This framework demonstrates that digital nostalgia is not merely a sentimental attachment to the past but a technologically organized affective economy. Algorithms function as non-human agents that shape cultural memory by privileging aesthetically appealing, depoliticized content while suppressing critical or locally rooted narratives. In this sense, algorithmic nostalgia represents a new mode of cultural governance, where memory, visibility, and value are intertwined within data circulation.

Beyond the specific case of Xiaohongshu, this study offers broader implications for understanding how algorithmic infrastructures participate in the commodification of heritage and the reconfiguration of identity in postcolonial societies. It calls for renewed attention to the ethics of algorithmic curation—particularly how digital platforms influence which pasts are remembered, aestheticized, or forgotten.

Ultimately, algorithmic nostalgia reveals both the creative agency and the structural constraints of living in a datafied culture. It invites us to reconsider nostalgia not as a return to history but as a mediated performance of memory under algorithmic control, a space where emotion, economy, and power converge in shaping the cultural future of the digital age.

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