Proceedings of ICADSS 2025 Symposium: Forum on Generative AI Technologies and Media Industry Applications
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.BJ28934

Artistic Labor and Cultural Value under Platform Algorithm

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Abstract. In the era of digital platforms, algorithms have become key mechanisms shaping cultural production and value. Social media platforms use algorithms to determine the visibility and dissemination of content, reshaping the visibility and economic logic of artistic creation. As the main agents of artistic production, artists are inevitably influenced by the societies they inhabit. While existing studies have largely focused on the relationship between algorithms, media, and users, little attention has been given to how platform algorithms affect artists themselves. This study conducted semi-structured interviews with ten artists active on RedNote, Douyin, and Instagram to explore how platform algorithms influence their modes of labor, income structures, and value recognition. The findings reveal that algorithms provide artists with new visibility but also lead to unstable creative work due to factors such as paid promotion, preferences, and algorithmic rules. Artists are required to engage in more "platform labor," including content management, data analysis, and audience interaction. This research helps explain how artists redefine their roles across creation, sharing, and negotiation, and demonstrates how they balance efficiency with long-term cultural value within digital spaces.

Keywords: platform algorithm, artistic labor, cultural value recognition

1. Introduction

In recent years, artists have become more dependent on digital platforms to show their work, gain attention, and maintain a basic income. These platforms' algorithms are key infrastructures that govern content visibility and circulation. Across platforms like RedNote, Douyin, and Instagram, artists use them to show themselves, connect with audiences, and make money. In this process, algorithm-based recommendation systems have become something artists cannot avoid. There are also debates about paid visibility. For example, in 2023, on RedNote, some users asked if artists should pay to get more exposure through promotion [1]. This debate showed a clear conflict in how platforms work. Algorithms bring speed and visibility, but they also create tension between creative freedom, economic survival, and online visibility. This means algorithms are not just a technical tool. They are also a structural issue in how culture is made and how value is shared. In this context, how artists interact, negotiate, and adapt to algorithms has become a question worth studying.

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.BJ28934

Existing studies discuss digital labor and platform systems from different angles. In theory, Srnicek explained "platform capitalism" and showed that big tech firms reshape capitalism through the platform model [2]. This model depends on data extraction and value conversion to grow the business, and changes how labor and value are structured and shared. This gives an important base to understand the economic logic behind algorithms. Fuchs extended this idea to labor, showing that digital labor is often free or hidden [3]. Creators do much work on platforms to keep content active and visible, but this labor is not recognized as formal work and still becomes part of capital circulation. These studies reveal the exploitative logic of platform economies and help explain the position of artists under algorithmic systems. For artists, labor is not only creative work but also the ongoing effort to stay visible in algorithms, interact with audiences, and follow platform preferences. This is platform labor. It is both a cultural production and part of the data economy driven by algorithms.

Beyond the theoretical context, empirical studies in China provide insight into how algorithmic governance operates in practice. Xu introduced the idea of the "algorithmic black box." He explained that algorithms serve market logic, such as efficiency and traffic, but also support ideological control to keep content stable [4]. Feng studied small-scale creators on RedNote and found that task systems and exposure metrics strongly affect creative behavior [5]. Creators must keep producing content to trigger algorithmic promotion, turning creative work into repeated "task labor." Zhao studied game-related labor and found that platform labor is fragmented and intense [6]. Workers must spend more time and energy to meet changing algorithmic evaluations. These studies show that intelligent recommender systems are not neutral tools. They shape labor rhythms and control visibility. Creators, including artists, must find a balance between autonomy and platform logic, which brings new pressure and uncertainty.

In methodology, Creswell and Poth explained that mixed methods are useful for studying complex systems [7]. Denzin and Lincoln also said that algorithmic systems are social and not transparent, so researchers need both qualitative and quantitative approaches [8]. Flick suggested triangulation to improve validity [9], and Noy described snowball sampling as a way to reach small or hard-to-access groups like independent artists [10]. These studies show that research on algorithms and labor should include both structure and experience. It should analyze platform systems and also listen to artists' voices.

In the art and cultural industries, scholars have explored how technology changes the art system. Duester and Zhang studied the digital and AI transformation of China's art industry [11]. They showed that since 2016, national policies have encouraged digital and AI development, and in 2023, this process became faster. Digital and AI tools are now common in art creation, exhibition, sales, and promotion. This means art labor depends more on platform infrastructure and data logic. Poposki studied NFT discourse and found that tokenization and algorithmic distribution push art into a speculative economy where cultural and financial values mix [12]. Art becomes both a cultural symbol and a financial asset. These studies show that cultural and artistic value is now shaped less by traditional art markets and more by algorithms and platform traffic. However, most of these works focus on big industry changes and not on how algorithms influence artists' daily labor and value recognition in practice.

Studies show that digital platforms and algorithms have moved from being simple tools of communication to main systems that shape how culture and work are organized. Algorithms are not just ways to share information. They now take part in art making, sharing, and judging value. They change how artists work, since artists must keep producing to stay seen in the cycle of posting and algorithms. They also rebuild what value means, connecting meaning with attention and traffic.

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Because of this, cultural work moves from creating meaning to fighting for attention. Algorithms also make inequality worse. They focus attention and money on a small group of creators. Overall, algorithms turn artistic work into platform work, artistic value into data value, and artists into players inside algorithm systems. This change affects how art is made and shared. It also changes how free art can be and how diverse culture is. These past studies give a strong base for understanding platform logic, digital labor, and cultural production. But as Pierre Bourdieu said, the artist is the main subject of creation [13]. There is still little research on how platform algorithms shape artists' work, value, and survival. This study aims to fill that gap. It uses semi-structured interviews and cross-platform comparison to explore how algorithms reshape artistic labor, visibility, and value in Chinese contemporary art.

To address this problem, the study focuses on three key questions:

1. How do artists adapt their creative practices to the cultural logics embedded in platform algorithms?
2. How do algorithmic platforms restructure artistic labor and creative routines?
3. How do algorithmic platforms shape and redistribute artistic income and value recognition?

By answering these questions, this study aims to show how platform algorithms reshape artistic labor, visibility, and value in Chinese contemporary art and how artists redefine their roles between algorithmic control and cultural autonomy. It helps explain the link between algorithmic culture and artistic labor and gives insight for media and cultural policy on how to balance efficiency with cultural value and how to protect the long-term rights and sustainability of creators.

2. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design. It is based on interpretivism as its way of understanding knowledge [7,8]. The goal is to study the role of platform algorithms in Chinese contemporary art. It looks at how they shape the work structure of artists, how they affect creative motivation, and how they change artists' views of cultural value and artistic meaning. Interpretivism focuses on understanding meaning, experience, and action in specific contexts.

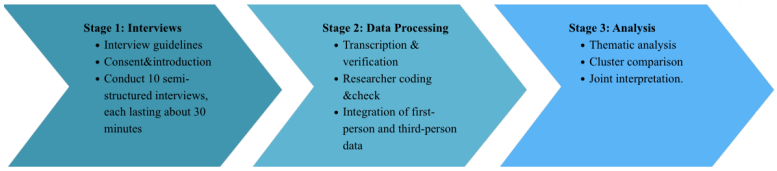

Figure 1. Research process flowchart

This study has three parts: (1) data collection; (2) data organization; and (3) data analysis (Figure 1).

2.1. Research design

This study adopted a semi-structured interview method [14]. This study collected data through semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of how artists perceive, negotiate, and respond to platform mechanisms in an algorithm-driven creative environment. The participants were recruited from three representative platforms: Instagram, RedNote, and Douyin (The full interview questions are provided in Appendix A). Instagram serves as a global social and exhibition space

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where algorithms determine visibility and online influence. RedNote is a major Chinese content community where algorithms shape art communication through lifestyle and interest-based logics. Douyin is a short-video platform known for its high-frequency feedback and rapid algorithmic responses. Participants were mainly recruited through the researchers' professional networks and peer recommendations. As the researchers study and work in the fields of visual arts and arts management, they have extensive connections with artists and art communities. The first group of participants was directly invited by the researchers' friends or classmates, and later, several participants introduced other artists who fit the study's focus. Participant information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' profile

Participant	Age	Platform(s)	Art Form	Main Use
P1	24	Instagram RedNote	Painting	• Instagram: Show works, sometimes sells through private messages, watch likes and views, think ne popular video brings more.
P2	25	Instagram	Sculpture, Jewelry	• Instagram: Start in college, post sculpture and jewelry, get custom orders through messages.
P3	24	Instagram	Sculpture	• Instagram: Use as the main platform, post only here, show works, connect with people, think tags or videos bring more views.
P4	23	Instagram	Illustration	• Instagram: Main platform for sharing children's book works, posting related photos when joining art fairs, and maintaining multiple accounts, including one for school.
P5	25	Instagram	Photography	• Instagram: Started posting during undergrad because it was required; used to promote self and make work more visible. • RedNote: Sometimes, posts work that can reach a broader audience; think of it as useful for exposure.
P6	25	Instagram RedNote Douyin	Illustration	• RedNote: Main platform since 2022, considered most effective for exposure; posts digital illustrations with short cycles and high frequency. • Instagram: Also posts but less central; more like a parallel presence. • Douyin: Started in 2018, posts lifestyle or anime-inspired works; uses it for wider sharing and getting feedback.
P7	35	Instagram RedNote Douyin	Illustration	• RedNote: First platform used; shares works and sometimes tutorials (e.g., Procreate tips). • Instagram: Publishes works as a portfolio matrix, trying to create a more complete self-image.
P8	23	RedNote	Installation, Mixed media	• RedNote: Started around 2020, mainly to archive works, gradually used for visibility; led to exhibition opportunities (e.g., exhibition in Lishui, Zhejiang).
P9	26	RedNote Instagram	Multi-media	• RedNote: Initially used for sharing works and ideas, I received exhibition invitations through it. • Instagram: Recently started systematic posting to build an independent artist profile and showcase works; less about direct sales, more about professional exposure.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.BJ28934

Table 1. (continued)

P10	29	Instagram RedNote	Painting	• Instagram: Networking, being discovered by curators, gaining exhibition opportunities (accounts for ~50–80% of opportunities). • RedNote: Recently adopted, mainly for showcasing works.

2.2. Date collection

All interviews were done online through Zoom, and each interview lasted about 20–30 minutes. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed word by word by the researcher. The transcripts were checked and revised several times to make sure the meaning and details were accurate. To protect privacy, all names and personal information were removed. The researcher kept a reflexive position during the process. After each interview, short field notes were written to record observations and reflections, such as tone, pauses, and unclear meanings. These notes provided useful context and helped make the later analysis more complete and coherent.

2.3. Data analysis

This study used Reflexive Thematic Analysis to identify and explain repeated patterns of meaning in the interview data [15]. The method not only describes what appears in the data. It also focuses on how the researcher interacts with the data during coding and interpretation. This helps understand how artistic labor and cultural value are formed in the context of algorithmic platforms.

In the coding stage, the researcher first transcribed all interview recordings word by word and read them many times to become familiar with the content. Then the researcher used open coding to mark sentences, paragraphs, or keywords that showed analytical meaning. Early codes included ideas such as algorithm preference influence, creative anxiety, traffic pressure, account maintenance, exposure pattern, and indirect income. The process was data-driven and did not use a fixed theory. The goal was to let key concepts emerge directly from participants' accounts.

In the category formation stage, the researcher grouped and summarized the initial codes. Concepts with close meanings were combined into middle-level categories. For example, traffic pressure and account maintenance were grouped under platform visibility management, while time fragmentation and interrupted creative rhythm were grouped under changes in work rhythm. By comparing and refining, this stage produced several categories that reflected shared experiences and meanings among artists.

In the theme development stage, the researcher raised these categories into higher-level themes that explained the research questions. Three main themes were formed: (1) the balance between creative orientation and cultural value, showing the tension between adapting to algorithms and keeping autonomy; (2) the formation of a compound labor structure, showing the mix of creation, operation, and interaction; and (3) the double effect of income structure and economic model, showing the contradiction between empowerment and inequality. Each theme included several subcategories that captured different sides of artists' experiences in algorithmic environments.

In the reflexivity and validation stage, the researcher returned to the raw data and compared it with the themes to check their accuracy. Themes were revised, merged, or renamed when needed. The researcher also kept reflexive memos, documented the analytic process, and discussed ideas with peers. This helped review how personal position or bias could affect the interpretation. Reflexivity here is not only a methodological requirement. It is a way to understand the shared space

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.BJ28934

between the researcher and the participants. They work together to create meaning in the same social and cultural system.

3. Findings

This study uses in-depth interviews with ten young artists who work on algorithmic platforms. It finds three main themes that show how platform algorithms change artistic practice in creative direction, work structure, and economic models. The study shows that algorithms are not only technical systems. They are also cultural and economic forces that are part of the art world. They shape what is seen, change how artists work, and affect income. They also change how artists see their roles and values. In creation, artists try to balance platform rules and their own style. In work, artistic jobs grow to include account management and talking with audiences. In the economy, algorithms give new ways to make money but also cause more inequality and dependence.

Table 2. Thematic structure for findings

Research Question	Theme	Categories (Sub-Themes)
RQ1. How do artists adapt their creative practices to the cultural logics embedded in platform algorithms?	Theme 1: Creative Orientation and Cultural Value Between Adaptation and Persistence	•Balance between artistic freedom and market rules • Change in how artistic identity is seen in digital culture • Conflict between short-term results and long-term cultural value
RQ2. How do algorithmic platforms restructure artistic labor and creative routines?	Theme 2: Compound Labor Structure and the Shift from Creator to Platform Worker	• Wider range of work: creation, operation, and interaction • Platform upkeep and data handling as new kinds of work • Broken work time and an "always on" way of working
RQ3. How do algorithmic platforms shape and redistribute artistic income and value recognition?	Theme 3: Income Structure and Economic Inequality in the Platform Era	• New ways to earn money through visibility and connection • Unequal income and unstable market caused by algorithm bias

3.1. Creative orientation and cultural value between adaptation and persistence (RQ1)

The interviews show that algorithmic logic strongly affects how artworks are presented and understood. Many participants said that algorithms and content preferences directly decide the visibility of their works. The form of content (video or image), the use of tags, and how well it fits the platform's style all change how visible a work becomes. This uncertainty gives artists extra pressure beyond creation. They must keep changing how they show their artworks to stay visible and keep their followers.

P3 said, "When I create, I don't think much about traffic or algorithms. When I post, I think about how to get more traffic." P5 said, "Positive feedback on a platform pushes me to create. Sometimes the platform's promotion gives me ideas." He also said, "Traffic is very important. More traffic means more chances." P7 said, "On my own website, I post what I like. On other platforms, if I want traffic, I need to follow their algorithms."

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.BJ28934

These comments show that artists' creative motives are not always shaped by algorithms. When they share their work, they need to follow platform rules. What changes is not their main expression but how they show and share their work. Some artists still keep their own styles and resist algorithm rules. They focus on creative freedom and cultural depth.

P6 said, "I try to keep my own style. If I can stay true to it and still get exposure, then I will find my own path." P9 said, "When I create, I don't think about whether the platform or data will like it. It doesn't affect me much."

These experiences show that artists are always balancing between freedom and dependence. They want to keep their own creative voice but also need to adapt to algorithmic power. Algorithms are not only external systems. They also become an internal force that shapes artists' motivation and thinking.

3.2. Compound labor structure and the shift from creator to platform worker (RQ2)

The interviews also show that the work of artists is no longer only about creation. It now includes tasks like account management, interaction, and data tracking. Their time is divided among creation, operation, and communication. The rhythm of work becomes fragmented and platform-based.

P1 said, "This change is good. It's hard to succeed without platform traffic. If you have traffic online, you will definitely study how to operate the platform." P6 said, "Every day I take some time, even when busy, to reply to messages. It helps keep the account active, and that is necessary for getting exposure." P7 added, "At first, I disliked this change. But now I enjoy the process because I can get some income from operating and promoting my work."

These statements show that artists are changing from being only creators to being both creators and platform workers. They are not only cultural producers but also active workers in the platform system. Maintaining accounts, interacting with audiences, and analyzing data have become part of their daily work to stay visible in the art world.

3.3. Income structure and economic inequality in the platform era (RQ3)

Platform algorithms have a double effect on artists' income. They bring new ways to earn and new chances for collaboration, but they also make income more unequal and unstable.

P2 said, "People message me on Instagram to buy my work, mostly custom jewelry." P5 added, "If you want to work as a commercial photographer, before using these platforms, there would be someone like an agent. The agent would ask to work together but take a commission. These commissions made it hard for artists to earn much in the end. Now, because information spreads fast, platforms help avoid some of these middlemen." P8 said, "In general, I got more opportunities than before using platforms. For example, my exhibition in Lishui, Zhejiang, this August came through RedNote." P10 said, "Maybe half or even 80% of my opportunities come from Instagram. Some curators found me there."

These examples show that platforms make information more open and help reduce intermediaries. Artists can connect with clients, curators, and buyers directly. This gives them a chance to keep more of their income. But some artists said the income from platforms is still unstable.

P1 said, "Traffic itself doesn't bring direct income." P4 said, "I once got a scam commission through Instagram. Real commissions from platforms are very few, maybe 2%."

These statements show the paradox of algorithmic platforms. They increase exposure and expand markets, but also create new inequality and risks. Top artists get more resources, while smaller ones

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face heavy work and low returns. Artists move between empowerment and exploitation, showing a typical pattern of a platform-dependent economy.

4. Discussion

The findings show how algorithmic platforms reshape artists' creative practices in many ways. They affect visibility, labor, income, and cultural value. Together, these dimensions show that artistic creation is not only an aesthetic process but also a form of social labor inside a technical and economic system. The discussion below follows the four main themes and connects them with theory and practical implications.

4.1. Negotiating cultural value and identity

Algorithms also change how artists think about cultural value and identity. Some artists keep their own style and resist algorithmic logic. Others make strategic adjustments in how they present their works to gain visibility. This shows a constant negotiation between freedom and dependence.

According to O'Neill's idea of "negotiated authorship," artists are no longer isolated creators [16]. They are strategic actors in algorithmic environments. They balance between technology, markets, and cultural ideals. Artistic creation becomes a form of "mediated autonomy." Cultural value is not fixed. It is reshaped through interactions between algorithms, audience feedback, and self-positioning.

4.2. Composite labor and platform dependence

The results also show that artistic labor now includes account work, data tracking, and audience interaction. This form of work matches what Fuchs and Terranova call "digital labor," where creation, promotion, and social activity blend as part of the platform economy [3,17].

In this system, artists' daily routines become fragmented. They reply to comments, plan content, and stay active online to gain visibility. This platform-dependent labor weakens creative autonomy. Artists must stay online and engage with algorithms to keep their visibility and identity. Zhao says that creative work in China is often hard and broken into small parts. Artistic work is now shaped by platform logic [6].

4.3. Income, inequality, and the winner-takes-all logic

In the economy, algorithmic platforms give new chances and new inequalities. Some artists get commissions, sales, and shows through algorithms. Most still face unstable income and limited traffic. This pattern matches Srnicek's "winner-takes-all" idea, where algorithms help a few top artists get more attention and hold back others [2].

Traffic and income stay with a few accounts. This brings back old hierarchies in new digital ways. Many artists said that even when they spend more time and work harder, their income does not match their effort. The platform system, therefore, does not make art more democratic. Instead, it rebuilds inequality in a new technical framework.

The interviews show that algorithms act as "gatekeepers of visibility" in today's art world. Many artists said that algorithms, tagging strategies, and content forms (video or image) directly decide if their works are seen. This supports Bucher's idea of the "politics of visibility," where algorithms control exposure and act as new systems of power [18].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.BJ28934

At the same time, the lack of transparency and the unstable nature of algorithms cause long-term mental and emotional stress. Artists keep changing posting time, format, and tags to maintain attention. The uncertainty of this process causes “algorithmic anxiety.” Artists face tension between free creation and forced adaptation. Algorithms become both a source of opportunity and a cause of stress.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Implications

This study is based on in-depth interviews with ten young artists who are active on algorithmic platforms. It examines how algorithmic systems influence artists’ practices in three main areas: creative intentions, labor structure, and economic strategies. The findings show that platform algorithms play a major role in how art becomes seen and shared. Their lack of clarity and unstable nature make artists feel more stress and worry. Artistic work also grows beyond making art and turns into a mix of creation and operation. Artists need to be both creators and platform workers. In money and value, platforms give new chances for income and exposure. They also make inequality worse. Artists must keep a balance between creative freedom and the need to survive. These findings match studies on digital work, algorithm control, and how cultural value is made again. They also show that artists are vulnerable and dependent on the digital economy.

5.2. Future directions

Future research can look at how artists from different generations react to algorithmic environments. The sample in this study still has some limits, especially in age, as it mainly includes young and emerging artists. It does not yet explore in depth how older and more experienced artists adjust their creative and working models under digital trends and academic change. Compared with younger artists, they often face greater challenges in adaptation. Studying different age groups in digital culture can help show how creative subjects differ across generations. It can also show how artistic labor continues and changes in times of social and technological transformation.

Education is also an important area to explore. As algorithmic platforms become the main system for art communication and value recognition, university teachers and art educators need to respond more actively to these changes. They should help students understand the power structures and social effects behind platform mechanisms. This can improve the media literacy of young artists and help art education stay forward-looking and critical in the digital cultural environment.

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Appendix A: interview questions

Opening and Background

1. Can you first give a short introduction about your current creative direction and the main platforms you use?

2. When did you start posting your works on these platforms? What was your first goal?

Creative Motivation and Topic Choice (for RQ1)

1. When you decide on a creative theme or topic, do you think about the platform's recommendation system or traffic rules? Can you give an example?

2. How much do you think platform data, such as likes, shares, and views, affects your future creative motivation?

3. Have you ever changed or adjusted your subject matter to get more exposure or recommendations? If yes, how did you do it?

Work Structure (for RQ2)

1. In your daily creative practice, besides making the work itself, how much time do you spend on platform-related work, such as posting, writing titles or hashtags, talking with viewers, or checking data?

2. How do these extra tasks affect your time and creative rhythm?

3. When facing platform rules or traffic logic, do you change your work style? For example, do you post more often, change how your work looks, or spend more time managing your account?

4. How do you see this change from pure creation to a mix of creation, sharing, and operation?

Income Structure and Economic Model (for RQ3)

1. What are your main sources of income now? About how much of it comes from platform-related income?

2. Have you ever gained new income sources or chances through platforms, such as revenue sharing, tips, ads, or brand work? Or met new collectors or received invitations to show your work?

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.BJ28934

If yes, can you share one example?

3. How is this kind of income different from the traditional art market, like gallery sales or auctions?

4. In your experience, do platform traffic changes or recommendation systems make your income unstable? If yes, what kind of effects do they cause?5. Have you used any methods to deal with this uncertainty?

Long-Term Impact and Strategies

1. In the long run, how do you think algorithmic platforms affect your creative freedom and career path?

2. What strategies do you use to deal with platform rules or traffic changes? For example, do you adapt, avoid, or resist them?

3. If there were no algorithmic platforms, do you think your creative path would be different?

Extra Thoughts

1. Under the influence of platform algorithms, what do you think is your biggest challenge and your biggest gain?