

Social Issues in Chinese-Language Podcasts—A Case Study of the Xiaoyuzhou App

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Abstract. With the recent resurgence and growth of Chinese-language podcasts, an increasing number of people are turning to the Xiaoyuzhou app to access Chinese-language podcasts as a media channel for understanding social hot topics and discussing public issues. This research examines Chinese-language podcasts on the Xiaoyuzhou app, employing autoethnography and semi-structured in-depth interviews as primary methodologies. By analyzing both podcast hosts and audience, it investigates how social issues are disseminated within the Chinese-language podcasting landscape. This research indicates that Chinese-language podcasts addressing social issues on the Xiaoyuzhou app do indeed possess the capacity to present in-depth content and complex thinking, whilst fostering a relatively rational interactive atmosphere that affords both hosts and audience a degree of security. Simultaneously, as a distinctive media format, Chinese-language podcasts can transcend the boundaries between the public and private spheres, thereby mitigating to some extent the phenomena of 'collective silence' and 'news avoidance' prevalent within the digital internet landscape. However, owing to the scale and strategic limitations of the Xiaoyuzhou app, coupled with the scarcity of high-quality podcasts dedicated to social issues, Chinese-language podcasts are improbable to emerge as the primary public forum for deliberating public affairs in the near future.

Keywords: Chinese-language podcasts, Xiaoyuzhou app, social issues, public affairs.

1. Introduction

As the short video boom fades and the market reaches saturation, the once-dominant format faces increasing homogenisation. Against this backdrop of widespread visual "information fatigue" and aesthetic weariness, the "audio economy" has emerged. Represented by podcasts, which first reached China in 2004 yet failed to gain sustained traction, the audio market is now experiencing a resurgence. Chinese-language podcasts are gradually replacing short-video platforms as a key channel for contemporary audiences to access information and enjoy leisure entertainment [1].

Unlike the brief and fast-paced nature of short videos, podcasts possess their own unique strengths. For hosts, podcast content tends to be significantly more in-depth and comprehensive than that typically produced in short-form video creation. For the audience, hosts can convey their views through conversational formats, making podcasts more companionable and emotionally resonant.

Beyond leisure and entertainment, Chinese-language podcasts have emerged as a new arena for public discourse on trending events. Particularly during the dissemination of social hot topics, certain short-form video platforms' excessive pursuit of clickbait marketing and propagation of low-quality, misleading content not only undermines the effectiveness of information dissemination but also diminishes the depth of public debate on critical issues [2]. These factors contribute to growing public weariness towards short-form video platforms and their coverage of societal hot topics.

Particularly in today's digital landscape, social media has gradually shifted public discourse from interactivity towards relationality and participation [3]. Against this backdrop, Chinese-language podcasts, combining depth with emotional resonance, are transcending boundaries to offer audiences a fresh arena for public discourse.

2. Research methodology

This research primarily employs auto-ethnography and one-to-one semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDI) as its core research methods.

Auto-ethnography is a qualitative research method that integrates personal narrative with cultural analysis. A key challenge of this approach lies in striking an appropriate balance between personal storytelling and theoretical analysis [4]. To balance the subjectivity of auto-ethnography with the objective development of Chinese-language podcasts, this research employs one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews to supplement the gaps in the autoethnographic approach, thereby providing a thorough interpretation of the research question.

Drawing upon an understanding of her own lived experiences, the researcher conducts systematic observation of her own ethnic group. Based on issues identified through this observation, suitable interviewees are selected for in-depth interviews.

2.1. Auto-ethnography

Since August 2022, the researcher has engaged with Chinese-language podcasts as a listener, utilizing them as a primary medium for information acquisition and participation in cultural and entertainment activities. From March 2024 onwards, the researcher further immersed themselves in podcast production as a creator, employing Chinese-language podcasts as a platform for sharing personal experiences, articulating perspectives, and conveying values.

Throughout this process, the researcher, leveraging dual identities as both listener and host, has comprehensively participated in every stage of podcast creation. This encompasses, but is not limited to, topic planning, content recording, post-production editing, multi-platform distribution, community management (listener groups and host groups), promotion on social media (Xiaohongshu), and engagement within comment sections. Simultaneously, through ongoing exchanges with audience and hosts of diverse backgrounds, the researcher explored variations in thematic approaches, accumulating extensive first-hand empirical material and personal insights.

This research selects general-purpose Chinese-language podcast platform Xiaoyuzhou app as its case subject. All analyses are grounded in the podcast content, hosts and audience based on this application.

2.2. Semi-structured In-Depth Interviews (IDI)

Centred on the research questions, the researcher selected ten podcast audience and five podcast hosts (who also avid podcast audience with over 400 hours of listening time on Xiaoyuzhou were)

from different cities and professions for in-depth interviews (Table 1). The criteria for selecting the audience were: cumulative listening time exceeding 100 hours on the Xiaoyuzhou app, and having listened to at least five episodes of podcasts addressing social issues. For podcast hosts, the criteria were: over 10,000 subscribers on the Xiaoyuzhou app, having published no fewer than 20 episodes (with at least five covering social issues), and an average play count per episode exceeding 5,000.

The interviews were designed to answer three core questions: (1) Compared with other media, what advantages do Chinese-language podcasts offer for public issues discourse? (2) For hosts, why is podcasting a more suitable medium for expressing their thoughts on social issues? (3) For ordinary audience, why do they prioritize podcasts as a platform for understanding public matters?

Given that these questions follow a structure of one overarching theme with two specific angles (hosts and audience), this study employed one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The "one-on-one" format ensures the researcher's emic perspective and provides necessary privacy for discussing public issues, while the "semi-structured" approach allows for flexibility. The interview guides for hosts and audience differ slightly, mainly in the section on experience and behavior exploration.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted via online voice calls, with recordings subsequently transcribed and organized. The researcher then repeatedly reviewed the interview materials to identify core concepts and recurring themes, which served as the basis for an in-depth analysis and theoretical conclusions regarding the research questions. To ensure interviewees' privacy and information security, the real names of interviewees are not used in this study (Note: Cumulative listening hours on Xiaoyuzhou were calculated for each interviewee, as of their interview date).

Table 1. Basic information on interviewees

No.	Identity	Name	Gender	Occupation	Education Background	Age (Years)	Location	Listening Hours on Xiaoyuzhou app
S01	Audience	LX	Female	Internet Professional	Bachelor's Degree	32	Qingdao	508
S02	Audience	YY	Female	Engineer	Bachelor's Degree	27	Nanchang	965
S03	Audience	HSL	Female	Freelancer	Bachelor's Degree	37	Beijing	2903
S04	Host	XYJ	Female	Writer	Bachelor's Degree	35	Shanghai	1405
S05	Host	MT	Female	Chip Engineer	Master's Degree	30	Shanghai	468
S06	Audience	ZS	Male	Accountant	Master's Degree	36	Melbourne	264
S07	Host	JX	Female	Internet Professional	Bachelor's Degree	33	Beijing	1721
S08	Host	LSY	Female	Writer	Master's Degree	27	Beijing	490
S09	Host	FY	Male	Freelancer	Bachelor's Degree	32	Beijing	656
S10	Audience	JZM	Female	Internet Professional	Master's Degree	27	Shenzhen	1200
S11	Audience	YZW	Male	Internet Professional	Bachelor's Degree	29	Beijing	317
S12	Audience	ZTY	Male	Internet Professional	Bachelor's Degree	28	Beijing	543
S13	Audience	QQ	Female	E-commerce Professional	Bachelor's Degree	24	Hangzhou	2211
S14	Audience	KK	Female	Student	Undergraduate (pursuing)	19	Melbourne	474
S15	Audience	YE	Male	Taxidermist	Master's Degree	26	Beijing	102

3. Research findings

3.1. Reconfiguring the depth and complexity of social issue discussions

During the dissemination of socially charged events, certain short videos excessively pursue attention-grabbing marketing tactics and propagate low-quality, misleading content. Such practices

not only diminish the efficacy of information transmission but also undermine the depth of public discourse on critical issues. These factors collectively foster growing public weariness towards short videos and their treatment of social hotspots.

In contrast to the brief, fast-paced, and often superficial nature of short videos, the longer-form, audio-only podcast format is demonstrating its unique advantages and appeal.

Among the 15 interviewees sampled, 14 responded affirmatively when asked "whether podcasts were more conducive to understanding in-depth social issues than short-form video platform?". Interviewees indicated that short videos, while low-cost to produce, suffer from diminished credibility due to an overabundance of fragmented and homogenised content. Particularly during the initial stages of social hotspots, creators are driven by traffic incentives to produce content capitalizing on "social sentiment". Consequently, within such cyclical emotional narratives, space for rational discourse becomes severely constrained [5]. Within the same rhythm of public opinion, the landscape of Chinese-language podcasts presents a striking contrast. For instance, "When Sanae Takaichi was newly elected as Japan's Prime Minister, short video platforms fixated on her attendance at the APEC meeting, with some netizens even using the footage to attack her appearance. It was only through listening to the podcast 'East Asia Observatory' on the Xiaoyuzhou app that I understood her political foundations were actually quite unstable."(S01)

On the Xiaoyuzhou app, the average podcast episode runs for 59 minutes [6]. The difference in length compared to short videos not only fosters a sense of trust among audience—"I feel that the host must have done extensive research, engaged in deep reflection, and carefully prepared a script before recording the podcast, which greatly enhances the credibility of the content" (S06), but also provides hosts with ample space to explore in-depth content. Hosts with a background in journalism, in particular, tend to favor podcasts as a medium to express their concerns about social issues.

"The logic of long-form audio allows me to develop a stronger sense of critical awareness and convey a greater volume of information. For instance, the recent events involving Emma Watson and J.K. Rowling are far too complex to be adequately presented through short-form video content." (S08) For 80% of interviewed host, tackling socially relevant topics, whether through "extensive preparation time" or "lengthier production cycles", appears essential for ensuring depth and navigating complex subjects.

3.2. Rational and safe interaction atmosphere

Whether in the realm of short videos or on earlier platforms like Douban and Weibo, netizens discussing public issues often seem prone to deconstructing events and shifting focus, ultimately causing the topic to veer off course [7]. This has led both users seeking quality content and creators eager to express themselves on public platforms to develop a resistance towards public discourse content and comment sections on social media. Amidst this information overload, many exhibit varying degrees of "news avoidance" driven by "emotional escapism" or "negative emotion management motives [8]." Increasingly, people resist engaging with public affairs online, fearing that "netizens will stray from the core issue and descend into meaningless attacks and abuse" (S13). This sense of insecurity has begun to permeate digital media. However, on the Xiaoyuzhou app, this tendency to avoid social issues due to perceived "unsafety" appears to be reversing. When asked, "Do you feel relatively safe when using the Xiaoyuzhou app to listen to Chinese-language podcasts discussing social issues?", 11 interviewees answered affirmatively, while the remaining 4 interviewees gave a more neutral response of "no particular feeling".

Firstly, Chinese-language podcasts on the Xiaoyuzhou app focus more on discussing public issues themselves rather than societal sentiment. Interview data indicates that when opening the

comment sections of podcasts addressing social issues on the Xiaoyuzhou app, one finds that listeners' remarks predominantly concern the podcast content or the social issue itself. "Unlike other social media platforms, the comment sections on the Xiaoyuzhou app are notably more friendly and moderate. Take the 'Wang Nuannuan' s cliff-fall incident' for example , comment on Weibo and WeChat would feature vicious remarks like 'she deserved to die' ,but I've never seen such comments on Xiaoyuzhou app. It seems as though everyone using Xioyuzhou app considers their words carefully before posting".(S03) Meanwhile, the hosts in the sample also believe that due to the product characteristics of Xiaoyuzhou's podcast—where hosts' personal profile pages reveal less personal information compared to platforms like Weibo and rednote, coupled with the podcast format's lack of requirement for 'showing one's face' that offers hosts a sense of security, relaxation, and time-saving. This allows them to devote more energy to creating podcast content. (S04)

Secondly, Chinese-language podcasts on the Xiaoyuzhou app have become a key channel for listeners to proactively break out of their information cocoons. Compared to other platforms, when consuming content on social issues via Xiaoyuzhou app, audience appear less inclined to seek resonance and more inclined to seek divergence. With the use of personalised algorithms on social media platforms, individuals become trapped within self-imposed cocoons, exposed only to information that aligns with their existing views [9]. This phenomenon alarms most interviewees: "Short videos rely entirely on algorithms. I genuinely dread being trapped in an information cocoon—I even deliberately seek out opposing viewpoints to force myself to listen" (S02); "Some perspectives are so jarring I might switch off immediately, but reason compels me to re-subscribe days later" (S13).

Beyond audience' apprehension about becoming trapped within information cocoons, another phenomenon is beginning to spread among creators. Today, social media creators all experience varying degrees of the "chilling effect", the fear that leads them to refrain from publishing certain content or to restrict the scope of their discourse [10]. However, on the Xiaoyuzhou app, due to the generally objective, rational, and neutral attitude of audience mentioned earlier, hosts on the Xiaoyuzhou app also gain a sense of security. Hosts tend to be more inclined to tackle sensitive and controversial social issues in their content and can anticipate even before they publish that users on Xiaoyuzhou are more likely to offer rational and objective feedback. "For instance, when discussing the incident involving Yang Li and JD.com, my WeChat video Channels received over 99 abusive comments, but none appeared on the Xiaoyuzhou app, which aligns with my prediction." (S05)

3.3. A new mechanism that breaks the public-private boundary and dissolves the spiral of silence

Since social issues are often sensitive, people typically choose, consciously or unconsciously, to become the "silent majority" in such circumstances. Particularly when faced with the risks and pressures of expression, individuals tend to remain silent in the moment [11]. However, Chinese-language podcasts on the Xiaoyuzhou app may be gradually breaking this long-standing pattern of silence.

Among the five hosts interviewed, all of them primarily operate podcasts as their main self-media platform. Before engaging with Chinese-language podcasts, none had considered alternative formats for expressing their perspectives on social issues. For these hosts, "the production costs of long-form video are prohibitively high, while short-form video is unsuitable for in-depth logical discourse". (S08) Podcasts appear to be the more comfortable and cost-effective choice.

Firstly, within the Xiaoyuzhou app, Chinese-language podcasts effectively break the boundary between the public and private spheres, serving as a potent vehicle for the the public expression of

individual experiences. Five interviewed hosts all possess some background in media work, which makes them more adept at controlling the content's appropriateness. For these hosts, podcasts serve as a "semi-open salon" where public issues are brought into private spheres by integrating personal experiences with social hot topics, they transform them into media for listening and discussion, which also represents a form of self-actualization for them (S09). For some hosts, despite podcasting being "extremely time-consuming, they still choose to persevere", sometimes even "producing daily episodes", because "as women, there's a desire to express views on public affairs, yet in real life, there's often no one to share with". (S05) Producing podcasts largely compensates for this emotional and expressive void.

For audience, the hosts' media backgrounds serve as a form of "endorsement". Many interviewees mentioned that their primary reasons for favoring podcasts like SisHighway and Hot Cocoa on the Xiaoyuzhou app, which focus on social issues, stem from a natural sense of trust in the hosts and their identities as media professionals (S01, S02, S03, S10, S14). This members of audience also noted that due to the longer duration of such podcasts (1-4 hours), they felt as though they were sitting at a table engaging in conversation with the hosts during the listening experience (S02). This sense of connection allowed them to feel as though they had "aligned their values" with the hosts, reaching a point where "whatever social issue they discuss, I'm willing to listen. Even if I often disagree with their perspectives." (S13). For members of this audience, Chinese-language podcasts on the Xiaoyuzhou app have found a delicate balance between "personal expression" and "public media".

In today's digital network environment, a persistent phenomenon remains: the vast majority of content is generated by a tiny fraction of active users, while the majority of users merely consume information passively without voicing their opinions [12]. This phenomenon appears to have been disrupted within the Xiaoyuzhou app. According to the report "The Power of Dialogue: The Public Value of Chinese-language Podcasts", Chinese-language podcast users demonstrate a strong inclination towards interaction, dialogue, and exploration. Among daily active users, 40% have engaged in interactive behaviors like liking posts, and among those who have posted comments, the average comment length reaches as high as 439 characters [6]. "Especially when a host I like faces criticism, I'll always step in to defend them, but I'll still stick to the facts"(S15). Moreover, over 40% of interviewees indicated they actively search for social issues of personal interest on the Xiaoyuzhou app, rather than passively relying on editorial recommendations or personalized (algorithm-based) suggestions.

Additionally, some interviewees noted, "It's evident that an increasing number of celebrities and public intellectuals have joined podcast production in recent years, figures like Yu Lu, JolinTsai, Yonghao Luo, and Zhiyuan Xu have all consciously operated podcasts in the past two years." (S10) This trend of public figures using personal podcasts to discuss public issues undoubtedly breaks the boundaries between public and private spheres while boosting exposure and traffic for Chinese-language podcasts. This allows audience of the Xiaoyuzhou app to fully experience a sense of "public consciousness", a feeling that "public figures have come into my home to chat with me." (S10)

4. Discussion

4.1. From "niche yet refined" to "the general public"

Although Chinese-language podcasts have emerged as a new forum for contemporary discussions on social issues, when asked, "Do you believe Chinese-language podcasts will become the primary

forum for public affairs discourse in the future?", 66% of interviewees gave a relatively pessimistic answer. An additional 20% indicated that, although "we welcome the trend, but remain cautiously optimistic".

Firstly, when social news breaks, only 40% of interviewees indicated they would use the Xiaoyuzhou app as their primary channel for understanding social issues. Issues such as limited timeliness, faster and more direct access through text, and the inability to easily rewind or pinpoint audio content, have become significant barriers that podcasts face. "Trending lists on Douyin and Weibo are constantly refreshed, but all resources on the Xiaoyuzhou app are updated only once every 24 hours."(S11) Some hosts also remarked, "The production cycle for podcasts is long, and it's exhausting to try to keep up with trending topics."(S04) "Compared to short-video platforms with an infinite content stream like 'waterfall feeds', Xiaoyuzhou app may not be the ideal space to shape public opinion."(S13)

Secondly, podcasts appear to have become a second-best option for many individuals. Whether audience turns to podcasts "due to the low quality of short videos" or hosts begin experimenting with podcasts "because they lack the skills to produce short videos", both seem driven by rather negative motivations. Many interviewees also noted, "If given sufficient time and energy, I would still prefer well-produced long-form videos over podcasts." This sentiment highlights the significant "channel barriers" that podcasts continue to face in the broader media ecology.

Thirdly, most respondents with a pessimistic outlook expressed that the podcast "pie" is simply too small. They noted the high cognitive cost associated with engaging in podcast content. Some audience expressed a strong interest in social issues, yet noted that high-quality programs are rare, almost to the point of scarcity. Simultaneously, some hosts pointed out that many listeners are under overwhelming social pressure, which leaves them with little need or capacity for in-depth exploration. This mismatch, where listeners perceive a supply shortage while creators worry that audiences lack the time or capacity to deeply engage, hinders the growth of the podcasting market.

Finally, the limited monetization potential of podcasts on the Xiaoyuzhou app is an unavoidable issue. Hosts note that tackling social issues is challenging and costly, sometimes requiring them to "pour their heart and soul" into the work. Few possess the capacity to produce such content, with most finding it "laborious and unrewarding, driven purely by passion", which model is unsustainable. (S08)

At the same time, some audience expressed greater trust in podcast content precisely because, as they put it, "Everyone knows podcasts don't make money. If a host is still producing content, it must be out of a sense of social responsibility. That's why I trust them more." (S01, S13). This contradictory situation appears to reflect the earlier-mentioned issue of the "small market pie".

Both audience and hosts often characterize Xiaoyuzhou app as a "small but refined" platform. However, social issue discourse ultimately requires formats that can reach the general public. From this perspective, Xiaoyuzhou app still has a considerable journey ahead [13].

4.2. Success and limitation: a double-edged sword of "focus"

As the only podcast-exclusive platform in China, the Xiaoyuzhou app has received widespread recognition from both hosts and users during interviews, particularly for its user characteristics and product design features, such as high editorial curation credibility and an efficient time-stamping ("clip marking") function.

Firstly, the overall level of awareness among Xiaoyuzhou app users is notably high. "Compared to the Ximalaya app, Xiaoyuzhou users show a significant improvement in overall quality."(S05) When asked whether they perceived users to possess independent thinking and critical faculties

when discussing social issues, all interviewees responded affirmatively. Furthermore, virtually no hosts encountered online abuse for addressing social topics (with the exception of gender issues).

Secondly, Xiaoyuzhou app maintains a more lenient content review policy compared to other apps, affording hosts considerable latitude in selecting topics. To some extent, Chinese-language podcasts on the platform appear to break away from mainstream narratives and challenge preconceived stances as well as binary oppositions. "I find it easier to hear perspectives that diverge from the mainstream on the Xiaoyuzhou app." (S11) Due to its lenient content review mechanisms, audience are also exposed to a diversity of viewpoints—they can choose content that resonates with their beliefs, or deliberately seek out alternative and dissenting voices.

However, hosts remain unclear about Xiaoyuzhou's app content moderation strategy. Some interviewees view it as a reflection of challenging public authority (S08), while others consider its vague boundaries to be irresponsible. "Platforms have the responsibility to inform hosts of clear content boundaries. Especially when it comes to social issues, people don't know where the line is, and that makes them afraid to produce such content." (S07) The author has also observed that currently on the Xiaoyuzhou app, if a programme is taken down, there is no in-app notification. This is highly unreasonable in terms of moderation strategy. Some interviewees suggested that the issue might simply stem from Xiaoyuzhou app having too few staff to handle moderation effectively, which could be improved by hiring more staff. (S09)

5. Conclusion

This research explores the social issues content within Chinese-language podcasts on the Xiaoyuzhou app. Firstly, Chinese-language podcasts enhance the depth of social issue content while providing hosts with a medium to articulate complexity. To some extent, this helps address the dilemma faced by traditional media in covering public issues, where short-form video is falling short, the revived podcast format steps in to offer "in-depth supplementation." Secondly, when addressing social issues, Chinese-language podcasts on the Xiaoyuzhou app furnish a rational discussion space. This environment provides users and hosts with an inherent sense of security, mitigating hosts' tendency to avoid news topics while offering listeners an avenue to break free from their information cocoons. Finally, the Chinese-language podcasts on the Xiaoyuzhou app break the boundary between public affairs and private discourse, creating a "public sphere where one can speak to China" that dissolves the silence phenomenon within public digital media.

However, if it aspires to become the primary platform for discussing social issues, the Xiaoyuzhou app has a long way to go in transitioning from being "niche yet refined" to catering to "the general public". These challenges include delayed content updates, limited scale, unbalanced exposure to criticism, a scarcity of high-quality shows, and the lack of monetization opportunities for podcast hosts. Issues requiring urgent attention include delayed updates, limited scale, imbalanced moderation, scarcity of quality programming, and poor monetisation opportunities for hosts. Furthermore, while the Xiaoyuzhou app focuses intensely on product features and content operations, its content moderation strategy remains underdeveloped. This "excessive focus appears to signal "weaknesses that require addressing".

This study aims to provide insights not only for the Xiaoyuzhou app but also for other Chinese-language podcast platforms. (1) Enhance the platform's responsiveness to social trends, offering hosts topic ideas while providing audience seeking immediate information with "quick-digest" options (such as embedding text tabs within the platform). (2) Enhance platform operational capabilities by establishing clear content boundaries for hosts, enabling them to focus their efforts more effectively; (3) Strengthen hosts' monetisation potential, thereby boosting their motivation to

produce content and ensuring sustainable development. Substantial rewards should be offered for high-quality, thus increasing the supply of quality content and rebalancing the supply-demand gap.

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