

# A Cyber Ethnography Research on Algorithm Power, Algorithm Resistance, and User Tactics of Platform Media

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**Abstract.** "Trending lists" have become an essential channel through which people can obtain information in the era of social media. "Trending list" is naturally accompanied by greater exposure to the event. Based on this, this study found that in the "trending list" process, the platform plays a key role depending on the algorithm, and the platform media can use the algorithm to filter and push content. To answer the related questions of "trending list", this study uses the method of online ethnography to discuss with the respondents their thoughts and comments on the phenomenon of "trending list" and the algorithm behind it. The research found that, on the one hand, users' attention to trending lists is personalized, and the platform algorithm plays a key role in screening and pushing trending list content. However, it also causes problems such as information cocoon room and public opinion deviation.

**Keywords:** Algorithmic Power; Digital Governance; Hot Search; Platform Paternalism.

## 1. Introduction

Under the influence of the platform algorithm, determining who appears on the trending list has become part of the platform's algorithmic power. At the same time, existing studies have also found that when the algorithm is complex to meet user needs through "technical inclusion", it may encounter the audience's escape and backlash from the algorithmic text (Zhang Meng, 2022). So, what is a platform under algorithmic control? We can refer to the concept of panopticon proposed by Bentham (Itai, 2021). This concept is related to the panoramic open-view architecture from an architectural perspective. From a legal standpoint, the platform's ban on users based on algorithmic power may be potentially controversial, so there are different views on whether the ban is illegal (Yin Jiguo, 2021). In a discussion on the attributes of technology, the discussion of algorithmic power and legal regulation is relatively sufficient. Relevant research emphasizes that the abuse of algorithmic power needs to be restricted (Tian Silu, 2022).

How do we measure the algorithmic power of the platform over trending lists? In recent years, society has gradually accepted the concept of platform paternalism. Closely related to platform paternalism, the idea of "algorithm game" or "playing with algorithms" involves constructing a platform management model to describe the key mechanisms between algorithms and users. At its core, platform paternalism under algorithmic manipulation is derived from the basic concept of paternalism, which means that the platform plays the role of a parent. The management model for users and accounts sets strict moral and public behavior restrictions and promotes others' obedience through self-discipline or self-restraint (Huangfu Boyuan, 2021). Based on this, this project intends to use the research and analysis of platform algorithms to evaluate the basic model and core content of platform paternalism, connect the discussion of algorithmic power, algorithmic resistance, and user tactics, and comprehensively analyze the specific social impact achieved by the platform with the help of algorithmic power.

## 2. Methodology: Cyber Ethnography

Network ethnography, or virtual ethnography, is an ethnographic method developed on the digital platform; that is, it advocates a qualitative research method based on the digital field or virtual field (Wang & Liu, 2024). Back to the topic of this study, what kind of topic can be a "trending list"? Regarding the study's observation, most emergencies with timeliness, novelty, uniqueness, and

certain visual impact can be "searched". In this process, the celebrity effect or star effect has also played a key role in expanding the exposure of some events. For example, the "trending list" process of online celebrity is inseparable from the boost of celebrity effect (Abidin, 2018). As a digital ethnography method, online ethnography may have a strong interest in some methods. For example, in the current research on Chinese overseas students, more attention has been paid to the role of social media in organizing international students (Xiang & Shen, 2009). In qualitative research on in-depth interviews, most existing research strategies use semi-structured interviews to obtain the attitudes and views of the respondents with open-ended questions and to collect valuable qualitative research data.

Specifically, the network ethnography method can be understood as a digital achievement of traditional ethnography, using various techniques to collect and analyze qualitative research data. In essence, ethnographic research methods mainly include in-depth interviews and participatory observation. In terms of designing research tools, this study should focus on designing interview and observation outlines. Regarding the content of interviews or observations, the empirical analysis of many qualitative studies is based on the encoded qualitative research data. Therefore, in the analysis process of this study, after designing the interview outline, this study will also consider how to compile the coding structure framework and gain a deeper understanding of the basic content of network ethnography research.

Regarding the design of research tools, the interviewees of this study are seven social media platform users aged 18-50. The interview method used is instant messaging tools such as WeChat. The interview time is March 2025, and each person will spend more than 30 minutes each time. Among them, quality control means repeated inspection. During the interview, specific questions include: 1. Do you usually pay attention to trending lists? Do you think a "trending list" is interesting? 2. What topics do you think can be "searched"? 3. Have you ever heard that you can spend money on a "trending list"? 4. What role do you think the platform plays in the "trending list" process? 5. Do you want to search for content related to yourself? 6. What do you think is the significance of a trending list? 7. How much does the algorithm play in trending list push?

### 3. Results & Analysis

#### 3.1 Coding Process

There are many ways to obtain qualitative research data, such as online ethnography, often with the help of in-depth interviews or participatory observation. In this study, the in-depth interview survey was conducted from 9 March to 12, 2025. During the implementation of the interview method, repeated questions were mainly used to improve the validity and reliability of the interview survey. To collect qualitative research data, this study primarily employs face-to-face interviews, which are recorded. There are mostly seven in-depth interviewees. The basic information of the interviewees is shown in the table below:

Table 1 basic information of respondents

| Number | Age | Gender | Occupation     | Social media service life |
|--------|-----|--------|----------------|---------------------------|
| 01     | 25  | female | Civil servants | 10 years                  |
| 02     | 49  | female | Employees      | unknown                   |
| 03     | 16  | female | Student        | 8 years                   |
| 04     | 16  | female | Student        | unknown                   |
| 05     | 17  | female | Student        | unknown                   |
| 06     | 17  | female | Student        | unknown                   |
| 07     | 17  | female | Student        | unknown                   |

The analysis of qualitative research data relies more on content analysis. It follows the coding analysis path of "open coding, spindle coding, selective coding" to process qualitative research data (Wang et al., 2023). In this study, the recording data were processed by technology, analyzed by iFLYTEK's recording conversion software, and combined with manual comparison to complete the

preliminary sorting of the recording data, summarize the key content of each interview, and sort out the main framework of the interview.

### 3.2 Results of qualitative research

One of the purposes of the in-depth interview in this study is to explore users' perception of the platform display "trending list", so the qualitative analysis of the interview content also focuses on the relevant key points. During coding analysis, the interview content needs to be open-coded. This study uses ATLAS.ti to process the data obtained from the interview. The analysis results are as follows:

Table 2 Analyze the results of open-coding

| Theme  | Quotation  |
|--|--|
| Focus on the trending list.                                | "Will pay attention to some interesting content." (01)   |
|  | "I usually pay attention to some trending lists on Weibo or xiaohongshu Shuyin, but not all of them." (04)   |
|  | "I usually pay attention to the content of the trending list, and often read it, such as the top few in the microblog trending list." (05)   |
| trending list conditions                                   | "Like the current media era, there will be much so-called grassroots attention, and ordinary people's things can also be searched, that is, some details in the possible life can arouse everyone's resonance." (03)   |
|  | "If it was just the Anonymous supporters that would brush up there, it would brush a topic with no hot topics and no degree of discussion, and no one would be willing to pay attention to it, or even be scolded." (04)   |
| Regarding spending money to reach the trending search list | "If he pushes this thing and his purpose is to search hot, it is a meaningful thing, but it may not be interesting, but if he accidentally searches hot, it may be more interesting." (01)   |
|  | "There should be some enterprises, for example, when they want to promote their popularity or products, but I don't think the effect is very clear because the trending list may still attract the attention of the whole people. If they just spend money to buy, I don't know how important it is." (02)   |
| Platform role  | "They often talk about buying trending lists. For example, there is a star whose something has been revealed. If fans or his company sometimes want to help him press trending list, they may buy more eye-catching hot topics to attract attention, as if it could be achieved through purchase." (05)  |
|  | "The platform must play a role in pushing in this regard. Then, it has some anonymous supporters, and it will have some trumpets or something to increase its hits. Then, it will promote more people, and then it will be easier for this group of people to share with his friends or people he wants to share, and then it is to expand a publicity area." (01) |
|  | "I do not think it is icing on the cake. It is to give you some basic traffic. It is the most basic thing at the bottom" (02)  |
| The significance of the trending list                      | "If this thing itself is not hot, I think it is difficult for it to attract attention in the trending list, so the platform should still play a role in promoting and amplifying." (05)  |
|  | "I am not a public figure, so I do not want to get more attention. But if it's my work content, such as my company's products, or something else, I hope it's going to the trending list. For example, some colleagues in my company want to attract attention when they make some new products." (02)   |
|  | "If it is some false news, I don't think it's perfect to mislead the public." (03)   |
|  | "Make others aware of this problem, and then promote the society to pay more attention to or protect it." (04)   |
|  | "It may raise public awareness of certain social news." (05)   |

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|------------------|---|
| Algorithmic role | <p>"It should also be different. For example, the mechanism of each platform should also be different, and the algorithm push of each content must also be different. I think it plays a role in laying a foundation, as I just said." (03)</p> <p>"Some platforms will take the initiative to push some content that users care about or browse more often to make them more interested in reading this." (07)</p> |
|------------------|---|

Based on the results of open coding, this study can conduct spindle coding; that is, it can obtain the main core content from the obtained interview content and establish the framework of spindle coding. In the process of spindle coding, the analysis logic of this study still revolves around six key themes, including "focus on trending list", "trending list conditions", "about spending money on trending list", "platform role", "the significance of trending list", and "algorithm effect".

Table 3 Spindle coding analysis results

| Theme  | Sub-Themes   | Quotation   |
|--|--|---|
| Focus on the motivation and frequency of the trending list | Focus on the trending list                                 | "At present, the hot issues that people pay more attention to are either relatively unpopular, but can trigger the kind of concerns that people have in mind, or are social hot issues." (01)   |
|  | Motivation analysis  | The motivation to pay attention to trending lists includes staying up-to-date with the latest news (such as current events, entertainment trends, etc.) and making informed choices based on personal interests. Some people pay attention to the trending list to follow social trends or stay informed about news developments.   |
|  | Frequency and mode   | Some respondents said they regularly checked the trending list, especially on specific platforms (such as Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu), while others checked it occasionally.  |
| trending list topic features                               | Topic type   | Topics that can be listed on the trending list generally include the following categories: social hot spots, entertainment gossip, technology and culture, and stories of ordinary people.  |
|  | Topic initiation method                                    | Topics that can be searched on hot issues need to have the potential to attract widespread social attention, including public figures, social hot issues, and highly discursive and controversial events.   |
| Platform role and trending list mechanism                  | Platform push and algorithm                                | "This should be a technical problem. I do not quite understand its principle, but if the trending list pushes, I think it must be that more people are clicking. Then he thinks that when we watch a trending list, we can also choose the interests we pay attention to. He may push relevant information to you if you pay attention to it. Then the more you pay attention to pushing, the more you watch, and the higher the number of views or other clicks, but it's unclear how to calculate it." (02) |
|  | Influence of platform and market mechanism                 | Some respondents mentioned that commercial factors, such as purchase popularity or guiding traffic, might affect the platform's push to promote some topics or content to enter the trending list.  |
| Buy the trending list and Anonymous supporters             | Cognition of buying the trending list                      | "It is often said to buy trending list. For example, a star has some things revealed. If fans or his company sometimes want to help him press trending list, they may buy more eye-catching hot topics to attract attention, as if it could be achieved through purchase." (05)   |
|  | Relationship between the platform and Anonymous supporters | "(the platform) lays the foundation of traffic, or does it play a role of putting something that is already hot and then adding fuel to the flames" (05)  |
|  |  | "The platform will definitely make profits in this way, and then because some people pay attention to this matter, the number of  |

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|---|--|---|
|   |  | users of the platform will increase, and then it is also possible that if the popularity is high, it will expand the impact of this matter."<br>(06)  |
| Personal privacy and trending list            | trending list attitude towards their own content | "I am willing to buy this trending list, so it must be easy for him to spread that negative emotion, and then it must be easy to intensify contradictions." (06)  |
|   | Creative content and trending list               | If the content related to creation and work is searched, the respondents generally show a more positive attitude, believing that it is helpful to obtain attention and positive evaluation. It mainly includes guiding social attention, public opinion guidance, and action.   |
| The social significance of the trending list  | Positive significance                            | That includes the deviation and misleading of public opinion and the flow to the top.   |
|   | negative effects                                 | "That kind of false news, which the Anonymous supporters or other people may push, may let the public come. For example, Internet users know some wrong information, which leads to cyber violence or other bad situations." (07)   |
| Proportion of algorithms in the trending list | different opinions                               | Respondents generally believe the algorithm is essential in pushing the trending list, but the specific proportion differs. Most people think that the algorithm greatly influences trending list push. However, the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the platform algorithm makes it difficult to determine the specific proportion. |
|   | most opinions                                    | "When a trending list is pushed, for example, some platforms may actively push some content that users care about or browse more so that they are more interested in reading it. But the trending list itself is a hot thing, so you can go to the trending list, so the proportion of algorithm in it should be less than half." (07)        |

As the final analysis module, selective coding critically reviewed the analysis results of spindle coding, focused on the influence and manipulation of the trending list phenomenon, and took it as the core of coding. The results of selective coding mainly include "the double-edged sword effect of trending list", "the leading role of platform and algorithm", "the complex emotions of the public towards trending list," and "social responsibility and prospects".

Table 4 Analyzes the results of selective coding

| Theme                                      | Sub-Themes                         | Quotation   |
|--|------------------------------------|---|
| Double-edged sword effect of trending list | Positive influence                 | For example, social events and public welfare activities can be widely disseminated through trending lists, attracting more attention and action.   |
|  | Negative effects                   | Some content may be listed only based on entertainment or emotional conflict, ignoring the depth and authenticity of the information and prioritizing short-term entertainment over beneficial public discussion. |
| Dominant role of platform and algorithm    | Push mechanism                     | When pushing content, the algorithm may be affected by commercial interests and data bias, further aggravating the bias in trending list content.   |
|  | Commercialization and manipulation | This situation has raised public concerns about platform algorithms' opacity and commercial manipulation. Behind  |

|   |                                      |  |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| The public's complex feelings about the trending list | Acceptance and vigilance             | the lack of transparency, there is a threat to the authenticity and fairness of information.<br>Many people are dissatisfied with the manipulation of trending lists through commercial means, believing that this phenomenon not only affects the authenticity of the information but also makes some events that should not be paid too much attention to be over-amplified and ignores more critical public issues.   |
|   | information screening and reflection | In this case, the responsibility of the platform and the media is increasingly important. Improving the transparency and fairness of information is an urgent problem that needs to be solved in the current trending list phenomenon.<br>Respondents generally believed that the platform should bear more social responsibilities. The governance of false information, the transparency of algorithms, and the supervision of commercial manipulation are all improvements that the public expects from the platform. |
| Social responsibility and future outlook              | platform responsibility              | With the widespread spread of the trending list phenomenon, the public's media literacy and information identification ability are also gradually improving.   |
|   | public reflection                    | Balancing information dissemination and authenticity has become important in the future of the Internet.   |

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Subjective will: Users pay attention to the personalized characteristics of trending list behavior

Through interviews, this study found that users' attention to trending lists is often based on personal subjective interests. Users mainly use social media to focus on trending lists, but it is usually irregular and random. At the same time, users' attention to the trending list is selective, and the influence of communication is an essential factor. This phenomenon may be because users' attention is easily distracted, and the content they pay attention to is random. To increase the user's use time, the platform will use algorithms to infer the content that users like and are interested in, allowing users who ignore the trending list to focus on hot topics. Users who focus on some trending list content can get more relevant information. Given this situation, many scholars have paid attention to the impact of algorithm recommendations. Algorithms create a "technology black box", and technology affects trending list recommendations more (Kuang Wenbo, 2021).

According to the observation results of fieldwork, the popularity of online searches is often due to the huge celebrity effect. Promoting popularity stimulates the growth of communication influence, which is not sustainable. The attention distribution mechanism of social media has changed. The emergence of grassroots star groups has stimulated the emergence of some new phenomena. At the same time, the interest in some communication events will bring their own traffic. The agenda-setting of the anonymous supporters has been challenging to get into a rhythm, but it will also stimulate the audience's rebellious psychology and produce a poor communication effect. With the rapid development of the Internet, people are increasingly willing to manage their social media presence. They are increasingly resistant to the platform's forced promotion or streaming behavior. For works with excellent content and high quality, the "tap water" effect on the audience is becoming increasingly apparent. They are willing to spontaneously promote these works without fans, which, to some extent, reflects the changes in network platform users in recent years. This situation is

especially universal for Generation Z. Therefore, constructing the era value of stars and heroes has become important (Liangying, 2024).

#### **4.2 Active drainage: suspension and restart of the role of platform gatekeeper**

As the respondents said, the platform is not "icing on the cake" but is used to perform basic tasks for some of the most basic traffic. Therefore, if the communication event is not popular, it is difficult for the platform to drive traffic. Thus, the platform should only play a role of promotion and amplification, not everything. Of course, as a necessary "gatekeeper", if there is no platform, the event cannot be displayed, and naturally, it cannot produce an actual communication impact. According to previous studies, the platform has partial decision-making power to screen and present information under algorithm empowerment (Ruan et al., 2018). The platform plays the role of gatekeeper. The public has given the platform the right to decide what content can appear on the trending list. Therefore, the platform needs a stricter review to avoid untrue and damaging violent information appearing on the trending list, causing mental injury and loss to the public and parties.

With the help of interviews, this study also found that the platform has no clear position but pursues the utilitarian communication view of "flow first", which needs the guidance of public power. The platform should have a specific social responsibility, that is, to use its influence to attract the whole society's attention and promote the realization of public value. The platform is still a super, integrated, and effective communication carrier, enabling the audience to obtain timely information. So, how can the platform bear its due social responsibility as a "gatekeeper"? In this regard, this study believes that we should improve the guidance of laws, regulations, and policies, establish a specific control mechanism within the platform, effectively supervise the behavior of operators and users of the platform, strengthen the management of data and algorithms, and avoid data leakage and abuse. All sectors of society should also supervise the platform's behavior, and the platform company should incorporate social responsibility into its corporate strategy.

#### **4.3 External intervention: The trending list's media presentation is tied to the power of communication**

From a technology perspective, the algorithm significantly affects the platform's judgment of the trending list. Algorithm intervention in the media presentation of trending lists is mainly based on the judgment of technology on data dissemination, which differs across different platforms. Algorithmic push is often based on the speculation of the audience's independent communication behavior data, which is affected by factors such as information cocoon room, filtering bubbles, and so on, and is relatively closed. Given this situation, this study believes that the algorithm reduces the labor cost to a certain extent, but also brings some problems. Most algorithm model push mechanisms in the market are single; the more clicks on related content, the more the pushes, which is more harmful than beneficial to a certain extent. Based on this, the algorithm should introduce more measurement mechanisms, dynamically adjust the weight of the algorithm, and balance personalized recommendation and content diversity to solve the problems caused by "trending list politics" (Yu, 2023).

From the perspective of communication, there may be human intervention or even spending money to search the current platform actively, but it should be a kind of marketing. To obtain benefits, the marketing behavior is close to advertising, and its communication effect is not the same as the natural trending list content. Hence, the analysis angle is also different. For some public figures, human intervention in the trending list is to obtain more significant symbolic capital to participate in the redistribution of attention. In this regard, this study believes that human intervention in the trending list undermines the authority of the trending list itself, which will make netizens question the platform's credibility and affect the user experience. At the same time, this kind of human intervention on trending lists interferes with the guidance of public opinion and will mislead the public. If the platform is left unchecked, it may also be held responsible for failing to fulfill its management responsibilities. Therefore, after understanding the trending list preference, the public management

department should design valuable countermeasures to intervene in the spread and influence of the trending list (Tian Jin & Tian Yu, 2021).

## 5. Discussion

According to the conclusions of existing studies, media literacy refers to the ability of people to choose, understand, question, evaluate, create, produce, and think critically when facing various kinds of new media information, as well as the ability to use media information for personal life and social development (Sheng & Zhan, 2009). In the face of a large amount of external information, people tend to be more willing to contact the content that conforms to their preferences and views, turn a blind eye to other information, and eventually confine themselves to a narrow and single information environment, forming the so-called "information cocoon room" (Jiang & Xu, 2021).

### 5.1 Improvement of digital governance capability: Strategies to strengthen the role of the gatekeeper of the media platform

It can monitor and analyze big data in real-time, identify false content, harmful information, and rumors, to conduct content audit and management more effectively, improve the quality of platform information, enhance the check function, and ensure the security and reliability of information dissemination (Shi & Zhang, 2025). In this context, the term "new gatekeeper" has received attention from the academic community.

So, what is the "new gatekeeper"? Compared with the traditional gatekeepers, the new gatekeepers are not only media practitioners, professionals, or platforms in the conventional sense but also ordinary netizens. In the new network communication environment, Internet users are both recipients and interpreters of information, as well as producers and disseminators. Through self-control, they use their own initiative to screen, process, and disseminate information and become a vital guard force in network communication (Yang Lei, 2018). Therefore, the improvement of digital governance capability is related to strengthening the role of gatekeepers of media platforms and is a critical communication reform.

### 5.2 Maintain the order of network communication: Public power should intervene in the behavior of the trending list by external forces.

In the new digital era, the concept of digital governance is gradually becoming familiar to everyone. What is digital governance? Digital governance refers to the use of digital technology to enhance governance capabilities to optimize the interaction between society and individuals. It is not only technology-enabled governance but also involves concept renewal, institutional change, organizational transformation, legal norms, and ethical concerns. Digital governance can better help and handle the relationship between people to improve people's sense of security and happiness (Zheng Lei, 2021). In the interview, we also found that the respondents disagreed with the behavior of buying a trending list. Public power should intervene to promote the construction of a network communication order.

What form should digital governance take in the background of the information technology revolution? It can break the asymmetry between information, and information can flow efficiently between different subjects. Information technology breaks the barrier between the public and governance. In this case, network users can also participate in governance. At the same time, using different technical means, digital governance is more scientific and practical (Chen, Leftyong, & Luzhipeng, 2019). For the governance of Shangre search, public management departments should fully understand the value of information technology in the digital governance process and provide further power to promote the improvement of governance level and governance effect.

## 6. Conclusion

The platform controls the presentation of information through algorithms, especially the "trending list" function, which has become an essential way of information dissemination. However, the algorithm recommendation system may cause problems, such as information cocoon room, misleading public opinion, and commercial manipulation. In the interview, we mainly focused on the user's motivation and behavior mode of the trending list and the impact of the platform algorithm on the trending list. This study found the platform's role in the trending list, users' cognition and attitude towards the platform algorithm, and the social significance and impact of the trending list. The research found that users' attention to trending lists has obvious personalized characteristics. The platform algorithm plays a key role in screening and pushing trending list content, but it also brings problems such as information cocooning and public opinion deviation. The platform plays a complex role in the trending list phenomenon. It should promote and enlarge hot topics and undertake information governance and social responsibility. Users have a complex attitude towards the trending list phenomenon, which recognizes its positive role and expresses concern about its potential risks. Therefore, improving users' media literacy, optimizing platform algorithms, and strengthening platform social responsibility are essential ways to deal with the challenge of the trending list phenomenon.

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