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Being Momo: Algorithmic Imaginary and Resistance

An Ethnographical Study of Momo on RED

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Abstract

This thesis explores the algorithmic imaginaries and practices of the momo community, a spontaneously formed anonymous group on the Chinese social media platform RED. By adopting a cultural perspective on algorithms, this study investigates how momo users conceptualize algorithms, their practices influenced by these conceptualizations, and how these practices manifest as a form of algorithmic resistance. Drawing on ethnographic research methods, including autoethnography and semi-structured interviews, this research examines the interplay between the algorithmic imaginary and elements in momo practice.

The finding reveals that momo users engage in tactical practices to resist RED's social recommendation algorithms, attempting to obscure personal data and reduce visibility within the algorithmic infrastructure. These practices reflect both a deep algorithmic awareness and a collective algorithmic imaginary shaped by similar affective encounter. Further, the study critiques the binary framework of algorithmic control and resistance, proposing a dynamic interplay where user agency and algorithmic power are interwoven. By positioning algorithms as both mediating infrastructures and cultural imaginaries, the research highlights the nuanced negotiations between power and resistance in algorithmic environments. The thesis contributes to the literature on algorithmic culture, resistance, and social media by shedding light on marginalized communities' engagement with algorithms, offering insights into the evolving relationships between media infrastructure, user agency, and cultural practices.

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Introduction

"The great hermit lives in seclusion in the city (大隐隐于市)" is an ancient Chinese philosophical concept. It encapsulates the wisdom of navigating ancient bureaucratic systems, suggesting that the most skilful form of concealment lies in blending into the crowd and the mundane world: dwelling within the centre of power yet skilfully veiling one's sharp edges to avoid being ensnared by the power itself. In recent years, this wisdom seems to find a contemporary interpretation in an anonymous community, momo, that has emerged on the Chinese social media platform RED (commonly known as "Xiaohongshu"). RED is one of China's most popular social media platforms, renowned for its diverse user-generated content (UGC) and highly precise recommendation algorithms (Perik, 2022). As reflected in its slogan, "Your Lifestyle Guide," the platform offers an extensive range of content spanning shopping recommendations, fashion trends, life experiences, popular culture, personal stories, and hobbies. These personalized contents, rooted in the lived realities of its users, foster an emotionally resonant community space, providing opportunities for individuals to seek and share first hand life experiences. Enabling this possibility is RED's robust algorithmic recommendation system, which ensures that even the most niche interests can find matching content and users (Tian, Xiao & Xu, 2021; Sun & Ly, 2023).

However, "An omnipresent media society also implies a society where power increasingly resides within algorithms" (Lash & Lury, 2007, p. 71). Not everyone is satisfied with this externally imposed influence, and this dissatisfaction is particularly evident among the momo community, the focus of this study. The term "momo" originated as the default nickname assigned to users when logging into RED and other Chinese social networking services (SNS) through external accounts, accompanied by a default avatar featuring a pink dinosaur. To prevent their social media accounts from being algorithmically suggested to acquaintances in real life, an increasing number of users who prefer not to disclose too much personal information on social media have voluntarily adopted "momo" as their nickname and the associated avatar. This intentional erasure of digital footprints flattens algorithmic tagging,

serving as a strategy to avoid identity-based algorithmic recommendation models. Today, momo has grown into a substantial anonymous community on RED, representing a subculture that resists algorithmic recommendations, privacy violations, and advocates for strongly anonymized social interactions. In the comment sections of various posts, the presence of these adorable pink dinosaurs is ubiquitous. To other users on RED, these momos are almost indistinguishable, as they share the same nickname and avatar while also hiding identifiable information from their profiles, such as collections, follower lists, and following lists. Hide in plain sight—momos, under each other's cover, create a powerful cloak of anonymity.

The emergence and popularity of momo serve as a striking illustration of Couldry and Hepp's (2016) theory of mediatized societies: online platforms like RED have become deeply intertwined with daily life, forming an inseparable force that shapes social structures and perceptions of reality (van Dijck et al., 2018). Undoubtedly, this phenomenon is closely linked to the growing significance of media infrastructures—namely, algorithms (Lash & Lury, 2007). On the RED platform, algorithms not only determine the content and modes of engagement available to momos but also profoundly influence their understanding of reality and modes of self-expression. At the same time, an increasing number of momos have become aware of this invisible hand and have made attempts to reclaim control. In this tug-of-war with algorithms, momos continuously reconstruct their understanding of media technologies, refine their coping strategies, and consolidate collective consensus and wisdom. Accordingly, this article focuses on the algorithmic awareness of momos and the specific media practices of this marginal group within the networked world.

It is worth noting that in this study, the discussion of algorithms is framed as a cultural phenomenon rather than merely as a functional tool of the RED platform. Technological essentialism tends to regard technology as an inherent function unaffected by social significance. However, later scholars have increasingly recognized that algorithms are far from fixed entities; they are dynamic processes that continuously absorb meaning from culture and adjust themselves accordingly. Further, aligning with the perspective of this

study, algorithms are understood not as something *in culture* but rather *as culture*. Following the interpretations of Seaver (2017) and Beer (2019), algorithms are meaningful modes of cultural participation and practice. They are an integral part of culture itself. Moreover, algorithms can also be further understood as a form of imaginary (Bucher, 2017), an imaginary that profoundly shapes momos' emotions and subjective experiences of algorithms.

As a site of resistance, RED is inextricably tied to issues of control and power. Within the realm of algorithmic control, much of the existing literature focuses on analysing algorithms as research objects rather than emphasizing their distinctive cultural significance. When we focus solely on the power structure of algorithms, we often overlook their embedded cultural meanings; this perspective reduces the interaction to a binary opposition of control versus resistance, neglecting the more nuanced negotiations and power dynamics between algorithms and the momo community. Framing algorithms as a cultural phenomenon opens a window into the complexities of the relationship between algorithms and momos. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how the momo community generates new practices and resistance tactics within the algorithmic framework, offering fresh insights into the study of algorithmic resistance.

This study aims to explore the cognitive processes of momo, a spontaneously formed anonymous community, regarding algorithms, investigating how their algorithmic imaginaries are constructed and identifying the role of algorithms in this process. Furthermore, it examines how their algorithmic imaginaries influence their practices and how these practices become a form of resistance. By adopting a perspective that treats algorithms as culture, this research seeks to move beyond the binary framework of control and resistance, emphasizing the evolving interplay between power and agency. It aims to uncover the subtle dynamic relationship between algorithms as both a mediating infrastructure and an imaginary, and being momo as a form of practice. Since ethnographic research cannot be fully pre-designed, this study is grounded in a "guiding theoretical problem" while allowing for adjustments as data and observations evolve, in order to capture a broader range of

perspectives (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 48). Accordingly, this research proposes the following key research questions:

1. How do momos perceive and reflect on the algorithms on RED?
2. How do they construct the algorithmic imaginary?
3. In what ways do they conduct algorithmic practice?
4. How does this practice become resistance?

This thesis is divided into five sections. The first section, the literature review, clarifies the cultural perspective adopted in this study and traces the scholarly evolution of concepts such as algorithmic control, algorithmic imaginaries, and algorithmic resistance, supported by existing empirical research. The second section, the theoretical framework, outlines the specific connotations and interrelations of these key concepts. The third section, methodology, provides a detailed introduction and procedural account of the three methods employed in this study. The fourth section addresses the research questions, mapping out the landscape of momos' algorithmic perceptions and imaginaries, describing their media practices, and uncovering the folk theoretical insights generated in the process. It also explores the resistance strategies of momos, advances theoretical development, and offers new reflections on their acts of resistance. Finally, the fifth section summarizes the main research findings, provides a critical reflection, and identifies potential directions for future research.

Literature Review

First, it is necessary to outline the specific context and background of this thesis. As Couldry and Hepp (2016, p. 27) assert, “the social world is not just mediated but mediatized.” The pervasive saturation of media has altered—and continues to cyclically reshape—everyday life. Through the lens of media construction, Couldry and Hepp (2016) offer a clear framework for understanding the fundamental role of media in social life. They emphasize that media is not merely a technological infrastructure but also the core of social construction and cultural production. Specifically, social interactions heavily rely on the support of media technologies. Media not only frames what people know and how they perceive the world but also serves as the channels through which relationships are maintained and communication is engaged. This process of construction is summarised as “deep mediatization,” highlighting the complex dynamics of mutual dependence and influence between evolving media relationships and social interactions. Couldry and Hepp (2016, p. 240) describe this as a “meta-process,” where “media-related dynamics come together, conflict with each other, and find different expressions in various domains of the social world.” Similarly emphasizing the central role of media technologies in social construction, van Dijck et al. (2018) propose the concept of the “platform society,” stressing the inseparable relationship between online platforms and social structures. For Couldry and Hepp (2016, p. 13), media platforms are spaces where individuals “enact the social” through interaction, forming part of the “media manifold” (p. 67). Van Dijck et al. (2018) share a similar perspective, asserting that media platforms are not merely economic phenomena or technological structures but instead function as a digital architecture organizing user interactions and embedding them into social, cultural, and political practices. In their words, platforms not only reflect society and culture but also actively “produce the social structures” (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 2).

From this perspective, algorithms attract scholarly attention not only as the “infrastructure” described by Couldry and Hepp (2016) but also as the platform affordance conceptualized by van Dijck et al. (2018). As algorithms increasingly become central to media and platform

operations, they appear to be more than mere extensions of mediatization and platformization processes. As Just and Latzer (2017) argue, reality is, to a significant extent, constructed by algorithms. Bucher (2018, p. 2) shares this view, noting that the commonality of people's media practices lies in their intensive interaction with algorithmic mediums. As daily life increasingly unfolds within an algorithmic media landscape, algorithms "shape everyday life and networked communication." Algorithms are often understood as automated instructions for converting inputs into outputs (Pasquale, 2015); or as crucial technical components of platform architectures that "make certain things visible, while hiding others" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 32).

However, the term "algorithm" and its definition as a research object remain ambiguous and contested in academic discourse. Seaver (2017) compares perspectives on the understanding of algorithms in critical algorithm studies and summarizes two perspectives. One approach, termed "algorithm in culture," focuses on how algorithms influence culture and how culture, in turn, reacts to algorithms, emphasizing their mutual interaction. More specifically, this perspective considers algorithms as discrete objects situated within or connected to cultural contexts. Using Seaver's (2017, p.5) metaphor, "algorithm in culture" is like a "rock in cultural stream," generating ripples and eddies in the flowing cultural environment but not being part of the stream itself. Seaver (2017, p.4) critiques this perspective of algorithms as technology, arguing that it adopts a dichotomy that highlights the technical characteristics of algorithms while potentially neglecting their social and cultural dimensions. This thesis follows his suggestion for an alternative perspective that transcends the opposition between technology and culture, treating algorithms as part of the sociocultural network and as "intrinsically cultural," rather than merely as a form of media technology (Seaver, 2017, p.10). Seaver (2017, p.5) asserts that algorithms should not be understood as "technical rocks" obstructing and influencing cultural streams but rather as part of the stream itself—that is, as part of culture. Seaver's (2017) explanation is that, just as practices are integral to cultural life, algorithms are not merely static objects but are enacted through various practices as multiple phenomena—composed of collective human activity, algorithms are part of broader patterns of meaning and practice.

Therefore, the focus of this thesis lies in the interactive relationship between users—in this case, the momos—and algorithms, rather than on the algorithms themselves. First, it is necessary to summarize and elucidate the relevant research within the field, outlining the theoretical framework adopted by this thesis. This chapter begins by presenting and synthesizing academic works on algorithms and their interaction with users, followed by a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework that this thesis employs.

In studies on algorithms, the interaction between algorithms and users is invariably tied to the narratives of "control" and "resistance." Accordingly, the first part of this chapter will begin by presenting prior research in the field concerning algorithms themselves or the power of algorithms. The second part will focus on user perceptions, while the third part will explore algorithmic practices.

Algorithm Control

Regarding algorithmic power and control, Beer (2009) first introduced the concept of "social power through the algorithm." In his research on user-generated content and participatory culture during the Web 2.0 era, he highlighted how algorithms shape social interaction and cultural production by "offering integrated affordances and boundaries," directly influencing individual behaviour and social stratification (Beer, 2009, p. 999). Looking at definitions of algorithms in the field of computer science, as early as the last century, Kowalski (1979) described algorithms as a combination of "logic" and "control." Although this was not a study in the social sciences, it implicitly suggested an original meaning and value judgment: that algorithms inherently possess a control-oriented attribute as a technology. Therefore, when algorithms entered the purview of social, political, and cultural studies, research initially focused on their power and forms of control, uncovering how algorithms influence the distribution and operation of social power. From this perspective, Gillespie (2014, pp. 25–26) further argued that algorithms are not merely "code with consequences" but mechanisms of social management and construction. Their power is embedded in societal systems through designs that appear neutral but are, in reality, selective, and to a certain extent, "remain

outside our grasp." In subsequent work, Gillespie (2017, p. 63) summarized this power as the ability to "grant visibility and certify meaning," such as the mechanism of search engine ranking. This process inherently incorporates existing social, cultural, and political biases into search results. Bucher (2018, p. 1) shared a similar view, proposing that the power of algorithms manifests as a form of "programmed sociality," embedding itself in and reconstructing social interactions and information flows. Beer (2019, p. 8), drawing on a Foucauldian perspective, further concretized algorithmic power into two "ways of intervention": "material intervention," reflecting the technical operations and decision-making impacts of algorithms, and "discursive intervention," referring to their symbolic power. Through the combination of these two forms, algorithms wield social power and convey specific concepts as part of the "production and maintenance of certain truths" (Beer, 2019, p. 8).

In line with the perspectives outlined above, a substantial body of empirical research has explored algorithmic power and its mechanisms of control by examining the negative impacts of algorithms on users. A representative study is Bucher's (2012) analysis of Facebook's EdgeRank algorithm, which compares the visibility mechanisms constructed by algorithms to Foucault's (2008) concept of panopticism, challenging Foucault's notion that surveillance entails "permanent visibility." Foucault (2008) described the panopticon as a system of observation where the observer conceals their presence, keeping the observed in a constant state of potential surveillance, thereby fostering self-discipline within power relations. In contrast, algorithmic systems emphasize content that generates significant likes and comments, making invisibility a form of punishment—a "threat of invisibility" (Bucher, 2012, p. 1171). This visibility-controlling mechanism is also evidenced in Cotter's (2023) study, which focuses on social media algorithms and the phenomenon of "shadow banning." Cotter explains how the asymmetrical power dynamic between users and algorithms can lead to "gaslighting," despite such control mechanisms being officially unacknowledged. Another form of potential control is "curation." DeVito (2017), through an analysis of Facebook's News Feed, discussed how algorithms curate content, revealing that these processes may reflect pre-existing biases of developers or broader sociocultural biases. A similar view is

supported by Powers (2017), who noted that algorithms are replacing traditional media gatekeepers. In further research, Bucher (2018) analysed Facebook's News Feed alongside case studies of algorithmic applications in Scandinavian news agencies. She argued that algorithms are not merely tools in cultural production but actively shape value judgments in journalism—newsworthiness is increasingly determined by algorithmic traffic metrics rather than the professional judgment of journalists. As a form of control exercised through specific organizations, Kellogg et al. (2020) also identified other methods by which algorithms are used to regulate organizational activities, including recommending, restricting, recording, evaluating, rewarding, and even replacing functions. Similar control mechanisms are observed in empirical studies on sharing economy platforms (Basukie et al., 2020; Guerra & d'Andrea, 2023). Although the forms of algorithmic power in organizational control are not the focus of this thesis, these findings reaffirm Gillespie's (2014 & 2017) assertion: algorithms are embedded in specific social systems and, in turn, re-mediate society and culture.

In response to these mechanisms of algorithmic power, as Gillespie (2017) emphasizes, distinguishing and addressing them institutionally and technologically is critical. Scholars have further summarized the issues and potential risks arising from such dynamics. For instance, Yeung (2018) identified five major concerns regarding personalized predictive algorithms: the exacerbation of consumer exploitation, large-scale manipulation of individuals, systemic marginalization, intensification of structural inequality and inequitable distribution, and the promotion of a narcissistic culture. Similar studies have also highlighted perception biases caused by algorithms, such as reinforcing stereotypes, fragmenting user groups, and reducing informational diversity (Bol et al., 2020; Reviglio & Agosti, 2020). As Bol et al. (2020, p. 2010) illustrate, on Facebook, "women get health, men get cars."

Overall, the literature in this field demonstrates that algorithms exert significant power and control in social and cultural participation, leading to structural issues of digital inequality. It is important to note that both Gillespie (2014 & 2017) and Beer (2009 & 2019) have emphasized that algorithmic power is a mediated power. In other words, algorithms as a

technology are not the direct source of power but rather a means or mediating tool through which power is realized. Even so, it is worth considering that the aforementioned studies on algorithmic power and control often struggle to entirely escape a certain degree of technological essentialism. As Seaver (2017) points out, this perspective tends to treat algorithms as entities independent of culture, interacting with and influencing culture from the outside. Consequently, more recent research has shifted its focus to the process of interaction between algorithms and humans, emphasizing human agency and asserting that users are not entirely passive but possess significant levels of understanding and awareness of algorithms. Scholars have proposed various related concepts to describe these understandings, which will be introduced in detail in the next subsection, along with a review of relevant studies.

Algorithmic Awareness, Folk Theory, and Algorithmic Imaginary

According to Eg et al. (2023), scholars refer to people's understanding of the existence, purpose, and mechanisms of algorithms as algorithmic awareness. While research on algorithmic awareness frequently emphasizes the disconnect between user experiences and systems caused by algorithmic opacity, as well as the uneven distribution of algorithmic awareness that may exacerbate the digital divide, scholars have also noted the widespread basic understanding of algorithms among users (Eslami et al., 2015; Gran et al., 2021; Swart, 2021). For Gran, Booth, and Bucher (2021, p. 1791), algorithmic awareness is a "meta-skill," a form of knowledge and understanding that enhances other competencies and benefits. Eslami et al. (2015) and Swart (2021) focus on the operation of Facebook's News Feed algorithm and its impact on user behaviour and cognition. Eslami et al. (2015) found that users often react with surprise or even anger upon learning of the algorithm's existence; however, this heightened awareness does not always translate into behavioural changes. Swart (2021), on the other hand, emphasizes how users gradually develop a vague understanding of algorithms through daily interactions and experiences, suggesting that people's perceptions of algorithmic influence are more rooted in subjective experiences than in technical knowledge. Further empirical studies have also highlighted the critical role of

algorithmic awareness in promoting algorithmic literacy and protecting personal privacy (Koenig, 2020; Shin et al., 2022).

In studies on algorithmic awareness, some literature has summarized people's relatively systematic knowledge and understanding of algorithms, forming a typology of folk theories of algorithms. A representative work is DeVito et al. (2017), which examines reactions to the hashtag #RIPTwitter, a protest against rumours of Twitter introducing algorithmic curation to its timeline. Their research shows that people's reactions to algorithms are shaped by their folk theories and categorizes these folk theories into two types: "abstract" folk theory, referring to general ideas about platform operations lacking specific details, and "operational" folk theory, which involves detailed explanations of how algorithms function (DeVito et al., 2017, pp. 3167–3170). Building on this, DeVito et al. (2018) connected the formation of algorithmic folk theories to self-presentation, suggesting that these theories are dynamic and mutually influence self-presentation practices. Further, DeVito (2021, p. 13) proposed four levels of folk theorization complexity, including basic awareness, causal powers, mechanistic fragments, and mechanistic ordering. As individuals' "theorization complexity level" rises, their folk theories become more sophisticated and robust, evolving into what DeVito (2021) describes as an "extensible algorithmic literacy." Similarly, other empirical studies have interpreted, categorized, and summarized various user-generated algorithmic folk theories from different perspectives. These include theories characterizing algorithms as confining, practical, reductive, intangible, and exploitative (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2020), as well as theories based on economic orientation, personal interaction, popularity, categorization, and algorithmic thinking (Dogruel, 2021).

Similar to the perspective of DeVito et al. (2018), some studies link algorithmic folk theories to people's practices. Eslami et al. (2015) discussed how Facebook News Feed users develop folk theories about algorithmic curation and use these theories to guide their engagement with the platform. For instance, some users attempt to manipulate the algorithm to increase or decrease the visibility of specific content in their feeds. As Siles et al. (2020, p. 11) put it, folk theories provide specific "strategies of action," which "enact different modalities of

power and resistance" towards algorithms. This aligns with DeVito et al.'s (2017) argument that folk theories serve as "frames for reactions." Similar to the concept of algorithmic folk theories, Bishop (2019, p. 2590) introduced the concept of "algorithmic gossip." This term emerged from an ethnographic study of YouTube beauty vloggers who share experiences and insights about algorithms within their community to make their content more visible. According to Bishop (2019, p. 2602), this concept refers specifically to "communally and socially informed theories and strategies pertaining to recommender algorithms," describing the process by which marginalized groups exchange social knowledge about algorithms and algorithmic visibility through unstructured, informal conversations. Unlike individual-level folk theories, algorithmic gossip emphasizes community and group dynamics, where people reveal and counteract the workings of platform algorithms through collective sharing and collaboration. While these theories may not be systematic, they are nonetheless subversive (Bishop, 2019).

In addition to algorithmic awareness, algorithmic folk theories, and algorithmic gossip, there is one final intriguing concept: algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2017). According to Bucher (2017, p. 40), this concept specifically represents "ways of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be, how they function, and what these imaginations in turn make possible." Bucher (2017) employs this concept to explain people's perceptions and practices surrounding algorithms at a cultural level, highlighting the connection between algorithmic imaginaries and algorithmic practices. Unlike the studies on algorithmic folk theory mentioned earlier, Bucher (2017) does not focus on a specific folk theory but instead adopts a perspective rooted in affect theory, incorporating users' "affective dimensions" into the analysis. This approach seeks to uncover the emotions, feelings, and meanings generated in people's interactions with algorithms. Similar to the arguments in research on algorithmic folk theory and algorithmic gossip (Bishop, 2019; DeVito et al., 2017; Siles et al., 2020) regarding the relationship between algorithmic perceptions and practices, Bucher (2017) also asserts that algorithmic imaginaries are not only "productive of different moods and sensations" but also actively shape practices. For example, when people discover that algorithms do not operate as they imagined, emotions such as surprise or frustration arise.

These moments, described as “whoa moments,” carry affective power, reshaping people’s algorithmic imaginaries and prompting practices aimed at correcting or resisting the algorithms (Bucher, 2017, p. 35).

It can be considered that algorithmic folk theories or gossip may be part of the broader framework of algorithmic imaginaries. However, the concept of imaginaries is not confined to operational understandings of algorithms as a technology. Instead, it provides an analytical framework for examining the symbolic and cultural meanings embedded in algorithmic imaginaries and their associated human practices. Building on this framework, Schellewald (2022) explored the algorithmic imaginaries of young TikTok users in the UK, arguing that “stories about algorithms” form the basis of these imaginaries, emphasizing the critical role of narratives in shaping the meanings attributed to algorithms. Similarly, Kazansky and Milan (2021, p. 366) examined how algorithmic imaginaries influence people’s practices, introducing the term “counter-imaginary” to describe critical responses to dominant technological narratives or algorithmic imaginaries, which “animate civil society’s tactical responses to perceived threats to its values and ways of living.”

Summarizing the above review of research on users’ perceptions and understandings of algorithms, and comparing the key concepts of algorithmic awareness, algorithmic folk theory, and algorithmic imaginary, it appears that these concepts are intertwined and mutually inclusive. Research on algorithmic awareness focuses more on the general and initial perceptions of algorithms among people. In contrast, studies on folk theories, akin to algorithmic gossip, delve deeper into individuals’ organized and structured understandings of algorithms, and further linking these to practical engagements. Building on these two, the concept of algorithmic imaginary can be regarded as broader, extending critical understandings and knowledge of algorithms to symbolic and cultural dimensions, thereby encompassing aspects of the former two. For Bucher (2017), moments when individuals become aware of algorithms are conceptualized as “affective encounters,” and theories about how algorithms operate naturally fall within the scope of the algorithmic imaginary. This broader conceptualization is also what makes it crucial to this thesis, thus it will be mainly

adopt in the analysis of this research. From algorithmic awareness to folk theories, algorithmic gossip, and imaginaries, one can sense the shift in perspective noted by Seaver (2017): from algorithms in culture to algorithms as culture. In this sense, it suggests that people's perceptions of algorithms constitute a cultural pattern, and algorithms are "culturally enacted by the practices" of individuals (Seaver, 2017, p. 5). Within this perspective, numerous studies have emerged on algorithmic practices and resistance, further emphasizing human agency.

Algorithmic Practice and Resistance

The preceding sections briefly discussed the literature on algorithmic folk theories and algorithmic imaginaries. It should be noted that a significant portion of research on these topics also addresses users' algorithmic practices and resistance. For example, as previously mentioned, Bishop (2019) views YouTubers' algorithmic practices—such as adjusting their content and production strategies to align better with algorithmic preferences—as a form of resistance; moreover, algorithmic gossip itself constitutes a discourse of resistance, as "gossip has long been a tool for countering power and facilitating resistance," tactically employed by marginalized groups (Bishop, 2019, p. 2599). Similarly, Siles (2020) highlights that when users become aware of Spotify's surveillance, they often adopt resistance strategies, such as exclusively listening to self-created playlists or attempting to use features that block algorithmic recommendations. Kazansky and Milan (2021) present even more organized modes of resistance, wherein individuals design and develop "secure" open-source software projects to protect their data from the perceived threats of algorithmic surveillance, even if such surveillance is only assumed. As Kazansky and Milan (2021, p. 374) put it, such initiatives represent an "encapsulation of an emerging counter-imaginary."

Karizat et al. (2021) similarly connected people's understanding of algorithms with resistance in their research on algorithmic folk theories. Karizat et al. (2021, p. 305) identified TikTok users' folk theory regarding algorithmic filtering and suppression of certain social identities, which they termed the "identity strainer theory." In line with Yeung (2018) and Bol et al.

(2020), this study introduced the concept of "algorithmic representation harm," which links algorithmic power to identity, pointing out that algorithmic preferences can further marginalize the visibility and voices of disadvantaged groups in digital spaces (Karizat et al., 2021). In response to such algorithmically constructed inequalities, users adopt strategies such as deliberately liking specific content to support marginalized groups or engaging in mass commenting and sharing under videos as acts of resistance (Karizat et al., 2021). Another representative case of user practices resisting algorithmic inequality is Velkova and Kaun's (2021) study of the media activist campaign World White Web. Addressing racial bias in Google's algorithms, this campaign launched a website offering downloadable images of nonwhite hands, ultimately succeeding in bringing these images into Google's search results. Velkova and Kaun (2021, p. 534) drew on Scott (1985) and de Certeau (1984) to conceptualize this resistance as a form of "repair politics," describing it as "tactical, incidental, and sporadic." The study underscores that resistance, as an intrinsic part of technological shaping, often manifests from within the system as a "tactic that is reformist rather than revolutionary" (de Certeau, 1984, cited in Velkova & Kaun, 2021). Adopting similar theoretical perspectives, additional empirical studies have corroborated such forms of everyday resistance within algorithmic systems. For example, van der Nagel (2018) revealed how Facebook users resist algorithmic censorship by employing strategies such as word substitutions (e.g., avoiding specific names or keywords) and taking screenshots. Bonini and Treré (2024) summarized diverse forms of everyday resistance across groups such as couriers, ride-hailing platform drivers, and K-pop fans, including bypassing algorithmic rules, intervening in algorithmic logic, and engaging in symbolic actions.

Notably, attention to algorithmic resistance has also been addressed in the context of China. Against the backdrop of complete digitization of evaluations and algorithmic monitoring of workers by Chinese food delivery platforms, Sun (2019) conducted an investigation into delivery riders employed by several different platforms. The study found that these delivery workers developed a unique understanding of platform algorithms within the platform economy and digitalization, using subtle yet highly creative methods to resist algorithms. Specifically, they sometimes ignored traffic rules, helped each other accept orders, or sourced

orders from multiple platforms simultaneously (Sun, 2019). Sun (2019, p. 308) termed these tactical practices the delivery riders' "organic algorithms," through which they disrupted, resisted, and even subverted the platform's algorithmic systems. There is also other research focuses on Chinese live streamers. For example, Lai (2022), in a study on Chinese "livestreaming villages," discusses how ordinary villagers develop their local economy through livestreaming, highlighting the impact of their algorithmic practices on the mediatization of physical locations and the new forms of social integration this practice fosters.

It is evident that most scholars studying algorithmic resistance are supporters of de Certeau (1984) and Scott (1985). However, one noticeable aspect of the discussion on algorithmic control and algorithmic resistance is that, even while acknowledging the interdependence and inseparability of the two, it often falls into the narrative of a simplistic binary relationship: algorithms exert a dominant power and impose control, while people engage in forms of resistance. However, according to Foucault (1975, cited in Heller, 1996, p. 79), control and resistance are not inherently opposed; resistance is merely a "ubiquitous, metaphysical principle." Therefore, as Bonini and Treré (2024) argue, algorithmic resistance should be understood as a far more complex and dynamic process. This is also the research gap this thesis seeks to address: in many of the cases presented above, including the momo phenomenon studied in this thesis, algorithms authorize certain forms of resistance, yet these actions still occur within the framework of the algorithm's rules; and the discourse describing resistance continues to echo the power of the algorithm.

As Chambers (2017) points out, beyond focusing on the material attributes of social media and how they shape people's lives, users also exercise agency through scalable sociality in polymedia environments. This aligns with Seaver's (2017) perspective that, while it is crucial to examine algorithms as material artifacts or technologies influencing culture, it is equally important to consider algorithms as part of culture itself, reflecting the complex relationship between humans and technology. In other words, within the dynamic relationship between algorithmic power and user resistance, neither the power of algorithms should be overstated

nor people's acts of resistance romanticized. Instead, a perspective that lies "somewhere between" technology and human agency should be sought to understand this intricate dynamic process. Therefore, adopting a perspective similar to Chambers (2017) and Seaver (2017), this thesis seeks to challenge the notion of a dichotomy between control and resistance. Specifically, this thesis focuses on the algorithmic imaginary of momo and uses it as a pivot to explore the complex dynamic relationships among people's algorithmic imaginaries, practices, and resistance. The following chapters will further elaborate on the theoretical framework of this thesis. The first subsection will focus on algorithmic imaginaries, the second on practice theory, and the final part will address theories related to resistance and everyday resistance.

Theoretical Framework

Algorithmic Imaginary

This thesis adopts Seaver's (2017) perspective of treating algorithms as culture and uses the theoretical framework of algorithmic imaginaries as its primary analytical lens. The earlier sections briefly discussed Bucher's (2017) theory on algorithmic imaginaries. Compared to similar concepts such as algorithmic awareness and folk theories, the concept of imaginaries transcends an operational understanding of algorithms as a technology and delves into their cultural and symbolic dimensions, offering a more holistic perspective. This is the rationale for selecting algorithmic imaginaries as the central theoretical foundation of this thesis.

Schulz (2022) highlights the ontological indeterminacy of algorithmic imaginaries. Thus, it is first necessary to define the concept of the imaginary. As a mechanism of "social representation" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 247), imaginaries is a culture's ethos—a society's or group's ideas, collectively shared discourses, and the meanings constructed through symbols (Strauss, 2006, pp. 324–328). Castoriadis (1987, p. 127) considers imaginaries as a fundamental dimension for the formation of social structures and institutions, to imagine is fundamentally a kind of capacity "to see it other than it is." Castoriadis divides imaginaries into two dimensions: radical imaginary, which refers to the aspect of imagination that precedes symbolic meaning and serves as the source of creativity and productivity (Castoriadis, 1987); and institutional imaginary, which represents the social dimension of imaginaries, described as "collectively available signifiers" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 93). Strauss (2006, p. 324) summarizes Castoriadis's concept of the social imaginary as "the ethos of a group in the sense of a society's shared, unifying core conceptions." Schulz (2022, p. 648), integrating Castoriadis's concept of imaginaries with that of algorithmic imaginaries, interprets algorithmic imaginaries in Castoriadis's sense as being "concretely part of the platform infrastructure," incorporating the perspectives of algorithms and designers into the notion of imaginaries. Applied to the momo case addressed in this thesis, Castoriadis's (1987) concept of imaginaries helps explain the initial motivations behind momo behaviours and

how their algorithmic imaginaries regarding RED function as an "institutional imaginary" to construct shared meanings.

Following Seaver's (2017) perspective on studying algorithms as culture, Taylor's (2004) concept of the social imaginary is particularly suited to the context of this thesis. Taylor (2004, p. 23) defines the imaginary as a cultural pattern consisting of images, stories, myths, and legends embedded in everyday life, told and shared by people recognized, valued, and legitimized. He notes that as a common understanding, which is both factual and normative, as expectations, the social imaginary leads to practices that constitute social life (Taylor, 2004, p. 24). Taylor's (2004) concept of the imaginary closely aligns with culture. As Taylor (2004, p. 92) states, the social imaginary concerns "the way we imagine our society," making it particularly apt for the aims of this thesis—not only to uncover the algorithmic imaginary of momo regarding RED but also to further discuss and analyse how people construct algorithmic imaginaries. Another significant contribution of Taylor's (2004) theory of the social imaginary to this thesis is its potential to integrate discussions on algorithmic awareness, folk theories, and algorithmic imaginaries. Strauss (2006) points out that Taylor emphasizes the role of theory in first shaping practices, which then shape the imaginary. However, Taylor (2004, p. 25) also notes in his discussion of the relationship between imaginary and theory that imaginary is "not theory" but exists beyond theory. The reason for this lies in Taylor's (2004, p. 23) conceptualization of the imaginary as the way people imagine their social environment, constructed not through theoretical terms but through images, stories, and myths. Simultaneously, the social imaginary is a "common understanding" that extends beyond immediate contextual understanding and requires a broader grasp of a background with no clear limits (Taylor, 2004, pp. 23–25). In other words, while, as Strauss (2006) suggests, imaginaries are shaped by practices guided by theory, they form prior to theory and include theory within them; meanwhile, imaginaries can guide practice without requiring a theoretical framework (Taylor, 2004, p. 26).

Previous discussions on the application of algorithmic folk theories and algorithmic imaginaries in empirical research, when revisited through this perspective, suggest a

similarity between the relationship of folk theories to Taylor's (2004) concepts of theory and imaginary, although folk theories could occupy a more peripheral position. It is worth considering that concepts such as algorithmic awareness, folk theories, and algorithmic gossip could all be encompassed within the algorithmic imaginary, influencing and transforming one another. This is critical to this thesis because it enables a more comprehensive analysis of the theories and discourses that momos develop regarding RED's algorithm, connecting these elements within the framework of the imaginary. Additionally, compared to Castoriadis (1987), practice occupies an indispensable role in Taylor's (2004) theory. Applied to this thesis, this perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between momo as an algorithmic practice and the algorithmic imaginary, aligning with the guidance of Chambers (2017) and Seaver (2017).

Understanding the perspectives of Castoriadis (1987) and Taylor (2004) provides a deeper lens to revisit the concept of algorithmic imaginaries. As previously discussed, this concept has been widely explored in studies of algorithmic practices and resistance. Bucher (2017, p. 40) defines algorithmic imaginaries as "ways of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be, how they function and what these imaginations in turn make possible." Bucher's (2017) theory is influenced by affect theory, where she interprets algorithmic imaginaries as mood and intensity corresponding to the "forces of encounter" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, cited in Bucher, 2017). Therefore, Bucher crucially emphasizes the productive and affective power of imaginaries, viewing them not merely as mental representations or models of algorithms as an "illusory relation;" instead, she argues that they should be studied as something inherently productive (Bucher, 2017, p. 41).

Unlike Taylor's (2004) discussion of theory and imaginaries, Bucher (2017, p. 37) relates the folk theories and knowledge of algorithms discussed earlier more closely to the "normative dimension" of her concept of algorithmic imaginaries, defined as "people expect algorithms to behave in a certain way." While it is clear that most users cannot understand algorithms on a technical level, they are still able to perceive and feel their effects. It is precisely these experiences, and the contexts and settings in which they occur, that shape algorithmic

imaginaries. Through the lens of affect theory, Bucher (2017) shifts the focus to the affective encounters people have when engaging with algorithms—that is, the specific moments when people perceive the consequences of algorithms, and the "affective dimension" these encounters construct; and reveal people's experiences, emotions, and feelings regarding algorithms via cultural analysis (Bucher, 2017, p.39).

In addition to emphasizing algorithmic imaginaries as a cultural explanation that guides practices, Bucher (2017) also highlights their role in shaping and generating algorithms themselves. Using an example from Bucher (2017, p. 41), when individuals attempt to manage algorithmic visibility by "clicking consciously," disrupting their 'liking' practices, or other means, the operational mechanisms of algorithms are simultaneously altered. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, algorithmic imaginaries are closely tied to the strategies people develop to counter algorithms. The influence of imaginaries on practice is described by Bucher (2017, p. 41) as providing people with a "reason to react." When there is a disconnect between people's experiences with algorithms and their imaginaries, practices and resistance emerge. This makes the concept particularly fitting for the momo case analysed in this thesis. More importantly, the framework of algorithmic imaginaries allows for a connection between people's imaginaries and their resistance, which is critical to this study.

In summary, drawing on the perspectives of Castoriadis (1987) and Taylor (2004) can further refine the theory of algorithmic imaginaries, enabling a deeper analysis of people's perceptions, practices, and resistance regarding algorithms while offering an explanation of this dynamic process. However, as Siles et al. (2020) point out, studies on folk theories and algorithmic imaginaries often fail to address "how (folk) theories and imaginaries of algorithms relate to specific sets of action strategies that shape modalities of power and resistance." This underscores the need to seek additional theoretical dimensions for support.

Dynamics of Social Practice

The theories related to algorithmic imaginary focus on people's awareness, cognitive

processes, and the interaction between algorithms and social systems, as well as the cultural constructions embedded in these processes. The earlier discussion covered how theories of algorithmic imaginaries explain practices and the relationship between imaginaries and practices. However, when closely examining the process through which imaginaries guide practices or practices reshape imaginaries, it becomes apparent that this process remains abstract and somewhat unclear. The research questions in this thesis require a closer and more detailed analysis of the processes through which momo functions as an algorithmic practice or resistance, as well as the evolving power dynamics within these processes. To address this need, Shove, Pantzar, and Watson's (2012) practice theory offers an alternative analytical framework to deconstruct the practices themselves from a different perspective. Therefore, this thesis adopts practice theory as a complementary framework, aiming to more comprehensively describe and analyze the algorithmic resistance of momos, and covering aspects beyond the scope of theories solely related to imaginaries.

Building on contemporary practice theory, Shove et al. (2012, p. 2) propose a systemic and dynamic perspective, focusing primarily on the dynamic between agency and structure. Shove et al. (2012, p. 33) conceptualize social practices as "ongoing integrations of elements," comprising three fundamental components: material, competence, and meaning. Practices are therefore defined by the "interdependent relations between" these three elements (Shove et al., 2012, p. 24). Using the example of "driving," Shove et al. (2012) illustrate the three elements of practice in detail. First, material refers to the physical environment and infrastructure necessary for the practice, including "objects, infrastructures, tools, hardware, and the body itself" (Shove et al., 2012, p. 23). For instance, the practice of driving requires essential materials such as cars and drivers, as well as extended materials like roads and traffic signs. Second, competence involves the various forms of knowledge, understanding, and skills needed to perform the practice—in the context of driving, this includes driving techniques and knowledge of traffic rules (Shove et al., 2012, p. 23). The final element, meaning, encompasses the "symbolic significance of participation", which refers to the non-practical motivational knowledge, mental activities, and emotions associated with the practice (Shove et al., 2012, p. 23). For example, driving may symbolize wealth,

adventure, convenience, or freedom—symbolic meanings that evolve over time. Practice theory particularly emphasizes that social practices are dynamic and constantly in flux. As the elements of a practice changes over time, their disappearance or renewal leads to changes in the practice itself. A key concept in this process is the "link", which refers to the relationships or structures that connect the basic elements and plays a central role in the continuity of a practice (Shove et al., 2012). According to Shove et al. (2012, p. 21), "practices emerge, persist and disappear as links between their defining elements are made, sustained, or broken." As new links form and old ones break, social practices undergo a continuous cycle of "making links" and "breaking links."

In summary, social practice theory is particularly suited to this thesis for several reasons. On the one hand, its focus on material elements aligns well with the thesis's emphasis on algorithms, addressing the focus on specific practices that the concept of imaginary struggles to fully encompass. On the other hand, its potential to reveal the dynamic relationship between human agency and structure is highly valuable for exploring the interaction between user agency and algorithmic power, aligning closely with the intermediate perspective advocated by Chambers (2017). The final subsection of this chapter will introduce theories related to resistance, aiming to define momo's algorithmic practices.

Everyday Resistance

Foucault's classic theory offers valuable insights into understanding algorithmic control and resistance. Foucault promoted Jeremy Bentham's metaphor of the "panopticon" to illustrate the omnipresent disciplines in modern society (Foucault, 2008). As briefly discussed earlier, Foucault's panopticon metaphor is frequently mentioned in studies on algorithmic resistance (Bucher, 2012; Sun, 2019). The prevailing view holds that Foucault suggests power and discipline are pervasive in everyday life, with individuals constantly subject to various forms of control. However, as Krips (2010) points out, Foucault also leaves space for creative resistance, since there will be no power relations if without free practice. As Foucault (1996, p. 441) states, "power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free."

Similarly, de Certeau's (1984) theory of everyday resistance is frequently employed as a perspective in studies of algorithmic resistance (Karizat et al., 2021; Velkova & Kaun, 2021). This is because de Certeau's approach to everyday resistance, rooted in cultural studies, naturally aligns with the theme of algorithmic resistance through its focus on cultural production within everyday practices as a means of countering structural power. De Certeau (1984) shifted the focus of study from critiquing macro-level power institutions to valuing people's everyday practices. He highlighted the ubiquity and significance of small acts of resistance in daily life, referring to them as the "art of practice" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 44). De Certeau (1984, p. 35) distinguishes between "strategies" and "tactics." Strategies are methods employed by the powerful—those with control over space and the ability to comprehensively plan actions, such as governments or corporations, include ways to "use, manipulate, and diverse" as expressions of power from above. In contrast, tactics are employed by the powerless—those lacking space and relying on limited resources to manoeuvre within existing structures; tactics serve as resistance against strategies, are from below (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 37-38). As de Certeau (1984, p. xix) notes, "whatever it wins, it does not keep." Ordinary people use tactical actions to navigate the challenges of everyday life. These actions, though small, are creative and adaptive, resisting generalised, top-down structural regulation. For de Certeau (1984), practices such as language use, cooking, and reading are forms of everyday resistance. For example, he interprets pedestrians cutting across lawns in urban spaces as an everyday resistance. These spaces, governed by rules and discipline representing "strategies" enacted by entities such as governments or corporations, are creatively subverted by actions like crossing roads or green spaces, practices that de Certeau sees as a creative "tactic".

Another related concept is Scott's (1985) theory of everyday resistance. For Scott (1985), everyday resistance, in contrast to more direct and overt forms of resistance, is a quiet, dispersed, and disguised expression. However, as Krips (2010, p. 14) points out, Scott's (1985) theory has often been criticized for overemphasizing the role of resistance. In contrast, de Certeau (1984) focuses on creative modes of action, which aligns particularly well with the momo case studied in this thesis. Therefore, this thesis primarily adopts de Certeau's

(1984) theories on everyday resistance to evaluate the practices of momos and to discuss momo as a form of resistance. It should also be noted, as Krips (2010, p. 17) observes, that both de Certeau (1984) and Scott (1985) to some extent fail to account for the "power/resistance dynamics." This echoes the research gap highlighted earlier in this thesis: studies on algorithmic control and resistance often struggle to escape binary discourses. To address this, this thesis integrates theories of everyday resistance, social practice, and algorithmic imaginaries. Using the RED platform and momo as a case study, it seeks to uncover the complex power dynamics between algorithmic control and being momo as a form of resistance.

Methodology and Method

Methodology

This thesis is a digital ethnographic study of the momo community on the media platform RED, aiming to explore their perceptions and experiences of algorithms, the construction of their algorithmic imaginaries, and their strategies of algorithmic resistance. As a qualitative study, this thesis is committed to "observing, describing, interpreting, and analysing the way that people experience, act on, or think about themselves and the world around them" (Bazeley, 2013, p. 4). In line with Flyvbjerg's (2001) emphasis on the importance of understanding and judgment through concrete cases in phronetic research, this thesis also focuses on the contextual power dynamics at play. Accordingly, the study centres on the momo community as a marginalised group and subjects of algorithmic oppression, aiming to uncover "the complexity of how domination and injustices play out," providing detailed insights grounded in empirical evidence, as opposed to abstract theory (Grasswick & Mchugh, 2022, p. 5). From the perspective of standpoint theory, the chosen case also aligns with the requirement of "science from below" (Harding, 2008).

As discussed in the previous chapter, Seaver's (2017) work provides methodological inspiration for this thesis. Seaver (2017) suggests that adopting the perspective of algorithms as culture makes ethnography a valuable approach to studying algorithms. As Seaver (2017, p. 6) notes, ethnography is particularly effective in "apprehending the everyday practices that constitute them (algorithms) and keep them working and changing," rather than merely focusing on their relationship with the "properly cultural domain." Moreover, as Hine (2015, p. 19) points out, the internet has become deeply "embedded, embodied" in people's everyday lives, making digital ethnography an effective method for capturing how individuals interact within these mediated spaces, or to say algorithmically mediated spaces. The momo community studied in this thesis is immersed in social media, engaging in algorithmic practices, making digital ethnography an appropriate "being there" method for studying this context. O'Reilly (2012, p. 3) also highlights that ethnography allows

researchers to engage in direct and sustained contact with human agents, "within the context of their daily lives and cultures." This capacity makes it well-suited to analysing power dynamics and cultural processes, aligning with the guidance of Flyvbjerg (2001) and Seaver (2017).

O'Reilly (2012, p. 42) notes that ethnography is an "iterative-inductive" process, starting from an initial interest or research question and evolving through continuous adjustments and refinements as the study progresses. Building on this foundation, this study establishes the goal of exploring the algorithmic imaginaries and resistance of "momo" and engages in iterative reflection throughout the research process. For the same reason, ethnographic research cannot be entirely pre-designed, and the methodological framework of this thesis has gradually taken shape as part of an inductive approach (Hine, 2015, p. 5). This not only determines the direction of the research but also reflects the ongoing reflexive nature of ethnographic inquiry (O'Reilly, 2012). Specifically, this thesis combines autoethnography and semi-structured interviews as methods for data collection and employs qualitative textual analysis for analysing empirical materials. By integrating multiple methods and comparing data from different sources, this study meets the requirements of "triangulation" (Schrøder et al., 2003, p. 74). Borrowing Pertierra's (2018, p. 84) concept, this thesis seeks to adopt an "emic" perspective, approaching the media practices of momos and their internal reflections and understandings of momo identity as an insider. At the same time, it remains continually mindful of the researcher's own position and the importance of sensitivity to contextual and cultural differences (Madianou & Miller, 2013).

Autoethnography

The mixed-methods approach adopted in this study was applied concurrently throughout the research process, guided by Madden's (2010, cited in O'Reilly, 2012, p. 125) "step-in-step-out" concept. This approach aims to detach the researcher from any pre-established familiar contexts, continuously introducing new reflections into the research process. It is important to note that generalizations derived from a single method may not fully reflect reality and

should partly be attributed to the method itself (Baert, 2005, p. 13). Consequently, the autoethnographic method in this thesis serves as a supplement to the materials collected through interviews. This aims to extract the media representations created and received by the momo community during their media engagement and, through these digital traces, further explore their imaginaries and practices. According to Hine (2015, p. 83), autoethnography offers an "embodied" perspective, enabling researchers to immerse themselves in the subject matter by becoming active participants and leveraging their experiences to interpret and understand the phenomena they observe. Furthermore, Hine (2015, p. 92) emphasizes that autoethnography "emphasizes the embodied and emotional experience of engagement with diverse media." In addition to providing closer observations of the momos' daily interactions and algorithmic practices, this method offers significant value in uncovering what Bucher (2017) describes as the "affective dimension" of algorithmic imaginaries.

The autoethnography conducted in this thesis follows the guidance of Hine (2015) and O'Reilly, specifically adopting participatory observation within an autoethnographical framework, which provides "from inside" descriptions and sensitivities (Hine, 2015, p. 83). Concretely, the researcher changed the RED username and profile to mimic a momo identity, critically engaging with posts both within and outside the momo community on RED, participating in comments and interactions, and joining momo groups and communities. During these fieldwork activities, the researcher conducted observations, participated actively, and kept an autoethnographic journal. Interactions were not limited to the momo community; the researcher also engaged with other RED users as a momo, commenting and interacting. This autoethnographic work has been ongoing since February 2024, representing a relatively long-term participatory observation. Specifically, the researcher collected 10 highly engaged posts from within momo groups, analysing comments left by momos in these posts' comment sections. Approximately 200 comments were collected in total as empirical material for analysis[1]. Additionally, the researcher recorded 12 reflective autoethnographic journal entries, which were reviewed and revisited multiple times[2]. The reflexivity of this

[1] See Appendix 2 for example of momo's posts & comments.
[2] See Appendix 8 for example of autoethnography diary.

process lies in the researcher's recognition that himself are "a part of researching and signifying," and that ethnographic journals function as a form of "self-interested" narration, with interactions between the researcher and the "momo" community embedded within RED's algorithmically constructed relational networks (Butz & Besio, 2009). Therefore, these materials must be combined with representations obtained through other methods, serving as a "strategic response" to address gaps in understanding introduced by different methods (Hine, 2015, p. 84).

By experiencing algorithms in this way and engaging with interactions within and outside the momo groups, the researcher gains an understanding of the phenomenon through perception and immersion. As Butz and Besio (2009) point out, this approach involves constructing the researcher themselves as "objects of knowledge" and requires an understanding of the research subject from the perspective of "flows" and "assemblages." Similarly, as Forberg and Schilt (2023) note, researchers themselves also "become the phenomenon of study." Simultaneously, within this process, the RED algorithm functions both as infrastructure and as a structure of imagination—serving as both the object and the medium of the research. This method enables the researcher to gain "authentic insight" (Hine, 2015, p. 82) into the RED algorithm and into being momo as a form of algorithmic practice.

Semi-Structured Interview and Sampling

Following O'Reilly's (2012, p. 160) guidance, this study adopts semi-structured interviews as the primary method for data collection to "understand the context and meanings of the information, opinions, and interests mentioned" (Brennen, 2021, p. 29). According to Byrne (2018, p. 469), semi-structured interviews reveal more "voices and experiences have been ignored, misrepresented, or suppressed." Since the momo community can be viewed as a subcultural group distinct from mainstream culture, employing semi-structured interviews facilitates deeper discussions with participants.

The sampling method followed Hine's (2015, p. 79) recommendation of a "targeted approach," although participants on RED did not appear to differ significantly in outward

characteristics. Potential participants were recruited using RED's built-in private messaging feature. Specifically, the researcher sent private messages to momo members in momo groups, introducing himself as a researcher and inquiring whether they would be willing to participate in the study. In the early stages of the research, the researcher attempted to identify potential participants through comments on momo community posts. However, due to the unique characteristics of the momo community, interview requests were often declined. As Hine (2015, p. 5) notes, this process involved "experiencing and embracing that uncertainty." Progress was made only after the researcher identified and joined momo chat groups on RED, which facilitated participant recruitment. This aligns with O'Reilly's (2012, p. 124) observation that researchers who position themselves as insiders are more likely to establish connections with participants.

In this thesis, a total of 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted[3]. The longest interview lasted 51 minutes, while the shortest was 37 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed into transcripts for subsequent analysis. It is worth noting that seven of the interviews were conducted via voice call on WeChat, while the remaining three were conducted using RED's private messaging feature, as these participants were unwilling to add the researcher as a contact on other platform. Before beginning the interviews, a pilot interview was conducted to test the initial interview guide.[4] Following the guidance of O'Reilly (2012) and Hine (2015), the interview guide was progressively refined during the research process. The final interview guide focused on three core themes: being momo as a practice, RED's algorithm, and practices of resistance. Questions centred around understanding the algorithmic practices and imaginaries of momos, their motivations for becoming momo, their perceptions of the RED algorithm, and their experiences of being momo. The guide primarily consisted of open-ended questions, aligning with O'Reilly's (2012) recommendation to allow participants to fully express their thoughts. During the interviews, questions and topics were adjusted based on participants' responses. The semi-structured interview guide included questions with varying degrees of structure and used

[3] See Appendix 3 for sample of participants.
[4] See Appendix 4 for interview guide.

diverse question formats to effectively advance the interview process (Tracy, 2019). For instance, in the initial stages of the interviews, non-threatening, open-ended factual questions were typically employed to quickly engage participants' interest and create a relaxed conversational atmosphere (Tracy, 2019). An example opening question was, "Could you explain the momo phenomenon to me?" This approach helped participants start from familiar content and encouraged reflection, while also providing opportunities for the researcher to delve deeper with follow-up questions (Tracy, 2019). Additionally, drawing on techniques introduced by Boyd (2015), the researcher frequently used follow-up prompts or silence to elicit immediate reactions or more detailed descriptions from participants.

Qualitative Textual Analysis

The qualitative textual analysis conducted in this thesis follows the guidance of Kuckartz (2014, p. 80) and employs an inductive category construction based on grounded theory, which is "based solely on the empirical data." Given that RED posts and momo group interactions are primarily text-based, this method effectively contextualizes people's perceptions of algorithms, their interactions with algorithms, and their communication processes, serving as a critical component of this thesis. Specifically, this study applied qualitative textual analysis to the materials collected during the autoethnographic process and the interview transcripts. Following Kuckartz (2014), the researcher began by analysing one interview transcript as a pilot case[5], inductively generating categories and creating an initial codebook[6]. This codebook was then used to analyse the remaining empirical data, while its validity was continuously tested. Throughout the analysis process, new codes were iteratively generated and connected to theoretical and conceptual frameworks. As Bazeley (2013, p. 140) recommends, the transcripts were "reprinted multiple times" to ensure a thorough and iterative review. This approach also ensured the consistency of the codebook throughout all stages of the analysis (Bazeley, 2013; Kuckartz, 2014).

The data analysis process was divided into two stages. The early stage involved open coding,

[5] See Appendix 6 for example of interview transcript.
[6] See Appendix 7 for coding process.

requiring a review of the sources to capture the literal essence of conversations and generate descriptive codes (Kuckartz, 2014). As O'Reilly (2012, p. 202) describes it, open coding is the process in which "concepts are identified." After completing the open coding stage, the process moved to the next stage of refining and forming categories and themes (Bazeley, 2013). In this thesis, all codes were ultimately consolidated into a unified codebook, which was used to analyse the data and connect it to the theoretical framework. As Strauss and Corbin (1996, p. 49) emphasize, grounded theory enables empirical materials to be transformed into a "higher level of abstraction" for interpreting phenomena. The text analysis process for this thesis was conducted using NVivo, the final analysis identified three key themes: practice, imaginary, and resistance.

Ethical Considerations and Methodological Reflections

It is important to note that, following Hine's (2015) recommendations, ethical considerations were continuously addressed throughout the research as part of an ongoing reflexive process. First, it should be clarified that the autoethnographic method employed in this study does not constitute covert participatory observation online, as the latter may violate the "principle of care" owed to research participants, leading to ethical concerns (Boellstorff et al., 2012; cited in Forberg & Schilt, 2023). This distinction arises because becoming a momo on RED does not require authorization or consent from others; it only involves adjusting the user profile. Moreover, the anonymous nature of being a momo serves as a "setting," meaning that as a momo, the researcher neither needed to nor should reveal their identity. The situation differs for joining momo group chats. When joining such groups, the researcher promptly disclosed identity and purpose in the group chat upon entry.

To avoid causing any potential harm, this study deliberately refrained from engaging with controversial or potentially misinterpreted topics and statements during participation, such as posts related to social events or observed instances of cyberbullying. This approach acknowledges that, under RED's algorithmic mechanisms, "even peripheral participation or just a few likes here and there can cause societal harm at a scale unimaginable in analog

research" (Forberg & Schilt, 2023). Additionally, before the interviews began, all participants either signed an informed consent form or requested the researcher to read the consent form aloud to them[7]. The consent form stated that all participant information would remain confidential and pseudonyms would be used. Participants were informed that they could terminate the interview or decline to answer any questions, and their preferences would be fully respected. This approach not only fulfilled ethical considerations but also aimed to create a comfortable and open environment for participants (Boyd, 2016).

Reflecting on the methodological combination employed in this thesis, it can be considered appropriate and rational. The autoethnographic approach adopted in this thesis achieved certain outcomes, but given that the momo community studied here has no entry barriers, the effectiveness of autoethnography in this context may be less significant compared to studies involving groups with higher access thresholds. Moreover, ethical considerations may have limited the researcher's experience. For instance, the researcher was not permitted to fabricate personal experiences during participation, even though this behaviour might be commonplace in the anonymous environment of this case. This limitation is particularly relevant as momo often intersects with cyberbullying or other "deviant digital spaces," placing autoethnography in an ethical dilemma (Forberg & Schilt, 2023).

As Pertierra (2018, p. 64) notes, ethnographic texts are "interpretative accounts produced by a subjective researcher." In this process, the "representational crisis" remains far from a cliché (Hine, 2015, p. 81). As Harding (2008) points out, the researcher's pre-existing standpoint can never be entirely avoided. The empirical materials I encountered through my own "fish-eye lens" may be marginal and limited. Additionally, sharing a similar set of cultural norms with my research subjects inevitably introduces a subjective perspective into my analysis.

[7] See Appendix 5 for consent form.

Analysis

"What's the difference between a friend recognizing your account and running naked?" This is a comment from a post in the momo community. It humorously illustrates a typical reason why they become momos, using the term "running naked" to metaphorically describe the discomfort and shame of having their real identities exposed by social algorithms. The actions and motivations of these momos reveal the complex interrelationship between algorithmic imaginaries, practices, and resistance.

The first section of this chapter will describe momo as a practice and identify its constituent elements. In the second section, the aim will be to conceptualize the momos' understanding and reflection on RED's algorithm, exploring their algorithmic imaginaries and discussing the relationship between these imaginaries and their practices. The final section will explain how momo becomes a form of resistance.

Momo as Algorithmic Practice

When using RED to search for "momo," you will find thousands of identical images: a cartoonish pink dinosaur. Charlotte is one of these "momo" users, defining herself as a loyal user of RED. *"I think RED is like Douyin (China's TikTok) combined with Baidu (a Google-like Chinese search engine). I usually enjoy scrolling through the 'Discover' page or using it to look things up."* The "Discover" page on RED utilizes algorithmic recommendations to provide her with content she might find interesting, such as shopping suggestions or travel guides. Charlotte shared that she frequently uses RED to find recipes and learn new cooking techniques, particularly for dishes that are visually appealing, simple to prepare, and suitable for home cooking. RED has also become a resource for her to obtain various types of information, ranging from life hacks to professional knowledge, all of which she claims can be found on the platform. Charlotte offered an illustrative example of a clever way she uses RED:

> "At the time, I was traveling in Italy, but tickets for 'The Last Supper' were sold out well in advance. So, I searched for ticket information on RED to see if anyone was reselling tickets. Initially, I didn't find anyone selling tickets, so I went back to the homepage and kept refreshing the 'Discover' page. This was because I knew that if someone posted a new note (post) related to tickets, the algorithm might recommend it to me. Sure enough, after some time, I quickly saw on the 'Discover' page that someone, due to a change in travel plans, no longer needed their ticket. After messaging her privately, she transferred the ticket to me."

From the ethnographic descriptions above, it appears that Charlotte, as a momo, does not seem to act differently from general users on RED. So, what influences their practice of being momo? According to Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012, p.33), practice can be understood as the "ongoing integrations of elements" and is composed of material, competence, and meaning. In engaging as a momo and participating in RED as a form of media practice, we can first identify the material elements within this configuration. For Shove et al. (2012, p.23), material provides the essential physical environment and infrastructure for practice, encompassing "objects, infrastructures, tools, hardware, and the body itself." In this case, material elements include anonymous momo accounts, recommendation algorithms, RED as a media platform, smartphones, screens, and the fingers swiping across electronic devices, etc. Among these, the most notable—and the primary focus of this thesis—is RED's algorithm. RED defines itself as a platform that aims to "inspire lives," enabling users to explore and connect with diverse lifestyles while offering "endless possibilities to widen life experiences" (Xiaohongshu, 2024). The content created by users on RED, primarily in the form of text-image or video posts called "Notes," is distributed through artificial intelligence and machine learning. Spanning topics from fashion and entertainment to food and parenting, this content encompasses all aspects of life and is shared within the community to assist individuals in making everyday life decisions (Xiaohongshu, 2021; Xiaohongshu, 2024).

The algorithmic foundation of RED's distribution mechanism lies in social recommendation. Social recommendation algorithms, which have been systematically developed since the early

21st century, can be narrowly defined as “any recommendation with online social relations as an additional input (Tang, Hu & Liu, 2013).” These algorithms aim to leverage the user relevance embedded in social connections, along with other available social media data, such as user interactions and click behaviours, to enhance the performance of recommendation systems, which encompass various objects, including items, tags, individuals, and communities (Tang, Hu & Liu, 2013). Utilizing collaborative filtering based on users’ past behaviours and geographical locations, alongside social graphs constructed from associated social media and contact list data, RED’s social recommendation algorithm identifies, groups, and cross-recommends users. RED’s socially-driven recommendations are not limited to a standalone feature such as “Discover People You May Know.” They also include pushing posts created by individuals users might recognize, as well as content they are likely to find engaging, directly to the “Discover” page on their homepage.

Shove (2016) argues that practices are tightly intertwined with the materials involved and continuously evolve in response to changes in the environment and the practices themselves. This dynamic is clearly illustrated in this case. When users actively search for information or passively consume content—such as browsing the “Discover” page without a specific purpose—the platform and its algorithms function as an underlying infrastructure. However, as demonstrated in Charlotte’s story about purchasing a ticket, when she repeatedly refreshed (browsed) the “Discover” page based on her understanding of RED’s algorithm and eventually obtained the desired information, the algorithm partially transformed into a tool. Among the momo community discussed in this thesis, participants, much like Charlotte, primarily browse RED’s “Discover” page or use RED as a search engine to collect the information they need, rather than to fulfil specific communication needs. Thus, as in Schellewald’s (2022) study of TikTok users, the experience of momos with the platform is fundamentally shaped by their engagement with the algorithm, both as infrastructure and as a tool.

However, as a material element of practice, the algorithm is evidently the same for *momos* and general RED users. What, then, accounts for the differences in their practices? As Shove

et al. (2012) point out, practice is a dynamic process, evolving or persisting through the interaction of its constituent elements. Analysing the other two elements of *momo* practices—*competence* and *meaning*—may offer an explanation.

According to Shove et al. (2012, pp. 23–29), *competence* refers to the combination of various forms of understanding and practical knowledge, which are, to some extent, defined by material elements. As Seaver (2017) illustrates with a compelling example, even humanities scholars and social scientists find it difficult to explain something like a bubble sort (A simple sorting algorithm) without prior knowledge. The same applies to momos: lacking the relevant background knowledge, they are unable to articulate what the algorithm as a material entity *specifically is*. Many scholars (Eslami et al., 2015; Accoto, 2018; Gran et al., 2021) have highlighted the opacity of algorithms. Despite their pervasive role in media platforms, the inherently automated nature of computational processes makes the hidden, invisible filtering and curation of algorithms difficult for most users to perceive. However, in the case of RED and the momo community, this dynamic appears markedly different: for them, RED's social recommendation algorithm is overly present, even hyper-visible. Based on personal observations, experiences, and assumptions, they develop a range of productive folk theories regarding the algorithm's function and mechanisms. When evaluating RED's algorithm, participants consistently use expressions such as "too powerful" (Charlotte) or "too scary" (Bella), reflecting their perception of the algorithm's precision and unexpected accuracy. Among these accounts, Ava's experience is particularly intriguing:

> Ava is an international student. After arriving in her new environment, she was surprised to discover that a classmate's RED post had previously appeared on her "Discover" page. That post had left a strong impression on her, but at the time, she did not know who the poster was—until they became classmates. Prior to this, there had been no connection between their lives. Ava believes that RED's algorithm is "not just based on geographical proximity" but is "likely based on everything you searched for."

Ava's theory portrays RED as a kind of oracle, with its algorithm seemingly predicting her future based on the content she and her classmate engaged with, their search histories, and

data from other social media platforms. This can be understood as an informal theory derived from what DeVito et al. (2017, p. 3165) describe as "causal models"—users' understandings of how technical systems operate. Within the empirical materials examined in this thesis, many similar examples can be identified. For instance, James pointed out the "data collection checklist" table in RED's settings page to the author:

> "It (RED) collects all the information you have entered on the platform, such as your occupation, school... as well as device information, and even reads the system clipboard. So, if you copy a shopping link from another app and then open RED, the algorithm will recommend related items to you."

Within these folk theories, the RED algorithm is understood not only to extensively collect all behaviour-based and device-based information but also to infer and predict based on this data. These understandings and knowledge align with DeVito's (2021) categorization of people's perceptions of algorithms' "causal power" and "mechanistic fragments," representing a synthesis of functional and structural theories about the RED algorithm (DeVito et al., 2017). From the perspective of practice, these folk theories, as a form of competence, provide users with skills and abilities that lead to changes in their practices. In the case of *momos*, based on similar understandings of algorithmic mechanisms, users attempt to reduce or eliminate RED's socially driven recommendations based on personal information by disabling the app's access to their phone contacts or unlinking it from other media or shopping platforms. However, participants also pointed out the limitations of these theories and methods. Bella stated, *"These methods are useless. Disabling contact-based recommendations only prevents you from appearing in others' 'people you may know' lists, but your notes can still show up on the 'Discover' page for nearby people or people you may know. It could be because you search for similar things or are geographically close."* Such theories circulate and evolve within the momo community, reflecting not only the iterative theorization process described by DeVito (2021, p.5), where folk theories "improve with repeated rounds of theorization," but also the dynamic and fluid nature of competence as an element of practice, as outlined by Shove et al. (2012). A preliminary conclusion can be

drawn: in the case of RED and momos, folk theories function as a form of competence, providing users with "specific techniques" and serving as a "precondition" for practice (Shove et al., 2012, p.35).

These reflective and informal forms of knowledge and theorization position the momos' folk theories closer to the realm of "algorithmic gossip" (Bishop, 2019). Bishop (2019, p.2590) defines algorithmic gossip as the unrestrained and informal conversations through which marginalized groups share social knowledge about algorithms and their visibility. A parallel example can be found in Bishop's (2019, p.2597) study of beauty influencers on YouTube, who use gossip to uncover how algorithms function and to adjust their content strategies. From a practice perspective, this process represents a collective construction of competence that alters practices. Although, compared to the influencer groups or so-called "algorithm experts" (Bishop, 2020) studied by Bishop, momos lack significant influence or visibility and have no opportunity to gain deeper insights into the platform's algorithms or resources. Instead, they occupy a more marginalized position in cyberspace. Their understanding and reflection on algorithms, as a collectively constructed knowledge resource, are relatively vague and disorganized. However, within the framework of practice, whether algorithms as material or algorithmic knowledge and theories as competence, there is no fundamental difference in the components of practice between the two groups. Nevertheless, although both of momos and beaty influencers are considered as marginalized groups, but there are significant differences exist between their algorithmic practice—while influencers strive to increase their visibility to secure economic benefits, momos aim to make themselves invisible. This highlights that discussions of folk theories about algorithms alone cannot fully explain the uniqueness of momos' practices. A closer examination of their practices reveals that the meaning underlying their practices is distinctly different.

What does momo signify? Distinct from practical theories and knowledge, Shove et al. (2012, p.23) identify meaning as the final element that constitutes practice, encompassing individuals' motivational knowledge, mental activities, and emotions, and defining it as the "symbolic significance of participation." This symbolic dimension means that meaning is not

only tied to the personal motivations and emotions of practitioners but is also embedded in broader cultural and social contexts. To analyse these symbolic and representational elements, the concept of the imaginary provides a suitable theoretical framework. As Taylor (2004, p.25) notes, the social imaginary "makes sense of our particular practices." Therefore, any discussion of meaning must uncover and interpret the algorithmic imaginaries of the momos, which forms a central focus of this thesis.

Algorithmic Imaginaries and Meaning

To explore the meaning of the momos' practices, it is essential to understand the reasons behind their becoming momos. On this point, participants consistently expressed their concerns about being discovered by people they know in real life or by those nearby. "*RED is by far the most accurate social media platform when it comes to recommending people you know. Even classmates I haven't contacted in hundreds of years are recommended to me. I've turned off everything I can, but it still recommends them—over and over. How can I completely turn it off?*" This excerpt from a momo's post vividly encapsulates their imaginaries about RED's social algorithm. For many, the starting point of becoming a momo often stems from a personal or vicarious experience that reveals the power of the algorithm. These moments are akin to what Bucher (2017, p.35) aptly describes as "whoa moments," instances when individuals suddenly become aware of algorithms, which are inherently diverse as they reveal "the intimate power of algorithms in strange sensations." However, for momos, their stories and narratives about algorithms are relatively homogenized. Through online observations and interviews, the author collected a large number of similar "algorithmic encounter moments" from momos.

Shared Moments of Encounter

> Emma is a teacher who once used her RED account to share a post about her travel experiences. For Emma, this behaviour was no different from what she would typically do on platforms like Weibo or WeChat Moments—simply sharing her feelings and snippets of her life. What she did not anticipate was that RED's powerful social

recommendation algorithm would push her post to an audience she had not intended to share it with: "...my post was seen by a parent of one of my students, and later, there was talk about it on their side. I found it really annoying...it made me feel really emo, to be honest. I think traveling is perfectly normal, but they ended up (making negative comments)." Shortly afterward, she deleted all the content she had posted and became a momo because she was "afraid of being disturbed."

These critical voices may stem from the cultural context in China, where parental anxieties about their children's education and excessively high moral and behavioural expectations for the role of "teacher" are prevalent. However, what is more apparent is that Emma should not have been troubled by this at all. For her, RED's powerful social recommendation algorithm was the root cause of everything. Thus, becoming a *momo* became a way to avoid these distorted perceptions and evaluative desires from others, representing the *meaning* of Emma's practice. It is important to note that, for these so-called "voyeur," accessing the content or accounts of *momos* may often be unintentional. As discussed earlier, they frequently stumble upon others' online identities on their recommended homepage without deliberate intent. As scholars (Seaver, 2017; Bucher, 2017; Schellewald, 2017) have emphasized, insights, fragments, and gossip about how algorithms work often emerge unexpectedly in everyday life. This suggests that, on RED, almost anyone can become a "voyeur," either actively or passively encountering unexpected content. *"If you gaze into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."* Henry used this Nietzschean quote to describe her feelings—when you see a post, your own homepage is also being viewed by others. For Ava, although she has not experienced the embarrassment of having private content seen by unintended audiences, she has often observed the possibility of such scenarios: *"I turned off all the permissions I could—both the 'privacy settings' within the app and the permissions on my phone. But one day, my partner told me I was recommended to him."* There are many similar examples beyond those previously mentioned:

"RED, stop your algorithm! I admit your algorithm is impressive, but can you please stop showing me people I know in real life? It's really awkward!" *(Excerpt from a post in the*

momo community)

> "I created a small account, but somehow, in the 'people you may know' section, an account of a netizen I know ages ago showed up... That netizen's account wasn't even followed or recommended by my main account... So, I'm genuinely terrified that the post I foolishly wrote about my crush might be seen by my roommate." *(Emma)*

Bucher (2017, p. 35) highlights one dimension underlying such encounters: the normative dimension of algorithms, where "people expect algorithms to behave in a certain way," such as correctly displaying the content they believe should be recommended. In the case of momos, the situation is often the opposite—the algorithm is perceived to be "too accurate," displaying their content to unintended audiences. This accuracy reinforces the awareness of the algorithm's presence and becomes a way to experience and perceive the algorithm in everyday life. Although such scenarios appear pervasive in the current social media environment, RED stands out in its unique ability to make visible the tangible impact of algorithms on offline lives. This gives the algorithm a more threatening image, even becoming something "potentially dangerous" (Ruckenstein & Granroth, 2020, p. 8). For instance, the author observed numerous momo users who, before becoming anonymous, experienced harassment from neighbours, colleagues, or nearby individuals; there are also people who shared critical posts about their companies on RED, which were recommended to colleagues or supervisors, resulting in forced resignations. Charlotte remarked on such situations: "*(I once posted something similar about my company), I have no idea how many colleagues saw it. It scared me so much that I locked all the posts where I shared personal reflections. Even if I cover my face, as long as it's someone from my real-life circle, they can still infer who I am from the content of the post.*"

In summary, these examples highlight the powerful yet uncontrollable nature of algorithms and the momos' fear of them. An obvious observation is that most of these shared experiences are infused with negative emotional factors, as well as the strong association between these awkward or uncomfortable encounters and the algorithm. This aligns with the findings of DeVito et al. (2017), who note that users' reactions to algorithmic changes are often tied to

negative emotions. Expressions such as “being watched,” “offended,” “violated,” and “uncomfortable” frequently appeared during interviews and online fieldwork. These phenomena not only reveal the dimension of meaning in momos’ practices through their emotions but also align with Bucher’s (2017) emphasis on the affective dimension of algorithms, where these “forces of encounter” correspond to mood and intensity (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; cited in Bucher, 2017). Gregg and Seigworth (2010, pp. 1–3) define affect as a force “beyond emotion,” with emotion being the structured and conscious outcome of affective intensities. As the affective force, the momos’ algorithmic imaginaries generate emotions and sensations, which simultaneously constitute a part of the meaning element within their algorithmic practices. When individuals experience affective encounters with algorithms that provide unusual mental activities and emotions, the meaning of their practices shifts, ultimately leading to transformations in practice.

Treat of Visibility: Exposure and Shame

Focusing on these striking affective experiences and the process of generating emotions, for momos, this largely stems from the exposure or fear of being exposed, which evokes a sense of “shame.” On this point, Ava shared an interesting perspective:

> “On RED, you might expose some of your ongoing projects or certain questions you have... (these) could be seen as aspects of your life where you are incompetent. For example, you don’t know how to do something, you’re looking for a roommate or a place to rent, or you have doubts about something, and you ask on RED. (Using an anonymous identity) doesn’t make you seem more ignorant… For me, its greatest value is hiding my clumsiness and protecting my sense of shame.”

Shame, as an intersubjective structure, can be understood as “a feeling of being exposed to the gaze of others in a way that makes one feel the desire to escape or disappear” (Guenther, 2011, p. 24). For the participants, connecting shame with surveillance feels entirely natural. Emma felt that she was under “intense monitoring” on RED, becoming increasingly self-abasement upon realizing that her content could be seen by unexpected audiences. For Bella,

posting on RED evoked a sense of being "*视奸*"—a term whose literal meaning is "visual rape." It metaphorically describes the feeling of being scrutinized or observed, akin to being stared at in a lecherous or invasive manner, evoking a sense of exposure or violation. This term implicitly conveys the discomfort or unease arising from becoming the object of intrusive gazes. For momos, this sensation appears universal—they seem to assume they are under the persistent gaze of potential acquaintances or ill-intentioned strangers, which are conceptualized as an external "witnessing other" (Miller, 2007; cited in Green & Vanheule, 2024). A notable point of discussion is that, in some cases, this other is real, as with Emma's example involving the parent of her student. However, for many, this other may not be tangible, and their gaze exists in the realm of imaginary. While not all momos have experienced the embarrassment of having their accounts discovered by unexpected people as Emma did, they frequently observe similar striking examples. Their encounters with algorithms, such as unintentionally discovering others' RED accounts, further underscore the potential for their own exposure. Thus, this omnipresent gaze of the other is constructed within the imaginary. Research on objectification has already illuminated the ways in which objectifying gazes produce shame (Calogero, 2004; Gervais et al., 2011). From a Lacanian perspective, the gaze represents how we imagine being perceived by others and how we wish to be seen by them, a "point of the hollow (Green & Vanheule, p. 329)" arising from the failure of perception, which represent the subject's awareness of the other's perception (Krips, 2010). In other words, as a symbolic structure, the gaze does not depend on the actual presence of the other. Therefore, the gaze experienced by momos is, in most cases, an imagined structure, internalizing their own norms or expectations. Specifically, the momos' references to "exposing aspects of incompetence in life" or "being visually raped" can be understood as an introspective imaginary of the other's perspective, which functions as a "reflexive middle voice" (Krips, 2010, p. 94).

It is important to note that the imaginary discussed above aligns more closely with Lacanian fantasy rather than a shared cultural or social imaginary. What I aim to further explore is that this gaze, which produces shame, is not merely an internal process but also a component of the momos' algorithmic imaginaries in this case. For Castoriadis (2016), this internal process

stems from the individual's radical imaginary, which refers to a fundamental and creative human imagination—a mechanism for generating new meanings and forms. According to Diehl (2019, p. 395), radical imaginary appears before the distinction between the real and the fictional, as a "forms that are previous to their concretisation in thinking." On a social level, this radical imaginary manifests as a collective capacity to produce norms and meanings, becoming an institutionalized imaginary (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 80). Castoriadis's and Taylor's concepts converge here, as Taylor similarly describes the social imaginary as a coherent structure that resonates with large groups of people.

As Highmore (2015, p. 16) points out, while the analysis of individuals' radical imaginary can be seen as a form of "closeness", the analysis of the social imaginary or institutional imaginary provides a perspective of "distance". Krips (2010) discusses the similarities between Lacan's and Foucault's theories of the gaze, both emphasizing the role of norms in shaping subjectivity and the gaze as a point of disruption in perception, destabilizing the subject's perception of self. A critical observation is that Foucault's (2008) metaphor of the panopticon is highly applicable to this context. Momos appear to exist within such an omnipresent system of surveillance, where everyone is watched "by all or certain of others" (Foucault, 1996, p. 235). As Foucault (2008, p. 5) notes, for momos, "visibility is a trap". Their actions are exposed to observers from all directions, while the observers' gaze remains invisible to them. Even though such surveillance and monitoring are not always active, the fear lies in its potential to occur at any moment. Foucault (1996, p. 232) summarizes this gaze as "at once collective and anonymous", which is well reflected in this case. It stems from the momos' imagined others—their real and unreal friends, family, colleagues, supervisors, and unexpected individuals from their lives. This non-individual, symbolic sense of "being watched" can be understood as an institutionalized social imaginary at the societal level, as described by Castoriadis (1987 & 2016). Here, the other as a heterogeneous presence is no longer merely an individual's internal imaginary but is expressed through concrete mechanisms while functioning as "collectively available signifiers" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 93). In this case, this process repeatedly manifests. Participants' folk theories, experiences, and feelings about algorithms are not isolated but similar and shared. Through these common

encounters, the algorithmic imaginary is generated and sustained.

For Foucault, the gaze of the panopticon is both a symbol of power and a tool of power. In this case, is power held by the watchers? The answer is likely no. Foucault (2008, p. 6) explains that the panopticon is a "machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad", automating and depersonalizing power through the gaze. In other words, the identity of the watcher is irrelevant; the panopticon, as a power structure, ensures that the gaze—and therefore power—is ever-present. Turning to RED, if we liken the media environment momos experience to a panopticon, the actual holders of power are not the potential others watching, but rather the institution that creates this power dynamic—namely, RED's algorithm. Bucher (2012), in her study of Facebook's EdgeRank algorithm, discusses the discipline that algorithm exert over users, arguing that this mechanism is the inverse of the visibility mechanism of the panopticon. By emphasising stories that generate significant comments and likes, the algorithm establishes participation as a norm, rendering invisibility a form of punishment—a "threat of invisibility" (Bucher, 2012, p. 1171). Such conclusions have been corroborated by various empirical studies on influencers and live streamers (Bishop, 2019; Cotter, 2018; Lai, 2022). However, the phenomena presented in this thesis seem to challenge this perspective. Compared to media platforms like Facebook or Instagram, RED and its algorithm are not particularly unique. Yet, participants do not anonymise themselves on media platforms outside of RED, nor do they report experiencing similar feelings of shame when discussing their use of other platforms.

What creates such a difference? From the perspective of practice theory, as discussed in the previous chapter, in the algorithmic practices of momos, RED and its algorithm as material are more oriented toward functionality and experience-sharing, compared to platforms that meet momos' social or emotional needs. Consequently, the overly conspicuous social recommendation algorithm sometimes becomes an unintended negative experience. While the distinction in material cannot be overlooked, like other platforms, RED and its algorithm also encourage interaction and participation. Moreover, users' understanding and knowledge of algorithms across different platforms, as well as their awareness of RED's operational

logic, form part of competence, which also shows no fundamental difference—even within RED itself, momos represent only a small subset of the user base. This suggests that these two elements do not play a decisive role in shaping their practices. Thus, my argument is that the meaning of a practice is not determined by platform rules or technical understanding. The difference between the practices of momos and other users is defined by the meaning created through imaginaries surrounding RED's algorithm. More importantly, most studies on algorithmic control focus on the algorithm as an object of analysis, emphasizing it as a power structure rather than a cultural phenomenon. As Bucher (2017) notes, the concept of algorithmic imaginaries aims to understand people's experiences of algorithms, rather than the algorithms themselves. Similarly, Seaver (2017, p.10) emphasizes that algorithms are "intrinsically cultural" constructions of people. When discussing algorithms as an imagined structure and the meaning and feelings generated around this structure, the heterogeneity of different groups naturally becomes amplified. In other words, the reason for differences in practices lies in differences in meaning, which stem from distinct social imaginaries—or, more directly, from cultural differences.

> When Henry recalled the experience that led him to become a momo, his tone was tinged with resignation. He had casually taken a photo of the inside of his suitcase, showing a few of his favourite sneakers—a post no different from what he typically shared on Weibo or WeChat Moments. Henry explained, "I originally intended it as a (WeChat) Moment. I just wanted it to be seen by people I follow and who follow me." However, the post unexpectedly garnered hundreds of comments and over a thousand likes. Henry felt a strong sense of being "overexposed," as he didn't consider the photo to be particularly special or worth public attention. Yet, it attracted so much attention in such a short time. "I felt undeserving (of the attention). I just wanted to share it with my friends. People were saying all kinds of things in the comments. At first, I replied to some, but eventually, it became impossible to keep up—there were just too many." This unanticipated exposure made him feel deeply uncomfortable. He suddenly realized that personal details of his private life had been broadcast widely without his preparedness, leaving him

regretful and even uneasy. Following this experience, he decided to hide the post eventually.

In contrast, on social media platforms like Weibo or Facebook, users primarily interact with followers, fans, or friends within their control, and thus, they rarely feel shame about their content being viewed by others. The Lacanian gaze undoubtedly exists in these spaces, as it persists within individuals as an internalized structure. Meanwhile, Foucault's concept of visibility operates as a reward for adhering to norms, encouraging active participation and interaction. From the perspective of disciplinary mechanisms, Henry's content performed well and was deemed worthy of reward, attracting more traffic to his post to sustain and amplify engagement. However, this disciplinary logic was disconnected from Henry's feelings. Instead of serving as a reward, the unexpected exposure became an affective encounter, provoking discomfort and embarrassment, and even becoming a burden. As Bucher (2017, p. 41) notes, these affective encounters are crucial for imaginaries, as they not only generate emotions and sensations but also contribute to "moulding the algorithm itself." For momos, RED's rules are inverted. Rather than imposing discipline through the threat of making users "disappear," RED's social algorithm exerts pressure by constantly making them "visible," creating a "threat of visibility." This threat is both too real and too pervasive, as countless shared stories, narratives, and experiences continually reinforce the idea that those imagined others must exist. For momos, the shame of being seen becomes a punishment, and non-participation becomes their new "understanding of the norms" (Taylor, 2004, p. 24). Within this power dynamic, RED's powerful social recommendation algorithm becomes inextricably tied to imaginaries of surveillance. In this process, meaning flows and changes, and avoiding or escaping such control becomes motivational knowledge, forming the new meaning of momos' practices (Shove et al., 2012, p. 23). In summary, this sense of shame and surveillance is both imagined and an imaginary. It originates in the momos' individual radical imaginary and gradually evolves into a shared discourse and meaning. While imaginaries cannot be reduced to discourse or symbolic structures, meaning, as a key element of practice, can at least be seen as the representation, or projection of the imaginary.

Imaginaries in Practice

To summarise at this stage, the discussion above outlined how the momos' algorithmic imaginaries generate emotion, mental activity, and motivational knowledge through affective encounters, providing the meaning of their practices. However, the role of the imaginary in momos' algorithmic practices is evidently not limited to this. As discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis, elements such as gossip and folk theories can also be subsumed within the realm of imaginaries. Taylor (2004, p. 23) highlights the relationship between imaginaries and theories, noting that imaginaries are not theories but beyond them. From this perspective, algorithmic imaginaries, through their embedded shared understandings and knowledge, also provide competence for momos' practices. Additionally, considering the emphasis in practice theory on the role of technology in practices, it becomes evident that in this case, people's imaginaries are specifically about the technology itself—the algorithm, as the imaginary about material. These imaginaries also incorporate theories and symbolic elements about the algorithm, providing both competence and meaning for practices. This to some extend reveals the dynamic interplay between imaginaries and practices in this case.

Bucher (2017) notes that algorithmic imaginaries are not only "productive of different moods and sensations" but also play an active role in shaping practices. Similarly, Taylor (2004, p. 24) pointed out long ago that imaginaries as "common understanding" and "expectation" guide social practices, and practice theory provides a more intuitive perspective on this process. Shove et al. (2012, p. 24) emphasize that elements within practices are not isolated but interrelated and interact with one another, connected through processes or relationships, without which practices cannot form. By deconstructing momos' algorithmic practices, it becomes apparent that algorithmic imaginaries serve as the link connecting the various elements of their practices. These imaginaries are about RED's algorithm as material, while the competence and meaning of momos derive from these imaginaries. As Shove et al. (2012, pp. 29–35) argue, changes in practice result from the fluidity and transformation of these elements. The elements themselves evolve and continuously form new connections, creating a cyclical process of "making links" and "breaking links." In this case, algorithmic

imaginaries act as the link connecting the different elements of practice, while changes in algorithmic practices emerge as a result of the flow and transformation of these imaginaries. At the same time, the role of imaginaries extends beyond merely connecting elements; it evolves alongside the transformation of practice elements. This cyclical process can be broken down into specific affective encounters in particular contexts, which continually remind individuals of the algorithm's presence. The unique combination of awareness, sensation, affect, and imaginary related to algorithms among momos is repeatedly activated, leading to the continual reconstruction of imaginaries surrounding RED's algorithm.

Above all, the algorithmic imaginary shared by momos about RED is powerful, radical, and unavoidable, yet also discomforting and fear-inducing. The imaginaries surrounding surveillance and control provide stories and myths about "RED's algorithm causing people to lose their jobs" and "disrupting normal social dynamics," constantly making momos feel the algorithm's power, linking the virtual world, personal lives, and social relationships. According to Taylor (2004; cited in Hill, 2020), this could be interpreted as a "false imaginary" that "reinforces a social order that promulgates inequalities." In the case of momos, the algorithm becomes an imagined oppressive agent, constructing unequal power relations. However, while the falsity of this false imaginary cannot be "total," as imaginaries are inherently radical and exaggerated, the social imaginary itself can often be "full of self-serving fiction and suppression" (Taylor, 2004, p. 183). Yet, these exaggerated emotions and narratives are also an essential part of the "actual imaginary" because they contribute to the construction of social imaginaries and are simultaneously reproduced by them, serving as a way to evoke the radical imaginary (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 127; cited in Grave, 2019, pp. 443–445). From this perspective, even though the algorithmic imaginary discussed in this thesis does not belong to the mainstream population—being constructed instead by momos as a marginal group—it is still a real imaginary because the symbols, stories, and narratives composing it are never purely fictional. Barthes (1979, pp. 27–29; cited in Hill, 2020) explained the Martian imaginary in French media and journals, arguing that "Mars is a cultural imaginary for Earth", people imbue imaginary UFOs and Martians with symbolic power, using them as a "means to structure ways of knowing that support a petit bourgeois."

Although algorithms, on a fictitious level, may occupy a more marginal position than Martians—who at the time, were often considered real by many—the algorithm shares the same mystery and unknowability as Martians due to its "black box" nature (Pasquale, 2015, p. 1). Both can be viewed as objects onto which symbolic power is projected and as cultural projections. The algorithmic imaginaries of RED are never about the code-based algorithm itself but rather the users' feelings, stories, and the broader social structures projected onto it.

Being momo as Resistance

In the preceding discussion, we have deconstructed the momos' algorithmic practices and algorithmic imaginaries. The imaginary surrounding RED's algorithm are both deeply influenced by the algorithm's power structures and imbued with exaggerated and emotional narratives that assign cultural significance to the algorithm. The final question, then, is why? What messages do their practices convey, and what goals are they attempting to achieve? As Foucault's text famously asserts: "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). The algorithmic imaginaries of momos depict the algorithm as occupying a top-down, oppressive position. Within such power dynamics, the momo identity, as a form of algorithmic practice, naturally emerges as a form of resistance, simultaneously becoming part of the power relationship. Therefore, "resistance" will be the central theme of the upcoming discussion in this chapter.

Everyday Resistance

Discussions of resistance frequently arise in studies of algorithmic practices. Returning to examples mentioned earlier, Bishop's (2019) research on algorithmic gossip illustrates one form of resistance: through gossip, beauty YouTubers attempt to uncover how algorithms operate and adjust their content strategies, a method considered a way to resist platform algorithms (Bishop, 2019, p. 2597). As Vinthagen and Johansson (2013) emphasize, the study of resistance is fundamentally the study of discourse. Focusing on momos and RED, this case reveals a unique social organization of algorithmic imaginaries. As a form of cultural production, it demonstrates discursive strategies from below and the potential for practices to

resist algorithmic power. In this case, the algorithm functions more as an imagined structure for momos rather than a tool, as it does for influencers. While momos' discussions about the algorithm are extensive, they are also fragmented, unlike the regionalized and concentrated discussions of YouTube's algorithm experts described by Bishop (2019 & 2020). This marginal position renders the momos' discourse about algorithms more distinctly from below. Examining the momos' discourse on resistance reveals some intriguing characteristics:

> "The first recommendation under 'Discover Friends' was actually my boss's daughter. Luckily, I never posted anything criticizing my boss or my job on RED. That same night, I switched to being a momo and hid all my previously published content" *(Fiona).*

> "As someone who never posts anything, I discovered that my follower list included two former primary school classmates I hadn't contacted in years. I immediately turned off permissions for features like 'recommend to nearby people' and 'recommend to people you may know,' and joined the momo army..." *(Bella).*

> "Anyway, since everyone's profile looks the same, who would know who I am?" *(Post comment).*

> "If IP addresses can't be hidden, at least allow me to hide profile picture and gender. I don't need anyone to judge me" *(Post comment).*

There is no need for excessive elaboration, these discourses once again reflect the oppressive role of the algorithm within the RED algorithmic imaginary. The "coercive relationships" constructed by this imaginary provide people with a "reason to react" (Bucher, 2017, p. 41). For momos, this reaction is to "hide" themselves. Thus, momo, as a practice, becomes a response to the pervasive disciplinary mechanism of visibility imposed by algorithmic power, serving as a form of resistance to the RED algorithm. One question arises: can "hiding" be considered a form of resistance? According to Vinthagen and Johansson (2013, p. 24), "avoidance" at least makes resistance a possibility. As Hill (2012, cited in Bucher, 2017) points out, being a momo is precisely a way of "participating in unpredictable ways." The act

of becoming a momo creates a barrier of disruption between the user and the algorithm. The momo identity, as a consistent anonymous identity, appears to fulfill all the strategies for countering RED's algorithm, partially dissolving the algorithm's power. While RED's algorithm can still precisely identify and locate them, the consequences of this identification are significantly diminished. Through anonymity, individuals no longer need to worry about excessive "exposure," as the elements that could be exposed have been deliberately concealed. In this way, they no longer experience the subtle yet persistent sense of shame. From the perspective of the imaginary, being a momo is both a practice and an extension of the RED algorithmic imaginary. The momo identity can be understood as a "counter-imaginary" (Kazansky & Milan, 2021), a reaction to the dominant power of the imaginary. In this case, it is a response to the RED algorithmic imaginary. If RED's algorithmic imaginary is characterized as a coercive and exposure-driven power structure, then momo, as a counter-imaginary, represents a subjectivity rooted in autonomy and concealment. As a symbol and narrative, momo becomes a way to articulate the needs of affected social groups and to serve their interests. Kazansky and Milan (2021, p. 366) describe this process as "tactical responses to perceived threats."

For de Certeau (1984), a tactic is a means of countering the strategy of the powerful. Can momo as a practice be considered a form of everyday resistance? According to Vinthagen and Johansson (2013, p. 37), adopting non-confrontational approaches and "concealing or disguising either the actor or the act" is indeed one way of practicing everyday resistance. De Certeau (1984, p. 18) argues that everyday resistance concerns how individuals find "ways of using imposed systems" and how tactics are employed to transform established structures into outcomes beneficial to themselves. The momo case aligns well with this argument. The reason lies in the fact that RED's algorithm imposes discipline through controlling visibility, which is undoubtedly a form of top-down structural regulation. Being a momo can be seen as a way of seeking change within the existing structure by utilizing limited resources. To borrow de Certeau's words (1984, p. xix), it operates because it "does not have a place." Evidently, the algorithm's discipline—or the algorithm as a power technology—remains dominant throughout the practice. The practice of being a momo still occurs within the

“place” defined by algorithmic configurations. Ultimately, the acts of being a momo or interacting as one occur entirely within RED, which is structured by the social recommendation algorithm. Becoming a momo does not genuinely diminish the power of the algorithm, as its data collection, processing, and control—such as for IP addresses or user behaviour—remain unaffected. Concealing one’s identity or disabling permissions still relies on the options provided by RED’s settings. In other words, their resistance continues to operate within the framework of algorithmic power.

As discussed in the previous chapters, the disciplinary mechanism within the momo algorithmic imaginary and the power relations it embodies bear strong similarities to Foucault’s panopticon metaphor. However, de Certeau (1984, p. 49) critiques this form of power as enjoying a certain “privileged” position, arguing that Foucault’s theory lacks attention to techniques—tactics—that do not occupy their own place. In this case, being a momo aligns precisely with what de Certeau (1984, p. 37) describes: “The space of a tactic is the space of the other.” The space of momos’ practices is small and fragmented, but it is also flexible and extensive. Their practices vividly demonstrate human agency and creativity: if an IP address cannot be hidden, then the user profile picture and gender are concealed; if device information and browsing history cannot be hidden, then everything else is concealed. Momo, as a creative and flexible adaptation of fundamental rules, opens up a space for action. While the algorithm still dominates this space, momos carve out their own paths to take control of more aspects and generate new meanings. The algorithm’s control appears intact, but when applied to individuals, its effectiveness becomes significantly diminished. Thus, as de Certeau (1984, p. 26) puts it: “here order is tricked by an art.”

De Certeau has been criticized for incorporating overly broad life practices into the framework of resistance, as it becomes difficult to demonstrate the impact of resistance on power relations (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). This critique seems applicable in this case as well—momo as a practice does not appear to significantly alter the power dynamics between humans and algorithms. However, there are moments where their resistance is indeed “concerned with battles” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 34). Returning to the examples cited earlier, it

is worth noting the subtlety of Bella's use of the term "momo army." In fact, not only has the term "army" been widely adopted by RED users, but similar terms like "momo sect" and "momo school" also frequently appear in various contexts. These terms point to organized, disciplined, and goal-oriented collective actions. The metaphor of an "army" or "sect" symbolizes order, strength, and discipline. The adoption of such symbolic language by momos can be seen as an act of linguistic empowerment, symbolizing their collective and forceful resistance. As Scott (1985) puts it, resistance is "weapons of the weak." The militarized metaphor becomes a symbolic weapon of resistance. Cobbe (2021) categorizes resistance in algorithmic practices into organized resistance and everyday resistance. From this perspective, being a momo appears to be a long-term, consistent collective practice, closer to the organized forms of collective responses or what Scott (1985; cited in Cobbe, 2021, p. 760) calls "publicly declared resistance." However, Cobbe also acknowledges that "everyday resistance activities and forms of organized resistance can interrelate, underpin, and inform one another" (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014; cited in Cobbe, 2021, p. 760). In the case of momos, this binary division seems inadequate.

As de Certeau (1984, p. xx) points out, tactics can also exhibit durability and permanence. In examining the algorithmic practices of momos, it becomes evident that the boundaries between so-called "organized resistance" and "everyday resistance" are far more blurred than mutually exclusive or interrelated. Momos do not adhere to specific rules or codes of conduct; rather, they can be considered the freest group on RED. Beyond their similar user profiles, they share less in common than any two random users. Ethnographic observations conducted for this thesis also confirm this. While momos belong to a shared collective and hold similar algorithmic imaginaries, their interactions and dialogues rarely extend beyond posts within specific communities. For example, their engagement is largely confined to discussions on topics such as "Why are there so many momos?" or "Let's see how many momos there are on RED." Individual interactions between members are rare.

> "I've never chatted privately with another momo" (Ava).

> "Normally when I see a momo in a post, I might give a like or reply but not send a

private message" (Bella).

Thus, even though they employ powerful symbols and discourses, their actions and practices are often flexible and dispersed. As Vinthagen and Johansson (2013, p. 26) describe, they are "decentred and intersectional." Moreover, as discussed earlier, their actions fundamentally comply with algorithmic rules, and even their discourse of resistance revolves around the algorithm's power. Therefore, while being a momo is a consistent collective practice, it is, in essence, a persistent, everyday tactic. As Vinthagen and Johansson (2013, p. 37) note, such intriguing contradictions may be inherent to everyday resistance— "both subordinate and rebellious at the same time."

Dual Resistance

At this point, this thesis has explored momo as a practice, the algorithmic imaginaries it entails, and its role as a form of everyday resistance. However, power relations cannot simply be analysed as binary oppositions, nor should resistance be understood as a straightforward, one-directional reaction to power. In the case of this thesis, imaginaries, practices, and resistance reveal a more complex interplay. Ultimately, what does momo truly signify?

> Today, I saw a post on RED from a toy shop located in City S, Country S. One of the local toy brands they were selling is currently trending in mainland China. To attract customers, the store created an account on RED to promote their products. The issue, however, was that their advertisement claimed to be the brand's official store, but to my knowledge, they are actually a souvenir shop selling a mix of miscellaneous items. Initially, I felt sceptical, but the moment I realized I was using my momo account, I immediately left a comment questioning their claims. Although my comment was eventually deleted by the store, it received several likes and sparked discussions among other users. The shop later deleted its original post and removed the claims of official authorization from its account. Reflecting on this experience, I was surprised by my own actions. I had never before questioned similar behaviours on RED or any other social media platform. I had always remained a bystander for

various reasons. It was being a momo that caused this transformation in me.

The above excerpt is taken from my ethnographic field diaries. In fact, up until the completion of this thesis, I have continued to maintain the identity of a momo. During this particular experience, I felt a reversal of power dynamics. In the original power structure, the toy shop, as the poster, held the ability to delete comments and, to some extent, benefitted from the algorithm's resources and a dominant position in discourse due to its semi-influencer status. However, during the dispute, I seemed to stand on a higher ground and gained a certain degree of advantage. My anonymous account concealed my social identity and standpoint, reducing the risks of facing online harassment or other potential problems—risks that were far less avoidable for the shop as a "real" subject. Similar sentiments were observed during fieldwork and interviews:

"The benefits of being a momo are unexpected… You can speak freely." (Post comment)

"After becoming a momo, I feel like I act more recklessly." (Charlotte)

This shift in power dynamics seems to suggest a form of covert resistance. So, what exactly are people resisting? As previously discussed, the threat does not come from any individual but rather from the disciplinary mechanism constructed by algorithmic imaginaries through visibility—an imagined gaze. In this sense, it is important to recognize that if momo serves as a "tactic" to protect individuals from the algorithm, neither the momos nor I faced any tangible, real-world threats or risks. In other words, the threat that momos resist is largely an imagined one—it does not come from the toy shop or any real-life person or group, even if people do not realize this during the process of practice. As de Certeau (1987) argues, everyday resistance even happens without the subject being fully aware of it. Using his own example, not every person walking the streets of Paris realizes their courage, yet their resistance is so real. If this is the case, is momo as a form of resistance itself imagined? It is worth considering that as momos, people often appear to be fighting against the more powerful party in a given context, but in reality, they are resisting an imagined power structure. Conversely, the fairness and justice they seek also do not exist in reality but in the

realm of imaginary (Diehl, 2019). From this perspective, “momo” as a symbol and metaphor becomes a discourse of resistance, as a shared cultural repertoire. However, unlike the imagined observers, the algorithm itself is real, and the game of hide-and-seek between momos and the algorithm is genuinely happening. Therefore, it is worth considering that being a momo as a form of resistance operates on at least two different dimensions: the practical dimension and the imaginary dimension.

Resistance always occupies a certain space (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). Revisiting the examples discussed in this thesis, it is clear that the spaces where resistance occurs differ. On the practical dimension, resistance takes place within the media-constructed field—the RED platform, where algorithms function as discipline and rules. Algorithmic imaginaries provide momos with competence and meaning, enabling them to act anonymously, change avatars, hide content, and adjust permissions to avoid potential consequences of algorithmic recommendations, forming a direct confrontation with the algorithm. The mediated space is dominated by the power and rules of the algorithm, and thus, as a form of everyday resistance, being a momo is both covert and marginal. All practices of momos are carried out under the authorization of the algorithm. On the imaginary dimension, however, momos’ resistance is cultural, unfolding within their reflective space. As discussed in previous chapters, the momos’ algorithmic imaginaries depict a panopticon-like power structure, with algorithmic power continuing to dominate their reflective space. The difference, however, lies in how discourses and practices of resistance transform momo into a unified and potent symbol and image to counteract the imagined power of the algorithm. Further, algorithmic imaginaries—as a collection of feelings, stories, narratives, and myths about the algorithm—reflect a broader understanding of social and cultural structures. Thus, in essence, what momos resist is the cultural norms and social order embedded within the algorithmic imaginaries—specifically, the social media culture that encourages participation and sharing. In this sense, the power dynamics of imaginary are indeed reversed. Across these two dimensions of resistance, the objects of resistance, or the power relations, are rooted in the same source: people’s imaginaries of the RED algorithm. This is because the power of the algorithm is fundamentally endowed by the imaginary. However, resistance occurs

simultaneously on two different levels.

Returning to practice theory, a deeper exploration of this dual resistance and the relationship between imaginaries and practices can shed light on the complex process of power dynamics at play. Algorithmic imaginaries act as the link connecting the elements of practice. The meaning endowed by the imaginary transforms momo into a form of resistance, and this resistance, in turn, introduces new elements into the practice. On one hand, resistance rooted in imaginaries weakens the power of the algorithm—even if this power is an imagined structure—while simultaneously bringing new meaning to practice. On the other hand, when people engage in algorithmic practices as momos, the momo itself, as a RED account, can be seen as a material element of practice. New stories and narratives are then constructed, producing new imaginaries. Just as imaginaries function as a link within practices, resistance is an extension of imaginaries. From this perspective, resistance is both a direct response to the algorithm and a reproduction and reversal of algorithmic imaginaries. Although the earlier discussion attempted to separate mediated space from reflective space, but actually, the two are inseparable. For momos, resistance is both a tactic within technological interactions and a cultural symbol within social imaginaries. Being a momo as resistance might not need a clear distinction between its effects and meanings; its value may lie precisely in the ambiguity and dynamism between the two.

Conclusion

In reviewing this study, the algorithmic practices of Momo can be reexamined from multiple dimensions. In summary, this research aims to explore the complex and dynamic relationship between humans and algorithms underlying Momo as a phenomenon. This thesis focuses on the algorithmic imaginary of Momo, discussing how it is constructed and highlighting its impact on being Momo as a practice. Additionally, it examines how the algorithmic practices of Momo users become a form of resistance. By adopting the perspectives of Seaver (2017) and Chambers (2017), this study seeks to move beyond the binary framework of control and resistance, emphasizing the evolving interplay between power and agency. In conclusion, this article centres on three key concepts related to Momo users: the algorithmic imaginary of RED, their practices, and algorithmic resistance. Now it can be considered that, this thesis elucidates two sets of relationships formed around these concepts: the relationship between practice and imaginary, and the relationship between imaginary and resistance.

This thesis employs the theoretical perspective of Shove et al. (2012) and the concept of algorithmic imaginary to explain the relationship between practice and algorithmic imaginary. In the process of being Momo as an algorithmic practice, the recommendation algorithm of the RED platform serves as the material foundation. This material encompasses not only specific technical structures, such as social recommendation algorithms and data collection systems, but also hardware like smartphones and mediating infrastructures like user interfaces. Meanwhile, users' intuitive understanding of algorithms and folk theories constitute the competence element in the practice of being Momo. This competence does not exist in isolation from material but is closely dependent on the algorithmic rules and platform structure of RED. At the same time, the meaning of the practice becomes apparent through the algorithmic imaginary. Momo users' narratives, perceptions, and reflections on algorithms act as the driving forces of their algorithmic practices. The algorithmic imaginary is an imaginary of the material, and in its relationship with practice, it serves as a central mediator linking elements of the practice. In the Momo case discussed in this thesis, the flow of

meaning becomes the key to changes in practice. The algorithmic imaginary provides individuals with different meanings, and the practice of being Momo begins to take shape.

Focusing on the algorithmic imaginary of Momo users, the RED algorithm constructs discipline through the control of visibility. The affective encounter of Momo users is consistently centred around negative emotions. For Momo users, the overwhelming algorithmic capabilities of RED make this discipline distinct from those of popular social media platforms; the discipline they face is characterized as a "threat of visibility." The RED algorithm constructs an absent-yet-present other—an other within the imaginary—acting as a surveillant constantly monitoring the every move of Momo users. Within this unequal power dynamic, RED's social recommendation algorithm becomes intertwined with the imaginary of surveillance, gradually forming a shared cultural narrative. This imaginary encompasses not only emotionally charged, symbolic narratives but also broader social structures and preexisting cultural norms. Consequently, the algorithmic imaginary under discussion is not only Castoriadis's (1987) institutional imaginary but also Taylor's (2004) cultural imaginary. At this point, meaning begins to flow, and being Momo emerges as a form of resistance. In this process, the relationship between practice and imaginary is bidirectional and dynamic: practices unfold through the creation of new meanings, and these new practices, in turn, provide the algorithmic imaginary with new affective power, which is further reconstructed.

The relationship between imaginary and resistance becomes even more complex. In Momo practices, the algorithmic imaginary serves both as the starting point and the object of resistance. From the perspective of imaginary, being Momo as a practice is simultaneously an extension of the imaginary; Momo, as an imaginary, becomes a response to dominant power, ultimately manifesting as a tactical response. Through de Certeau's (1984) lens, it becomes evident that the discipline and control constructed by the RED algorithm and its associated imaginary pervade all places—whether within RED as a digital media platform or in the reflective spaces of people's imaginary. Thus, being Momo evolves into a bottom-up, sustained, and everyday tactic where Momo users hide from and evade algorithms, engaging in an "art of resistance" (de Certeau, 1984). However, this art unfolds in two distinct places:

one within the algorithmically mediated media space, and the other within the reflective space embedded in the imaginary dimension. In the mediated space, Momo as a form of resistance remains silent, operating within the boundaries permitted by the RED algorithm, with its power still granted by the algorithm. In the imaginary dimension, however, Momo's resistance takes on a cultural character, opposing not only the algorithm as a cultural construct but also the existing social order and cultural norms embedded within the algorithmic imaginary. Within this imaginary, power relations are indeed reversed, with Momo users emerging as agents of power. For Momo users, resistance represents both a creative tactic within the confines of the media and a potent cultural narrative within the social imaginary. This study, by distinguishing between the dimensions of the imaginary and the media, identifies an intermediate space between power and resistance to examine the dynamics of algorithmic power and being Momo as resistance. It highlights the complex, intertwined, and push-and-pull dynamics of power between the two. As Bonini and Treré (2024) have noted, research on algorithmic control and resistance should neither overemphasize the power of the dominant nor overly romanticize the resistance of the weak. This study supports this perspective, as the example of Momo and RED demonstrates the ongoing flow and tension in their power relations across different spaces.

It must be noted that this thesis is far from exhaustive. Adopting a relatively narrow perspective, it leaves many aspects of Momo as a phenomenon open for further discussion. For instance, Momo, as a form of collective anonymous action, may raise issues related to privacy protection and algorithmic literacy. Its unified collective identity may also involve discussions of identity performance and self-presentation. While emphasizing anonymity and concealment, Momo users exhibit a strong sense of collectivity. Although the empirical data of this thesis does not agree with this notion, their sense of belonging and collective consciousness may still shift as identities evolve. According to van Dijck et al. (2018), social media platforms leverage algorithms not only to create value for users but also to produce economic value through user participation, such as content categorization, ranking, and curation. Momo, as a practice that seemingly resists algorithmic control by the platform, does not entirely escape algorithmic influence. While the anonymizing behaviours of Momo users

reduce the risk of personal exposure, their collective action, as a visible social phenomenon, could paradoxically generates more traffic and attention for the platform. Within the framework of algorithmic recommendation and social media's economic model, Momo's presence may not only be exploited by platforms to attract users but also integrated into the platform's profit-making logic. Further research needs to systematically explore the impact of the Momo phenomenon on the broader sociocultural and technological landscape. For example, does Momo, as a decentralized and spontaneous action, offer a new model for future digital protests or collective actions? Do its collectivity and anonymity inspire other forms of online and offline interaction? Furthermore, as algorithmic technologies continue to evolve, might the existence of Momo drive platforms toward stricter regulation of user privacy, potentially sparking new debates on technological ethics? These unresolved questions not only remain unanswered but also provide fertile ground for sustained academic exploration. Much remains to be explained about Momo as a phenomenon, and the issues mentioned above represent perspectives for further research to consider.

It is important to reiterate, as discussed in the methodology section, that the "representation crisis" remains close at hand (Hine, 2015, p. 81). While ethnographic research is an ongoing reflexive process, as a researcher, I cannot claim to have entirely avoided the influence of my existing standpoint, nor can I easily determine whether the phenomena I describe are constructed by me as a researcher. It must be noted that the auto-ethnographic approach adopted in this study inevitably introduces a subjective lens—that of myself as a less socially inclined Chinese individual. Consequently, the empirical materials I accessed through my "fish-eye lens" may be marginal and limited. Moreover, I share a set of similar cultural norms with my research subjects, which means that even if I were not conducting Momo-related research, I might have joined them and experienced the joy of invisibility within algorithmic discipline. For those with unpleasant memories related to Momo, such as experiences of online harassment or cyberbullying, perspectives would undoubtedly differ from mine. One could even imagine that if this case were examined by a non-Asian researcher, it might lead to entirely different results. Algorithmic power and resistance are not novel concepts, and discussions of anonymity and privacy protection have likely become almost clichéd.

However, examples similar to Momo are rarely seen in Western research. Thus, despite the inescapability of subjectivity, it is worth considering that this might be a matter of diversity. As this thesis argues, when discussing algorithmic imaginaries, it is essential to consider the heterogeneity of groups. At the same time, this may also represent an advantage of this thesis as an ethnographic study. Of course, awareness of these issues is only the beginning; the key lies in maintaining continuous reflection and incorporating more diverse perspectives.

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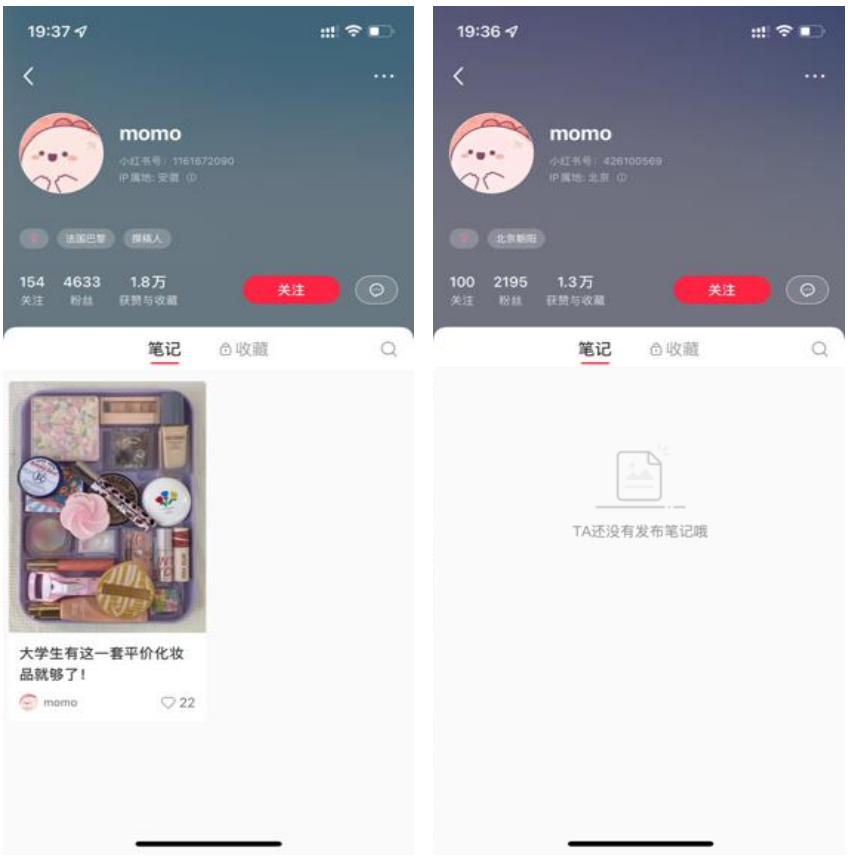
Appendixes

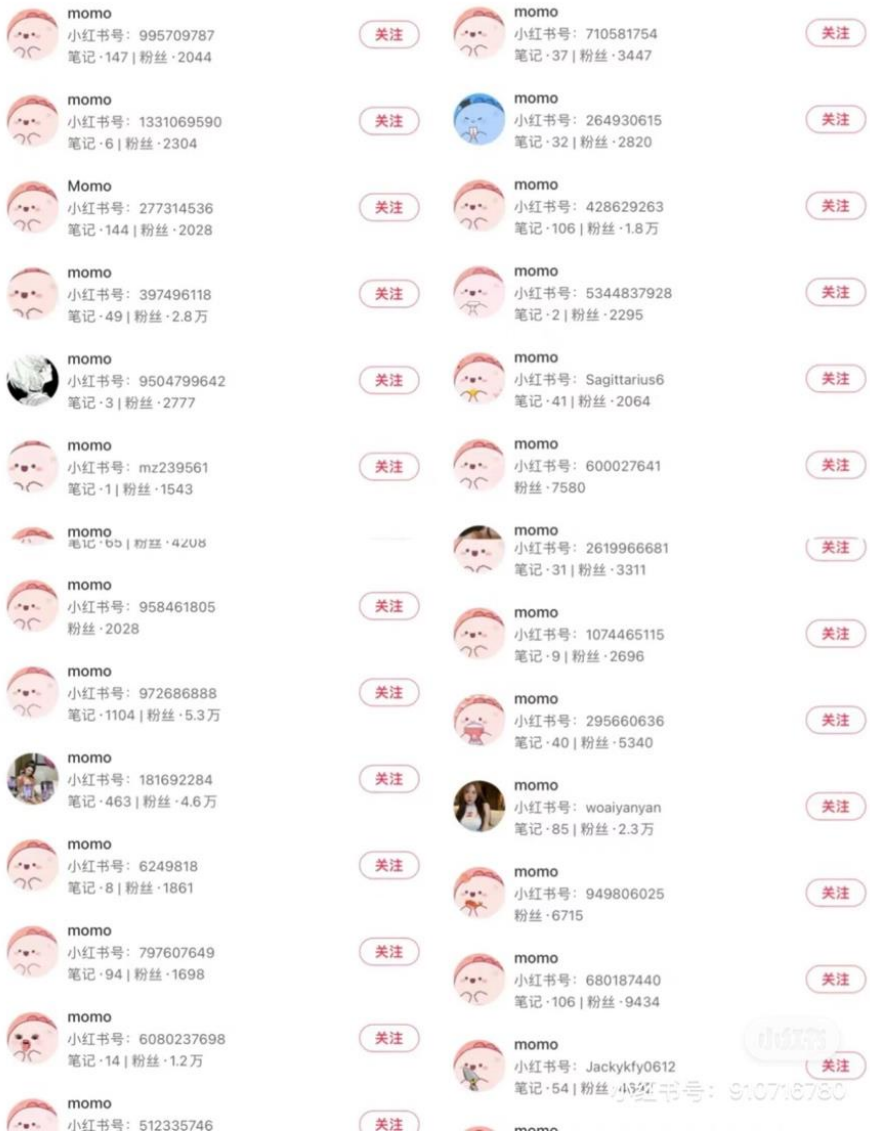
Appendix 1: Example of momo users on RED

Example of momo's profile



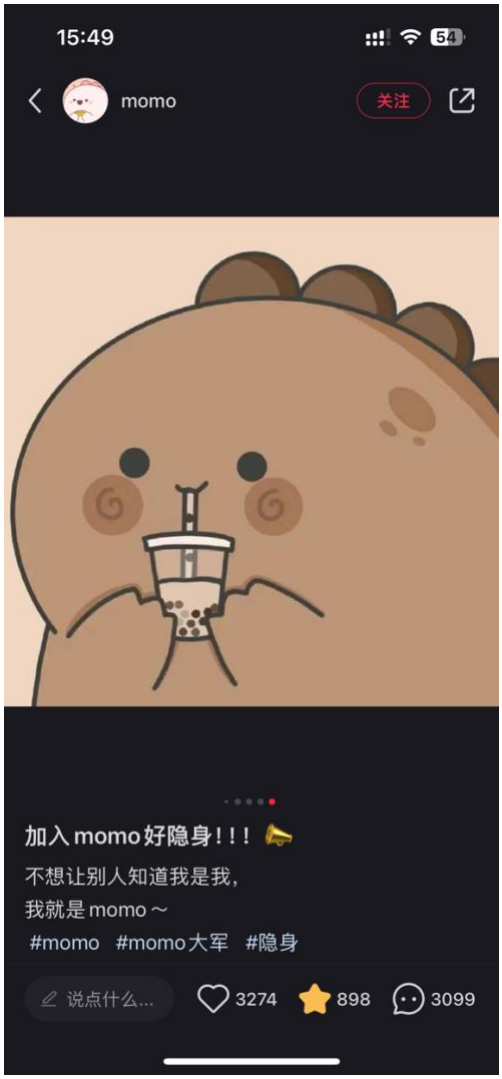
Example of momo in comment section

Example of momo users list in RED



Appendix 2: Example of momo's posts & comments

Example of one of selected posts in RED



Author: momo

Title: Join momo and stay hidden!!!

Content:

Don't want others to know who I am,

I am momo~

#Momo #MomoArmy #Hidden

Example of selected momo's comments from the post above

1. I'm here! The benefits of being momo are beyond your imagination. Once you become momo, you'll find that online harassment and doxxing are far away from you. You can speak freely, and there are countless other momos to take the blame for you.
2. I'm also curious how many momos there are. You can find them in almost any comment section.
3. I still think most people just want to be an unnoticed momo—someone nobody recognizes, who can speak freely and be a happy little bitch.
4. I originally picked a nickname I liked, but later I changed it to match the momo trend. After all, the collective invisibility of the group is the real essence!
5. If no one can guess who's who, then you can just go wild and be yourself.
6. I'm just afraid that if I overshare some weird abstract details about myself in the comment section and someone I know recognizes me, I'd want to disappear from the world.
7. Most people go through confusion, envy, and frustration before deciding to become momo themselves. That's how it happened to me.
8. Honestly, it's great. Ever since I had some random netizen attack me based on my username in the comments, I switched to momo.
9. Since I've never posted anything, I was shocked to find two old elementary school classmates in my follower list. I quickly turned off all the "suggest to people nearby or people you might know" permissions and joined the momo army.
10. I once posted a roast about my parents, and my dad saw it. I regret not changing to momo earlier.

Appendix 3: Sample of participants

Interview	Name of the participant in thesis	Gender	Interview via	Interview date	Duration of the interview
Pilot	Fiona	Female	WeChat	15.03.2024	38 minutes
1	James	Male	WeChat	22.03.2024	45 minutes
2	Charlotte	Female	WeChat	23.03.2024	37 minutes
3	Daniel	Male	Private message	25.03.2024	/
4	Ava	Female	WeChat	27.03.2024	51 minutes
5	Hannah	Female	WeChat	29.03.2024	41 minutes
6	Isabella	Female	Private message	31.03.2024	/
7	Bella	Female	WeChat	01.04.2024	43 minutes
8	Grace	Female	Private massage	14.04.2024	/
9	Emma	Female	WeChat	27.05.2024	47 minutes

Appendix 4: Interview guide

Introduction

- Build rapport with the interviewee by sharing my story of interest in this topic.
- Inform the interviewee of their rights and ask if they agree to sign the consent form.
- Reconfirm with the interviewee that the interview will be recorded and ask if they have any questions before we begin.

Background Information:

1. Could you briefly share your basic background information, such as age, gender, occupation, and educational level? Of course, if you wish to keep any of this private, that's perfectly fine.
2. What social media platforms do you use in your life? What do you use them for? What role do they play in your life, or what do they mean to you?
3. How do you think RED compares to other social media platforms? What unique impact does it have on your daily life?
4. What do you do on the Red and what does the Red mean to you?

Theme 1: Being a momo

5. First, could you please explain to me what momo is?
6. When did you become a momo, and why?
    a) Specifically, what changes did you make to your account?
    b) What changes in your usage habits occurred before and after becoming a momo?
    c) Did you notice any emotional or mental changes?
7. Have you joined any momo groups? Why? What kind of content is discussed there, and can you provide some examples?

8. Have you interacted with other momos or commented on momo-related content? Can you give some examples? Why do you say that? What feelings do interactions with other momos bring you?
9. Have you observed other momos having similar experiences or circumstances with you, or perhaps different?
10. From your perspective, what are the main benefits of remaining anonymous as a momo on Little Red Book?
11. How has this contributed to your overall experience on the platform?
12. On the other hand, have you encountered any challenges or drawbacks related to maintaining your anonymity?
13. Have these challenges affected your interactions with the momo community?
14. What do you think the overall image of momos is? Do you feel a sense of belonging to this group? Could you explain in detail?

Theme 2: RED's Algorithm

- If the interviewee became a momo to avoid being discovered by acquaintances:
    a) RED's algorithm for recommending acquaintances is quite strong, so I'd like to discuss some issues regarding the algorithm.
- If it's for other reasons:
    b) Many people mention becoming a momo because RED's algorithm is too powerful.

15. What do you think an algorithm is?
16. What do you think an algorithm is used for?
17. Are there any moments during your use of social media that made you aware of the algorithm's presence?
18. How do you think RED's algorithm is different from those of other platforms?
    a) Do you think RED's algorithm is accurate? Could you provide some examples?

Theme 3: Practice of resistance

19. What changes/initiatives have you ever made as a result of the algorithmic recommendation mechanism of the Red?
20. Do you think there's any algorithmic influence on you becoming a momo?
21. What role do you think algorithms play in the process of you becoming a momo?
22. Does that role come from the algorithm itself or from how you feel about the algorithm?
23. Do you have any other relevant examples to share?
    a) In my research, I view momo as a form of resistance against RED's algorithm (to avoid acquaintances). Does this make you think of anything? Are there other related forms in your life?

Appendix 5: Consent form

Consent Form

This consent form will inform you of the required participation and your rights as a participant. Information obtained through this research will be only used in a qualitative master thesis, which will be submitted to Department of Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Science, Lund University.

The purpose of this study is to understand the phenomenon of momo, including the algorithmic imaginary it encompasses and its role as a form of resistance against algorithms.

Your participation in this study will consist of a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30-40 minutes. I will ask you some questions about momo and algorithms on RED. These questions are not fixed and may be adjusted based on your responses. You are not obligated to answer any question. If any question feels difficult or uncomfortable for you to answer, you have the right to skip it or terminate the interview at any time. Please don't feel pressured or nervous; we can treat this like a casual conversation, and I simply ask that you share your genuine thoughts.

The use of interview data will be aggregated with other interview data for analysis purposes, and the content of the dialogue will possibly be used in the thesis as argumentation. For that purpose, the interview will be recorded and transcribed. All your personal information will remain **anonymous**.

After the interview, you can contact me anytime to ask questions about anything you are concerned about through yi7333zh-s@student.lu.se or zhouyihuai@hotmail.com.

If you agree to take part in this study, please sign your name and date below:

Full name of interviewee:_____

Date:_____

Appendix 6: Example of interview transcript

Q: First, I'd like to ask some basic questions. Could you provide some basic information about yourself, such as your age, gender, and occupation? Of course, if you prefer not to share, that's perfectly fine.

A: Ok, I'm a 24-year-old woman, currently studying abroad for my master's degree. That's about all I can share.

Q: Okay, do you use social media often?

A: Quite a lot.

Q: What does social media mean to your daily life?

A: It's mainly for collecting information, as well as passing time and entertainment. Also, I occasionally post things on social media.

Q: Where do you usually post?

A: Weibo, RED, WeChat—those are the main ones. Also, Instagram.

Q: Do you think RED has anything particularly special compared to the other platforms?

A: Compared to Weibo, WeChat, and Instagram, RED seems less focused on connecting with people you know. Sometimes I can share things there that I don't want my acquaintances to see.

Q: Can you elaborate on what you usually do on RED?

A: Mainly, it's for passing time and using it as a search engine. It has a lot of useful life information, and occasionally I post diaries.

Q: What do you mean by diaries?

A: For example, recording my study abroad experiences, like a journal.

Q: Okay, since you are now a momo. Could you explain what you think momo is from your perspective?

A: Momo is an anonymous group on RED. They mainly want to hide their identity from people they know by using this anonymous method.

Q: How long have you been a momo?

A: About six months.

Q: Why did you decide to change your name to momo initially?

A: One day, a friend mentioned that they had seen me on RED. Although they didn't follow me, it scared me, so I quickly changed my nickname.

Q: What were you afraid of?

A: Maybe I wasn't that close with those people, and I had a sense of being watched.

Q: Specifically, how did you adjust your account settings? Did you change your nickname and icon?

A: Yes, I changed both.

Q: Does this approach completely prevent people you know from discovering you?

A: It doesn't completely avoid it because there are extreme methods to find RED users. Even if you change your name and icon, if you've shared RED links with your friends, they can use the user ID in the link to find your account. Even if you are a momo, they can still pinpoint you. But relatively speaking, changing your name to momo is a safer way, for example, in the local RED sections or when people browse randomly. After learning this method, I now send RED links to myself first and then send them to my friends in WeChat, so the user ID won't be discovered this way.

Q: Okay. I'd like to know why you care so much about whether others recognize you or not.

A: Because I feel that when posting on RED, it's usually for seeking help or recommending places I've been. Also, there's information I don't want my friends on social media platforms like WeChat, Weibo, or Instagram to see.

Q: What kind of information are you referring to?

A: For example, posts with detailed records of my mood. I might not post as much text on WeChat. On RED, where no one knows me, I'm more willing to share such details.

Q: Okay, so you don't want others to know who you are, so you changed to the name momo, right?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you think your behavior on RED has changed since becoming a momo, or is there no difference? For example, in terms of usage habits.

A: It has changed of course. Initially, I might have been hesitant to comment on others' posts, but after becoming a momo, I feel I can be more unrestrained. Even if my profile might have some personal information, like mood posts or my location. But I'm a momo. You understand? With my icon and nickname, which might be shared by over a million people in Red, they can't pinpoint who I am. If I used a username that's also my Weibo name, others might find me on other platforms.

Q: When you comment on others, can't they still click on your icon to see who you are?

A: Yes, but it greatly reduces the likelihood of being discovered by people I know. I don't mind interacting with strangers or netizens because they don't know me.

Q: But if I'm an acquaintance of yours and I see your post, knowing you study abroad, and you share something based on your interests or personal information, I might still recognize you, even if you have a momo icon.

A: You're right, but just momo can reduce this possibility.

Q: Because I'm also a momo, I don't post anything, and even if people I know see me in RED, they won't know who I am. Another question I have is, do you find that the content you post on other social media platforms differs significantly from what you post on RED?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you elaborate on that?

A: For example, on other social platforms, I might mainly post pictures with brief text. On RED, I might record my mood and include pictures.

Q: Is it still pictures and text? What's the specific difference?

A: Yes, but I don't record detailed mood updates on other social media, while I do on RED.

Q: More detailed?

A: Yes.

Q: Actually, I'm not just asking about the differences in how you use RED versus other platforms, such as posting private content. What I want to know is what aspect

of RED makes you particularly concerned. Like, what content are you particularly keen not to have others discover?

A: I think one important point is that on RED, you might expose ongoing projects or some of your life doubts, which can be seen as a sign of inadequacy in your life. For instance, if you don't know how to do something, you might seek help on RED. If you need a roommate or want to rent a place, you might post on RED. If you have questions about a place or something, you might ask on RED. Having an anonymous identity allows you to discuss more freely without appearing ignorant.

Q: Why wouldn't you post such help-seeking information on Weibo or Instagram?

A: On Weibo, you reveal who you are, and you have many mutual followers there.

Q: Could you use an alternative account on Weibo? How does using a Weibo alternative account compare to using an anonymous RED account?

A: I think it's simply because RED has a stronger search engine function. Its algorithm can push content to many relevant users. On the other hand, Weibo is mostly based on information from people you follow. They are different. Do you know what I mean? Weibo is mainly for seeing updates from people you follow or trending news, while RED pushes content that's new and relevant to your interests.

Q: What kind of content does RED usually push to you?

A: Generally, it's from accounts I haven't followed, but it's content I'm interested in. There's more randomness. For example, if I'm interested in LEGO recently, after searching for LEGO content, it will show me a lot of LEGO-related posts. Later, if I'm interested in something else, it will push different content. It satisfies my curiosity in real-time better than Weibo.

Q: Returning to the previous question, both an alternative account on Weibo and a momo account are anonymous, and meant to hide your identity. What do you think is the difference between the two accounts?

A: I think the difference is that while being a momo on RED, you're eager to interact with others but don't want to reveal your clumsiness. However, an alternative account on Weibo is a private space where you don't intend to interact with others. Weibo also doesn't push your alternative account to others.

Q: Okay, based on what you've said, the algorithm on RED has a significant impact on your decision to become a momo. You've also mentioned that the algorithm helps you find content you're interested in. How do you think the algorithm plays a role in your use of the platform or in your decision to become a momo?

A: I think it's because of this thing that I became a momo. It can recommend me to people I know. It's based on both my interests and my personal information to make recommendations.

Q: I think your answer focuses more on what the algorithm does, but what do you think the algorithm itself is? If you find this question difficult, you don't have to answer.

A: I think the algorithm is just a recommendation mechanism. I don't really understand the complex calculations behind it. For me, it's just what the algorithm does, you know?

Q: Mm-hmm. You mean that for you, the algorithm is just its function, right?

A: Yes.

Q: How do you think RED's algorithm compares to other social media platforms like Weibo, Douban, or Bilibili?

A: I think each platform is different. Bilibili recommends content you're interested in but doesn't recommend people you know. Weibo, on the other hand, I don't have a strong sense of its algorithm. It focuses more on entertainment or news and updates from people you follow. It's very focused on acquaintance-based social interactions. RED's characteristic is that it pushes a lot of interesting content and you might discover acquaintances among strangers.

Q: Do you think the recommendation mechanism on RED is accurate?

A: Very accurate.

Q: Can you give some examples?

A: For example, as I said before, I'm interested in Lego at that time. Let me give you a more generalized example, let's say I had my eyebrows trimmed the day before yesterday, and I searched for eyebrow trimming on RED, and then by the time I exited the search screen, I had three or four more posts or videos about eyebrow trimming on my recommendations homepage.

Q: But Taobao also does this, where it pushes related products after you search for something.

A: But I need practical help or other people's wisdom, you know?

Q: Understood. Since you mentioned that the algorithm is particularly strong in terms of real-life interpersonal relationships, do you have more examples related to that?

A: For example, before studying abroad, after receiving my offer, I was able to see posts from my classmates on RED.

Q: What classmates?

A: Graduate students. My current classmates. After I received offer, I searched for university information. I don't know why, but maybe because I searched for my major, it recommended me classmates in the same major. I feel like RED's social feature includes not just people you already know but also people you might meet in the future.

Q: That's interesting. Are there any other examples?

A: Another example is a friend who found their neighbor on RED. His neighbor was recording her date process online. It was really surprising to see that directly. And I'd like to add, that the algorithm might not only be based on coming from the same place. As I mentioned, it might help you find future acquaintances based on everything you search. For example, future schools, future majors, or future jobs. RED often has cases where users expose or complain about their companies, and their supervisors or colleagues end up seeing it. Some people's posts about interview experiences get seen by HR, and they might lose their job.

Q: Such things can easily happen.

A: Yes, I don't know the exact probability, but I've seen many such cases.

Q: Okay. For this recommendation mechanism, besides becoming a momo, do you take any other measures?

A: You mean on RED?

Q: Yes, like how you mentioned sending links to yourself on WeChat before sharing them.

A: Yes, that's one thing.

Q: I'd like to know if there are any other examples, but if you can't think of any right now, that's okay.

A: I think it's mostly basic actions. Turning off contact list permissions, hiding favorites and likes, and hiding the list of people I follow and my followers. It's about not letting others see what I'm interested in or what information I'm following.

Q: From what we've discussed, it seems that the algorithm has a significant impact on your decision to become a momo. Have you observed why other momos choose to remain anonymous?

A: I feel that most people are in it for this reason. Some might choose anonymity to discuss sensitive topics or make controversial statements.

Q: Okay. Many posts have a lot of momo comments. Have you had any interactions with them?

A: Yes, but I don't specifically seek out momos. If I find their comments interesting, I might reply. Except when the momo thing was hot before.

Q: What was that event?

A: When momo was first established, and we had the momo code of conduct and the momo community concept.

Q: I'm curious why you used the term "established." Is it organized, or is it spontaneous?

A: Everyone becomes a momo spontaneously, joining the momo community.

Q: What's it like interacting with other momos?

A: It's interesting. Even though no one knows each other, everyone remains friendly. There's an unspoken understanding because most people became momos because of the algorithm. In a certain sense, they are similar to me, so interactions tend to be respectful of boundaries and privacy.

Q: But there are also people who become momo because they publish or do something weird and it comes to light.

A: Yes, that happens too.

Q: It might also be momo just for fun.

A: There are indeed various reasons for becoming a momo. But in interactions within the community or in comments, you wouldn't know all these reasons.

Q: Yes, you're right. I have one more question. If you want to remain anonymous, why not choose a name like ABCD1234? Why choose the name momo?

A: Because blending in with the crowd makes it harder to reveal your individuality. You know what I mean? I became part of the Momo Army. I think it's interesting that people use the metaphor of "army". The icon and nickname have no personal color but express a clear identity. Using ABCD feels too dull. But momo provides a sense of belonging while remaining anonymous in the crowd.

Q: From your perspective, what's the greatest benefit of being a momo?

A: Apart from not being recognized by acquaintances, the greatest benefit is that it makes me appear less awkward, hiding my clumsiness and protecting my sense of shame.

Q: Has becoming a momo helped you in your experience on RED?

A: I'm likely to be bolder in commenting and participating.

Q: I find it interesting that momo seems like a very collective behavior. What do you think of momo's as an overall impression?

A: It should be a relatively friendly group.

Q: Can you give an example? Because many people might think momos are very aggressive.

A: I don't think so. We have a momo community code, right? We are all friendly.

Q: Yes, but many people do insult others in the comments.

A: I don't represent all momos, but most I've seen are still quite friendly. Most people become momos for personal reasons, not to vent online.

Q: Okay. That pretty much wraps up our interview here. Do you have anything else to add?

A: Not at the moment.

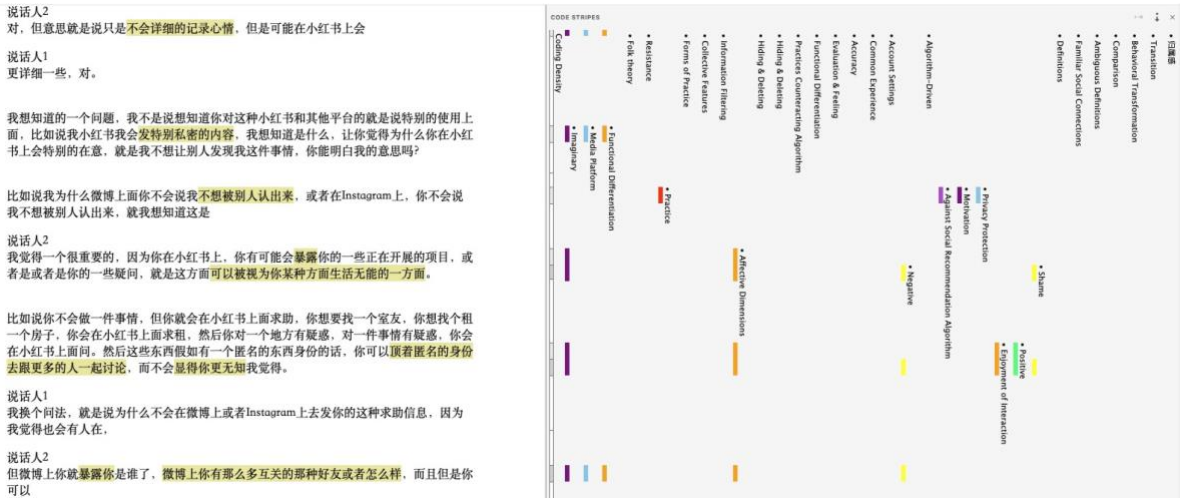
Q: Alright, thank you very much for your participation. Goodbye!

Appendix 7: Coding process

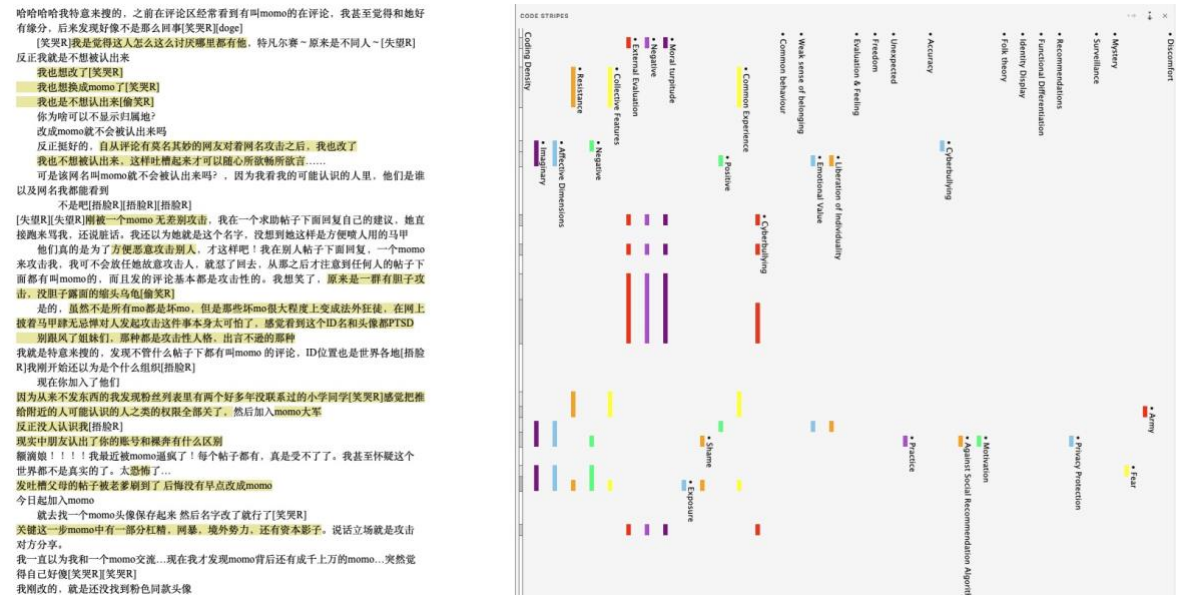
This appendix presents the coding framework and thematic structure developed during the analysis of the interview data. Open coding illustrates examples of the initially identified discrete codes. The codebook outlines the themes, categories, subcategories, and sub-subcategories, as well as their interrelationships, providing descriptions and examples.

Open coding

Example of interview open coding



Example of posts open coding



Codebook

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Sub-subcategory	Description	Examples	References
Practice						87
	Motivation					44
		Against Social Recommendation Algorithm				44
			Self-experience	Refers to the individual's personal experiences with social recommendation algorithms that motivate their behavior.	Sometimes coworkers or people I know might recognize me from a post, and then the next day at work, they'll ask, "Hey, was that you? I followed you!" It's just really awkward. (F)	9
			Privacy Protection	Motivations related to protecting personal privacy from the algorithmic recommendations and data collection processes.	I don't want people to see what I'm interested in. (C)	35
	Transition			The shift in behaviour or interaction style that occurs as individuals move between different stages of their	After becoming a momo, I feel like I can be a bit more unrestrained in the Internet. (B)	5

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Sub-subcategory	Description	Examples	References
				momo practice or personal choices in relation to the algorithm.		
	Forms of Practice					38
		Anonymous Participa-tion		Participating anonymously on RED without revealing personal identity.		38
			Searching for Information		I feel like I'm using RED as a search engine now; it's really quick to look up things. (F)	1
			Life Sharing		Just documenting my study abroad life. (B)	1
			Anonymous Posting		Sometimes I just post random thoughts. (A)	1
			Algorithm-Driven	Actions driven or influenced by algorithmic suggestions, recommendations, or features on the platform.	Honestly, it's only because this feature exists that I even started using momo. (C)	8
			Comment & Interaction	Leave comments under other's posts and interact with each other; interaction via private message.	If there's already a comment made by other momo, I'll jump in and leave one too. (D)	4
			Account	Modifying	I just set it to "only	12

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Sub-subcategory	Description	Examples	References
			Settings	personal account settings to control visibility and interaction with the platform's algorithms.	me can see" (A)	
			Hiding & Deleting	Hiding or deleting content or information.	I turned that feature off because I didn't want my boss to find out. (D)	11
Imaginary						275
	Folk theory					49
		Functional Differentia-tion				40
			Recommen-dations	The algorithm's ability to suggest content based on user activity, preferences, and data.	Even if you don't search for anything, it'll still push content to you. (E)	6
			Surveillance	The perceived or real monitoring by the algorithm, where the user feels their actions or behaviors are being tracked.	I feel like I'm being watched. (H)	4
			Information Collection	The process by which platforms collect user data to provide personalized recommendations and	I feel like it makes finding things easier. For example, if something's trending or there's a popular spot,	7

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Sub-subcategory	Description	Examples	References
				advertisements.	there'll be guides or travel tips posted there, which makes it super convenient. (I)	
			Information Filtering	The algorithm's process of sorting and presenting specific content to users based on their data and behavior.	Like the other day, I searched for eyebrow grooming on it, and as soon as I exited the search, my homepage was already filled with three or four posts or videos about it. (C)	11
			Familiar Social Connections	The algorithm's ability to suggest connections with familiar people or acquaintances on social media platforms.	On Red, you're more likely to come across people you know. (A)	12
		Comparison		Comparison of algorithms on different platform.	Each platform serves a different purpose. WeChat is mainly for communication and work-related chats. Weibo is more about recording my life. As for RED, I feel like I'm using it as Baidu now to search for things. (F)	9

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Sub-subcategory	Description	Examples	References
	Definitions					6
		Ambiguous Definitions		Unclear definition of algorithm	Maybe through some data, it can widely filter out certain content. (G)	6
	Affective Dimensions					179
		Negative		Negative emotion caused by the algorithm's suggestions or exposure on the platform.		104
			Discomfort		It's so annoying. (F)	8
			Fear		It's scary how it pushes content to you without you doing anything. (F)	13
			Exposure		Exposing myself. (E)	31
			Cyberbully-ing		For instance, if I want to cyberbully someone, I can use this account to insult them. Some people just love talking recklessly online, and there's nothing you can do about it. (D)	18
			Shame		Afraid that family members might see and I end up posting some	34

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Sub-subcategory	Description	Examples	References
					weird things. (G)	
		Positive		Positive emotion caused by the algorithm.		75
			Enjoyment of Interaction		It feels interesting, like everyone doesn't know each other but still maintains friendliness. (C)	14
			Emotional Value		Using momo makes it easier for strangers to share personal things with each other. (Posts)	24
			Liberation of Individuality		Since this account is more private, what you say might feel more genuine. (I)	23
			Freedom		After becoming a momo I feel like I can speak more freely. (Posts)	14
	Evaluation/Feeling					41
		Indisposed		The feeling of unease or discomfort caused by interactions with the algorithmic system	I was browsing RED in the office, and suddenly it pushed content to me like a salesperson, which was really frustrating. (G)	4
		Invasion		The perception of	I feel like my little	4

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Sub-subcategory	Description	Examples	References
				personal boundaries being breached or violated by the algorithmic system.	private space is being invaded. (H)	
		Accuracy		The perceived precision or correctness of the algorithm's recommendations or predictions.	It does push content that I'm genuinely interested in. (D)	18
		Unexpected		The sense of surprise or unpredictability in the algorithm's actions, recommendations, or outcomes.	It's almost absurd sometimes. (F)	8
		High Frequency		The frequency with which algorithmic recommendations or interactions occur, creating a sense of overload or saturation.	It frequently shows content about games or similar topics. (D)	7
Resistance						62
	Behavioral Transforma-tion			The shift in behaviour or interaction style that occurs as individuals after being momo or their momo practice.	I rarely commented before, but after becoming a momo I gradually dared to express my opinions on certain matters. (I)	5
	Practices					17

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Sub-subcategory	Description	Examples	References
	Counterac-ting Algorithm					
		Responses to the Algorithm		Resistal behavior or practices in response to the perceived influence or control of the algorithm.	I won't let others use my account; otherwise, the content will reflect their interests instead of mine. (B)	6
		Hiding & Deleting		The actions of hiding or deleting content or personal information to avoid or resist the algorithm's influence or recommendations.	I hide everything I can. (A)	11
	Collective Features					40
		Common Experience		The common or shared experiences that individuals have in relation to algorithmic practices.	I think they became momo for the same reasons as me—because they're similar to me in some ways. (C)	23
		Army/ School/ Sect		A metaphor for a unified group or collective identity that resists or challenges the algorithm together.	The "momo army." (E)	7
		Weak Sense of		The feeling of connection and	I don't feel a sense of belonging. (I)	10

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Sub-subcategory	Description	Examples	References
		Belonging		community are relatively weak.		

Appendix 8: Example of autoethnographic diary

This appendix includes two examples of autoethnographic diaries, documenting my personal reflections, experiences, and emotional responses throughout the research process as a momo. These transparent self-recordings are interwoven with the research subject. Through the analysis and observation of these insights, a deeper understanding is provided of momo's algorithmic imagination and algorithmic resistance. I will also use pseudonyms and codes throughout to refer to any identifiable information.

Example 1

Date: 17.3.2024

The X brand dolls have been trending a lot on RED recently. Luckily, I asked a friend to help me buy many of them last year. Over the past few days, I've seen lots of posts about X brand on RED, with many people looking to purchase. Chinese buying power truly lives up to its reputation.

However, it's strange that I saw a post on RED from a toy store located in S Country, S City. One of the local toy brands they were selling is currently trending in mainland China. To attract customers, the store created an account on RED to promote their products. The issue, however, was that their advertisement claimed to be the brand's official store, but to my knowledge, they are actually a souvenir shop selling a mix of miscellaneous items.

Initially, I felt skeptical, but the moment I realized I was using my momo account, I immediately left a comment questioning their claims. Although my comment was eventually deleted by the store, it received several likes and sparked discussions among other users. The shop later deleted its original post and removed the claims of official authorization from its account.

Reflecting on this experience, I was surprised by my own actions. I had never before questioned similar behaviours on RED or any other social media platform. I have always been an observer. I'm afraid of starting arguments, and even more afraid of being recognized and having it affect my real life. I often have this terrifying fantasy, "One day, someone from real life comes up to me and says, 'I saw you on RED. How could you say/do that?'" Chinese parents have taught their children from a young age not to meddle in others' affairs. Deep down, I might also believe that getting involved in matters unrelated to me is shameful, even if it might be for justice. But this time, it's precisely because I am a momo that I experienced this change.

Example 2

Date: 28.4.2024

Last evening, RED sent me a notification. The pop-up message read, "C (someone I might know) seems to be your friend, say hi!" I couldn't help but marvel at how RED handles offline social connections. Just a few days ago, I had stumbled upon C's profile on my homepage and clicked into his/her page. I had met C a few times in real life, and we had exchanged contact before. However, in our interactions, I often felt that we had conflicting views on various values, so our relationship was not really in my comfort zone.

After I clicked the notification and entered his/her profile, I found that C was live-streaming. The username he/she used on RED was the same as on WeChat, and his/her profile had very few followers and showed no signs of trying to be an influencer or something—just an ordinary user. In fact, I had heard from a friend before that C often live-streams on RED, so I was curious about what content C was streaming. However, I hesitated to click into the live-stream room because I knew that RED live streams show a prompt like "xxx has entered the live-stream room, welcome," which everyone in the room can see.

But then, I immediately realized that I am now a momo, and the likelihood of being recognized and exposed was very low. My worries instantly vanished, and I entered C's live-stream room. I stayed for about ten minutes before leaving. In the live-stream, C was chatting with a few netizens through voice chat. The topics were very random, ranging from trivial work matters to the latest electric car release by a certain car brand. Since the number of viewers was small, C greeted everyone who entered the room. When C mentioned my username, I felt a little nervous but still replied with a "hello" in the comments.

One of the reasons I chose to become a momo was the fear of being watched by others, but in this process, I became the observer. At the same time, it did greatly reduce my anxiety about exposing my identity. I imagined that if I had entered the live-stream room with my original account name, C might have recognized me. This situation is one where it's hard to say whether I intentionally (searching for his/her account by myself) or unintentionally (due to the algorithm recommendation) enter his/her live-stream room. C might assume the former and think I was trying to spy on him/her, and that assumption would make me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed.