

From the Streets to the Cloud: A Study of the Digital Ecosystem of Gen Z's East Asian Subcultural Creative Practices

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Abstract

The rise of digital platforms has profoundly transformed the production and dissemination of youth subcultures. This study focuses on the subcultural practices of the Z Generation in China, Japan, and South Korea. We have constructed a theoretical framework - namely, the so-called "digital creative ecosystem", and employed a multi-site digital ethnography approach to explore several key questions: How do digital platforms shape the emergence and evolution of subcultural styles? How do online and offline spaces interact? And how do individuals construct their self-identities in these environments? Some notable features emerged from the research findings: Platform algorithms and interface designs are not merely neutral conduits; they actively reshape subcultural styles in a distinctly "platform-driven" manner. Online communities and physical spaces mutually reinforce each other, forming a "mutually reinforcing cycle" that blurs the boundaries between digital and reality, creating a hybrid cultural domain. At the same time, the Z Generation exhibits a characteristic we call "curatorial identity" - they establish new forms of emotional connections and a sense of belonging through cross-platform self-presentations. When comparing these three East Asian cases, a clear pattern gradually emerges: shared cultural roots, but diverse forms. These societies share the inheritance of Confucian culture, but each has developed its own unique subcultural expression forms, influenced by their specific platform ecosystems, policy environments, and consumption habits. This study provides new theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence for anyone attempting to understand the cultural practices of young people in the digital age.

Keywords

Generation Z; subculture; digital ecosystem; digital ethnography; East Asia; identity construction.

1. Problem Statement

1.1. Subcultural Practices of Generation Z in the Digital Age

Generation Z refers to those born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s and who grew up in a digital environment. They have distinct generational characteristics: as the first generation of digital natives, they consume cultural content in a personalized way through smartphones and other mobile devices, and are accustomed to sharing their emotional experiences on social media platforms. In China, anime, manga, games, and novels (ACGN) culture have become the most popular subculture among young people, with teenagers mainly participating in these cultural activities through smartphones [1]. According to the data from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in 2024, as of December 2023, the number of Chinese internet users reached 1.092 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 77.5%. Among them, young internet users aged 10 - 39 accounted for 47.6%.

In East Asia, digital platforms occupy a central position in people's daily lives and cultural activities. Unlike previous generations, the millennial and Generation Z generations consume popular culture in an individualized way through smartphones and mobile devices, and enjoy sharing their emotional experiences on social media platforms [2, 3]. Due to these generational characteristics, the cultural practices of Generation Z are inevitably closely linked to digital platforms. From the fan economy in South Korea to the consumption culture in Japan, and to the traditional revival subculture and cross-border game communities in China, Generation Z in East Asia has created a rich variety of cultural forms on digital platforms.

1.2. Limitations of Existing Research

At present, there are several obvious gaps in the research on Generation Z subculture.

One issue is that the field is quite fragmented. Many studies focus on a single platform, such as TikTok or Bilibili, or concentrate on a specific phenomenon like fan culture or gaming culture. What's missing is a broader view of how Generation Z actually uses the full range of digital tools and infrastructure available to them. Take China's ACGN subculture as an example: most of the literature zeroes in on smartphone addiction and social capital as mediating factors, while studies on mobile gamers tend to revolve around virtual consumption and cultural identity. Hardly anyone is looking at how these different subcultural forms connect to or influence each other [5].

Another problem is that the theoretical framework feels outdated. The "resistance-incorporation" model from the Birmingham School still dominates subcultural research, with its focus on symbolic resistance and how subversive styles eventually get absorbed into the mainstream [6]. But the digital age has changed that dynamic. In China, youth subcultures are shifting away from pure self-entertainment toward something closer to "transcendence and integration," and young people's agency is moving from "resistance" toward "collaboration" [2]. The old theoretical toolkit doesn't capture this new terrain very well.

A third gap is the neglect of regional context. Most digital culture research takes the West as its default reference point and pays little attention to East Asia's unique technological, cultural, and political landscape. Table 1 shows just how different these platform ecosystems are: China operates under a "state-market" hybrid model with what you might call "algorithmic collectivism," while Japan and South Korea are shaped more by the interplay between local consumer culture and global platforms like Netflix and YouTube [7]. But we still lack systematic comparative work on how these regional differences actually filter into Gen Z's subcultural practices.

1.3. Core Research Question

Considering the above background - the research environment we describe and the existing research gap - we finally raise a core question: in the context of East Asian culture, how can the subculture of Generation Z express creativity, develop its style and build its own identity through digital platforms?

This core issue is further subdivided into three specific issues:

- (1) How can the algorithms, interfaces and functional characteristics of digital platforms intervene in the generation process of subcultural styles and promote their rapid changes?
- (2) How can online communities and offline creative spaces form a dynamic and mutually reinforcing cycle, and finally build a hybrid cultural space?
- (3) How do Generation Z members carefully build their identities in this digital ecosystem? In the process, how can they establish new emotional connections and cultivate a sense of belonging to the community they belong to?

Table 1. Comparison of Digital Platform Ecosystem Characteristics in China, Japan, and South Korea

Dimension	China	Japan	South Korea
Dominant Platforms	WeChat, TikTok, Bilibili, Xiaohongshu	Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LINE	KakaoTalk, Naver, Weverse, YouTube
Platform Governance Models	State-Market Hybrid Governance	Market-led, self-regulation-focused	A combination of government guidance and industry self-regulation
Algorithm Characteristics	Algorithmic collectivism and strong recommendation mechanisms	Equal Emphasis on Social Relationships and Algorithmic Recommendations	Fan-data driven, with strong interactive design
Subculture Policies	Guiding Integration, Regulating Development	Protecting Freedom of Expression	Supporting the Cultural Industry and Promoting Exports

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Design

2.1. Definition of Core Concepts

Generation Z: In this study, Generation Z refers to the people born from the late 1990s to the early 2010s who grew up in the digital world. They are essentially digital natives - they are not only used to obtaining cultural content through mobile devices, but also willing to share their emotional lives on social media. In East Asia, their consumption habits often have the characteristics of personalization, fragmentation and high socialization [8].

Digital creative practice: This term covers various creative cultural activities carried out by Generation Z through digital media. It covers a wide range, including making and sharing short videos, shaping self-image on social platforms, buying virtual goods and participating in mobile game interactions, and co-creating content and symbols in fan groups. All of these revolve around what we call "mediated existence" - that is, the state of the intersection of technology, politics and personal subjectivity, constantly reshaping the subcultural form [9].

Digital ecosystem: It can be understood as an interdependent cultural system that is always in dynamic change, composed of platforms, algorithms, user communities, and various modes of content production and consumption. There are several points that need to be emphasized here: (1) Platforms are not only technical infrastructure, but also actively participate in cultural production; (2) Algorithms are like "invisibly hands", which play a role in guiding and limiting the expression of content; (3) Users are not passive consumers, they are also producers and communicators, embedded Join a dense network of actors [10].

2.2. Theoretical Framework: The "Digital Creative Ecosystem" Model

We built this "digital creative ecosystem" model by drawing on a few different theoretical traditions.

The first is platform studies. The concept of platformization helps us see that digital platforms don't just host cultural activity—they actively reshape how culture gets made, embedding their own infrastructure and economic logic into everyday life [11]. They do this through algorithmic recommendations, interface design, and community guidelines. Take Netflix and YouTube: these global giants pull in massive datasets from across the Global South and use algorithmic models to change how East Asian audiences find and consume popular culture [7]. Building on

this, our study looks at how algorithms, interfaces, and platform rules channel—and sometimes limit—what subcultural groups can express.

The second is subcultural studies. Rather than sticking with the Birmingham School's familiar "resistance-incorporation" framework, we turn to de Certeau's distinction between "strategy" and "tactics." Strategy is how those in power organize and control space; tactics are the clever, improvised moves that the less powerful make to operate within spaces they don't control [12]. In today's platform-dominated environment, Gen Z subcultural practitioners show their "tactics" through creative appropriation and flexible pushback against platform rules. Meanwhile, Chinese youth internet subcultures are moving from a "marginal" position toward something like a "new mainstream culture," with subcultural discourse increasingly working through symbolic negotiation with mainstream ideology [2].

The third is creative city theory. Offline physical spaces still matter a great deal in cultural production. Drawing on this tradition, we explore how physical creative clusters—anime districts, fan conventions, creative markets—interact with online communities to create hybrid spaces that are neither fully virtual nor entirely physical.

Figure 1 shows the overall structure of our "digital creative ecosystem" model. The core idea is straightforward: Gen Z subcultural practices unfold within an ecosystem shaped by three interlocking elements—platform rules (algorithms, interfaces, community norms), hybrid spaces (online communities interacting with offline clusters), and actor networks (creators, consumers, platform operators, regulators). Cultural styles don't emerge from nowhere—they're produced and transformed through the constant push-and-pull among these forces. Same goes for identity: it's not something individuals build alone, but something shaped, performed, and reworked within this dynamic field.

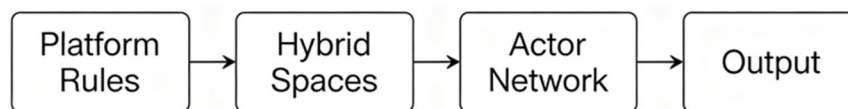


Figure 1. Framework of the "Digital Creative Ecosystem" Model

This conceptual framework reveals the structure of the digital creative ecosystem. It consists essentially of three elements: (1) platform rules, including algorithmic mechanisms, user interface design, and community standards; (2) the mixed space, which combines online communities and offline groups; and (3) the network of actors, encompassing creators, consumers, platform operators, and regulatory authorities. Finally, the content produced by this ecosystem primarily manifests in two forms: a cultural style—particularly shaped by the platform's logic—and an identity construction characterized by careful planning.

2.3. Research Methods and Case Selection

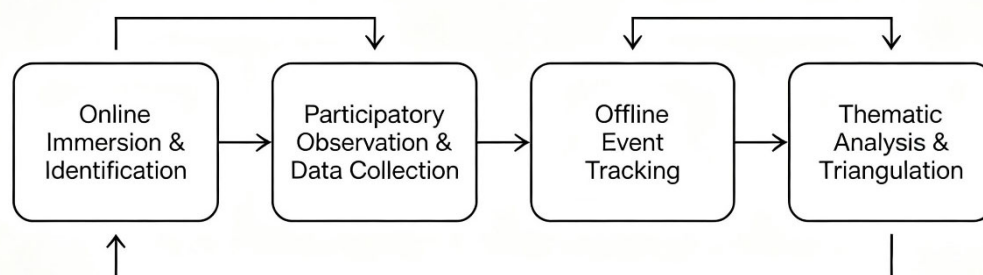
We used a multi-case comparative design. We picked one representative Gen Z subcultural phenomenon from each of three countries—China, Japan, and South Korea—and analyzed each in depth before comparing them side by side. The choice of cases is based on three criteria: their ability to fully reflect the overall situation, significant differences between them, and reaching theoretical saturation (i.e., having sufficient data to support solid conclusions).

Table 2 presents the three ultimately selected cases. Each case illustrates, in a unique way, one of the most active and influential forms of upward mobility among Generation Z within a specific national context.

Table 2. Selection and Characteristics of Research Cases

Country	Platform/Community	Subculture Type	Core Characteristics	Representative Platform
China	Traditional Revival Subcultures	Cultural Heritage and Innovation	Young creators reconstruct intangible cultural heritage through micro-content, achieving the contemporary transformation of traditional culture[13]	Bilibili, Xiaohongshu, Douyin
Japan	Consumer-oriented subcultures	Personalized Aesthetic Performance	The combination of personalized consumption and social sharing gives rise to a cultural expression of the “curated self” [14]	Twitter, Instagram
South Korea	Fan Economy-Based Subcultures	Structured fan participation	Highly structured fan communities, with platforms deeply involved in idol-fan interactions [15]	Weverse, Bubble

This research adopted multi-site digital ethnography as the main methodology, while also incorporating critical platform analysis and in-depth interviews. The entire research design was a 12-month longitudinal study. Figure 2 presents a visual breakdown of the research process from start to finish.

**Figure 2.** Multi-sited Digital Ethnography Research Process

The study, conducted over a 12-month period, was carried out in four stages.

(1) First stage (1 to 3 months): online immersion and identity verification. We began as non-participating observers, then conducted in-depth research on three study platforms. The objective of this phase was clear: identify the main participants, determine the primary forms of communication, and understand the unwritten rules and cultural norms specific to each community.

(2) Second stage (4 to 7 months): participatory observation and data collection. Subsequently, we transitioned from observers to active participants, engaging within the communities under study. We carried out participatory observations, network analyses using Gephi, and conducted in-depth interviews—8 to 10 times per case—to gather approximately 24 to 30 respondents across three cases.

(3) Third stage (8 to 10 months): follow-up of offline activities. We then shifted our focus to the real world. We conducted follow-up work on offline activities such as fan conferences, gatherings, and creative markets. By carefully observing interaction patterns between online and offline spaces, as well as individuals' movements within these spaces, we also documented physical activities through digital means.

(4) Fourth stage (November–December): thematic analysis and peer verification. In this final phase, we carried out a thematic analysis of all collected data—observation records, audio recordings of interviews, and online data. This analysis included coding, categorization, and extraction of key themes, enabling us to compare multiple data sources and ensure the reliability of research findings.

3. Research Findings

3.1. Platform-Based Styles: Cultural Reconstruction Mediated by Algorithms

Preliminary analysis indicates that the technical characteristics of digital platforms profoundly influence the generation and evolution of subcultural styles. As shown in Table 3, the mechanism designs of different platforms exert differentiated impacts on the production of subcultural styles.

Table 3. The Relationship Between Platform Mechanisms and the Production of Subcultural Styles

Platform	Algorithmic Mechanisms	Interface Features	Impact on Style Production
Bilibili	Interest-Based Recommendations + Community Interaction	Danmu Culture, Clip-Sharing Feature	Promotes in-depth content and collaborative creation
Xiaohongshu	Interest Graph + Social Recommendations	Visual Cards, Hashtag System	Driving Aesthetic Consistency and Style Curation
Twitter	Timeline + Trending Recommendations	Short posts, hashtags	Facilitating Instant Sharing and Topic Aggregation
Instagram	Visual recommendations + social connections	Feed and Stories	Enhances visual aesthetics and personal branding
Weverse	Fan Data-Driven	Exclusive community, paid membership	Structured fan engagement and data-driven insights

In the Chinese context, the algorithm recommendation mechanism of Bilibili and Xiaohongshu has promoted the transformation of traditional cultural content into "micro-content" that meets the aesthetic standards of the platform - traditional handicrafts are compressed into 15-second to 3-minute short videos, aiming to attract users' attention through visual impact and emotional resonance [16]. A paper-cutting artist and intangible cultural heritage inheritor interviewed said, "In the past, paper-cutting had to tell a complete story; now, we can only cut out the most exciting moment, otherwise no one will see it." On the one hand, this "micro-contentization" expands the scope of dissemination of traditional culture, and on the other hand, it also leads to the symbolic compression of cultural memory.

In Japan, visual-oriented interfaces such as Twitter and Instagram encourage subcultural participants to pay more attention to cultivating personal visual styles and showing unique

aesthetics. Through carefully designed text and image content, users build a "consumable self" [14]. The "curableness" of platform algorithms has become a key intermediary factor in style production. As described by a Japanese interviewee: "When posting photos on Instagram, you must consider filters, composition and color consistency - it's like running a small art gallery." In the Korean case, the functional design of Offan applications (such as Weverse) deeply shapes the interaction mode between idols and fans. The functions provided by the platform - such as paid members, exclusive live broadcasts and fan communities - transform the emotional labor of fans into quantifiable data indicators and consumable digital goods [15]. A Korean fan community administrator said, "Weverse makes idol fan culture feel like playing a game - there are levels, tasks and rewards; everything is digital."

3.2. Mutual Reinforcement Cycle: The Formation of Hybrid Online-Offline Spaces

The three cases we examined all show clear signs of mutual interaction between online and offline spaces. Figure 3 illustrates the concrete functioning of this mutual reinforcement mechanism.

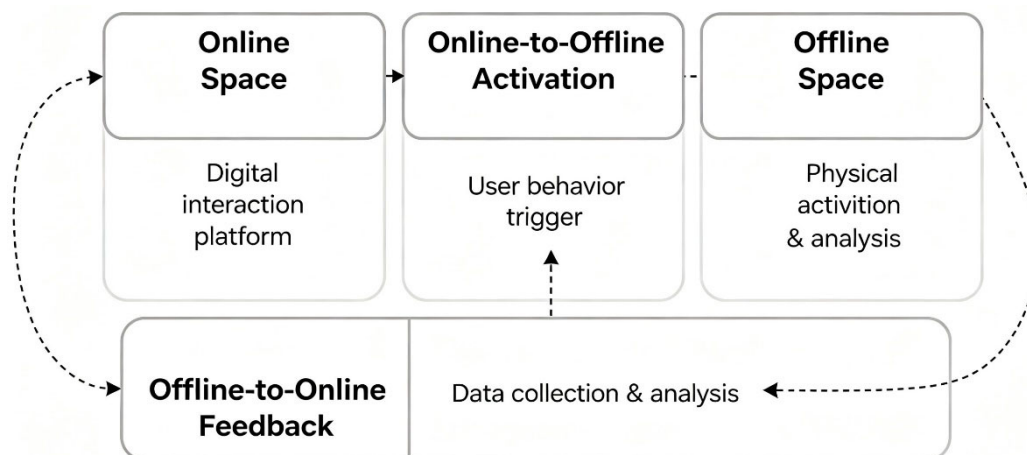


Figure 3. Mechanism of the Online-Offline Mutual Reinforcement Cycle

This cycle begins in digital space and is driven by community interaction, content creation, emotional investment and information flow. Then extend to the real world and go through multiple stages: the initial participation stimulates collective interest, which then develops into organized mobilization, and finally promotes concrete actions in reality. When participants enter the real world, they devote themselves to various activities to experience practical operations, face-to-face communication and common emotional resonance. The whole process then returns to the digital realm - continuing through event recording, new content creation, shared resources and identity restructuring. This cycle is repeated, each round of iteration becomes more dynamic, and the overall cycle is becoming more and more stable over time. Take South Korea's fan economy as an example: fan-centered applications are not only online digital interactive platforms, but also the organizational pillar of offline activities (such as concerts or parties). The experiences and content generated in these activities are recorded, uploaded and shared into the application, thus enhancing community cohesion [9]. One participant said, "After the concert, everyone will share their feelings and photos on Weverse; these common memories have further distanced the community."

In the Chinese subculture with the revival of traditional culture as the core, there is a similar cycle between offline intangible cultural heritage (ICH) workshops and the online dissemination of short videos. Digital content stimulates people's curiosity about offline real

experience, and the real situation of offline activities and the richness of reach provide emotional materials for new online content [13]. An organizer of an ICH workshop described this dynamic process: "Many people come to participate after watching our short video, and then record the video and share it by themselves, just like a relay race."

The phenomenon we have observed coincides with the "mixed space" described by Lefebvre: a space that is both physical, spiritual and, and most importantly, social [17]. Online communities provide organizational strength and emotional expectations for offline activities, thus promoting their development; in turn, these activities inject unique experience elements and emotional energy sources into online content. These two dimensions are inseparable, rich in each other, and together form a complete ecosystem. The practice of Generation Z subculture is built on this ecology.

3.3. Curatorial Identity: Cross-Platform Self-Presentation

Generation Z adopts a unique way of self-expression, which can be described as "elaborately designed" when they are active on multiple platforms. They don't present themselves in the same way everywhere: they will adjust their image according to the specific dynamics of each digital space. Table 4 shows the self-presentation of respondents on different platforms, reveals the strategies they adopt, and shows the evolution of these strategies in various cyberspaces.

Table 4. Multi-Platform Self-Presentation Strategies (Using a Typical Respondent as an Example)

Platform	Content Type	Presentation Objective	Target Audience	Identity Dimensions
Bilibili	In-depth content, knowledge sharing	Expertise, cultural depth	Shared Interests	Cultural identity
Xiaohongshu	Daily Outfits, Lifestyle	Aesthetic taste, lifestyle	Women of the same age	Aesthetic Identity
Weibo	Trending Comments, Social Issues	Social Concerns, Values	Public Interest	Citizenship
Douyin	Entertainment Content, Snippets	Lighthearted, fun, and approachable	General Audience	Entertainment identity

Our Internet celebrities will not publish the same content on different platforms at will, but attach great importance to strategy. According to the target audience and algorithm preferences of each platform, they will take different ways: share their cultural interests on Bilibili, show lifestyles in Xiaohongshu, or comment on hot topics on Weibo [18]. Cross-platform identity management includes two aspects: on the one hand, it abides by the rules of each platform; on the other hand, it is a conscious and controllable process used to build a personal brand.

A versatile creator explained his practice as follows: "On Bilibili, I publish in-depth content to show my professional ability; on Xiaohongshu, I share my daily clothes to reflect my attitude; on Weibo, I spread hot news to highlight my sense of social responsibility. Each platform is like a different theater - I play different roles, but together they constitute my complete personality. This also involves emotional factors. Research shows that virtual consumption not only meets material needs, but also promotes close emotional connection between individuals and

communities. Research on Chinese mobile players shows that virtual consumption is actually a connection rooted in emotions and personal identity [5]. By purchasing in-game items and participating in activities, players establish emotional connections with their characters and other players. This kind of connection creates a sense of belonging, like a "virtual home", which makes them truly feel that they are one of them. This emotional support, in turn, strengthens their cross-platform identity and integrates isolated platform behavior into a coherent self-concept.

3.4. The Specificity of the East Asian Context: A Model of "Same Origin, Different Forms"

When comparing the three countries of China, Japan and South Korea, a clear pattern gradually emerges - we call it "differences in commonality". Although countries have a common cultural foundation, the resulting subcultures are significantly different in many aspects. Table 5 systematically presents these differences and similarities, provides us with a clear perspective, and helps us understand that the development trajectory of folk culture in various countries is independent.

Table 5. Comparison of Gen Z Subcultural Practices in China, Japan, and South Korea

Dimension	China	Japan	South Korea
Cultural Origins	Confucian tradition, revolutionary narratives, experiences of modernization	Shinto traditions, the aesthetics of mono no aware, consumer culture	Confucian tradition, nationalism, modern industry
Platform Ecosystem	State-market hybrid governance, with local platforms taking the lead	Global Platform Dominance with Coexistence of Local Platforms	Local platforms dominate, with global platforms serving as a supplement
Relationship with the Mainstream	Integration and mutual construction, negotiated inclusion	Parallel coexistence, depoliticization	Industrial integration, business-led
Organizational Models	Loose communities, interest-driven	Individual Participation, Clique Culture	Highly structured, with distinct fan tiers
Stylistic Characteristics	Modern reinterpretation of traditional elements	Aesthetics-first, personal taste	Idol-centric, fan participation

Commonalities are manifested in: All three subcultures are deeply influenced by the traditions of the Sinic cultural sphere, Confucian values, and East Asian experiences of modernization; all have undergone a media transition from traditional media to digital platforms; and all face a complex ecosystem where global platforms (such as YouTube and Netflix) coexist with local platforms [7].

The points of divergence are precisely where things become truly interesting. In China, subcultures are deeply influenced by the "state-market hybrid governance" model. There, you see a process of mutual construction - subcultures and mainstream ideologies are not opposing forces, but rather actively negotiate with each other. Subcultural discourse often functions through symbolic exchanges with the dominant ideology [2].

Japan presents a different picture. Japanese subcultures are more deeply influenced by consumer culture and individualism. Their focus often lies in aesthetic expression and personal taste, and the entire scene has a distinct "de-politicization" characteristic - it can be said to be an aesthetic turn, avoiding direct ideological postures [14].

South Korea shows a different scene. Its subcultures are deeply integrated into the highly industrialized idol economy system. Everything appears more structured and commercialized, and the emotional investment of fans is completely commodified by the platform itself [15].

This "homogeneous yet diverse" model indicates that digital globalization is not some powerful homogenizing force. It does not compress everything into a single model. Instead, when the global platform logic meets the local cultural context, what is presented is not consistency, but diversity - various subcultural forms, each shaped by its specific environment.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1. Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study fall into three main areas.

First, we've put forward a mid-range model—the "digital creative ecosystem"—that pulls platform studies, subcultural studies, and creative city theory together into one analytical framework. This gives us a fresh angle on young people's cultural practices in the digital age. As Figure 1 shows, the model moves beyond the old "resistance-incorporation" paradigm, offering a more nuanced lens for grasping the tangled relationships between subcultures and mainstream culture today [19].

Second, we've introduced a few original concepts—"platformed style," "mutual nourishment cycle," and "curated identity"—that add new analytical tools to the digital culture research toolkit. Table 3 unpacks "platformed style," showing how platform technologies mediate, reshape, and sometimes fundamentally remake subcultural aesthetics. Figure 3 maps out the "mutual nourishment cycle," tracing the ongoing back-and-forth between online communities and offline groups. Table 4 gets at "curated identity," revealing the selective self-presentation strategies Gen Z uses across platforms.

Third, we've proposed a "same origin, different forms" model to make sense of East Asian cultural circulation. This adds a valuable non-Western perspective to the global conversation on digital culture. What Table 5 makes clear is that the encounter between digital globalization and local cultural contexts doesn't homogenize everything—on the contrary, it actively generates a diverse range of subcultures, each with its own distinctive character.

4.2. Practical Implications

This study has some practical takeaways too—for cultural policy, platform governance, and youth work.

For cultural policymakers, the key point is recognizing how much digital platforms mediate the transmission and innovation of traditional culture. Yes, support young creators in their creative transformations on these platforms—that's important. But also keep an eye on the downside: platform algorithms can cause a symbolic compression of cultural memory, reducing rich traditions to easily digestible snippets.

For platform operators, the message is slightly different. They need to reflect on how their own rules—algorithmic and otherwise—end up shaping and constraining subcultural expression. Cultural diversity should be part of the equation when designing algorithms and interfaces. Otherwise, excessive commercialization risks eating away at the creative energy that makes subcultures vibrant in the first place.

For youth workers, the task is to truly understand the identity-building strategies and emotional needs that Gen Z navigates within this digital ecosystem. That means providing community support that bridges online and offline spaces, and helping young people channel their digital practices into positive identity formation—rather than letting those practices become hollow or alienating.

4.3. Research Limitations

We should be upfront about the limitations of this study. First, resource constraints meant our fieldwork across the three countries wasn't entirely even in depth—we couldn't spend the same amount of time and energy in each place. Second, we tended to focus on successful creators and highly active participants, which means we didn't pay enough attention to those on the margins or those who only participate occasionally. Third, 12 months of tracking just isn't long enough to really capture how subcultural styles evolve over the long term.

Looking ahead, there are several directions worth pursuing. One is to expand the geographical scope—bring in cases from other East Asian countries like Vietnam and Thailand to really test the "same origin, different forms" model. Another is to adopt a longer-term longitudinal design, following the same subcultural community over a more extended period to see how it shifts and changes. We also think it's important to dig deeper into platform algorithm transparency—exploring how methods like algorithmic auditing could be brought into subcultural research. And finally, with AIGC technology already making waves, it would be timely to examine its potential impact on subcultural production and think through what new possibilities it might open up for technology-enabled cultural transmission.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate Gen Z's subcultural creative practices across East Asia. We built a "digital creative ecosystem" framework and used multi-sited digital ethnography to get at the details. What we found, in a nutshell, is this: digital platforms—through their algorithms and interface design—aren't passive channels for subcultural styles; they actively shape how those styles form and evolve. Online communities and offline clusters feed into each other in a dynamic, mutually reinforcing loop, giving rise to hybrid cultural spaces that blur the line between digital and physical. At the same time, Gen Z is doing something quite sophisticated—they're constructing curated identities across platforms, presenting different facets of themselves in different spaces, and in doing so, they're forging stronger emotional bonds and a deeper sense of collective belonging.

When we step back and compare the three national cases—China, Japan, and South Korea—a larger pattern comes into focus: common cultural roots, but distinct forms of expression, shaped by the particular ways global platform logics intersect with local cultural contexts.

This research pushes beyond the old "resistance-incorporation" framework that has long dominated subcultural studies. It offers fresh theoretical angles and practical insights for those working in cultural policy, platform governance, and youth development, and provides a useful reference point for future research on digital youth culture and the new technologies that keep reshaping it.

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