

Spatial Production from a Media Perspective: How Social Platforms Constructs “Check-in Culture”

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Abstract: In the context of digital media, the "reproduction" logic of social platforms on social space has derived "check-in culture". This paper focuses on analyzing the generation logic of "check-in culture" from the perspective of mediatization theory, and analyzes the impact of "check-in culture" on user communication practice, social capital, and cultural capital commodification from three dimensions of interaction. The study shows that in the spatial domain, online check-ins "reproduce" concrete space, interweaving reality and virtuality, but also making urban landscapes converge; in the temporal domain, the "presence" logic of the media strengthens the "synchronous presence" of online check-ins. Under the influence of the platform storage and push mechanism, the "past tense" of check-ins can be continuously circulated, becoming the eternal presence of "moments", making personal memory a cultural product controlled by algorithms; in the data domain, check-in behavior is digitized by the platform and incorporated into the traffic distribution system. The user's communication practice is subject to the allocation of visible resources. High-influence users and brands have the advantage of information dissemination, while the expression space of ordinary users is limited.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital media environment, the production and experience of space are increasingly influenced by media technology^[1]. On social media platforms, "checking in" has become a widespread cultural practice. People record a certain space by uploading check-in photos, videos and texts, making it part of individual memory and gaining new symbolic meaning in collective communication. In recent years, social media platforms represented by Douyin and Xiaohongshu have created highly visual and algorithmic spatial experience models. "Checking in" has changed from a personal behavior to a social phenomenon^[2], becoming an important tool for local marketing, urban image construction and tourism economic development.

From the perspective of mediatization, rather than saying that "check-in culture" is a spontaneous behavior of users, it is better to regard it as a spatial practice under the joint influence of platform algorithms, visual technology and social and cultural demands^[3]. When social platforms use technologies such as recommendations, tags, and hot lists to induce users to focus on specific places and become a network landscape, physical space is digitally reconstructed and a new media landscape emerges^[4]. The attractiveness of a place no longer relies on natural landscapes or historical culture, but on visibility and dissemination on the Internet. When checking in becomes a form of social capital, the user's spatial experience is shaped by the platform's discourse system, and the boundary between real geographical space and cyberspace becomes increasingly blurred^[5].

However, it is worth thinking about that while "check-in culture" has brought about the development of local economy and cultural communication, it has also brought about a series of problems. On the one hand, the mediatization of space has led to the convergence of urban landscapes, and the sense of place has been obscured by the production logic of traffic and content. The Internet celebrity landscape check-in places on social platforms often have a visual aesthetic tendency of "looking at each other". The stereotyped pink walls, "neon" slogans, and minimalist cafes have changed people's perception of space in the symbolic expression of space and communication, blurring the local characteristics of local culture. On the other hand, the spatial hotspots on social platforms often show a phased evolutionary logic of "increase in traffic-commercial development-tourists influx-traffic expiration". Short-term commercial development squeezes out the long-term planning of local governance^[6], threatening community life and cultural heritage protection. The popularity of check-in internet celebrity spots may also bring about social inequality, exacerbate the imbalance of communication between "traffic centers" and "marginal spaces", and strengthen the control of social platforms over space.

Although the research on "check-in culture" has increased in recent years, in general, the academic community still focuses on social communication^[7] ^[8], consumer culture^[9], identity recognition^[10] ^[11] and other dimensions, but there is still a lack of systematic analysis of its role in the spatial production process. Today, when social platforms have become people's primary spatial experience medium, the meaning of real space has gradually been given new symbolic value and consumption logic in the digital communication mechanism, platform algorithm and human interaction.

2. Literature Review

Mediatization theory is a systematic study of the profound impact of media on culture, politics and economy in social change. It has formed a multi-dimensional theoretical system in the disciplines of communication, sociology and cultural studies. Different from the traditional media influence research, mediatization focuses on examining the embedding and construction of media in social processes, and structural adjustments have taken place in social behavior, social system logic, cultural production behavior and power relations^[12]. With the development of digital media and social networks, mediatization research has entered a new stage. Scholars have begun to explore how media can be transformed from external influencing factors to the internal mechanism of social structural change, thus promoting mediatization theory from a single "media influence" research

paradigm to how media can shape the institutional logic and practice model of various fields of society.

The development of mediatization theory has roughly formed two academic traditions: institutionalized mediatization and socially constructed mediatization. The representative view of institutionalized mediatization was proposed by Hjarvard, which emphasizes that mediatization is the process of social system adapting to media logic. In the context of institutionalized mediatization, social fields such as news, politics, religion, and education are permeated by media logic and their modes of operation change under the influence of media logic. For example, under the trend of "newsification" of political communication, politicians increasingly use the media to construct their agendas, subtly shaping people's attitudes towards political life^[13]. Unlike institutionalized mediatization, which emphasizes the adaptation of social systems to media, socially constructed mediatization emphasizes the penetration of media into social systems and becoming an "endogenous force" for social change. Hepp believes that deep mediatization means that media is no longer an external variable, but an organic part of society itself, and deeply affects the entire social life^[14]. In this framework, technologies such as social platforms, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things reshape the way social organizations are organized from a structural level. For example, news production has evolved from "editor-led" to algorithm-driven "data journalism", and the value of news no longer depends solely on the judgment of professionals, but is influenced by user clicks, social interactions, and social network recommendation algorithms.

In the context of media technology being deeply embedded in social interaction practices, Kuldli and Hepp proposed a theoretical framework of "interfiguration" based on Elias's concept of "figuration" to explore how media can play a continuous, dynamic, and formative role in the process of social construction^[15]. The concept of "figuration" highlights the interdependence and dynamic change of social relations, and believes that society is not composed of discrete individuals, but a network composed of actors in a specific way, and is always changing. The concept of "inter-type" points out that in the process of constructing the social world, media technology is not a passive communication tool, but an intermediary that actively constructs social relations and power structures. "Inter-type" focuses on how technology, social relations and communication practices are nested with each other and jointly shape the mediated social order^[16].

Couldry and Hepp pointed out that mediatization research from the perspective of "inter-type" needs to focus on three key dimensions in social structure, namely space, time and data. The "space" dimension focuses on the changes in the boundaries of human interaction caused by communication technology, which enables people to communicate over long distances, get rid of the limitations of physical space, and also makes new possibilities for social control and power distribution. The "time" dimension emphasizes how the mediated society reconstructs people's daily rhythms, organizational methods and time perception through technical means. Due to the immediacy, storability and traceability of digital media, people's time is no longer just a linear movement, but also an operational resource for social action. "Data" refers to the process by which media technology shapes social cognition and action through data collection, storage and algorithmic calculation, and data gradually transcends individual initiative and affects the way social meaning is constructed.

From the perspective of "interaction", media technology is the core driving force of social

structural change. The embedding of communication technology does not simply promote the flow of information, but forms a stable communication mode under the interaction of different media combinations and affects the rules of social interaction. For example, the rise of social media platforms has made the boundaries of information circulation more blurred, and individual identities, social networks and communication practices are all regulated by platform algorithms. At the same time, the power relations in the mediatized society have also changed due to the intervention of data and algorithmic governance, and the traditional social hierarchy has gradually been reconstructed by a new order based on data empowerment. For example, in the social media environment, the distribution of influence no longer depends solely on social capital, but is deeply influenced by technical factors such as platform push mechanisms and interactive data.

Therefore, this article regards "online check-in" as a digital practice deeply embedded in mediatized daily life. "Online check-in" on social platforms is a composite communication practice that integrates spatial positioning technology, text and video content generation, and the interactive mechanism of social media platforms, forming a "mutual" symbiosis between people and media. Based on this, this article explores how "online check-in" shapes users' communication practices and information flows in the three dimensions of space, time, and data? How does the "check-in" practice construct social capital and cultural capital in the flowing digital space, thereby promoting the reshaping of the social order and continuously evolving in the process of mediatization?

3. Research Methods

This study uses in-depth interviews to obtain first-hand experience data. From April to May 2025, this study used keywords such as "check-in", "store exploration", and "travel check-in" as search entries on the Xiaohongshu platform to screen out potential interviewees who meet the research criteria. Interviewees must meet the following criteria: (1) post check-in-related content within the past three months; (2) have a certain degree of interactive activity; (3) content creation is mainly UGC, not commercial promotion, to ensure the subjectivity of the expression and the authenticity of practical experience.

Finally, 12 interviewees were determined, with a certain degree of diversity in gender and check-in content to enhance the heterogeneity of the sample and the breadth of the research. The formal interview was conducted via WeChat voice. The interview time for each interviewee was 20 to 40 minutes, and a semi-structured outline was used during the interview. The outline is designed around the following aspects: (1) the selection of topics and motivations for the creation of check-in content; (2) the perception and response to platform algorithm recommendations, traffic distribution, and popular mechanisms; (3) the significance of check-in behavior in spatial experience and social relationship construction; (4) the impact of platform check-in behavior on self-expression, social capital accumulation, and cultural consumption concepts.

The interview data were extracted into key concepts and thematic units to sort out the media practice logic and platform mechanism influence behind the interviewees' narratives. By comparing the similarities and differences of different interviewees in check-in practice, platform perception, and social interaction, the generation mechanism and social effects of check-in culture in the process of mediatization are further summarized. The basic information of the interviewees is

shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Basic information of interviewees

number	gender	age	Check-in content
F1	female	21	Travel check-in
F2	female	20	Cafes and food check-in
F3	female	28	Check-in at art galleries and exhibitions
M1	male	22	Baji Collection Check-in
F4	female	26	Brand store visit
M2	male	20	King of Glory Victory Check-in
F5	female	30	Attractions
F6	female	23	Food Check-in
M3	male	24	Sports activity check-in
M4	male	29	Photography check-in
M5	male	33	Check-in in urban public spaces
F7	female	19	Campus check-in

4. The spatiotemporal structure and data flow of online clocking-in

4.1. Space: The interweaving of virtuality and reality

In traditional geography, space is static and objective, while in communication and media studies, space is understood as an existence that is embedded in media technology^[17]. Online check-in is a spatial production practice that transforms the geographical space of the physical world into a "digital landmark" through geo-tagging, images, and comment interactions. Users check in and share through social platforms, giving places new cultural significance, and through continuous dissemination and interaction, they gain symbolic significance in digital space^[18]. For example, some Internet celebrity restaurants, attractions or street corners have become hot spots in the digital cultural space due to the check-ins of countless users, forming a "network landscape". "I had no interest in that place, but when I saw many people checking in, I wanted to take a similar photo." (F5)

For the practice of online check-in, it brings about a dual change in space. On the one hand, it expands the boundaries of space, allowing people to achieve "presence" on a global scale without leaving their homes^[19], and even if you are not present at a certain place, you can still gain a "virtual sense of presence" through the check-in information on the social platform. "I saw many people posting check-ins at famous schools. Although I have never been there, I feel that I am more familiar with the famous landmarks of these famous schools." (F7); On the other hand, it reduces the boundaries of space, making the real geographical distance no longer an obstacle to information dissemination. Any place on the social platform can quickly become a global cultural landmark through digital dissemination^[20]. For example, on the short video platform, a niche tourist destination became popular overnight because of check-ins, breaking the pattern of traffic distribution determined by geographical location in the traditional tourism industry. "Zibo barbecue

suddenly became popular on Xiaohongshu. Many people around me went to Zibo to queue up for barbecue during that time” (M5).

4.2. Time: Real-time and continuous information flow

The instant communication characteristics of social platforms make online check-ins highly real-time. Users can create an immersive experience of "here and now" with the combined effects of geographic location, timestamps and multimodal information. This instant sharing feature strengthens the user's sense of presence. "When I posted my graduation photo, I saw that many classmates also posted on the same day. Although we were not in the same city, I felt that we all graduated." (F7) Under the "time-space separation" framework proposed by Giddens, digital media breaks the time synchronization of traditional face-to-face communication, allowing users in different places to share the experience of the same time node through online check-ins and achieve "synchronous presence".

Online check-ins are a media practice of meaning production. Users give these moments specific symbolic meanings by checking in at specific time nodes (such as birthdays, anniversaries, festivals, and travel), making them an integral part of individual identity construction. "Every year on my birthday, I post a few photos on Xiaohongshu or Moments. Regardless of whether they know me or not, everyone sends me congratulations." (F6). This "digital ritual" allows users to structure time through media technology, thereby gaining collective recognition in social networks. In the social media environment, online check-ins make personalized time nodes have the effect of public communication. For example, on platforms such as Weibo, Moments, and Xiaohongshu, users construct personal time narratives and participate in the construction of collective memory through collective check-ins at nodes such as the Spring Festival, New Year's Eve birthdays, and graduation ceremonies.

If real-time sharing focuses on the "present" of online check-ins, then "retrospection" and "regular review" focus on the continuity of time. The storage performance of digital media makes online check-ins not only a kind of instant memory, but also a media archive that can be revisited and reproduced. Past check-in content is repeatedly activated and generates new value in the "performance" process, forming a kind of "digital memory". For example, the "a few years ago today" reminder of Tietie is a reproduction of a certain time node in the past of users based on algorithmic recommendations. This reproduction affects users' personal memories and also changes the way social memory is constructed, making the fluidity of time show nonlinear characteristics in the digital environment^[21]. Moreover, users can also actively look back at past check-in content and shape their own media identity through "time reconstruction". For example, a travel blogger may regularly review past travel experiences, re-edit and publish them from a new perspective. This "re-mediation" process prolongs the life cycle of check-in content and enhances the "time visibility" of individuals in digital space. "I often look back at my previous travel check-ins, and every December I will edit the travel destinations of the year into a collection and publish it." (F1)

4.3. Data: Algorithm-driven and visible construction

Social platforms rely on algorithms to digitize users' check-in behaviors, including data

collection, content recommendation, and user portrait construction. When users check in, the platform will simultaneously collect multimodal data such as user location information, timestamps, interaction data, visual information, and text information, forming a digital footprint of user behavior, which directly affects the platform's recommended content algorithm and forms the basis for precision marketing and commercial operations^[22].

The long-term accumulation of check-in data enables the platform to construct a "data portrait" of users, and then use algorithms to predict and guide users' future communication behaviors^[23]. For example, identities such as "travel expert", "food expert", and "store explorer" will affect the platform's distribution of its information flow. "I often post gym and exercise check-ins. My Xiaohongshu recommends me videos of fitness experts or protein powder reviews, how to use equipment, etc." (M3) The platform also analyzes the preferences of users' historical check-in points and predicts their future consumption behavior to accurately deliver commercial advertisements to them. This algorithm-based communication practice strengthens the commercial logic of social platforms, weakens users' communication autonomy and gradually makes them part of the data economy^[24].

In the data-driven communication ecology, the visibility of information is never neutral, but is determined by the commercial interests or traffic distribution logic of the platform embedded in the algorithm system. The communication logic of online check-ins follows the "popularity algorithm". The more interactive the content is, the more likely it is to be recommended by the system^[25]. This makes it easier for popular tourist attractions and popular check-in shops to enter the public eye, while check-ins in remote villages and non-mainstream culture are likely to be ignored by the algorithm. "The abandoned factories and old streets I took pictures of have almost no views. No one is interested in them." (M4) Social platforms also make it easier for commercial content to be exposed through paid promotion and traffic distribution logic and information distribution path control, while non-profit and grassroots check-ins may be downgraded due to lack of economic value.

Not only that, the operating logic of the algorithm may further strengthen social inequality and aggravate the structural bias in information dissemination^[26]. Based on the operating logic of the platform algorithm, since the platform algorithm relies on historical data in the early stage, it tends to recommend check-in information to the central area of the city, and check-in activities in marginal areas may be ignored. This has invisibly shaped the geographical pattern of digital space, making some areas "visible hot spots" while others are hidden by algorithms from the ocean of information. In addition, users with high spending power are often classified as "high-value users" and thus will be regarded as high-quality users by companies and receive more commercial recommendations, while people with low spending power are easily demoted by algorithms, showing information asymmetry.

5. How does online check-in build social capital and cultural capital

5.1. Redistribution of social capital: influence and user hierarchy

Social capital is a kind of relational capital, a resource reserve obtained by establishing relationship links among people and gaining social recognition and social influence^[27]. Checking in

as a social behavior is an important way for people to gain social capital. The social interaction behaviors such as likes, comments, and reposts brought by checking in make users visible to others on social platforms and strengthen users' network connections. "If you check in at a big brand store, such as LOEWE House and Gucci Café such places are themselves traffic hotspots. After posting, the number of likes and collections is indeed much higher than that of daily check-ins" (F4). This shows that high-end restaurants, luxury stores, concerts, art exhibitions and other entertainment activities can bring symbolic capital to users and gain higher recognition in the social field.

Users on social platforms are not in an equal position. There are significant differences in the influence of different user groups in check-in behavior, which constitutes an uneven distribution of social capital. KOLs often play a dominant role in check-in behavior due to their huge fan base, professional content production capabilities, and traffic tilt empowered by the platform. Their check-in content is more likely to enter the "traffic pool" of the recommendation algorithm, forming a "visibility spillover effect". Unlike KOLs, ordinary users are limited by the visibility of social networks and rely on their acquaintance network in their check-in behavior. Their social capital is also relatively limited, and they need to accumulate it through long-term communication, planning, and social strategies (such as keeping up with hot content, participating in comments and liking hot topics, etc.). "Every time I post a travel check-in note, it is actually difficult to become popular. Even if I choose the scene very carefully, the number of likes is only 30 or 40. Unless I get on the popular topic of the platform, the traffic may be better" (F1). "I feel that the content I post mainly relies on the likes of acquaintances. Xiaohongshu tends to favor people with very professional content" (F2). It can be seen that ordinary users often rely on the platform's recommendation system when checking in. When their check-in content cannot reach more communities on the platform, it is difficult to obtain continuous appreciation of social capital. Anonymous users are at the bottom of social capital distribution. Their check-in behavior cannot obtain effective interaction due to lack of social network support, or is regarded as "low-value content" by algorithms and has reduced visibility. On some platforms, the visibility gap between KOLs and ordinary users has been structured by platform rules, such as Blue V certification, high-quality content recommendations, paid promotion, etc., making social capital accumulation increasingly dependent on platform empowerment. This makes social capital accumulation present a "Matthew effect", where users who have already generated influence gain more visibility, while users with less influence are treated coldly.

5.2. Commoditization of cultural capital: brand marketing and business model

Online check-in was originally an individualized media practice of users, reflecting the construction of social identity and the display of cultural capital. However, under the rule that social media algorithms determine content exposure, brands quickly set their sights, treating UGC as a marketable resource, and using the self-media potential of social networks to amplify brand voice. "Some check-in posts are obviously implanted ads, such as limited edition peripherals, and the pictures are particularly "official", which makes it feel like they are no longer shared by themselves" (M1). "Nowadays, there is also a sense of being guided when checking in game results. It is common to see star teams post screenshots in a unified format. If ordinary players do not

follow suit, the exposure rate will be very low" (M2). The essence of these phenomena is that brands use UGC to make PGC, attract consumers to actively check in, and then use KOLs to spread it, incorporating "spontaneous check-ins" with brand intentions into the communication system. In this process, the cultural capital of users is used by brands and commercialized by platforms to form a new "social currency".

With the intervention of brands, the social logic of online check-in is gradually reshaped by commercial logic, causing users' check-in behavior to change from "spontaneity" to "purposefulness". On the one hand, the user's check-in content is structured under the platform algorithm, and commercial content is easier to be recommended, which leads to users actively catering to the communication framework designed by the brand in order to obtain higher visibility. On the other hand, the commercial check-in behavior will also affect the user's social practice. Users gradually change from "sharing life" to "planning life" - before checking in, users have preset the "presentability" of the check-in content and perform to complete the check-in narrative. "Every time I go to check in at an exhibition, I basically search for popular camera positions and poses taken by others on Xiaohongshu. I feel that taking check-in photos is now a preset performance, not just experiencing art" (F3). This shows that check-in behavior is becoming a tool for companies to "manage cultural capital" rather than simply self-expression.

In the commercialization of check-in practice, the platform plays a key intermediary role. It commercializes cultural capital through mechanisms such as algorithm recommendation and traffic tilt^[28], and finally forms a tripartite symbiosis of brand, user and platform.

6. Suggestions

In the context of social platforms increasingly dominating urban space experience and cultural communication, punch-in culture has evolved from an individualized media practice to a social phenomenon. However, as mentioned above, punch-in culture faces prominent problems such as spatial convergence, traffic monopoly, uneven distribution of social capital, and productization of cultural capital, which affect the autonomous expression of punch-in culture and also pose challenges to the diversity of local culture, social fairness, and the authenticity of information dissemination. Based on this, I believe that targeted measures should be taken to promote the sustainable development of punch-in culture and build a more equitable, diverse, and healthy media ecology.

6.1. Algorithm recommendation mechanism improves the fairness of traffic distribution

At present, the recommendation algorithm of the platform is highly inclined to the logic of traffic economy, and the traffic tends to tilt towards KOLs, big Vs and other people with more social capital, and the expression space of ordinary users is limited. The visual orientation of the algorithm makes "Internet celebrity attractions" with specific aesthetic characteristics get excessive exposure, while local cultural venues are marginalized due to lack of visual impact. Therefore, relevant social platforms should improve the transparency of recommendation algorithms and publish the algorithm calculation rules of some content recommendation algorithms, such as "popular punch-in of the month" or "must-punch list of the month", to weaken the algorithm's bias against content. In

addition, the platform can adopt a decentralized way to distribute traffic, set up a "cold recommendation" weighted section or a "content not exclusive to KOL" section to ensure that the high-quality content of ordinary users can also get a certain degree of exposure. For non-Internet celebrity attractions such as historical and cultural monuments and traditional handicraft workshops, the platform can also adopt an algorithm strategy that prioritizes local culture to enhance the visibility of regional culture, and encourage users to participate in the sharing of multi-dimensional space experience through the "local characteristic punch-in plan".

6.2. Promoting collaboration between social platforms and local governance

Social platforms have become an important shaper of urban spatial experience, but local governments' governance capacity for check-in culture is relatively lagging, resulting in some popular online spots facing problems such as "over-commercialization", "tourist crowding" and "local cultural loss" due to short-term traffic explosions^[29]. To solve this dilemma, local governments can establish a "Digital City Traffic Governance Alliance" with platforms and formulate a flow control mechanism for check-in hotspots based on social data analysis, such as limited flow reservations and time-divided opening, to avoid instantaneous flow shocks. Local governments can also use the platform's data analysis tools to adjust tourism management models, such as paying attention to the flow fluctuations of popular online check-in spots and adjusting infrastructure construction in a timely manner to reduce the impact of traffic overload on the lives of local residents. In order to avoid the "quick digestion" of local culture by check-in culture, the government should work with social platforms to promote the "cultural narrative guidance" strategy, encourage bloggers to incorporate cultural background, historical value, local stories, etc. into the check-in content, and help users enhance their spatial cognition rather than simply pursuing "visual consumption."

6.3 Regulating the commercial operation of the clock-in culture

It has become a common phenomenon for brands to conduct marketing through the check-in culture. Some businesses even deliberately create an "Internet celebrity atmosphere" to attract users to check in. In the face of the proliferation of the check-in culture, social platforms should actively establish a "commercial content review mechanism" to "downgrade" check-in information that is falsely advertised or over-marketed, to ensure the authenticity of the information obtained by users. In addition, the content of brand cooperation should also meet the "content completeness" standard, that is, when sharing the check-in experience, check-in bloggers should make a comprehensive and fair evaluation of the merchant's environment, service, price, experience and other factors, rather than just using the "Internet celebrity atmosphere" as a reference for selling points.

7. Conclusion

As the process of mediatization continues to deepen, are we entering a "world shaped by algorithms"? In this world, space is no longer defined only by geographical environment, but is dominated by traffic, visibility and communication rules; time is no longer just a linear process, but

a system that can be stored, traced back and re-recommended by algorithms; data is no longer just a record of user behavior, but has become the core of platform governance, business operations and social order construction. The punch-in culture seems to be an individual media expression, but in fact it is a transfer of data rights - personal memory, social interaction and even local culture are being processed, archived and even manipulated by digital systems.

When the platform becomes a shaper of spatial meaning, does the individual spatial experience still retain autonomy? When the accumulation of social capital depends on algorithmic empowerment, is the right of expression of ordinary users being disciplined by technical logic? Future research should further explore how social platforms affect the fairness of local cultural communication, how local governments can strike a balance between traffic economy and cultural protection, and whether users can regain the right to shape space through digital resistance strategies. In a highly mediated world, the punch-in culture is not only about information dissemination, but also about how we understand space, time and social relations. Media shapes the world, but we should examine how media shapes our lifestyle.

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