

Becoming Momo: A Digital Ethnography of Collective Anonymity and Everyday Algorithmic Resistance in China's Platform Society

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Abstract: This study investigates the collective anonymity phenomenon known as the “Momo Army” on the Xiaohongshu platform. It aims to analyze why young users choose to abandon personalized identity markers to integrate into collective anonymous groups, and how this behavior constitutes an algorithmic resistance strategy. Employing a combination of digital ethnography and in-depth interviews, the research conducted six months of systematic observation from January to June 2023. Fifteen representative users participated in semi-structured interviews, with data processed through thematic analysis. Findings reveal four core motivations for collective anonymity: concealing individual identity to prevent privacy leaks, mitigating “context collapse” through identity homogenization, building group belonging through anonymity, and employing collective anonymity as an algorithmic resistance strategy. The Momo community creatively addresses identity dilemmas in the algorithmic era through “secondary anonymization,” not only evading algorithmic discipline but also forging a new form of “digital subjectivity.” However, this approach carries risks such as group polarization, low-quality content, and media dependency. Research indicates that collective anonymity transcends traditional privacy frameworks, emerging as an innovative practice of everyday resistance. “Collective invisibility” reconstructs digital subjectivity and fosters “anonymous solidarity,” revealing that algorithmic power is not unidirectional domination but is constantly countered by users' creative resistance. Future efforts must balance privacy protection with freedom safeguards to promote a healthy internet ecosystem.

1. Introduction

Within algorithm-driven social media ecosystems, user identity management is undergoing unprecedented complex transformations. Traditionally, online anonymity has been viewed as a liberating space where individuals can escape societal constraints and explore diverse identities (Andrejevic & Burdon, 2015)[1]. However, as platform algorithms grow increasingly sophisticated and data surveillance mechanisms become pervasive, anonymity has evolved from a simple means of protecting personal privacy into a complex digital survival strategy. Particularly within China's social media landscape—governed by the world's strictest real-name registration policies—a novel phenomenon of “collective anonymity” is rapidly spreading. Users adopt uniform default identity

markers (such as the “Momo” avatar and nickname on Xiaohongshu) to form massive anonymous groups, thereby evading algorithmic tracking and social surveillance. This phenomenon prompts crucial theoretical inquiries within academia: Why do users en masse voluntarily abandon personalized identities to integrate into collective anonymity in an era of intensifying algorithmic governance? More critically, could this seemingly “de-individualized” behavior constitute a novel form of digital resistance against platforms' systematic capture and commodification of personal data? While existing research has explored individual motivations for online anonymity, it has largely overlooked the theoretical potential of collective anonymity as a collective action strategy—particularly its unique manifestations within China's distinctive social media regulatory framework of “pseudonyms in the foreground, real names in the background.” This study focuses on the emerging “Momo Army” phenomenon on Xiaohongshu, aiming to address the following core questions: (1) Why do young users choose to abandon personalized identity markers and integrate into collective anonymous groups within a highly algorithmic social media environment? (2) How does this collective anonymity constitute a resistance strategy against algorithmic governance? (3) As a novel digital practice, what theoretical insights does collective anonymity offer for understanding power relations in contemporary social media? Using the “Momo” group on Xiaohongshu as a case study, this paper employs participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and digital ethnography to explore the motivations and impacts of their anonymous social interactions and algorithmic resistance behaviors.

2. Research hypotheses

2.1 Theoretical Development and Existing Research on Network Anonymity

With the rapid development of social media, many platforms now offer anonymous social features such as anonymous Q&A and anonymous comments. These functions provide users with a space to conceal their true identities, enabling them to express their thoughts and emotions more freely while also enhancing the diversity and richness of information online. Against the backdrop of unprecedented online social activity, people are enthusiastic about declaring their identities and stances in public spaces to enhance their visibility. Yet, they simultaneously seek “confessional spaces” to pour out their hearts and vent emotions while concealing their true identities. Consequently, anonymity has gradually emerged as a fundamental social need. This trend traces back to the widespread use of invisible status in the QQ era, evolved through WeChat's Shake and Drift Bottle features, and culminated in major platforms introducing anonymous functions like Weibo's anonymous reposting and WeChat's “visible for three days” group settings. The internet now hosts vast numbers of anonymous users, such as Douban's “Account Deleted” group users, Zhihu's “Anonymous User” IDs, and Tieba's “Unknown” users. App stores have also launched anonymous social apps like Momo, Tantan, and Soul, reflecting contemporary netizens' demand for social anonymity. Today, most platforms adopt a “front-end nickname, back-end real name” model, allowing users to customize avatars and aliases to embody entirely new personas in cyberspace—whether mirroring their real selves or presenting completely contrasting identities. However, with the integration of algorithmic recommendation systems and regulatory requirements, major platforms have intensified oversight of real-name verification. Measures like real-time IP geolocation, acquaintance-based recommendations, and address book access have reintroduced users' true identities into cyberspace, undermining the anonymity sought in social media interactions. Consequently, the emerging “Momo” community on Xiaohongshu has evolved into a novel trend in anonymous social networking.

Research on online anonymity has undergone a theoretical evolution from technological determinism to social constructionism. In early internet studies, anonymity was often viewed as an

inherent property of technology, a core characteristic distinguishing cyberspace from real-world society. With the advent of the Web 2.0 era, the rise of social media platforms shifted the theoretical positioning of anonymity. Goffman's (1959)[2] dramaturgical theory has been widely applied to explain online identity management, with researchers focusing on how users meticulously craft self-presentations on the “front stage” while safeguarding private spaces on the “backstage” (Frame, 2014)[3]. Studies during this period generally regarded anonymity as a tool for individuals to protect privacy and explore multiple identities. However, recent research has begun challenging the assumption that anonymity is solely an individual-level phenomenon. Marwick and boyd (2011)[4] revealed the “context collapse” phenomenon in Twitter research—the blending of different social circles makes it difficult for users to maintain consistent identity performances, forcing them to rethink privacy management strategies. Design changes on social media platforms can disrupt users' carefully constructed privacy boundaries, leading to “privacy management fractures” (Strauß & Nentwich, 2013)[5].

Notably, anonymity research within China's social media landscape follows a distinct trajectory. Unlike Western platforms that predominantly encourage real-name systems, Chinese social media adopts a hybrid model of “pseudonyms in the foreground, real names in the background”. Users enjoy extensive freedom to construct identities in the foreground while remaining constrained by the real-name system in the background. This distinctive structure has spawned novel anonymous practices, such as the “collective anonymity” phenomenon exemplified by Xiaohongshu's “Momo Army.” Users form large-scale anonymous groups by adopting uniform default identity markers, thereby evading algorithmic tracking while gaining collective identity. This phenomenon transcends traditional anonymity research frameworks focused on individual behavior, pointing toward anonymity as a new dimension of collective action strategy.

2.2 New Challenges to Anonymity in the Age of Algorithms

However, anonymous social behavior also brings a series of challenges and issues. The presence of anonymity on social media platforms may lead users to engage in undesirable behaviors such as spreading misinformation, cyberbullying, and online violence. Under the cover of anonymity, users may be more prone to making offensive remarks since they do not have to take responsibility for their words. This phenomenon poses certain challenges to the civilized development of cyberspace and social stability. At the same time, anonymous social interactions also raise concerns regarding personal privacy and information security. In anonymous social interactions, the leakage and misuse of personal information can adversely impact user privacy, potentially triggering data breaches that lead to identity theft or other forms of harm.

Through reviewing relevant literature and searching for anonymity-related studies on CNKI, the author found that domestic research on anonymity focuses on two main areas: the communication patterns and usage-satisfaction dynamics of anonymous social platforms, and the examination of anonymous social software, including reflections on its value and associated issues.

Regarding anonymous social media usage, Professor Zhu Jianhua proposed the “New Media Trade-off Demand” theory based on the Uses and Gratifications theory. He posits that audiences adopt and persistently use a new medium only when they perceive a significant unmet need in their lives that traditional media cannot fulfill, while anticipating that a new medium can satisfy it [6]. Guo Miao contends that mobile social networks, characterized by anonymity and concealed identities, create opacity around user identities. Though situated within the same community, individuals—unfamiliar with one another—can freely express emotions, achieving the “strangers on a train” phenomenon. This allows them to disclose personal information to strangers, thereby extending personal feelings [7] and attaining the goal of “stranger resonance.” Chen and Liu contend

that egalitarian social platforms and anonymous communication environments enable users to disregard influences stemming from identity, status, or image, thereby minimizing the impact of ingrained stereotypes. Furthermore, drawing from Bakhtin's "carnivalization" theory, they propose that anonymous social interactions enable individuals to subvert traditional rational thought structures through carnivalesque thinking, thereby reconstructing linguistic environments and discursive communication scenarios [8]. However, this carnivalesque anonymity can also lead to disorder within online environments and social contexts.

The development of anonymous social networking has revealed both its advantages and disadvantages. Scholars have reflected on and summarized the evolution of anonymous social apps and platforms. Liu Ying and Li Peishan hypothesize that if the basic security settings of anonymous social apps are breached, users' identity information could be exposed, and users might even be tracked. Without safeguards for user information security, personal anonymity becomes impossible [9]. Moreover, the absence of gatekeepers in anonymous environments makes it difficult to effectively filter excessive negative energy, violence, pornography, rumors, and other harmful content. These are all challenges facing anonymous social groups and the development of anonymous social software. In her reflection on the value of anonymous social networking, Zhang and Tang points out that lost social motivation adversely affects the use of anonymous software. While rumors, exposés, pornography, and violence may yield short-term effects, garnering significant attention and usage, and providing users with immediate satisfaction, once the novelty wears off, user engagement with anonymous social platforms declines, and voyeuristic motivations will manifest as disappointment when unfulfilled in subsequent interactions [10].

Research on online anonymity has evolved from early simplistic views treating anonymity as an inherent technical attribute to a multidimensional perspective recognizing it as a complex social strategy. From the era of universal invisibility on QQ to contemporary social media's "front-end pseudonyms, back-end real names" model, anonymity has transcended its singular function of protecting individual privacy, evolving into a creative strategy for users to navigate platform algorithms and social discipline. However, existing research predominantly focuses on individual motivations for anonymity or its negative effects, severely neglecting the theoretical potential of collective anonymity as a new form of resistance practice. Particularly within China's social media landscape, where algorithmic governance intensifies, users form large-scale identity strategies through "collective anonymity" actions like the Xiaohongshu Momo Army. This phenomenon evades algorithmic tracking while constructing novel group identities, challenging traditional anonymity research's theoretical assumption that anonymity is purely an individual act. This study seeks to rethink the contemporary implications of digital identity politics by exploring how collective anonymity becomes a form of everyday resistance in the algorithmic era.

3. Research design

This study combines digital ethnography with in-depth interviews to explore the collective anonymity phenomenon known as the "Momo Army" on the Xiaohongshu platform. The research team conducted a six-month systematic digital ethnographic observation from January to June 2023, focusing on Momo-related activities on Xiaohongshu while extending to the Douban "Momo universe" group, the Weibo #Momo Army# topic, and related WeChat communities. Observational methods included participant observation, content tracking, and documentation of key interaction scenarios. Sample selection employed a combined strategy of purposive and maximum variation sampling. Participants were recruited through Xiaohongshu and Douban groups, ultimately identifying 15 representative individuals (Table 1) spanning diverse age groups (18-30 years), genders, occupations, and geographic backgrounds. All interviews were conducted via encrypted

communication software using semi-structured outlines, lasting 45–75 minutes each, yielding a total transcript volume of 126,843 characters. Data analysis employed thematic analysis. Two researchers conducted independent open coding, using NVivo 14 software to generate initial codes. Through iterative comparison, 42 initial codes were consolidated into 8 latent themes. To ensure analytical reliability, inter-coder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa=0.82$) was calculated, meeting the criterion for good agreement. Through three coding meetings to discuss discrepancies, the research team finalized four core themes: Concealing One's True Self, Concealing One's Authentic Self, Seeking Group Belonging, and Protecting One's Digital Self. Each theme is supported by substantial data, including representative quotations and cross-source validation. The study strictly adhered to digital research ethics guidelines, implementing measures such as informed consent, privacy protection, researcher reflection, and member validation to ensure transparency in the research process and credibility of the findings.

Table 1 Interviewee Information

Number	Age	Gender	Education Level	Occupation	Location
A1	19	Female	Undergraduate	Student	Henan
A2	25	Female	Graduate School	Student	Tianjin
A3	23	Female	Graduate School	Student	Henan
A4	26	Female	Undergraduate	Corporate Clerk	Zhejiang
A5	24	Female	Undergraduate	Copywriter	Henan
A6	30	Female	Undergraduate	Civil Servant	Hebei
A7	18	Female	High School	Student	Beijing
A8	28	Female	Undergraduate	Teacher	Shenzhen
A9	25	Male	Associate Degree	Police Officer	Hebei
A10	23	Male	Graduate School	Student	Jilin
A11	35	Male	Doctoral Degree	Doctor	Shanghai
A12	20	Female	Undergraduate	Illustrator	Chengdu
A13	22	Male	Associate Degree	Freelancer	Guangzhou
A14	32	Female	Graduate School	Startup CEO	Hangzhou
A15	17	Male	High School	Student	Chongqing

4. Analysis of Motivations behind Anonymous Social Behavior among Young People

4.1 Concealing Personal Identity: Preventing the Leakage of Personal Privacy or Being Subjected to Online Archaeology and Cyberbullying

In algorithm-driven social media ecosystems, users face an unprecedented “digital panopticon” dilemma. Foucault's (1977)[11] theory of discipline gains new relevance in the digital age—algorithms construct increasingly sophisticated surveillance mechanisms through data collection and behavioral analysis, trapping users in a state of “permanent visibility.” Users simultaneously crave visibility for social validation while fearing privacy risks from excessive exposure. This study reveals that the Momo community on Xiaohongshu creatively addresses this paradox through collective anonymity strategies. By transforming individual anonymity into collective anonymity, they construct “invisibility” under algorithmic surveillance. This collective anonymity practice transcends traditional individualistic frameworks of privacy protection, forming an “anonymity sanctuary.” Contemporary algorithmic governance not only monitors user behavior but also transplants real-world social structures into digital spaces through social relationship mapping, rendering the hybrid model of “pseudonyms in the foreground, real names in the background” increasingly ineffective. By adopting unified identity markers, the Momo community generates “identity noise” that disrupts algorithms' recognition capabilities, implementing a strategy

of “algorithmic obfuscation.” “Having the same profile picture and nickname makes me feel safe. Since everyone is Momo, even if I say something I shouldn't, it's hard for anyone to trace it back to me.” (A5) This statement reveals the core mechanism of collective anonymity: reducing individual identifiability through identity homogenization to create a safe space for expression under algorithmic surveillance.[12]

At a deeper level, the Momo phenomenon reflects users' creative response to the “privacy paradox.” Despite privacy concerns, users persistently share personal information—a contradictory behavior rooted in platform-designed structural constraints. Through collective anonymity, the Momo community evades algorithmic tracking while sustaining social engagement, forming a pattern of “resistance-based participation.” “Before, when my views differed from others, I feared backlash and avoided commenting. But now, under the Momo identity, I speak my mind freely.” In many instances, no direct or tangible conflict of interest exists between observers and the observed. Yet differing stances, viewpoints, and narrative styles frequently spark friction between them. Thus, beyond the privacy paradox, the tension between the desire for expression and the fear of violence becomes another paradox on online platforms, causing varying degrees of distress for social media users.

4.2 Concealing the True Self: Mitigating Context Collapse Through Identity Homogenization

On social media platforms, “context collapse” has become a core challenge for contemporary users. The unexpected mixing of different social circles within digital spaces makes it difficult for users to maintain consistent identity performances. This study reveals that the Momo community creatively addresses this challenge through “identity homogenization,” transforming collective anonymity into a tool for “context boundary management.”

In today's social environment, people have dual psychological and physiological needs for social interaction. The complexity and volatility of society accelerate life rhythms while increasing pressures in learning and work. On one hand, identity labels like occupation, social status, and age impose specific demands and expectations. Thus, individuals seek to shed role-based tags in cyberspace, temporarily evading identity-driven responsibilities and expectations to express authentic selves and pursue genuine hobbies and interests. On the other hand, the rapid pace of modern society induces anxiety and fatigue. To adapt to environmental demands, individuals often conceal their true intentions and assume various roles. Over time, this suppression of inner emotions leads to psychological issues like emotional instability. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory posits that social interaction resembles theatrical performance: people meticulously stage their public selves (“frontstage”) while safeguarding private spaces (“backstage”).

However, algorithmic recommendation systems and social relationship mapping functions have shattered traditional frontstage-backstage boundaries, exposing users' “backstage” performances to “frontstage” audiences and causing “performance breakdowns.” Anonymous social platforms offer young people an opportunity to escape the constraints of social identities. In anonymity, they shed societal roles and identities, freely exploring and expressing diverse social personas. This resolves the tension between free expression and social pressure, separating acquaintance-based interactions from private life. The Momo community reconfigures the frontstage-backstage dynamic in digital spaces through unified identity markers: All Momo users share a “collective front stage.” Within this space, individuals need not worry about mixing social circles, as all interactions occur in the anonymous “collective backstage.” By minimizing self-disclosure, the Momo community further clarifies the boundaries between front and backstage, effectively reducing the risk of contextual collapse. This allows users to maintain their idealized front-stage performance and avoid performance breakdown. Moreover, collective anonymity brings together users of diverse personalities and regions under a shared Momo identity. Users freely control social distance and frequency, eliminating the need to

socialize for others' approval. Social behavior becomes an actively chosen pattern. "My coworkers followed my social media account, so even venting or going crazy required careful thought. That's why I abandoned my old account and re-registered on Momo." (A9)

4.3 Seeking Group Belonging: The Paradox of Collective Identity in Anonymity

The Momo phenomenon reveals a profound collective identity paradox: users seek belonging through self-erasure rather than self-affirmation. This finding challenges traditional identity theories, demonstrating that in the era of algorithmic governance, collective anonymity can serve as a strategy for constructing new forms of social recognition. Momo's group practices cultivate a "collective pseudonymity" where individuals relinquish unique identity markers to merge into a shared anonymous collective. This collective identity formation embodies the mechanism of "anonymous communities." Collective action in the digital age no longer relies on pre-existing social bonds but can rapidly emerge through shared practices. By adopting identical avatars and nicknames, Momo users instantly establish symbolic solidarity without requiring pre-existing social relationships. "When one Momo acts, all Momo stand behind them. Everyone sporting the same avatar and nickname feels like playing the same role—we must uphold our shared image" (A1) reveals how this symbolic solidarity translates into collective responsibility and group norms.

Anonymized socializing offers young people a freer, more open space for expression. Behind anonymity, they can more freely express their views, emotions, and personalities without the constraints of their real identities. Moreover, anonymous social behavior can be seen as a form of social entertainment and interest exploration, enabling them to seek group belonging and gain collective recognition. Traditional social psychology posits that personal identity exists within references to the world and affirmation gained through interpersonal relationships [13]. "No one knows who's on the other side, and more importantly, there are no representatives or hierarchies in Momo. Everyone is equal, and you don't have to worry about saying the wrong thing and getting called out. There aren't many things to be cautious about, so everyone chats happily together." (A8) The Momo community actively supports and defends each other on social media platforms, vigorously upholding their identity while drawing clear boundaries from other groups. This demonstrates their strong collective identification with this internet label. The Momo Army frequently engages with trending topics, unleashing a frenzy in comment sections. Sharing common interests, they derive enjoyable experiences and emotional fulfillment through interaction. The emotional belonging stemming from this strong collective identity provides psychological comfort and emotional value to the anonymous group, serving as their spiritual anchor in the virtual world and fulfilling the social needs of anonymous interpersonal interaction.

However, this collective identity also carries inherent tension. As Marwick (2013)[14] demonstrated in his study of social media celebrities, digital identities perpetually exist within the tension between "authenticity" and "performance." The Momo community circumvents this tension through collective anonymity—individuals need not perform a "true self" because 'Momo' itself is an accepted performative role. This "shared role-playing" offers freedom of expression while alleviating pressure to maintain identity authenticity, fostering a unique sense of "anonymous belonging."

4.4 Protecting the Digital Self: Collective Anonymity as an Algorithmic Resistance Strategy

Research indicates that the Momo phenomenon should not be simplistically interpreted as a privacy protection measure, but rather viewed as a practice of "everyday algorithmic resistance." Algorithms are not merely technical systems; they are power structures embedded within social relations. Through mechanisms such as data collection, user profiling, and content recommendation, they exert implicit discipline over user behavior. Through collective anonymity, the Momo

community has developed an innovative “algorithmic disruption” strategy that challenges the platform's surveillance and commodification logic.

Currently, people's lives are being reshaped by big data algorithms, which permeate every aspect of existence. Foucault introduced the concept of “discipline”: individuals are constrained by social norms to perform ‘correct’ behaviors. “I delete posts that might reveal my real identity, fearing my students or family/friends might recognize me through big data recommendations—it's quite frightening now.” (A3) In the era of big data, people's technologized lifestyles immerse everyone within “information silos,” subjecting them to surveillance and discipline by technological spatial power. Within this “panopticon prison,” we face the predicament of a drastically diminished private sphere. Features like “contact recommendations,” “people you may know,” and “People Nearby,” which precisely deliver users' accounts, posts, and likes to acquaintances. The intrusion of real-world strong ties disrupts self-presentation on social platforms, as these uninvited guests from actual relationships shatter pre-established performance scripts and undermine idealized self-presentation. Concerned by this, many develop social fatigue, hesitating to reveal themselves on platforms, making disciplinary pressures ubiquitous. Thus, Momo emerged—an app designed to erase personal information and evade algorithmic recommendations. By operating in stealth mode, Momo circumvents identity-based recommendation systems, partially liberating users from algorithmic discipline.

More crucially, the Momo phenomenon demonstrates the innovative power of “collective anonymity as resistance.” While traditional resistance theories emphasize public protest and identity assertion, the Momo community achieves a different form of resistance through “collective invisibility”—not by declaring “we are here,” but by ensuring “we are nowhere to be found.” “Now I can go crazy whenever I want without fear of colleagues or family finding out. I feel freer than before.” (A6) This resistance strategy not only circumvents algorithmic discipline but also creates a new form of “digital subjectivity,” enabling users to maintain a degree of autonomy within algorithm-dominated social media environments.

5. The Mediating Dilemma of Anonymous Social Behavior: The Dual Logic of Protection and Absence of Accountability

5.1 Collective Euphoria and Group Polarization Tendencies

Research reveals that the collective anonymity practices within the Momo community not only create safe spaces for expression but also give rise to a unique phenomenon of “anonymity-induced polarization.” Under the “protective umbrella” of collective anonymity, users gain freedom of expression while shedding accountability constraints, creating a “responsibility vacuum.” This state not only lowers the threshold for cyberbullying but is also systematically amplified through algorithmic recommendation mechanisms—when multiple Momo users express similar sentiments toward the same content, algorithms aggregate these dispersed anonymous reactions into “trending topics,” further intensifying group polarization.

In the digital age, the virtual nature of cyberspace dilutes real-world constraints and pressures, lowering the cost of cyberbullying. The emergence of anonymity mechanisms propels cyberbullying down an uncontrollable path. The polarization within the Momo community reveals the inherent paradox of “anonymous solidarity.” Collective action in the digital era relies on shared emotional experiences, and the Momo group rapidly built an emotional community through shared identity markers. However, this anonymity-based solidarity lacks the organizational structures and accountability mechanisms found in traditional social movements, making emotional expressions prone to slide into irrational extremes. “After becoming a Momo, I worry less. When I see strange comments, I just blast them.” (A4) Momo's secondary anonymity allows diverse, already

hard-to-trace users to wear identical masks, making it even harder to identify the source of statements. Within this collective anonymity, individuals may develop irresponsible attitudes. Momo users sometimes indiscriminately verbally attack others, unrestrainedly venting personal emotions, thereby jeopardizing cybersecurity and social stability. “Last time someone sent me a private message cursing me. I rarely comment or post, so I asked for clarification and discovered that person didn't know many people go by ‘Momo.’ They thought I was the specific Momo who cursed them.” Moreover, fueled by intense group identification, the Momo Army easily polarizes, transforming from an anonymous collective into a mob that collectively attacks individuals or issues. This triggers group violence and escalates conflicts in social media interactions. Thus, a mechanism designed for self-protection becomes a tool for perpetrators to satisfy their own venting, gradually dissolving individual consciousness, value recognition, and sense of responsibility within this virtual self.

5.2 Homogeneous Content and Low Quality Issues

Currently, media literacy among Chinese netizens remains underdeveloped. Anonymous social platforms provide them with outlets for emotional and irrational expression, resulting in media spaces flooded with low-quality content. The Momo Army, cloaked in a uniform social persona, hides behind anonymity to evade the collective pressure of public opinion. Wielding virtual microphones in the public sphere, they freely voice abuse, malicious attacks, meme-driven chaos, and moral judgments, while false information proliferates unchecked. This not only harms society by disrupting public order and eroding personal trust but also damages the online ecosystem. Platforms must refine mechanisms to verify information authenticity, establish user reporting and appeal channels, and strengthen content moderation systems to ensure information reliability.

5.3 Risks of Excessive Immersion and Media Dependency

The Momo phenomenon represents not only an identity strategy but also a novel form of “digital dwelling,” reflecting contemporary youth's adaptive survival tactics within algorithmic society. However, this study reveals that such strategies may create an “adaptive trap”—where short-term psychological gains from collective anonymity can evolve into long-term media dependency and detachment from reality. From a media dependency theory perspective, the Momo community exemplifies a new form of “selective dependency.” Through collective anonymity, Momo users simultaneously satisfy multiple needs: privacy protection (preventing algorithmic tracking), freedom of expression (evading social evaluation), and group belonging (anonymous solidarity)—needs often difficult to fulfill concurrently in real-world social interactions. These needs foster intense dependence on the Momo identity, creating a digital comfort zone that discourages more challenging real-world social interactions. By concealing their identities, Momo users evade social control within the virtual realm, yet this escape offers only fleeting solace. Overindulgence in anonymous socializing for emotional fulfillment may paradoxically lead to greater isolation, loneliness, and anxiety in real life. Furthermore, this behavior may heighten the risk of role dysregulation—conflict and imbalance between one's virtual and real-world personas—further exacerbating mental health issues. To gain deeper insight into this phenomenon, we must examine the behavioral patterns and psychological mechanisms of the Momo community within anonymous social spaces. Simultaneously, we need to explore how to guide this group toward developing healthy social habits, reducing media dependency, and fostering active participation and wholesome development in real life.

At a deeper level, the Momo phenomenon reveals the complexity of identity politics in the digital age. Social interaction resembles stage performance, requiring a balance between the front stage and backstage. The Momo community creates a “permanent backstage” through collective

anonymity—within Momo spaces, users need not maintain front-stage performances and can remain in a state of “backstage relaxation.” “Sometimes I catch myself using Momo's blunt, simplistic communication style in real life—which is clearly unprofessional,” reveals how this skill atrophy spills over from digital spaces into reality. While offering short-term psychological relief, this state hinders users' development of comprehensive social abilities, leading to “social competence atrophy.”

6. Conclusion

This study examines the “Momo Army” phenomenon on Xiaohongshu as a case study, exploring the sociocultural logic and process of subjectivity reconstruction inherent in “collective anonymity” as a form of everyday algorithmic resistance. Through digital ethnography and in-depth interviews, the research reveals that users' collective anonymity practices—characterized by identical nicknames and profile pictures—are driven by four primary motivations: First, “concealing the individual self” for privacy protection and algorithmic risk avoidance; Second, “concealing the authentic self” by blurring identity boundaries to manage social expectations; Third, “seeking group belonging” through shared symbols to forge emotional bonds; Fourth, “algorithmic resistance” by disrupting algorithmic recognition and content recommendation logic through “de-identification.”

These seemingly minor individual actions embody a “post-individualist resistance framework” in the digital age. Unlike traditional resistance centered on personal agency, public expression, or counter-narratives, the practices of the “Momo Army” demonstrate a novel form of resistance that “substitutes invisibility for visibility and collective action for individual struggle.” Its “collective anonymity” not only resists algorithmic labeling and visibility discipline of individual identities but also fosters loose yet enduring emotional bonds through shared identity symbols. In other words, this constitutes a form of algorithmic resistance strategized around “collective invisibility.” Its power lies not in visible protest but in the quiet disruption of algorithmic logic and the redefinition of subjectivity. In this sense, “collective anonymity” reveals a crucial shift in digital subjectivity—from a model centered on individual expression and self-presentation toward a relational subjectivity characterized by shared action and mutual concealment. This subjectivity does not represent a complete escape from algorithms but rather a limited autonomy achieved through “shared invisibility” within the interstices of algorithmic governance and social pressure. It compels us to rethink the meaning of ‘existence’ in the digital society: when visibility is defined as a value standard by algorithmic logic, choosing “invisibility” itself becomes an act of agency.

However, this anonymity also brings challenges for online regulation, such as cyberbullying fueled by group polarization, irrational public opinion, and infringements on others' rights. Facing these challenges, individuals must strengthen self-discipline, while regulatory bodies and social platforms should jointly shoulder supervisory responsibilities. Although collective anonymity offers users privacy protection and communication convenience in the internet age, it simultaneously provides fertile ground for extreme behaviors, fostering risks in online social interactions. As information technology continues to evolve, striking a balance between safeguarding privacy and ensuring freedom will become a critical issue requiring deep reflection in the future development of the internet ecosystem.

In this digital age where algorithms increasingly permeate daily life, understanding how users creatively navigate this power structure concerns not only the protection of digital rights but also the fundamental question of human agency. The Momo phenomenon reveals that resistance need not be grand revolution; it can manifest as everyday, dispersed, collective acts of concealment—seeking digital spaces of freedom for ordinary users under the gaze of algorithms.

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