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City Walk as Platform-Native Counter-Mapping: Entangled Resistance and Algorithmic Visibility in Chinese Digital Urbanism

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Abstract

As digital platforms increasingly structure how cities are navigated, seen, and valued, urban walking practices have become sites of both algorithmic capture and tactical improvisation. This study examines the emergence of City Walk (城市漫步) in China as a form of platform-native counter-mapping. This user-led spatial practice utilizes digital tools to document, reframe, and disseminate alternative urban narratives. Drawing on digital ethnography, platform content analysis, and interviews in four Chinese cities, the study examines how participants engage in entangled resistance—tactically negotiating visibility algorithms while remaining embedded within platform infrastructures. Rather than rejecting platforms, City Walk participants leverage them to perform affective spatial storytelling, explore non-recommended routes, and archive marginal spaces. These practices are conceptually situated within the literature on algorithmic resistance, everyday spatial tactics, and critical cartography. While some City Walk content is commodified through lifestyle aesthetics and platform branding, others sustain oppositional potential through semantic drift and infrastructural appropriation. By reframing City Walk as a counter-cartographic practice situated within the logics of platform urbanism, this article contributes to broader debates on digital spatial agency, mediated urban practices, and the politics of algorithmically curated visibility.

Keywords

algorithmic resistance; City Walk; counter-mapping; digital spatial practices; platform urbanism

1. Introduction

As digital platforms increasingly mediate urban spatial experience, practices of perception, mobility, and everyday navigation have become deeply embedded within algorithmically governed infrastructures (Ash et al., 2018; Fields et al., 2020; Kitchin, 2016). In this platform-saturated landscape, urban space is no longer a neutral or passive container; rather, it is produced and regulated as a curated, calculable terrain of algorithmically modulated attention geography (Graham, 2020; Sadowski, 2020). Recommendation systems, behavioral tracking, and engagement-driven visibility hierarchies transform how cities are seen, accessed, and valued.

This transformation is particularly pronounced in China, where platforms such as Baidu Maps, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) play a central role in structuring urban experience. These infrastructures prioritize commercially viable, interaction-intensive nodes, while marginalizing spaces that are historically layered, socially peripheral, or politically sensitive (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Under the imperatives of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), algorithmic systems reproduce and intensify spatial inequalities, generating critical interest in the politics of visibility, access, and urban representation (Barns, 2020; Bucher, 2018; E. Fisher, 2020; Smith, 2020). Amid this techno-political landscape, a growing wave of City Walk (城市漫步) practices has emerged, particularly among young users aged 18 to 35. These practices take shape on social media platforms through the documentation and sharing of exploratory urban walks that foreground physical presence, sensorial immersion, and the rediscovery of urban heterogeneity (de Certeau, 1984; Mattern, 2021; Papacharissi, 2015). Unlike state-sanctioned heritage tours or platform-curated lifestyle itineraries, City Walk offers a bottom-up mode of navigating and narrating the city, emphasizing detour, drift, and micro-level storytelling as everyday tactics of spatial reappropriation.

Walking as a form of urban critique has deep historical roots. From the *flâneur* (Benjamin, 1934/1968) to the situationist *dérive* (Debord, 1956/2006), and later the experimental itineraries of collectives like Stalker (Bassett, 2004; Wiley, 2008, 2010), urban walking has long been mobilized to resist dominant spatial logics. City Walk extends these traditions into the digital realm where walking is no longer solely physical but also semantically encoded, socially circulated, and algorithmically conditioned. In doing so, it reflects both continuity and rupture with earlier forms of walking as spatial resistance, retaining the embodied, exploratory impulse while becoming increasingly mediated and platform-native.

In this study, City Walk refers to a digitally mediated and narratively articulated form of urban walking that unfolds within, and in negotiation with, platform infrastructures. Unlike unmediated acts of wandering, City Walk is characterized by its intentional documentation, tagging, and circulation on platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin. Participants do not merely walk; they perform, narrate, and reframe their movements as content. These walks thus function simultaneously as embodied practices and algorithmically legible interventions, crafting alternative spatial imaginaries that challenge dominant metrics of visibility and value. Yet this oppositional potential is complicated by the very infrastructures that enable its articulation. The visibility, circulation, and affective resonance of City Walk are deeply entangled with platform logics of optimization, commodification, and algorithmic filtering (Gillespie, 2010; Leszczynski, 2019; Plantin et al., 2016). As users attempt to reclaim spatial agency through walking and digital storytelling, their actions are continuously shaped, constrained, and sometimes co-opted by the same systems they seek to subvert (Bonini

& Treré, 2024; Velkova & Kaun, 2021). This paradox underscores a key tension: Can spatial resistance retain critical agency when enacted from within platform architectures designed for engagement and control?

To investigate this dynamic, the study conceptualizes City Walk as a hybrid and platform-embedded form of spatial resistance—one that is both constrained by and tactically improvised within algorithmic infrastructures. It draws on theoretical frameworks surrounding platform urbanism (Barns, 2020; Sadowski, 2020), counter-mapping (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, 2021; Jeppesen & Sartoretto, 2023; Peluso, 1995), and tactical media (Dalton & Stallmann, 2018; Milan, 2017) to investigate how everyday digital practices can subvert spatial hierarchies and produce alternative cartographies of urban experience. Against this backdrop, the study addresses three interrelated research questions: How do young users tactically negotiate and disrupt platform-constructed spatial hierarchies through movement, route deviation, and digital storytelling? How do Chinese social media platforms simultaneously enable and constrain such counter-mapping practices through algorithmic governance? Within a media environment driven by visibility metrics and content commodification, can spatial practices like City Walk retain sustainable oppositional agency? To address these questions, the study adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach, combining digital ethnography, platform-oriented content analysis, and semi-structured interviews conducted in four Chinese cities. It systematically examines how City Walk participants generate affective, embodied, and critical spatial experiences within the affordances and constraints of digital platforms. By situating this practice within the sociotechnical and political context of contemporary Chinese urbanism, the study contributes to ongoing debates in digital geography, media studies, and platform urbanism—particularly concerning the dialectical tension between resistance and incorporation, and the possibility of immanent critique from within platform infrastructures.

2. Theoretical Framework: Platform Capitalism, Algorithmic Governance, and Spatial Resistance

In recent years, a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship has examined how digital platforms are reshaping the sensory, spatial, and social dimensions of urban life—an emergent field now frequently conceptualized as platform urbanism (Barns, 2020; Fields et al., 2020; van Dijck et al., 2018). This framework shifts the analytical gaze from platforms as neutral service providers to active technopolitical infrastructures that mediate urban governance, spatial production, and socio-material organization. Platforms do not merely facilitate interaction; they structure perception, mobility, and memory through algorithmic recommendation, data extraction, and engagement-based visibility systems (Gillespie, 2010; Leszczynski, 2019). Operating through computational logics, platforms determine which urban spaces are rendered discoverable, valuable, or invisible, based on interaction metrics and commercial viability. As a result, the experience of the city is increasingly shaped by platform-mediated cartographies—curated layers of visibility that foreground optimized sites while suppressing others. This process transforms urban space into a real-time data interface where movement, attention, and affect are continuously harvested and redirected (Crawford, 2021; Mattern, 2021).

2.1. Platform Capitalism and the Governance of Urban Visibility

Platform capitalism, as the dominant logic underpinning the contemporary digital economy, is organized around the datafication, prediction, and assetization of user behavior through platform infrastructures

(Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). In urban contexts, this logic extends beyond simple navigation or localized services—it reconfigures the legibility, visibility, and value of space itself (Fields et al., 2020; Mattern, 2021). Through computational hierarchies of recommendation, engagement metrics, and commercial optimization, platform algorithms curate urban space into stratified layers of attention. As a result, highly interactive and monetizable nodes are rendered hyper-visible, while politically sensitive, socially marginal, or economically inert spaces are algorithmically erased or down-ranked (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). This regime has given rise to what has been described as "platform urbanism" or even "the platform as the city" (Plantin et al., 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018). No longer passive intermediaries, platforms function as algorithmic gatekeepers of urban knowledge (Leszczynski, 2019), shaping not only what is visible but also what is knowable within the digital city. The result is a new politics of computational visibility where the conditions of urban experience are governed by engagement thresholds, circulation potential, and platform-defined aesthetics.

In the Chinese context, this logic is deeply entangled with state-led urban development, platform capitalism, and technocratic governance—a tripartite assemblage that structures urban life through data-driven infrastructures. On one hand, state-led developmentalism promotes the integration of smart technologies into urban planning; on the other, platform firms such as Baidu, Tencent, and ByteDance operate as epistemological gatekeepers, shaping how cities are seen, known, and experienced (E. Fisher, 2020; Marvin et al., 2022). Platforms such as Baidu Maps (navigation), Xiaohongshu and Douyin (social media), and Meituan or Dianping (lifestyle services) constitute the infrastructural substrates of everyday sociality and mobility, organizing urban perception through data-optimized interfaces while simultaneously regulating algorithmic thresholds of visibility. This tripartite configuration—state, platform, and city—does not merely reorganize space; it reconstructs the perceptual and epistemic infrastructure of urban life (Crawford, 2021; Marvin et al., 2022). Within this system, urban space becomes increasingly detached from historical depth, community memory, or alternative value systems. Instead, it is re-rendered as a circulation-optimized, consumable, and shareable terrain designed for check-ins, algorithmic tagging, and visual storytelling. The perceived significance of space is no longer anchored in use, memory, or meaning, but in circulability, aesthetic shareability, and platform engagement potential (Langlois et al., 2015; Zuboff, 2019). These processes reproduce spatial hierarchies and power asymmetries, mirroring broader dynamics of data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Ricaurte, 2019). Platforms extract spatial experience as behavioral data, repackage it into algorithmic representations, and redistribute it through monetized visibility systems. Urban narratives, under these conditions, become stratified—some rendered hyper-visible, others algorithmically muted. This ontological shift transforms space itself into a form of digital spatiality (Mattern, 2021; Sadowski, 2020), where visibility, access, and spatial representation are governed less by civic or historical logics than by computational regimes of circulation. This sets the stage for new forms of urban exclusion and inclusion, while also opening space for emerging practices of resistance, appropriation, and reimagination.

This marks a deeper transformation in the cognitive structure of urban experience. What emerges is a form of "cognitive enclosure" (Behrendt & Sheller, 2023) where platforms define not only how the city appears, but also how it is imagined and inhabited. Within this enclosure, urban space is datafied, visualized, and behaviorally modulated. This shift constitutes an epistemological reordering: The city becomes legible only insofar as it aligns with algorithmic logics of value, visibility, and optimization.

2.2. Algorithmic Governance and Spatial Control Mechanisms

Algorithmic governance refers to the regulation of behavior, perception, and mobility through automated, data-driven systems embedded in platform infrastructures (Bucher, 2018; Pasquale, 2020). In urban contexts, this form of governance goes far beyond route suggestion or content delivery. It constitutes a deep spatial control mechanism, shaping how individuals move, what they see, and what counts as legible space within the city (Crawford, 2021; Mattern, 2021). Rather than imposing explicit prohibitions, algorithmic governance operates through ambient modulation—a set of invisible thresholds and filters that guide users along paths of least resistance, highest engagement, or commercial potential. This study identifies three interrelated mechanisms through which algorithmic governance structures urban spatial experience:

First, spatial filtering. Platform recommendation systems prioritize urban nodes with high interaction potential based on behavioral data, location histories, and engagement metrics. Spaces lacking commercial value or circulability are subject to algorithmic invisibilization—not deleted, but submerged in the hierarchy of discoverability (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; Gillespie, 2010). This filtering reinforces platform logics of spatial value where visibility becomes contingent on algorithmic legibility rather than historical or social significance. This mechanism is particularly acute in Chinese cities, where urban redevelopment often erases informal or migrant neighborhoods from digital platforms altogether. These spaces become what Fricker (2007) calls sites of "epistemic injustice"—their experiences excluded from the datafied record of the city.

Second, the visibility economy. Urban experience is now governed by a visibility economy where content circulates based on likes, shares, comments, and watch time (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Duffy & Meisner, 2022). This transforms the city into a set of commodified visual units—cafés, alleys, parks—curated for performative display. Platform infrastructures elevate spaces that are photogenic and emotionally resonant while suppressing those that challenge dominant narratives or aesthetics. As a result, the value of space becomes detached from its lived function or cultural significance and instead hinges on algorithmic performativity. The city is continually reassembled into what Ettlinger (2018, pp. 5–6) calls "affordances for productive resistance," but only insofar as they remain platform-compatible—mapped, circulated, and encoded through spatial logics of calculability and interoperability (Wilmott, 2020).

Third, spatial homogenization. Algorithmic dissemination, combined with platform-driven aesthetics, produces spatial convergence. Users are nudged toward stylized templates—vintage streets, curated markets, pastel signage—that align with dominant platform trends. This leads to urban aesthetic flattening where spontaneous, vernacular, or politically charged spaces are excluded from circulation due to low visual or engagement value (Fields et al., 2020; Graham, 2020). This dynamic reflects what Leszczynski (2019) terms glitchy urbanism: a version of the city optimized for platform consumption where the heterogeneous urban fabric is smoothed over by algorithmic preference. The result is not only a homogenized visual culture but also a semantic narrowing of what the city can mean.

Collectively, these mechanisms constitute what Marvin et al. (2022) describe as an "algorithmic enclosure" of urban space. Within this enclosure, movement, memory, and meaning are guided by data flows and optimization routines. Navigation becomes less about orientation and more about behavioral modulation, where the platform gently nudges users toward specific experiences, consumption patterns, and spatial imaginaries.

At a deeper level, algorithmic governance reshapes fundamental rights to the city—not through law or policy, but through infrastructure. As Plantin et al. (2016) argue, platforms increasingly act as quasi-public regulators, redrawing the boundaries of participation and access. Urban subjectivity is no longer defined solely by physical co-presence in space, but by one's algorithmic visibility and ability to produce, circulate, and engage with spatial data. This governance does not operate through direct repression but through ambient constraints—what Bonini and Treré (2024, pp. 23–25) call the "soft power of algorithmic resistance." In this environment, user agency becomes a situated, negotiated, and platform-contingent practice—one that must continually adapt to algorithmic logics to remain intelligible, visible, and affectively resonant.

2.3. Tactical Spatial Resistance and Platform-Dependent Practices

In the face of platform-dominated regimes of urban visibility, a critical question emerges: Can spatial resistance still be enacted under conditions of algorithmic governance? Building on de Certeau's (1984) seminal distinction between strategies (institutional control) and tactics (everyday improvisation), this study conceptualizes City Walk as a form of tactical spatial resistance—a situated, embodied, and often ephemeral urban practice that unsettles the algorithmic ordering of space.

Rather than overt confrontation, such tactics operate through micro-deviations, affective reorientations, and spatial improvisation (Farman, 2014). City Walk participants frequently traverse routes that are non-recommended, algorithmically invisible, or socially peripheral—including abandoned factories, migrant enclaves, or demolished heritage zones. These walks are not just physical movements, but performative acts of spatial re-sensing that challenge the homogeneity, commerciality, and aesthetic flattening imposed by platform infrastructures (Couldry & Hepp, 2016; Mattern, 2021). Such practices reflect what Scott (1990) termed "everyday resistance": subtle, embodied interventions that avoid direct confrontation but nonetheless subvert dominant spatial logics. They also resonate with what Ettlinger (2018) describes as "productive resistance"—counter-practices that emerge from within the very systems they challenge.

Importantly, these spatial tactics are not enacted outside or despite platforms, but rather through them. They constitute platform-dependent practices—appropriating the tools, affordances, and infrastructures of digital platforms to rearticulate spatial meaning. Users deploy geotags, hashtags, aesthetic filters, and short-form narratives not merely to optimize visibility, but to document loss, recirculate marginal spaces, and construct affect-laden counter-narratives (Jeppesen & Sartoretto, 2023; Kidd, 2019). These interventions do not exist in opposition to the platform; rather, they exemplify what Salamon and Saunders (2024) describe as infrastructural resistance—forms of dissent that emerge from within sociotechnical systems through semantic drift, reframing, and tactical modulation.

To theorize this dynamic, the study introduces the framework of entangled spatial resistance. This concept captures the dialectical tension at the heart of City Walk: On the one hand, such practices depend on platform infrastructures for visibility, circulation, and connection; on the other, they seek to subvert, reframe, or resemanticize the spatial logics that those very infrastructures impose (Crawford, 2021; Papacharissi, 2015). Entangled resistance thus refuses the binary between compliance and refusal. Instead, it operates through situated negotiation—where platform affordances are tactically repurposed to produce alternative spatial meanings. Participants do not reject platforms wholesale; they inhabit them critically, leveraging their tools to carve out space for memory, affect, and counter-visibility.

Within this framework, City Walk can also be understood as a form of counter-mapping—a grassroots rearticulation of spatial knowledge that contests hegemonic cartographic representations, often produced by state, commercial, or algorithmic actors (Harris & Hazen, 2006; Peluso, 1995). Contemporary scholarship has expanded the scope of counter-mapping beyond traditional cartographic forms to encompass digital, affective, and narratively driven spatial interventions (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, 2021; Kollektiv Orangotango+, 2018). From this perspective, City Walk functions not merely as a bodily practice of resistance but as a platform-native cartographic practice—one that uses digital tools to inscribe erased geographies, reclaim subjective spatial memory, and circulate alternative urban imaginaries within algorithmically governed environments.

In short, City Walk exemplifies how spatial resistance today is infra-structurally entangled: enacted through the very systems it critiques, yet capable of producing semantic fractures and affective ruptures within optimized urban landscapes.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a multi-method qualitative design to examine City Walk as a tactical spatial practice within platformized urban governance. By combining digital ethnography, platform content analysis, and semi-structured interviews, the research offers a situated understanding of how young urban users navigate algorithmic visibility, affective mobility, and spatial storytelling in Chinese digital cities (Hine, 2020; Pink et al., 2015).

The researcher assumed the role of a platform-embedded ethnographer, engaging directly with the production and circulation of City Walk content across Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Baidu Maps. This embedded positionality foregrounds the entanglement of infrastructure, user agency, and embodied meaning-making in algorithmic environments. Empirical data were collected over a 12-month period from June 2024 to June 2025 through three interconnected pathways. Over 500 publicly accessible posts and short videos were gathered from Xiaohongshu and Douyin using keywords such as “City Walk,” “random walking,” and “non-recommended routes.” From this larger dataset, 50 representative cases were selected for close analysis, based on three criteria: spatial deviation from platform-recommended routes; affective narration (e.g., nostalgia, melancholy, curiosity); and tagging or circulation strategies (e.g., hashtags like #HiddenCity or #EscapeTheAlgorithm).

In parallel, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and Guangzhou with individuals aged 18 to 35 who actively engage in spatial practices on digital platforms. Participants included students, designers, journalists, and creative professionals. The interviews explored motivations for walking, route selection, affective experience, and participants’ interpretations of algorithmic recommendation systems. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and conducted in accordance with established ethical protocols. In addition, the researcher conducted a series of embodied City Walk field experiments in Beijing and Chengdu, deliberately avoiding platform-promoted landmarks and commercial hotspots. These walks were documented through GPS tracking, fieldnotes, and simulated platform interactions, including real-time location checking, in-app camera use, and attention to algorithmic prompts or content suggestions. This embodied engagement aimed to capture the frictions between physical mobility and algorithmic mediation, as well as the affective and perceptual shifts that occur when walking against or outside platform logics (Light et al., 2016).

Data were analyzed using a combination of thematic coding and narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008). Thematic coding identified recurring strategies such as anti-recommendation tactics, spatial affect, and platform-modulated visibility. Narrative analysis focused on how users construct counter-cartographic stories through visual, textual, and embodied sequences—often defying platform expectations while leveraging platform infrastructures. Images and videos were also analyzed thematically, focusing on framing, spatial composition, and the affective use of filters, captions, and aesthetic cues.

Rather than treating platforms as uniform environments, the study attends to the relational ways in which interface design, discursive framing, and user practice interact to shape spatial expression. In this context, Baidu Maps, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin exhibit distinct infrastructural dynamics. Baidu Maps emphasizes mobility-based search and commercial indexing, offering minimal capacity for affective spatial storytelling. Xiaohongshu fosters curated, lifestyle-oriented content through semantic tagging, enabling reflective and aestheticized mapping of urban experience. Douyin, by contrast, prioritizes short-form, viral performance and emotional immediacy, often at the expense of spatial specificity. These infrastructural differences shape how City Walk is practiced, circulated, and interpreted across platforms—a dynamic explored further in the analysis.

All research activities were conducted in accordance with ethical standards. Participants signed informed consent forms and all digital content analyzed was publicly available and anonymized. Beyond procedural ethics, the project adopts a reflexive and critical methodological stance in which the researcher, as both participant and analyst, is implicated in the production and circulation of spatial meaning. This aligns with the concept of entangled resistance and situates City Walk as a form of participatory counter-mapping (Calvo & Candón-Mena, 2023), wherein walking, documenting, and navigating converge as modes of situated critique within platform-mediated urban space.

4. Negotiating Algorithmic Visibility and Tactical Spatial Agency

4.1. Route Deviation and Sensory Disruption: Interrupting the Platform-Imposed Rhythm of the City

The City Walk phenomenon in contemporary China draws from a longer trajectory of urban walking as a critical spatial practice. From the surrealist promenades to the situationist *dérive*, from the performative urban drift of the Stalker collective to more recent psychogeographic tactics, walking has historically served as a mode of both spatial exploration and resistance to dominant urban regimes. While these earlier practices contested the bureaucratic or capitalist ordering of urban space, City Walk engages with a new paradigm: algorithmic governance. In this context, walking becomes a means of negotiating visibility, reclaiming sensory experience, and resisting the normalization of movement through platform infrastructures.

Participants engage in a range of embodied and tactical practices designed to circumvent the homogenizing logic of algorithmic recommendation. Rather than total refusal, these practices exemplify what Bonini and Treré (2024) call algorithmic resistance—forms of micro-resistance that are immanent to platforms, operating through negotiation and infrastructural appropriation. In line with Scott's (1985) theory of "everyday resistance," these acts are subtle, situated, and interstitial. They do not aim to dismantle platforms from outside, but to tactically reconfigure them from within. Findings indicate that route deviation is one of the most prevalent tactics, materializing in three interrelated forms. First, "blind walking" involves the deliberate

abandonment of digital navigation tools. Participants engage in unstructured, open-ended exploration that resists platform logics of efficiency and optimization, echoing what Ziewitz (2017, p. 11) terms a "not quite random walk" in algorithmic environments—an experimental practice that foregrounds uncertainty and embodied improvisation. Second, "drift-style exploration" draws from psychogeographic traditions, privileging affective cues, emotional states, and ambient atmospheres over destination and utility. Movement becomes a response to mood, light, or texture rather than mapped intent. Third, "hidden city discovery" entails the purposeful traversal of marginalized, algorithmically invisible spaces—industrial ruins, migrant neighborhoods, or peripheral alleys—places often excluded from platform visibility due to low commercial or aesthetic value.

Together, these tactics enact a form of intentional detachment from algorithmically curated urban rhythms. Through spontaneous movement and the rediscovery of overlooked spatialities, City Walk participants contest the platform's epistemic authority over what is visible, knowable, and worth visiting. Interview data further support this. A 24-year-old filmmaker in Beijing critiqued the repetitiveness of algorithmic spatial curation:

> Every time I open Baidu Maps, it recommends the same cluster of hyper-commercialized places—Sanlitun, 798, Qianmen. These places are optimized for visibility, not for exploration. I started doing "random walks" to escape this repetition, to experience the city without being guided.

This sentiment was echoed across interviews. Eleven out of 15 participants reported intentionally avoiding AI-generated walking routes provided by Baidu Maps or similar platforms, describing them as repetitive and experientially hollow. These forms of avoidance are not merely individual preferences, but speak to a shared critique of algorithmic urbanism—a recognition that digital infrastructures structure not only how we move but what we perceive as meaningful space.

Platform content analysis reinforces this trend. Among the 50 representative posts drawn from Xiaohongshu and Douyin, nearly half explicitly labeled their routes as "non-mainstream." Hashtags such as #EscapeTheAlgorithm and #HiddenCity were not only frequent but also associated with higher-than-average engagement. These tags function as more than metadata—they operate as affective publics (Ahmed, 2004; Papacharissi, 2015) where shared frustration, curiosity, and resistance converge into collective imaginaries of the urban elsewhere. They also serve as counter-mapping devices, linking emotional narratives to spatial deviation in a way that challenges platform-generated cartographies.

Participants frequently emphasized the value of urban serendipity and the pursuit of unmapped textures. A 29-year-old architect in Shanghai reflected:

> There's an entire layer of the city untouched by digital maps—abandoned factories, forgotten alleys, migrant worker neighborhoods missing from platform recommendations. These are the places I seek out because they break the illusion that everything in the city has already been pre-mapped and pre-monetized.

This perspective was widespread. Ten participants described their City Walk practices as direct responses to the standardization and datafication of urban mobility. On Xiaohongshu, one user documented an unstructured walk through Guangzhou's industrial periphery, writing: "No algorithm, no itinerary, no

destination—just wandering through the city's forgotten spaces." Such narratives reflect a desire for de-algorithmized perception and highlight the sensory hybridity embedded in City Walk practices. These are not merely alternative walking behaviors, but acts of embodied critique—engagements with the city that foreground memory, emotion, and presence over platform optimization (Vaughan, 2018).

Building on counter-mapping literatures (Harris & Hazen, 2006; Kollektiv Orangotango+, 2018; Peluso, 1995), this study conceptualizes City Walk as a form of user-generated counter-mapping that unfolds across three dimensions: (a) unpredictable mobility trajectories that evade algorithmic capture and challenge spatial predictability; (b) repurposing platforms as archives, in which digital content becomes a repository of alternative spatial knowledge; and (c) affective and sensory interventions, where walking operates as a perceptual disruption of algorithmic authority. These dimensions reflect not a rejection of platforms but a tactical reworking of their affordances—what Ettlinger (2018) calls "productive resistance."

These practices are infrastructurally entangled and politically ambivalent. As one 22-year-old university student in Guangzhou explained: "We fight the platform with the platform—using hashtags to escape recommendations, using content to resist ranking."

During participatory fieldwork, the researcher encountered similar tensions. In Chengdu's Dongjiao Memory district, Baidu Maps labeled the zone as a "pending development area," implying emptiness. On the ground, however, the space was vibrant—filled with informal markets, mobile vendors, and youth-organized film screenings. When the researcher uploaded this experience to Xiaohongshu using hashtags such as #HiddenCity and #NonRecommendedRoutes, the post received significantly lower visibility than content referencing algorithm-preferred "hotspots." This asymmetry revealed the structural logics of algorithmic visibility reduction and positioned the researcher not just as an observer but as a participant embedded within the very infrastructures under critique.

City Walk thus emerges not merely as a cultural phenomenon but as a site of epistemic negotiation—a contested arena where users reconfigure meaning, visibility, and agency from within platform systems. The walk becomes more than a sensory act; it becomes a cartographic counter-performance, a form of situated resistance that is neither outside nor fully inside algorithmic governance, but always negotiating it from within.

4.2. Counter-Cartography and Affective Mobilization: Rewriting Urban Narratives

City Walk, as an embodied and digitally mediated spatial practice, has evolved into a form of digital counter-cartography—a user-led process of re-mapping urban meaning from within platform infrastructures. While platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin function as algorithmic curators of urban desirability, they are simultaneously repurposed as contested archives—spaces where users document demolition sites, spatial erasure, and vanishing everyday life. These acts do not unfold in opposition to the platform but rather within its logic: a politics of visibility negotiated through content, tags, and affect. This aligns with earlier understandings of counter-mapping as the grassroots production of spatial knowledge that challenges hegemonic representations.

In the platform context, counter-mapping becomes not only about spatial representation, but also about temporal memory and emotional resonance. Participants frequently use digital tools to reclaim spatial memory—archiving residual urban fragments, such as soon-to-be-demolished neighborhoods, to resist the erasure imposed by commercial redevelopment. These digital traces contest both forgetting and the singular aesthetic narrative of the "modernized" city. Through melancholic captions, filtered imagery, and deliberate tagging, users mobilize affective spatial politics—not to incite protest, but to evoke identification, loss, and attachment. Emotion becomes a mode of political engagement, challenging the sanitized, promotional cityscapes pushed by platform algorithms.

This aesthetic-political tension is often negotiated through hashtags, which act as semantic and affective nodes. Tags such as #DisappearingNeighborhoods, #EscapeTheAlgorithm, and #NonRecommendedRoutes do more than organize content; they articulate counter-publics (Papacharissi, 2015) that coalesce around shared spatial dissatisfaction. As noted by a 27-year-old university student in Shanghai: "I know the platform won't recommend this kind of content, but through these hashtags we recognize one another—we find our version of the city." This quote captures the dual function of hashtags: both tactical and relational. They circulate affective narratives but also perform community-building within algorithmically managed space. Through such practices, platforms are not rejected outright but re-coded—used to build what Rob Kitchin might term "digital spatial citizenship" (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019), where visibility becomes a civic claim.

However, the very infrastructures that enable these counter-narratives also constrain them. Participants frequently report experiences of algorithmic suppression—a form of visibility control that operates through downranking, shadow banning, or non-deletion disappearance. Interview data indicate that four out of fifteen participants encountered sudden engagement drops, suspected moderation, or inexplicable invisibility. A 34-year-old journalist in Shanghai recounted: "I posted a photo series about a community facing forced demolition. A few hours later, almost no one saw it. The platform didn't delete it—but it became invisible." This condition of algorithmic invisibilization (Roberts, 2019) reflects a key contradiction: Platforms appear open but selectively silence content that deviates from commercial or political norms. As Dotson (2012) argues, epistemic exclusion is not always about censorship—it is about which knowledges are allowed to circulate, and which are quietly erased.

Moreover, platforms do not suppress all memory equally. Aestheticized nostalgia—such as retro cafés or stylized hutong imagery—is often algorithmically privileged, while content that foregrounds conflict, dispossession, or displacement is rendered invisible or de-ranked. A widely shared video juxtaposed archival images of a demolished industrial zone with its current form as a luxury mall. The caption read: "This space once belonged to the working class. Now it belongs only to consumerism." This contrast elicited strong emotional reactions. As a 30-year-old software engineer in Chengdu remarked, "If you post about a hutong café, it gets pushed to the top. But if you post about a displaced family, it gets immediately de-ranked. The platform decides which histories are worth remembering." This algorithmic sorting of memory constitutes what could be called a curated memory regime—one in which the past is not erased, but selectively aestheticized for circulation within profitable attention economies. Counter-cartography, then, becomes not only a spatial act but a temporal-political intervention, resisting the platform's memory politics.

Yet, these acts of resistance are rarely absolute. As Burgess (2007) argues, users develop "platform vernaculars"—expressive norms adapted to the affordances and constraints of particular infrastructures.

In the case of City Walk, these include visual composition techniques, captioning strategies, and carefully timed posts designed to evade moderation while still maintaining visibility. This form of tactical compliance reveals a nuanced mode of agency: not withdrawal but strategic alignment with platform logics to sustain counter-narratives under algorithmic governance. Such practices illustrate a core paradox: Resistance from within is always at risk of absorption. Counter-mapping content may be de-ranked, commodified, or even incorporated into official city branding. As one user wryly noted in a comment thread, "They'll turn our ruins into tourist routes soon." This underscores the fragility of oppositional space within platform systems—not because resistance is futile but because it is always entangled.

City Walk's digital layer, then, should not be romanticized as autonomous or purely subversive. Rather, it operates as a terrain of immanent critique—a site where visibility, memory, and meaning are negotiated through continuous infrastructural tension. Through visual archiving, emotional circulation, and hashtag-based assemblage, users construct performative cartographies of resistance. These are not maps in the traditional sense, but felt mappings—situated spatial imaginaries grounded in loss, longing, and the refusal to forget.

4.3. From Resistance to Commodification: City Walk and the Logics of Platform Co-Optation

While City Walk initially emerged as a tactical response to algorithmic urbanism—through route deviation, affective witnessing, and counter-cartographic experimentation—it increasingly encounters absorption into the very platform infrastructures it once sought to circumvent. This process reflects what scholars have termed algorithmic capture under platform capitalism: the transformation of dissent into circulation, and resistance into monetized visibility. Platforms do not merely neutralize critique—they incentivize it, actively reconfiguring oppositional gestures into profitable content forms. This dynamic constitutes a form of recursive enclosure in which critical spatial practices are continuously folded back into platform logics through algorithmic ranking, commercial partnerships, and experiential branding. What once operated as spatial refusal becomes stylized as curated serendipity—an aestheticized performance of urban discovery that simulates difference while reinforcing the homogenizing tendencies of platform-mediated urban experience. The result is not pluralism, but pseudo-heterogeneity: the appearance of spatial diversity filtered through algorithmic preferences.

Platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin deploy recommendation engines, traffic-based promotions, and monetization pathways to convert the contingent, affective practices of City Walk into marketable visual formats. The rise of influencer-led guides—e.g., "Best City Walk Routes" or "Urban Strolling Checklists"—signals a shift from spontaneous drift to pre-scripted itineraries, often linked to brand sponsorship or tourism campaigns (Salamon & Saunders, 2024). The platform does not merely host these transitions—it actively engineers them through its visibility logics. This transformation is directly perceived by users. A 32-year-old photography blogger based in Guangzhou illustrated this shift: "No one looks at my posts about industrial ruins. But if I switch to old streets, cafés, and retro filters, it instantly goes viral." Such algorithmic preferences privilege aestheticized, emotionally palatable content, while marginalizing critical or politically charged spatial narratives. Over time, users internalize these logics. A 28-year-old freelance designer in Beijing reflected: "At first, I wanted to escape mainstream recommendations. But now I find myself thinking about what kind of content is more likely to be seen. Gradually, I've become the kind of content creator I originally wanted to resist." This illustrates how platform algorithms, through the differential allocation of visibility, guide user practices from dissenting expression toward self-disciplining reproduction.

This shift is not merely perceptual but structural. Hashtag metrics reveal that posts labeled with #CityWalk consistently garner more engagement than untagged content. This encourages not only individual creators but also brands, marketers, and local governments to appropriate the vocabulary, aesthetics, and rhetoric of City Walk. What began as a grassroots expression of spatial agency is increasingly institutionalized as a lifestyle media genre.

At the municipal level, this process is formalized through curated routes, festivals, and redevelopment projects. A 35-year-old planner in Shanghai described: "The government is now rebranding previously demolished areas as 'ideal City Walk destinations.' It's a spatial cycle: first erasure, then aestheticization, then commodification." This cycle—demolition, rebranding, and monetization—exemplifies how counter-mapping practices may be absorbed into governance-led placemaking. Platforms reinforce this trajectory through algorithmic curation. A 29-year-old photographer in Guangzhou explained: "I used to document old neighborhoods, but no one paid attention. It wasn't until I added filters, background music, and cinematic framing that the algorithm began to promote my videos." Here, visibility is not neutral—it is conditioned by platform-specific aesthetics, attention economies, and moderation protocols. As users adapt to these constraints, the line between resistance and performance becomes increasingly blurred. The 2024 launch of Xiaohongshu's "Official City Walk Guide" marks a decisive moment in this transformation. User-generated routes are now formalized into platform-certified itineraries, ranked by popularity and engagement. While framed as discovery, the mechanism reinforces experiential homogenization and spatial standardization. A 32-year-old architect involved in urban regeneration in Chengdu commented: "We were documenting spaces on the verge of demolition—now the platform tells you which street to walk, which café to visit. This is no longer resistance; it's just another algorithmic path." Features such as check-in badges, point rewards, and visibility metrics further integrate City Walk into gamified data production loops. The critical and socio-political charge of early walking practices is replaced by a logic of participation that privileges metrics over meaning.

This recursive co-optation reflects a deeper structural condition: platform capitalism's ability to aestheticize critique and commodify dissent. As M. Fisher (2009) argues, capitalist realism operates not through the suppression of resistance, but through its profitable incorporation. Zuboff (2019) similarly diagnoses predictive commodification as the transformation of human experience into raw material for algorithmic modulation. Under such a regime, visibility becomes not a right but a reward for compliance with platform norms.

However, City Walk practitioners are not entirely passive. Many continue to engage in subtle forms of semantic displacement and tactical deviation. Through hashtag manipulation, euphemistic captions, and experimental visual formats, users attempt to evade suppression while preserving critical intent. These strategies exemplify what Milan and Treré (2020) describe as de-domesticated use—an immanent form of critique that operates within technical systems without fully conforming to them. The evolving trajectory of City Walk reveals that resistance is not a binary, but a field of tension, ambivalence, and negotiation. Its political potential lies not in its purity, but in its capacity to open micro-fissures within dominant infrastructures. City Walk becomes a cartography of contradictions: at once a disruption and a commodity, a refusal and a performance. Within the recursive dynamics of platform governance, urban agency is not defined by escape, but by the ability to tactically rearticulate meaning—to walk, write, and map otherwise, even under algorithmic constraint.

Importantly, not every City Walk is an act of resistance. While this study emphasizes City Walk as a tactical engagement with algorithmic infrastructures, it also acknowledges that many participants do not self-identify their practices as oppositional. For some, City Walk is primarily a form of aesthetic immersion, emotional expression, or leisurely exploration. In this regard, the figure of the modern-day Chinese flâneur—wandering with curiosity but without explicit political intent—remains useful in expanding our understanding of affective urban agency. As Elwood (2006) argues, spatial practices frequently operate beyond the binary of co-optation or resistance, unfolding instead within a spectrum of everyday meaning-making.

Moreover, many participants simultaneously seek visibility and critique visibility; they may optimize their content for engagement while expressing discomfort with commodification. This ambivalent position does not invalidate their agency. Instead, it reflects what Milan and Treré (2020) term immanent critique: a form of resistance that unfolds within systems, not against them. City Walk, therefore, should not be reduced to a singular oppositional movement, but understood as a heterogeneous assemblage of spatial practices—some resistant, some aesthetic, others exploratory. What unites them is a shared engagement with the algorithmic city and a desire to re-narrate urban experience on their own terms.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined how young urbanites in China engage algorithmically mediated infrastructures through the emergent practice of City Walk. Moving through the city on foot, yet embedded in mobile platforms and social media interfaces, participants enact a form of spatial practice that is at once affective, tactical, and infrastructurally situated. Through route deviations, digital counter-mapping, and hashtag-mediated storytelling, users renegotiate what is visible, desirable, and knowable in platformed urban space. Framed against the backdrop of platform capitalism, this study traced how algorithmic governance reshapes urban agency—not by enforcing absolute control but by modulating participation, aesthetics, and circulation. It showed how resistance is no longer solely oppositional or external, but increasingly entangled within the very systems it seeks to subvert. Participants do not retreat from platforms; rather, they inhabit them critically, enacting what Bonini and Treré (2024) describe as algorithmic resistance—a negotiation of power from within.

To analyze this phenomenon, the study introduced the concepts of platform-dependent tactics and entangled spatial resistance. The former describes resistant gestures that emerge inside and through algorithmic infrastructures; the latter captures the recursive, negotiated, and often contradictory nature of these practices. Together, they help reframe resistance not as rupture, but as semantic drift, repetition with difference, and infrastructural improvisation. City Walk is not entirely new. It sits within a longer genealogy of urban walking as critique. From surrealist *dérives* and situationist drift to the transurban practices of the Stalker collective (Wiley, 2008, 2010) and contemporary psychogeography (Bassett, 2004), walking has long served as a method of spatial reimagination. What distinguishes City Walk is its platform entanglement—its simultaneous rejection of one type of platform (navigation apps) and embrace of another (social media platforms), transforming walking into a networked, participatory media event.

Empirically, this study drew on one year of multi-sited fieldwork, fifteen semi-structured interviews, and digital ethnography on Xiaohongshu and Douyin. Through these methods, it documented how spatial narratives circulate through platform vernaculars—hashtags, filters, captions, and engagement strategies—forming what

might be called vernacular cartographies. These do not merely represent space but perform agency under algorithmic constraint. Yet these practices unfold within a structural paradox. The same platforms that enable visibility also suppress dissent and aestheticize critique. Algorithmic infrastructures reward nostalgic, visually polished content while downranking politically charged or emotionally raw narratives. Even practices born in critique—such as walking through demolition zones or documenting informal neighborhoods—are susceptible to commodification, gamification, and institutional appropriation. This reveals not the futility of resistance but its transformation. Resistance is not dissolved; it is stylized, anticipated, and sometimes recirculated as authenticity. Still, resistance persists—not as purity, but as immanent critique (Milan & Treré, 2020), enacted through ambiguity, reframing, and strategic use of platform affordances. These tactics open micro-fissures within dominant infrastructures, sustaining the possibility of alternative spatial imaginaries.

This study contributes to the scholarship on counter-mapping by expanding the concept beyond formal cartographic production. Drawing from Peluso (1995), Harris and Hazen (2006), and Kollektiv Orangotango+ (2018), it conceptualizes City Walk as a performative counter-mapping practice—one that operates through the tools and grammars of social platforms to render visible what is algorithmically concealed. These acts of mapping do not chart coordinates; they trace affect, memory, and movement, transforming digital fragments into spatial critique.

City Walk also reflects a broader condition of digital urbanism in the Global South, where algorithmic governance intersects with state-led redevelopment and platform infrastructures. In this context, the city becomes a contested interface, and digital infrastructures emerge not only as mechanisms of control but as tactically appropriable, emotionally expressive, and semantically reconfigurable terrains of practice. Walking thus becomes a media act—a way of writing back to the city as it is being rewritten by code. Moving forward, future research could engage in cross-cultural comparisons of platform-mediated spatial resistance, exploring how similar practices unfold in cities shaped by different urban histories, infrastructural inequalities, and political regimes. This includes examining how platforms selectively promote pseudo-diversity, shaping the conditions under which critique becomes visible or is rendered invisible. Additional attention might be given to the convergence of aesthetic and emotional labor in digital spatial storytelling, and to how users navigate the tension between engagement and erasure.

The rise of City Walk reminds us that in algorithmically organized urban environments, resistance does not disappear—it mutates. It becomes embedded, situated, and recursive. It manifests not through grand confrontations, but through semantic negotiation, spatial improvisation, and platform reappropriation. In this sense, to walk is not only to move through the city, but to rewrite it—to make visible what the algorithm hides, and to open up new ways of knowing, sensing, and inhabiting the digital city from within.

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Conflict of Interests

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