

Virtual Ethnography of Chinese Jazz Culture Across Major Platforms: Memes, Posts, and Participation

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Abstract

In the past five years, there has been an increasing number of research papers on the virtual ethnography of jazz music and its fans; however, there are almost no studies on the virtual jazz life of Chinese netizens. This article addresses this gap by analyzing platform vernaculars, including memes, posts, commentaries, and forum threads—on RedNote and exploring their influence on recent jazz culture and urban life in China. The findings suggest that online platforms reshape jazz participation by lowering barriers to entry, expanding audiences beyond elite urban spaces, and enabling new forms of affective, symbolic, imaginary engagement. This research contributes to studies of jazz communities, digital music cultures, and the globalization of jazz by demonstrating how jazz is locally reinterpreted and emotionally circulated through everyday digital practices in contemporary China.

Keywords: virtual ethnography, jazz online community, Chinese social media platform

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Introduction

Offline Jazz Community

In the early twentieth century, the arrival of jazz in Shanghai made it one of the main forms of entertainment for the upper class of Shanghai citizens and foreigners. In the Chinese historical context, jazz music was therefore embedded within elite culture in Shanghai, and its circulation was closely connected with urban modernity and international exchange (Marlow, 2018). The situation of jazz music in Western countries during the same period differed significantly. Jazz has historically been framed as a form of youth subculture (Margolis, 1954). At the same time, scholars have described jazz communities as racialized and marginalized urban formations closely associated with African American culture, segregated urban spaces, nightlife, and underground scenes (Gerard, 1998).

Research on jazz communities has also historically emphasized professional musicians and formal performance contexts. Merriam and Mack's (1959) influential sociological study of the jazz community suggested that jazz communities revolve primarily around the work, skills, and contributions of those who perform jazz professionally. Within this framework, audience members are positioned as secondary participants whose role is largely defined through their relationship to musicians. Becker (2023) argues that art should not be understood as the product of isolated geniuses but rather as the outcome of cooperative networks involving many participants, including individuals who are not artists. From this perspective, audiences, technicians, promoters, educators, and other participants all contribute to the production and circulation of artistic meaning.

In practice, however, beginners often experience feelings of exclusion due to the technical demands of improvisation and the informal norms governing jazz performance (De Bruin et al., 2020). Consequently, some people associate jazz communities with isolation and exclusion. In contemporary China, several major cities—including Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong—host active jazz scenes with clubs, festivals, and conservatory programs. Nevertheless, these activities remain concentrated within relatively limited cultural spaces. Jazz performance is largely confined to niche audiences and specialized urban environments, and access to live jazz events often depends on geographic location, social class, or formal musical training. Consequently, participation in jazz culture remains unevenly distributed.

Virtual Communities and Changing Modes of Jazz Engagement

The development of digital platforms has introduced an alternative mode of engagement that expands beyond these traditional boundaries (Prouty, 2011, 2013). Through short videos, memes, posts, and comment threads, online users can encounter and interact with jazz culture in everyday digital environments. In addition to professional musicians and individuals with clearly articulated jazz identities, digital environments expand the field of participation to include ordinary listeners, video viewers, commenters, sharers, meme creators, and even passers-by who, in the information age, may also function as insiders in meaningful ways (Judd, 2022).

Although Howard S. Becker's "art world" model acknowledges the presence of audiences and their contribution to the arts (1982), it offers limited insight into how audience members interact with one another. Virtual communities make jazz-related content and people's interactions visible. In this sense, online spaces extend existing jazz communities. As a result,

virtual communities play an increasingly important role in shaping contemporary jazz culture by expanding the range of participants who can engage with the music.

These conditions raise several important questions: How do people online engage with jazz music? Do fans matter in the formation of virtual jazz communities? While jazz scholarship has increasingly examined virtual jazz communities, research in the Chinese context remains relatively limited. Chinese platforms such as RedNote, Douban, Bilibili, and TikTok host large volumes of jazz-related content in the form of memes, short videos, posts, and comment threads. Within these environments, users actively interpret, discuss, and circulate jazz-related materials. These interactions transform how jazz is experienced and understood, shifting participation away from exclusively performance-based contexts toward broader forms of cultural engagement.

This study therefore examines how jazz culture is experienced and interpreted within Chinese digital environments. It focuses particularly on the interactions of ordinary users who engage with jazz through online media rather than through professional performance or formal training. The study investigates the following research questions: How do Chinese netizens engage with jazz music online? What cultural interaction patterns emerge from their engagements?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines perspectives from communication theory and music studies. These perspectives help explain how musical meaning is produced, circulated, and experienced in digital environments. Rather than treating jazz as a fixed musical object, this framework conceptualizes online jazz engagement as a social and communicative process in which emotions, symbols, and interactions play central roles.

Affective Media and Resemblance Theory

Affective media theory suggests that media engagement often operates at the level of feeling rather than cognitive interpretation (Grossberg & Rudd, 1992). Cultural theorists argue that audiences frequently respond to media texts through emotional intensities that precede analytical understanding (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019a, 2019b). Similarly, Papacharissi (2015) conceptualizes contemporary digital environments as “affective publics,” in which emotional expression, circulation, and amplification become primary forms of participation. Music constitutes a particularly powerful medium for affective communication. In music philosophy, Peter Kivy’s theory of musical expressiveness (1993) proposes that listeners perceive emotional qualities in music because musical structures resemble patterns of human expressive behavior. For instance, slow tempos and descending melodic gestures may resemble sadness, while abrupt dynamics or rough timbres may evoke tension or excitement. Crucially, such expressive perception does not require formal musical training; listeners can intuitively recognize emotional qualities in sound.

Symbolic Interactionism and Musical Meaning

While affect theory emphasizes emotional experience, symbolic interactionism highlights the social processes through which meaning is constructed. According to symbolic interactionism, cultural meanings do not reside inherently within objects but emerge through interaction and interpretation (Blumer, 1969). Musicologist Nicholas Cook (2001) similarly argues that

musical meaning is not produced solely by the sonic structure of a work but through the interaction between performance, mediation, and reception. This perspective suggests that the meanings associated with musical sounds are continuously negotiated through listening practices, discussions, and cultural narratives. Visual imagery, historical narratives, and social contexts therefore shape how audiences interpret music.

Participatory Culture

Shifman (2012) describes internet memes as a central form of participatory culture in which users reproduce, remix, and reinterpret shared cultural symbols through everyday digital practices. Within such environments, participation does not depend on professional expertise or specialized knowledge. Users engage with cultural materials through humor, emotional reactions, symbolic commentary, and short textual responses. These forms of interaction enable large numbers of individuals to contribute to cultural conversations even when they lack technical or academic familiarity with the subject matter.

Methodology

This study employs virtual ethnography, a qualitative research approach designed to examine cultural practices and social interactions within digital environments. Virtual ethnography enables researchers to observe how meanings, identities, and communities are constructed through online communication (Ward, 1999), making it particularly suitable for investigating music cultures that increasingly circulate through social media platforms. The primary field site for this research is RedNote, one of the most widely used social media applications in China (Cao, 2025). The platform hosts large volumes of user-generated cultural content and facilitates extensive interaction through comment sections, reposts, and visual media. Because jazz-related materials on RedNote frequently appear in the form of short videos, memes, and discussion posts, the platform provides a valuable environment for examining how Chinese netizens encounter and interpret jazz music in everyday digital contexts.

The dataset for this study consists of associated comment chains, memes, short videos, and GIFs related to jazz music. From this broader dataset, four representative posts were selected for detailed analysis. These cases were chosen according to three criteria: temporal breadth, including posts published between 2023 and 2026; form diversity, incorporating different types of media such as short videos, concert clips, and internet memes; and high levels of netizen interaction, with comment sections ranging from approximately 170 to 600 responses. The analytical approach focuses on identifying patterns of affective, symbolic, and participatory engagement within user interactions. Comments were coded according to recurring themes, emotional expressions, symbolic interpretations, and cultural narratives in order to reveal how jazz is collectively interpreted and experienced within Chinese online communities.

Discussion

Affective Resonance

The meme “Jazz for Your Soul” illustrates how humor operates as an affective entry point into jazz culture (Figure 1). The image of a man holding a fire extinguisher as if it were a saxophone, accompanied by the caption “Jazz for your soul,” exaggerates the emotional intensity often associated with jazz performance while simultaneously mocking its performance skills. The humor lies in the tension between chaotic or amateurish performance and the exaggerated claim

of emotional authenticity. Commenters respond with brief reactions such as “so funny”, “so many people are jazz men!!”, or “why jazz is niche, but so many jazz men on RedNote?” These responses demonstrate that users recognize the meme’s irony and collectively participate in its playful self-mockery. This acknowledgment fosters a sense of belonging, as users collectively negotiate the humorous if jazz fandom and affectionate dimensions of jazz musicians. Importantly, interaction is pre-discursive, which means the resonance of the meme does not require verbal explanation or musical expertise, but rather is experienced affectively and socially. Through this mechanism, the meme creates a virtual space where community identity is reinforced via shared humor, irony, and emotional recognition.

Figure 1

Screen Shot of RedNote Search Results for “Jazz Memes”



Note. The post was posted in RedNote on April 20, 2023 by 周北树. It was originally uploaded in early 2007 by Daum Blogger Masaru7 from Korea. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/jazz-for-your-soul>

A similar affective orientation appears in responses to Tony Bennett’s performance of Fly Me to the Moon (Figure 2). In this case, emotional engagement centers on empathy and vulnerability. This piece of music has no connection with sadness either in terms of rhythm style or lyrics. However, commenters frequently mention Bennett’s declining health, noting that he was already suffering from dementia when the performance was recorded. Expressions such as “this made me cry,” “so many emotional triggers,” and “tears kept flowing” dominate the comment section. From the perspective of affective media theory, this video operates as an affective event, generating collective emotional resonance among viewers. Comment sections function as amplifiers, synchronizing grief and empathy through the repetition of crying emojis and expressions of sadness, creating a networked space of shared affect. Viewers’ engagement is primarily characterized by empathetic affect, in which responses are oriented less toward technical musical appreciation and more toward an emotional recognition of the performers’ vulnerability and perseverance. In this sense, jazz here transcends sonic experience, operating as a medium through which audiences co-experience and articulate profound human emotions.

Figure 2

Screen Shot of “Fly Me to the Moon” Video



Note. The video was posted in RedNote on June 17, 2025 by 听爵士乐的木兆先生

Symbolic Association

Another theme emerging from the data involves the symbolic interpretation of jazz authenticity. In online discourse, users frequently rely on culturally recognizable cues—such as vocal timbre, performer identity, or visual imagery—to interpret what counts as “real” jazz. This pattern is particularly evident in responses to Louis Armstrong’s *What a Wonderful World* (Figure 3). Although Armstrong occupies a canonical position within jazz history, netizens interpret the video primarily through symbolic icon. Comments such as “I knew it was a black singer without even watching the video,” “This jazz sounds truly authentic,” or “Why don’t white singers sing like this?” illustrate how audiences associate certain sonic qualities with racial identity. There is a symbolic recognition: Armstrong’s vocal timbre and presence are read as markers of “real jazz,” and his racial identity is associated with the authenticity of jazz music as well. Armstrong’s performance thus becomes a symbolic sign of cultural expectations about what “real jazz” should sound like in Chinese context.

Interestingly, symbolic association also appears indirectly in the meme “Jazz for Your Soul.” The humor of the meme relies on the cultural stereotype of the “soulful jazz musician,” exaggerating the idea that emotional intensity is central to jazz performance. Even in parody, the meme depends on a shared symbolic understanding of what jazz is supposed to represent.

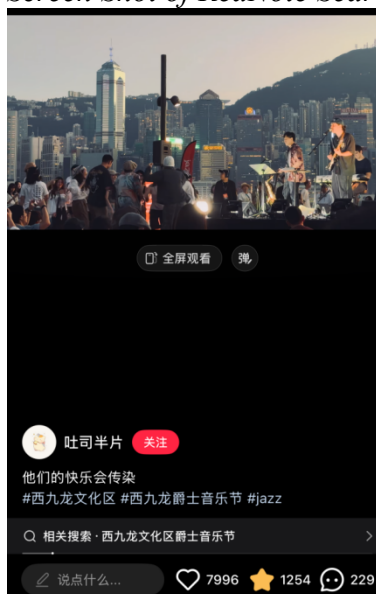
Figure 3
 Screen Shot of RedNote Search Results for “Jazz Music”



Note. The video was posted in RedNote on January 1, 2026 by JOYKEYS 现代音乐

Aspirational Imagination of Jazz Culture

In some digital contexts, audiences respond more to the lifestyle and atmosphere surrounding jazz performance. The video of the West Kowloon Jazz Music Festival (Figure 4) provides a clear illustration of this pattern. Commenters frequently describe the scene using expressions such as “This is too happy,” “It feels like a completely different world from my life,” or “I really want to run over there and feel this happiness.” Rather than discussing the music itself, viewers focus on the emotional atmosphere created by the setting: outdoor performance spaces, sunset lighting, relaxed audiences, and the communal enjoyment of live music. Jazz music in this mediated form becomes a symbol of freedom, leisure, and emotional fulfillment, evoking an imaginative space that contrasts sharply with the pressures of everyday life. In online contexts, the meaning of jazz is often inseparable from the broader sensory environment in which it is presented. Music, imagery, and atmosphere combine to produce an idealized representation of jazz as a symbol of cosmopolitan cultural life.

Figure 4*Screen Shot of RedNote Search Results for “The Jazz Festival”*

Note. The video was posted in RedNote on November 9, 2025 by 吐司半片

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Chinese people engage with jazz music in RedNote application. The analysis suggests that online participation is structured through a multilayered engagement model consisting of affective resonance, symbolic association, and aspirational imagination. Affective resonance emerges when audiences respond to jazz through immediate emotional reactions such as humor, empathy, or shared sentiment, as seen in meme culture and emotional responses to performances. Symbolic association reflects how users interpret jazz through recognizable cultural cues, including racialized notions of authenticity or widely circulated images of jazz identity. Aspirational imagination, meanwhile, highlights how jazz-related media evoke visions of desirable emotional and social worlds, where music becomes linked to ideals of happiness, freedom, or meaningful human connection.

The findings underscore the significance of virtual participation in jazz music. Such engagement reshapes who can access jazz, how it is understood, and the cultural functions it performs, particularly in contexts where formal jazz education and live performance opportunities are limited or unevenly distributed. Virtual participation positions jazz not as a fixed tradition preserved through technical mastery, but as a dynamic cultural resource that is emotionally experienced, symbolically negotiated, and socially reimagined through everyday digital practices.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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