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Negotiating Expression: Cultural Fields and AI-Mediated Production in Chinese Web Series

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Abstract: Chinese web series production operates within overlapping forces of state regulation, platform governance, commercial capital, and audience participation. This study examines how creators negotiate creative freedom within this AI-mediated ecosystem. Based on Bourdieu's theory of cultural fields, the research develops a four-field analytical model to analyse interactions among cultural production, capital, symbolic capital, and power. This qualitative study draws on six semi-structured interviews with actors, directors, writers, and producers in Beijing and Shanghai, complemented by thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. A co-occurrence matrix was constructed to identify the semantic relationships among eight subthemes and the four broader fields. Findings show that creators navigate a constrained environment shaped simultaneously by platform algorithms, policy expectations, and data-driven audience feedback. The strongest thematic linkage emerged between the Field of Cultural Production and the Field of Symbolic Capital (12.7%), indicating that creative intentions are closely intertwined with audience participation and symbolic valuation on digital platforms. In contrast, the tight coupling between capital and power (12.0%) highlights how institutional and commercial logics jointly structure the production process. This study contributes a theoretical model illustrating how creative freedom is negotiated within an AI-mediated cultural production system. It also highlights the need to reconceptualize symbolic capital in platformised environments shaped by algorithmic visibility and participatory metrics.

Keywords: Chinese web series; cultural production; AI-mediated; symbolic capital; audience participation

Introduction

In recent years, Chinese web series have rapidly evolved into a mainstream narrative form within the country's expanding digital audiovisual landscape. According to the China Online Audiovisual Development Report (2025), China's online audiovisual user base reached 1.091 billion by the end of 2024, with a usage rate of 98.4% among internet users, while short video users numbered 1.04 billion. The report further notes that among the global Top 100 revenue-generating audiovisual applications, 20 are Chinese, including eight micro-drama platforms, underscoring the rising international influence of China's platform-driven content economy. Within this convergence of technology, content, and communication, web series have become important carriers of cultural expression and instruments of China's cultural internationalisation strategy (Liu & Keane, 2022).

As culturally significant media forms, web series operate within a production environment shaped by state policy, commercial capital, and platform governance. Prior research shows that ideological red lines and platform metrics—such as completion rates and keyword rankings jointly regulate narrative form and content decision-making (Feng, 2021). Complementary studies further reveal how platform-mediated information

practices shape patterns of participation and visibility (Tan, 2024), reinforcing the narrative that creators primarily respond to institutionalised constraints with limited strategic agency. Meanwhile, platforms increasingly exert influence over content selection and visibility through algorithmic recommendation systems, traffic modelling, and data-based optimisation (Wang, 2023, pp. 145-152), raising concerns about the shifting balance between creative autonomy and institutional power.

Bourdieu's (1996) theory of cultural fields offers a foundational lens for examining how symbolic capital is produced and contested. However, scholars have noted its limitations in contexts dominated by large-scale, digitally mediated media systems driven by algorithmic evaluation and behavioural data (Garnham, 1993; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Importantly, in contemporary platform environments, AI does not operate as an independent technological domain but functions as an embedded mediator within platform governance, translating user behaviour into signals that structure content visibility. Audience participation—via bullet comments, likes, reviews, and fan-led discourse—further contributes to symbolic meaning-making and circulates through algorithmic systems (Jenkins, 2006, pp.131-133; Z. Chen, 2020). Similar patterns of mediated participation have been observed in Southeast Asia, where digital communication reshapes public engagement and institutional power (Abdullah & Rahman, 2024).

Despite growing scholarly attention, existing research remains fragmented. Studies often focus separately on policy regulation (Feng, 2021), platform governance and commercial optimisation (Wang, 2023, pp95-110), or audience participation and symbolic negotiation (Z. Chen, 2020; Abdullah & Rahman, 2024), resulting in the absence of an integrated analytical framework that explains how these forces interact to shape creators' creative freedom. Furthermore, although Bourdieu's theory has been instrumental in analysing cultural production, it has rarely been adapted to incorporate AI-mediated evaluation systems or the dynamics of platformised participatory cultures, leaving a theoretical gap in understanding symbolic capital formation in digital ecosystems (Garnham, 1993; Hesmondhalgh, 2006).

To address these gaps, this study draws on Bourdieu's field theory to construct a four-field analytical model—comprising the Field of Cultural Production (FCP), Field of Capital (FC), Field of Symbolic Capital (FSC), and Field of Power (FP)—to examine how Chinese web series creators negotiate creative freedom amid overlapping structural forces. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) how creators adapt their expressive strategies under structural constraints; (2) how digital platforms reconfigure symbolic capital generation and circulation; and (3) how multiple fields interact in shaping creative freedom.

Studies on cultural production

Research across cultural production, platform governance, algorithmic mediation, media regulation and participatory culture provides an essential foundation for examining the environment in which Chinese web series are produced. Yet these bodies of scholarship often analyse separate dimensions of media systems, which limits their ability to explain how creators negotiate competing pressures in an AI-mediated production ecology. This section reviews four major bodies of literature and evaluates their contributions, limitations and points of intersection.

Studies on cultural production have been strongly shaped by Bourdieu's field theory, which conceptualises cultural creation as a structured arena in which actors compete for symbolic capital, legitimacy and authority (Bourdieu, 1996). In this model, creators develop expressive strategies within a system of positions that reflect power relations. The theory has been applied widely to analyse artistic labour, media professions and symbolic production in traditional cultural industries. Although this model provides an influential framework, scholars have raised concerns about its relevance to contemporary digital environments. Garnham (1993) argues that Bourdieu pays insufficient attention to the economic organisation of mass media, while Hesmondhalgh (2006) highlights the need to recognise the institutional scale and corporate structures of cultural industries. These critiques suggest that the cultural field is increasingly shaped by the economic strategies of media institutions rather than by autonomous artistic norms.

Recent scholarship has extended these critiques by showing how digital platforms transform the structure of cultural fields. Van Dijck et al. (2018, pp. 4-7) describe platforms as socio-technical infrastructures

that organise public communication through commercial, algorithmic and governance mechanisms. Couldry and Mejias (2019) further argue that digital platforms convert everyday behaviour into data, which becomes a basis for classification and control. These studies highlight the increasing influence of computational systems on cultural value and distribution. Research on global streaming services, including Netflix, shows that recommendation algorithms shape international visibility, genre selection and production design (Lobato, 2019, pp. 86–90, 110–115). Collectively, this literature demonstrates that cultural fields are now mediated by automated evaluation and distribution processes that were not present in earlier media environments. This development suggests the need to update field theory to address algorithmic participation in the organisation of symbolic capital.

Research on platform governance provides a second body of literature relevant to understanding web series production. Digital platforms manage content through recommendation systems, ranking logics and automated decision-making processes. Napoli (2014) shows that platforms rely on viewer metrics such as completion rates, click ratios and engagement intensity to guide the allocation of visibility. These measurable indicators are then used as proxies for cultural value and commercial potential. Flew et al. (2019) argue that algorithmic systems encode governance rules into technical procedures that influence content visibility without the need for explicit directives. Research on global streaming platforms has shown that predictive analytics affect script development, narrative pacing and character design (Tryon, 2015). In the Chinese context, Wang (2023) demonstrates that platform algorithms structure creative choices by linking distribution opportunities to performance indicators. Although these studies offer insight into platform mechanisms, they provide limited understanding of how creators interpret or negotiate algorithmic expectations (pp. 173-179). The literature tends to focus on institutional power rather than on the micro-level adjustments made by creative workers. As a result, little is known about how platform governance interacts with symbolic capital, cultural fields or regulatory constraints.

Further research on digital labour and cultural work provides additional insight into how creators respond to platformised production environments. Studies of creative labour in Western streaming industries show that workers operate under conditions of uncertainty, data-driven feedback and intensified commercial expectations (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Video creators often adapt their production strategies to satisfy platform metrics, which may include pacing adjustments, audience retention strategies and content formatting that aligns with algorithmic preferences. Research on YouTube and TikTok demonstrates that creators monitor performance dashboards to refine content in real time, which shifts creative autonomy toward forms of self-optimised production (Bishop, 2019). These findings indicate that algorithmic visibility shapes creative decision-making across diverse media environments. The Chinese context differs in scale and regulatory depth, yet creators experience similar pressures as they respond to platform metrics that influence investment decisions, distribution and audience reach. The international literature on platformised creative labour therefore contributes useful parallels for understanding the adaptive strategies used by Chinese web series creators, while also highlighting the need for context-specific analysis that accounts for China's regulatory and institutional environment.

A third strand of scholarship examines media regulation and governance in China. This literature outlines a layered regulatory environment that combines ideological guidance, administrative oversight, legal frameworks, platform responsibility and automated moderation. Feng (2021) shows how political norms, moral guidelines and content rules structure narrative acceptability in Chinese online dramas. Xu and Yu (2022) demonstrate that platforms are required to implement internal compliance systems that include risk scoring, human review and automated filtering tools. Zhao (2019) shows how informal governance networks and technological infrastructures shape digital media labour and production routines. Recent scholarship also notes that technological governance in China is rapidly evolving, with regulatory expectations increasingly embedded into platform-level automated systems. Studies of platform governance also highlight the growing role of automated moderation, where AI-assisted systems classify, filter and evaluate content as part of routine governance processes (Roberts, 2019, pp. 3-6, 182-187). These studies illustrate a regulatory environment in which creators must balance ideological requirements, platform guidelines and technical systems. However, much of this research treats censorship, platform governance and creator agency as separate areas of analysis.

Less attention has been given to how regulatory and algorithmic mechanisms interact with commercial pressures or audience metrics during the production process. This gap limits our understanding of how creators negotiate constraints in a media system shaped by overlapping structures.

A fourth strand of literature focuses on participatory culture and the influence of audiences on symbolic production. Jenkins (2006, pp. 3-4; pp. 169-177) introduced the concept of participatory culture to describe how audiences engage with media through interpretation, commentary and creative practices. In China, participatory culture has taken distinctive forms through platforms such as Bilibili and Weibo, where audience members contribute bullet comments, fan art and community discussions. Research by Chen (2020) shows that digital symbolic power emerges through distributed participation in Chinese online spaces. Z. T. Chen (2020) demonstrates how bullet comments create real-time interpretive layers that influence audience perception, community identity and content visibility. Other studies show that participatory engagement becomes integrated into algorithmic systems, where behavioural signals are aggregated into metrics that guide recommendation flows (Huang & Ye, 2024). These patterns contribute to the formation of symbolic capital in digital environments. Although this literature provides insight into audience behaviour, it gives limited attention to how creators respond strategically to participatory dynamics or how audience metrics influence production decisions.

Although research across these four areas is extensive, it remains fragmented. These domains seldom engage with one another, and the absence of an integrative perspective restricts the ability of current scholarship to explain how policy institutions, commercial imperatives, platform algorithms and audience participation jointly shape creative autonomy. Studies of platform governance often overlook creative labour. Research on censorship seldom addresses how algorithms mediate regulatory power. Analyses of participatory culture focus on audience communities rather than on creator decision-making. Research on Chinese web series specifically has tended to examine policy frameworks (Feng, 2021), platform business models (Wang, 2023, pp. 120-130) or audience reception, but rarely the interaction among these forces. The existing literature therefore provides an incomplete account of the conditions shaping creative freedom in China's platformised media industry. This fragmentation also limits theoretical development, as cultural field theory has rarely been adapted to incorporate algorithmic evaluation, platform governance or datafied forms of symbolic capital.

This study responds to these limitations by integrating insights from cultural field theory, platform governance, media regulation and participatory culture into a unified analytical model. The four-field framework developed in this study conceptualises cultural production as an environment shaped by interactions among the Field of Cultural Production, the Field of Capital, the Field of Symbolic Capital and the Field of Power. This model provides a structure for analysing the dynamic pressures that shape creative autonomy, including policy boundaries, commercial imperatives, algorithmic systems and audience behaviour. By foregrounding the strategies used by creators to navigate these pressures, the study offers empirical evidence that complements existing theoretical work. It also contributes to the adaptation of field theory for digital environments by incorporating AI-mediated mechanisms of evaluation and distribution. This integrated framework therefore establishes a foundation for understanding creative freedom in a media system shaped by interdependent structural forces. By extending field theory to incorporate algorithmic governance and datafied forms of symbolic capital, the study contributes to a contemporary understanding of cultural production under platformised conditions.

Methodology

The study is grounded in Bourdieu's (1996) theory of the cultural field, which conceptualizes cultural production as a competitive space structured by symbolic capital, rather than being fully dictated by state or market logic. Building on this, a four-field analytical model is developed—comprising the FCP, FC, FSC, and FP to analyse how creators navigate intersecting forces from policy regulation, platform mechanisms, and audience participation. The model bridges structural constraint with creative agency, especially under AI-mediated conditions. It adapts Bourdieu's distinctions between production, capital, symbolic struggle, and institutional power, providing a structured lens for analysing how these dynamics operate in platformised media environments.

To operationalise this conceptual model, a qualitative methodology was adopted, combining semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. This approach emphasizes contextual depth and processual understanding, making it suitable for capturing how creators construct meaning and exercise agency amid algorithmic governance (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Six creators based in Beijing and Shanghai were interviewed, including actors, directors, screenwriters, producers, and technical staff—covering a broad range of creative roles. These cities represent key hubs in China’s web series industry. Although geographically concentrated, these two cities host the majority of China’s web series production. This concentration allows for meaningful variation across professional functions even within a limited spatial range. Maximum variation sampling was used to ensure diversity across roles, gender, and age. Theoretical rather than statistical representativeness was prioritized, with sampling guided by the principles of structural heterogeneity and meaning saturation (Patton, 2014, pp. 267–270, 273–274).

A limitation of the sampling design is that all participants were based in Beijing and Shanghai, which are highly centralised production hubs. This concentration reflects actual industry clustering but limits geographic diversity, and this constraint is acknowledged as a methodological limitation. All interviews were conducted online via Tencent Meeting and took place in Mandarin Chinese. Each semi-structured session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. With participants’ consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription, and participants were assigned coded labels (C1–C6) for confidentiality. The interview guide consisted of four thematic domains: (1) creative decision-making and narrative intention, (2) interactions with platform mechanisms and data feedback, (3) the perceived influence of audience engagement, and (4) responses to regulatory or ideological constraints. This structure ensured consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate on individual experiences. This design supports in-depth exploration of how expressive tensions are negotiated across the creative field.

Table 1. Overview of participants in web series interviews

Creator number	City	Age	Gender	Occupation
C1	Shanghai	26	M	Actor/Director
C2	Beijing	35	M	Music producer, Composer
C3	Beijing	36	F	Producer
C4	Beijing	26	M	Actor/Producer
C5	Beijing	25	F	Assistant director
C6	Beijing	32	F	Script Writer

To ensure thematic adequacy, coding and analysis were conducted concurrently with data collection in a rolling, iterative manner. No new themes emerged after the fifth and sixth interviews, and code structures stabilized, meeting the criterion of thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Although the web series industry is structurally complex, the aim of this study is to capture core patterns of creative freedom rather than industry-wide generalisation. Because the six participants held diverse creative roles, the dataset provided sufficient conceptual range to support thematic saturation. In qualitative research, analytical depth rather than sample size determines adequacy, and the interviews generated rich, recurring themes that were adequate for the study’s theoretical focus. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and approved by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (JEP-2024-944). Despite the small sample, the diversity of creative roles and the saturation of core themes ensured sufficient theoretical transferability.

Thematic analysis was employed, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework. The initial phase of open coding produced 42 preliminary codes. These codes were iteratively reviewed, merged, and refined through constant comparison, resulting in eight second-level themes aligned with the four analytical fields. Theme consolidation was guided by theoretical alignment, where codes relating to creative intention, commercial forces, symbolic valuation and regulatory mechanisms were grouped respectively under the four-field model. Coding consistency was enhanced through peer debriefing with a qualitative research specialist (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 308-309), which served as a reliability check. This systematic coding procedure

ensured that theme development was grounded in the empirical material and analytically coherent. Meaning units, rather than isolated words, served as the coding basis to preserve semantic integrity and identify recurring expressive patterns. This segment-level approach was particularly effective in capturing how creators articulate responses to structural constraints. Compared to traditional content analysis, thematic analysis offers a more nuanced understanding of meaning construction through language in context and institutional negotiation (Shakman et al., 2017). Overall, this design supports the study’s exploration of creative freedom within AI-mediated cultural systems and bridges an empirical gap between creators’ lived experiences and the reconfiguration of symbolic capital in the digital era.

Through thematic analysis of the interview data, the study verifies four key fields that influence creative freedom in Chinese web series: FCP, FC, FSC, and FP. In order to further explore how these fields contribute to creative decision-making and creative freedom, this study constructs a field-topic correspondence structure based on the results of the thematic analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2. Analytical framework of fields and thematic codes

First theme (Field)	Secondary theme	Definition/Coding guidelines
Field of Cultural Production (FCP)	Creative Motivation and Content Intentions (CMCI)	Refers to the creator’s initial expressive direction during project development or scriptwriting, including the transformation of personal experience, articulation of social issues, or construction of emotional and value-oriented messages.
	Narrative Strategy and Stylistic Choices (NSSC)	Refers to the creator’s decisions regarding genre, pacing, and aesthetic style (e.g., realism, suspense, comedy) during the storytelling process.
Field of Capital (FC)	Platform Mechanisms and Creative Guidance (PMCG)	Refers to how streaming platforms influence content through keyword guidelines, completion-rate algorithms, popularity rankings, and other structural interventions.
	Investment Structure and Commercial Interference (ISCI)	Refers to the role of production budgets, brand placement, investor demands, and personnel networks in shaping project design, casting, and narrative structure.
Field of Symbolic Capital (FSC)	Audience Participation and Evaluative Practices (APEP)	Refers to audience engagement via bullet comments, user ratings, online reviews, and fan-generated content, which contributes to meaning-making and symbolic negotiation.
	Symbolic Value and Renewal Logic (SVRL)	Refers to how platforms or investors assess a work’s value based on audience response (e.g., Douban scores, social media trends), and use that data to determine sequel or redistribution potential.
Field of Power (FP)	Censorship Constraints and Expressive Evasion(CCSE)	Refers to how creators self-censor or adjust narrative expression based on anticipated policy boundaries, ideological sensitivities, or regulatory expectations.
	Institutional Governance via Platform Regulation (IGPR)	Refers to the indirect role of state ideology embedded in platform review systems, operational standards, and data-based compliance mechanisms that guide content production.

A co-occurrence matrix was also constructed to identify how thematic codes overlapped across fields. Co-occurrence analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti, which enabled systematic retrieval of overlapping coded segments across themes. The software’s query and code co-occurrence functions were used to calculate frequency counts and identify thematic intersections, ensuring transparency and replicability in the analytical process. Co-occurrence frequencies were calculated on the basis of segment-level coding, which enabled the identification of field linkages and structural tensions. The structure consists of four first-level fields and eight

corresponding second-level themes with coded definitions, which serve as the theoretical basis for the subsequent analysis of co-occurrence and the identification of field tensions.

Methodological limitations include the small sample size and the geographic concentration of participants in major production hubs. While these constraints limit the breadth of perspectives, the study prioritised analytical depth and used saturation and cross-role variability to strengthen interpretive validity. These limitations are consistent with the norms of in-depth qualitative inquiry and are addressed through transparency of method and theoretical alignment. These limitations do not undermine the study's analytical claims because the objective is conceptual explanation rather than statistical generalisation, and the data provide sufficient depth for theory-informed interpretation.

The Findings

Analysis of the interview data produced eight themes mapped onto the four analytical fields. The co-occurrence network in Figure 1 illustrates the density of interaction across themes, with thicker edges indicating segments in which participants simultaneously referenced multiple pressures. At the thematic level, the strongest connections appear between creative motivation and audience participation (CMCI–APEP), narrative strategy and censorship expectations (NSSC–CCSE), and platform mechanisms and institutional governance (PMCG–IGPR). These high-density intersections highlight the structural points at which creators most frequently negotiate overlapping constraints during the production of web series. Themes relating to investment structure (ISCI) appear with lower frequency, suggesting that commercial interference often operates indirectly compared with the more immediate pressures of audience feedback, platform governance, and regulatory boundaries. Across the eight themes, six were mentioned by at least four participants, indicating that the thematic structure reflects shared patterns rather than isolated individual experiences.

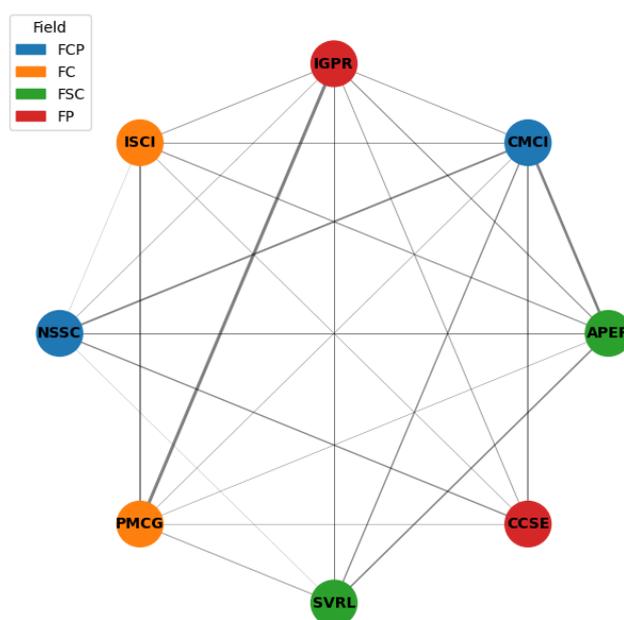


Figure 1. Undirected Circular Co-occurrence Graph

This visual representation provides a structural overview that complements the qualitative narratives analysed below. As shown in Figure 1, the structural clusters identified through co-occurrence analysis form the basis of the empirical findings. The relevance of these clusters becomes clearer when examined alongside participants' narratives. Many creators described how expressive intentions are shaped early in the process through anticipations of audience response. Five of the six participants mentioned that creative motivation is inseparable from projected audience engagement. One creator noted, "Before we shoot, we already think about what kind of rhythm will keep people watching or commenting" (C1). Another explained that meaningful themes must still be balanced with potential market appeal: "I prefer works that reflect real social issues or

emotions, because only then does the story feel meaningful” (C3). At the same time, several participants suggested that they have only limited influence over key decisions but still attempt to retain some space for self-expression. As one screenwriter put it, “We, the screenwriters, have the least say in the whole project... but still, we try to sneak some personal voice into the client’s brief” (C6). A music producer similarly described this tactic as “aesthetic infiltration”: “Music is just part of the commercial packaging... but I always try to insert a bit of my own taste. That’s aesthetic infiltration” (C2). These accounts correspond to the strong CMCI–APEP linkage and indicate that creative motivation involves not only responding to anticipated audience attention but also preserving personal expression within structural limits.

Narrative strategy also emerges as a domain heavily conditioned by censorship expectations and by the need for layered expression. Four participants described adjusting stylistic or structural elements to avoid regulatory risks. One participant stated, “Some topics cannot be too direct, so we shift to metaphor or focus more on personal stories” (C3). Another recalled substantial last-minute revisions: “Sometimes the script is wonderful at first, but after rounds of revisions, it becomes something different” (C6). Participants also reported designing multi-layered narratives that speak differently to different segments of the audience. One producer noted, “Sometimes we embed things that only attentive viewers can notice... not everything is for trending” (C3). These narratives correspond to the dense NSSC–CCSE linkage in Figure 1 and show that narrative form is both an artistic strategy and a mechanism of regulatory negotiation, with creators using metaphor, indirection, and stratified expression to manage risk while maintaining a sense of meaning.

Platform governance forms another major cluster in the co-occurrence network, particularly around PMCG and IGPR. Five participants noted that platform-level rules and tools structure decision-making, often more directly than formal government documents. As one creator explained, “The rules never say ‘censorship’, but you know the risk levels come from the policy environment” (C5). Others highlighted the role of automation: “Automated screening systems will flag visuals or words that may be risky, and we adjust before human review” (C2). These descriptions underscore how policy expectations are translated into operational guidelines and technical infrastructures, a pattern reflected in the strong PMCG–IGPR co-occurrence in Figure 1. Commercial pressures are also mediated through platform logics. One assistant director observed a shift in evaluative criteria: “Urban scores are now less important than Weibo buzz. If it doesn’t trend, the platform won’t push it—even if the show is critically solid” (C5). Another creator emphasised that they now think not only about audiences but also about how those audiences are rendered in data form: “We think about the audience, yes, but we think about how the algorithm reads the audience. That’s different” (C1). These accounts illustrate how platform mechanisms link capital and power, and they align with the strong FC–FP connection in the field-level analysis.

Audience participation and symbolic evaluation form another area of intensive interaction. Five participants noted that audience feedback—particularly bullet comments, trending metrics, and platform ratings—directly shapes how creative value is interpreted. One actor-producer described how audience comprehension guides narrative pacing: “I think from the audience’s perspective. If the build-up isn’t clear enough, they won’t follow... so we tweak the arc accordingly” (C4). A scriptwriter observed the transformation of audience reactions into quantified value: “Bullet comments tell you what people care about, but the platform only counts the numbers. That becomes the value of your work” (C6). Another participant added, “The platform uses data to decide whether the story can continue, like sequel potential or promotion resources” (C3). Several creators also pointed out that vocal fan communities can influence renewal decisions beyond textual quality. As one screenwriter put it, “Sometimes a show with weak writing gets renewed because the fans are loud. It’s not just about the plot—it’s about the noise it makes” (C6). These narratives echo the strong APEP–SVRL linkage in Figure 1 and show that symbolic capital is increasingly tied to “algorithmic heat” rather than to professional evaluation alone.

Regulatory expectations appear across all four fields and are frequently internalised as self-censorship. Five participants referred to self-censorship as a routine part of production. One explained, “Some topics cannot be touched; if you try, the script won’t pass the platform meeting” (C6). Another described working within a recognized “grey zone”: “We’re not told what to write, but we know what won’t pass. And we try to stay within the grey zone and still say something” (C4). A further participant noted, “We know the platform

reviews reflect the broader policy climate, so we adjust before anything gets submitted” (C4). Taken together, these accounts show that power is exerted not only through explicit prohibition but also through anticipatory adaptation and “fuzzy” adjustment of content and tone. They correspond to the multiple connections between CCSE, PMCG, and IGPR observed in Figure 1 and reveal how policy, platform, and creative practice are tightly interwoven.

To interpret the broader structural logic behind these thematic interactions, it was necessary to move beyond individual theme pairs. Aggregating theme-level co-occurrences into field-level relationships allows the analysis to capture how structural forces cluster in practice. Building on the theme-level patterns visualised in Figure 1, the eight themes were grouped into the four analytical fields—Cultural Production (FCP), Capital (FC), Symbolic Capital (FSC), and Power (FP)—and co-occurrence counts between theme pairs were aggregated to produce a 4×4 field-level matrix. Table 3 presents the resulting values.

Table 3. 4 ×4 Field Co-occurrence Matrix (Absolute Value)

	FCP	FC	FSC	FP
FCP	0	7	20	16
FC	7	0	9	19
FSC	20	9	0	8
FP	16	19	8	0

The strongest field-level connections occur between the Field of Cultural Production and the Field of Symbolic Capital (FCP–FSC = 20) and between the Field of Capital and the Field of Power (FC–FP = 19). The former reflects the extent to which creators anticipate symbolic evaluation—both audience response and platform scoring—when formulating expressive intentions. The latter indicates the tight coupling of commercial constraints with institutional governance. One participant summarised this dynamic: “You want to do something meaningful, but you also think about what can pass, what will get views, and what investors want. All of these come together when you make decisions” (C1). Another concluded, “It’s not just that we write stories anymore. We write things that survive in this ecology” (C2), highlighting that creators must continually adjust their expressive choices to remain viable within a system shaped by platform rules, policy expectations, and audience data.

Taken together, the structural patterns depicted in Figure 1 and Table 3 show that creators operate within a multi-layered environment where creative goals, platform logic, regulatory frameworks, commercial constraints, and symbolic valuation are deeply intertwined. The interview narratives reveal that these intersections do not function as isolated pressures but as overlapping structures that shape nearly all stages of creative decision-making. The patterns described here represent empirical findings derived directly from the interview data. Interpretive and theoretical implications, including the percentage-based heatmap and the multi-field synergy model, are addressed separately in the Discussion section.

Discussion

Building on the field-level co-occurrence patterns reported in the Results, this section moves from empirical description to theoretical interpretation. To clarify the relative strength of the relationships among the four fields and to avoid over-emphasising individual cell values from Table 3, the absolute co-occurrence counts were normalised into percentages. Each cell in the percentage matrix represents the share of co-occurrences for a field pair relative to all cross-field co-occurrences. These results are visualised as a heatmap in the left panel of Figure 2, placed alongside a preliminary structural diagram of field relationships in the right panel. The heatmap highlights the same clusters identified in the Results—particularly the strong coupling between the Field of Cultural Production and the Field of Symbolic Capital, and between the Field of Capital and the Field of Power—but expresses them as relative intensities rather than raw counts. This additional step is interpretive rather than purely descriptive, which is why it is presented in the Discussion rather than in the Results section.

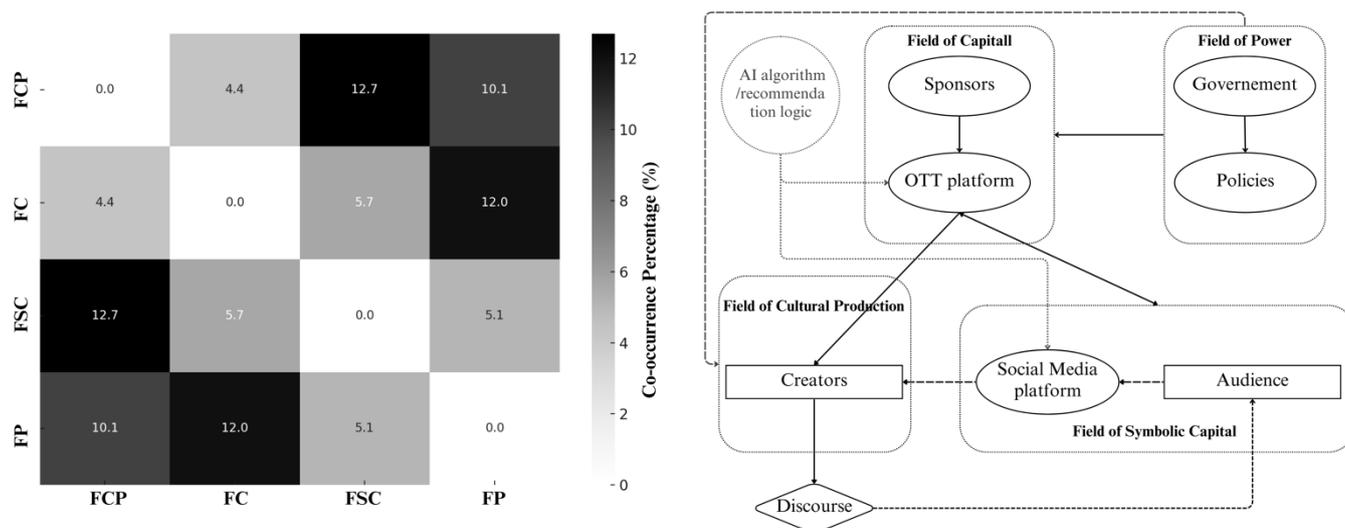


Figure 2. Field co-occurrence heat map and preliminary field-relationship diagram (left: Percentage heat map; right: schematic diagram of field structure)

In the heatmap on the left side of Figure 2, the cell corresponding to FCP–FSC exhibits the highest percentage of cross-field co-occurrences, followed closely by the FC–FP pairing. The FCP–FSC linkage reflects the way creative intent and narrative strategy are tightly interwoven with audience interaction and symbolic evaluation. As the Results showed, creators anticipate bullet comments, popularity metrics and platform ratings at the earliest stages of story development and continue to adjust pacing, genre and stylistic choices in response to these forms of feedback. The prominence of FCP–FSC in Figure 2 therefore visualises how creative freedom is constantly negotiated against datafied measures of recognition and value. The strong FC–FP coupling, by contrast, captures the alignment between commercial imperatives and institutional regulation. Platform guidelines, automated screening systems and performance-based investment decisions embed state and institutional expectations into the everyday logic of production, confirming Garnham’s (1993) and Hesmondhalgh’s (2006) critiques that economic and institutional structures have become central to the organisation of cultural fields.

The right-hand panel of Figure 2 translates these percentage patterns into an initial AI-mediated structural sketch of Chinese web series production. OTT platforms and social media platforms are positioned as central nodes linking FCP, FC, FSC and FP. Solid lines indicate direct institutional or resource relationships—for example, budget allocation, contractual arrangements and formal review procedures—while dotted lines represent diffuse structural constraints such as informal risk awareness, anticipatory self-censorship and expectations around “algorithmic heat.” Arrows denote the predominant direction of influence, capturing both unidirectional forms of regulation (such as policy-to-platform translation) and feedback loops in which audience behaviour, encoded as data, feeds back into capital placement and symbolic valuation. By placing the percentage heatmap and this schematic side by side, Figure 2 shows how quantified co-occurrence intensities inform a conceptual mapping of how platforms mediate relations among the four fields.

These patterns enable a more precise articulation of the study’s theoretical contribution. Bourdieu’s (1996) original formulation centres on the tension between the Field of Cultural Production and the Field of Power and emphasises that symbolic capital is secured through relative autonomy from external constraints. This binary configuration is well suited to explaining struggles over artistic autonomy in print or fine arts, but it is less adequate in an environment where cultural production is highly platformised, deeply commercialised and densely mediated by data infrastructures (Garnham, 1993; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). The findings of this study suggest that a reconceptualisation of the cultural field is required, in which capital and symbolic capital are not treated as background conditions but as distinct, interacting fields whose dynamics are structured through AI-driven platform mechanisms.

Placing these findings in dialogue with existing research further clarifies their contribution. Studies of Chinese online dramas and web series have tended to focus on policy frameworks and ideological supervision (Feng, 2021) or on platform business models and industrial development, often depicting creators as largely reactive to top-down regulation. Comparative work on Western streaming services such as Netflix has highlighted the growing power of recommendation algorithms and audience metrics but has often treated “the audience” as a relatively coherent entity rather than as an object reconstituted through data profiles and behavioural traces (Lobato, 2019, pp. 90–93, 135–138). The present study complements and extends this work in three ways. First, it shows that in the Chinese context, policy, platform and audience feedback are not parallel influences but interlocking components of a single governance assemblage, with platforms serving as the primary interface where institutional power, capital and symbolic valuation converge. Second, it demonstrates that creators’ strategies of accommodation and resistance—such as metaphorical framing, pacing adjustments and selective address to “attentive viewers”—are best understood at the intersection of these fields rather than solely as responses to censorship or market pressures in isolation. Third, it suggests that the dynamics observed in China resonate with broader global trends toward datafied cultural production, while still reflecting the particular regulatory density and political centrality of the Chinese media system.

The model also carries important practical implications. For creators, the findings underline that creative freedom is shaped less by isolated instances of censorship than by ongoing calibration to a moving target composed of policy shifts, platform rules, investor expectations and volatile audience metrics. Understanding these forces as field interactions rather than as discrete constraints may support more deliberate strategies for preserving creative intent—for example, by designing narratives that can accommodate both regulatory acceptability and layered symbolic meaning. For platforms, the analysis points to their role not only as commercial intermediaries but as *de facto* regulators whose algorithmic and review practices redistribute symbolic capital and help define what counts as “valuable” or “acceptable” content. This raises ethical and governance questions about transparency, accountability and the concentration of cultural power in a small number of data-driven intermediaries. For policymakers, the multi-field synergy model highlights the indirect ways in which regulatory aims are realised through platform infrastructures, suggesting that formal guidelines may be less important than how they are interpreted, operationalised and automated within platform systems.

Finally, the study invites a more critical reflection on the implications of these dynamics for cultural diversity and democratic expression. The strong couplings visualised in Figures 2 and 3 suggest that works which conform to dominant data patterns—high engagement, high shareability, low political risk—are structurally advantaged in the circulation of symbolic capital. Content that pursues slower, more experimental or politically sensitive forms of expression faces layered obstacles at the levels of policy, platform visibility, investment and audience metrics. While creators do carve out pockets of “limited freedom” through strategic adaptation, these spaces remain fragile and contingent on the tolerance of platform and policy regimes. In this sense, the multi-field synergy model not only updates Bourdieu’s theory for an AI-mediated media environment but also underscores the need to interrogate how platform–capital–audience configurations reshape who can speak, what can be said and which kinds of cultural futures become thinkable.

Conclusion

This study examined how Chinese web series creators negotiate creative freedom within an AI-mediated and platform-based media environment shaped by policy regulation, platform governance, capital interests and audience participation. Drawing on Bourdieu’s cultural field theory and interview-based thematic analysis, the research identified four interrelated fields – Cultural Production, Capital, Symbolic Capital and Power – and developed a multi-field synergy model to describe their interaction. The field-level co-occurrence patterns and qualitative narratives show that creators work within a layered system in which platform rules, commercial expectations, datafied audience metrics and regulatory boundaries intersect. Although constraints are substantial, creators do not simply comply; instead, they engage in strategic adaptation and maintain a form of “limited freedom” through techniques such as layered expression, aesthetic infiltration and anticipatory self-regulation.

Theoretically, the study extends Bourdieu's framework in three main respects. First, it reconceptualises symbolic capital under platform conditions by showing how recognition is increasingly organised around "algorithmic heat", including retention rates, trending indices and fan mobilisation, rather than around professional and critical judgement alone (Bourdieu, 1996; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Second, it moves beyond the classical tension between the Field of Cultural Production and the Field of Power by modelling four distinct but interacting fields in which platforms operate as central mediating infrastructures that translate power, allocate capital and redistribute symbolic value (Garnham, 1993). Third, it introduces the notion of "limited strategic freedom" to capture how creators manoeuvre within regulatory and algorithmic constraints without either fully escaping them or being entirely determined by them. These refinements adapt field theory to a context in which cultural production is strongly shaped by algorithmic visibility and data-driven valuation.

In practical terms, the findings highlight that creative freedom in Chinese web series is less a matter of single censorship decisions than of continuous calibration to shifting policies, opaque platform rules, investment logics and volatile audience data. For creators, understanding these forces as interacting fields can support more deliberate strategies to preserve creative intent, for example by designing narratives that remain regulatory compliant while still allowing for layered symbolic meaning. For platforms, the analysis underlines their position not only as commercial intermediaries but also as de facto regulators whose review procedures and recommendation systems play a decisive role in determining which works gain visibility and symbolic capital. For policymakers, the multi-field synergy model shows that regulatory aims are increasingly realised through platform infrastructures, suggesting that questions of transparency, accountability and governance of algorithmic systems are now central to cultural policy.

At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a small, purposive sample concentrated in major production hubs, which restricts the range of perspectives and may underrepresent experiences in other regions or tiers of the industry. The analysis focuses on creators' accounts and does not directly incorporate the perspectives of platform operators, investors or regulators, limiting insight into institutional decision-making. In addition, the study infers the operation of algorithmic systems from discourse rather than from direct technical or computational analysis, which constrains the granularity with which platform mechanisms can be described. These limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings and their broader applicability.

Future research could address these constraints by including platform engineers, policy officials and producers in the sample, and by combining interviews with computational or data-analytic approaches to trace how engagement metrics, recommendation flows and renewal decisions are actually produced. Comparative studies across different national and regional markets, such as global streamers, Korean or Japanese platforms, or other sectors of the cultural industries including music, short video or publishing, would help test and refine the multi-field synergy model beyond the Chinese web series context. Longitudinal designs could follow specific projects or creators across time to examine how strategies of adaptation evolve with regulatory change and technological innovation. By pursuing these directions, subsequent work can deepen understanding of how AI-mediated infrastructures reconfigure cultural power and further clarify the possibilities and limits of creative freedom under platform-dominated conditions. Overall, this study provides an integrated analytical framework for understanding how creative freedom is negotiated in platformised and algorithmically mediated media systems, offering conceptual tools that can support future empirical, comparative and policy-oriented work on digital cultural production.

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