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Impact of Modernisation on the Socio-Cultural and Living Conditions of Banjaras in India

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Abstract

The Banjara community, one of India's largest nomadic and semi-nomadic groups, has undergone considerable changes in its cultural identity, economy, and living standards due to modernisation. The Banjaras, traditionally known for their caravan commerce and mobility, have undergone significant change due to developments in transportation, education, technology, urbanisation, government development programs, and global cultural influences. This study examines the effects of modernity on socio-cultural practices, economic livelihoods, settlement circumstances, gender relations, young ambitions, and health outcomes. This study provides a detailed, analytical, and multidimensional examination of the impact of modernity on the socio-cultural life, economic structure, and living conditions of the Banjaras in numerous Indian states. While it has increased access to education, employment, and social services, it has also caused cultural loss, identity disputes, and unequal economic integration. The article concludes with recommendations for culturally sensitive, sustainable development policies.

Keywords: modernisation, culture, living conditions, tradition, caravan trade, transportation, and Banjaras

1. Introduction

The Banjaras are a traditionally nomadic population that engages in trade and transportation. The Banjaras, also known as Lambada, Lambani, Sugali, and Labana, are a historically nomadic tribe that lives in Telangana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan. Historically known as caravan merchants and salt transporters, they survived by moving goods over long distances on pack animals, serving armies and local

administrations (Bhangya, 2017). Historically known as caravan merchants, salt wholesalers, and long-haul transporters, their livelihoods and cultural customs have swiftly transformed due to contemporary socioeconomic developments. Their identity, based on mobility, vibrant attire, oral traditions, and strong community leadership, has undergone significant changes as modernity alters India's social and economic landscape. Modernisation created new options in education, wage labour, technology, and urban employment while undermining

traditional systems and cultural continuity (Xaxa, 2016).

Historically, Banjaras were nomadic traders who moved salt, wheat, and metals across India (Hasnain, 2013). Their nomadic existence entailed living in tandas (mobile encampments), following a community-based leadership structure led by the Naik, a traditional chief, and engaging in a variety of cultural traditions, including needlework, folk music, and ceremonial rituals. The demise of their traditional commerce was caused by the growth of railways and roads, as well as British colonial laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (Bose, 2019), which restricted their movement and forced settlement.

2. Review of Literature

The Banjaras have a distinct culture and make an important contribution to Indian heritage. Their way of life is distinct and does not resemble that of the residents of flat regions or indigenous tribes known as Banjaras. The Banjaras are an ethnic group found in Telangana and adjacent states. They speak in a recognised dialect.

Gor Boli, which lacks a written alphabet, contains components of Sanskrit, Hindi, Marathi, and Gujarati (Lal, 2016). Alcohol is the most often taken substance by adolescents, and a nationwide survey shows that many participate in habitual excessive drinking, potentially due to the liberalisation of the Indian market (Naik, 2013).

Female banjara tribal workers are playing an increasingly important role in agricultural and associated enterprises. Tribal women face a variety of health and nutrition challenges, including increased fertility, infant mortality, malnutrition, and shorter life expectancy (Lal, 2005). To provide appropriate employment and subsistence for the Banjara population, MSMEs must operate with little investment, less machinery and equipment, raw materials, power, and other resources. It is critical to the production of goods and services, to employment, to exports, and to income for a large proportion of the population (Lal, 2020).

3. Objectives and Methodology

- 1) To investigate the socio-cultural progress of the Banjaras in the context of modernism.
- 2) To investigate economic restructuring and the move from itinerant trade to stable and

diverse livelihoods.

- 3) To analyse changes in living conditions, including housing, health, education, technology, and welfare utilisation.
- 4) To give regional case studies demonstrating the various implications of modernity.

The paper employs a qualitative descriptive technique reinforced by secondary sources, government data, and ethnographic research, as well as regional case studies from Telangana, Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra.

4. Results and Discussion

This paper focuses on and analyses the socio-cultural implications of modernity, the economic consequences of modernisation, the influence of modernisation on living standards, and the challenges associated with modernisation. These concerns include the loss of traditional cultural practices, the demise of traditional livelihoods, and the difficulties of adapting to a more sedentary lifestyle.

4.1 The Socio-Cultural Effects of Modernisation

Traditional nomadism is on the decline:

Historically, Banjaras travelled across regions, transporting salt, agricultural products, and goods for trade. Modern transportation technologies, particularly railroads, trucks, and highways, have rendered traditional caravan trading obsolete. For millennia, Banjaras specialised in salt transportation, grain and metal trafficking, caravan logistics, pack-animal transportation, and supply to armies and kings. In this case, nomadic pathways were abandoned. A considerable proportion of Banjaras established permanent communities and thandas, shifting from nomadic to sedentary lifestyles. Railway networks, roadways, and administrative policies compelled Banjaras to adopt permanent settlement. Sedentarisation impacted housing patterns, social ties, and mobility (Reddy & Seevalal, 2020). While it improved access to government programs, it undermined their traditional nomadic lifestyle.

The evolution of social organisation and leadership:

Traditional decision-making was ruled by the Naik (chief) and elder councils; modern government has established Panchayati Raj institutions, a state bureaucracy, and legal frameworks. As a result, traditional institutions have diminished as younger generations rely more on formal governance and education. The transition from embroidered,

mirror-embellished apparel to modern clothing reflects a cultural decline: young ladies favour sarees, salwar suits, or Western ensembles. Significant silver jewellery is replaced with low-cost imitations. The impact of modern education and media, which promote contemporary ideas and lifestyles, hastens this transformation.

The Lambadi language is at risk of extinction due to state language education policies, urban migration, and a lack of a written script and formal instruction. This leads to communication gaps between generations and the demise of oral traditions (Yadav, 2015).

Modernisation has pushed younger Banjaras to embrace contemporary dress, resulting in a decline in the use of traditional ghagras, intricate jewellery, and embroidered apparel. The Banjara dialect (Lambadi) is fading as dominant languages such as Telugu, Hindi, and Kannada gain popularity. Rituals and festivals: Specific ancestral rites and ceremonies are disappearing, particularly among metropolitan families. Traditional festivals, needlework cooperatives, and governmental tribal marketing programs are all helping to revive the culture. Traditional fire rites, folk storytelling, and communal festivals are undermined by mainstream Hindu practices and by time constraints imposed by paid jobs. Modernisation threatens ritual continuity (Hasnain, 2013). Cultural erosion: Traditional dress and eating habits are changing. Women are increasingly choosing commercial materials and synthetic yarns for their ceremonial dress over traditional embroidery (Lal, 2015). The impact of globalisation has caused significant changes in societal customs. Over 90% of Banjaras now follow non-Banjara marriage norms, which usually involve the dowry system.

Nuclear families are replacing joint families as people relocate for better jobs. When state governance systems replace traditional power, Naik's authority diminishes (Bhangya, 2017).

Technology, Media, and Youth Culture: Improved school access has increased literacy rates for both male and female students, as well as increased awareness of rights, social programs, and mobility. Women were encouraged to participate in self-help groups, local governance, and micro-enterprises. Even though conventional gender boundaries have loosened, patriarchal norms remain prevalent in

many thandas. Mobile phones, television, and social media influence cultural behaviour by boosting information and education, decreasing intergenerational communication, and encouraging acceptance of modern ideas. This promotes both empowerment and cultural displacement among young people.

4.2 Economic Implications of Modernisation

The decline of traditional professions: Modern transportation and commercialisation have jeopardised the viability of the caravan trade, animal-husbandry-based migration, and salt transportation. As a result, the Banjaras had to seek alternative means of income. Modern transportation has rendered the caravan trade obsolete. Forestry regulations hampered pastoral activity. The community was obliged to look for alternative sources of income (Bose, 2019).

Transition to agriculture and landlessness: Many Banjaras turned to small-scale agriculture, sharecropping, and landless labour. Agriculture is unstable due to a lack of irrigation and land rights (Xaxa, 2016). The Banjaras are currently employed in agriculture, agricultural labour, wage labour under MGNREGA, construction, small businesses (including shops, needlework, and handicrafts), auto driving, transportation-related vocations, and employment in both the public and private sectors among educated youth. This diverse economy has ensured stability; nonetheless, several families remain in low-income categories.

Construction, brick-kiln labour, roads, domestic employment, and factory work all rely heavily on wage labour. Seasonal and permanent migration to urban areas increases economic opportunities but also poses risks, such as slum living and exploitation (UNDP, 2022).

The emergence of needlework and handicrafts as an economic asset: Banjara women's traditional embroidery has become a commercial industry, with information spread through NGOs, government exhibitions, and self-help organisations. This has created revenue for women while also preserving their cultural identity. Lambani embroidery has gained international recognition, provided economic support, and preserved traditional heritage (Sahoo, 2018).

Improved access to welfare programs: Modernisation and government action have

made property titles, housing initiatives, educational scholarships, health care, and livelihood programs more accessible. This has considerably increased the economic stability of many Banjara households. MGNREGA, PMAY, PDS, scholarships, and Ayushman Bharat help to improve financial stability (NITI Aayog, 2021). Nonetheless, access restrictions persist due to low literacy and bureaucratic constraints.

4.3 Effects of Modernisation on Living Conditions

Transition from temporary to permanent settlements: Banjaras have built permanent homes in government-supported colonies (thanda development plans) and semi-urban areas. This change has resulted in improved sanitation, electricity and water supply systems, transportation links, and formal-sector integration.

Improvements in housing and infrastructure: Government initiatives such as PMAY (housing), road connectivity plans, and village power have considerably raised living standards. Nonetheless, numerous thandas exist, including inadequate water supply, poor drainage, and limited access to healthcare. According to the 2011 Indian Census, government housing schemes have converted traditional huts into concrete dwellings equipped with power, sanitation, and drinkable water.

Improvements in education, health, and nutrition: Increased access to primary healthcare, vaccination programs, and maternal and child health services has improved health indicators. Nonetheless, increased rates of anaemia, malnutrition, drunkenness, and lifestyle-related diseases remain serious issues. Modernisation increased literacy rates among Banjaras. Residential schools and scholarships foster socioeconomic growth (Yadav, 2015). Nonetheless, dropout rates remain high, linguistic barriers limit early learning, and migration disrupts academic continuity. Health indicators show improvement, but the population still faces severe anaemia, malnutrition in children, alcoholism in men, and limited access to basic healthcare clinics in remote thandas (Reddy & Seevalal, 2020).

Media and technology exposure: Modernisation has improved access to mobile phones, social media, television, and the internet. This has increased awareness and connectivity, fostered educational and employment goals, and increased adolescent exposure to mainstream

culture. However, it has also resulted in the destruction of traditional knowledge and a loss of oral culture transmission across generations. Although access to sanitation has improved under Swachh Bharat, many thandas still lack drainage and potable water infrastructure.

4.4 Challenges in Modernisation

Despite its benefits, modernity has brought new challenges: cultural decline and an identity crisis. A large majority of teenagers experience a disconnect from traditional Banjara practices, ceremonies, and languages. The transition away from traditional employment has led to instability in livelihoods, driven by unemployment and underemployment. Substance misuse and societal unrest: exposure to metropolitan areas has exacerbated alcoholism and youth-related social problems. Land alienation: Banjaras surrendered land in specific locations due to illiteracy, exploitative contracts, and legal complexities. Despite increases in literacy, dropout rates remain high due to variables such as poverty, labour mobility, and linguistic difficulties. Cultural decline, a teenage identity crisis, poverty, and informal occupations. Substance misuse, gender inequality, vulnerability of urban slums, caste prejudice, and unequal access to support services. Modernisation is uneven, favouring specific segments over others (Xaxa, 2016).

4.5 Case Analyses: Regional Impacts

Telangana has a strong residential school infrastructure, high participation in Self-Help Groups, excellent road connectivity, and growing urban migration to Hyderabad. Identity confrontations with Adivasi people, land dispossession in forested areas, and young unemployment are among the challenges.

Karnataka: The benefits of Banjaras in Karnataka include magnificent traditional attire adorned with GI-tagged Lambani needlework, robust Self-Help Group networks, and cultural revitalisation activities. However, issues persist, including high female dropout rates and water scarcity in North Karnataka.

Maharashtra's Positive Outcomes: Banjara professionals in public service, strong political representation, and significant integration of urban employment.

Poor slum housing conditions, frequent alcoholism among migrant males, and the disappearance of traditional urban celebrations

are among the challenges.

Rajasthan Beneficial Effects: Most banjaras may earn a living through tourism, and cultural performances provide revenue—obstacles include a harsh desert climate, limited agricultural capability, and ongoing water scarcity.

4.6 Discussion

Modernisation is a two-pronged process: beneficial outcomes include education, improved housing, women's empowerment, wage labour opportunities, and political participation; adverse consequences include language and cultural erosion, economic instability, migration vulnerabilities, and identity fragmentation. The Banjaras selectively adopt modernity, retaining some traditions while adopting new practices (Bose, 2019). Improved socioeconomic mobility: Modern education, public-sector jobs, and skill-based professions all enhance upward mobility. Increased political participation: Banjaras are now involved in Panchayats, local government, and state-level lobbying. Women's empowerment through self-help groups, microfinance, and government efforts has enhanced income generation and autonomy. The monetisation of Banjara needlework, dance, and festivals has received widespread praise.

Policy Recommendations: Cultural Preservation: Include Lambadi in educational curricula and promote embroidered crafts through cooperatives. Economic empowerment includes strengthening Self-Help Groups, improving market access for artisan goods, and ensuring land rights, including irrigation support. Hostels, scholarships, and bridge schools are among the educational options available to migrant children. Mobile health units and nutrition initiatives aimed at mothers and children. Governance entails political inclusion and the establishment of specific Banjara development boards.

5. Conclusion

Modernisation has presented both advantages and disadvantages to the Banjara population. It has resulted in increased economic stability, better living conditions, greater access to education, healthcare, and welfare, as well as the modernising of lives through technology and social mobility. However, it has also resulted in the loss of traditional culture, the breakdown of nomadic identity, the deterioration of language

and customs, and socioeconomic disparities within the community. The future well-being of the Banjaras depends on equitable development that promotes modernity while protecting cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and community identity.

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Social Proof and Its Effect on Chinese Consumers' Buying Decisions on Social Media Platforms

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Abstract

Social proof has emerged as a defining force in shaping consumer behavior within China's rapidly evolving digital economy. As social media platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu merge social interaction with e-commerce, the opinions, behaviors, and endorsements of others have become powerful determinants of purchasing decisions. This paper explores the mechanisms through which social proof operates in the Chinese context, examining its cognitive, emotional, and cultural dimensions. It discusses how visual cues, influencer marketing, and peer validation foster trust and drive engagement while highlighting the distinct influence of collectivist values, social status consciousness, and guanxi networks in reinforcing these effects. The analysis also addresses the ethical challenges posed by manipulated endorsements, fake reviews, and algorithmic bias, emphasizing the need for transparency and consumer protection. Finally, the study considers the future trajectory of social proof in China's e-commerce ecosystem, where AI-driven personalization and data analytics are expected to make social influence more targeted yet ethically complex. By situating social proof within China's cultural and technological landscape, this paper underscores its dual role as both a driver of digital engagement and a test of trust in the modern marketplace.

Keywords: social proof, Chinese consumers, digital marketing, e-commerce, Douyin, WeChat, Xiaohongshu, collectivism

1. Introduction

Social proof is a psychological mechanism that influences decision-making by leveraging the actions, behaviors, and opinions of others. It suggests that individuals are more likely to conform to behaviors or beliefs when they perceive that others are engaging in those actions or holding those views. Rooted in social psychology, social proof operates on the assumption that if others are doing something, it

must be the correct or desirable course of action. This phenomenon plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior, especially in the context of online environments where peer validation is easily accessible.

In today's digital age, the influence of social proof has become even more pronounced due to the pervasive presence of social media platforms. Particularly in China, platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu have created new

spaces for social proof to manifest, shifting the way consumers make purchasing decisions. These platforms blend social interaction, content creation, and e-commerce, allowing consumers not only to share and consume content but also to act as both audience and participant in product recommendations and endorsements. The convergence of social media and e-commerce on these platforms has made social proof a central factor in modern consumer decisions.

WeChat, for instance, serves as a multifunctional platform where consumers can interact with friends, follow brands, and make direct purchases. Douyin, the Chinese counterpart of TikTok, is known for its short-video format, which effectively captures consumer attention and showcases products through influencer-driven content. Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) has positioned itself as a platform that blends lifestyle content with shopping recommendations, creating a community-driven marketplace where user reviews and recommendations significantly influence purchasing behavior.

As these platforms have integrated social proof into their core features—such as likes, shares, user-generated reviews, and influencer endorsements—they have fundamentally altered the way consumers in China make decisions. The ability to see what peers or influencers are buying, recommending, or sharing provides reassurance and validation to potential buyers, often guiding their choices. As a result, social proof has become a key driver of purchasing decisions in China's increasingly digital consumer landscape, making it an essential aspect of understanding modern consumer behavior.

In this paper, we will explore how social proof functions within the context of Chinese social media platforms, its psychological impact on consumer decisions, and the broader cultural and ethical implications it brings to the digital marketplace. By examining this phenomenon, we aim to provide insights into how social proof shapes consumer behavior and how businesses can effectively leverage it to engage with Chinese consumers in the digital age.

2. The Rise of Social Media as a Marketplace

2.1 Transformation of Social Media Platforms

Over the past decade, social media platforms have undergone a profound transformation,

evolving from simple communication tools to powerful spaces for commerce and consumer interaction. Initially designed as platforms for connecting friends, sharing personal updates, and engaging in casual conversations, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu now serve as crucial elements of the digital economy, seamlessly integrating social networking with e-commerce and digital marketing.

This shift has been largely driven by the recognition of consumer behavior changing in response to a more digitally connected world. Consumers no longer limit their product searches to physical stores or traditional websites. They turn to their social media feeds to discover products, read reviews, watch tutorials, and ultimately, make purchasing decisions. As these platforms have grown in reach and influence, they have begun to blur the lines between social interaction and commercial transaction. Platforms are no longer just about maintaining relationships or sharing experiences—they have become dynamic marketplaces where buying and selling occur within the social space.

The growth of social media as a marketplace has been most evident in China, where platforms like WeChat and Douyin have built-in features that directly support e-commerce. For example, WeChat offers a variety of features that go beyond simple messaging, such as WeChat Pay, Mini Programs for shopping, and official accounts that allow businesses to connect directly with consumers. Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) has created an interactive environment where short video content is used to market products, with integrated e-commerce capabilities that allow users to buy directly through the platform. Similarly, Xiaohongshu has successfully combined social networking with shopping by allowing users to share lifestyle content alongside product recommendations, and providing a space where brands can promote their products to a highly engaged community.

This transformation has created a new, hybrid form of commerce, where users are not just passive consumers of content, but active participants in the buying process. They engage with content, share their opinions, follow influencers, and contribute to the market conversation—all while making purchase decisions. The ability to blend social interaction

with instant purchasing has made social media platforms in China some of the most influential digital marketplaces in the world today. These platforms have become essential tools for brands and marketers who want to capitalize on the trust, engagement, and sense of community that social media fosters, while also driving sales.

The rapid rise of social media as a marketplace highlights a significant shift in how consumers and businesses interact. No longer simply a tool for socialization, social media now plays a central role in shaping consumer decision-making, facilitating direct purchases, and enabling brands to engage with their audiences in more personal and direct ways than ever before. The seamless integration of social proof into these platforms only strengthens their role as key drivers of modern purchasing decisions.

2.2 Integration with E-Commerce

In recent years, the integration of e-commerce functionalities into social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped the way consumers shop online. Platforms such as WeChat and Douyin have gone beyond their original roles as communication tools and social hubs, incorporating direct shopping features that allow users to seamlessly transition from social interactions to purchase decisions. This integration has transformed social media into a key component of the digital shopping experience in China, blurring the lines between content consumption and e-commerce transactions.

WeChat, as one of China's most widely used apps, has pioneered the integration of e-commerce with its Mini Programs and WeChat Pay system. Mini Programs are lightweight applications embedded within WeChat that allow users to shop directly from the platform without leaving the app. They provide a convenient shopping experience, where consumers can browse products, make purchases, and even participate in promotional activities without the need to switch between different apps or websites. Additionally, WeChat Pay enables smooth payment transactions, which further enhances the user experience by making purchasing fast and convenient. WeChat's ecosystem connects social networking, commerce, and payment in one seamless environment, creating a fully integrated e-commerce experience.

Similarly, Douyin (TikTok's Chinese counterpart) has evolved from a short-video entertainment platform into a robust social commerce platform. Douyin's e-commerce integration allows users to purchase products directly through the videos they watch, leveraging the viral nature of its content and the persuasive power of influencers. Brands and influencers promote products through video content, and users can instantly click on embedded links to buy products. This integration is not limited to branded content; user-generated content also plays a significant role in driving sales, as consumers share their own experiences and recommendations with their followers. Douyin's live-streaming feature, where influencers or sellers interact with viewers in real-time while showcasing products, has become a dominant form of social commerce, further blurring the lines between entertainment and shopping.

This shift has been particularly impactful in China, where mobile-first shopping behavior has grown rapidly. According to the 2021 China E-Commerce Research Report, over 60% of e-commerce transactions in China are now influenced by social media platforms. The integration of social proof—such as product reviews, user-generated content, and influencer recommendations—into these platforms enhances consumers' confidence in purchasing, making social media a primary shopping destination for millions of users.

The integration of e-commerce within social media platforms like WeChat and Douyin represents a paradigm shift in how consumers engage with brands and make purchasing decisions. These platforms do not just provide a space for consumers to passively consume content—they enable a dynamic and interactive shopping experience where social interactions and commerce are intricately linked. Consumers are no longer just passive recipients of advertisements; they actively participate in the shopping experience through content engagement, peer recommendations, and real-time purchases. This creates a more personalized, engaging, and efficient shopping experience that is set to dominate the future of e-commerce.

As social media platforms continue to integrate more advanced e-commerce functionalities, the landscape of digital shopping will become even more interactive, seamless, and immersive, with social proof playing an even greater role in

guiding consumer behavior. The convergence of social media and e-commerce is reshaping the traditional shopping journey, creating a new digital shopping ecosystem where social influence and commercial transactions coexist seamlessly.

2.3 Commercial Opportunities and Consumer Engagement

The convergence of content and commerce on platforms like WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu has unlocked vast commercial opportunities for brands, businesses, and individual creators. Social media platforms have shifted from being simple communication tools to becoming powerful digital marketplaces where content creation and consumer engagement are directly tied to sales and brand development. This transformation allows for more personalized, interactive, and effective marketing strategies, appealing to modern consumers who expect a seamless blend of entertainment and shopping.

The integration of social commerce into these platforms has made it easier for brands to directly engage with their target audiences through content-driven advertising. On Douyin, for instance, businesses can create engaging short videos that are often shared by influencers or even by users themselves, expanding their reach through organic interaction. This form of user-generated content functions as a modern form of word-of-mouth marketing, which has a significant impact on driving consumer behavior. A 2022 report by iMedia indicated that 75% of consumers were more likely to make a purchase after seeing a product recommended by peers or influencers on social media.

On WeChat, the platform's multifaceted ecosystem allows businesses to engage with consumers in numerous ways. Through WeChat Pay and Mini Programs, companies can run branded content, offer exclusive deals, and even launch interactive experiences that lead directly to purchases. These features allow businesses to cultivate direct relationships with their audience, increase customer loyalty, and encourage repeat purchases. The integration of social media and e-commerce helps create an immersive shopping experience that brings consumers closer to brands and makes the entire process more seamless.

The ability to micro-target consumers through personalized advertisements is another

significant advantage of social media commerce. Using big data and AI algorithms, platforms can analyze user data to serve highly relevant content to specific audiences. Platforms like Xiaohongshu use detailed user profiles and behavioral analytics to provide brands with insights into consumers' preferences and purchasing habits. This enables brands to tailor their messages and offers to particular audience segments, ensuring greater relevance and engagement.

Additionally, the rise of live-streaming on platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu has become a powerful sales tool. Through live sessions, influencers, celebrities, and brands can showcase products in real time, creating a sense of excitement and urgency among viewers. Limited-time deals or exclusive offers during live streams encourage consumers to act quickly, driving higher conversion rates. A 2021 Alibaba report revealed that live-streaming accounted for over 10% of all e-commerce sales in China, with top influencers driving millions of dollars in sales during a single broadcast. This real-time engagement creates a stronger emotional connection between brands and consumers, enhancing trust and boosting sales.

Furthermore, social media platforms have given rise to a new economic model where individual creators, influencers, and even ordinary consumers can monetize their influence. Through affiliate marketing, sponsored posts, and product placements, individuals can now earn income by promoting products to their followers. This has led to the rise of influencer-driven commerce, where consumers themselves are actively involved in the marketing process, effectively turning them into business partners.

The integration of content and commerce on Chinese social media platforms has revolutionized how brands and businesses connect with consumers. By engaging users through personalized content, influencer marketing, and live-streaming, these platforms create a more interactive and engaging shopping experience. This convergence makes social media not just a space for content consumption, but also a powerful, dynamic marketplace where consumers and brands directly engage with each other in real time.

3. Mechanisms of Social Proof in Social Media Platforms

3.1 Types of Social Proof

Social proof is not a one-size-fits-all concept; rather, it can manifest in various forms, each playing a distinct role in shaping consumer decisions. Understanding the different types of social proof helps clarify how they influence consumer behavior, particularly on social media platforms. In the digital age, where social interactions and commercial transactions are intertwined, these types of social proof have become powerful tools for guiding purchasing decisions.

Expert Endorsements

One of the most powerful forms of social proof comes from expert endorsements. Consumers often seek advice or validation from individuals or entities that are recognized as authorities in a given field. Expert opinions provide credibility and foster trust in a product, as consumers believe that the advice is rooted in knowledge, experience, and expertise. On platforms like Douyin and WeChat, brands often collaborate with experts—such as nutritionists, fitness coaches, or tech specialists—to promote their products, leveraging their expertise to appeal to potential customers. Expert endorsements are particularly effective in industries like health, wellness, and technology, where consumers may feel uncertain about their choices and rely heavily on authoritative figures to guide them.

User Reviews

User reviews represent a form of social proof that has become an integral part of the digital shopping experience. In the context of e-commerce and social media platforms, user-generated reviews offer firsthand accounts of product experiences. Reviews provide consumers with real-world perspectives on a product's performance, quality, and value, often influencing purchasing decisions more strongly than traditional advertisements. Research consistently shows that consumers trust peer reviews over marketing messages, and this is especially true in China's digital landscape, where platforms like Xiaohongshu have created a culture of community-driven product feedback. Positive reviews can drive sales, while negative reviews can deter potential buyers, making them one of the most powerful forms of social proof on digital platforms.

Celebrity Endorsements

Celebrity endorsements are a longstanding form

of social proof, and their impact on consumer behavior is amplified in the digital age. In China, where celebrity culture is deeply ingrained, endorsements from well-known figures—whether actors, musicians, or sports stars—can elevate a brand's credibility and visibility. Douyin and Weibo have become platforms where celebrities regularly promote products, and their followers, who often view them as role models or figures of aspiration, are highly susceptible to their influence. The emotional connection that fans have with celebrities makes their endorsements particularly powerful, and consumers often feel a sense of social validation when choosing products associated with their favorite stars. As a result, brands in China increasingly rely on celebrity partnerships to tap into the influence these figures have on public opinion and purchasing behavior.

Peer Recommendations

Peer recommendations, a form of social influence, are arguably the most relatable and trusted form of social proof. When individuals make purchasing decisions based on what others within their social circle have bought or recommended, it reflects the deep-seated human tendency to align with group norms and behaviors. In China, where *guanxi* (personal networks) plays a significant role in social interactions, peer recommendations hold immense weight. Social media platforms like WeChat and Xiaohongshu encourage users to share their experiences, which creates a sense of community-driven validation. For example, when a friend or family member shares a positive experience with a product, consumers are more likely to trust that recommendation and make similar purchasing decisions. Peer influence is often seen as more authentic and less commercial, which increases its effectiveness in guiding consumer behavior.

Each type of social proof operates differently but collectively plays an integral role in influencing consumer behavior on social media platforms. By strategically leveraging expert endorsements, user reviews, celebrity endorsements, and peer recommendations, brands can effectively shape the perceptions and purchasing decisions of potential customers. The power of social proof lies in its ability to create a sense of trust, community, and validation for consumers, which is why it has become such a central aspect of modern e-commerce and marketing strategies,

particularly in China's digital environment.

3.2 Visual Cues and Popularity Indicators

In the digital age, visual cues and popularity indicators on social media platforms have become essential tools for guiding consumer decisions. These visual markers, such as likes, shares, comments, and follower counts, function as immediate signals of a product's desirability, quality, and credibility. They provide consumers with a sense of validation and social proof, reinforcing the idea that a product or service is worth considering because it has already been positively received by others.

Likes and Shares

On platforms like Douyin and WeChat, the number of likes a post receives is often seen as a direct measure of its popularity and, by extension, its quality or appeal. Likes are simple, quantifiable markers of approval that create an immediate visual cue for potential buyers. When a product or piece of content receives a high number of likes, it signals to the consumer that others find it valuable or desirable, making it more likely that they will engage with it. In addition, the act of sharing a post further amplifies its credibility and appeal. When a product is shared among friends, followers, or social circles, it increases its visibility and spreads social proof more organically. Shares suggest not only approval but also a willingness to advocate for the product, which significantly boosts its trustworthiness in the eyes of potential consumers.

Comments and User Interaction

The comments section on social media platforms plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions. Unlike passive likes, comments offer deeper insights into the user experience and can reveal personal stories, feedback, and recommendations. A high level of engagement in the comments section signifies active interest in the product, making it a valuable indicator of its popularity. On platforms like Xiaohongshu, where product reviews and personal experiences are commonly shared, the comments section often becomes a place where potential buyers engage with current users. Positive feedback and lively discussions can increase the product's perceived credibility, while negative comments can quickly deter others. This form of user interaction further bolsters the credibility of the product or brand and creates a sense of social validation for

potential buyers.

Follower Counts and Influence

On social media, follower counts are often viewed as a key indicator of influence and trustworthiness. High follower counts, particularly for influencers or celebrities, signal to consumers that the individual or brand has a large and engaged audience. In China, where KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) and influencers play a significant role in shaping consumer behavior, follower numbers directly correlate with social proof. A high follower count suggests that a person or brand is reputable, and their recommendations are likely to be taken seriously. Consumers tend to trust products promoted by individuals or brands with larger followings, as they assume that these figures have earned their popularity and credibility over time.

These visual cues not only provide validation but also create a sense of urgency and scarcity, two factors that can drive consumers to make faster decisions. The visual impact of these indicators, combined with the underlying psychology of social proof, shapes how consumers make choices. They may believe that if a product or post has been liked, shared, commented on, or followed by many people, it must be worthy of attention. This perception of popularity serves as an automatic decision-making shortcut, reducing the cognitive effort involved in evaluating a product's value.

In essence, visual cues and popularity indicators serve as immediate and effective signals of a product's appeal, fostering trust and social validation. On platforms like Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat, these visual elements create a feedback loop where products gain more popularity as they accumulate likes, shares, comments, and followers, further enhancing their attractiveness to new consumers. The integration of these cues into social media platforms has made them an essential tool for marketers and businesses, as they leverage these visual indicators to influence consumer decisions and drive sales.

3.3 Case Studies of Effective Social Proof

Social proof has proven to be an indispensable tool in modern marketing, particularly in China's digital ecosystem, where platforms like Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat have created a fertile ground for social commerce. By

leveraging the power of influencer-driven promotions and viral product launches, brands can create a powerful feedback loop that significantly impacts consumer behavior. In this section, we explore several successful campaigns and examples where social proof played a central role in influencing consumer decisions and driving sales.

3.3.1 Douyin's "Live Streaming Sales" and Influencer Marketing

One of the most notable examples of effective social proof comes from Douyin, where the live streaming format has revolutionized e-commerce. Influencers (often called KOLs—Key Opinion Leaders) have become central figures in driving consumer purchases. These influencers, with their large followings, showcase products live on camera, demonstrating their features, usage, and benefits in real time. Consumers can interact with the influencer, ask questions, and instantly make purchases through embedded links.

Case Example: In 2020, Li Jiaqi, known as the "Lipstick King" on Douyin, became a global sensation by selling lipsticks and beauty products during his live streaming events. His social proof came not only from his personal charisma but also from the massive number of viewers interacting with the product during the livestream. In one instance, he sold over 15,000 lipsticks in just 5 minutes, demonstrating the power of social proof and how it can influence rapid consumer behavior. The interaction between the influencer and viewers created an environment of trust and authenticity, where viewers felt compelled to purchase based on the validation provided by the influencer and their followers.

The success of live streaming on Douyin highlights how real-time interaction, coupled with social proof in the form of large, engaged audiences, can lead to dramatic increases in sales. The immediate feedback from other viewers, including likes, comments, and shared experiences, adds credibility to the influencer's product recommendations and encourages potential customers to follow suit.

3.3.2 Xiaohongshu and the Power of User-Generated Content

Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) is another platform where social proof is particularly effective. Known for its focus on lifestyle content and product reviews, the platform has become a

go-to destination for young, digital-savvy consumers looking for peer recommendations. The platform's core value is based on authentic, user-generated content, where everyday users share their product experiences and reviews, often with photos or videos of the products they have purchased.

Case Example: In 2020, SK-II, a luxury skincare brand, leveraged the power of user-generated content on Xiaohongshu to boost its presence among Chinese consumers. Instead of relying on traditional celebrity endorsements, SK-II partnered with influencers and everyday users who shared their personal experiences with the product. These authentic reviews and testimonials, coupled with before-and-after photos, generated widespread buzz and engagement on the platform. The social proof created by the user-generated content led to increased brand visibility and a surge in sales. Consumers trusted the product more because it was recommended by real users, and the images and stories shared created an emotional connection with the brand.

Xiaohongshu's emphasis on authentic content makes it an ideal platform for social proof-driven campaigns. It demonstrates how user-generated reviews and shared experiences can shape consumer perceptions, build trust, and drive purchasing decisions. The social interactions in the comments section—where users ask questions, share advice, and express their opinions—further amplify the impact of social proof, making it a powerful marketing tool.

3.3.3 WeChat's Mini Programs and Peer Influence

WeChat, the most widely used social platform in China, has successfully integrated e-commerce into its environment through Mini Programs and WeChat Pay. Brands use Mini Programs to create seamless shopping experiences within the app, where consumers can browse products, make purchases, and even participate in group buying or flash sales. However, it's the social proof elements built into WeChat's social ecosystem that make the platform particularly effective for driving sales.

Case Example: A major success story on WeChat involved the instant noodle brand, Uni-President. The company used a combination of peer influence and social proof to drive group-buying deals through WeChat's

Mini Programs. By leveraging user testimonials and social sharing, Uni-President encouraged users to share special discounts and offers with their friends. When one consumer made a purchase, it was easy to see who else in their social circle had bought the product or participated in the promotion. This peer influence created a sense of belonging and exclusivity, making consumers feel that they were part of a larger, engaged group. As a result, Uni-President's sales surged by over 30% during the campaign, as customers were encouraged by their friends' choices and the growing popularity of the product within their social circles.

In WeChat, peer influence is a key form of social proof. The integration of e-commerce with social sharing functions creates a direct line between purchasing behavior and social validation, where consumers are motivated to buy based on their friends' and family's actions.

3.3.4 The Role of Social Proof in Viral Product Launches

In the fast-paced digital landscape of China, the ability for a product to go viral is a prime example of the power of social proof. A viral product launch can drive massive traffic, engagement, and sales, particularly when the product becomes widely endorsed and shared across social media platforms.

Case Example: One of the most well-known examples of viral product launches in China occurred with Chanel's pop-up store in Shanghai. Chanel leveraged social media influencers and key opinion leaders (KOLs) to create a buzz about the launch event. The influencer posts, combined with consumers' social media sharing of their experiences, led to widespread visibility and created a sense of exclusivity around the event. Consumers were not just buying a product; they were buying into a social experience that was endorsed by influencers and peers alike. This form of social proof turned the pop-up store into a viral phenomenon, driving significant traffic and sales to the event.

The product launch was not only about the product itself but also about the social validation it received from consumers, influencers, and celebrities who shared their experiences online, encouraging others to join in. This is a clear example of how social proof, when amplified through influencers and consumer sharing, can

trigger a viral cycle that leads to widespread adoption.

4. Psychological Impact of Social Proof on Chinese Consumers

4.1 Cognitive Mechanisms

The influence of social proof on consumer behavior operates through a series of subtle yet powerful cognitive processes that shape how individuals interpret information and make purchasing decisions. These mechanisms often function automatically, allowing people to rely on the behavior of others as a guide when navigating uncertainty. Within China's digitally interconnected society, where social influence and communal norms carry strong weight, such mechanisms are deeply intertwined with cultural values like collectivism and *guanxi* (personal networks). As a result, social proof exerts an especially strong effect on Chinese consumers, shaping perceptions of trust, quality, and desirability.

One central mechanism underlying social proof is conformity—the psychological tendency to align one's behavior or beliefs with those of others. This impulse stems from a desire for social acceptance and the avoidance of standing out within a group. In the Chinese cultural context, where harmony and collective belonging are valued, conformity often takes on a deeper social significance. When consumers observe their peers, colleagues, or online communities endorsing a particular brand or product, they experience a subtle social pressure to follow that pattern. The endorsement of a product within a social network or on platforms like WeChat Moments or Douyin feeds becomes a form of reassurance that aligns individual choices with group norms. Such behavior reinforces social belonging while simultaneously validating personal decision-making.

Social proof also functions through social comparison, the cognitive process by which people assess themselves relative to others. Consumers continually evaluate their choices in relation to the behaviors, lifestyles, and consumption patterns of peers and influencers. In digital spaces like Xiaohongshu or Douyin, where users publicly share product reviews, experiences, and consumption habits, social comparison becomes constant and visible. When a consumer sees others purchasing or praising a certain product—particularly those perceived as successful or aspirational figures—the product

gains additional symbolic value. For many Chinese consumers, aligning with these visible social standards can convey not only good taste but also status and cultural sophistication, reinforcing the decision to purchase.

Another important cognitive factor is heuristic processing, which allows individuals to make quick judgments using minimal mental effort. In complex environments like online marketplaces, consumers rely on simple cues—such as likes, shares, comments, and follower counts—to gauge the reliability or popularity of a product. These visible markers of approval act as mental shortcuts that replace time-consuming research. On Douyin or WeChat shops, a product with thousands of likes or comments immediately signals popularity and trustworthiness. The human brain interprets these metrics as evidence of collective endorsement, reducing uncertainty and accelerating decision-making. This kind of rapid cognitive evaluation is particularly effective in digital commerce, where attention spans are short and decisions are made in seconds.

The bandwagon effect reinforces these tendencies by encouraging individuals to adopt behaviors that appear widely accepted. The perception of popularity itself becomes persuasive. When consumers witness products trending on Douyin or gaining widespread mentions across WeChat groups, they are inclined to join in, assuming that collective participation signals value. In a cultural setting that prizes social harmony and shared experiences, following popular trends can also provide a sense of community. A product's success becomes self-perpetuating: as more people buy or endorse it, its perceived worth increases, leading even more consumers to participate.

Social proof also interacts with cognitive dissonance, the mental discomfort that arises when a person's beliefs or actions are inconsistent. Positive social validation—such as high ratings, enthusiastic reviews, or influencer approval—helps reduce doubt after a purchase, reinforcing the sense that the decision was wise and socially supported. For Chinese consumers, whose sense of identity is often linked to social belonging, such reassurance holds particular significance. A purchase that aligns with peer behavior or influencer trends not only fulfills personal needs but also maintains social harmony and protects one's sense of face

(mianzi).

The cognitive dynamics of social proof reveal why it holds such sway in the Chinese digital marketplace. Conformity, comparison, heuristic shortcuts, and emotional reassurance all converge to shape the modern consumer's decision-making process. In a society where collective identity remains a guiding force and digital networks amplify every signal of approval, social proof functions as both a psychological comfort and a social compass. It transforms consumption from an individual act into a shared experience, reinforcing trust and belonging in China's rapidly evolving online economy.

4.2 Emotional Reactions and Psychological Effects

Social proof exerts a powerful emotional influence on consumers by appealing to fundamental human needs for belonging, validation, and social acceptance. These emotional responses often operate beneath conscious awareness, yet they are decisive in shaping how people evaluate products, brands, and even themselves in relation to others. On Chinese social media platforms such as Douyin, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu, the emotional dimension of social proof is particularly visible, as users continuously encounter curated images of lifestyles, products, and endorsements that reflect broader social values and aspirations.

One of the most powerful emotional responses triggered by social proof is the need for belonging. Humans are social beings who derive comfort and meaning from membership within groups. In the digital age, this sense of belonging often manifests through participation in online communities and shared consumer experiences. When users on Douyin or Xiaohongshu see others endorsing a product—whether through reviews, videos, or likes—they feel drawn to align themselves with the collective. Purchasing the same product or engaging with similar content creates a subtle sense of inclusion, as if joining a larger community of like-minded individuals. In China, where collectivist values remain strong, belonging through consumption also carries social reassurance; it allows individuals to feel connected to trends and cultural movements that define contemporary urban life.

Social proof also activates feelings of validation, reinforcing consumers' sense of identity and self-worth. When a person's purchase decision

aligns with socially approved choices, it provides emotional affirmation that they have made the “right” decision. Online feedback mechanisms—such as receiving likes, positive comments, or reposts—further heighten this emotional validation. On WeChat, for example, when users share a product they have bought or a brand they endorse, the engagement they receive from their network acts as emotional reinforcement. The approval of others confirms not only the product’s value but also the consumer’s discernment and taste. In this way, validation derived from social proof becomes part of the consumer’s self-expression and emotional satisfaction.

The desire for social acceptance also plays a crucial role in shaping emotional responses to social proof. Consumers are influenced by the implicit emotional rewards of being socially recognized and accepted. In China, where social hierarchy and reputation (known as *mianzi*, or “face”) hold cultural importance, aligning with popular or respected consumption trends can serve as a means of maintaining or enhancing social standing. For example, when an influencer or celebrity endorses a luxury product on Douyin, owning or discussing that product can help consumers project a sense of sophistication and modernity. Emotional responses tied to acceptance and admiration motivate individuals to conform to prevailing consumer trends, reducing the risk of social isolation or appearing “out of touch.”

The emotional effects of social proof are also reinforced by the psychological pleasure of shared experience. Participating in collective trends—such as joining group-buying events on WeChat, watching live-stream sales, or commenting on popular product posts—elicits a sense of unity and excitement. These emotionally charged experiences transform shopping into a social act, one that offers not only material satisfaction but also emotional fulfillment through connection. The pleasure derived from being “part of something bigger” makes consumers more likely to engage repeatedly with such platforms, strengthening their emotional attachment to brands and communities.

Social proof, therefore, operates not only as a cognitive shortcut but as an emotional bridge between individuals and their social environments. It fulfills deep-seated psychological needs for belonging, validation,

and social inclusion—needs that are intensified in China’s highly networked, relationship-oriented culture. In digital marketplaces where visibility equals recognition, these emotional responses are key to understanding why consumers place such strong trust in collective opinions and endorsements. Social proof does not merely guide what people buy; it shapes how they feel about themselves and their place within society.

4.3 Trust, Credibility, and Perceived Value

The effectiveness of social proof in shaping consumer behavior ultimately depends on trust—the degree to which individuals believe that the information, recommendations, and opinions of others are genuine and reliable. Trust functions as the psychological foundation that allows social proof to influence decision-making. Without it, even the most visible forms of social validation—likes, endorsements, or reviews—lose their persuasive power. In China’s dynamic digital marketplace, where online content is abundant and consumer skepticism is growing, the interplay between trust, credibility, and perceived value determines how social proof affects purchasing behavior.

Trust in social proof arises when consumers perceive authenticity in the opinions or behaviors of others. In China’s online ecosystem, this trust is often cultivated through relatability rather than authority. Consumers tend to rely on recommendations from sources they perceive as similar to themselves—friends, peers, or everyday social media users—rather than distant experts or overt advertising. This preference aligns with the collectivist nature of Chinese culture, where interpersonal relationships and *guanxi* form the basis of credibility. When information about a product is shared within a trusted social circle on WeChat or through peer-driven platforms like Xiaohongshu, consumers are more inclined to accept it as reliable. The emotional comfort derived from familiar or socially verified sources strengthens the perceived legitimacy of the message, creating an environment where social proof operates most effectively.

Credibility, however, is not confined to interpersonal trust—it is also shaped by perceptions of authority and consistency. On platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo, consumers assess credibility through the

reputation and perceived expertise of influencers or brands. Influencers with strong personal brands, transparent communication, and a consistent tone of authenticity tend to command higher trust. A study by QuestMobile in 2022 found that over 70% of Chinese consumers trusted influencer recommendations more when they appeared “authentic and experience-based” rather than overtly commercial. This finding illustrates that credibility is not purely a function of exposure or popularity—it is tied to the perceived sincerity of the endorser. The ability to convey honesty, emotional connection, and lived experience often outweighs traditional markers of authority.

Brands, in turn, must work to cultivate both institutional trust and relational trust. Institutional trust derives from a brand’s established reputation, transparency, and adherence to ethical standards, while relational trust emerges from the ongoing interactions between consumers and the brand or its representatives. In China’s competitive e-commerce environment, where counterfeit products and misleading promotions have eroded consumer confidence, maintaining transparency is crucial. Platforms like Alibaba and JD.com have introduced verification systems and authenticity guarantees to strengthen trust in online transactions. Similarly, on WeChat and Douyin, verified brand accounts, live-stream interactions, and behind-the-scenes content help humanize brands, bridging the emotional distance between companies and consumers.

Perceived value—the subjective assessment of a product’s worth—serves as the outcome of this trust-credibility dynamic. When consumers perceive the source of social proof as credible and trustworthy, they tend to assign higher value to the endorsed product or brand. In this way, trust acts as a filter that transforms information into perceived value. A product praised by credible influencers or endorsed within a trusted peer network gains symbolic weight beyond its functional attributes. For example, on Xiaohongshu, when a beauty product receives authentic, detailed reviews from users with relatable experiences, its perceived value increases because consumers view it as socially validated and emotionally reliable. The purchase then becomes more than a transaction—it becomes an act of alignment with

a trusted community.

In the Chinese cultural context, credibility also intersects with broader notions of *mianzi* (face) and reputation. Choosing products associated with trustworthy brands or endorsed by respected figures helps consumers maintain their social image and self-esteem. A purchase that reflects good judgment, discernment, or sophistication enhances personal credibility within one’s social network. This cultural linkage between personal trust and social reputation amplifies the emotional stakes of consumer choices, making credibility a key determinant of purchasing behavior.

Trust, therefore, operates as the invisible currency of social proof. It transforms collective behavior into persuasive influence and allows digital interactions to carry emotional and symbolic meaning. When credibility is established through authentic voices, transparent communication, and relational engagement, social proof gains power, translating digital signals into real consumer action. In China’s socially interconnected marketplace, where the boundary between friendship, influence, and commerce is increasingly fluid, the ability to foster genuine trust remains the most decisive factor in turning attention into loyalty and visibility into value.

5. Cultural Context of Social Proof in China

The operation of social proof in China cannot be understood without recognizing the profound influence of cultural values and social structures that shape how people think, interact, and make decisions. Chinese consumer behavior is deeply intertwined with collective identity, social hierarchy, and interpersonal relationships. Within this cultural framework, collectivism, social status, and *guanxi* (personal networks) form the foundation upon which social proof functions. These elements do not simply reinforce social influence; they define how it is interpreted, trusted, and acted upon in everyday consumption.

At the core of Chinese social life is collectivism, a value system that emphasizes harmony, interdependence, and the prioritization of group goals over individual preferences. This cultural orientation naturally aligns with the logic of social proof, which relies on the idea that people look to others for behavioral cues. In China, the pursuit of consensus and social harmony means that individuals are more likely to adopt

attitudes and behaviors that reflect collective approval. Consumer decisions are therefore influenced not only by personal preference but by what peers, colleagues, or family members consider appropriate or desirable. On platforms like WeChat and Douyin, this tendency manifests in shared product recommendations, group purchasing behaviors, and viral consumption trends. When users see that their social circles favor a product, they interpret this as both a sign of quality and a social signal that their own participation will maintain group harmony. The alignment between collectivist values and social proof mechanisms makes social validation a particularly powerful force in shaping Chinese consumers' purchasing patterns.

The cultural significance of social status and group identity further intensifies the impact of social proof in China's digital marketplace. Consumption often functions as a means of expressing social standing and belonging to particular social groups. The products individuals choose, the brands they follow, and the influencers they admire communicate their position within the social hierarchy. In China's fast-evolving consumer culture—especially among urban youth—social proof helps signal aspiration and success. When an influencer or celebrity promotes a product on Douyin or Xiaohongshu, the act of following their recommendation allows consumers to symbolically align themselves with a more desirable social category. Owning the same product or engaging in the same consumption trend becomes a way to reinforce identity within a group and to gain social recognition. The importance of “face” (*mianzi*) amplifies this process: choosing well-reputed, socially approved products reflects not only taste but also discernment and cultural sophistication. In this sense, social proof in China is not merely about trusting others' opinions—it is about maintaining one's social image and affirming membership within the right circles.

Equally significant is the role of *guanxi*, or personal networks, in validating social proof. *Guanxi* represents the web of relationships that sustain social and economic life in China, rooted in mutual trust, reciprocity, and long-term obligation. Within this system, credibility and authenticity are often judged not by institutional authority but by the strength of personal connections. When information or

recommendations come from within one's *guanxi* network—family members, close friends, or colleagues—it carries far more persuasive weight than anonymous online reviews. Social media platforms have adapted this traditional logic to the digital era by embedding network-based trust mechanisms into their design. On WeChat, for example, recommendations shared within private groups or Moments feeds are perceived as more reliable than advertisements. Similarly, Xiaohongshu users often trust reviews from verified community members who share relatable lifestyles, because they resemble the intimacy of offline *guanxi* relationships. This blending of digital interaction with interpersonal trust transforms social proof from a mass phenomenon into a relational experience, rooted in the emotional and moral fabric of Chinese society.

Together, collectivism, social status consciousness, and *guanxi* form the cultural foundation that gives social proof its distinct power in China. These values shape not only how consumers interpret the opinions of others but also why they find those opinions meaningful. To buy what others buy is to affirm one's place within a community; to follow a trend endorsed by an admired group is to strengthen one's social identity; to trust recommendations from personal networks is to honor bonds of reciprocity and loyalty. In this sense, social proof in China operates as both a psychological mechanism and a cultural expression—a way of navigating modern consumer life while maintaining continuity with enduring social values.

6. Challenges and Ethical Implications of Social Proof in E-Commerce

The growing influence of social proof in e-commerce has transformed how consumers make decisions and how brands market their products. Yet this transformation has also introduced complex ethical challenges that question the authenticity, transparency, and fairness of digital persuasion. As algorithms, influencers, and social networks increasingly shape what people see and trust, the line between genuine recommendation and commercial manipulation has blurred. In China's rapidly evolving digital marketplace where consumer trust is both powerful and fragile, the ethical use of social proof has become a defining issue for sustainable e-commerce.

One major challenge arises from the manipulation of social validation signals, such as likes, reviews, and follower counts. These visible cues are central to how consumers gauge credibility, but their reliability can easily be distorted. On platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu, inflated metrics—created through fake accounts, bots, or paid engagement—can fabricate an illusion of popularity. Similarly, fake reviews have become a persistent issue across e-commerce sites and social media platforms, where businesses pay for positive feedback to enhance product reputation. According to a 2023 report by the China Consumers Association, nearly 30% of online shoppers had encountered misleading or falsified reviews in the past year. This erosion of authenticity undermines the core principle of social proof, turning what was once a reflection of collective trust into a tool for manipulation. When consumers can no longer distinguish genuine experiences from fabricated endorsements, confidence in digital commerce weakens.

The use of influencer marketing introduces another layer of ethical complexity. Influencers and KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) hold immense sway over consumer decisions in China, but their endorsements often straddle the boundary between personal opinion and paid promotion. Without clear disclosure of sponsorships, consumers may mistake commercial advertising for authentic recommendation. Regulatory authorities, such as China's State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR), have implemented stricter guidelines in recent years to address this issue. In 2022, the government reinforced rules requiring influencers and online personalities to clearly identify sponsored content and prohibit the spread of false claims. Despite these efforts, enforcement remains uneven, and many brands continue to exploit the emotional credibility of influencers to subtly shape consumer behavior. This lack of transparency not only violates ethical marketing norms but also exploits the trust that followers place in perceived authenticity.

Beyond deception and manipulation, there are psychological implications that raise ethical questions about how social proof is used to influence consumers. Algorithms designed to amplify engagement often reinforce herd behavior by promoting content that already performs well, creating a cycle where popularity begets more popularity. This algorithmic bias

can pressure users to conform to trends, regardless of their actual needs or preferences. On platforms like Douyin, where viral challenges and live-streamed sales dominate, consumers can experience social pressure to participate in collective buying moments. The resulting "fear of missing out" (FOMO) can lead to impulsive spending and emotional fatigue, blurring the line between informed decision-making and psychological manipulation. Such practices raise concerns about whether e-commerce platforms are prioritizing consumer well-being or exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities for profit.

Data privacy is another ethical dimension linked to the operation of social proof. The algorithms that curate what users see rely on vast amounts of personal data, tracking behaviors, preferences, and interactions to deliver targeted social validation cues. While personalization can enhance user experience, it also raises questions about consent and autonomy. Consumers are often unaware of how much their online activity is monitored and used to shape their exposure to products and endorsements. This opaque process challenges the ethical principle of informed choice and risks turning consumers into passive participants in an algorithm-driven marketplace.

The ethical use of social proof in China's e-commerce ecosystem therefore hinges on transparency, accountability, and authenticity. Brands and platforms must commit to honest representation by ensuring that reviews, endorsements, and engagement metrics reflect genuine consumer sentiment. Influencers should disclose sponsorships openly and maintain integrity in their content. Meanwhile, platforms must invest in stronger verification systems and data ethics frameworks that protect users from manipulation and misuse. Promoting media literacy among consumers is also essential, empowering them to critically assess social proof signals rather than accepting them at face value.

The power of social proof lies in its ability to build trust and foster connection—but when misused, it can corrode the very trust that sustains digital commerce. In China's competitive and fast-moving online market, maintaining ethical standards is not just a matter of compliance but of long-term sustainability. Social proof must evolve from a tool of influence into a mechanism of mutual trust, where both

businesses and consumers participate in an environment of honesty and respect. Only through such ethical balance can social proof continue to enhance—not exploit—the social fabric of digital consumer culture.

7. The Future of Social Proof in China's E-Commerce Ecosystem

The future of social proof in China's e-commerce ecosystem will be defined by the continued convergence of technology, consumer psychology, and ethical responsibility. As artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and algorithmic personalization reshape digital commerce, social proof is poised to become more adaptive, individualized, and embedded in every stage of the consumer journey. These innovations promise new opportunities for engagement and precision marketing, yet they also introduce challenges that will test the boundaries of trust, transparency, and consumer autonomy in China's online marketplace.

Emerging technologies are transforming how social proof operates and how consumers perceive credibility. Advanced AI algorithms now analyze user behavior in real time, identifying patterns of interest, purchase history, and emotional engagement to curate hyper-personalized product recommendations. Platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu already employ AI-driven recommendation systems that prioritize content with high engagement rates, effectively amplifying social proof signals. As these systems evolve, they will increasingly tailor the visibility of endorsements, reviews, and influencer content to individual users, creating unique social validation experiences. For instance, a consumer interested in skincare may see product endorsements not only from top influencers but from micro-communities and users whose profiles closely match their own demographic and aesthetic preferences. This personalization enhances the emotional relevance of social proof, making it more persuasive and contextually meaningful.

Big data will further expand the predictive power of social proof. By aggregating insights from millions of interactions—likes, shares, purchase behaviors, and search histories—platforms can identify emerging consumption patterns before they become mainstream trends. This capability allows businesses to design marketing strategies that

preempt consumer desires, positioning products at the intersection of popularity and personal relevance. However, such predictive influence also carries ethical implications. When algorithms anticipate and nudge consumer behavior, the boundary between choice and manipulation becomes increasingly blurred. In this data-driven landscape, the responsibility of maintaining consumer trust will depend on how transparently platforms use behavioral data and whether users retain meaningful control over their digital experiences.

The integration of virtual influencers and AI-generated content represents another emerging dimension of social proof in China. Brands are beginning to experiment with virtual personalities who can engage with followers and promote products without the unpredictability of human influencers. While this innovation allows for greater consistency and control, it raises new questions about authenticity. The emotional resonance of social proof depends on perceived sincerity, and as AI-generated endorsements become more common, consumers may struggle to distinguish genuine advocacy from algorithmic simulation. Maintaining credibility in this environment will require platforms to clearly disclose the use of virtual agents and to ensure that such content aligns with ethical marketing standards.

As the social and technological dimensions of e-commerce deepen, ethical considerations will become the defining force in sustaining the credibility of social proof. The Chinese government has already taken steps toward establishing clearer regulatory frameworks for online marketing, influencer transparency, and data governance. Future developments are likely to include stricter oversight of algorithmic bias, endorsement authenticity, and data-driven persuasion. For brands and platforms, the challenge will lie in balancing innovation with accountability—harnessing the power of AI and social data to enhance engagement while protecting users from manipulation and exploitation.

Equally important is the evolution of consumer awareness. As digital literacy improves, Chinese consumers are becoming more discerning in evaluating social proof signals. Younger generations, in particular, demonstrate a growing ability to differentiate between organic endorsements and paid promotions. This shift suggests a future in which social proof will rely

less on surface-level popularity and more on authentic interaction, transparency, and community trust. Brands that cultivate long-term relationships with consumers through honest storytelling, consistent values, and meaningful engagement will stand out in an increasingly skeptical digital environment.

The trajectory of social proof in China's e-commerce ecosystem points toward a hybrid future—one that blends technological precision with human authenticity. The success of social proof will depend not only on its ability to influence but also on its capacity to foster trust in an age of algorithmic persuasion. As AI and big data continue to shape consumer experiences, the most successful brands will be those that use these tools responsibly, aligning technological advancement with ethical integrity and cultural sensitivity. In this balance lies the sustainable future of social proof—one where innovation and trust coexist to define the next generation of digital commerce in China.

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Space Security, Economy and New Demanding Cybersecurity Challenges Through the EU Space Act

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on the European Commission's proposal for the EU Space Act, which has a legal basis in Article 114 TFEU. The proposal's ultimate goal was to harmonize national legislation on security, resilience and sustainability in relation to space activities within a single market like the European one. The regulation proposes and highlights precise and uniform rules for economic and private operators, which fosters investment and respects sovereign prerogatives in connection with the protection of national security requirements. The analysis also focuses on the challenges that may arise in the coming years, both nationally and internationally, by examining the context of the Union's legal order, which is interconnected with provisions related to other Union-related matters.

Keywords: EU Space Act, space, security, defense, sustainability, resilience, cybersecurity, Art. 114 TFEU

1. Introduction

The proposal for a regulation by the European Parliament and the Council on the safety, sustainability and resilience of the Union's space activities, proposed on 25 June 2025, deserves investigation.¹ The EU Space Act regulation is yet another innovation of the European Union, designed to provide member states with a precise legal framework to foster and strengthen an internal market for space activities. The EU Space Act has highlighted a framework to

ensure safety, environmental sustainability and resilience, while also seeking to facilitate the Union's competitiveness in the space sector. This harmonization allows for overcoming the differences in existing individual state legislation, helping the start-up of small and medium-sized enterprises and their growth beyond national borders within the unified market (Ünüvar, 2025). The proposal was launched at a historical moment that space demonstrates to be critical due to the potential it offers from an economic perspective for aspects related to its own safety.

The space economy, which has grown in recent years, is becoming a specific, critical component for various sectors, especially communications, financial transactions, agriculture, weather forecasting and space resources, which play a

¹ Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on the safety, resilience and sustainability of space activities in the Union, COM/2025/335 final: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=cel-ex:52025PC0335>. See also in argument: <https://www.european-space-act.com/>

key role in the opportunities and exploitation offered by new technologies.¹ The space economy involves the growth of both public and private actors. Non-spacefarer states are those that have integrated their space activities into a national space program. These states are protagonists in a struggle for time and space, considered special and important for the formation of customary norms for the sector. Spacefarer states, through various private entities, initiate activities in this sector. Obviously, the original structure and traditional actors are the United States and the Russian Federation, currently important groups for the states that have developed space programs. Furthermore, regional international organizations such as the European Union and the African Union have autonomous programs for space agencies (Wouters & Thiebaut, 2009; Von Der Dunk, 2017; Mahulena Hofman & Blount, 2018; Onwudiwe & Netwton, 2021). Alongside national space agencies, other actors are focusing on space and on interests associated with space resources and services. Private actors are thus significantly increasing the potential profits derived from space activities such as space tourism, satellites and the use of large constellations (Lacombe, 2019; Venkatesan, Lowenthal & Prem, 2020). Activities related to the development of space technology extend beyond the original space sector to the states and the objectives pursued, namely political and/or military ones.

Within this sector, support for the privatization of these activities is evident within a framework of exclusive prerogatives for states that assist their public and private actors, that is, within a framework of activities that do not appear to be fully regulated (Lockridge, 2006). Thus, a market for space activities is growing, driven by numerous private actors, with a regulatory impact that necessitates regulations based on the evolution of its context. The European Union, even at the regional level, is not excluded from this evolving procedural process, with a dual objective, this of European integration.

2. The Strategy Envisioned for the EU Space Act

The proposed Regulation Space Act was based on a European legal and political framework for

the space sector that integrates and introduces an element of harmonization into this sector. Space also represents a cross-cutting area of interest for civilian activities linked to the defense and security sectors, thus entrusting a variety of space-related assets. Within this area, the work of the European Space Agency (ESA) (Krige, Russo, 2000) is noteworthy. This intergovernmental institution has been recognizing the failures of European space partnerships since 1975. Thus, the implementation of programs for space safety, space exploration and the development of European launchers for an emerging satellite industry positions the ESA to allow member states to invest in and support the development of the European space industry. In this spirit, the European Commission has supported space activities that consider horizontal tools for policies that have launched large-scale space programs in the fields of satellite navigation and Earth observation. Interest is thus growing progressively in relation to the development of a capacity for infrastructure, telecommunications, satellite navigation and Earth observation services with a decisive impact on society. The European Union has thus established its own link with the ESA, namely the Joint Space Strategy of 2000, which followed the Space Policy of 2003. The project was based on the 2004 agreement between the EU and ESA. Subsequently, key programs such as Galileo for satellite navigation and Copernicus for Earth observation, as well as other Space Surveillance and Tracking (SST) programs, were developed, i.e., objectives to protect European space infrastructure.

Following the Treaty of Lisbon, the Union was granted competence in space matters, namely the Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities.² This binding document offered guidelines for conduct aimed at ensuring the safety and sustainability of space, thus falling within the scope of soft law instruments, the law of space activities. It has thus assumed significant and growing importance in the evolution of international law, given the difficulties of reaching agreement on a legally binding text. This is why we are talking about a new Space Strategy for Europe, which was adopted by the

¹ OECD, Space economy at a glance, 2014, <https://www.oecd.org/sti/the-space-economy-at-a-glance-2014-9789264217294-en.htm>

² EU, Draft International Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities, 31 March 2014, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/space_code_conduct_draft_vers_31-march-2014_en.pdf

European Commission in 2016.¹ The Strategic Compass of 2022 and space identified as a strategic area, was put forward by the European Commission,² the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who in practice issued the European Union Space Strategy for Security and Defence on 10 March 2023.³ Space has played a key role in the Union's Common Security and Defence Policy, highlighting and drawing attention to the defense and security sector, which is shifting to an aspect involving the use of force in space. The related strategy thus proposed actions to strengthen the resilience and protection of the Union's space systems and services. This resulted in the issuance of the EU Space Law, which provides a common framework for the security and sustainability of space, strengthening the exchange of information on incidents and facilitating cross-border coordination for broad cooperation. In this way, the European Commission's proposal achieved a goal set for its strategy.

The proposed EU Space Act implements strategic objectives already identified for Europe through the Competitiveness Compass.⁴ In this spirit, we recall the Approach for Space Traffic Management (STM) of 15 February 2022⁵ and

the Green Deal of the Union.⁶ In this regard, the EU Approach for Space Traffic Management highlighted and addressed the connection between space traffic and the presence of an exponential number for satellites and earth orbits, according to the need to avoid debris. The European Green Deal (Campins Eritja & Fernández Pons, 2024) sought to influence the governance and regulation of space activities. This strategy aims for a green transition and the achievement of climate neutrality by 2050. It concerns various economic sectors such as transport, energy, agriculture, sustainable finance and aerospace activities, which contribute to the fight against climate change. In the 2024 Transition Pathway for the Aerospace Ecosystem document, the topic was dedicated to the air and space sectors.⁷ Finally, of direct relevance, is the Vision for the European Space Economy, issued on the same day as the presentation of the legislative initiative, i.e., 25 June 2025.

The vision outlines a strategy to ensure Europe's significant share of the global space market, while strengthening its autonomy and technological advantage. It defines actions to strengthen the EU's space ecosystem. Among other things, it envisions a "Space Team Europe", an inclusive, high-level forum bringing together European space stakeholders, including the European Space Agency (ESA) and the European Union Agency for the Space Programme (EUSPA). This highlighted the unification of fragmented efforts to consolidate the Union's capacity. The ultimate goal is also to invest in the development of a unified regulatory framework for the Union's space market, especially in emerging sectors such as space mining and the use of space resources.

¹ EU, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Space Strategy for Europe, COM(2016/0705 final: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2016%3A705%3AFIN>

² European Union, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, 24 March 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en

³ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, European Union Space Strategy for Security and Defence, Brussels, 10.3.2023, JOIN(2023) 9 final, [https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/detail?ref=JOIN\(2023\)9&lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/detail?ref=JOIN(2023)9&lang=en)

⁴ European Commission, Competitiveness Compass, Brussels, 29.1.2025, COM(2025) 30 final, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/competitiveness-compass_en

⁵ European Commission High Representative of the Union For Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, An EU Approach for Space Traffic Management. An EU contribution addressing a global challenge, 15.2.2022 JOIN(2022) 4 final: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=cel-ex:52022JC0004>

⁶ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions "The European Green Deal", COM(2019) 640 final of 11 December 2019: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=cel-ex:52019DC0640>

⁷ European Commission, Transition pathway for the aerospace ecosystem, 2024: https://img.spaceeconomy360.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/07155258/Transition-Pathway--Aerospace-Ecosystem--EN.pdf?_gl=1*rezqup*_gcl_au*MTM5NTUzMjU1OC4xNzYwMTY5NjY1. European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A Vision for the European Space Economy, del 25.6.2025, COM (2025) 336 final: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=cel-ex:52025DC0336>

The building blocks are based on a single market framework for space, industrial preparedness and technological independence, along with a qualified working effort such as international cooperation, economic diplomacy and support for space-specific commercialization, in a continuous effort to accelerate research and innovation. This vision of the EU Space Act emphasizes competitiveness as a tool to enhance the space economy and establish a single market for space through data-driven space services. Thus, the new regulation provides common, predictable rules that contribute to making the European space industry highly competitive.

3. The Basis of the New Regulation

The work carried out by the European Commission before adopting a new regulation was focused on the functioning of the national space market, also highlighting the institution's political orientations regarding European competitiveness in space qualified as a strategic, fundamental sector of the Union.¹ The basis of the EU Space Act is understood as a preliminary reference to the Union's competences for space activities. Following the Treaty of Lisbon, competence for space was conferred upon the Union, positioning it as a potential key player in this sector. Article 4, paragraph 3 TFEU (Kellerbauer, Klamert & Tomkin, 2024) is recalled for the sectors of research and technological development, space for the Union. The Union has the competence to conduct actions aimed at defining the implementation of certain programs without the related competitive exercise, which has the effect of preventing Member States from exercising these rights among themselves.

The TFEU grants a qualified, *sui generis*, parallel, competitive competence in this area, shared with the Union and the Member States on a general basis, based on the exclusion principle. Its exercise does not impede Member States but highlights the regulatory provision that concerns the conduct of actions defined as the implementation of programs in this sector. This provision was inserted through the TFEU to allow the Union to issue regulations in this sector, leading to the process of integration in relation to the security sector and its own defense. Its limited and specified competence is

granted by Article 189 TFEU (Kellerbauer, Klamert & Tomkin, 2024) with reference to European space policy. This policy is based on the former Article 189 TFEU, which provides the foundations and support for research, technological development and the coordination of efforts necessary for the exploitation of space, exclusively through the harmonization of national regulations in the space sector.

The harmonization limit and competence of the Union's space policy are limited by the adoption of national legislation within new and emerging sectors regulating space, such as the exploitation of space resources and space traffic management. Space competences and capabilities at the European level and at different levels of governance are subject to the risk of misalignment as they achieve various regulatory levels. This criticality, for the European Commission, lays the foundation for security, resilience, environmental sustainability and renewable energy for the Union's space activities, avoiding fragmentation and providing the basis for a single regulatory framework for all Member States (Liakopoulos, 2024).

The EU Space Act, based on Article 114 TFEU (Kellerbauer, Klamert & Tomkin, 2024), on the adoption of space measures within the Union, has promoted space activities that promote the competitiveness of the space industry, facing thus the risks of an exponential growth of space activities that safeguard the use of space.²

Article 114 TFEU justifies and addresses the divergent approaches of Member States that create difficulties for operators and the conduct of space activities in cases requiring authorization from different space authorities, such as the launching state and the territorial state. Article 114 TFEU achieves the objectives of an internal market based on Article 26 TFEU (Kellerbauer, Klamert & Tomkin, 2024) through the harmonization and approximation of legislation for the Member States of the Union. It also ensures the original, primary objective of the free movement of persons, services and capital within an area of internal borders. Additionally, the case law of the CJEU has highlighted a broad interpretation of Article 114 TFEU in relation to the areas of competence

¹ CJEU, 5 October 2000, C-376/98, Germany v. Parliament and Council, ECLI:EU:C:2000:544, I-08419. 12 December 2006, C-380/03, Germany v. Parliament and Council, ECLI:EU:C:2006:772, I-11573.

² CJEU, 5 October 2000, C-376/98, Germany v. Parliament and Council, ECLI:EU:C:2000:544, I-08419. 12 December 2006, C-380/03, Germany v. Parliament and Council, ECLI:EU:C:2006:772, I-11573.

excluded from the treaty (Weatherill, 2017).¹

Obviously, the use of general internal market rules is intended to pursue instrumental sectoral policy objectives that circumvent the Treaty's stated limitations. Space activities, as referred to in Article 114 TFEU, have enabled the European need to harmonize uniform disciplines regarding aspects of the activities of private commercial operators within an internal market, such as states that maintain control over services and data related to dual-use space activities of strategic importance for national security. The ability to regulate aspects such as launch authorization regimes for private operators, liability and insurance profiles, the registration of launched objects and the enactment of national legislation refer to common rules that smooth out frictions arising from the application of conflicting state regulations (Linden, 2016).

The sector operator that acquires authorization from states to have a basic activity link and the various criteria connecting it, such as territory, nationality, registration, etc., lay the foundation for European regulation capable of establishing preferential criteria that avoid other procedures, also facilitating the entry and operation of the European market. The actions of Article 189 TFEU are suitable for achieving this effect. The regulation is based on harmonization with reference to key aspects of safety, resilience and environmental sustainability. It takes into account authorizations that are related to space activities. Independently coordinating activities for individual states means offering the corresponding recognition for authorizations that are linked to another member state as a connecting factor to the activity and the competence that issues the basis of the national regulation. This solves the problem and the need for a private operator facilitating commercial activities to request their own authorizations, while preserving the possibility for each state to impose restrictive criteria deemed objectively and necessary for its own territory.

The relevant provisions for operators operating in areas under the jurisdiction of multiple states lack legal status as they are not based on a precise and uniform regulatory framework.

Simplification of the final instance makes the space industry competitive through new space startup avenues that encourage investment in the space sector. The technical requirements proposed by the regulation and debris mitigation, along with sustainability that stimulates innovative research and technological development, activate a virtuous cycle capable of improving the Union's economic environment in the long term. The European Commission, in an explanatory appendix to the proposal, identifies the relevant aspects relating to subsidiarity and proportionality, linked to legislative initiative. This highlights the establishment of a single European framework, which also represents added value compared to the action of high-level member states. This Union level has created equal conditions regarding safety, resilience and environmental sustainability requirements. This avoids overlaps, duplications and conflicts between legislation in force in various countries, thus improving the functioning of the internal market.

The need for various authorizations is eliminated through the mutual recognition mechanism that guarantees that the Union's space infrastructures provide services in a safe and secure manner. This ensures consistent, uniform environmental impact assessments. The proportionality of regulatory intervention ensured by the European Commission does not introduce rules that go beyond the objectives pursued and create disproportionate costs that harm the European space industry. The specific measures are applied to the different types of orbits that conduct space activities and do not influence the choice of technologies that safeguard state prerogatives and national security.

The proposed regulation introduces a simplified authorization process for constellations and less restrictive rules for activities carried out in low earth orbit, given the proximity to the atmosphere and the relative brevity of space missions in that area. These factors take into account the proportional rules of actual needs and the space dimension at a critical level for the mission and the propulsion system used. This use takes into account the European Commission's choice of a legal instrument for the regulation. In this spirit, Article 114 TFEU allows for the adoption of regulations and decisions that are appropriate and uniform, so

¹ 14 October 2004, C-36/02, Omega, ECLI:EU:C:2004:614, I-09609. 8 June 2010, C-58/08, Vodafone and others, ECLI:EU:C:2010:321, I-04999. 22 January 2014, C-270/12, United Kingdom v. Parliament and Council, ECLI:EU:C:2014:18, published in the electronic Reports of the cases.

as to avoid even the slightest discrepancies in an application profile resulting from discretionary choices related to the implementation of a directive. The explanatory document and the reasoning behind this choice ensure transparency and uniform guarantees of rights and obligations as service providers operating in an internal space market between the Union and third countries.

Another consideration concerns the measure, as an initiative that refers to European Space Law,¹ a content and object of aspects that respect full harmonization. In such a way, the legal basis, which refers to Article 189 TFEU, is assessed, i.e., a space policy consistent with the choice of name for the EU Space Act, as a measure based on Article 114 TFEU.

4. Structure and Content of the EU Space Act

When speaking of the structure of the new regulation, we refer to the variety of topics systematically addressed through a number of titles totaling 119 articles, introduced by detailed rules for an authorization regime for space activities and the governance of the technical requirements required for this type of procedure. The provisions aim to achieve an important and forward-looking objective for the EU Space Act, which is to ensure the safety, resilience and environmental sustainability of the Union's space activities. The rules focus on research and balancing state needs related to the security and defense of the Union, enhancing the internal market through regulatory harmonization.

The definitions of the material areas are included in Title I of the EU Space Act, which seeks to regulate, authorize and register the Union's space activities, including management rules for orbital traffic to avoid future collisions. This therefore involves governance and the implementation of its decisions, such as the establishment of the Union space label, as well as the introduction of capacity-building measures. In this spirit, Article 109 of Title VI, relating to the proposed regulation, includes development activities and capabilities in the space sector, as well as technical support for space operators and competent state authorities. The development of guidelines and the

identification of best practices, as well as in-orbit services, facilitation of information exchange, funding of research projects and technological innovation, are also included. Already within the scope of the UN, the main capacity-building activities were the result of the work of the United Nations Office of Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA), which consisted of training, education, technical advisory services and the management of programs promoting space science and applications.²

Title II includes provisions relevant to authorizations. The European-level agency already relies on information from the competent state authorities for authorizations, as well as on basic information on authorized operators under national law. The Union Register of Space Objects (URSO) has been created to include operators from third countries. This simplified description of small operators conducts activities in orbits close to the earth's atmosphere and within constellations. An authorization for space objects is thus provided, which comprises authorizations for individual objects. Space objects within the Union, as well as the competent authorization authority, are linked to the European Commission. Other international organizations, as well as operators from third countries, can register to URSO by demonstrating compliance with the required technical requirements. The agency issues the relevant certificate of conformity in electronic format for these activities.

Title III concerns the governance and responsibilities of national authorities and related technical bodies with supervisory, sanctioning and inspection powers, such as those of the Agency. They play a coordinating role with similar state authorities and the activities of operators managing assets for the Union, providing support to states that lack adequate capacity at the national level.

Technical requirements are included in Title IV in strict compliance with the principle of proportionality, which differentiates the requirements relating to the safety, resilience and sustainability of the various categories of operators and the activities conducted. The rules on safety and the reduction of collision risks,

¹ Legislative Train Schedule of the European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-new-plan-for-europe-s-sustainable-prosperity-and-competitiveness/file-eu-space-law>

² <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/de/ourwork/topics/capacity-building.html>

mitigation and the production of debris in orbit¹ are safety procedures for both orbit and deorbit. Within this spirit, the measures and devices use objectives set for debris mitigation plans and the reduction of radio and light pollution for specific aspects, including those relating to mega-constellations. Security primarily considers the security dimension.² The same title includes the main management links for space risks and infrastructures, including cyber risks. The connection and reference to cybersecurity rules protects critical infrastructures relating to safety profiles and the security dimension. The protection measures include the space mission cycle, launch design and the operational phase of potential physical and cyber risks. The regulations also include the Space Act, which is considered a *lex specialis*, as well as the NIS2 Directive on information security. This facilitates cooperation between the actors involving the Commission and the Agency at the European level, as well as the competent authorities of individual states, as envisaged in the establishment of the Union Space Resilience Network (EUSRN), which seeks to monitor the management of significant cyber incidents for the alignment of resilience measures.

The EU Space Act introduces provisions on environmental sustainability, which include an environmental impact statement. The indications on the requirements for space objects required to achieve environmental sustainability objectives also provide for the possibility for the Commission to issue standard rules for technical characteristics. In this spirit, Title V defines the activities of operators for third countries and international organizations of the Union. It also outlines an equivalent system for licenses issued to international organizations managing assets for the Union based on Article 218 TFEU (Kellerbauer, Klamert & Tomkin, 2024). Support measures are provided for in Title VI, which includes technical assistance and

capacity-building, such as digital solutions for any functional means convenient for the implementation of the regulation. Title VII also includes final and conclusive provisions, which are of particular interest for interim measures, given that the regulation is applicable to space activities starting from the 2030 regulation and its connection with the legal system of the Union.

The European Commission's proposal is based on existing regulations covering diverse areas such as cybersecurity and the impact on space activities. In this regard, Regulation (EU) 2021/696³ established the European Union Agency for the Space Programme (EUSPA) together with the Union Space Programme, enabling the Union to operate autonomously and competitively in the space sector (Davis Cross, 2021). Regulation 696/2021, unlike the EU Space Act, has found legal space in Article 189, paragraph 2 TFEU, allowing for space, which is a key sector for the services provided to everyday society and on earth for the protection of strategic interests such as security and technological resilience. The objective of harmonizing Union rules in the space sector makes the regulation the basis for progress towards simplifying the Union's governance system.

Article 3 of Regulation 696/2021 includes the Galileo programme as a civil global satellite navigation system; EGNOS as a civil regional satellite navigation system; Copernicus, as well as a satellite observation system for the entire Earth; and Space Situational Awareness (SSA), which includes a surveillance system for space tracking, as well as the observation of space weather events monitoring in proximity to earth. These are essential elements for the detection of potential threats and for the adoption of related countermeasures. GOVSATCOM, as a civil and governmental satellite communications service, is also included in this spirit.⁴ The European Commission was identified as responsible for implementing a space programme capable of

¹ Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS), Scientific and Technical Subcommittee, Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee (IADC) Space Debris Mitigation Guidelines, 3 February 2025, A/AC.105/C.1/2025/CRP.9, par. 3.1, p. 8: https://www.unoosa.org/res/oosadoc/data/documents/2025/aac_105c_12025crp/aac_105c_12025crp_9_0_htmlAC105_C1_2025_CRP09E.pdf

² UNIDIR, What's in a word? Notions of 'security' and 'safety' in the space context, 12.5.2023, <https://unidir.org/whats-in-a-word-notions-of-security-and-safety-in-the-space-context/>.

³ Regulation (EU) 2021/696 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 establishing the space programme of the Union and the European Union Agency for the Space Programme and repealing Regulations (EU) No 912/2010, (EU) No 1285/2013 and (EU) No 377/2014 and Decision No 541/2014/EU, OJ L 170, 12.5.2021: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/696/oj/eng>

⁴ https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-space/govsatcom-satellite-communications_en

defining the relevant priorities for long-term development according to Article 28 of Regulation 696/2021. EUSPA, as a new agency of the Union, has been given legal personality, replacing the Galileo Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) agency, which in practice works in close cooperation with all other external and internal Union actors such as the European Space Agency, the Member States and the relevant EU agencies relating to the European External Action Service.

This is a sphere of old and new issues introduced by Regulation 588/2023 of 15 March 2023, which highlighted the Union's program for secure connectivity,¹ focused on secure and stable communications services for both civilian and government sectors, enabling infrastructure protection, surveillance, and, above all, crisis management. Within this framework, the IRIS2 constellation is expected to be in orbit for a period of time until 2027 to ensure very fast communications, thanks to cryptographic and quantitative technologies. The EU Space Act harmoniously integrates Regulation 696/21, clarifying the interconnection between the provisions of its provisions. The EU Space Act itself proposed linking other provisions addressing issues of interest to the Union with space-related aspects. Thus, the communications sector also addresses cybersecurity and the protection of strategic infrastructures.

We continue with Title IV, which deals with technical rules in the resilience sector, also addressing the topic of coordination with the Information Security Directive and infrastructure with essential services according to NIS2, i.e., the Resilience Directive on critical infrastructure² and physical, anthropogenic and natural threats, including terrorist threats.³ The related NIS2 Directive takes into account the

Union's level of cybersecurity, taking into account the protection of terrestrial infrastructure⁴ and the protection of terrestrial infrastructure for use by Member States and by private entities for space activities that exclude the scope of application for infrastructure managed, used by the Union on behalf of, and within the scope of its own space program. The Directive does not provide a comprehensive framework for the management and risks for segments of space infrastructure and for all space operators, given the limited scope for activities that take place on their own planet. Therefore, the EU Space Act includes and integrates the regulatory framework that fills the gaps in this regard.

On the other hand, the interest between the various sectors emerges above all in relation to cybersecurity, which is lacking in this sector given that the security of satellite traffic is not guaranteed to reduce the risk of collisions due to damage caused by marked debris.

This increases resilience, which aims to protect the Union's and member states' infrastructure from threats, especially cyberattacks. It ensures the long-term sustainability of space activities through common standards and lifecycle assessments for space objects. The link with cybersecurity is relevant to the activity under investigation.

The EU Space Act explicitly establishes and proposes the application of cybersecurity regulations to all space operators for space infrastructure, thus creating a basis for measuring resilience in the space sector. Private and public actors in this sector acquire specific legal obligations necessary to ensure the resilience associated with space missions. The regulation's direct applicability thus overcomes criticisms related to the delayed and timely implementation of the NIS2 Directive. The proposed regulation provides a general information security framework for the Union establishing specific requirements in the space sector, thus becoming a *lex specialis* for information security measures. According to the NIS2 Directive, Union space operators are included in the category of entities implementing the directive with objectives that comply with the cybersecurity risk management

¹ Regulation (EU) 2023/588 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2023 establishing the Union Programme for Secure Connectivity for the period 2023-2027, PE/65/2022/REV/1, OJ L 79, 17.3.2023, pp. 1-39: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/588/oj/eng>

² Directive (EU) 2022/2555 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union, amending Regulation (EU) No 910/2014 and Directive (EU) 2018/1972 and repealing Directive (EU) 2016/1148 (NIS 2 Directive), OJ L 333, 27.12.2022, pp. 80-152: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2022/2555/oj/eng>

³ Directive (EU) 2022/2557 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on the resilience of critical entities and repealing Council Directive 2008/114/EC of 14 December 2002, in OJ L 333/164, 27.12.2022: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2022/2557/oj/eng>

⁴ Directive (EU) 2022/2555 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union, cit., Annex I, p. 67.

measures. It also reports obligations among those that are important for the functioning of the sector and the type of services they provide. The accuracy criterion complies with the requirements set out in the EU Space Act, which also comply with the content of the NIS2 Directive.

The Union's policies in the area of safety, coordination and air traffic management encompass various sectors, such as air transport, movement of people, and so on. They also include space activities that affect multiple Member States, according to Regulation (EU) No. 2019/123,¹ which highlights the functions of the European network. Thus, the mandatory reporting system for the Union, pursuant to Regulation No. 376/2014,² is systematically implemented within the scope of aerospace activities. The provisions of the proposed regulation seek to integrate existing legislation. Also details in this regard specifically related to space operations. In environmental matters, the regulation precisely addresses the Green Deal and the Union's related sustainability objectives, using methodologies that assess the impact of space activities, such as life cycle assessments (LCA) and environmental products, taking into account specific, yet complex, environmental impacts of space activities. The relevant directive includes critical infrastructure, including the space sector, which falls within the scope of the directive concerning the provision of services that depend on ground infrastructure operated for use by Member States and/or private entities. The regulation thus functions and complements the provisions regarding an orbit infrastructure that qualify as critical. The effort is to coordinate new legislation with a legal framework that applies within the space sector, which is only at a collateral level. The EU

Space Act presents and establishes a guarantee of primary coordination in the sector, primarily to ensure the specific criteria of the related specific requirements in the space sector.

In this spirit, relations with international law, which requires the Union to recognize the Outer Space Treaty and the principles developed within the UN framework, represent a fundamental point for the legal regulation of space activities within strategic documents such as the Space Strategy. Adhering to the principles of the Outer Space Treaties, the Astronaut Rescue Agreement,³ the Liability Convention,⁴ and the Registration Convention⁵ are also referred to in the Space Traffic Management document (Bennett, 2023).

5. The Security and Defense Framework

The EU Space Act highlights several security issues for the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice that are worth analyzing at this point. First, we refer to Article 2, paragraph 3, which excludes the applicability of the regulation and related objects used exclusively for defense and national security objectives, regardless of the provider of space services. Military command and control posts for defense objectives do not apply to space objects for the entire duration of the space mission. Thus, it is up to each Member State to determine its own circumstances as a space object falling under this type of exclusion. The regulation under investigation does not affect authorization provisions regarding the radio spectrum regulated under Decision 676/2002/EU, Directive (EU) 2018/1972 and Decision 243/2012/EU. There are also interrelations with the space sector that continue

¹ Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/123 of 24 January 2019 laying down detailed rules for the implementation of the functions of the air traffic management (ATM) network and repealing Commission Regulation (EU) No 677/2011 Text with EEA relevance, C/2019/293, OJ L 28, 31.1.2019: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg_impl/2019/123/oj/eng

² Regulation (EU) No 376/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 April 2014 on the reporting, analysis and follow-up of occurrences in civil aviation, amending Regulation (EU) No 996/2010 of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Directive 2003/42/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council and Commission Regulations (EC) No 1321/2007 and (EC) No 1330/2007, OJ L 122, 24.4.2014, pp. 18–43: <https://www.easa.europa.eu/en/document-library/regulations/regulation-eu-no-3762014>

³ Agreement on the Rescue of Astronauts, the Return of Astronauts and the Return of Space Objects Launched into Outer Space (ARRA), adopted by the General Assembly by General Resolution 2345 (XXII), opened for signature on 22 April 1968, entered into force on 3 December 1968, 672 U.N.T.S.119, <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties/introrescueagreement.html>

⁴ Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects (LIAB), adopted by the General Assembly by resolution 2777 (XXVI), opened for signature on 29 March 1972, entered into force on 1 September 1972, 961 U.N.T.S. 187, <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties/introliability-convention.html>

⁵ Convention on Registration of Objects Launched into Outer Space (REG), adopted by the General Assembly with resolution 3235 (XXIX), opened for signature on 14 January 1975, entered into force on 15 September 1976, 1023 U.N.T.S. 15: <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties/introregistration-convention.html>

to be applied to specific standards such as the European Electronic Communications Code.

The regulation includes safeguard clauses for state sovereignty, recognizing the Member States' prerogatives in the area of national security. In this spirit, Article 4 of the Regulation includes the national security clause. This is intended to reassure Member States against any interference by the Union and related matters, which falls within its exclusive jurisdiction. The European Commission considers the adoption of functional measures that serve the European interest and respect the principles of subsidiarity, proportionality and full respect for state competences. The preamble already specifies the scope of the clause, which refers to cases where a state needs to establish specific space measures by taking control of an object under its jurisdiction for the purpose of exercising its national security competence. The security issue includes objects, dual-use infrastructures and especially resilience measures, as well as infrastructures that are operational for the control and assessment of space threats for the development of the EU Space Threat Response Architecture.

The Union Space Resilience Network (EUSRN), pursuant to Article 94, paragraph 1 of the Regulation, supports and identifies events related to space systems that pose a threat to the Union and its Member States. It therefore presents itself as an effective response to threats that complement the provisions of Council Decision (CFSP) 2021/698 on the security, systems and services used within the Union's space program, related to Union's security.¹ The EU Space Act proposes the European Union Space Strategy for Security and Defence, taking into account a geopolitical context that sets strategic objectives to protect space assets, defend the Union's interests, deter hostile activities in space and strengthen its strategic autonomy. The strategy identifies threats that put space systems and related infrastructures on one's planet at risk, thus identifying counterspace capabilities. These are the activities that demonstrate capabilities and deterrence against competitors, preventing the use of space

systems to achieve information superiority. Space assets orbit their supporting infrastructures, which are present on earth via interconnected links. The desired effect of employing a space countermeasure reversibly includes these types of activities, which are directed against specific targets in a space sector that affects the radio frequency spectrum. Use by space objects does not immediately include the classification of space assets as military or civilian.

In this spirit, the 2021 Council Decision (CFSP) on the security of systems and services in connection with space programmes is a binding legal document that, unlike the EU Space Strategy, includes enforceable provisions that allow the Union to identify and attribute related threats in order to respond and put the security of the Union and of its member states at risk. The High Representative launched the Space Threat Response Architecture to implement the Council Decision. This decision clearly highlights the EU Space Strategy laying the foundation for an effective countering of threats, thus broadening the scope of the mechanism and the response employed to defend Galileo and all the Union's space systems and services. This mechanism is based on the availability of an information framework (Space Domain Awareness) and the immediate identification of in-orbit threats (Early Warning) based on the capabilities of the member states, as is the new service that connects with the EU Satellite Centre and the European Union Agency for the Space Programme (EUSPA). An interconnection to this system is presented through the regulation, which proposes resilience as a response to threats. Specifically, Articles 74-95 of the provision address its own resilience and space infrastructure.

The general principles applicable to risk management for space infrastructure are also established. The obligation to perform and assess risks is based on the legislation in force regarding the cybersecurity and physical resilience of the relevant entities. Space operators conduct risk assessments, identifying vulnerabilities and corrective measures that are adapted to the specific risk scenarios of each space mission. The Union's space operators have passed on major incidents involving Union-owned assets to the Agency. As a Union space resilience network, the EUSRN seeks to facilitate cooperation between the European

¹ Council Decision (CFSP) 2021/698 of 30 April 2021 on the security of systems and services deployed, operated and used in the Union space programme which may affect the security of the Union, and repealing Decision 2014/496/CFSP, OJ L 170/178 of 12.5.2021: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32021D0698>

Commission and the Agency for national authorities. It is responsible for monitoring and managing major incidents to align and implement resilience measures with other relevant Union frameworks. The vision for the European Space Economy strategically highlights the space sector's overall economy and its related military, technological and security objectives.

Space investments are geared toward government and military demand, resulting in the distinction between commercial, civil and military space programs, as well as dual-use assets in orbit. The ongoing tensions and crises surrounding government and military satellite constellations supporting communications, missile tracking and real-time situational awareness for military operations enable the commercial space sector to play a key role in providing these capabilities to sectors such as intelligence and defense services. This allows for a strategic autonomy that outlines the Union Strategic Compass for Security and Defense. Thus, the space industry plays a fundamental role in contributing to the achievement of this objective.

The relative involvement of commercial players in the space sector in armed conflicts is a reality that highlights the vulnerability of space infrastructure to kinetic and cyber attacks and the devastating effects on the economy and civilians. The increase in cyberattacks as a form of attack also includes hybrid, missile and cyber attacks. The European Commission calls for the adoption of precise cybersecurity standards for satellites in space. Radio frequency interference jeopardizes the security of European transport services, especially air and sea transport, ultimately compromising the safe operation of Europe's critical infrastructure. The Union considers countermeasures and investments that protect the infrastructure of numerous economic players to be necessary. The development of resilience systems and the increased security and protection of the Union's existing space systems provide space services for all civilian sectors, such as energy, thus offering a fundamental response to such emergencies. Space capabilities exist at the national level to indirectly provide the Space Act, which enables and establishes a unified framework that fosters the development of precise rules through the internal market.

6. Connection with Cybersecurity Rules

The regulation has established traffic management for the protection of critical infrastructures that takes into account cybersecurity aspects. This regulation covers space objects that damage, and compromise equipment related to the total or partial disabling and decommissioning of space systems due to defects that are accidentally caused in control and management systems, such as IT. The risks, already outlined in the preamble, include collisions and increased orbital congestion, resulting in debris production, as well as geopolitical threats related to the cybersecurity of space infrastructures. Critical situations are related to physical contact and disruptive activities within their systems, as well as the safety of space operators and the associated compromises. The guarantee of protection and the compromise of the functioning of space systems is addressed in two ways. The security, space activities and earth orbits of economic operators in the sector put in the foreground human activities on earth that depend on space-based systems such as satellite systems, telecommunications, remote sensing, weather forecasting, the acquisition of their own images and information that meet needs within the scope of their own security.

The cybersecurity of the Union, through the regulation of Directive NIS2 2022/2555, refers to this matter only incidentally, placing the envisaged regime in a system that does not include all possible actors, private, government and services relevant to the space system. However, no reference is made to communications network providers, non-public services, research institutions and education institutions. Also missing is the regime for European assets, which is based on a Union space program. The EU Space Act seeks to standardize resilience by increasing standards for state assets, bringing them closer to those of the European space program. Cybersecurity requirements, unlike those adopted by all Member States through national legislation, unbalance and compromise the functioning of the internal market, which they must address. The European-level provision and the related minimum infrastructure requirements specify the needs of a typology that contributes to and eliminates the inequalities that create solid, identical basic conditions for the entire Union internal market. This objective is established by the EU Space Act as an appropriate system for

managing risks and design phases of space missions. This ensures cybersecurity for space infrastructure and all resources and data systems that are essential for all phases, from design and manufacturing to launch and operation throughout the entire life cycle. This puts in place robust risk management measures through a life cycle for space missions that adequately address all evolving phases.

In this spirit, Title VI is considered, which contributes to state capabilities related to achieving this objective. The related infrastructures at all levels, as well as the actions managed for each type of risk, enable the regulation to harmonize requirements appropriately with the diverse needs associated with the space environment. The provisions also include Directive 2022/2555 as a *lex specialis* that complies with Article 21. This directive applies across sectors of interest to the Union. It continues to represent a useful reference basis for the space sector, introducing requirements that tighten risk management and the need for a harmonized framework for the entire market.¹

The related harmonization with the NIS2 and CER directives regarding risk management and procedures for managing incidents, threats and information exchange refers to Chapter II of Title IV of the new regulation. Space activities thus have an impact that determines the security of the earth, relying on space capabilities and especially on the area of freedom, justice and security. The Copernicus Earth observation program is already used in border control and indirectly in migration issues. The judicial police also uses satellite control systems for geolocation, shadowing, communications and image collection.² Examples can be seen in space activities that become integrated with terrestrial activities. Ensuring the safety and functioning of space assets, the protection of space activities, has a direct impact on the guarantee and security of the planet. The measures referred to in the EU Space Act are based on producing their effects in this area.

¹ Regulation (EU) 2019/881 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on ENISA (the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity) and on information and communications technology cybersecurity certification, and repealing Regulation (EU) No 526/2013 ('Cybersecurity Act'), PE/86/2018/REV/1, in OJ L 151, 7.6.2019, pp. 15-69; <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2019/881/oj>

² https://www.esa.int/Enabling_Support/Preparing_for_the_Future/Space_for_EarthSatellite_technology_to_help_fight_crime

7. Concluding Remarks

From the previous paragraphs, we have sought to explore the European Commission's proposed regulation, seen as an important step for the Union's role in the space sector, governed by legal aspects. The related strategies, which are linked to the EU Space Strategy for Security and Defense and the Strategic Compass, as space represents a key interest, increase activities and foster the proliferation of actors engaging with economic potential. The related European-level provision aims to harmonize national legislation in this sector. It is not linked to state competences but provides a single framework with uniform rules to facilitate the activities of commercial operators and related investments. Legal protection guarantees the safety, resilience and sustainability of space activities, aligned with the will of the European legislator as an effect that ensures the protection of space assets. The national security clause is inserted into a provision that excludes the applicability of detailed rules, while effectively retaining dual-use assets within the scope of the regulation. The EU Space Act has proposed other relevant measures that are relevant to the space sector, such as the related directives on cybersecurity (NIS2) and critical infrastructure (CER). The regulation is intended to be a *lex specialis* for space activities. The regulation is ultimately based on the legal basis of Article 114 TFEU on the harmonization of rules for the functioning of an internal market, which proposes, in a complementary manner, compliance with national legislation. The EU member states have thus sought to enact space legislation through the use of relevant space-related legislation that has a uniform regulatory effect for in-orbit activities, including the terms of their own governance for the relevant actors in their respective sectors.

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A Study on Strengthening the Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation Among Youth in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Through the 15th National Games

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Abstract

The 15th National Games, which is hosted by the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area as an integrated region, mark a major domestic sporting event whose impact on forging a strong sense of the Chinese national community among young people in the three jurisdictions will be profound. By unpacking the internal logic from the twin perspectives of collective memory and emotional identification, this paper argues that the Games' ritualized sports and competitive spectacles can create shared memories and spark emotional resonance, thereby strengthening youth's sense of group belonging and identity. On this basis, it analyzes the Games' value across political, economic and cultural dimensions—enhancing national identity, accelerating regional economic integration and amplifying the influence of traditional culture. Finally, it offers post-Games implementation proposals from three angles—spatial production, media communication and social interaction—advocating the sustained consolidation and deepening of a Chinese national community consciousness among Greater Bay Area youth through the activation of memory sites, narrative innovation and cross-border volunteer initiatives.

Keywords: The 15th National Games, Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao youth, a strong sense of the Chinese national community, Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area

1. The Internal Logic of Strengthening the Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation Among Youth in the Greater Bay Area via the 15th National Games

1.1 Collective Memory

Every social group is rooted in its

corresponding collective memory. The collective memory embedded in the subconscious of members of the Chinese national community forms the foundation for forging a strong sense of the Chinese national community for the

Chinese nation.¹ Collective memory, as a medium for transmitting social norms and values, can reconstruct the past and foster a shared identity among individuals, thereby building a sense of community that transcends individual consciousness.² Based on the collective memory of the Chinese national community, members can consciously accept the discipline and guidance of shared social norms and values, ultimately forming a “pluralistic and integrated” sense of the Chinese national community.

Consciousness is a product of society. Memory, as the medium through which social reality is transformed into consciousness, carries the marks of society and history. Memory has a layered nature: individual memory and collective memory give rise to different forms of consciousness. The former forms individual consciousness, while the latter forms collective consciousness—that is, a sense of community. The two interact and transform into one another. When individual consciousness resonates collectively and individuals subconsciously affirm the norms and values of the community, a sense of communal identity is established.

This communal consciousness, shaped by shared norms and values, influences individual memory from the top down through collective memory. Shared memory exists as a transitional form between individual and collective memory, providing the foundation for the formation of collective memory.

Given the vast territory of the Chinese nation, members of the Chinese national community have diverse living habits and social experiences, which may lead to varied perceptions of the same group events. For the Chinese national community as a whole, a single diachronic shared memory is insufficient to foster a profound sense of communal identity characterized by shared weal and woe, honor and disgrace, life and death, and a common destiny. Instead, it may lead to a diffusion of consciousness—like sound waves dissipating over distance. The further away from the event, the weaker the communal foundation becomes.

In general, shared memory extracts common

fragments from individual memories. Collective memory aggregates and reorganizes these shared memories into a coherent form with shared norms and values, thereby forming a stable, enduring, and value-oriented sense of the Chinese national community.

To forge a strong sense of the Chinese national community, it is essential to create, uncover, and awaken shared memories. Memory relies on media such as space, behavior, symbols, or rituals to exist.³ Performance-based events at the 15th National Games, as an integral part of mass sports activities, are deeply rooted in Chinese culture. These localized and symbolic performances, carried out through traditional Chinese sports, are rich in national metaphor. Through ceremonial celebrations, they encode and display national characteristics via language, imagery, and dance, generating shared memories with national traits. These shared memories provide a mnemonic foundation for guiding youth in the Greater Bay Area to embrace the norms and values of the Chinese national community.

1.2 Emotional Identity

Emotional identity is the core element and focal point in forging a strong sense of the Chinese national community for the Chinese nation.⁴ Emotions shape an individual’s understanding and perception of social values. Positive emotional experiences can transform cognitive understanding into emotional identification, fostering a strong sense of belonging to the community. Identification is the psychological mechanism through which individuals develop a sense of belonging to the community. Emotional identity, driven by emotions such as belonging, leads individuals to imitate the values and norms of the community, forming behavioral patterns similar to those of other community members.

As Durkheim stated in *The Division of Labor in Society*, collective consciousness arises from the natural tendency of individuals to conform.⁵ It

¹ Wang Mingke. (2006). *On Chinese Borderlands Historical Memory and Ethnic identity*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 50-51.

² Jan Assmann, Chen Guozhan. (2016). What is “cultural memory”? *Foreign Theoretical Trends*, (06), 18-26.

³ Zhao Jingrong. (2020). The generative mechanism and classic construction of national memory. *Study and Practice*, (10), 120-131.

⁴ Liu Jichang, Zengxing. (2020). Affective Identification as Key Element in Forging a Strong Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation. *Journal of South-Central Minzu University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, (6), 11-16.

⁵ David Émile Durkheim. (2013). *De la division du travail social*. (Qu Dong Trans.). SDX Joint Publishing Company, 61-62.

is reinforced through shared emotions and consolidated through symbolic systems such as rituals. Durkheim further noted that opposing consciousnesses tend to cancel each other out, while similar consciousnesses merge into the collective ideas of the community and are transformed into its driving force for development. Thus, shared emotion is a crucial psychological foundation for the survival of a community. For the Chinese national community, shared emotion is the internal bond that connects all the ethnic groups and the basis for generating a sense of national belonging, honor, pride, and responsibility.

Emotional identity serves as a key link between cognitive identity and behavioral identity.¹ It is the main bridge connecting individual behavior and communal consciousness and can have a significant impact on the development of society and the nation. Emotional identity is built upon the psychological foundation of shared emotion and is the aggregation of individual emotions. However, if there is only a superficial shared emotion without effective means of consolidation, a strong sense of the Chinese national community cannot be formed.

On the one hand, individual emotions naturally tend toward entropy—tending to increase in complexity due to diverse life experiences. On the other hand, the Chinese national community is composed of countless individuals with differing emotional experiences, which can conflict with the unity of the community. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate collective emotions and consciousness through “aggregation, gathering, and assembly,” aligning individual emotions with the collective emotions of the Chinese nation and maintaining the “unity” of community consciousness within a “pluralistic” context.²

Specifically, the 15th National Games can use shared emotion as a medium to strengthen the emotional identity of youth in the Greater Bay Area toward the Chinese national community. On the one hand, the Games create ritualized competitions that generate dramatic tension,

providing opportunities for the emergence of collective emotions. On the other hand, the Games not only evoke shared emotions such as joy, excitement, and disappointment but also offer a focal point for community members through competitions and performances, further consolidating the unity of emotional identity.

In short, as a platform for showcasing national unity and cultural diversity, the 15th National Games can use the unique universal language of sports to create a lasting atmosphere of national collective participation. This enables different ethnic groups to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers, achieve spiritual communication and emotional resonance, and weave emotional bonds that forge a strong sense of the Chinese national community among youth in the Greater Bay Area.

2. The Value Connotation of Strengthening the Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation Among Youth in the Greater Bay Area Through the 15th National Games

2.1 Political Value

Youth in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area represent the future of the region. However, due to the unique institutional backgrounds of Hong Kong and Macao, there is a degree of cognitive ambiguity in national identity among youth in these areas.³ At the political level, the 15th National Games transcend the scope of a mere political ritual. From the preparation to the execution of the Games, from the symbolic construction of the mascots to the dissemination of slogans such as “Passionate National Games, Dynamic Greater Bay Area,” youth in the region are immersed in a social atmosphere of regional coordination and joint event organization under the overall guidance of national forces.

Youth in the Greater Bay Area not only participate in the Games as spectators, volunteers, and athletes, contributing to its success, but also strengthen their collective memory of working together to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Through publicity and guidance, these youth can develop a regional identity of integrated development in the Greater Bay Area and a recognition of the nation’s economic strength

¹ Lin Junchang, Zhang Hongli, Zhaomin. (2021). An Analysis of the Path to Cultivate the Chinese National Community Consciousness from the Perspective of E-motional Identity. *Heilongjiang National Series*, (02), 1-7.

² David Émile Durkheim. (2011). *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. (Qu Dong, Ji Zhe Trans.). Beijing: The Commercial Press, 589-590.

³ Kong Wenhao, Ren Ziyi, Jing Huaibin. (2023). Behavioral effects and formation mechanism of Hong Kong-Macao youth cross-border development policies. *Youth Exploration*, (02), 98-112.

and organizational capacity, thereby consolidating the foundation of their national identity.

2.2 Economic Value

Building a prosperous world-class bay area through joint efforts is the goal of social and economic development in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. Against the backdrop of high-quality development, the co-hosting of the 15th National Games by Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao has given rise to a new form of the event economy — “National Games Economy.” This economy uses sports as a new growth point, promoting the integrated development of sports with culture, tourism, business, education, and technology.

The National Games Economy can foster industrial integration and innovation, cultivate brand value for enterprises, and reflect social responsibility and commitment to the era. For youth in the Greater Bay Area, models such as industry-education integration have driven deep collaboration between universities and enterprises, creating more opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship. This strengthens their recognition of a shared national economic interest and enhances their strong sense of identity and belonging to the Chinese nation.

2.3 Cultural Value

Hong Kong, Macao and the Pearl River Delta are rooted in Lingnan culture. However, over the course of history, Lingnan culture in the mainland has evolved under the influence of socialism and reform and opening-up, while in Hong Kong and Macao, it has developed under colonial rule and liberal capitalism, forming a unique, hybrid, East-meets-West cultural landscape.¹

Forging a strong sense of the Chinese national community among youth in the Greater Bay Area can enhance the discourse and influence of Chinese traditional culture in Hong Kong and Macao. Traditional Chinese culture, which integrates cultural symbols from all ethnic groups, provides a strong medium for unifying the “pluralistic” cultures under a shared “unity.”

At the 15th National Games, traditional Chinese

sports such as dragon boat racing, Go, Tai Chi, and dragon and lion dances were performed as living embodiments of cultural heritage. Building on this inheritance, youth in the Greater Bay Area can create new cultural expressions to understand and represent themselves, achieving cultural innovation rooted in tradition.

3. Recommendations for Strengthening the Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation Among Youth in the Greater Bay Area in the Post-National Games Era

3.1 Spatial Dimension

Space serves as a container for meaning and emotion. It is both a product and a producer of social relations. Through planning, design, and symbolic attribution, space can be shaped into a carrier for conveying specific ideologies and values.²

The 15th National Games created a temporary memory space that transcended administrative boundaries. However, in the post-Games era, since the temporal immediacy of memory has departed from the shared spatial context, it is necessary to recall, awaken, consolidate, and sublimate the shared memory, and to endow it with national-level significance.

First, we should awaken the shared memory of Greater Bay Area youth within tangible physical spaces. The three regions of Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao possess a large number of Games venues, which are spaces that carry the emotions and meanings of the 15th National Games. The events that took place within these venues provide raw material for creating shared memory among youth.

When these youth revisit the venues in the post-Games era, their memories of participating in or contributing to the Games—as athletes, spectators, or volunteers—will be reactivated. At this point, the shared memory of the Games can be transformed into a longitudinal, diachronic collective memory.

One, in the post-Games era, we should fully open up the venues and fully leverage the “National Games legacy.” This will give youth more opportunities to interact with these spaces. Inside the venues, exhibitions can be set up to showcase the athletic achievements or volunteer stories that took place there, guiding youth to

¹ LI Yan, SITU Shang-ji. (2001). A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE OF HONG KONG, MACAO AND ZHUJIANG DELTA. *Human Geography*, (01), 75-78.

² Henri Lefebvre. (2021). *The Production of Space*. (Li Chun Trans.). Beijing: The Commercial Press.

recall and reflect, thereby laying a mnemonic foundation for forging a strong sense of the Chinese national community.

Two, we can organize new events using existing venues, with a focus on uncovering symbols of national will. For example, based on the cross-border men's road cycling race—the only event that spanned all three regions—we can organize marathons or cycling events for youth, utilizing national landmarks like the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge. By combining sportsmanship with the promotion of national infrastructure, we can enhance youth strong pride, identity, and belonging toward the Chinese nation.

Second, we should gradually construct a spiritual and cultural space that forges a strong sense of the Chinese national community through the National Games.

One, we must closely integrate the culture of the National Games with national policy interpretation. Emphasize that the Games are a vivid practice of integrating sports into national strategy, and highlight their real-world and era-specific significance in the context of the sports-power strategy. We should also explain how the advantages of the “one country, two systems” policy, the achievements of Greater Bay Area development, and the successes of reform and opening-up supported the hosting of the Games. Additionally, we should showcase the new development concepts demonstrated during the Games—such as coordination, openness, and shared participation.

Two, we must interpret the spirit of the National Games in conjunction with the spirit of Chinese sports. Highlight the embodiments of the Chinese sports spirit by athletes, volunteers, and referees. We can organize youth to learn and inherit Lingnan cultural elements—such as Cantonese opera, lion dancing, Yingge dance, and Hong Kong pop music—that were featured in the opening and closing ceremonies. This will help cultivate cultural confidence and construct a spiritual and cultural space for the Chinese nation in the post-Games era.

3.2 Media Dimension

A strong sense of the Chinese national community does not naturally form in people's

minds.¹ Rather, it is gradually constructed through certain “media,” in accordance with the laws of human cognition, across history and reality.

In the information age, media is a key force in shaping cognition and constructing identity. In response to the relatively limited participation of Greater Bay Area youth in the National Games, we should take advantage of their diverse information channels and active thinking, innovate communication strategies, and enhance their depth of engagement.

First, we should adapt to media transformation trends and reconstruct narratives using language and formats that resonate with youth. By leveraging innovative media, we can create deep resonance between grand themes and individual emotions. For example, during the Games, youth in the Greater Bay Area used grassroots and popular language to reinterpret the mascots “Xiyangyang” and “Lerongrong,” nicknaming them the “Greater Bay Chicken.” This shifted the role of youth from passive recipients to active disseminators, expanding the scope of publicity coverage and indirectly increasing their engagement.

In the post-Games era, if such harmless “meme culture” can be guided properly, the symbolic meaning of the mascots can spread more widely, deeply, and enduringly, becoming part of the collective memory of Greater Bay Area youth and the Chinese nation, thereby solidifying their emotional identity.

Second, a clear historical memory is the premise for media innovation. Archival resources serve as media and tools for constructing collective memory of the Chinese nation and play an important role in enhancing young people's sense of national identity.

The archives of the 15th National Games objectively record the successful experience of co-hosting the event and showcase the new face of Greater Bay Area development. We should use these archives, supported by national archival institutions, to collect, activate, and exhibit these archival resources through

¹ Li Qingwen. (2025). Logical levels and practical paths for integrating the forging of a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation into ideological and political courses in universities—Based on the cognitive-emotional-action analysis framework. *Journal of Zhejiang Sci-Tech University (Social Science Edition)*, 1-8[2025-11-01]. <https://link.cnki.net/urlid/33.1338.TS.20251011.1045.020>.

compilation, exhibitions, and media dissemination, evoking emotional resonance among youth.

One, we should establish a dedicated archive for the 15th National Games. Drawing on the successful experience of the “Beijing Winter Olympics Archive Collection,” we should launch a “15th National Games Memory Collection Program,” with coordinated efforts to collect, organize, open, and utilize archives from the bidding, preparation, hosting, and post-Games operation periods. This will enhance the integrity and diversity of the Games’ memory and help build a “Passionate National Games, Dynamic Greater Bay Area” sports memory.

Two, we should build a youth archive database for the Greater Bay Area, collecting and preserving digital records of youth participation in the Games. This should include not only their athletic achievements but also the stories of volunteers and service teams, enriching the national sports and youth cultural heritage repository.

3.3 Social Interaction Dimension

A strong sense of the Chinese national community is also constructed through social interaction.¹ Ultimately, the goal of using the National Games to strengthen this sense among youth is to encourage them, under the influence of collective memory and emotional identity, to practice the shared norms and values, and to engage in sustained, deep, and positive social interaction and collective action.

One, we should use the Games as an opportunity to guide youth in the Greater Bay Area to participate in building China into a sports powerhouse. We can regularly organize cross-regional sports events. In addition to team sports like dragon boat and rowing that were popular during the Games, we can also include easier-to-organize and low-threshold activities like jump rope and shuttlecock, expanding the scope of youth participation. This will revive the collective memory of cooperation during the Games and deepen mutual understanding among youth from the three regions under the shared goal of a sports powerhouse.

Two, we should use the volunteer service legacy

of the Games as a platform for youth to realize social value. Building on the “Little Dolphin” volunteer team, we can establish a “Dynamic Greater Bay Area Youth Volunteer Corps.” Inspired by the volunteer spirit of the Games, youth can participate in public sports services, transforming superficial interpersonal connections into deep empathy and shared value recognition. This will allow the volunteer culture formed during the Games to continue, innovate, and deepen in the post-Games era, becoming a solid bond for consensus-building and community identity among Greater Bay Area youth.

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¹ Liu Ruobing. (2025). Discourse research on forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation in universities in the era of intelligent media. North Minzu University.

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Gender and the Everyday Politics of Informality in African Cities

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Abstract

This paper explores how gender shapes the everyday politics of informality in African cities. It argues that informality is not a sign of disorder or economic failure but the central organizing logic of urban life, where survival, labor, and power are negotiated outside formal governance. Within this terrain, gender operates as a key determinant of access, visibility, and belonging. Women's participation in informal economies through trading, domestic work, and neighborhood organization reveals how they sustain urban livelihoods while navigating moral regulation, spatial exclusion, and economic precarity. The paper conceptualizes these practices as a *politics of survival*: subtle, embodied acts through which women claim space, security, and recognition in contexts of structural inequality. Their informal labor functions as both social infrastructure and political expression, reconfiguring the meanings of citizenship beyond legality or formal rights. By examining informality through a gendered lens, the paper rethinks African urban politics as a field of everyday negotiation, where care, reciprocity, and endurance form the foundations of city life and governance.

Keywords: everyday politics, citizenship, embodiment, survival

1. Introduction

Across African cities, informality is often understood as the pulse of urban life — a vast constellation of practices, relationships, and spatial improvisations that sustain millions of people. It has long ceased to be a marginal or residual feature of development; instead, it forms the foundation of what some scholars have described as “the actually existing city” (Roy, 2005). The informal sector is not a parallel economy running beside the formal one, nor a symptom of failure or underdevelopment. It is a social and political formation that structures how urban residents produce, exchange, and inhabit space. Within this formation, gender

emerges as a constitutive dimension rather than a secondary variable. To understand informality without gender is to miss the everyday negotiations that define who belongs, who labors, and who governs within the uneven terrain of African urban modernity.

The entanglement of gender and informality is evident in the texture of daily life. Women constitute a significant portion of those working in informal economies, from street vendors in Accra and market traders in Lagos to domestic workers in Johannesburg. Yet their labor remains systematically undervalued and precarious. The informality of their work reflects the broader feminization of survival in African

cities, where the retreat of the welfare state and the expansion of neoliberal urban policies push women into self-reliance and entrepreneurial improvisation. In many contexts, women's economic agency is celebrated rhetorically as resilience or innovation, but in reality it often masks structural exclusion from property ownership, credit, and formal employment (Chen, 2012). Informality, in this sense, becomes a space of both empowerment and constraint, a domain where women forge livelihoods through ingenuity while navigating deep-rooted gender hierarchies.

Gender also mediates how informality is perceived and governed. The labeling of certain urban activities as "informal" or "illegal" is not neutral; it reflects moral and political judgments about whose practices are legitimate. The female street hawker or market trader is often seen not only as an economic actor but as a moral subject whose respectability, cleanliness, and comportment are publicly scrutinized. In cities such as Kampala or Nairobi, regulations around vending and public hygiene often function as tools for disciplining gendered bodies in space (Lindell, 2010). The spatial politics of informality thus reproduce colonial and patriarchal hierarchies in which women's presence in public space is tolerated only under conditions of docility and invisibility. At the same time, women appropriate these spaces to claim recognition and autonomy, challenging dominant spatial orders through their daily practices of presence and persistence.

To speak of the "everyday politics" of informality is to acknowledge that power in African cities operates through diffuse, mundane interactions rather than through formal institutions alone. Political theorists such as Partha Chatterjee (2004) have shown how marginalized urban residents engage in what he terms "political society," a realm of negotiation and accommodation outside the liberal ideal of citizenship. In African contexts, these informal politics take on distinctly gendered forms. Women traders organize collective savings groups, negotiate with local officials, and establish systems of mutual protection that function as micro-governments. These practices embody an alternative mode of urban citizenship rooted in relationality and care rather than in legal recognition. The politics of informality are therefore not only about evading the state but also about reshaping it from below

through the quotidian labor of survival.

Urban informality also provides a lens for rethinking the relationship between visibility and power. For many women, the ability to occupy public space and conduct informal business is a form of political visibility. Yet this visibility carries ambivalence. The woman who sells fruit by the roadside is visible as an economic agent, but that same visibility exposes her to police harassment, gendered violence, and social stigma. The body becomes a site where political and moral orders intersect, marked by mobility, risk, and surveillance. Feminist geographers have noted that women's bodily presence in urban public spaces often destabilizes normative boundaries between the domestic and the civic (Nagar, 2014). In African cities, this destabilization is both a source of empowerment and a trigger for regulatory backlash, revealing how gendered bodies mediate the moral geography of urban space.

The gendered dynamics of informality are also inseparable from broader histories of urban governance and colonial legacies. Colonial administrations in Africa categorized populations according to race, class, and gender, defining who could inhabit the "planned" city and who was relegated to peripheral zones of informality. Postcolonial states inherited and reconfigured these logics of control, often treating informal settlements and economies as problems to be managed rather than as expressions of urban citizenship. The persistence of gendered inequality in informal economies thus reflects deeper continuities in the spatial organization of power. Women's informal labor is not merely an outcome of contemporary economic restructuring but part of a longer historical pattern in which their productive and reproductive roles have been spatially segregated and politically devalued.

At a theoretical level, examining gender within the everyday politics of informality challenges dominant narratives of urban development that privilege formal institutions and infrastructural projects as the engines of progress. The African city, viewed through this lens, is a space of improvisation, where social reproduction and collective survival depend on flexible arrangements that defy formal categorizations. Women's informal activities exemplify this improvisational politics. They reveal how urban residents create alternative infrastructures, of care, exchange, and information that sustain the

city when formal systems falter (Simone, 2004). These infrastructures are not only material but also affective, woven through trust, reciprocity, and shared vulnerability.

The gendered politics of informality also invite a reconsideration of what counts as “political” in the first place. Traditional political theory associates politics with the visible realm of the state, parties, and laws. Yet the daily negotiations of market women, the collective savings schemes of domestic workers, and the informal childcare networks in urban neighborhoods all constitute forms of political practice. They embody what Asef Bayat (2010) terms “the politics of the ordinary,” where people enact citizenship through acts of endurance, cooperation, and quiet resistance. These practices challenge the binary between public and private, showing that the home, the market stall, and the street corner are all arenas of political life.

To deepen the understanding of informality’s gendered dimensions, it is crucial to situate these practices within the moral economies that regulate urban belonging. Informality in African cities is sustained not only by economic necessity but also by social expectations around kinship, respectability, and care. Women’s informal labor often carries the moral weight of sustaining households and communities, which in turn legitimizes their presence in public space even as it confines them to certain roles. The everyday politics of informality are thus embedded in a moral economy of gendered obligation, where survival and virtue are intertwined.

In sum, the informal city is a gendered city. It is a space where inequalities of labor, visibility, and authority are produced and contested through everyday interactions. Gender shapes not only who participates in informal economies but also how informality itself is understood, governed, and lived. The study of African urban informality must therefore move beyond questions of legality or regulation to examine the intimate politics of gender that animate the city’s informal lifeworlds. This essay approaches informality as both a structure of constraint and a field of creative possibility, arguing that within the precarious spaces of African cities, women’s everyday practices of survival and negotiation constitute a deeply political reimagining of urban life.

2. Informality as a Gendered Terrain

2.1 *The Gendered Logic of Urban Informality*

Urban informality in African cities operates as a complex mode of life and governance rather than as a space of simple absence. The informal economy is woven into the texture of the city, shaping how labor, space, and survival are organized. Yet this informality is not neutral. It is profoundly gendered in its logic and operation, structuring the possibilities available to women and men differently. Women often enter informal economic activities not through choice but through structural exclusion from formal employment, access to capital, or property ownership. Informality becomes both a constraint and a strategy, a means of survival that simultaneously reproduces gendered inequalities.

Scholars such as Sylvia Chant (2008) have described the feminization of poverty and informality in urban Africa, where the decline of formal job opportunities and the retrenchment of public welfare have disproportionately affected women. Informal work offers flexibility that accommodates the reproductive labor women are expected to perform in the household, yet this same flexibility becomes a mechanism of exploitation, erasing the boundaries between domestic and economic labor. A woman who sells cooked food in Accra’s Makola market often does so while caring for children, negotiating with suppliers, and maintaining kinship obligations. Her productivity is sustained by invisible labor that remains unrecognized within economic statistics and policy frameworks (Chen, 2012).

The gendering of informality thus lies not only in who participates in informal economies but also in how the value of labor is perceived. Men engaged in informal activities such as artisanal work or transport services are often framed as entrepreneurs, while women in similar precarious settings are seen as supplementary earners. This gendered discourse shapes the social legitimacy of informal livelihoods and determines whose activities are tolerated or criminalized. In cities like Lagos or Harare, street vending by women is subject to more moral policing than comparable male-dominated forms of informality, revealing the intersection of gender, class, and urban regulation (Lindell, 2010).

2.2 *Gendered Space and Everyday Urban Geography*

The spatial organization of African cities reflects deep-seated gender hierarchies. Public space, formal employment zones, and political arenas have historically been masculinized domains, while the household and community spaces are feminized. Informality disrupts these spatial boundaries by inserting women into public and semi-public spheres through markets, roadside vending, and neighborhood-based production. Yet the visibility of women in these spaces often provokes anxiety within patriarchal cultures that associate femininity with privacy, modesty, and domestic containment.

In marketplaces across West and East Africa, women navigate complex codes of conduct that regulate how they speak, dress, and move. The moral discourses that surround women's economic participation frequently cast them as both necessary and dangerous: they are the lifeblood of local commerce yet also potential transgressors of gender norms. The Ghanaian scholar Akosua Adomako Ampofo (2007) notes that market women in Accra are often portrayed in public discourse as loud, assertive, and unruly, traits that simultaneously earn them respect as successful traders and condemnation for stepping beyond prescribed gender roles. The informal market, then, becomes a stage for the performance of contested femininities.

Urban planning and state regulation reinforce these gendered spatialities. The eviction of informal traders under the guise of modernization projects disproportionately affects women, as they rely on small-scale trading for daily subsistence. The "beautification" of city centers, as seen in Nairobi's 2010 urban renewal campaigns, often targets female vendors while leaving male-dominated transport or construction informality largely unchallenged. These interventions expose the gendered selectivity of urban order-making. The informal city is tolerated only when it conforms to gendered and aesthetic ideals that align with middle-class and masculine visions of modernity.

2.3 Moral Economies and the Discipline of Respectability

The politics of respectability plays a crucial role in shaping women's participation in informal economies. Respectability, as theorized by scholars like Lynn Thomas (2003), refers to a moral framework through which African women negotiate public identity, sexual

propriety, and social legitimacy. Within informal urban contexts, this framework manifests in the regulation of women's behavior by both community norms and state authorities. Women traders often face scrutiny not only for their business practices but also for their personal conduct. Their economic agency must be carefully balanced with moral propriety to avoid being labeled as wayward or immoral.

This moral surveillance functions as a form of governance that supplements formal regulation. In some Nigerian cities, for example, female hawkers are routinely harassed by local officials under accusations of indecency or obstruction, even though male traders occupy similar spaces. Such policing reflects deeper anxieties about female mobility and autonomy in urban space. The informal economy thus becomes a moral economy, where compliance with gendered expectations determines access to legitimacy, safety, and economic opportunity.

At the same time, women subvert these moral regimes through subtle strategies of negotiation. Market women cultivate networks of solidarity, draw upon kinship ties, and invoke maternal authority to legitimize their economic activities. By framing their labor as an extension of their duty to provide for their families, they reposition themselves as moral citizens rather than deviant actors. These rhetorical strategies reveal how moral discourses are not only restrictive but also generative, providing cultural resources for women to claim agency within constrained circumstances.

2.4 Gendered Infrastructures of Care and Exchange

AbdouMalik Simone's concept of "people as infrastructure" (2004) captures how informal networks constitute the social fabric of African cities. When viewed through a gendered lens, these infrastructures are sustained by women's labor of care, mediation, and relationship-building. Informal economies depend on trust, reciprocity, and reputation, qualities often cultivated through affective labor traditionally associated with femininity. Women organize rotating savings groups, manage neighborhood credit schemes, and coordinate supply chains that link rural producers with urban consumers. Their relational labor enables the circulation of goods and services that formal institutions fail to deliver.

The gendered nature of these infrastructures extends beyond economics into the realm of

social reproduction. Women's informal labor sustains not only households but also the wider urban system. They feed workers, provide childcare, and maintain social cohesion in neighborhoods characterized by instability. This dual role as economic actors and caregivers situates women at the heart of urban resilience. Yet their contribution remains undervalued precisely because it blurs the boundary between productive and reproductive work. The invisibility of this labor in policy discourses perpetuates a cycle where women bear the cost of maintaining the informal city without receiving commensurate recognition or protection.

The interdependence between informal economies and social reproduction suggests that informality cannot be analyzed solely through market logics. It must be understood as a social infrastructure shaped by gendered obligations and affective economies. This perspective aligns with feminist urban theory, which emphasizes care and interdependence as central to the functioning of cities (Tronto, 2013). The gendered infrastructures of informality reveal that survival in African cities depends not only on market exchange but also on the intimate labor of sustaining relationships and communities.

2.5 The Political Economy of Gendered Informality

The gendered terrain of informality is also embedded in broader political economies of neoliberal urbanism. Structural adjustment policies and market-oriented reforms have deepened the reliance on informal labor, particularly among women. State withdrawal from welfare provision has shifted the burden of social reproduction onto households and informal networks, reinforcing gendered inequalities. Women have become both shock absorbers of economic crises and engines of informal growth.

This dynamic produces a paradox. Development discourse often celebrates women as entrepreneurs and agents of empowerment while overlooking the systemic conditions that make informality their only viable option. Microfinance programs and "women's empowerment" initiatives frequently valorize small-scale entrepreneurship without addressing structural issues such as wage inequality, lack of childcare, or insecure tenure (Roy & AlSayyad, 2004). The neoliberal city thus

instrumentalizes women's resilience as a substitute for social policy, turning survival strategies into symbols of empowerment.

Gender also shapes the political relations that underlie informality. Women's associations and market cooperatives often mediate between informal workers and local authorities. These organizations provide platforms for collective bargaining and social support, yet they also reproduce hierarchies based on age, ethnicity, and class. Senior women, or "market queens," in cities like Accra wield considerable power in mediating market governance, but their authority can marginalize younger or migrant women traders. The gendered terrain of informality is therefore not uniformly emancipatory. It is a contested field where power circulates unevenly within and across gendered lines.

To conceptualize informality as a gendered terrain is to recognize that gender operates not as an external factor but as an organizing principle of urban life. The informal city is sustained by gendered labor, regulated through moral and spatial hierarchies, and politicized through everyday practices of negotiation and resistance. Women's participation in informal economies illuminates how urban citizenship in Africa is enacted not through legal status but through embodied presence, relational labor, and the management of risk. This perspective invites a rethinking of urban theory itself. The gendered politics of informality challenges developmentalist narratives that privilege formality, order, and state-centered governance. It reveals that the vitality of African cities lies precisely in the improvisational and relational practices that women sustain. By centering gender in the analysis of informality, scholars and policymakers can move beyond reductive binaries of legality versus illegality to engage with the lived realities that produce urban life. The gendered terrain of informality thus embodies both the inequalities and the creativity of African urbanism. It is within these informal spaces — markets, streets, and neighborhoods — that new forms of citizenship, solidarity, and political imagination emerge. Recognizing this terrain not as a site of deficiency but as a locus of social production transforms how the city itself is understood.

3. The Everyday Politics of Survival

3.1 Survival as a Political Condition

In African cities, survival is not simply a biological imperative but a political condition that defines the daily experience of millions of urban residents. The persistence of informality across the continent reflects not a lack of development but the normalization of precariousness as an enduring mode of urban life. For many, particularly women, survival in the city requires continuous negotiation with state authorities, market forces, and social hierarchies. These negotiations take the form of small, often invisible acts that sustain livelihoods, create networks of dependency, and redefine what it means to be a citizen in the city.

Feminist scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (2003) and Srilatha Batliwala (2011) argue that women's everyday acts of endurance and adaptation constitute a politics of survival, a set of practices that simultaneously reproduce and challenge existing power structures. In African urban contexts, this politics is not enacted through formal protest or organized mobilization but through ordinary acts of persistence that allow the poor to claim a foothold in the city. These acts are political because they intervene in the distribution of space, resources, and recognition, even when they are not articulated as political demands.

The capacity to survive amid structural marginalization requires improvisation and relational intelligence. A market trader in Harare must read the moods of local officials to anticipate crackdowns, adjust her prices according to fluctuating currency values, and maintain social ties that guarantee credit and protection. These acts of calibration are part of a repertoire of survival that produces its own form of governance. The urban poor, through their daily negotiations, generate informal systems of order that operate parallel to or in the absence of formal state institutions (Simone, 2004).

3.2 Negotiating State Power and Informal Authority

The relationship between the state and the informal economy in African cities is characterized by oscillation between repression and tolerance. State authorities depend on informal economies to absorb surplus labor and sustain urban livelihoods, yet they also seek to control and extract from them. This ambiguous relationship creates a space for continuous negotiation, in which women informal workers become both subjects of regulation and agents of

self-governance.

Street traders in Nairobi, Accra, or Dar es Salaam routinely encounter municipal police who enforce by-laws through fines, confiscations, or eviction. These encounters reveal the gendered dimensions of urban power. Women are often targeted not only for violating trading regulations but also for transgressing moral codes associated with female propriety in public space (Lindell, 2010). Yet these same interactions also generate opportunities for informal compromise, where traders use humor, persuasion, or small bribes to negotiate temporary tolerance.

The anthropologist Janet Roitman (2005) conceptualizes such practices as "fiscal disobedience," where informal actors engage with state institutions in ways that blur the line between compliance and resistance. For women, these negotiations are rarely confrontational; they operate through subtle forms of accommodation that allow survival without open defiance. In this way, the everyday politics of survival is neither purely oppositional nor submissive. It is a pragmatic engagement with power that allows continuity amid uncertainty.

Within informal economies, authority is not limited to the state. Local market associations, neighborhood committees, and informal leaders often regulate activities and mediate conflicts. In Ghana, for example, market "queens" oversee the allocation of stalls, enforce pricing norms, and act as intermediaries between traders and municipal officials (Clark, 1994). These roles illustrate how women exercise authority within the informal sector, transforming spaces of economic vulnerability into sites of social governance. Yet this authority is also hierarchical. Senior women who have accumulated capital and connections may reproduce inequalities within the informal sphere, showing that survival politics is embedded in complex power relations.

3.3 Gendered Networks of Solidarity and Reciprocity

The informal economy thrives on social networks that provide mutual support in the absence of formal security. For women, these networks often take the form of rotating savings associations, neighborhood cooperatives, or religious groups that double as welfare systems. They function as both economic and emotional infrastructures, offering credit, information, and protection against crisis.

These networks embody what feminist economists have called the “social reproduction of the informal city” (Elson, 1999). Through them, women sustain not only their households but also the moral and economic fabric of urban life. A street vendor’s ability to maintain her business depends as much on social trust as on market demand. Relationships with other traders, customers, and local officials determine her access to credit, safety, and information about inspections or price changes.

These gendered networks constitute an informal public sphere where women collectively deliberate and act, though often outside the language of formal politics. In cities like Maputo or Lusaka, women’s cooperatives have evolved into powerful social actors that can mobilize resources for housing, sanitation, and education. Their activities challenge the conventional boundaries of citizenship, situating women as active producers of urban infrastructure rather than passive beneficiaries of state development.

The solidarity cultivated through informal networks also has an affective dimension. Shared experiences of vulnerability foster empathy and collective identity. Women who gather daily in markets or transport hubs develop a sense of communal belonging that counters the fragmentation of urban life. These affective bonds transform spaces of marginality into spaces of collective agency, where survival becomes a shared endeavor rather than an individual struggle.

3.4 The Moral and Symbolic Dimensions of Everyday Politics

The politics of survival is not only material but also moral and symbolic. Women’s everyday activities in informal economies engage with dominant cultural narratives about respectability, motherhood, and citizenship. By sustaining households through informal labor, women enact forms of moral agency that legitimize their presence in public space. Their survival work becomes a claim to moral worth and social contribution, even when it defies state legality.

In many African societies, the figure of the market woman occupies an ambivalent position. She embodies industriousness and community service, yet she also represents disorder and unruliness. Public authorities invoke this ambivalence to justify periodic crackdowns on street trading under the pretext of restoring order or modernizing the city. These moral

discourses shape how women navigate visibility and invisibility in urban life. They must remain visible enough to attract customers and invisible enough to avoid persecution. This delicate balance between exposure and discretion reflects the embodied politics of survival that structures their daily existence (Lindsay, 2003).

The moral dimension of survival politics extends to the household, where women’s economic activities often intersect with patriarchal expectations. Women who earn income in the informal sector may face resistance from male partners or kin who view their independence as a threat to domestic authority. To sustain their legitimacy, many women frame their labor as an extension of maternal duty rather than as individual ambition. This strategic moral positioning allows them to claim economic agency within socially acceptable boundaries, revealing how moral narratives become tools of political navigation.

3.5 Everyday Resistance and the Limits of Visibility

While the everyday politics of survival emphasizes negotiation and adaptation, it also contains elements of resistance. Acts such as refusing to pay inflated market fees, organizing collective boycotts, or reoccupying cleared vending sites constitute subtle forms of defiance that challenge urban governance. These actions are rarely recognized as political because they do not conform to conventional models of protest. Yet they reshape the city by altering the balance of power between informal workers and authorities.

Asef Bayat (2010) describes these practices as “quiet encroachment,” a form of non-movement through which marginalized groups gradually claim space and rights. Women’s informal activities exemplify this mode of politics. By occupying pavements, transforming residential courtyards into workshops, or converting informal savings into micro-capital, they expand the boundaries of what is possible within the city. Their resistance is not dramatic but accumulative, producing slow transformations in the social and spatial order.

However, the politics of survival also has limits. The same strategies that enable endurance can entrench dependency and reproduce inequality. Negotiating with corrupt officials may secure temporary safety but reinforce systems of arbitrary power. Relying on kinship networks can provide stability yet exclude migrants or

outsiders who lack local connections. These contradictions underscore the ambivalence of survival politics: it is both a means of empowerment and a mechanism of containment.

3.6 Reframing Citizenship through the Everyday

The everyday politics of survival redefines citizenship as a lived practice rather than a legal status. For the urban poor, especially women, citizenship is enacted through participation in informal systems of exchange, mutual aid, and governance. It is a relational form of belonging grounded in contribution rather than entitlement.

Partha Chatterjee's notion of "political society" (2004) captures this transformation. Women who organize market associations or negotiate with municipal authorities act as citizens even without formal recognition. Their interactions with the state are characterized by tactical negotiation rather than rights-based claims, yet these engagements cumulatively reshape urban governance. In many African cities, local officials depend on informal women's organizations to maintain order and collect fees, blurring the line between formal and informal authority.

By centering survival as a political condition, this framework challenges liberal theories that equate citizenship with legality and institutional participation. It foregrounds the lived realities of those who make the city function through informal labor and social reproduction. Their agency lies not in overt resistance but in the capacity to endure, adapt, and create spaces of possibility within constraint.

4. Embodied Space and the Politics of Visibility

4.1 The Gendered City and the Production of Embodied Space

African cities are not neutral terrains. They are historically and socially produced spaces inscribed with hierarchies of gender, class, and power. The experience of the city is lived through the body, and this embodiment is shaped by the material and symbolic organization of urban space. Women's movements, gestures, and occupations of public space are constrained by expectations about femininity, morality, and propriety. The informal economy brings these dynamics into sharp relief because it requires women to occupy spaces not

designed for them. The street, the marketplace, and the transport hub become arenas where gendered bodies are made visible, regulated, and politicized.

The concept of "embodied space" captures how power operates through the physical and sensory experience of the city. The urban environment disciplines bodies through architecture, policing, and social norms, but bodies also produce space through their everyday practices (Low, 2017). In African cities, women's bodies carry the burden of spatial contradiction: they are central to the functioning of the informal economy yet frequently treated as out of place within the modernist aesthetic of urban order. Their visibility in streets and markets signals economic vitality while simultaneously provoking anxiety about disorder, sexuality, and respectability.

Colonial planning practices reinforced these contradictions by producing spatial segregation that mirrored racial and gender hierarchies. The "planned" city was masculinized and Europeanized, while the "unplanned" or "native" quarters were feminized, associated with domesticity, reproduction, and informality (Mabin, 1998). Postcolonial urban governance inherited these binaries, perpetuating an aesthetic of control that continues to marginalize women in public spaces. The persistence of these spatial orders means that women's informal economic participation always involves negotiating visibility within landscapes shaped by historical exclusion.

4.2 The Female Body as a Site of Surveillance and Control

The gendered body in African cities is subject to intense forms of surveillance that regulate its presence and movement. Surveillance is not limited to the state; it operates through everyday gazes, gossip, and moral judgment. Women who work in public spaces are often scrutinized for their comportment, dress, and demeanor. A street vendor in Nairobi may face harassment from city officials who accuse her of littering, while also encountering moral criticism from passersby who associate her visibility with sexual impropriety. These layered forms of surveillance reflect how power is dispersed across institutional and social domains (Foucault, 1979).

The policing of women's bodies in informal economies extends beyond the enforcement of

by-laws. It functions as a broader mechanism for maintaining patriarchal order. Public visibility exposes women to harassment, arrest, and sometimes violence, particularly when their activities are framed as disruptive to urban aesthetics or morality. In Lagos, for example, municipal campaigns against street trading are often justified in terms of cleanliness or modernization, but they also serve to reassert control over women's presence in the city (Agunbiade, 2015). These interventions regulate not only space but also the moral boundaries of femininity, defining who has the right to be seen and under what conditions.

Yet the body is not only an object of regulation; it is also a medium of resistance. Women develop embodied tactics to navigate hostile environments: adjusting their dress to convey respectability, modulating their speech to command authority, or adopting protective postures that minimize exposure to harassment. These tactics reveal how embodiment becomes a form of urban intelligence. Through the body, women learn to sense, anticipate, and manage the shifting boundaries between visibility and vulnerability.

4.3 Visibility, Respectability, and the Performance of Gender

Visibility in the informal economy carries both power and danger. To be visible is to attract customers, assert presence, and claim legitimacy in public life. At the same time, visibility invites scrutiny and control. This ambivalence produces a politics of appearance, where women must continually negotiate how they present themselves in public spaces. The performance of respectability becomes a strategy for managing risk and asserting dignity in contexts where female visibility is morally charged.

The sociologist Florence Bénit-Gbaffou (2016) describes how women street traders in Johannesburg use dress and bodily comportment to craft respectability and distinction. By maintaining cleanliness, wearing modest clothing, and invoking maternal identities, they resist stigmatization and signal their belonging to the moral community of the city. Respectability, in this sense, is not passive conformity but an active performance that enables women to inhabit public space without being reduced to stereotypes of disorder or promiscuity.

In many African contexts, respectability is

intertwined with the politics of class and age. Older women, especially those with established market reputations, can claim moral authority that shields them from some forms of harassment. Younger women, migrants, or unmarried traders, however, often occupy more precarious positions, their bodies read as morally ambiguous or threatening. These hierarchies within informality reproduce broader gendered and generational inequalities, showing that visibility is mediated not only by gender but by the intersection of multiple identities (Lindsay, 2003).

The performance of respectability also has a collective dimension. Market women often organize to defend their public image through rituals of cleanliness, religious expression, or charitable activities that frame their work as socially virtuous. These collective performances transform informal spaces into moral spaces, rearticulating the meanings of femininity and public service within the city.

4.4 Fear, Mobility, and the Spatial Politics of Risk

The experience of urban space is deeply embodied through the emotion of fear. Women's mobility in African cities is shaped by the anticipation of harassment, theft, or violence, which produces gendered geographies of safety and danger. Nighttime markets, bus stations, and deserted streets are often perceived as unsafe, compelling women to develop spatial routines that minimize exposure to risk. These embodied geographies of fear influence not only where women work but also how they move and occupy space.

Fear functions as both a constraint and a form of knowledge. It teaches women to read the city tactically, to identify safe routes, trustworthy officials, and protective alliances. Yet this constant vigilance exacts a physical and emotional toll, reinforcing gendered boundaries of mobility. In cities like Kampala or Lusaka, women often restrict their working hours or limit their range of activity to avoid danger, sacrificing potential income for safety (Porter, 2011). The politics of visibility thus intertwines with the politics of fear, producing a cityscape in which women's bodies are simultaneously central and constrained.

Urban infrastructure amplifies these dynamics. The absence of adequate lighting, sanitation, and transport services increases the vulnerability of women in informal economies. Their bodies

become exposed not only to social risk but also to environmental precarity. A trader who spends long hours under the sun or in polluted air internalizes the material inequalities of the city through her body. The health consequences of such exposure highlight how gendered embodiment is not merely symbolic but deeply material, rooted in the uneven distribution of infrastructure and care (Beall, 2002).

4.5 The Body as a Medium of Political Expression

The body's visibility in the informal city can also become a form of political expression. Women's physical presence in markets and streets asserts their right to the city in Henri Lefebvre's sense, the right to inhabit, produce, and define urban space. This right is not articulated through legal claims but through embodied occupation. By working, resting, and socializing in public spaces, women transform them into zones of belonging and livelihood.

Moments of collective action often emerge from the embodied proximity of informal workers. In Accra or Lagos, when authorities attempt to evict traders, women's bodies become instruments of protest as they physically block access to markets or stage sit-ins to prevent demolition. These actions dramatize the centrality of the body to urban politics. Visibility here is not vulnerability but presence, a refusal to be erased from the city's moral and spatial order.

At the same time, everyday bodily acts such as sitting, speaking, or carrying goods acquire political meaning within contexts of exclusion. The feminist geographer Gillian Rose (1993) argues that space is produced through embodied difference; women's bodies, by occupying and transforming urban space, challenge dominant spatial narratives. In African informal economies, these embodied practices constitute a vernacular form of politics that does not rely on formal representation but on the sheer persistence of presence.

The intersection between visibility and political agency also emerges in digital and media representations of informal women workers. Images of market women, often circulated in news and political campaigns, oscillate between tropes of resilience and disorder. By framing women's bodies as symbols of both tradition and chaos, these representations reproduce ambivalent attitudes toward informality. Yet women increasingly appropriate visual media to

narrate their own experiences, using photography, radio, or social media to assert visibility on their own terms (Kruger, 2019). The politics of embodiment thus extends into visual culture, where the struggle over representation becomes an extension of the struggle over space.

4.6 Embodied Citizenship and Urban Belonging

The politics of visibility in informal economies reveals that citizenship in African cities is enacted through the body. Legal documentation or formal employment are not the primary markers of belonging; presence and participation in the urban lifeworld are. Women's embodied labor, the act of showing up daily in markets, providing food, care, and services, constitutes a form of civic contribution that sustains the city. Their bodies perform citizenship through action rather than recognition.

This embodied citizenship challenges the liberal conception of the urban subject as a disembodied, rational actor. It foregrounds affect, physical endurance, and social reproduction as central to the making of urban life. In doing so, it exposes the gendered blind spots of urban governance, which privileges infrastructure over bodies and policy over lived experience. Recognizing women's embodied presence as a form of political participation requires rethinking what counts as public, who constitutes the public, and whose visibility is protected or punished.

The informal city thus becomes a stage for the redefinition of urban belonging. Through their daily negotiations of visibility, women expand the boundaries of what is seen as legitimate participation in city life. Their bodies write alternative geographies of citizenship that privilege care, resilience, and adaptability over formality and control.

Embodiment and visibility lie at the heart of the gendered politics of African urban informality. Women's bodies are not passive recipients of regulation but active agents in the production of urban space. Their visibility is double-edged: it exposes them to risk while enabling them to claim presence and dignity. Through their physical and symbolic occupation of streets and markets, they transform exclusion into participation, vulnerability into endurance, and everyday survival into a form of politics. The city's moral and spatial orders are constantly rewritten through these embodied practices.

Informal women workers do not merely adapt to the city; they create it through their movements, interactions, and bodily resilience. Their visibility unsettles the boundaries between private and public, legality and informality, respectability and resistance. In their embodied negotiation of space, the everyday politics of African cities finds its most vivid expression.

5. Informality, Citizenship, and the Gendered City

5.1 Rethinking Citizenship Through Informality

In African cities, citizenship cannot be understood solely as a matter of legal membership or formal rights. It is lived, negotiated, and embodied within the porous boundaries between legality and informality. Where formal state capacity is uneven and bureaucratic authority fragmented, everyday practices of survival and exchange become the means through which people enact belonging. Informality thus constitutes a vital infrastructure of citizenship, one that is deeply gendered in both structure and meaning.

For many urban residents, particularly women, access to livelihood, housing, and social support depends on informal networks rather than state provision. In the markets of Kumasi, the settlements of Nairobi, or the neighborhoods of Kinshasa, citizenship is measured less by documentation than by participation in systems of reciprocity and community regulation. The informal economy becomes a site of social membership where individuals gain recognition and support through their labor, trustworthiness, and contribution to collective welfare (Simone 2004). This form of belonging, grounded in practice rather than legal status, constitutes what anthropologists call *vernacular citizenship*—an everyday negotiation of rights and obligations outside formal institutions (Isin, 2008).

Women's central role in these informal structures challenges the conventional public-private divide that underpins liberal notions of citizenship. By organizing markets, rotating credit groups, and neighborhood associations, women provide governance functions that states often fail to deliver. These institutions regulate economic behavior, mediate conflicts, and manage shared resources. In the absence of formal welfare systems, they act as micro-governments, ensuring community cohesion and survival. Yet these same

formations also reveal how gender mediates authority, legitimacy, and participation within the informal sphere.

5.2 Gendered Forms of Urban Belonging

The gendered city is not only a spatial but also a political construction. The norms that define who counts as a legitimate urban subject are tied to gendered expectations about productivity, respectability, and domesticity. Women's participation in informal economies often situates them at the margins of official citizenship, where their economic contributions are essential yet undervalued. Their presence in public spaces such as markets or transport hubs is tolerated as long as it remains framed as an extension of domestic responsibility—feeding families, educating children, or supplementing household income. Once women's activities appear to threaten the patriarchal order or urban aesthetics, their citizenship becomes precarious.

The link between informality and citizenship thus exposes a paradox. Women's informal labor sustains the economic and social life of cities, yet it does not grant them political recognition. Their contributions are often celebrated rhetorically as expressions of resilience, entrepreneurialism, or empowerment, while their rights to space, security, and resources remain unprotected. This selective recognition reflects what James Ferguson (2015) terms the "distributional politics of neoliberalism," where inclusion is conditional and depoliticized. Women are valued as flexible workers or self-reliant citizens, but only insofar as they reduce the state's responsibility for welfare and infrastructure.

In many African contexts, access to urban citizenship is mediated by social networks and local authorities rather than formal law. Women rely on market leaders, neighborhood chiefs, or political patrons to secure trading spaces and protection from harassment. These intermediaries function as brokers of belonging, translating informal relationships into semi-recognized forms of citizenship. Yet this brokerage system is gendered in its operation. Male intermediaries often control access to state officials, while senior women leaders, such as "market queens" in Ghana, regulate female traders through hierarchical systems that mirror patriarchal governance (Clark, 1994). Citizenship within informality is thus uneven, stratified by gender, class, and age.

5.3 Informality as Governance

Informality in African cities is not a void of regulation but an alternative regime of governance. It encompasses a dense web of rules, norms, and negotiations through which authority is produced and exercised. Women's associations, market committees, and savings cooperatives play crucial roles in this system. They maintain order, enforce collective decisions, and mobilize resources for social services such as funerals, health care, or schooling. These organizations function as what Foucault (1991) might call "technologies of governmentality", mechanisms through which people govern themselves in the absence of state provision.

The gendered character of these institutions is central to their legitimacy. Women often invoke maternal identities and moral authority to claim leadership positions. Their governance is built on notions of care, reciprocity, and communal obligation, contrasting with the bureaucratic rationality of formal politics. This moral economy of care grants women both influence and constraint. On one hand, it legitimizes their authority as nurturers of the community. On the other, it confines their political agency within the boundaries of self-sacrifice and domestic morality.

The relationship between informal governance and the state is not simply oppositional. It is characterized by mutual dependence and negotiation. Municipal authorities rely on informal associations to mediate urban management, collect market fees, and maintain social order. In return, these associations gain limited recognition and protection. This arrangement creates what Ananya Roy (2009) describes as *graduated sovereignty*, where citizenship and rights are distributed unevenly across different groups. For women, this means partial inclusion in the urban polity—visible enough to be governed, yet rarely secure enough to claim full citizenship.

5.4 The Neoliberal City and the Feminization of Citizenship

The neoliberal transformation of African cities has intensified the gendered contradictions of informality. Structural adjustment programs and urban privatization policies have reduced state welfare and shifted responsibility for survival onto individuals and households. Women, as primary managers of domestic economies, have absorbed the burden of this restructuring. They

have become the invisible welfare providers of the neoliberal city, filling the gaps left by the retreating state through unpaid and underpaid labor (Chant, 2008).

This process has produced what scholars term the *feminization of citizenship*. Women are increasingly celebrated as ideal neoliberal subjects, self-reliant, adaptable, and community-oriented while being denied access to social rights and protections. Development agencies and NGOs often frame women's informal activities as evidence of empowerment, yet this discourse obscures the structural inequalities that force women into precarious livelihoods (Cornwall et al., 2007). The rhetoric of "women's entrepreneurship" becomes a substitute for genuine social justice, shifting attention from collective rights to individual responsibility.

At the same time, women's collective practices in informal economies resist complete incorporation into neoliberal logic. Their networks of mutual aid, rotating savings, and communal welfare challenge the commodification of social life by foregrounding values of solidarity and reciprocity. These practices represent alternative forms of citizenship rooted in care rather than competition. They demonstrate that informality, though shaped by economic necessity, can also generate counter-publics that redefine the meaning of civic participation.

5.5 Embodied Citizenship and the Everyday City

Citizenship in the gendered city is not only institutional but embodied. Women's daily presence in markets, streets, and neighborhoods enacts belonging through physical occupation and social contribution. Their bodies bear the material and symbolic marks of citizenship: the strain of long working hours, the negotiation with officials, the cultivation of customer relationships, and the moral labor of respectability. Through these embodied practices, women transform informal spaces into arenas of civic participation.

This form of citizenship operates through visibility and endurance rather than through rights and representation. A market trader's ability to return to her stall each morning, to rebuild after eviction, or to sustain her family through unstable economies is itself an act of political presence. It asserts her right to inhabit and reproduce the city. These acts do not fit

within the conventional language of citizenship, yet they constitute what Asef Bayat (2010) calls “the politics of the ordinary”, incremental acts that reshape urban life from below.

Embodied citizenship also reveals the intersection of gender and spatial justice. Access to urban space—where to trade, where to live, where to move—becomes a key dimension of citizenship. Women’s struggles against eviction or harassment are thus not merely economic but civic, asserting their entitlement to the city as producers and caretakers. The urban body, marked by labor and endurance, becomes a living claim to citizenship.

5.6 Citizenship Beyond the State

The relationship between informality and citizenship in African cities challenges the state-centered model of political membership. For many women, the state appears not as a provider of rights but as an unpredictable actor oscillating between neglect and coercion. Citizenship must therefore be secured through alternative channels: social networks, religious affiliations, market organizations, and neighborhood solidarities. These non-state spaces of belonging form what Holston (2008) calls *insurgent citizenship* practices that arise from the margins but redefine the terms of urban life.

Women’s informal collectives often function as such insurgent spaces. Through savings groups, they mobilize resources, enforce accountability, and advocate for better working conditions. Their negotiations with municipal authorities over vending rights or sanitation infrastructure create hybrid forms of governance that blend informality with civic engagement. These practices demonstrate that the boundaries of citizenship are not fixed but continually remade through negotiation.

At the same time, these informal modes of citizenship carry internal hierarchies and exclusions. Migrant women, younger traders, and those without kinship ties often face marginalization within community structures. The challenge is not only to recognize the political agency of informality but to confront its inequalities. A feminist reading of citizenship insists that belonging must be measured not only by participation but by justice, by the capacity to claim rights and dignity within both formal and informal orders.

The intersection of informality, gender, and

citizenship reveals the African city as a political frontier where belonging is continuously negotiated. Women’s informal labor sustains the urban economy and provides governance where the state falters, yet it also exposes the limitations of existing citizenship frameworks. The city’s vitality depends on practices that remain unrecognized, unprotected, and undervalued. To speak of the gendered city is to acknowledge that urban citizenship is neither universal nor evenly distributed. It is shaped by moral economies, spatial hierarchies, and embodied experiences that privilege certain forms of presence over others. Women’s engagement with informality challenges these hierarchies, showing that citizenship can emerge from the everyday labor of care, cooperation, and endurance. Informality, when seen through a gendered lens, reveals the political imagination embedded in ordinary life. It exposes the city as a site not only of exclusion but of creation, a space where new forms of belonging are forged through struggle, adaptation, and shared survival.

6. Conclusion

The study of African cities has often been dominated by frameworks that privilege formal governance, state planning, and economic modernization. Yet the lived reality of urban life across the continent unfolds within spaces and practices that defy these formal structures. Informality, long dismissed as a symptom of underdevelopment, has emerged as the dominant condition of African urbanism. It organizes economies, shapes political relations, and sustains social life. Within this informal order, gender plays a central and constitutive role. The everyday experiences of women in markets, streets, and neighborhoods illuminate how informality is not a peripheral or temporary domain but the primary arena in which urban citizenship is enacted, contested, and reimagined.

To rethink urban politics through gendered informality is to shift the analytical gaze from institutions to practices, from formal governance to everyday negotiation. Women’s participation in informal economies reveals that power in African cities operates through relational and moral economies rather than through legal frameworks alone. Their labor sustains the material and affective infrastructure of the city. The preparation of food, the management of small-scale trade, the organization of savings

groups, and the care of households all constitute forms of urban production that remain unrecognized within dominant paradigms of development. Yet these activities are indispensable to the functioning of the city. They reveal that informality is not simply an economic category but a mode of social reproduction.

The gendered nature of this reproduction is both enabling and constraining. Women's participation in informal economies offers flexibility, autonomy, and opportunities for collective organization. At the same time, it exposes them to exploitation, insecurity, and moral regulation. The gendered politics of informality therefore resides in the tension between survival and subversion. Women's everyday practices of negotiation whether through informal alliances, strategic compliance, or subtle resistance, constitute a form of political agency that challenges the boundaries of the formal political sphere. These acts may not take the shape of organized protest or legal advocacy, yet they transform the social and spatial order of the city from below (Bayat, 2010).

This rethinking of politics also demands an expanded understanding of citizenship. In many African contexts, citizenship is not secured through legal documentation or formal employment but through participation in networks of exchange, care, and mutual aid. Women's informal labor and community organization embody a vernacular form of citizenship grounded in contribution rather than entitlement. Their presence in the city, their capacity to sustain others, and their visibility in public life are acts of belonging that claim recognition beyond formal law. The city itself becomes a moral and relational space, where citizenship is lived through shared vulnerability and interdependence (Simone, 2004).

At the same time, the gendered dimensions of informality expose the exclusions embedded in these alternative forms of citizenship. Informal governance often reproduces patriarchal hierarchies and social inequalities, granting authority to those who conform to dominant moral orders. Senior market women may wield considerable influence, while younger or migrant women remain marginalized. The challenge, therefore, is to recognize women's agency without romanticizing informality as an inherently emancipatory sphere. Gendered informality must be understood as a terrain of

power where domination and resistance coexist in constant negotiation.

Rethinking urban politics through gender also requires attention to embodiment and space. The informal city is not an abstract system but a lived geography of bodies, movements, and emotions. Women's daily navigation of markets, transport routes, and domestic spaces reveals how urban power is inscribed on the body. Visibility in public space carries both political and personal risks, yet it is through this visibility that women assert presence and legitimacy. Their bodies become sites of negotiation between the demands of survival and the expectations of respectability. This embodied politics challenges the masculinist bias of urban theory, which often treats space as neutral and politics as disembodied. The gendered body, with its rhythms of labor, care, and endurance, is central to understanding how the informal city functions (Low, 2017).

The reconfiguration of urban politics through gendered informality also speaks to broader questions of justice. Development discourse often celebrates women's resilience in informal economies without addressing the structural conditions that make resilience necessary. Recognition of women's contributions must therefore be accompanied by a critique of the economic and spatial arrangements that perpetuate inequality. Policies that seek to formalize informal economies or "clean up" urban space frequently undermine the very systems of survival they depend on. A feminist approach to urban governance must begin by valuing care, reciprocity, and social reproduction as legitimate foundations of the urban order.

The gendered perspective on informality invites a more inclusive understanding of the African city—not as a failed imitation of Western urban modernity, but as a dynamic space of invention, where citizens continually negotiate the terms of life and belonging. Women's informal labor, social organization, and embodied presence are central to this negotiation. Their everyday practices illuminate a politics that is not located in institutions or policies but in the minute acts that make the city liveable. This politics is both pragmatic and visionary. It builds the city from below while imagining forms of justice that exceed the limits of formal citizenship.

In rethinking urban politics through gendered informality, scholars and policymakers must

recognize that African cities are not deficient but differently organized. Their apparent disorder masks intricate systems of cooperation, regulation, and mutual care. To take gender seriously in this context is to uncover the invisible labor that sustains these systems and to acknowledge the political intelligence embedded in everyday survival. The informal city is not an exception to modernity; it is its most vital expression. Within it, women's embodied and relational practices point toward alternative urban futures, futures grounded in solidarity, dignity, and the politics of the ordinary.

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