

“Unbelievably Terrible” Yet Viral: How Social Media Stirred Up a Storm for Chinese Animation Film *Niu Lai*

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Introduction & Background

Niu Lai, a low-budget Chinese animation film, has taken social media by storm. Outperforming recent Hollywood blockbusters such as *The Odyssey* and *Spider-Man: Brand New Day*, *Niu Lai* became a surprise box-office hit and reportedly one of the most profitable movies in Chinese history relative to its remarkably small budget (Li, 2026). The film has earned more than \$2.5 million (Ting, 2026) from a reported budget of a little over \$1,000 (Ewe, 2026), despite having zero marketing budget (Chapman, 2026). Following its initial release on August 5, 2026, Chinese moviegoers described the film’s visuals as “ugly,” “bad in every aspect,” and “unbelievably terrible” (Hawkins, 2026). These deficiencies, however, soon became the source of its viral appeal. Made by an interior designer and her son, the home-made animation film tells a story about a young calf’s dream of growing up through themes of courage, friendship, and survival (Yasmin, 2026). Propelled by scathing online mockery, prank recommendations, and viral clips, many flocked to theatres to experience firsthand just how “absurd” the movie was (Kuo, 2026). For example, many fans joked that *Niu Lai*’s rough backgrounds even made *Minecraft* look highly detailed (Salazar, 2026). *Niu Lai* thus emerged as an unusual “so bad it’s so good” cultural phenomenon in which perceived cinematic deficiencies paradoxically fueled public curiosity and collective celebration (Hawkins, 2026).

The film’s viral popularity quickly expanded beyond China and evolved into a broader social media phenomenon. Based on data from Tweet Binder, social media posts related to *Niu Lai* generated 502,160,923 potential impressions and an estimated €397,523.41 in economic value between August 13 and 20. These metrics indicate the extraordinary scale and visibility of the online discourse surrounding the film. The explosive surge of social media mentions related to *Niu Lai* provides a unique opportunity to examine how social media users responded to an initially ridiculed cultural product and how social media discourse shaped its broader cultural and economic meanings. This study thus seeks to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: What emotional reactions did social media users express toward *Niu Lai*?

RQ2: How did social media discourse shape the cultural and economic meanings surrounding *Niu Lai*?

Research Method

To examine how social media users discussed the Chinese animated feature—*Niu Lai*, this study collected and analyzed social media data from two analytics platforms: *Brandwatch* and *Tweet Binder*. These platforms enable the collection and analysis of large-scale, real-time social conversations across social media and other online sources. The period of focus was determined based on the emergence and rapid escalation of public attention to the film. Google Trends data showed that online search interest in *Niu Lai* started to rise noticeably around August 14, 2026, increased sharply over the following several days, and reached its peak on August 18, 2026 (see Figure 1). Tweet Binder documented a similar, substantial increase in X activity during this period (see Figure 2). This study thus examined social conversations from August 14 through August 18, 2026, capturing the critical period during which *Niu Lai* transitioned from relatively limited visibility to become an Internet sensation.

Figure 1. Online Search Interest in *Niu Lai* from Google Trends

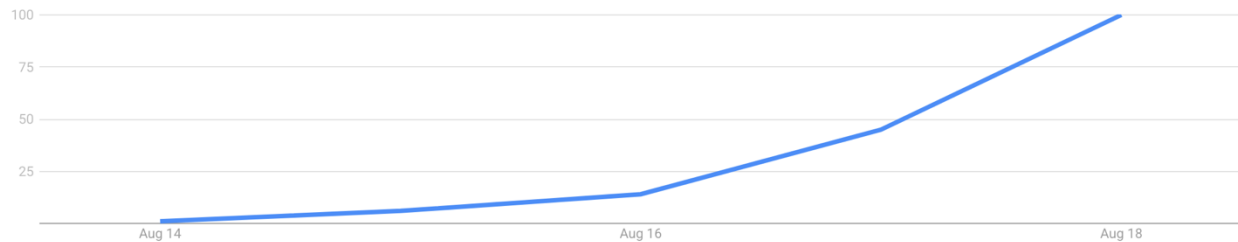
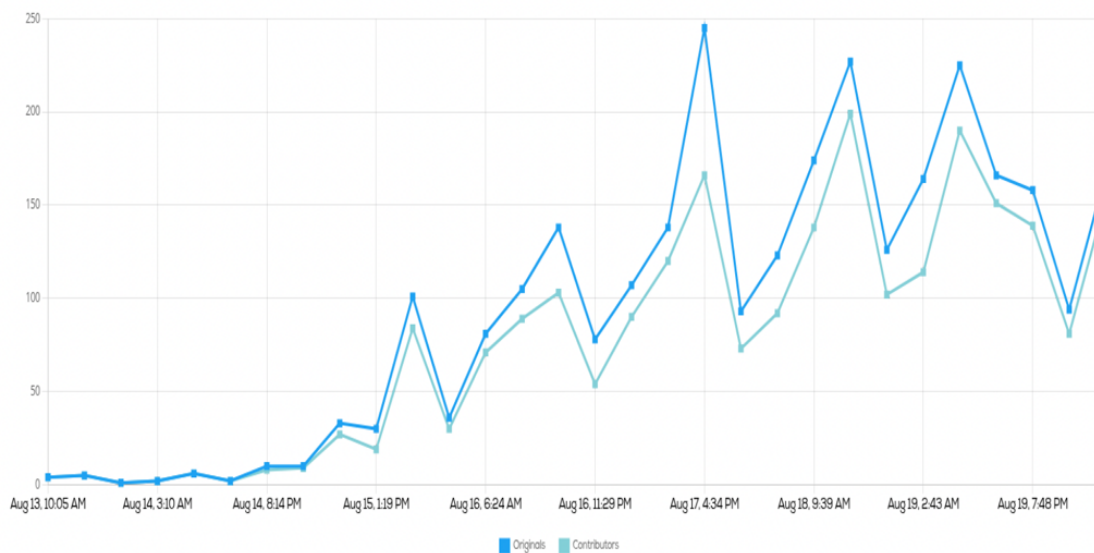


Figure 2. Retweet Growth on X from Tweet Binder



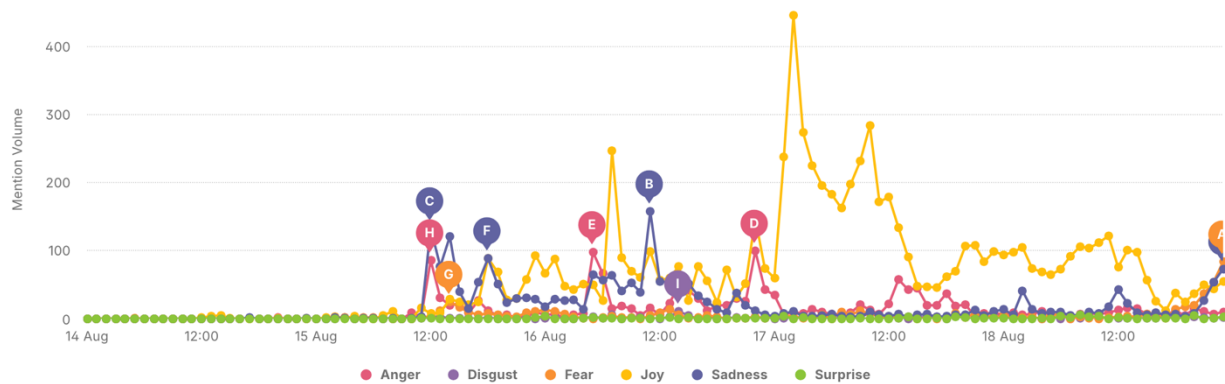
Brandwatch was utilized as the primary social listening platform to identify and analyze the broader social conversation surrounding the film, including conversation volume, sentiment, prominent keywords and topics, as well as platform distribution. A search query incorporating relevant English- and Chinese-language terms (e.g., “Niu Lai,” “#Niulai,” “牛来,” and “#牛来”) was used to harvest relevant conversations across platforms such as X, Facebook, Reddit, and online news sources. The inclusion of multiple languages helped capture different ways in which users referred to the film across online discussions. Tweet Binder served as a supplementary source for examining the temporal growth of X conversations about the film. Its activity timeline provided additional evidence of the explosive increase in social media attention during the study period.

The Brandwatch dataset yielded a staggering 26,000 social conversations related to *Niu Lai* in a five-day span. X emerged as the dominant platform, accounting for 92% of the total conversations, followed by Reddit (5%) and online news (1%), with the remaining conversations distributed across Facebook, Instagram, Bluesky, and other online sources.

Findings

RQ1: What emotional reactions did social media users express toward *Niu Lai*?

Dominance of Joyful Emotions

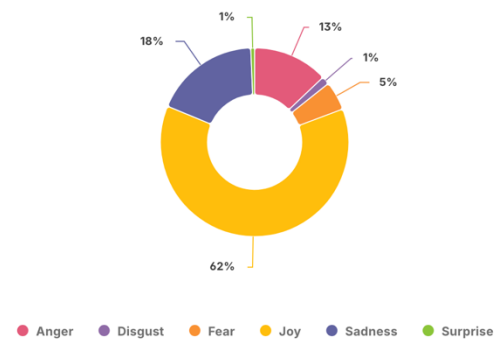


As revealed by *Brandwatch*’s emotion analysis, joy appeared to be the dominant emotion surrounding *Niu Lai*. Among approximately 26,000 posts, 62% were associated with joy, providing strong evidence of widespread positive emotional engagement with the film. This finding is particularly striking given *Niu Lai*’s initial reception as a “rough” or even “disastrous” animation. Rather than discouraging audience engagement, this film’s unconventional quality became part of an unexpected viral phenomenon that subsequently contributed to its remarkable box-office success. Joy manifested in several interconnected ways, including the film’s ability to

foster connection with people, inspire creative expression, and generate appreciation for its primitive, human-made art in comparison to AI-generated animation.

Joy through shared laughter and human connection.

First, despite its rough animation quality, this film appeared to generate social media users' affection through its ability to bring laughter and joy, cultivating a global opportunity for human connection. As one viral post stated: "It makes everyone laugh—that's its magic. We met because of *Niu Lai*, and the world is better for...so all beings can share the joy." Indicated by *Brandwatch's* geographic data, joyful conversations extended across countries including Australia, Canada, China, India, Japan, Nigeria, Spain, U.K., and U.S., suggesting that the film's appeal traveled well beyond its original cultural context. Furthermore, social media users seemed to derive pleasure from collectively participating in sustaining the phenomenon by "being in on the joke together." *Niu Lai* gained notoriety precisely for its crude animation quality, with some viewers recommending it to others as a "prank" or "social experiment" to experience just how unconventional the film was. What started as mockery thus evolved into a form of collective entertainment, in which the film's perceived flaws became part of the pleasure of watching, sharing, and discussing it.



Joy through participatory creativity. Second, social discussions on *Niu Lai* have sparked an unexpected wave of creative expression among social media users. Instead of being passive viewers or spectators, netizens actively participated in this phenomenon by producing humorous hand-made posters, memes, spoof videos, and parodies inspired by the film's unconventional aesthetic. As one enthusiastic fan exclaimed, "*Niu Lai* is bringing out the creative genius in everyone." Hence, the film's seemingly unprofessional animation quality became not simply an object of mockery but a creative source that invited social media users to reinterpret, imitate, and play with its distinctive visual style.



This participatory creativity was especially evident in social posts featuring hand-drawn posters, memes, and videos. These users embraced the film's rough, hand-made aesthetic by producing deliberately simple and funny artwork, turning perceived artistic flaws into a recognizable part of

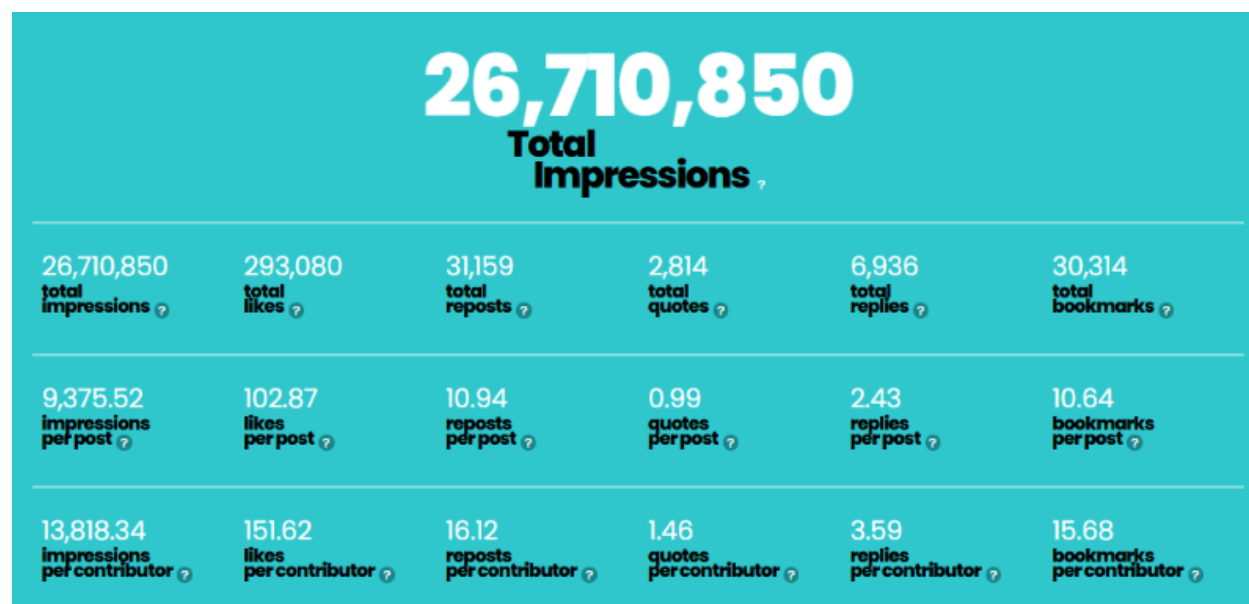
Niu Lai's cultural identity. The pleasure related to the film thus extended far beyond viewing and mocking. Social media users evolved into co-creators of the viral phenomenon by creating and distributing their own interpretations. The film seemed to provide an avenue for netizens to create and express their joy. The joyful nature of such creative participation was exemplified in the following viral post: "We've never seen a super viral moment happening in China...people are...having fun, they're laughing. It's just pure raw fun and happiness, all the emotions that makes a meme a meme." This observation illustrates that *Niu Lai* has become a shared cultural intersection among creativity, humor, and participation.

Joy through affirmation of human creativity. Strikingly, *Niu Lai* emerged surprisingly as a symbol of resistance to AI-generated art, as social media users celebrated its authenticity, human touch, and obvious imperfections. Netizens praised the film's "hand-crafted" animation and often reframed its crude and unpolished quality (e.g., low-fidelity audio, low-resolution graphics, limited cinematic polish, etc.) not as artistic deficiencies but rather as clear evidence of authentic human creation. As one viral post exclaimed: "*Niu Lai*'s handmade weirdness has that rare human spark no model can fake." In this social discourse, the very imperfections for which the film had initially been mocked acquired new appreciation, becoming visible evidence of "manual labor" and human creativity and more valuable than what some users characterized as the "sterile" or "soulless" qualities of AI-generated content.

This sentiment was reflected in posts celebrating the film's unlikely success in an increasingly AI-saturated media environment. One viral post stated, "In a world where AI movies are being put into box office im glad *Niu Lai* found success." Another exemplar post characterized the *Niu Lai* phenomenon as an "inverse AI / human creativity" story before declaring, "*Niu Lai* is perfect." Another *Niu Lai* enthusiast claimed that *Niu Lai* is "reviving human art." These reactions suggest that part of the joy about *Niu Lai* derived from witnessing an unapologetically imperfect, human-made production achieve unexpected success at a time of growing concerns over AI-generated creative content. Instead of diminishing the film's appeal, its rudimentary techniques became a symbol of authenticity, a reminder that creative work could be valued not only for its polished production but also for the human effort and imperfection embedded within it. Therefore, *Niu Lai* became more than a dark horse of box-office success; rather, its success represented a symbolic confirmation of human creativity in the age of generative AI.

Tweet Binder results were generally consistent with the key findings from *Brandwatch*. The *Tweet Binder* dataset recorded an overall sentiment score of 61.07, placing the conversation at the lower boundary of *Tweet Binder*'s positive sentiment range. At the post level, however, neutral sentiment was most prevalent (51.7%), compared with 12.2% positive and 8.0% negative posts, while 28.1% remained undefined. These findings suggest that the conversation was not predominantly negative despite the film's widespread criticism. Rather, much of its discourse was neutral, with positive posts modestly outnumbering negative ones. This sentiment pattern is consistent with a broader paradox surrounding the film in which negative perceptions coexisted with surging audience interest. For example, posts from Kompas.com noted that the film was "mocked on social media because its animation was labeled bad... [but] the bad reviews made residents in China curious." Similarly, *The Hindu* described it as "dubbed as the 'worst movie of 2026' on social media," yet becoming "a box office sensation."

Tweet Binder analysis showed more than 26.7 million impressions (see below) for *Niu Lai*-related content on X.



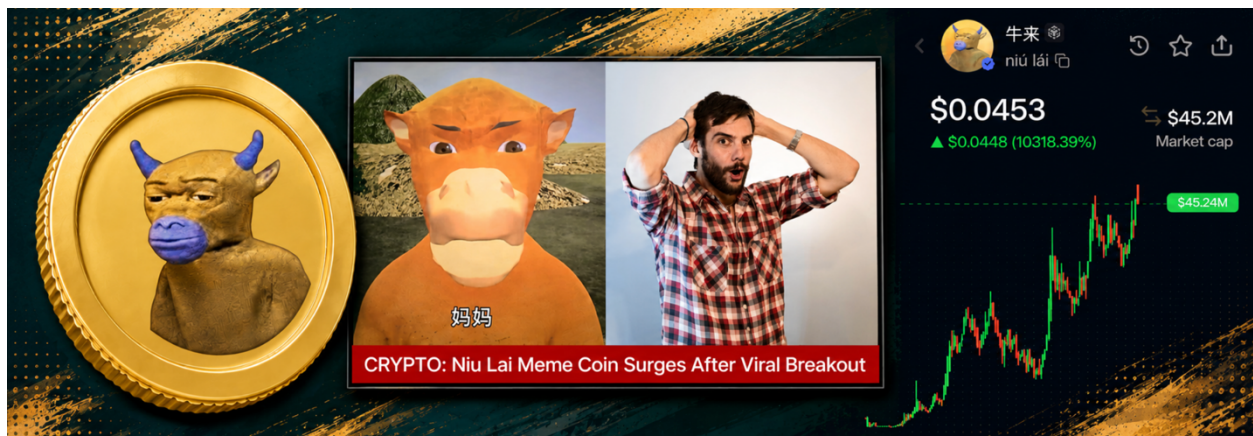
RQ2: How did social media discourse shape the cultural and economic meanings surrounding *Niu Lai*?

Cultural to Financial Currency Transformation

Ironically, *Niu Lai*'s perceived poor cinematic quality evolved into a source of cultural currency. The initial scathing online reviews and mockery portrayed the film as “unbelievably terrible and eye-opening,” “disaster,” “extremely rough,” “stiff animation,” “clunky,” “crude CGI,” “jerky movements,” “so absurd,” “bad in every aspect imaginable,” and “a hobbyist’s AI homework.” However, such ridicule sparked curiosity and engagement on social media, transforming the film into a “so bad” but also “so good” phenomenon. The more users mocked its crude production, the more others appeared motivated to experience its absurdity firsthand and participate through memes, posters, videos, and comments on social media. Collective mockery thus generated cultural currency. Mockery stimulated attention, which subsequently encouraged participation on social media and ultimately further amplified the film’s visibility and commercial success.

Impressively, this cultural currency soon acquired a more literal financial meaning. The film’s Chinese title, 牛来 (“the bull is coming”), resonated naturally with the symbolism of a bull market in financial circles, as captured by one viral post, “Bull Is Coming” 🐮😂 No promotion...Still a masterpiece in every investor’s heart. #牛来.” The film’s underdog trajectory, from an obscure, extremely low-budget production to an unexpected box-office hit, further reflected the speculative appeal of an undervalued asset suddenly surging in value. Within days, *Niu Lai*'s cultural visibility extended into cryptocurrency through an associated memecoin (\$*Niu Lai*), effectively transforming accumulated social media attention into a tradeable digital asset. Social media users shared stories of their extraordinary gains, including posts reporting life-changing profits of over \$100,000. One viral post boasted about their crypto gains, “just made

over \$418K on #牛来 basically retired my entire family...still crazy to think one memecoin trade can change everything this fast.” Impressively, a viral post with one million reach claimed, “I just make \$162,000 off # 牛来. It’s insane how fast you can change your life with memecoins & crypto.” These social testimonials highlight the life-changing potential and rapid financial gains possible in the volatile memecoin crypto market. Regardless of whether such self-disclosed gains can be verified, their viral circulation demonstrates how *Niu Lai* was rapidly reframed from a cultural meme into a speculative financial discourse. This phenomenon thus illustrates an unusual transformation of value. Specifically, online mockery generated cultural currency through memes, jokes, posters, and shared references, and this cultural currency, in turn, fueled attention that was translated into both commercial and speculative financial value.



The Power of the Underdog Narrative

The story behind *Niu Lai* represents the enduring appeal of the underdog narrative in which audiences become emotionally attached to and root for unlikely success. The film’s journey from obscurity and ridicule to viral fame was intertwined with the creators’ own story of personal struggle and perseverance. Social media discussions frequently highlighted that the film was produced over several years by a remarkably small mother-and-son team with limited resources and little professional backing. Notably, netizens also drew parallels between the creators’ personal journey and the film’s narrative of a mother protecting her calf, connecting the fictional story of parental love and perseverance with the real-life struggles behind the film’s production. It seemed that these comparisons humanized the film, enabling audiences to see past its crude production quality and recognize the dedication and persistent labor embedded in its creation.

This underdog narrative appeared to transform at least some of the initial mockery into genuine admiration and support. One viral post observed, “A mom and son team making a movie for five years hits all the right heart strings when it comes to struggle, family loyalty, and an unfair market.” Another viral post commented on the creators’ lengthy production journey, “They [*Niu Lai*’s creators] spent six years making this? I kinda want to support them.” Similarly, after noting that the film was created by a tiny two-person team “over an arduous six-year period,” another viral post described *Niu Lai* as “an underdog story can create emotional attachment” and “can transition from something people watch just to laugh at into something people genuinely want to

support.” These social media reactions collectively demonstrate a notable shift in audience engagement. The creators themselves became part of the story that audiences were consuming and sharing. What started as ridicule of a technically flawed film evolved, for many social media users, into admiration for outsider artists who persevered despite limited resources and initial public rejection. *Niu Lai*’s imperfection thus became intertwined with its underdog identity, turning its unlikely success into an emotionally meaningful story that audiences could champion.

Discussion

Based on the social media conversations surrounding *Niu Lai*, the film’s meteoric rise reveals three key transformations: from ridicule to collective joy and participation, from cultural attention to economic value, and from initial mockery to admiration and support for an underdog. A salient paradox lies at the core of these transformations. Namely, negative evaluations of the film’s quality did not prevent, and might have contributed to, its visibility and audience interest. Its “so bad it’s good” appeal became part of the spectacle itself, creating opportunities for humor, creative expression, and collective participation. The following sections discuss these transformations and their broader theoretical implications for understanding social media virality.

The Paradox of Joy: Transformation from Ridicule to Collective Participation

The findings of this study reveal that *Niu Lai*’s viral ascent was not an accidental anomaly but the product of several intertwined emotional, social, and communicative dynamics that transformed an initially ridiculed film into a joyful and participatory cultural event. Specifically, one mechanism that helps explain this transformation is the social sharing of emotion (Rimé et al., 1992), in which emotional experiences prompt individuals to communicate their feelings and reactions to others. *Niu Lai*’s unconventional and rudimentary production challenged established expectations and standards of what counts as a quality animation film, initially eliciting negative reactions such as disappointment, frustration, and ridicule. However, these emotional reactions did not remain individual experiences. Through sharing on social media, users discussed and circulated their reactions, allowing them to collectively make sense of an unusual cultural subject and build shared meanings around it. Such processes can help individuals work through their emotional experiences and contribute to the restoration or reconstruction of shared beliefs and meanings (Rimé et al., 2010).

Strikingly, this social sharing generated further emotional reactions and social interaction on social media, subsequently contributing to a participatory culture in which cultural consumers turned into active creators and distributors of cultural meaning (Jenkins et al., 2015). As *Niu Lai*’s perceived deficiencies became the target of collective amusement, social media users moved beyond just criticizing the film. Rather, they created and circulated memes, hand-drawn posters, spoof images, and insider jokes. In this process, ridicule itself became socially creative and productive. What initially started as negative reactions to something perceived as “so absurd” and “so bad” (e.g., *Niu Lai*) was collectively reinterpreted as a source of amusement and shared joy. This paradox, thus, demonstrates that negative evaluations did not suppress engagement nor simply give way to positive evaluation. Instead, through emotional sharing and creative participation, the object of ridicule itself evolved into the very resource for collective enjoyment and participation.

Transformation of Cultural Attention to Economic Value

Niu Lai initially generated little conventional cultural value, since the film was widely ridiculed as absurd and amateurish. However, this mockery generated enormous social attention, making it socially valuable to know about the film, share it, joke about it, and participate in the relevant social conversations. The attention-economy perspective (Falkinger, 2007) helps explain this phenomenon. In an information-rich environment, human attention itself becomes a scarce resource. Visibility thus can acquire value regardless of whether the evaluation is positive or negative. In the case of *Niu Lai*, every joke, meme, criticism, or sarcastic recommendation about how “terrible” the film was ironically extended its viral visibility and generated strong curiosity. Much of *Niu Lai*’s initial value hence appeared to derive not from traditional perceptions of its artistic quality but from its extraordinary capability to capture and sustain viral attention. As social media mentions and jokes circulated, curiosity increasingly translated into viewing behavior and ticket purchases, converting viral attention into commercial box-office value.

The concept of social currency (Berger, 2013) further helps explain why social media users were eager to sustain social attention to this film. Sharing information can provide social currency in the eyes of others, especially when people make their knowledge visible (Berger, 2025). As *Niu Lai* became a trending cultural phenomenon, knowing about the film and participating in its jokes and conversations enabled social media users to demonstrate their social currency. *Niu Lai* thus became a form of social currency that users could exchange through recommendations, critiques, jokes, and creative content. As these individual acts of participation accumulated, social currency at the individual level contributed to the film’s broader cultural currency—its collective visibility and relevance within the digital culture. In doing so, repeated social sharing and participation on social media transformed individually generated social currency into a collectively sustained form of cultural currency.

More importantly, the *Niu Lai* phenomenon reflects an unusual process through which different forms of value became intertwined. Online mockery generated social attention, and such attention prompted social participation on social media. Repeated participation accumulated cultural currency that became financially lucrative. Initially, this conversion occurred through increased ticket purchases and box-office revenue, as cultural attention was commercialized through consumption of the film itself. But the process extended beyond the film’s commercial success. *Niu Lai*’s accumulated cultural currency expanded into the cryptocurrency community, where its name, imagery, and symbolism became attached to a memecoin. Cultural currency was thus not only converted into consumption of the cultural product, but it was further converted into a speculative digital asset. The case of *Niu Lai* illustrates a distinct pathway of value transformation in digital culture: from attention to social and cultural currency, to commercial value, and ultimately to speculative financial value.

Transformation of Initial Mockery to Resonance with the Underdog

Examples of underdog narratives are prevalent in literature, sports, politics, businesses, and organizations (Bort & Totterman, 2023) as they inspire and resonate across cultures and times (Lude et al., 2023). An underdog refers to a person, brand, or organization that possess limited resources, is expected to lose, yet has passion and determination to overcome the hurdles (He et

al., 2020). Existing research in marketing and consumer behavior (Paharia et al., 2011; Patel et al., 2024) suggest that consumers are likely to identify, relate, and associate with underdog narratives because they perceive underdog aspects in their own lives. Paharia et al. (2011) argued that the two essential components of underdog narratives, external disadvantages and passion as well as determination, are the driving forces behind consumers' positive reactions such as increased purchase intention and loyalty. Underdog brands tend to receive greater consumer support as consumers see aspects of themselves reflected in the disadvantaged position in underdog narratives (Nagar, 2019; Tezer et al., 2020).

Niu Lai's background story closely represented these defining characteristics of an underdog narrative. The film was created by a small mother-and-son team that persisted through years of struggle despite limited resources, little professional backing, and the initial public mockery. These circumstances made both dimensions of the underdog narrative, external disadvantage as well as passion and determination, particularly salient (Paharia et al., 2011). As the creators' backstory became widely recognized through social media conversations, audiences appeared to evaluate *Niu Lai* not only in terms of its technical and artistic deficiencies, but also in reference to the people, effort, and perseverance behind its creation. Interestingly, the very limitations that initially provoked online ridicule could be reinterpreted as evidence of the creators' disadvantage and persistence. Reactions on social media suggest that this reinterpretation fostered identification and emotional resonance, helping transform at least some initial criticism and mockery into admiration and a desire to support both the creators and the film.

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