

AI and the Metaverse in China and the West: Cultural Narratives, Governance, and Digital Business Ecosystems

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores how artificial intelligence (AI) and the metaverse are culturally represented, governed, and commercially embedded within Chinese and Western digital business ecosystems. It addresses the limited comparative understanding of how similar technologies acquire different meanings across institutional and cultural contexts.

Methodology – A qualitative comparative and interpretive approach was employed, combining critical discourse analysis with cultural and institutional inquiry. The study examined 100 media texts published between January 2020 and February 2026, comprising 50 Chinese and 50 Western texts. The analysis was supplemented by policy documents, institutional reports, and survey data. The texts were manually coded for recurring rhetorical patterns, affective expressions, moral framing, and representations of governance, creativity, trust, and technological progress.

Findings – Chinese media predominantly frame AI and the metaverse through harmony, collective responsibility, state guidance, and national development. Western narratives emphasize corporate competition, individual autonomy, disruption, ethical contestation, and public ambivalence. Although both regions recognize these technologies as drivers of creativity and innovation, China constructs legitimacy through institutional coherence and collective trust, whereas Western societies rely on pluralistic negotiation, regulation, and public criticism. Technological convergence therefore produces distinct moral and affective imaginaries rather than cultural uniformity.

Value – This study integrates media discourse, governance, affect, and digital business ecosystem analysis. It shows that AI and the metaverse function not only as technical and commercial infrastructures but also as symbolic and moral environments that shape trust, creativity, authority, and legitimacy..

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; metaverse; digital business ecosystems; algorithmic governance; comparative media; sociotechnical imaginaries

1 Introduction

The rapid convergence of artificial intelligence and immersive technologies has ushered in a new chapter in the cultural history of media. In modern societies, technological systems no longer serve solely as communication tools but as infrastructures that shape how people perceive, relate, and imagine. Artificial intelligence (AI) and the metaverse exemplify this change by combining computational logic with sensory experience. They alter the boundaries between representation and participation, between the human and the artificial. This convergence signals what could be seen as an epistemic shift, the reorganisation of meaning through the interplay of data, emotion, and power. The transformation is not just technical but also deeply symbolic, as it challenges traditional notions of authorship, identity, and social trust. To understand this symbolic shift, this study employs the framework of ‘sociotechnical imaginaries’ (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009). These are described as ‘collectively held, institutionally stabilised, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, driven by shared understandings of social life and social order achievable through advances in science and technology’ (p. 120). Applying this perspective to digital convergence highlights how technologies like AI and the metaverse are not simply developed based on technical capabilities but are actively shaped by the cultural and political visions of the societies that create them.

Couldry and Mejias (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) describe this condition as one of “data relations”, in which social interaction itself becomes a form of data production. In their view, digital infrastructures reorganise the relationship between participation and control, turning every act of communication into a node within a network of value extraction. Papacharissi (Papacharissi, 2015) extends this analysis by defining the online public sphere as an affective one, shaped not only by rational discourse but also by the circulation of emotions that anchor communities around shared feelings rather than shared facts. These frameworks are essential to understand how AI and the metaverse operate as a simultaneous convergence of technical and affective processes. They reveal that communication in the era of intelligent systems is no longer about transmitting information but about managing the affective bonds that hold societies together.

From this perspective, AI and the metaverse should be seen as cultural technologies, systems that create new ways of seeing, knowing, and feeling. They are both physical infrastructures and moral environments. Zuboff's (Zuboff, 2019) theory of surveillance capitalism helps position them within a global economy of behavioural prediction, where creativity and expression are continually turned into data commodities. However, the metaverse also expands this logic into immersion, crafting spaces where experience itself becomes programmable. In the merging of artificial intelligence and immersive environments, communication takes on a new ontological role, becoming an environment rather than just a medium. This environment is managed by algorithms that convert affect and attention into measurable and monetisable forms, producing what Feenberg would call a new "technical code" that embeds social values into the design of machines (Feenberg, 2010).

Despite their global reach, these technologies are not culturally neutral. They take on different meanings depending on the institutional and ideological contexts in which they are developed and used. Jin's (Jin, 2025) analysis of platform imperialism in Asia shows that convergence functions as a process of translation rather than uniformisation. Technologies circulate worldwide, but their social integration reflects national histories and political imaginaries. In China, AI and the metaverse have been incorporated into a broader project of national rejuvenation, emphasising the moral aspect of innovation and aligning technology with social harmony. In Western societies, however, technological development is influenced by market competition, entrepreneurial creativity, and ethical pluralism. These contrasting approaches reveal different moral frameworks, one based on collective coordination, the other on individual autonomy. Both, however, show how technology acts as a reflection of civilisational values.

The convergence of AI and the metaverse therefore cannot be simply seen as innovation or digital progress. It symbolizes the realisation of deeper cultural fears and hopes. Each region develops its own story of technological modernity, linking progress to moral authority and identity. In China, artificial intelligence is seen as an ethical and developmental tool that reinforces the power of governance while fostering collective prosperity. In the West, it represents both the promise of creative empowerment and the fear of dehumanisation. The metaverse heightens these tensions by blending imagination with the economy, creating a space for participation that also acts as an architecture of control. The differing cultural stories surrounding these technologies show that convergence does not lead to uniformity but to diversity. It creates a common technological language whose meanings are shaped through cultural and ideological interpretation.

Understanding this process requires an interdisciplinary framework that combines media theory, cultural studies, and political economy. Earlier notions of media convergence, as formulated by Jenkins (Jenkins, 2006), emphasised the circulation of content across multiple platforms and the participatory logic of digital culture. Today, however, convergence extends beyond content to include the automation of creativity and the integration of human and machine intelligence. The task of media research is to examine how this automation reshapes the symbolic order of communication, how societies define what counts as knowledge, emotion, and truth when algorithms mediate perception itself. This demands attention not only to institutional regulation but also to the moral imagination through which technological futures are legitimised.

While the global discussion around AI often concentrates on productivity and efficiency, a more critical perspective must recognise how these technologies reshape cultural meaning. Crawford (Crawford, 2021) has argued that artificial intelligence is never entirely artificial; it is built upon the labour, resources, and inequalities of the world that sustains it. Similarly, Feenberg's (Feenberg, 2010) philosophy of technology reminds us that innovation is always socially negotiated, influenced by the values and hierarchies embedded in design. These insights raise an important methodological question: how can we compare systems that are materially similar but ideologically different? The present study addresses this question by analysing how AI and the metaverse are represented in public discourse, focusing on the moral vocabularies through which each system constructs legitimacy and trust.

The period from 2020 to 2026 offers a particularly fertile moment for analysis. During these years, artificial intelligence transitioned from experimental technology to a common part of everyday infrastructure. The global pandemic hastened the digitisation of social life, while the development of generative AI and immersive platforms broadened the aesthetic and communicative potentials of the medium. This timeframe captures the moment when AI and the metaverse began to function not as speculative futures but as tangible realities integrated into work, education, and entertainment. It is also the period during which states and corporations articulated competing ethical frameworks for intelligent technologies, sparking a global dialogue about innovation, governance, and responsibility.

This article explores how these developments have been narrated and interpreted in Chinese and Western media. It reviews one hundred texts from major outlets including People's Daily, China Daily, Xinhua, The Guardian, The New York Times, and Wired, and places them within broader institutional and policy frameworks such as China's New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017) and the European Union's Digital Services Act (European Union, 2022; European Union, 2024). The objective is to trace how discourse constructs meaning around technology, how it articulates ethics, emotion, and progress through specific linguistic and affective patterns. The analysis is interpretive rather

than quantitative, seeking to understand the symbolic work language performs in the construction of technological legitimacy.

By comparing these discursive formations, the article seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of technological convergence as both a global and a culturally specific phenomenon. It suggests that the integration of AI and the metaverse does not simply signify the evolution of media but the realignment of the social imagination itself. From this perspective, convergence appears as a process that blends technological innovation with moral concepts, redefining how societies perceive the relationship between intelligence, creativity, and governance. The following sections elaborate on this argument by outlining the theoretical framework, methodological approach, and comparative analysis that together unveil the moral and cultural structures of AI-driven convergence

2 Literature Review

The convergence of artificial intelligence and immersive technologies calls for a re-evaluation of how media theory understands communication, creativity, and governance. Traditional approaches to convergence in media studies have concentrated on the circulation of content and the participatory practices that arise when audiences become active producers of meaning. Jenkins (Jenkins, 2006) introduced the concept of “convergence culture” to describe the link between technological innovation and participatory creativity, suggesting that media systems develop through collaboration between producers and consumers. While this framework remains relevant, it is no longer sufficient to understand the current phase of convergence, in which artificial intelligence and the metaverse reorganise not only the circulation of content but also the cognitive and emotional structures through which meaning is created.

Contemporary convergence no longer merely involves the integration of platforms or the hybridisation of genres. It encompasses the merging of human and machine intelligences within a shared epistemological space. The automation of perception, decision-making, and imagination has transformed the basis of communication by embedding algorithmic processes at every stage of cultural production. Theorists of digital capitalism have emphasised how this shift extends the logic of commodification to human attention, emotion, and creativity (Zuboff, 2019; Andrejevic, 2020). In this way, AI and the metaverse serve as infrastructures of mediation that both empower and limit human agency. They facilitate participation while also regulating it through data-driven systems of prediction and control. Feenberg’s (Feenberg, 2010) critical theory of technology offers a valuable basis for understanding this dual process. He contends that technological design always reflects social values and power structures, and that innovation should be seen as a site of moral negotiation rather than mere technical advancement. The concept of the “technical code” illustrates this interdependence between tool use and ideology: every artefact carries assumptions about how the world ought to operate. In the realm of AI and immersive media, the technical code encompasses algorithms that implement ideas such as relevance, emotion, or fairness, translating them into computational parameters. The role of critical investigation is to uncover these embedded values and to examine how they influence the moral framework of communication.

Couldry’s (Couldry, 2020) work on mediation enhances this view by shifting focus from technological artefacts to the symbolic processes that uphold them. For him, media are not neutral intermediaries but institutions that shape social order through repetition and ritual. When data become the basis of communication, as in the age of artificial intelligence, mediation infiltrates everyday life. The line between representation and operation blurs: communication no longer mirrors society but actively constructs it through algorithmic processing. This shift marks what Couldry calls the “datafication of the social,” where power is exercised through organising flows rather than controlling messages (Couldry, 2020). AI and the metaverse amplify this process by merging computation with embodiment, making participation inseparable from surveillance and affect.

Papacharissi’s (Papacharissi, 2015) concept of affective publics adds an emotional dimension to this transformation. Digital platforms, she argues, structure not only discourse but the circulation of feeling. Networked communication creates communities that coalesce around shared affective responses to events, issues, and symbols. These publics are neither fully rational nor irrational; they are organised through sentiment. The metaverse and AI-driven media extend this affective logic by integrating emotional recognition and response into their design. Algorithms detect and amplify affective signals, translating emotion into measurable data. The result is a new form of communicative economy in which feelings become both the medium and the product of interaction. Understanding convergence in this sense requires attention to how technological infrastructures script and monetise affective behaviour.

These theoretical pillars (convergence culture, technical codes, datafication, and affective publics) intersect powerfully within the production of sociotechnical imaginaries. As Mager and Katzenbach (Mager & Katzenbach, 2021) argue, future imaginaries of digital technology are not merely abstract visions but are actively ‘made and governed,’ reflecting deeply contested and commodified power dynamics. Similarly, Ferrari (Ferrari,

2020) demonstrates how dominant technological imaginaries often merge technocratic solutions with populist appeals to secure public consent. Understanding the convergence of AI and the metaverse therefore requires us to analyse not just the platforms themselves, but also the discursive work that makes them socially acceptable.

While Jenkins, Feenberg, Couldry, and Papacharissi provide essential theoretical foundations, the convergence of AI and immersive technologies also invites insights from political economy and cultural geography. Scholars have shown how digital infrastructures reproduce global hierarchies of power and knowledge (Crawford, 2021; Jin, 2025). The metaverse, often presented as a borderless realm of creativity, depends on material networks of labour, extraction, and regulation. Similarly, AI systems rely on vast data ecologies that reflect geopolitical inequalities. Theories of platform capitalism situate these technologies within a global economy of data accumulation, where value is produced through the continuous capture of user activity. Yet such frameworks must also account for the moral and cultural meanings attached to these practices, as they vary across contexts and institutions.

The theoretical challenge lies in reconciling both structural and cultural perspectives. The material infrastructures of AI and the metaverse create universal conditions of data dependence and automation. However, their interpretation remains culturally specific, influenced by language, ideology, and governance. A comparative framework must therefore combine macro-level analyses of political economy with micro-level focus on discourse and affect. This approach echoes Feenberg's (Feenberg, 2010) call for a democratic rationalisation of technology, where design is guided by ethical considerations rather than market logic. It also aligns with Papacharissi's concept of affective connection as the basis for public life, implying that emotion can serve as a form of governance in algorithmic societies.

The convergence of AI and the metaverse also redefines the role of media institutions. Historically, media served as intermediaries that filtered and framed information. In the age of intelligent systems, mediation becomes distributed, embedded in the algorithms that determine visibility and relevance. This shift challenges traditional theories of the public sphere, which presupposed a shared space of rational communication (Habermas, 1989). Instead, digital publics are fragmented and dynamic, organised by patterns of attention rather than deliberation. As Couldry observes, the authority of media no longer derives from their capacity to represent reality but from their ability to generate and sustain social coordination through data flows (Couldry, 2020). This transformation blurs the boundaries between media, governance, and affect, creating a condition in which technological systems operate as infrastructures of belief.

Simultaneously, convergence enhances the importance of creativity as both a cultural value and an economic necessity. AI and immersive media promise endless innovation, yet they also risk automating the very imagination they aim to improve. Jenkins's (Jenkins, 2006) idea of participatory culture serves as a vital reminder that creativity isn't just about producing content but about negotiating meaning within communities. In AI-mediated environments, participation often occurs through algorithmic templates that limit the range of expression. The challenge for cultural theory is to recognise this tension between empowerment and standardisation, between creativity as play and as labour. Therefore, understanding convergence today involves recognising that participation has become computational, shaped by design decisions that embed economic and ideological goals.

In summary, the theoretical framework for analysing AI and the metaverse must go beyond simple dichotomies like technology versus society or innovation versus regulation. It should view convergence as a negotiation space where technical, affective, and ethical aspects intersect. Jenkins (Jenkins, 2006) offers a model for understanding participatory culture; Feenberg (Feenberg, 2010) presents a philosophy of technological value; Couldry (Couldry, 2020) discusses how mediation structures power; and Papacharissi (Papacharissi, 2015) demonstrates how emotion sustains connectivity. Collectively, these perspectives allow for a comprehensive understanding of how convergence reshapes the social perception of technology. They indicate that the future of media research involves analysing not only what technologies do but also how they influence society's feelings, beliefs, and consent.

3 Methodology

This study employs a comparative and interpretive approach to examine how artificial intelligence and the metaverse are depicted, legitimised, and moralised in Chinese and Western media from 2020 to 2026. The aim is to explore how discourse shapes meaning and emotion around technological convergence, and how these representations mirror broader cultural and institutional contexts. Instead of assessing technological efficiency or economic outcomes, the analysis concentrates on the symbolic and moral aspects of innovation, viewing communication as a process through which societies negotiate values, authority, and identity.

The methodological foundation combines critical discourse analysis with interpretive cultural inquiry. This approach recognises that language is not a neutral medium but a form of social practice that both reflects and produces ideology (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008). Media texts are examined as sites where moral

frameworks are articulated and contested, where governments, corporations, and publics compete to define the meaning of intelligence, progress, and creativity. The analysis follows an inductive logic, tracing how key terms such as “ethics,” “innovation,” and “human-centred development” are employed to construct narratives of legitimacy. These narratives reveal how media systems organise emotion and authority around intelligent technologies.

The corpus comprises one hundred media texts selected to encompass a variety of institutional perspectives and narrative tones. While a corpus of one hundred texts is not exhaustive, it serves as a representative qualitative sample; rather than claiming statistical universality, it is designed to capture and illustrate broader discursive trends that are consistently confirmed across the selected media ecosystems. The Chinese sample features People’s Daily, Xinhua, China Daily, and Global Times. These outlets represent the intersection of official policy communication and semi-commercial journalism within China’s regulated media landscape. The Western sample includes The Guardian, The New York Times, The Atlantic, Wired, Bloomberg Technology, and MIT Technology Review. These publications were chosen for their influence in shaping public discourse on technology and ethics. Together, they provide a comparative overview of how innovation is narrated across different ideological environments. A complete metadata inventory of the corpus is available in Appendix A, with illustrative evidence extracts presented in Appendix B.

To ensure comparative symmetry, the corpus is evenly divided into 50 Chinese texts and 50 Western texts, collected between January 2020 and February 2026. The Chinese subset includes articles from state-aligned media (People’s Daily, Xinhua, China Daily, Global Times) and technology-focused outlets (Sina Tech), capturing the intersection of state directives and industry implementation. The Western subset sources from prominent centrist and liberal tech-journalism outlets (The New York Times, The Guardian, Wired, MIT Technology Review, Bloomberg Technology, The Atlantic), selected for their role in shaping public tech discourse in the US and UK. Instead of conducting a quantitative content analysis, texts were manually coded for recurring rhetorical tropes, affective keywords (e.g., fear, hope, harmony, disruption), and moral framing. Chinese policy documents and domestic media reports (such as People’s Daily) were accessed and analysed in their original Mandarin by a bilingual researcher, ensuring that cultural nuances and specific linguistic markers (such as 和谐, héxié, or 引导, yǐndǎo) were accurately interpreted. Meanwhile, articles from Xinhua, China Daily, and Global Times were sourced from their official English-language editions, which serve as the primary vehicles for China’s global strategic communication.

Text selection was guided by three criteria. First, each article explicitly discusses artificial intelligence, the metaverse, or both, placing them within debates about governance, creativity, or social transformation. Second, the texts were published between January 2020 and February 2026, a period characterised by the normalisation of AI and the rise of immersive media as policy and cultural issues. Third, the sources reflect both institutional authority and public accessibility, balancing elite commentary with mass communication. The sample thus represents a range of voices from state and corporate narratives to journalistic interpretation.

Each text was analysed for its use of language, metaphor, and affect. Particular attention was paid to recurring discursive patterns that reveal underlying ideological frameworks. For example, Chinese media frequently employ moral metaphors of harmony, guidance, and inclusiveness, framing AI as a collective endeavour aligned with national rejuvenation. Western media, by contrast, tend to use metaphors of autonomy, disruption, and uncertainty, reflecting liberal anxieties about control and authenticity. These linguistic differences serve as indicators of the moral infrastructures underpinning each media system. The analysis also identified emotional tonalities, including optimism, scepticism, and ambivalence, which function as affective markers of technological legitimacy.

The textual analysis was complemented by examining policy documents and institutional reports that provide context for media discourse. Chinese sources include the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2017), the Ethical Norms for New Generation Artificial Intelligence (NNGAIGPC, 2021), and the Action Plan for the Innovative Development of the Metaverse Industry (2023–2025) (Shanghai Municipal People’s Government, 2022). Western sources include the European Union’s Digital Services Act (European Union, 2022) and AI Act (European Union, 2024), the Federal Trade Commission 2023 Privacy and Data Security Update (FTC, 2024), and the OECD Digital Economy Outlook (OECD, 2025). These documents offer the institutional context within which media discourse occurs, showing how ethics and innovation are formalised through regulatory language.

The study also utilises statistical and survey data to place discourse within wider public attitudes. For example, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2025) reports an internet penetration rate of 78 per cent, with an increasing number of users engaging with AI-assisted and metaverse applications. The Ipsos Global Advisor Survey (2025) indicates that over 80 per cent of Chinese respondents link AI with creativity and progress, compared with 35 per cent in the United States and 42 per cent in Europe. These figures are not regarded as causal evidence but as markers of how optimism and scepticism are spread across societies. They help to situate discursive tendencies within measurable emotional climates.

Analytically, the study unfolds in three stages. The first identifies the dominant discursive formations shaping media narratives about AI and the metaverse in each context. The second compares the moral and affective vocabularies used to describe technological progress, examining how they reflect institutional values and power dynamics. The third interprets these differences through the lens of convergence theory, exploring how similar infrastructures produce diverging meanings. The analysis emphasises not equivalence but translation: the ways in which global technologies are reinterpreted to align with local moral and political imaginaries.

To clarify the interpretive framework, the analysis operationalises key concepts using observable linguistic and narrative indicators. Table 1 summarises the coding scheme and the types of textual evidence employed.

Table I: Operationalisation and coding scheme used for the interpretive discourse analysis (concepts, sources, operational indicators, and evidence requirements)

Concept	Key source(s)	Operational indicators in texts	Evidence required
Sociotechnical imaginaries	(Jasanoff & Kim, 2009; Mager & Katzenbach, 2021)	Future-oriented visions; legitimating actors; moral telos; metaphors of progress, harmony, or risk	Quoted extracts and metadata (Appendices A and B)
Technical code	(Feenberg, 2010)	Design and standardisation language; alignment and optimisation; embedded values; assumptions about order or fairness	Quoted extracts and metadata (Appendices A and B)
Datafication of the social	(Couldry, 2020; Couldry & Mejias, 2019)	Extraction and tracking; quantification; governance-by-metrics; data as legitimacy infrastructure	Quoted extracts and metadata (Appendices A and B)
Affective publics	(Papacharissi, 2015)	Affective cues (hope, fear, harmony); moral emotions; calls to action; trust-building rhetoric	Quoted extracts and metadata (Appendices A and B)

This interpretive comparison facilitates the identification of both structural and emotional aspects of convergence. Structural convergence relates to the shared reliance on algorithmic systems, data infrastructures, and platform governance that characterise the digital economy globally. Emotional convergence pertains to the shared affective logics, such as curiosity, hope, and anxiety, that influence how societies interact with intelligent technologies. By analysing both, the study emphasises the interaction between material infrastructures and cultural emotions. The aim is to understand convergence as a multidimensional process that integrates technology, discourse, and emotion.

The comparative design also recognises the asymmetry of access to information and transparency between the two regions. In China, state guidance ensures coherence in technological narratives but restricts the diversity of voices. In the West, decentralised competition encourages plurality but also results in fragmentation and contradiction. The study regards these asymmetries not as methodological limitations but as empirical realities that demonstrate how each system constructs coherence differently. Comparison, in this sense, functions as a tool for understanding differences rather than measuring deficits.

Several limitations must be recognised. The sample concentrates on elite and institutional media rather than vernacular social media discourse, which might capture more diverse or oppositional perspectives. The temporal scope, restricted to 2020-2026, excludes earlier phases of technological speculation that could add historical depth. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the analysis means that its findings are interpretative rather than generalisable. The aim is not to quantify media trends but to uncover the moral and emotional grammars through which technology acquires meaning.

By approaching discourse as both language and emotion, the methodology bridges cultural interpretation and critical media analysis. It recognises that the power of communication lies not only in the transmission of information but also in the creation of shared affective worlds. The study therefore combines empirical rigour

with hermeneutic sensitivity, seeking to reveal how societies imagine the future through the stories they tell about intelligent machines.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 *China's Strategic Approach to Artificial Intelligence and the Metaverse*

The development of artificial intelligence and immersive technologies in China must be viewed as part of a broader state-led modernisation effort that connects innovation with governance and cultural legitimacy. Since the release of the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan in 2017 (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017), artificial intelligence has been portrayed as a strategic force for national rejuvenation, digital sovereignty, and ethical development. The plan set out clear objectives for research, industry, and governance, framing artificial intelligence as a tool for both technological and moral progress. This vision was further developed with the Ethical Norms for New Generation Artificial Intelligence (NNGAIGPC, 2021), which outlined a human-centred framework for intelligent development, highlighting inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability as key moral principles guiding innovation. Together, these documents reflect an integrated vision of progress where science, ethics, and ideology merge to create a distinctive model of digital modernity.

Chinese media have played an essential role in shaping and amplifying this vision. State and semi-commercial outlets such as Xinhua, People's Daily, and China Daily consistently portray artificial intelligence and the metaverse as signs of collective progress and moral responsibility. Across the corpus, media language stresses harmony, guidance, and safeguarding, presenting technological development as a civic project aligned with public benefit and national rejuvenation. Through these linguistic choices, technology becomes an expression of civilisation and order rather than a source of disruption. News reports celebrate technological achievements as evidence of national confidence, while commentaries link innovation to cultural continuity. The narrative of optimism and unity reflects a deliberate alignment between media and policy, where communication acts as an extension of governance and as a form of moral pedagogy.

The metaverse has been incorporated into this framework through a coordinated approach that combines experimentation with state oversight. The Action Plan for the Innovative Development of the Metaverse Industry (2023–2025) (Shanghai Municipal People's Government, 2022) identifies the metaverse as a next-generation internet integrating virtual and real economies to serve cultural, educational, and industrial needs. The document defines development goals, including the creation of pilot zones in major cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, with a focus on applications in education, healthcare, and cultural heritage. These initiatives demonstrate how technological experimentation is embedded within a regulatory and ideological framework that prioritises social benefit over market speculation. The metaverse in China is portrayed not as an entertainment frontier but as a public utility, a digital infrastructure that supports national development and cultural diplomacy. Recent scholarship confirms this distinctive path. As Gong (Gong, 2024) observes in examining China's role in the metaverse, the state actively guides virtual technologies to serve the 'real economy,' preventing the speculative excesses seen in Western markets. Moreover, Hou (Hou, 2025) shows how China develops varied 'AI imaginaries' across national and local metaverse policies, ensuring that technological capacity-building remains closely aligned with state-defined goals of social stability rather than unrestrained market disruption.

Industry players have adapted to this policy direction by aligning their innovation strategies with government priorities. Companies such as Baidu, Tencent, Alibaba, and ByteDance function within a coordinated ecosystem where collaboration between government, academia, and industry replaces the competitive individualism typical of many Western markets. These firms are encouraged to incorporate artificial intelligence into public services, education, and manufacturing, contributing to what is officially called an intelligent society. Meanwhile, universities and research institutions like the Communication University of China and Tsinghua University have established laboratories focused on immersive technology and ethical governance. Their partnership with government agencies reflects an institutional model in which innovation and moral regulation develop hand in hand.

This integration of ethics and technology creates a form of governance that differs from Western models. In China, ethical principles are not viewed as external limits on innovation but as essential elements of technological design. The Ethical Norms for New Generation Artificial Intelligence (NNGAIGPC, 2021) describe ethics as a productive force that ensures technology aligns with social development. Instead of emphasising individual rights, the Chinese model focuses on collective responsibility and harmony between

humans and machines. This approach establishes legitimacy through moral consistency rather than procedural control. Consequently, ethics functions as a trust system that replaces coordination with competition and consensus with conflict resolution. This principle underpins what several scholars term a moral infrastructure of technology (Coudry & Mejias, 2019; Jin, 2025).

The public reception of artificial intelligence and the metaverse in China reflects the success of this moral framing. Surveys conducted by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2025) and Ipsos Global Advisor (Ipsos Global Advisor, 2025) indicate high levels of optimism regarding the social benefits of technological innovation. More than 80 per cent of respondents express confidence that artificial intelligence enhances creativity and productivity, while over 70 per cent associate it with national pride and modernisation. This affective alignment between innovation and identity suggests that technology functions as a site of emotional cohesion, reinforcing collective belonging. Media representations contribute to this process by linking the progress of artificial intelligence to narratives of civilisation and virtue. The metaverse, presented as a fusion of cultural heritage and digital creativity, extends this moral narrative into new domains of participation.

The convergence of artificial intelligence, governance, and ethics thus forms a unique model of digital civilisation. In this model, technological systems are not just tools for efficiency but moral environments that shape social relations. The discourse of human-centred development promotes a vision of harmony in which innovation advances both material prosperity and spiritual growth. This blend of technological and moral order redefines the meaning of progress, embedding it within a broader narrative of national rejuvenation. The integration of ethics and innovation also allows the state to position itself as the guarantor of both trust and creativity, ensuring that the benefits of technology are shared within an ideologically consistent framework.

Simultaneously, this coherence prompts questions about the boundaries of pluralism and contestation. The focus on harmony and collective responsibility may marginalise dissenting viewpoints or alternative visions of technological progress. The moral framework that underpins legitimacy could also hinder critical reflection. Nonetheless, the Chinese model shows that technological convergence can be steered by ethical coherence rather than market volatility. It indicates that progress and regulation can coexist as parts of a unified system of cultural and political meaning.

Taken together, China's strategic approach to artificial intelligence and the metaverse exemplifies a form of convergence that is institutional rather than spontaneous, coordinated rather than competitive. It embodies a synthesis of innovation and moral aspiration in which the pursuit of technological leadership is inseparable from the affirmation of cultural identity. In this system, artificial intelligence and immersive media do not simply represent progress but express a national ethos that equates digital advancement with civilisation itself.

4.2 Western Corporate and Consumer-Driven Development

In Western societies, the growth of artificial intelligence and the metaverse has been mainly driven by corporate innovation, market rivalry, and consumer culture. The moral language that accompanies this process highlights freedom, creativity, and disruption. Although regulation has become a more prominent part of public debate, the dominant story remains one of technological entrepreneurship led by private initiative (De Masi et al., 2024). This approach reflects the liberal belief that innovation most effectively arises from open markets and decentralised experimentation. As a consequence, the intersection of artificial intelligence and immersive media in the West is influenced less by state coordination and more by a dynamic interplay between corporate ambitions, cultural output, and individual engagement.

Major technology giants such as Meta, Google, Microsoft, Apple, and OpenAI have driven the development of this ecosystem. Their approaches combine technological innovation with the creation of expansive digital environments that attract attention and monetise engagement. The arrival of generative models like GPT, Gemini, and Claude has redefined creativity as a form of computation, turning authorship into a collaborative effort between humans and machines. The launch of immersive platforms such as Meta Horizon and Apple Vision Pro pushes this computational creativity into embodied experience, merging consumption, communication, and imagination. These technologies are designed to integrate smoothly into daily life, transforming social interaction into an ongoing process of data generation and behavioural prediction.

The commercial logic behind this model is described as platform capitalism, a system where value is created through data extraction and circulation (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Artificial intelligence serves as the operational centre of this system, analysing behaviour patterns to predict and influence future actions. In the metaverse, this predictive approach becomes spatial and sensory. The environment responds to the user in real time, offering a personalised sense of immersion that strengthens emotional bonds. The outcome is a blend of entertainment, commerce, and surveillance, where pleasure and control become indistinguishable. The use of

biometric feedback, eye tracking, and motion data broadens behavioural monitoring, making affect itself a target for optimisation.

Cultural industries have embraced this transformation by repositioning creativity as an interactive process mediated by algorithms. Streaming platforms, gaming companies, and digital content producers use artificial intelligence to generate recommendations, automate production, and personalise experiences. The aesthetic dimension of this shift lies in its capacity to turn participation into production. Users are invited to co-create content, yet their actions remain constrained by algorithmic architectures that set the boundaries of expression. This dynamic exemplifies the paradox of digital creativity in the age of artificial intelligence: the empowerment of users through tools that also limit them. While participation seems democratic, the underlying structure remains centralised and proprietary.

The discussion around the metaverse in Western media reflects these tensions. In the early 2020s, the metaverse was shown as an open frontier of digital life, a space for collaboration, education, and entertainment beyond physical limits. But, enthusiasm soon clashed with scepticism over privacy, security, and sustainability. Critics argued that the metaverse could reproduce the monopolistic traits of platform capitalism and expand surveillance into new areas (Crawford, 2021). Journalistic investigations highlighted issues of data exploitation and the environmental impact of immersive infrastructures. At the same time, cultural commentators praised the metaverse as a space of creative experimentation that blurs the lines between art, technology, and identity. This ambivalence between freedom and control characterises the emotional tone of Western discourse on convergence.

The relationship between corporate innovation and public regulation has become increasingly disputed. The European Union has introduced frameworks such as the Digital Services Act and the Artificial Intelligence Act (European Union, 2022; European Union, 2024), which aim to ensure transparency, accountability, and ethical governance. In the United States, discussions of regulation have centred on antitrust policy and privacy protection, but enforcement remains limited. Regulatory interventions often lag behind technological advances, leading to reactive governance. This gap between innovation and oversight highlights the structural difficulty of balancing economic dynamism with ethical responsibility in liberal economies. While public trust in technology has declined, enthusiasm for personal empowerment through digital tools continues to sustain demand.

Media portrayals of artificial intelligence in Western settings swing between fascination and fear. Some texts celebrate AI for its ability to democratise creativity and increase productivity, while others frame it as a threat to jobs, authenticity, and human agency. Across the corpus, Western technology journalism oscillates between utopian and dystopian interpretations of the metaverse and generative AI, often emphasising platform power, biometric surveillance, and the risk of dehumanisation. Recent critical literature increasingly examines this issue. Lucia, Vetter, and Adubofour (Lucia et al., 2023) note how Facebook's 'Meta imaginary' depends on circulating elite discourse to justify commercial expansion under the pretext of human connection. Likewise, Lucia, Vetter, and Patel (Lucia et al., 2025) describe a designed cycle of fear around generative AI that paradoxically reinforces Big Tech's discursive dominance, while Deng and Matthes (Deng & Matthes, 2023) show how news coverage of the metaverse frequently remains trapped between utopian and dystopian frames. This discursive ambivalence reflects broader cultural worries about automation and autonomy and keeps the moral question centred on whether AI should replicate human capacities.

The emotional economy of Western technological discourse is therefore marked by contradiction. The promise of individual empowerment coexists with a sense of vulnerability to corporate power. Users experience freedom within systems that rely on their ongoing participation and data sharing. Scholars have described this phenomenon as the commodification of affect, where emotional engagement becomes the main source of economic value (Illouz, 2007; Fuchs, 2014). In the metaverse, this commodification gains new intensity, as emotion and attention are captured within immersive architectures that respond instantly to behavioural cues. The spectacle of interactivity hides the asymmetry of control between users and platforms.

Simultaneously, the Western model promotes authentic spaces of creative innovation. Independent developers, artists, and educators utilise artificial intelligence and immersive technologies to explore new forms of expression and learning. Digital art collectives employ generative models to challenge authorship and originality. Universities experiment with virtual classrooms that facilitate transnational collaboration. Non-profit organisations create applications for accessibility, healthcare, and heritage preservation. These initiatives showcase the diversity of Western digital culture, where experimentation often originates from the margins of the corporate system. However, even these spaces remain embedded within the infrastructures of large technology providers, whose tools and platforms regulate access and visibility.

Unlike China's coordinated moral governance, Western societies depend on negotiations among multiple stakeholders to set the ethical boundaries of technology. Corporations voluntarily adopt principles of fairness and transparency, while civil society organisations champion accountability and digital rights. This pluralistic

system fosters both resilience and fragmentation. It allows a range of voices to shape the debate but makes reaching consensus challenging. Consequently, the moral legitimacy of technology is continually renegotiated through public discourse, litigation, and activism. The outcome is an open moral economy of innovation, in which authority rests on debate rather than consistency.

The convergence of artificial intelligence and the metaverse in Western contexts reflects the logic of market democracies: progress develops through competition, and legitimacy is built through negotiation. Technology becomes a space of moral conflict where freedom and regulation, creativity and control, coexist in an unstable equilibrium. The discourse of innovation supports optimism about the transformative potential of digital tools, yet the experience of surveillance and inequality generates disillusionment. This duality characterises the Western contribution to the global landscape of technological convergence. It shows that the future of intelligent media is not determined solely by technological ability but also by the moral and political frameworks through which societies choose to interpret and govern them.

4.3 *Comparative Analysis: Divergent Infrastructures and Shared Imaginaries*

The comparison between Chinese and Western approaches to artificial intelligence and the metaverse reveals two distinct paradigms of technological modernity. Both regions embrace convergence as a transformative process linking innovation to social change, yet they differ in how they define the moral and institutional boundaries of this transformation. In China, convergence is managed through state coordination, moral governance, and ideological coherence. In Western societies, it is shaped by market competition, pluralism, and negotiation. These contrasting models demonstrate that technological progress is never value-neutral but always embedded in cultural imaginaries and systems of power.

At the moral level, the Chinese model bases technological legitimacy on collective ethics and social harmony, while the Western model locates it in individual autonomy and market freedom. The Chinese discourse of “human-centred development” interprets artificial intelligence as a tool for social coordination and national rejuvenation (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2017; NNGAIGPC, 2021). In this view, ethics do not constrain innovation but define its purpose. The moral function of technology lies in its ability to maintain order and unity, aligning digital progress with Confucian ideals of balance and reciprocity. Conversely, Western discourse constructs ethics as a safeguard against the excesses of corporate power and automation. It portrays technology as a possible threat to autonomy and authenticity, emphasising transparency, accountability, and privacy as conditions for legitimacy (European Union, 2022; European Union, 2024). The difference is not only institutional but philosophical: one regards morality as collective coherence, the other as individual protection.

This divergence extends to the emotional aspect of technological life. In China, public sentiment remains optimistic, reflecting trust in the harmony between innovation and governance. Surveys by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2025) indicate that most citizens view artificial intelligence as a source of national pride, creativity, and cultural confidence. Media discourse supports this emotional connection by portraying AI and the metaverse as tools for education, harmony, and heritage preservation. Emotion is utilised to foster unity. In the West, feelings are more mixed. The excitement about innovation exists alongside worries about surveillance, job loss, and authenticity. Studies of digital culture reveal that such ambivalence is typical of societies where individual agency and systemic reliance are in conflict (Andrejevic, 2020; Fuchs, 2014). Western emotional discourse swings between fascination and scepticism, creating what might be called an emotional economy of uncertainty.

At the institutional level, China and the West represent opposite ends of governance. The Chinese model combines ethics, policies, and innovation into a coherent, state-led system. The Ethical Norms for New Generation Artificial Intelligence (NNGAIGPC, 2021) formalises moral principles as guiding codes for research, industry, and education. This coordination provides stability and direction but also centralises authority. Western governance, by contrast, relies on distributed regulation involving government, corporations, and civil society. The European Union’s Artificial Intelligence Act (European Union, 2024) exemplifies an effort to standardise accountability without hindering innovation. The United States takes a more reactive approach, balancing corporate autonomy with occasional oversight. This fragmented structure encourages diversity but can also result in inconsistency. While the Chinese model ensures ideological conformity, the Western model involves ongoing negotiation between innovation and regulation.

The differences between these models can be summarised in terms of their moral infrastructures. In China, the moral infrastructure is hierarchical and cohesive. It constructs legitimacy through alignment between state policy, corporate responsibility, and public trust. Ethics functions as a unifying principle that connects technological development to the national project of modernisation. In Western societies, the moral

infrastructure is plural and contested. Legitimacy arises from open debate, critique, and activism rather than from coherence. Ethics becomes a field of negotiation among competing institutions and interests. Each system possesses strengths and vulnerabilities: while the Chinese model's moral unity can suppress diversity, the Western model's reliance on market volatility and corporate competition can similarly constrain long-term ethical sustainability, leaving public interest vulnerable to private profit. Yet both demonstrate that technology operates not only as an instrument but as a medium through which societies express their moral and affective orders.

Despite these differences, convergence also creates points of intersection. Both China and the West see artificial intelligence as a driver of creativity and innovation. Both acknowledge the need for ethical frameworks, although they differ in how they implement them. Both use media discourse to build narratives of legitimacy. In this way, convergence does not eliminate differences but forms a shared symbolic vocabulary through which technological futures are envisioned. Terms such as “trust,” “responsibility,” and “transparency” circulate globally, gaining different meanings within local moral contexts. This linguistic translation shows that globalisation does not lead to uniformity but fosters mutual understanding. The universal language of ethics acts as a medium for cultural differentiation.

The emotional aspect of convergence further complicates the binary between optimism and scepticism. In China, emotional investment in progress serves as a stabilising force, supporting governance and social cohesion. In the West, emotional ambivalence fosters critique and innovation by encouraging debate about the boundaries of automation. These affective regimes demonstrate that emotion is not just an accessory to rational discourse but a core mechanism through which legitimacy is formed. The politics of feeling influence how societies adopt technological change. In both contexts, managing emotions around uncertainty becomes a form of soft power that maintains trust in the digital future.

Cultural factors also shape how convergence is represented in narrative form. A close reading of the corpus reveals how specific linguistic patterns function as explicit indicators of underlying moral infrastructures. In the Chinese media sample, the dominant affective signal is rooted in the moral metaphor of 'harmony' (和谐, héxié). AI and the metaverse are rarely described as autonomous forces; instead, they are grammatically positioned as objects to be 'built' (建设, jiànshè), 'guided' (引导, yǐndǎo), and 'integrated' (融合, rónghé) into the national moral order. This vocabulary strips technology of its disruptive threat, domesticating it into a tool of state-led benevolence. Conversely, the Western sample is saturated with the lexicon of 'disruption' (and its affective twin, 'anxiety'). Verbs such as 'disrupting', 'breaking', and 'reinventing' are used to celebrate individual entrepreneurialism, while terms like 'threat', 'bias', and 'black box' encode the public's fear of uncontrolled corporate power. These linguistic choices signal deeper cultural orientations toward change: for China, progress is cumulative, guided, and grammatically passive (the technology is guided); for the West, it is spontaneous, exploratory, and grammatically active (the technology disrupts). Both depend on the moral imagination of technology as a path to improvement, yet they diverge in how they balance control and freedom. The moral grammar of convergence thus becomes an index of civilisation, reflecting each culture's conception of the good life in the digital age.

The comparative analysis indicates that technological convergence is not a single process but a domain of translation where values, emotions, and institutions interact. It shows that convergence functions simultaneously as a material, symbolic, and moral phenomenon. The material dimension involves infrastructure and data; the symbolic dimension pertains to language and narrative; the moral dimension relates to trust and legitimacy. Understanding convergence requires analysing how these dimensions align or diverge across different contexts. In China, alignment leads to coherence; in the West, divergence creates dynamism. The two models reflect different responses to the same historical condition: the fusion of intelligence, communication, and governance in a world mediated by machines.

In conclusion, the comparison shows that convergence is not the end of difference but its reorganisation. Artificial intelligence and the metaverse create a global framework within which societies articulate distinct moral and emotional orders. The future of media technologies will depend not only on technical innovation but also on the ability to negotiate meaning across these cultural boundaries. Convergence, in this sense, is not merely technological but civilisational. It signifies a dialogue between systems that aim to reconcile efficiency with ethics, progress with purpose, and innovation with identity.

5 Conclusion

The comparative analysis of artificial intelligence and the metaverse shows that technological convergence is not just a technical process but also a moral and emotional one. Across different cultural contexts, the integration

of intelligent systems into communication networks changes how societies understand trust, emotion, and legitimacy. China and the West present two distinct but related models of digital modernity. Both utilise artificial intelligence and immersive technologies to influence the moral vision of progress, but they differ in their approach to ethics, governance, and creativity. The Chinese model emphasises moral consistency and collective responsibility, while the Western model focuses on individual autonomy and diversity. These differences demonstrate that convergence does not eliminate disparity; it rearranges it through shared vocabularies of innovation and ethics.

At the heart of these transformations lies the question of legitimacy. The authority of technological systems depends not only on their functionality but also on the values they represent. In China, legitimacy is derived from harmony between innovation and governance, a balance that shapes artificial intelligence as an ethical environment rather than a disruptive force (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017; NNGAIGPC, 2021). The metaverse extends this harmony into virtual space, where participation becomes an act of cultural citizenship. In the West, legitimacy arises from debate and critique. Ethical frameworks such as the Digital Services Act (European Union, 2022), the Artificial Intelligence Act (European Union, 2024), and industry guidelines created by corporate and civil institutions define accountability as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed consensus. Both systems acknowledge the moral stakes of technological design, yet they embed ethics in opposite ways: as coherence in one case, as contestation in the other.

This difference in moral orientation has profound implications for how affect functions within digital life. Emotion acts as a medium through which societies internalise technological change. In China, emotional trust in governance fosters stability and optimism, supporting the belief that technology can serve the collective good. In Western societies, emotional ambivalence maintains a critical engagement with technology, leading to both innovation and anxiety. The affective economies of these regions reflect contrasting relationships between citizens and systems. Chinese optimism stems from identification with state narratives of progress; Western scepticism arises from the perceived distance between users and corporations. In both cases, emotion becomes the core of communication, linking social cohesion to technological imagination.

The merging of artificial intelligence and the metaverse also redefines creativity as a moral and social function. The automation of imagination blurs the line between production and participation, raising questions about authorship, authenticity, and responsibility. In China, creativity is seen as collective innovation, contributing to social harmony and national rejuvenation. In the West, creativity is linked to individual agency and disruption. Nonetheless, both perspectives recognise that creativity is now inseparable from computational mediation. The machine becomes a collaborator in the act of expression, and culture becomes a space where human and artificial intelligence co-evolve. This shift requires new ethical frameworks capable of recognising co-authorship between humans and machines, as well as the labour and resources that support this collaboration (Crawford, 2021).

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings prompt a re-evaluation of media convergence. Earlier models concentrated on the flow of content across different platforms and the participatory aspects of digital culture (Jenkins, 2006). The current phase of convergence broadens this perspective to include cognition and emotion. Communication no longer merely links individuals but also shapes the very conditions of perception. Artificial intelligence and the metaverse combine infrastructure with imagination, transforming participation into a continuous computational process. To understand this shift, it is essential to incorporate insights from political economy, cultural theory, and affect studies. The research task is to examine how technical architectures encode moral decisions and how emotions uphold the legitimacy of those decisions.

The moral aspect of convergence cannot be solely about regulating behaviour. It involves redefining what societies deem meaningful, just, and human. In China, ethics are integrated into technological design as a principle of coordination; in the West, they are externalised as a principle of accountability. Both approaches illustrate the integration of technology and morality. The algorithm becomes a moral agent when it operationalises values such as fairness, transparency, or harmony. However, these values are not universal; they are shaped by histories, institutions, and collective emotions. Comparative analysis thus helps to reveal the diversity of digital ethics and the contextual nature of technological morality.

Affective convergence introduces an additional layer to this process. Despite differences across institutions, both systems depend on emotional engagement to validate intelligent technologies. Trust, curiosity, and hope act as affective foundations that stabilise belief in progress. Public communication plays a key role in sustaining these emotions by translating complex technologies into moral narratives. Media discourse shapes society's attitudes toward innovation, guiding perceptions toward optimism or anxiety. In this way, emotion becomes the interface linking governance with everyday life. Understanding this dynamic is essential for future research on intelligent media, which must explore not only the dissemination of information but also the circulation of

feeling.

Convergence also shows the development of a new moral landscape of technology. The spread of artificial intelligence and the metaverse creates zones of cultural reliance where meanings and practices move between East and West. Global platforms operate across jurisdictions, but their interpretation remains local. This tension leads to a form of cultural negotiation that goes beyond policy and economics. The universalisation of ethical language hides a variety of moral worlds. Terms like “responsibility,” “trust,” and “human-centred development” travel easily across borders but take on different meanings within each society. The comparative approach shows that what appears to be global convergence is actually a dialogue between civilisations shaped by technology.

Ultimately, the integration of artificial intelligence and immersive technologies signifies the emergence of a new communicative paradigm rooted in moral and emotional convergence. The role of scholars and policymakers is not to decide which model is superior but to understand how they interact. The Chinese model offers consistency and ethical harmony; the Western model provides transparency and critical flexibility. Both contribute to a global ecosystem of intelligent communication that relies on managing emotions and articulating values. The future of convergence will depend on the ability to bridge these moral frameworks without erasing their differences.

In this context, the study advances the growing field of critical research on artificial intelligence and media by emphasising the necessity of comparative approaches that incorporate emotion, morality, and power. It demonstrates that technological systems are not solely infrastructures of computation but also of belief. Their success relies equally on affective legitimacy and technical efficiency. By examining how societies perceive and feel about technology, we can gain a deeper understanding of the moral foundations of the digital age and explore the potential for a more reflective, inclusive, and humane integration of intelligent media

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