

A Study on the Construction of Rural Women's Images on Short Video Platforms: A Case Study of Douyin (Postprint)

Authors: Guo Lei

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Abstract

With the flourishing development of short video platforms, identity construction has gained a new arena. For a long time, rural women have constituted a neglected group, and the absence of channels for voicing their concerns has gradually rendered them voiceless in society. However, due to characteristics such as low barriers to entry, directness of expression, and social attributes, short video platforms have enabled a substantial number of rural women to construct their online images, thereby drawing greater attention to this demographic. This study primarily employs participatory observation and in-depth interviews to investigate the image construction of rural women and its underlying motivations under the empowerment of short video platforms, and offers reflections and recommendations.

Full Text

Preamble

Title: A Study on the Construction of Rural Women's Image on Short Video Platforms: A Case Study of Douyin

Author: Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, 102627

Abstract

With the vigorous development of short video platforms, image construction has gained a new stage. For a long time, rural women have been a neglected group, gradually becoming voiceless in society due to the lack of channels for expression. However, because of the low threshold, direct expression, and social attributes of short video platforms, a large number of rural women have utilized these platforms to construct their online images, drawing more attention to this group. This paper primarily employs participatory observation and in-depth

interviews to explore the image construction of rural women under the empowerment of short video platforms and its motivations, and proposes reflections and recommendations.

Keywords: short video; rural women; image construction; Douyin

(I) Research Background

With the continuous development of internet technology, short video platforms have gradually occupied people's daily lives. The year 2016 is known as the "first year of short videos," and many video producers have shifted their stage for self-presentation to these platforms. In recent years, short video platforms have continued to expand their influence, with Douyin, Kuaishou, Xiaohuoshan, and Toutiao becoming ubiquitous in people's lives and serving as stages for self-display and social interaction.

According to the *2021 China Online Audio-Visual Development Research Report*, as of December 2020, China's online audio-visual user base reached 944 million, with a usage rate of 95.4% among netizens. Among various segments, short videos had the highest usage rate at 88.3%, with 873 million users. According to the *50th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development* released by CNNIC, as of June 2022, the gender ratio of Chinese netizens was 51.7:48.3, essentially consistent with the overall population ratio. Data show that the gender ratio among Chinese netizens decreased from 87.7:12.3 in October 1997 to 51.7:48.3 in June 2022, roughly matching the national population gender ratio that year (51.6:48.4). The internet penetration rate for male and female populations reached 74.4% and 74.3% respectively, approximately 12 and 17 percentage points higher than global levels. The internet is profoundly changing the social participation patterns of both gender groups, providing more opportunities for individual development and value realization, and injecting new vitality into digital society development.

It is estimated that China's rural female population is approximately 268 million. This massive group has been characterized by scarcity and singular representation in mass media. With the popularization of short videos in rural areas, rural women have achieved a transformation from being obscured and represented by others to actively presenting themselves, gaining a certain degree of discursive equality, emotional release, and the power to construct their own self-image. Despite the size of this group, academic circles have not paid sufficient attention to it. This study attempts to reveal the types and motivations of image construction among these women.

(II) Conceptual Definition

1. Rural Women

An increasing number of women are coming online, driven by the popularization of internet devices, social progress, work requirements, and the awakening

of female self-consciousness. More women are willing to express themselves online. Since 2019, Li Ziqi, a rural internet celebrity blogger, has repeatedly topped trending searches with her rural-themed videos, attracting widespread attention. Rural life has gradually entered public view, with more rural life videos emerging, and more rural women using short videos to express their rural lifestyles. The rise of short video platforms has provided a stage for women's self-display and image construction. An increasing number of rural women are showcasing themselves and actively maintaining and constructing their online images.

Due to time, manpower, and material constraints, this study does not discuss rural internet celebrities on the Douyin platform but focuses on ordinary women living in rural areas. It concentrates on the image construction of ordinary rural women, examining the types of self-presentation and their cultural motivations, and proposes reflections and recommendations.

(III) Research Methods

1. Literature Research Method

After determining the research topic, extensive literature collection and organization were conducted, followed by categorized reading. This process helped understand the current usage of short video platforms by rural women and research on their image construction on these platforms. The study clarified the developmental trajectory of rural women's use of short video platforms for image construction and formed the basic framework for this research.

2. Participatory Observation Method

This study collected relevant data through participatory observation. First, searches were conducted on the Douyin short video platform using keywords such as "rural," "agriculture," "farmer," "village," and "countryside" to identify relevant users and video content. Rural women's identities were confirmed based on the gender and location displayed on account profiles and the content they posted. Simultaneously, the platform's features and video shooting functions were personally experienced to understand rural women's experiences of self-presentation on Douyin.

3. In-depth Interviews

To deeply understand the characteristics and motivations of rural women's image construction on the Douyin platform, this study also employed interviews to explore rural women's performance on short video platforms. Due to limitations in manpower and material resources, the interviews with rural women focused on several individuals known to the author, providing a foundation for understanding rural women's image construction on short video platforms.

2. Types of Rural Women’s Image Construction on Short Video Platforms

Based on Douyin’s operational characteristics, users’ image construction on the platform is primarily manifested through autonomous online image design, such as uploading preferred profile pictures and signatures, filling in personal identity information, and independently editing and uploading works. This study analyzes rural women’s Douyin accounts and their posted short video content to examine the image characteristics displayed by this special group of rural women on the platform.

(I) Pursuing Self and Breaking Free from Constraints

An individual’s image serves as a calling card in group life. For a long time, Chinese rural women have been associated with relatively singular images, often stereotyped as “rustic” and “backward.” With the emergence of new short video platforms, particularly their focus on lower-tier markets and the gradual decentralization of communication power, rural women—previously information-isolated, backward in mindset, and voiceless—can now express themselves and realize their self-expectations.

From the perspective of rural women’s name settings and profile information configuration, their pursuit of self is mainly reflected in their recognition of their rural identity. Rural women are willing to present their real identities and information. Additionally, they prefer using personal photos or family photos as profile pictures. These practices demonstrate the awakening of rural women’s subjective consciousness as they strive to break free from constraints and build their ideal self-images. Simultaneously, they also recognize and accept their real self-images, avoiding getting lost in the virtual images created by Douyin. Instead, they seek a balance and unity between ideal and real self-images.[?]

[Figure 1: see original paper] Rural Women’s Name Settings

(II) Witty and Humorous, Optimistic and Upward-looking

The rural women discussed in this study are ordinary women living in rural areas. Within families, diverse identity relationships such as wife-husband, mother-child, and mother-in-law-daughter-in-law impose considerable pressure on most rural women. They also face significant pressures in terms of economic sources, living conditions, and labor intensity. Consequently, for a long time, constrained by stereotypes and traditional concepts, rural women have often been perceived as suffering, feudal, and pessimistic. Currently, many rural women in short videos have transformed this stereotypical image suppressed by traditional concepts, presenting a witty, humorous, optimistic, and positive self-image.

[Figure 2: see original paper] Rural Women’s Posted Videos

(III) Courageous in Expressing Emotions, Valuing Family

In the era of traditional media, rural women, influenced by traditional concepts, always appeared as shy, conservative, and closed-off. The emergence of new media platforms has provided them with opportunities to prove themselves and stages to showcase their selves. From the video content, it is evident that most rural women enjoy sharing their lives with family members, including traveling with family, dining with friends, sharing about their cute children, and their loving husbands. On short video platforms, they can freely display their emotional worlds, which helps break the stereotypical image of rural women in people's minds.

Additionally, rural women have other types of self-presentation, such as being shrewd and capable, economically independent, documenting their work, or utilizing short video platform traffic to achieve profitability. Currently, rural women's video types have become more diverse, and the image of rural women in people's minds has undergone renewed development.[?]

3. Motivations for Rural Women's Image Construction

[Figure 3: see original paper] Rural Women's Posted Videos

Currently, rural women construct and present diverse image types in short videos, with most displaying positive aspects. Changes in the external environment provide favorable conditions for rural women's self-presentation, while simultaneously satisfying their own emotional needs and self-expectations. Research reveals that rural women's image construction is motivated by multiple factors.

(I) Internal Factors

1. Self-expression and Satisfying Social Needs With the accelerating pace of life, the social functions of short videos can well adapt to people's fast-paced lifestyles. Rural women can use fragmented time to access others' living conditions, scenes, and current situations, obtaining external information, and quickly and conveniently share personal information. In summary, the emergence of short videos has enabled more comprehensive, timely, practical, and effective information transmission. The fragmented nature of information from short videos better aligns with user habits in fast-paced life and can more precisely target audiences. Through contact with and use of short videos, rural women continuously obtain external information and use it to understand the outside world.

Rural women can communicate and establish emotional connections with others through video comments, private messages, and other means on Douyin. The platform's topic recommendation and local user recommendation functions enable rural women to quickly find their belonging groups. By observing other

group members, they can imitate and learn, find commonalities with other members, and thus achieve a sense of group belonging and identity.

2. Leisure and Entertainment, Recording Life Due to their living environment, ordinary people have limited access to elegant art forms. Compared with highbrow art that always maintains a certain distance from ordinary people, short videos can accommodate ordinary people and satisfy their relatively basic and common entertainment needs. The inherent “grassroots” characteristic of short videos coincides with the increasingly secular aesthetic trend in contemporary society. To some extent, the emergence of short videos provides a spiritual satisfaction for ordinary people who have long lacked modern cultural and entertainment activities.[?]

Simultaneously, most videos posted by rural women are records of daily life. During interviews, they mentioned that their main intention is to record their children’s growth, their current happy lives, and to capture beautiful moments.

3. Fulfillment of Self-expectations In interacting with others, rural women perceive how others evaluate them, develop a certain understanding of their own image and behavior, generate self-expectations, and continuously improve themselves and construct their image according to these expectations. (As shown in [Figure 4: see original paper]) Rural women express these images through information and videos on short video platforms, realizing the construction of their ideal images.[?] Rural women have a relatively high acceptance of special effects and functions on short video platforms and often choose filters, music, and other elements to make their images better align with their expectations.

(II) External Factors

1. Changing Social Climate and Education Popularization In traditional perceptions, people often believed that women should “stay behind closed doors” and that “a woman’s virtue lies in her lack of talent.” However, with the penetration and dissemination of gender equality concepts, rural women also have the right to showcase themselves. Similarly, due to the popularization of compulsory education and educational reforms, rural areas now have many highly educated individuals. Education has changed people’s values to a greater extent. Although rural women live in rural areas, they have also been exposed to new concepts and information. The power of concepts has promoted the transformation of rural women’s subject roles and the awakening of self-consciousness. They are no longer backward and ignorant but crave recognition from others and society, hoping to keep pace with the times. The overall open and equal social atmosphere encourages rural women to open their hearts and bravely showcase themselves.

2. Rise of Short Videos, Aligning with User Habits The development of mobile internet technology has brought about the popularization of smartphones, gradually replacing traditional media as the primary tool for people to obtain information, which has also provided more convenience and development

space for short videos. People can watch videos anytime and anywhere through their mobile phones. Short video platforms' characteristics of being easy to learn, rich in special effects, and appropriate in duration align well with current user habits and are more suitable for ordinary rural women to use.

Short videos have achieved an unprecedented user scale and have even become an important platform for social interaction. The media environment has stimulated rural women's desire to create short videos and share their lives. The development of short videos has provided a platform for rural women to voice themselves, gradually moving them out of the "voiceless" situation.

Currently, rural women's self-image construction on short video platforms is driven by multiple reasons, including internal and external factors, which have prompted more ordinary users to display their personal images. People are no longer solely focused on opinion leaders and their self-presentation. Rural women's imaginative construction on short video platforms also signifies the awakening of female consciousness.

4. Issues in Video Presentation

(I) Excessive Information Exposure

Some rural women on the Douyin platform often use beauty filters, special effects, and other means to present their ideal selves when choosing self-presentation, even carefully selecting captions to shape their self-image. Under the psychology of being watched, they present their relatively private life scenes on short video platforms like Douyin. To gain attention, they maximize and even crazily present their life scenes and images, willingly showcasing their figures, which leads to excessive spectacularization. Meanwhile, some rural women have relatively weak privacy awareness and often capture their personal information during video shooting, which may infringe upon others' rights and interests and potentially expose their own information to be exploited by criminals.

(II) Distorted Values

Some rural women deliberately adopt ugly appearances, intentional humor, and clownish behavior to gain attention, creating meaningless symbols. During interviews with rural women, they mentioned seeing such content, finding it funny at first, but becoming bored and annoyed when many people use the same gimmicks, considering it a smearing of the rural women's image. Some women cannot distinguish values-distorted language and present them in their videos. For example, after the incident of "a woman being thrown into a septic tank by her husband," some women used it as a subject of ridicule and humor, expressing it in a lighthearted manner in their captions. When confronted with rebuttals, they remain indifferent. This may cause others to follow suit, which is detrimental to shaping correct social values.

Rural short videos, as a highly controversial visual spectacle today, reflect the reality of the urban-rural social binary division and modern people's entertainment demand for instant gratification. Specifically, the visual text content of rural short videos continues the logic of spectacle production. Marginalized groups seeking attention, recognition, and capital engage in self-presentation and self-promotion, attempting to create a "second life" in the virtual world. On the other hand, during the dissemination of rural short videos, the public decodes rural symbols based on various emotional experiences in real society—questioning, condemning, identifying, or reprocessing—continuously engaging in the secondary construction of rural short video spectacles. Many problems have emerged in this process, requiring relevant departments and short video platforms to pay attention and provide correct guidance. Simultaneously, rural women should improve their media literacy and cultivate correct values.

5. Conclusion and Reflection

Currently, the rapidly increasing user coverage of short videos has provided a stage for rural women in long-term enclosed spaces to recognize and showcase themselves, becoming a window for rural women's self-expression. Rural women are gradually gaining discursive power and communication initiative in modern communication activities. The study finds that while rural women fulfill their self-expectations and satisfy social needs through short videos, they also present diversified images of rural women to the public, changing previous stereotypical impressions. However, new problems have emerged, such as weak privacy protection awareness and, driven by economic benefits, some rural women deliberately distorting their self-images, leading to certain deviations between rural women's media images and reality. This, in turn, creates new stereotypes about rural women. This requires strengthening platform regulation to help rural women establish correct social gender consciousness and values. For rural women themselves, they also need to improve media literacy and actively use media image presentation to guide changes in their real-life images.

Due to limitations in manpower and material resources, this study only focuses on rural women with close contact with the author, resulting in incomplete interview content and inability to understand other women's perspectives. Additionally, due to the large number of rural female users on the Douyin platform, this paper's focus on Douyin short video platform also limits the scope of discussion.

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