

Identity and Transcendence of Urban Bottom Layer in “Kuai-Shou” App

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Abstract. In the article “Cruel Stories of Bottom: Rural China in a Video Social Media” published online, the author describes, with great length, contents about self-torture, eye-catching and crude etc. on “Kuai-Shou”, rendering “cruel and absurd scenes” for us. Under the circumstance, “Kuai-Shou”, a short video social media and its users have been pushed to the centre of public opinion. “Kuai-Shou” seems to have become a place where full of “vulgar perform”, and its users are also labeled “vulgar”. But is that true? This paper use data research and literature analysis to explore the deep problems behind the phenomenon of “Kuai-Shou” app.

1. Kuai-Shou: Rapidly rising short video social media

According to iiMedia research, in the ranking of the percentage of active users of China short video app in 2017Q1, “Kuai-Shou” topped the list, with a significant advantage of 7.63 percentage of active users. Kuai-Shou formerly known as “GIF Kuai-Shou”, which was born in March 2011 as a mobile phone app used to make and share GIFs. In October 2013, Kuai-Shou officially decided to make short video social media, since then Kuai-Shou users began to rapid and stable growth. In June 2015, Kuai-Shou users exceeded 100 million, according to official data. After 8 months, the number of users reached 300 million. By this year, the number of Kuai-Shou users has reached 700 million, with more than 100 million daily activity, far more than other any other short video social media. There are several reasons that contribute such rapid growth.

First is the development of technology. Since the advent of the Internet, it has expanded rapidly throughout the world. China officially became a member of countries which Internet is full-featured. After twenty years of development, China’s Internet popularity has rapid increased. According to the 43rd China Internet Development Statistics Report released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of December 2018, the number of Internet users in China reached 829 million, and the Internet popularity reached 59.6%. At the same time, the number of people who own smartphone in China is doubling year by year. The report shows that the scale of China’s mobile netizens has reached 817 million. Short video social media, based on the Internet and smartphones, has also seen its own boom in the past two years. As a pioneer in this industry, Kuai-Shou naturally can also grow quickly.

Second is the choice of target audience. At present, most of short video social media users are concentrated in first-tier and second- tier cities, which to a certain extent ignored vast rural areas and a large number of urban fringe community needs. According to the China Statistical Bulletin on National Economic and Social Development in 2018, reported by National Bureau of Statistics, at the end of 2018, the total population of mainland China was 139.538 million, of which 831.37 million were resident in urban areas and 56.401 million were registered in rural areas. The rural populations accounting for 40.42 percent, it can be said that this group has a great development value. Based on the blank point of this market, Kuai-Shou can quickly occupy the rural areas. “Some people interpret the emergence of Kuai-Shou as a kind of hunting for novelty victory, because it contrast to reality strongly generated users’ peeping psychology. Cao, who worked as a product manager at Tencent, says Kuai-Shou is the second Internet product to attract spontaneous contributions from third- and fourth-tier cities, even rural groups. Too many Internet product products overlooked this part of users at the start.”^[1]

Third is the design of the software. First of all, the interface of Kuai-Shou weakened “private message” function, highlighting video function, the entire interface has only three plates: “Attention”, “Discovery” and “Location”. When watching videos, if you want to support the broadcaster, just double-click on the screen, these settings are conducive to the urban bottom layer with less educated to make it easier. Meanwhile, Kuai-Shou doesn’t have the so-called “Big-V” setting, video is or not recommended to the “Discovery” doesn’t depend on how many fans you have. Whether you are a broadcaster with 10 million of fans, or just a new user, value of videos and if it can be recommended to the “Discovery” is all determined by artificial intelligence algorithms. This mechanism makes users feel equal. Finally, the most expensive virtual gift to the broadcast in Kuai-Shou is not more than 40 yuan, which is in sharp contrast to the other video social media that has virtual gifts of thousands of RMB. Of course, this is also closely related to its targeting groups, most of Kuai-Shou users have lower incomes. Such a reward setting make users don’t feel the gap between each other, attract the urban bottom layer with lower income and education firmly.

2. Identity: The bottom Group's entanglement phenomenon hidden in the “vulgar performance”

In our daily life, when it comes to Kuai-Shou, there is always a lot of negative labels such as “appreciation of ugliness”, “low and vulgarity”, “morbid performance”, “evil taste”, “boring to death” and so on. Kuai-Shou, with such a notoriety, why is there still such a large number of users? In addition to the three external reasons as discussed above, Kuai-Shou itself forms a entanglement phenomenon of the urban bottom group, constantly attracting people at the bottom to join in, and then self-carnival.

The videos on the Kuai-Shou can be divided into the following categories:

(1) Eating videos. Some people eating large quantities of food to prove he or she has a big stomach; some people eating strange and unconventional foods, such as chili peppers, raw onions, insects, etc. to attract eyes.

(2) “Social shake” videos. On the street, young people shake their body with dynamic music. This kind of dance can be said to be meaningless, just shake body at random.

(3) Rural pranks videos. Do a variety of bizarre acts to others in the name of “spoofing”. Most of these videos are full of “village atmosphere”: without any shooting or editing skills. Compared to the other short videos on the other social media, there is no aesthetic feeling in its background and graphics, the content is no more nutritious.

Kuai-Shou mainstream users are the urban bottom people, so its main producers and viewers of the short video are the same people. Due to their own conditions and external environmental pressures, they are free from urban life and mainstream culture with the possibility of being marginalized. Through posting and viewing these videos on Kuai-Shou, they have built a sense of self-identity.

The first is identity as a video producer. In general, there are two main models for content production on website. One is the professionally-generated content (PGC) model, which is under the strong operations; the other is the user-generated content (UGC) model, which is virtually operational. The former gives audience a feeling of boutique creation and very professional, the latter gives audience a feeling of messy, but also appetency. Unlike other short video social media, the core of Kuai-Shou is UGC production. For the audience, there is no good or bad, as long as the fit is the best. The audience and community atmosphere on Kuai-Shou dictate that adopting the latter will be more popular. ^[2] The city bottom layer has always been a “aphasia” side, whether voluntary or not, their characters were shown in the mainstream media and PGC operating mode of social media. Elites speak on their behalf, sympathize or flirt. The city bottom group lack of social concern, divorced from mainstream Internet world. But human nature is to get attention, it is Kuai-Shou provide these people a platform to show themselves proactively. In this way, people in the city bottom concentrate on Kuai-Shou. The same experience and similar emotional experience make them find a sense of belonging to the Kuai-Shou, and established self-identity.

The second is identity as a video consumer. “Consumer behavior is not only to meet the needs of individual survival and development, as a dynamic cultural event, but also to become one of the important ways for people to build identity.”^[3] The consumption identity produced by the practice behavior of consumption is the way in which the individual carries on the social orientation and expresses the unity and difference between oneself and others. Consumers will easily find their own taste of goods based on economic status and social role awareness. During China's social transformation, the economy developed rapidly and the process of urbanization accelerated. In this process, however, many people are forced to join the city's life before they are ready. As a result, they have become the city bottom group. They believed they were “drifters”, who had to enter the city for a living, rather than “urbanites”. They are increasingly experienced the feeling of being ignored and excluded in urban life, in this situation, a platform that can enable “drifters” to find spiritual sustenance urgently needed. Kuai-Shou is such a platform. The short video on Kuai-Shou shows a large number of rural scenes, and broadcaster’s language with a dialect accent that can help the city bottom layer find resonance. They achieve both visual and spiritual satisfaction by watching these non-mainstream short videos.

The distance between video producers and viewers in Kuai-Shou is greatly drawn closer, due to the similarity level of material and spiritual life shown in the short videos, forming mutual identity. The city bottom group has created a place of their own spiritual life because of cannot integrate into the city's life and mainstream culture. In this place, the bottom group supports each other to alleviate the anxiety and uneasiness caused by being marginalized. Despite there have strong criticism from the mainstream culture, these groups remain unique. They refuse to accept the definition from the upper class, and refuse to admit the marginalization of their own society and rituals, all of which, while inadequate, are certainly necessary for further resistance.

3. Identity transcendence: The desire for “recognition”

Alexandre Kojève wrote in his book *“Introduction à la lecture de Hegel”* that “Every desire of human beings, which originates from self-consciousness and human reality, is ultimately closely related to the desire of ‘recognition’..... Therefore, talking about the origin of self-awareness is bound to talk about the life-and-death duel for ‘recognition’ ”. Francis Fukuyama also in his book *“The End of History and the Last Man”* says that history is fundamentally driven by the need for “recognition”, which is the ultimate attribute of human differences from animals. From the point of view of “recognition”, human is a social existence from the outset: His own sense of self-value and identity is closely linked to the values that others give him. Due to the social division of labor and its own conditions, the urban bottom layer lack of feeling of need, their sense of respect and recognition is losing. That's why “recognition” is crucial to them. The urban bottom layer in Kuai-Shou find the identity of group through “vulgar performances” and get mutual recognition. However, this recognition is not sufficient. It's like a student getting recognition from a teacher is far more exciting than being recognized by other students, self-value is closely related to the evaluation of others. In order to pursue a higher sense of value, it is required to have upper group than their own identity to their “recognition”.

Therefore, when we watch some short videos on Kuai-Shou, we can not only find the elements of villages, but also see the elements of urban life. By inserting urban elements into the video, people who are rooted in the city bottom trying to transcend their current identity, and get rid of a sense of anxiety that is not recognized by the city while living in the city. This desire for “recognition” continues to drive the people in urban bottom to express through Kuai-Shou, transcend identity by various means. The first is the broadcaster's dress. The most obvious performance about wanting to transcend self-identity is the dress-up of the broadcasters, their style of dress, make-up and hairstyles are approaching to urban trend. The body is basic medium of communicate, one’s appearance can show a lot of things, such as living standards, education, social status, etc. We can see people in the countryside no longer conservative, they began to dye their hair, do whatever they think is cool. Through Kuai-Shou, the urban bottom people represent their image of “urban”, “impressive”, in order to obtain the recognition from urban mainstream aesthetic. In

addition, the videos themes chosen are also closely followed by social topics. After the “Ice Bucket Challenge” public service was introduced to China several years ago, there were a lot of related videos on many social media platforms, and Kuai-Shou is not exception. By actively joining the challenge, the urban bottom group will gain the “recognition” of the urban mainstream for their participation in public affairs. As a well-known broadcaster in Kuai-Shou said: I practice muscle desperately in order to be able to drive a limousine, find a beautiful girlfriend, even my fart others also feel fragrant. In the final analysis, he wants to separate from bottom layer identity, and to the top.

Through dress and language imitation, topic follow-up and other ways, the urban bottom group in Kuai-Shou presents an image that they are unwilling to stop at the bottom identity, and want to transcend it. “Struggling for recognition is the first real human action”, their actions about attempt to integrate into urban life not only show the determination that they do not accept to be marginalized, but also their efforts to seek recognition.

4. Conclusion

“Identity is associated with traditional social structure, which is a phenomenon with traditional meaning”.^[4] In the traditional concept, identity has the meaning of rank, status, privilege and so on. Everyone is born with identity. On the Kuai-Shou, the urban bottom layer presents itself through videos, seizes the right to speak, and establishes its own identity. Meanwhile, in order to obtain a higher level of “recognition”, the urban bottom layer shows characteristics that beyond their identity in the videos.

Nowadays, criticism about “vulgar” videos on Kuai-Shou is endless, but we should also see the display about the urban bottom people identity seeking and identity transcendence behind those videos. They show their life and ideals through Kuai-Shou platform, so that the society not only has an elegant aspect, but also a vulgar aspect. If we can get rid of the “theatre-goer” superiority, with a sense of communication and understanding into Kuai-Shou, a short video social media that have 700 million registered users, and the daily activity of more than 100 million, we may see the other side of this world, as well as the urban bottom layer’s lives.

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