



# Anti-dwarfing and Anti-gazing: Self-disclosure and Resistance in Short Videos of Young Rural Women

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**Abstract.** Digital media technology has provided rural women in China with new ways of cultural production. The vividness of short videos has activated the “visibility” of rural daily life, gathered the attention of young rural women, and created a social field in rural space. Based on a virtual ethnography, this paper explores the transformation of young rural women’s self-perceptions from awakening, identification and subversion through active disclosure, enriching digital content production through the emergence of individual female consciousness, embodied communication practices and “Iron Girl-style” aesthetic identity. Behind their discursive practices, they have broken free from the social manipulation of framing and bodily landscaping, and have achieved a brighter expression from the bottom up, being the “maidens” of rural revitalization in the new era.

**Keywords:** young rural women · self-disclosure · female short videos · embodied communication · gazing

## 1 Introduction

In the past, under the traditional mass media constructs, rural women have been dwarfed into “the silent” and “the marginalised”, the “other side” to be sympathised with and gazed at, in an in the past, rural women have been dwarfed as the “silent” and “marginalised”, the “other” side of the pity and gaze, in an awkward situation of lack of “subjectivity” and action. In rural societies, where the primary and secondary industries are the mainstay, women are often invisible due to their physical condition and social division of labour, or are defined as “ignorant” or “housewives” They are also defined as “ignorant” or “housewives”, which are stigmatised symbolic images. Many people’s news stories often portray women in a negative light with topics such as “extramarital affairs”, “divorced” and “abandoned after failed plastic surgery”, creating a one-sided image of the rural female population. This has created a one-sided image of rural women.

Nowadays, many groups of young rural women are using new media and technology to find a connection with the outside world and to re-establish their “new self” in the records of their daily lives. The construction of a “new self” and self-identity is a process of gradual empowerment, interspersed with processes of self-individuation and self-exclusion. [1] Self-media has expanded women’s discourse, extending the field

of expression of women's public discourse and creating a channel to defend women's discourse rights that have been "ravaged" by the mainstream media. Rural women's communication in the age of self-media refers to the proliferation of women as the target and subject of communication through social media platforms, with topics touching on forms of communication that women do not reveal. With the use of the strong and weak WeChat and microblogs, and the genderless use of various video software, women are free to share their preferences, interests and opinions. The spontaneous formation of small circles of women also "pushes" society to expand the discussion of gender inequalities, causing many online discursive actions of civil opinion to collide with mainstream opinion. With the empowerment of the media, young rural women have changed their posture from that of "spectators" to one of "observed" and "coldly presented" social gaze, and under the initiative of "self-expression", the image of young rural women is vividly drawn, which is an active exhibition of new rural life under rural revitalisation.

Based on this, this study focuses on rural female bloggers in short video platforms such as Crypto and Jitterbug, and explores the behavioural practices and discursive expressions of rural female bloggers in the process of short video production, in an attempt to answer what kind of content rural female bloggers present under self-disclosure and the real-life dilemmas behind their resistance, in an attempt to guide society to re-examine the mediated survival scenario of rural female youth in the digital age.

## 2 Study Design

In order to deeply explore the mediated survival scenarios of rural young women's short videos, this paper first includes TikTok, Today's Headlines, and Racer in the scope of the study and conducts virtual field observations, focusing on each rural young women's video accounts. Based on the research results, TikTok, which has the highest daily activity and social reputation, was chosen as the main research site, with the newly emerging young rural women as the focus of the study.

### 2.1 Identification of the Study Population

In order to ensure the comprehensiveness of the sample, the author chose purposive sampling to identify the research subjects, and chose two methods in total. The first search method was to select "rural women", "young rural women", "left-behind women", "new farmers", "rural women" and "rural youth" as keywords in TikTok. The first search method was to search for "rural women", "young rural women", "left-behind women", "new farmers", "rural youth" and "users", and to find users who were mainly rural women, as shown on the main interface of the account, and then to further filter the young women group. The second search method was to search for "rural women" as a keyword in the TikTok topic list, select video accounts with topics related to rural women, and identify 10 topics such as #rural women #rural women's life #rural women left behind #rural entrepreneurial women #rural women's talent #rural women's comeback From each of these topics, we filtered them according to their hotness (with high circulation) and judged their identity and age, and selected accounts that did not

have “rural young women” in their nicknames but posted content highly relevant to rural life. The sample was expanded by “snowballing”, and 46 accounts were finally identified.

2.2 Sampling Principles and Content Coding

As this study examines the active self-presentation of a group of young rural women, the frequency of their updates is directly related to their strong desire for expression. The sample size excluded bloggers with a low total number of works in their accounts, and selected those who maintained daily or every-other-day updates from the remaining accounts, which were observed in the field for four months between June and September 2022. On this basis, it was also necessary to meet the following criteria: (1) a clear indication of rural identity in the profile information and long-term production of video content; (2) the short videos were presented in a setting with recognisable daily scenes in the countryside, such as agricultural production; and (3) the number of followers was one million or more, with more macro-referential representative figures.

Combining the above sampling principles, among the 46 video users retrieved, 10 eligible video bloggers were selected, and a total of 8590 videos were posted by the 10 bloggers. Due to the large number of videos in the sample, the videos with the highest number of retweets per week were selected as the sample for content analysis, and a total of 160 valid samples were obtained. After the sample was identified, the researcher first generalised the content of the videos, and to ensure a low error tolerance rate, the data was coded by two researchers in the field. The first 20 video samples were coded in advance by two coders to ensure sample viability and reliability testing. In addition, the researchers were not only deeply involved in the bloggers’ short video comments, live sharing and fan group discussions, but also analysed and compared the qualitative

numb er	Name	Fans	Age	Provinc e	Video topics
1	Mai Xiaodeng	1053.6w	25-30	Henan	Gourmet food, Labour, Live Streaming, Customs and traditions, Daily Life
2	Xiaoqiao in the countryside	778.1w	25-30	Jiangsu	Gourmet food, Labour, Customs and traditions, Daily Life
3	Zhang Xiuxiu	129.1w	25-30	Jiangsu	Gourmet food, Labour, Daily Life
4	Xiaoyan in the countryside	141.8w	20-25	Henan	Gourmet food, Labour, Daily Life
5	Our countryside	320.2w	25-30	Henan	Live Streaming, Daily Life
6	Xiaomei in rural Sichuan	572.9w	25-30	Sichuan	Labour, Customs and traditions
7	Hunan girl named Xinbao	312.7w	25-30	Hunan	Gourmet food, Talent Performance
8	Xiaoyu's daily life of fishing	418.4w	30-35	Hannan	Gourmet food, Labour, Daily Life
9	Sister-in-law's rural life	257.9w	30-35	Jiangsu	Live Streaming, Customs and traditions, Daily Life
10	A'xiang in the countryside	116.4w	25-30	Guizhou	Gourmet food, Customs and traditions

Fig. 1. Writer’s compilation based on user profile data on TikTok (2022.06 - 2022.09)

content, comparing the similarities and differences between the samples, and gaining insights into the logic behind the self-presentation of young rural women groups through the audiovisual medium (Fig. 1).

### **3 Disclosure: Cognitive Evolution and Content Production in the Face of Digital Visibility**

Short videos, with their short and focused nature, are rapidly sinking into the rural market, gradually intervening in daily life and interaction behaviour, capturing people's time and attention. Young rural women content producers are actively disclosing their new life scenarios on video platforms, along with the awakening of self-consciousness, identification and subversion, content production also opens up channels of connection between the government and the people, activating the vividness of rural content, and overturning the stigmatised image of the ontology as the breadth and depth of self-disclosure expands. Jourard, one of the earliest proponents of self-disclosure, points out that the process of self-disclosure is the gradual integration of the self into the norms of social governance, using the audience as a benchmark for behaviour on social media, and the interweaving of identity with the target group in a dynamic perception. With the development of social media, self-disclosure in the online environment has gradually increased: the process of self-disclosure is a passive or active way in which the subject discloses personal information to the public in a virtual environment, using media channels, and the scope of self-disclosure runs through the whole process of the subject's production and life. [2] In the light of the existing literature, this paper is framed by a further explanation of self-disclosure as the use of video to reveal part of one's personal information on social platforms in order to satisfy the need to communicate with others and to gain the social benefits one expects.

#### **3.1 Awakening: The Involvement of Women's Perspectives in Bridging the Gap Between Government and the People**

In the Paradigm of Care, Gilligan points out that the establishment and development of the sexes are two parallel and divergent paths, with women at the end of a dependent social relationship, providing for the needs and development of the other, and in the role of the disembodied. [3] Although young rural women are still passively involved in the social flood from the perspective of the society as a whole, they are breaking away from their social dependency against the current, adapting their self-perceptions through the development of digital composite media technology, telling rural stories from a new female perspective, and realising self-disclosure in the virtual production space. The All-China Women's Federation has mentioned in its Opinions on the Implementation of "Women's Action for Rural Revitalisation" that "young women play a pivotal role in economic development, providing a constant source of endogenous power and development opportunities, and are a solid foundation for digital rural revitalisation, boosting the development of the rural At the same time, the revitalisation of the countryside will certainly add more development opportunities for the future of young rural women and realise the rise of 'her power'." [4].

Self-empowerment is a form of self-empowerment outside the system. Young women in rural areas are gradually becoming the main force behind the creation of ‘rural videos’ from a female perspective. The presentation of rural spaces in the new media era has abandoned grand narratives and turned the camera to point at previously concealed, indifferent and remote daily practices, activating the emerging areas under traditional agriculture. With the national policy of “rural revitalisation” and the traffic support of the platform, young women can create videos that combine the breadth of exploration of their work with the strength of their contribution to their hometowns. They are more perceptive in terms of media technology, resource advantages and topic creation, and show a vigorous creative appetite in their creation of everyday life. Mai Xiaodeng, who resigned from her job to start her own business in order to take care of her sick father, attracted the attention of netizens with her skillful photography, bridging the gap between the private and official public opinion arenas and writing a female legend in rural revitalisation.

### **3.2 Identity: Embodied Communication Practices Activate Rural Vibrancy**

‘Embodiment’, or ‘embodiment’, was first conceptualised in a normative and systematic way by the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, which highlighted the dynamic nature of embodiment itself in its conceptual formulation. In his conception, the body itself is the medium through which the world reaches the person. [5] With the expansion of the object of study, embodied communication was introduced into the field of communication, and a large number of scholars began to include the study of bodily media in all aspects of communication, and carried out extensive research. Through digital media and embodied communication, rural women’s video communication has made it easier to construct group identities with viewers in front of the screen; physical communication has largely counteracted technological regulation and reduced the sense of alienation and emotional indifference in rural society caused by the intervention of new media technologies.

Firstly, short videos are embedded in the lives of farming families and agricultural production. The videos produced by young rural women either reveal the real life patterns of their own families or present the original rural scenes around them, embodying the vivid life of the countryside. More than 60 per cent of the video bloggers portray the role of mother, wife and daughter-in-law, portraying the media as the “main” decision-maker in family affairs. Xiuxiu, a young rural woman with a million followers, is often smiling in her daily life with her family, explaining in words and deeds the time-honoured civilised concepts of respect for the elderly, orderliness, respect and mutual assistance, which provoke emotional resonance in the audience and renew the image of the sorrowful and mean-spirited rural woman. A large proportion of the bloggers’ videos are often in dialect, either planting farmland or showing food preparation, highlighting the distinctiveness of rural life in the beauty and cuisine. The production and labour of food with local characteristics not only embodies the folklore but also recalls the collective memory of the people. Secondly, short videos are embedded in the folklore and ethnic characteristics of the countryside. Local folklore videos are the differentiating feature of minority video creators, and are mobile “folk recorders”. A’Xiang, whose lifelong goal is to record and pass on the culture, customs and cuisine of the Dong ethnic group, often

travels in ethnic costumes and physically spreads the diverse customs of Dong weddings and funerals, reflecting the sharing and integration of cultures among multiple ethnic groups. With her self-identity, many remote areas that have been hidden from view have been disseminated from a first-hand perspective, and have been brought to life with a broader perspective, activating the “micro-power” of rural revitalisation.

### 3.3 Subversion: The “Iron Girl” Aesthetic Allows for the Reversal of Stigmatized Images

The term ‘iron girl’ first appeared in the mid-20th century during the ‘Iron Girl Movement’, a laudatory term for the de-feminisation of Chinese women. Within the framework of mass media coverage, rural women have always maintained an image of low culture, rusticity and vulgarity that needs to be changed. Goffman’s discourse on stigma refers to the individual’s perception of self as a reflection in the mirror framed by social prejudices, as an individual who does not possess the ability to be accepted in its entirety by society. Under the label of stigmatisation, young rural women uphold the ‘iron girl’ aesthetic in their video creations, re-regulating and reversing the stigmatised depictions, presenting an emphasis on the ‘good side’ and overturning the solidified ‘symbolic hierarchy’. “The video is a re-canonisation and reversal of stigmatised depictions, presenting an emphasis on the ‘good side’ and overturning solidified ‘symbolic hierarchies’”.

As the main actors in the production of short videos on rural themes, young women have taken the initiative to subvert their previous “modelled” and “stigmatised” appearance, reconstructing their three-dimensional image and deepening their self-identity. The first is the subversion of the “ego”. Rural women resist the aesthetic hegemony of the urban elite and capital with their crude, undecorated bodies. Although the women in the videos are not heavily made up, their simple clothes and light make-up explain their authenticity and naturalness; in addition, dancing, singing and learning talents reveal their pursuit of self-image. The stigmatised media discourse of “rural women are childbearing machines” is broken down in the emotional resonance sought, and a new image of independent, resilient women is conveyed. Women such as Xiao Yanzi are no longer the repressed party, and the mobile video expands the space for the expression of young people’s views on marriage, representing a more personalised, close-up image of women. The second is the reconstruction of the “big self”. The theme of the video includes dynamic daily farming and static architectural displays to convey folk customs; the new generation of local young women, such as Xinbao, are transformed into the “maidens of the times” from the national perspective of “great unity and development”. “They have created content that is in line with mainstream values and current affairs, and have used public welfare mountain products to help farmers to develop a “rural-urban” approach to poverty alleviation, overturning the solidified impression of the countryside. The short video activates the desire for expression of online activists, and portrays in detail the daily life of ordinary women under the construction of new rural areas, stimulating the endogenous motivation of rural builders, and is a self-disclosure of the practice of “new farmers”. It is a self-disclosure of the practices of the “new farmers”, and a positive, energetic and sunny image of cultural communication.

## 4 Resistance: The Dilemma of Invisibility After Self-disclosure

The body as an infrastructure is always a field of resistance and negotiation, where people struggle against the plight of the invisible in the production of visible videos, weaving narratives of resistance to discursive practices of production. The image of young rural women set by the mass media agenda is inevitably solidified, thanks to the breaking of boundary frames and the struggle against the male gaze under discursive regulation, which in time constructs and regulates and guides the video production of young rural women.

### 4.1 Anti-self-dwarfing: Framing Boundaries Under Discursive Regulation

In the video, the “dwarfing of the self” is the result of the regulation of discursive power, which generally refers to the subconscious micro-power that acts on the subject within the limits of the rules, and is an invisible form of repressive power. [6]. Through discursive practices, women also actively suppress and even objectify their selves in a calm environment. In reality, the power status of urban residents is projected onto the short video, and the “other” from above does not directly lecture in a brutal way, but rather, under the gentle turn of praise and commentary, it provides ideological guidance, ultimately achieving a tacit and refined oppression. Rural women in “hidden labour” are often in the awkward position of being “dwarfed”. According to UN Women data, women make up two-thirds of the workforce in China, but they are often “dwarfed” by the low social value of their “invisible work” and the insurmountable gap between them and independent urban women.

Along with the expansion of media access, users enjoy freedom of choice with easy access to information, reshaping the social order in the real space. The gathering of social classes on online social platforms has broken the monolithic urban-dominated communication paradigm and given the underclass the possibility to be part of the same media discourse. As Tang Min, a counsellor of the State Council and Youcheng Foundation, said, rural women are the maidens of rural revitalisation in terms of urban-rural integration and resource cooperation. With the openness of short videos, rural young women are more active and pioneering in the fields of rural culture, politics and economy, thanks to their keen observation and more innovative construction power, weakening the apparent gap between urban and rural young women. In terms of participation in public discourse, rural women have bridged the boundary between “front and back”, extended their public space through short videos, and changed the profound problem of spatial production, [6] changing the destiny of being represented and told. Mai Xiaodeng, a young rural woman, has participated in the “Meet the Most Beautiful Anyang” tourism campaign, recording a tourism video for her hometown to let more people know about the cultural heritage of the ancient capital of Anyang, highlighting the new power of young women of the times in a dynamic interactive identity. The short videos of young rural women have gained a stronger group identity among a predominantly female audience, speaking to a discursive struggle that was previously stripped from the urban mainstream. Short videos of young rural women have gained a stronger collective, group identity among a predominantly female audience, speaking to struggles previously stripped from the urban mainstream, and providing a platform for the public expression of rural women, breaking

down the potential female divide between urban and rural areas and complementing the more explicit bottom-up self-representation of the countryside.

#### 4.2 The Anti-male Gaze: The Landscaping of the Rural Female Body

In Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze", men often occupy the main view of the video gaze. This means that the content is created with men in mind and is targeted for their visual pleasure. The success of the video is judged by the compliments of the male gaze, and the gender gaze is concealed under the interactive discursive modifications. [7] In addition, the 'patriarchal bargain' proposed by Laura Hamilton and others, whereby women conform to patriarchal notions of 'feminine expectations' as a means of gaining economic, social and other personal benefits, can further reinforce their subordinate status. In the past, video works or entertainment videos have intentionally created an over-packaging of the female body, creating a 'vehicle' for sexual innuendo in the context of male fantasy.

Young rural women do not use gender elements as selling points in a big package, spreading fresh and equal gender perceptions. Firstly, they do not use male preferences as a starting point: in gender perceptions, high heels, with their own strong sexual connotations, are considered a symbol of male objectification of women. [8] The young rural women in the sample also rarely wear high heels for visual entrapment, but instead make a generous appearance in loose, comfortable clothes, breaking the perspective of being in a position of being gazed at and dwarfed, putting on a confrontational exhibition of traditional masculine ideas and reinforcing their self-identity. She does not confine herself to dressing up according to male preferences, thus weakening male prejudice. Secondly, the relationship between male and female attachment is explored, showing a 'new phenomenon' from being left behind to being attached. Whereas in the past rural women were often equated with words such as "left behind", the new phenomenon of social production and division of labour is now crocheted through short videos. Xiao Qiao, who decided to return to her hometown to start her own business because she was dissatisfied with the status quo at work, has opened up a new look at rural life through short videos, and has become a "partner of three farmers". Her husband works behind the scenes as an account operator and event planner, recounting the implicit rule that "men are in charge and women are in charge", and constructing a new network of power relations and media images. In addition, women are no longer subordinate to men. Xiao Na in "Niu Bu La" had her marriage broken up due to Da Niu's infidelity, but instead of showing her feminine frailty, she continues to update her personal account "Na Ben is Me" with topics such as buying and decorating a house, weight loss and make-up, interspersed with moments with her parents and happy times with friends. She is also happy to post happy moments of flirting with her friends. She is not dependent on men, and with the help of short videos, she is an independent and self-empowered woman who has reconstructed the idea of women's subordination to men. The young rural women's practice of short videos in a new interpretation of the gender genus of the new era has transformed and subverted the shackles of gender gazing thinking, allowing them to gain a greater radial identity in a more diverse daily and social engagement.



## 5 Conclusions

The self-disclosure of rural women shows the emergence of individual consciousness, identity and the subversion of images, opening up the channel of connection between the government and the people, activating the fresh vitality of the countryside, overturning the solidified “symbolic hierarchy” and constantly complementing the traditional image of rural women. From a holistic perspective, the awakening and reinvention of young rural women is due to multiple factors, including the struggle for self-empowerment, the breakthrough of the discursive framework, and the rejection of traditional gender attributes, providing an opportunity for the construction of multiple contents and the reinvention of the self-image of young rural women.

It is noteworthy that short video creators are caught in a whirlpool of wealth in terms of profit generation, neglecting the creative design of their content and gradually using it as a tool for profit-making, which in turn is a flexible oppression of video creators. Unlike the physical resistance and borrowed media resistance exhibited by peasants when it comes to profit resistance, peasant self-media creators appear to follow and cater more to commercial interests, presenting a digital alienation under commercial logic. According to Marx, ‘labour alienation’ is the most fundamental form of alienation based on wage labour. The “digital alienation” is derived from the development of Internet technology. Under the logic of commerce, the rural short video narrative model can easily affect the construction of farmers’ subjects. The “digital alienation” faced by farmers’ self-publishers is a top-down to outside-in alienation of power. During the short-video explosion, a large number of farmers were attracted to join in as producers of short-video content, relying on platform subsidies and traffic realisation. However, due to the limitations of farmers’ production skills and knowledge, the low quality of the content they produce leads to extremely low subsidies and incomes, haunting the commercial dreams woven by the platforms, and even becoming free digital labourers for the platforms, resulting in the illusory commercial dream of “labour to death” and becoming parasites under the “new digital alienation”. The embedding of short videos provides an opportunity to change the image of young rural women.

As women enter the public sphere, how to be more consistently and vividly creative in content production and conceptual communication, so that the content production narrative of rural women’s short videos has a more lasting impact, is the key point to be considered for the development of rural women’s short videos in the new era.

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