Research on individual narrative and identity construction of short video of small town youth

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Abstract: Research on the youth population in small towns is expanding from focusing solely on their significant consumption power in the film and television industry to encompass a broader range of areas, such as cultural production, identity reconstruction, and promoting urban-rural connections. The study now includes the examination of the identity and construction of small-town youth within its research scope. By observing the real cultural life circumstances of small-town youth, their internal interactions with the internet, emotional connections, and creative talents in the realm of short videos, it is evident that these virtual spaces have become the platform where small-town youth engage in new forms of personal narratives and identity construction. This paper focuses on the consumption and creation of short videos by 15 small-town youth in the northwest region of China. It not only illustrates the presentation and construction of small-town youth in relation to short videos but also reflects the partial changes in group mentality and social reality resulting from these interactions.

Keywords: Youth Population; Short Video; Identity Construction

1. Introduction

With the popularity of platforms like Kuaishou and Douyin, a grassroots short video culture has emerged among small-town youth, symbolizing their collective identity. This culture arises from the accumulation of suppressed and rebellious emotions among small-town youth who have long been exposed to the "elite culture" of big cities. The emergence of these simple and user-friendly short video platforms coincided with the gathering of small-town youth from all over the country, bringing down-to-earth content. This virtual space has become the most active platform for small-town youth, where they gather, meet, and showcase their talents, creating lively and imaginative works. It has become the main stage for small-town youth nationwide. By participating in the creation and social interaction of short video content, small-town youth engage in a process of redefining their social and cultural identity.

2. Problem Awareness and Research Methods

This paper aims to explore two issues: Firstly, through on-site observations of the daily lives and cultural consumption of small-town youth, it aims to enrich the subjective experiences of small-town youth in short video creation. Secondly, it aims to investigate how small-town youth, who are detached between big cities and small towns, seek identity reconstruction through short videos.

This study attempts to gain insights into the personal narrative styles and identity construction processes of the small-town youth in the world of short videos through an ethnographic "thick description" approach. The author returned to Wuwei City, Gansu Province during the summer vacation period in July-August 2023, adopting a participant and researcher perspective and engaging in extensive interactions with 15 small-town youth. This study also embodies a participatory and interventionist approach, where the author gradually transitioned from being an outsider with distant experiences to an insider with similar experiences.

This study involves 15 small-town youth from Wuwei, Gansu Province. After completing their middle or high school education, these individuals discontinued their studies due to various reasons and sought opportunities for development in first and second-tier cities. However, they were unable to stay there and had to choose to return to their small towns, inheriting the lifestyles of their predecessors. Although this sample of 15 small-town youth may not be representative or comprehensive in terms of quantity, the findings of this research directly point to the core issue: small-town youth struggle in their

real-life circumstances but find new ways of self-presentation and identity in the realm of short videos.

3. Small-Town Youth and Their Cultural Life

3.1 Characteristics of the small-town youth population

Since the concept of small-town youth as a "new addition" to the consumer market in the film industry was introduced, both academia and industry have been attempting to define this group more clearly, but the discussion has remained ongoing. Some scholars define small-town youth based on geographical criteria, identifying them as young people who grew up in third- and fourth-tier cities, county towns, and rural areas. They may have had work and life experiences in first- or second-tier cities or have always lived and worked in small towns[1]. Other scholars argue that "small town" is not a geographical concept but represents a differentiated consumer ecosystem relative to first- and second-tier cities[2]. In various research fields, "small-town youth" is portrayed in different ways, resulting in a lack of a precise definition or scope for this group.

The 15 small-town youth involved in this study are aged between 18 and 30, mostly belonging to the post-1990s generation, also known as the "Internet Generation" or the generation that grew up with the internet. As a result, they were early adopters of internet connectivity and turned to big cities for opportunities after their education. After being influenced by the values and consumption patterns of big cities, they experienced a psychological conflict upon returning to their hometowns. However, with the emergence of short videos as a new virtual community, the low entry barrier, anonymous identities, and diverse content quickly drew small-town youth into this new realm of cultural consumption[7].

3.2 Cultural consumption of short videos among small-town youth

After drifting through big cities, hometowns, and unfamiliar places, short video platforms have become the gathering place for the daily lives and emotional anchor of small-town youth. The viewing habits of small-town youth on platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou are not random; they are closely related to their own experiences and interests. The act of watching videos holds significance for them. It can serve as a means of expanding their social circle and finding like-minded communities, guiding them in that aspect. It can also have educational significance as they seek to acquire knowledge. Additionally, it can hold consumer significance as they engage in purchasing goods through live streaming. In summary, the act of small-town youth watching short videos always carries a certain meaning that they identify with, which fuels their endless scrolling and liking[3].

After graduating from junior high school, Xiaoqiang went to Xinjiang with a few classmates to learn cooking. Now, his culinary skills have reached the level of a head chef, and his income surpasses that of the other small-town youth surveyed in this study. In his daily life, besides work, he spends a significant amount of time watching short videos, sometimes for up to four consecutive hours. The content mostly revolves around his family and friends, as well as videos showcasing the skills of folk artists, grassroots singers, and funny moments from everyday life. "I usually don't make these videos myself; I'm too busy to find the time. But I love watching them. It's where I can see my family, classmates, and friends. I'll like their posts and engage with them in the comments section. Since I'm away from home for a long time, sometimes it's our only way of connecting. Almost everyone is into short videos now," Xiaoqiang says. For him, short videos serve as a way to connect with his hometown and a means of emotional attachment when he misses his hometown.

For Xiaoxia, short videos serve as a platform for learning makeup and dance. "I didn't wear makeup when I was in college, but later I found many tutorials on these short video platforms. I started learning from them, including how to buy makeup products. Once, I even won a foundation in a live streaming session. I also learn some simple dance routines and teach students rehearsing performances for holidays", she explains. These short video platforms provide a combination of knowledge and entertainment, meeting the daily cultural consumption needs of small-town youth.

Tingting, on the other hand, engages in various forms of consumption through short video platforms. "My parents love watching Kuaishou in their free time, especially my mom. She enjoys buying things from live streaming sessions on Kuaishou. Those hosts are really persuasive. I also often buy things through Douyin. Whenever I see someone's recommendation, I feel like the product will definitely be useful", she shares. In this case, short videos have become a favored shopping mall for small-town youth, as they explore and make purchases based on the recommendations and endorsements they

come across while scrolling through the platform.

The consumption of short videos by small-town youth is not only a means of psychological adjustment but also a form of self-fulfillment. They yearn for the excitement of big cities but are content with their small-town lives. Therefore, engaging in cultural consumption through short videos allows them to somewhat compensate for this sense of longing and make up for what they perceive as a lack[8].

4. Short video creation by small-town youth

For several decades, small-town youth have been marginalized and subjected to the dominance of "elite culture" prevailing in big cities. They have been passive recipients, lacking a voice of their own. However, with the emergence of short video platforms like Kuaishou, Douyin, Pippi Shrimp, and Watermelon Video, small-town youth have gained a newfound sense of agency. They have started utilizing these platforms to express their collective voices and make themselves heard[4].

4.1 Engaging in proactive creation for personal narratives

All 15 small-town youth have their own short video accounts, where they capture a wide range of content, including work-related experiences, daily anecdotes, romantic moments, and travel adventures. Regardless of the content, they are enthusiastic about using this platform to express themselves and showcase their perspectives to the world.

Xiao Sen, a small-town youth who has been drifting away from home for a long time, showcases the content of his work and life in his Kuaishou videos. He has a total of 111 videos on his account, out of which 56 are related to his work. For instance, he captures before-and-after images of his car repair work, seeking affirmation from friends, family, and even strangers to fulfill his psychological needs. At times, he also films himself covered in dirt, expressing his realization that earning money and living a good life is not easy, motivating himself to work even harder.

Yuan Yuan holds a highly approving attitude towards the emergence of short videos. "In my parents' generation, people had very conservative mindsets. If you put on makeup or dressed more attractively, they would criticize and gossip about you. It's even more open-minded now, with my mom and the aunts in the village wearing skirts, putting on red lipstick, and dancing in the village square, even filming videos and sharing them online. I serve as my mom's photographer, and I don't care about what others think. As long as my mom is happy, I'm content. Let others say what they want." Yuan Yuan's Kuaishou videos often involve filming her mother singing. Through her actions and words, she is leading the older generation to keep up with the times. The format of short videos serves as a bridge, not only connecting parents and children but also linking to the changes of the current era.

Ting Ting is a beautiful girl, and in her Kuaishou videos, she frequently appears in self-portraits accompanied by various special effects and filters, transforming into a flawless doll-like figure. These videos often reflect her attitude towards life. In the captions accompanying her selfies, she writes phrases such as "If no one protects you completely, then be cool enough to have no vulnerabilities", "After the age of laughter, there are more moments of wanting to cry", "Strive to shine, and the right people will come towards you". These captions demonstrate her self-expectations and attitude towards life. They reveal a slightly melancholic emotion under the pressures of life, but also highlight her determination to keep striving for a better life.

In their short video creations, they are the protagonists, and regardless of the emotions and moods conveyed in their content, it is their self-narrative. They do not have expectations for traffic or profits from their works. Instead, it is more about self-expression and presentation. The joy and satisfaction derived from creating these works surpass the works themselves. Through this form of short videos, they also convey a more comprehensive portrayal of their group to the public, showcasing different aspects of their lives and perspectives.

4.2 Reconstruction of identity in virtual space

In the realm of cultural creation and consumption, small-town youth have long been subordinate to elite culture. However, on short video platforms, the small-town youth finally found a space for camaraderie. Small-town youth from all over the country gather together, appreciating and encouraging each other. They no longer feel marginalized or ignored, but rather, they find a sense of belonging in

online group activities, creating a unique grassroots culture[5].   Within this community, everyone is equal and shares the same identity. They are no longer constrained by reality, as ideals and reality converge in this space.

Just like Zheng Yuan, he is an enthusiast of online gaming. When I discussed online mobile games with him, he immediately became animated and started enthusiastically sharing his stories and experiences with gaming. In his spare time from his renovation work, he utilizes the Kuaishou platform to live stream his gaming sessions. This not only satisfies his own gaming desires but also allows him to connect with like-minded individuals in that virtual space. He has made friends with people who share common interests and even collaborates with gaming experts for live streaming sessions, expanding his social circle and broadening his creative ideas for content creation. Offline, he is a hardworking laborer striving to make a living, but online, he is a gaming expert admired by his fans.

For Xiao Tao, the short video platform serves as a good channel to meet people of the opposite sex. As he has reached the age of marriage, he feels the pressure from his family to settle down, but the closed nature of his work environment provides him with few opportunities to meet potential partners. However, he is also a fitness enthusiast, and he shares videos of his workouts on his profile, showcasing his muscular physique. From his content, we can see that he positions himself as someone who loves fitness, enjoys making friends, and has an outgoing personality.

Compared to offline interactions, they prefer to establish a community within the realm of short videos. Online, they have the opportunity to reconstruct their identities and create various works to present their self-image. In this space, they can be their authentic selves, and they feel more confident in engaging with others and expressing themselves.

5. Conclusion

The term "small-town youth", which is the subject of study in this paper, was initially coined by the film and television industry. The significant cultural consumption power of small-town youth garnered attention from the industry. In this article, the chosen definition of "small-town youth" is based on geographical criteria. It refers to the young population from third-tier, fourth-tier, and lower-tier cities, including those who were born in such cities and currently reside in first-tier and second-tier cities. The research conducted in this article focuses on 15 small-town youth from a township in Wuwei City, Gansu Province, China.

To conduct in-depth research on the research subjects, the study employs participant observation and in-depth interviews. It provides a detailed description of the personal narrative styles and group identity construction of this group in short videos, elucidating the behavioral significance behind the viewing and creation of short videos by small-town youth. As the cultural ecology of small-town youth becomes increasingly diverse and garners more societal attention, the cultural resources available to this group have become richer. They have been recognized as a new force in consumption by society. The small-town youth community has gradually gained a voice and space for expression, marking an important shift in the cultural ecology of small-town youth.

After the emergence of short video platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Pippi Shrimp, the cultural life of small-town youth shifted to this virtual space. This space provided a safe haven for their conflicting spirits. It unified their physical living space with their ideal living space and became a platform for small-town youth to observe the world and express themselves. In terms of viewing, they selectively liked and shared content that they enjoyed, gradually refining their preferences. The content they consumed was closely related to their work, daily life, and hobbies. Under the influence and guidance of short videos, small-town youth would make attempts and changes in their real lives. For example, Cai Yu, inspired by a video showcasing muscles on Douyin, decided to start working out, while Xiaoyu, inspired by beauty and nail art videos on Douyin, learned techniques such as bridal makeup, eyebrow shaping, and skincare and started a small business. The act of liking and commenting during the viewing process not only strengthens social connections among friends and relatives but also expands their social circle through interactions with strangers, strengthening the sense of identity among the small-town youth community. In terms of creation, the works of small-town youth mostly revolve around documenting life or expressing emotions, reflecting their unique attitudes towards life and individual images. Their creative behavior is driven by a strong desire for self-expression that has been present within this group for a long time. This space, where a large number of small-town youth gather, becomes a place for mutual appreciation and camaraderie among like-minded individuals. Moreover, the unique internet language they create not only influences their daily communication but

also constructs their group cognition and contributes to the construction of the collective identity of small-town youth. Cinema and mobile-based film and video consumption coexist in the cultural ecosystem of small-town youth, forming a diverse and rich cultural environment. Due to these changes, the cultural consumption of small-town youth has gradually synchronized with that of larger cities, becoming more diverse. Small-town youth have transitioned from passive consumers of culture to active creators. Throughout this process, they value the construction of their identities and the exchange of emotions. With the development of internet technology and urbanization policies, small-town youth now have access to increasingly abundant cultural resources. The market also pays more attention to the cultural needs of this group. After being overlooked for a long time, small-town youth have finally unleashed their tremendous potential. They are not just contributors to box office revenue but a group worth paying attention to in the future.

In summary, small-town youth are actively engaging in individual expression within the world of short videos because platforms like short videos have evolved beyond being mere tools to pass the time. In a sense, these platforms have provided a virtual space that offers a sense of security and belonging for small-town youth. Within this space, small-town youth receive likes and recognition from the public through the performance of their own self-image. The format of short videos also provides them with a means to voice their opposition to "elite culture"[6].

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