

The Representation of Subjective Consciousness among Young Rural Women on Douyin Short Videos

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Abstract: In traditional society, rural women have long been marginalized, with their images symbolized and treated as the "other." However, with the rapid rise of short-video platforms, young rural women have gained unprecedented opportunities for self-expression. Drawing on case analyses of three representative accounts, this study explores their diverse and individualized pathways of subjectivity construction across three dimensions: local cultural identity, everyday life narratives, and the articulation of emotional relationships. By showcasing local culture, challenging gender stereotypes, and expressing personal emotions, these women gradually break free from conventional role constraints, achieving a transformation from "silent others" to "agentic subjects." Nevertheless, their subjectivity remains constrained by algorithmic mechanisms, patriarchal culture, and limited creative resources. The study concludes with a call for collaborative efforts from platforms, society, and policy to foster an inclusive and supportive media ecology that empowers young rural women to realize an enhanced sense of subjectivity.

Keywords: Rural women; Female subjectivity; Digital empowerment; Short videos; Subjectivity representation.

1. Introduction of the Research Problem

Subjectivity theory emphasizes that individuals are not merely passive "objects" subject to social structures, but rather "agentic subjects" who continuously construct and demonstrate self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-practice within specific social relations and cultural contexts [1]. For a long time, rural women, as a marginalized social group, have been represented in mainstream media narratives primarily through "othering" and "symbolization," while their authentic life experiences, value judgments, and cultural practices have often been simplified, obscured, or even erased.

With the accelerating development of the information society, short videos have emerged as a new form of media communication, evolving into an important channel for the public to access information, participate in social life, and engage in self-expression. By December 2024, the number of short-video users in China had reached 1.04 billion, with a penetration rate as high as 93.8%, ranking first among online audiovisual applications for six consecutive years [2]. This phenomenon highlights how short videos, as a representative form of new media, have been deeply embedded in the media structure of contemporary Chinese society, becoming a powerful force in shaping public opinion and influencing social perceptions.

Against this backdrop, the rapid rise of short-video platforms such as Douyin has created new spaces for subjectivity construction among young rural women aged 14 to 35 [3], who either live in rural areas, hold rural household registration, or have rural upbringing experiences. The platform's intelligent recommendation algorithms, fragmented content formats, and low-threshold participation mechanisms align with the fast-paced rhythm of modern life. Moreover, its "decentralized" communication environment further enhances user interactivity and mechanisms of individual expression, fostering the continual formation of a communication structure centered on user-generated content (UGC). Within this process, young rural women are able to transcend the stereotypical portrayals imposed by traditional

media and actively express themselves in more authentic and diverse ways.

As the platform penetrates deeper into lower-tier markets, young rural women are gradually breaking away from their traditional role as "silent others" in public discourse. By sharing content related to daily life, work scenarios, emotional experiences, aesthetic preferences, and even personal growth trajectories, they actively participate in the production and dissemination of sociocultural values. This not only expands their boundaries of self-expression but also facilitates their entry into the public sphere.

Therefore, this study takes Douyin as its research field, selecting short videos published by young rural women as the primary objects of analysis. Based on clearly defined criteria for "young rural women," three representative accounts were chosen by filtering information such as the creator's age and gender. Through case studies, this paper explores three distinct expressive pathways, thereby revealing the diverse manifestations of subjectivity consciousness in their short-video practices. Furthermore, it examines the key constraints hindering their subjectivity under the conditions of media empowerment, while also considering potential strategies for optimization.

2. The Diverse Manifestations and Expressions of Subjectivity among Young Rural Women

(1) Identity Expression through the Lens of Local Culture
"Identity" refers to the ongoing inquiry into one's position in social, cultural, and emotional contexts. The pursuit of identity is essentially a process of subjectivity construction [4]. As a crucial component of rural society, local culture profoundly shapes individual modes of identity formation. For young rural women, local culture not only embodies their long-term life experiences but also serves as an important resource for self-expression and subjectivity construction in the digital media environment. In traditional rural society, women's subjectivity was often constrained by family structures, gendered division of labor, and patriarchal culture.

With the rise of short-video platforms, however, local culture—familiar and stable within their daily lives—has gradually become a vital support for subjectivity expression, providing a visible pathway for articulating female agency.

In short videos, young rural women employ audiovisual practices to “narrate the self,” thereby constructing cultural identity in the interplay between being viewed and narrating themselves. On Douyin, for example, many young rural women use local dialects, folk activities, traditional clothing, and regional cuisine as cultural symbols to confirm their identities. One notable case is Douyin creator “Xiangmei Xinbao”, whose videos revolve around the local culture of Xinhua County, Hunan Province. Her content documents the preparation of local delicacies (such as braised mutton and spicy fermented beans), participation in folk activities (such as tea harvesting and rapeseed oil pressing), while personally appearing on camera in a lively and natural manner. This not only integrates her subjectivity with local cultural identity but also transforms short videos into a platform for showcasing rural charm, expressing love for countryside life, realizing personal value, and affirming cultural pride. The case illustrates how young rural women strategically use cultural resources such as cuisine and folklore to shape a distinctive cultural identity and transform themselves from passive traditional figures into proactive cultural communicators.

Female identity is a discursive practice shaped through interaction with both culture and other groups [4]. For young rural women, interaction with local culture occurs in the process of creating short videos, while interaction with broader audiences takes place through digital engagements such as views, likes, and comments from other Douyin users. These forms of digital interaction become key factors in the construction of identity. Through comments, likes, and shares, rural women not only gain greater social recognition for their content but also participate in wider networks of cultural production and dissemination, constantly adjusting their self-image and modes of expression in response to feedback.

(2) Self-Representation in Everyday Narratives

The awakening of women’s subjectivity is often measured by two criteria: the recognition of one’s intrinsic value as a human being, and the awareness and evaluation of one’s biological sex [5]. However, in traditional rural society, women’s roles were narrowly defined as “wife” and “mother,” with gender identity tightly bound to domestic labor, childcare, and family caregiving. This restrictive framework not only shaped women’s self-perceptions but also made biological sex a decisive factor in determining their social roles and identities.

Short-video platforms such as Douyin provide young rural women with a low-threshold and highly visible expressive space, enabling them to overcome the limitations of geography, class, and traditional cultural norms, and to present more diverse self-images. For instance, the Douyin creator “Xiaolan” frequently features herself in Lolita or JK (Japanese school-style) fashion [6] while filming everyday rural settings. Her videos juxtapose rural landscapes—country roads, fields, and mountains—with scenes of traditional rural labor such as feeding chickens, collecting snails, or farming, creating a striking contrast between refined dress and rustic environments. Originally, such fashion was part of urban youth subculture, yet by bringing it into the rural context, Xiaolan challenges stereotypical perceptions of rural women’s appearances. In doing so, she re-centers marginalized rural femininity within cultural expression.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, proposed the theory of “gender performativity.” By conceptualizing gender as performance, Butler argued that women need not remain mere objects of male desire but can actively challenge gender norms through acts of performance [7]. In Xiaolan’s case, she is not performing the stereotypical role of a “rural girl” but instead presenting herself as an authentic, lively, and agentic individual. Using her body as a medium—through clothing, makeup, and visual language—she expresses both her pursuit of beauty and her individuality. Thus, by choosing her attire, makeup, and behaviors, young rural women in short videos break away from traditional gender paradigms and assert alternative forms of subjectivity.

Overall, the everyday life narratives of rural women on Douyin are not only tangible expressions of subjectivity but also subtle acts of resistance against traditional gender roles. In seemingly trivial or playful daily moments, a generation of young rural women is gradually shedding old labels and attempting to challenge convention while constructing their self-image in new ways.

(3) Subjectivity in Emotional Relationships

For rural women, relationships in marriage, family, and parenthood have historically been central to their social identities. Under conditions shaped by exogamy and patrilocal traditions, women were often defined through dependence on male kin—fathers, husbands, and sons. Their subjectivity was tightly bound to the patriarchal logic of “obeying the father before marriage, the husband after marriage, and the son after the husband’s death” [8].

Within this context, it is particularly significant to examine how young rural women in emotional relationships attempt to empower themselves through short-video creation and challenge patriarchal role expectations. A prominent example is “Village Xiaoqiao,” a top female content creator in Douyin’s rural category, who married in 2021. Her pinned videos—which creators personally select to shape their desired public image—include her wedding record, a visit with her husband to a leprosy village to care for the elderly, and a personal appearance in front of Tiananmen Square. Since marriage, much of her content has focused on family life, including accompanying in-laws to shop for clothes, helping her father-in-law plant garlic, and collecting snails with her husband and relatives. She also documents her pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare experiences, such as swimming with her daughter. While these videos highlight her role in building harmonious family relations, they also reveal a decline in content focused on individual growth, replaced by depictions of shared family activities. This shift illustrates how gender roles in emotional relationships continue to discipline women, transforming their identities from “individualized rural women” to family-centered figures. Even in the seemingly open digital space of short-video platforms, women often face invisible pressures to frame their content around being a “good wife” or “good mother.”

Nancy Fraser’s critical perspective on women’s roles in the public sphere is useful here. Fraser argues that achieving equality requires not only addressing formal exclusion but also interrogating the discursive interactions within public platforms [9]. True empowerment, therefore, is not merely about visibility but about whether women can construct equal and autonomous identities in such spaces. If rural women are continually defined by family roles despite apparent creative freedom, their subjectivity risks being partially erased.

Feminist scholar O'Reilly proposed “resisting motherhood through maternal practice,” reminding women that engaging in diverse role-playing can subvert fixed gender roles [10]. In Xiaoqiao’s case, she has also produced content that transcends traditional family roles—such as paying wages to workers at her cotton factory, participating in county-level political activities, and visiting elderly villagers during festivals. Unlike many rural female creators who rebrand their accounts with family-oriented labels after marriage, she has retained her original name and personal profile image, signaling her commitment to maintaining an individual identity.

Her example provides an alternative model of subjectivity for young rural women navigating emotional relationships: one in which entering marriage and motherhood does not necessitate absolute conformity to patriarchal logic. By selectively presenting life experiences, rural women can reconstruct their identities and actively shape their social roles through digital self-expression.

3. Discussion and Reflections

The emergence and popularization of short-video applications such as Douyin have granted users greater autonomy in communication. Groups that were previously passive and disadvantaged in traditional media structures now enjoy opportunities to be seen, recorded, shared, and recognized [11]. For young rural women, digital empowerment has opened up broader spaces for self-expression, enabling some creators to experience an awakening of subjectivity in their short-video practices. This awakening is reflected not only in the deepening of individual self-awareness but also in the proactive reconfiguration of social roles. Through continuous creation and expression, they transition from passive recipients of discourse and information to active constructors of social order and consciousness. In this process, media serve as a crucial “intermediary force,” facilitating the reconstruction of gender structures in digital spaces.

This study analyzed young rural women’s subjectivity through three pathways: cultural identity, everyday life, and emotional relationships. In the cultural identity pathway, young rural women construct localized cultural images through the display of dialects, folk customs, and local cuisine, reinforcing their sense of belonging while affirming cultural confidence. In the everyday life pathway, women engage in personalized displays of clothing, makeup, and labor scenes, enacting Butler’s theory of “gender performativity” and thereby challenging entrenched stereotypes of rural femininity. In the emotional relationship pathway, young rural women negotiate spaces of subjectivity within family, marriage, and parent–child relations. While “conforming” to traditional roles, they nonetheless retain self-awareness and creative perspectives.

Despite their increasingly active subjectivity expressions in digital media spaces, young rural women continue to face substantial structural challenges across several dimensions, including platform mechanisms, cultural traditions, public opinion, and resource allocation.

First, Douyin and similar platforms rely heavily on algorithms driven by user preferences and commercial value. Under the logic of traffic maximization, algorithmic mechanisms tend to prioritize entertaining, visually stimulating, or sensational “traffic-oriented” content, while paying insufficient attention to culturally rich or authentic

everyday narratives. As a result, creators risk becoming “outdated” at any moment. This compels them to prioritize visibility and virality, sometimes at the expense of their own subjectivity, thereby reducing them to mere “objects” of traffic [12].

Second, patriarchal culture remains deeply entrenched in rural society, with lingering notions of male superiority and expectations of women’s dependency and obedience [11]. Such cultural norms impose invisible constraints on rural women’s media behaviors and expressions. Even when granted relative expressive freedom on digital platforms, many young rural women continue to face disciplinary scrutiny from family members, local communities, and broader public opinion. Expressions that deviate from traditional expectations are often labeled as “improper” or “unvirtuous,” subjecting creators to psychological and emotional pressures.

Third, although infrastructure such as smartphones and internet access has become more widely available in rural areas, high-quality content creation often requires additional resources—advanced filming equipment, editing software, operational knowledge, and sufficient time—that are not equally accessible to all creators. The lack of such resources weakens content quality and limits the sustainability of creative practices.

In conclusion, short-video platforms represent a new media arena that provides young rural women with unprecedented opportunities for subjectivity expression. Yet, obstacles rooted in algorithmic mechanisms, cultural traditions, public scrutiny, and resource inequality continue to constrain these expressions to varying degrees. Only through the combined efforts of platform governance, cultural transformation, and governmental support can a truly inclusive, supportive, and diverse digital ecology be established—one that empowers rural women’s voices to move from the margins to the center, and from individual breakthroughs to collective progress. Ultimately, rural women’s subjectivity can only transcend passive conformity and disciplinary constraints when their expressions evolve from merely being “seen” to being genuinely “understood.”

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