

Algorithmic Construction of Rural Conceptual Boundaries: A Comparison of Trending Rural Videos on Douyin and Kuaishou

Zhixuan Zheng

*Communication University of China, Beijing, China
Maxwellhandleit@outlook.com*

Abstract. Platform content distribution algorithms can also have a selective impact on the creation of the rural imagery, thus shaping certain conceptual frames of "the rural." Such platforms as Douyin and Kuaishou, with their algorithmic recommendation and traffic-prioritization systems, have become a major cultural and economic phenomenon. This paper explores the algorithmic construction of divergent conceptual frames of the rural by Douyin and Kuaishou. It presents two different institutional-technical logics through a comparative analysis of popular videos. Douyin arranges a top-down gazed-upon countryside: official campaigns predetermine aesthetic frames, algorithms enhance refined visual production, and commercial monetization finishes the loop, with consumption being the priority. On the other hand, Kuaishou enables a bottom-up co-constructed rural field, in which visibility is based on community-initiated triggers, authenticity performances (dialect, immediacy), and interaction and relational trust distribution system. These processes generate a systematic opposition of visibility criteria, which shapes the imagination of the masses and imposes strategic paradoxes on creators. The study combines the theory of visibility and an algorithmic culture approach to explain platforms as active agents in the cultural (re)production of rurality.

Keywords: Rural conceptual boundaries, short video, comparative study, platform algorithm, visibility

1. Introduction

Short video platforms have become significant media linking urban and rural cultures in the current urban-rural digital integration of China. Nevertheless, although platform content distribution algorithms pierce geographical boundaries, they can also have a selective effect on the construction of the rural imagery, thus creating certain conceptual contours of the rural. Such platforms as Douyin and Kuaishou, with the mechanisms of algorithmic recommendation and traffic-prioritization, have introduced rural landscapes, characters and narratives into the national circulation, becoming powerful cultural and economic drivers of the rural revitalization policy. This does not only alter the domestic social image of the countryside, but also exposes the Chinese rural culture to a global audience through the transnational dissemination channels of the platforms.

However, mediatized visibilities are not so free; it is conditioned, disciplined by the selective processes of platforms [1]. This orchestration of visibility, achieved by technology and institutional design, has an effect on what rural narratives are forced into the public eye as well as how they are framed and represented. In many ways, it is also involved in the construction of the conceptual borders of the rural, which in a cultural context determines the symbolic range of what constitutes the rural and what lies outside it. Visibility theory is based on the assumption that the availability of exposure and presentation modes in media systems translates into the logic of power. The platforms, with the help of algorithmic ranking and content strategies, define the social visibility of rural imagery and its priority, which serves as a significant entry point to the study of rural digital communication in China.

The research, which is situated in the Chinese context, incorporates the production mechanisms and semiotic processes of rural digital visibility into the global discourses on algorithmic culture and media geography. It has a two-tiered sampling methodology. The first level gathers 150-300 popular rural videos on each platform to code lightweight, tracing the distribution of overall content and remnants of institutional machineries. The second level will pick 20-30 deep samples on each platform and mix them with platform mechanism materials (campaign pages, description of trending charts, policy discourse). A multimodal semiotic analysis framework (visual, auditory, textual) is used, alongside a Barthesian three-level structural analysis of denotation-connotation-myth [2,3]. The mechanism analysis, which combines the visibility theory with an algorithmic culture perspective, is used to study how various platforms selectively create rural symbols based on the institutional and technical conditions.

On the one hand, this paper will help to comprehend that digital platforms in the Global South are involved in constructing cultural boundaries. On the other hand, it is a response to the necessity of theoretical enrichment by non-Western environments in the international academic discourse, presenting the experiences of cultural governance of Chinese short video platforms. Practically, the results may provide policy and technical guidelines to platforms to streamline content recommendations policies and enhance a more balanced and fair representation of rural narratives.

2. Literature review

The fact that domestic scholars have engaged in multifaceted research on the content production and image construction of rural short videos in the recent years has given the study a rich theoretical background. Studies about the new farmers of Douyin show that creators tend to practice identity formation by verifying themselves through the platform, hashtag systems, and recognizable symbols of scenes (fields, courtyards, dialects, etc.). Nevertheless, in the logic of traffic and algorithmic discipline, these signs are in danger of being transformed into marketable traffic passwords, resulting in an alienation of identity, so that identity is no longer connected to lived experience [4]. Aesthetic tendencies are examined in two propensities, a diminutive tendency that simplifies complexity by parody and exaggeration, a poetizing tendency that idealizes the actual sufferings by over-beautifying them, both of which may undermine the subjectivity of the farmer [5,6]. When comparing across platforms, it has been shown that Douyin tends to focus on an urban-nostalgic and consumption-focused presentation, whereas Kuaishou still has greater life recording and local expression [7]. The model of hot presentation/cold concealment also demonstrates that popular content is boosted by its visual and emotional attractiveness, whereas authentic expressions that do not match the interests of the algorithm are hidden [8].

A theoretical chain which links "symbol-visibility-algorithm" can be incorporated into the phenomena. Semiotics focuses on the three-layer structure of text meaning, namely denotation,

connotation, and myth [2]. In short videos, the symbols of multimodality, including color, composition, framing, background music, and title keywords, all build emotional and value orientations, which in turn condense into cultural myths, like diligence leads to prosperity, pastoral healing or folk-custom spectacle. When these myths establish stable formations with a platform recommendation, hashtag and campaign systems, they become symbolic boundaries that are reproduced by algorithms over and over again. In the view of an algorithmic culture, algorithms do not just sort information but culturally foretell, create, and replicate value [9,10]. Through assigning the aspect of visibility and coding of aesthetic criteria, platforms influence the arrangement of meaning and identity orders within content ecosystems.

Overall, the available literature will offer a strong basis of the relationship between the following variables: platform mechanisms-symbolic presentation-conceptual boundaries. There are however, two weaknesses. To begin with, the majority of the studies are at the single-platform or macro-descriptive level, which does not involve systematic validation that the institutional texts (trending chart rules, campaign discourse) directly correlate with the multimodal symbols. Second, the cross-platform differences have been characterized, but not explicated on the platform of the algorithmic culture and the theory of visibility to explain how the institutional orientations produce various conceptualized rural myths at the micro-level of visual, auditory, and textual composition, and thus, create differentiated conceptual boundaries.

Thus, the paper will be anchored in the real-life setting of Chinese countryside short videos and will participate in the global theoretical discourse of the platforms and algorithmic culture. It attempts to disclose the disparities and similarities in the construction of the conceptual limits of rural culture through a two-dimensional analysis of the concept of platform mechanisms-video symbols.

3. Research design

This paper takes two-tiered sampling method and multimodal analysis that based on the three-tiered model of Barthes. It follows a lightweight-in-depth logic, in which a broadly scoped lightweight sample pool is first built to map the overall distributions and to act as a candidate pool to a set of in-depth samples, after which typical cases are purposely selected out of the sample pool to be in-depth multimodally coded using the three tiers of Barthes.

For Tier One, 150 popular rural short videos were collected based on trending metrics from Douyin and Kuaishou respectively. Lightweight coding was applied to map the overall content distribution and traces of institutional mechanisms. This involved recording: (1) Basic themes (e.g., food preparation, farming activities, craftsmanship/intangible cultural heritage, daily life, scenic displays); (2) Formal features (video duration, use of popular templates/effects, subtitle style); (3) Mechanism traces (use of official hashtags, participation in platform campaigns, evident commercial elements). This stage aimed to sketch the overall spectrum of rural content on each platform, establish the candidate pool, and quantify platform differences.

In the case of Tier Two, 15 in-depth samples were chosen purposely in the pool of lightweight of each platform. It was selected based on coverage in the dimension platform-campaign-involved vs. organically popular, high/medium/low traffic, aestheticized vs. documentary style, dialect vs. Mandarin, livestream commerce, return migration, and folk culture themes. In-depth samples were collected by collecting relevant platform mechanism materials simultaneously, and video screenshots, complete transcripts, and keyframes were stored.

In-depth samples were studied in multimodal semiotic analysis (visual, auditory, and textual) that were operationalized by coding according to the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth

proposed by Barthes. Denotation is objective description of shots and timestamps. Connotation refers to a meaning of the cultural values and emotional orientations presented by combinations of the symbols. Categories of shots were divided into a set of seven preset connotation codes such as Labor Beautification, Pastoral Healing, Poverty and Hardship, Folk-Custom, Spectacle, Achievement and Reversal, Consumption and Entertainment, etc. The sophisticated myth system (M1-M7) was used:

M1 Pastoral/Healing

M2 Labor Beautification/Prosperity-through-Diligence

M3 Folklorization/Othering

M4 Commodification/Nostalgia Consumption

M5 Problematization/Poverty Narrative

M6 Individual Achievement/Reversal Narrative

M7 Entertainment/Parody

Myth assignment required support from at least two types of evidence.

To present the results and provide the theoretical perspective, the study quantitatively explains the distribution of Connotation and Myth codes across platforms and discusses their relationship with campaign involvement, type of creator, and measures of interaction. It qualitatively gives evidence chains (Denotation → Connotation → Myth → Mechanism_Linkage) of typical cases. It integrates the theory of visibility and an algorithmic culture viewpoint and examines how platforms selectively construct and amplify particular symbols of the countryside due to the existence of institutional and technical circumstances. The study seeks to describe differences with an additional purpose of explaining the mechanism-symbol coupling process that creates them how platform architecture, operational strategies, and cultural logic interact to produce two parallel, competing myth systems of the digital rural the interaction of surface-level audiovisual symbols.

4. Findings: platform algorithms and the dual construction of the rural

4.1. Platform ecosystem divergence and structural differences in rural narratives

This study identifies systematic, structural differences in the content ecosystem of Douyin and Kuaishou based on quantitative coding of 150 popular rural videos of each platform. This forms the macro-ground of the differentiation construction of the rural concept. The content of Douyin has a specific orientation on the mediatized refinement, with high-saturation visual grading, standardized composition and editing rhythms and high dependence on templates of popular music; This formal preference serves a category of highly purified thematic content: aesthetically pleasing natural landscapes abstracted from specific social contexts, ritualized presentations of traditional crafts, and family interaction scenes emphasizing warmth and harmony.

In contrast, the content of Kuaishou displays a strong attribute of situated rawness, which is mainly direct recording by mobile phone, use of natural light, ambient sound, and dialogue in dialect. Editing is less formal and less deliberate. The themes of its content are close to the grassroots livelihood practices, including the direct documentation of agricultural products sales, the ordinary image of the family everyday life, and the practical knowledge-sharing of production.

This macro-divergence shows that the two platforms are not objectively presenting various aspects of the same rural reality. Rather, according to their respective internal logics, they selectively and intensively choose some characteristics, hence establishing two original cognitive structures of the rural. Douyin forms an imaginary rural world that is directed at remote watching and aesthetic

consumption. Kuaishou offers a field of the countryside that is based on participation and relationship interaction.

4.2. Constructing the boundary of Douyin's simulacra countryside: the aesthetics of a consumable spectacle

The visibility ecology of the rural imagery of Douyin is a boundary that is gazed upon, which is created by a top-down chain. To start with, the platform constructs meaning by the very beginning of the narrative with the help of official hashtags, campaigns, and descriptions of the trending chart. According to coding, Douyin samples often use campaign hashtags such as #Pastoral Life or Slow Life Challenge, or suggestive names in the form of opening frames. These institutional discursive spaces restrict and select what type of countryside is worth viewing, and direct further image choice and display into aesthetics and subjects that the platform approves.

Second, visual-audio mixes of high production value, including drone shots, stabilized shots, multi-camera arrangements, warm-tone filters, and rhythmically synchronized music become the production paradigm of achieving algorithmic traction. Detailed samples reveal that Douyin videos tend to turn particular work or landscape into an object of middle-class aesthetic by framing and rhythm of music, depriving a situated rural experience and translating it into products of image consumption.

Third, the aestheticized rural in turn is associated with brand cooperation and livestream trading infrastructure, becoming scenes of consumption. Cues such as hashtags of the campaign being used often, a high level of consistency in visuals and music, and the inclusion of commerce or collaboration links in video descriptions are evidence. The net impact is the institutional discourse to commercial circulation that is a closed loop where only certain rural imagery is able to gain visibility.

4.3. Constructing the boundary of Kuaishou's rural field: the performance of authenticity in a relational arena

Conversely, Kuaishou creates a co-constructed boundary by the bottom-up communal mechanism. To begin with, community triggering: Topic and dissemination triggers are often self-generated by creators or community activities on the grassroots level. Second, authenticity performance: Content is more likely to conform to a central principle of authentic performance: handheld direct recording, dialect-synchronized sound, ambient noise preservation and limited post-processing is an aesthetic of authenticity equals visibility on Kuaishou. Detailed samples often reveal bare scenes of labor, emotional stories or comic local performances. These features in themselves are assets to visibility, not in need of pre-framing by external topics. Third, community-based monetization: The Recommendation is more based on the idea of sustained interaction, comments, and virtual gifting, which are indicators of social relationships, to enable content to spread gradually through social networks and has long-tail effects. Livestreams, gifting and local transactions are commonly monetized, and creators can earn money by keeping the community trust. This can be supported by the fact that dialect and synced sound are highly prevalent, the number of views increases gradually, and the invitation to a livestream and contact with a person privately are normalized. The route of Kuaishou results in rural imagery being co-created in interactive relationships, as opposed to one-sidedly pre-established by the platform.

The comparison demonstrates that Douyin and Kuaishou have systematic differences in the discursive starting points, visibility criteria, distribution logic, and monetization paths. The

institutionalized discourse and business interests of Douyin are biased towards high-aesthetic production, thus recreating the myth of the simulacra countryside. Focusing on relations and authenticity, Kuaishou keeps and enhances the expression of the grassroots and the variety of social reality. Both of these processes of constructing boundaries do not only influence the various public constructions of the rural, but they also impact on the production strategies of creators, the ethics of narratives, and the paths of livelihoods in a substantive way. In the interpretation of rural representation in the digital era, the researchers need to place the visual-auditory texts into the framework of institutional and algorithmic logics to conduct a co-constitutive analysis.

5. Conclusion

This paper addresses the differences between rural re-presentation of short videos on Douyin and Kuaishou through two-tiered sampling and multimodal, three-tiered Barthesian analysis and identifies two different mechanisms of establishing boundaries and their implications. To begin with, there is the divergence in the ecosystem. Douyin has the gaze-upon-country oriented to aesthetics and commodification, and Kuaishou has the co-constructed rural field with the focus on authenticity and relations within the community; Second, visibility is determined by separate mechanistic chains. Douyin functions through an institutional pre-setting to an aesthetic encoding, which is then amplified and converted into commerce in an algorithmic process, which selectively amplifies high-production visual discourse. Kuaishou pursues a community trigger to authenticity performance then relation-based distribution and community-based monetization based on interaction and trust to maintain long-tail distribution. Lastly, the effect on creators implies structural paradoxes. Makers who adhere to the logic of Douyin can receive quick exposure and commercial payoff but will be prone to decontextualization and flattening of the narrative. The creators who work in the logic of Kuaishou can maintain the situational context and community trust, yet they have the instability of monetization and unpredictable traffic.

The sample timeframe and volume limit this research, and the active changes of the platform algorithms can influence the generalizability in the long-term. Longitudinal tracking, audience reception, cross-national comparisons or field experiments that involve algorithmic alterations can be conducted in future research to better determine the long-term effects of platform mechanisms on rural narrative ecologies. Short video platforms are not only communication media, but institutionalized spheres of meaning production. This paper shows that across the various platforms, institutional-technological-commercial formations are selective as they construct two parallel landscapes of the digital countryside. Understanding of this process is of great importance to academic interpretation, creator practice and public policy.

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