An Investigation of the Function of Self-Media in Facilitating the Empowerment of Rural Women

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Abstract:

As technology advances, short videos have increasingly become a widely used form of media that has reached even the most remote and underdeveloped areas of China. This has given rural women's groups a platform to communicate their opinions and perspectives. Due to social, economic, and technological circumstances, the issue of whether the growth of self-media has truly empowered rural women has become increasingly prominent. This phenomenon has not only garnered significant interest from scholars but has also exerted a wide-ranging influence on real-world implementations. To gain a deeper understanding of these challenges and effectively tackle them, this study examines the impact of self-media platforms on the empowerment of rural women. This will be done through the use of case studies and analysis of relevant literature. Through the examination and evaluation of the narratives provided by rural women on prominent self-media platforms like Kuaishou and TikTok, subsequent significant discoveries were obtained: Rural women have utilized self-media platforms to express themselves, sharing their daily experiences and emotions. However, their actions align with the societal expectations of gender roles, reinforcing traditional gender norms. Consequently, their expression remains passive and objective, highlighting the absence of alignment between the collective and individual empowerment of women. This further implies that the process of empowering rural women through online media is not fully achieved and may potentially have negative effects when viewed from a feminist standpoint.

Keywords: Rural women, self-media, empowerment, doing gender.

1. Introduction

This study examines the influence of social media platforms in China on the empowerment of rural women as they make progress. Rural women in the village community typically rely on their fathers or husbands for their livelihood. They lack formal education, and employment opportunities, and face significant barriers in accessing essential resources such as land due to rural rules and customs. Their requirements are obscure, and they are perceived as a marginalized group. The rise of self-media has enhanced the prominence of rural women and provided them with a platform to express themselves independently, without relying on industrial infrastructure, transportation, or financial investment. The current epoch is characterized by the prevalence and extensive engagement with social media, which has swiftly and extensively disseminated the concept of women's empowerment. Social media has emerged as a catalyst for societal transformation, playing a crucial role in advancing women's empowerment through diverse means [1]. This study is highly pertinent to the empowerment of women living in rural areas. This study examines the extent to which self-media effectively empowers rural women. It employs the literature analysis method to identify and review pertinent information and literature. The advantage of this method lies in its ability to comprehensively analyze both the positive and negative aspects of social media in the process of empowering rural women, as well as the discrepancy between group and individual empowerment among women. This approach is beneficial for the study. This study intends to thoroughly examine the main challenges related to the success of self-media in empowering rural women. To achieve this purpose, a comprehensive analysis and debate have been carried out.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

Empowerment is a proposed idea aimed at enhancing the living conditions of marginalized groups in society. Its goal is to diminish, reverse, and eradicate the unfavorable assessment and discriminatory preconceptions that these groups face from the majority of society. Empowerment, in contrast to direct assistance, seeks to strengthen rather than rescue individuals. It highlights the inherent capabilities of the person, encouraging them to perceive, analyze, reflect, and take action to continually enhance their ability to control their own life. Ultimately, empowerment aims to challenge and transform the illogical patterns of social policies and the distribution of social resources [2].

West and Zimmerman argue that gender should be seen as a set of behaviors rather than an inherent characteristic.

The social construction of gender necessitates ongoing reconfiguration by established norms of masculinity and femininity. Individuals will behave with the awareness that they will be evaluated based on the criteria of societal expectations for femininity or masculinity. The normative constructs of masculinity and femininity exhibit variability across different periods, ethnic communities, and social environments. However, the ability to conform to the roles and behaviors associated with being male or female is universally present. Gender is a constant and integral part of social interaction, commonly known as 'performing gender' [3].

3. Literature Review

Recently, both domestic and international experts have extensively examined the Internet, rural women, and the promotion of female empowerment. In 2015, Sonali Sharma and Snehlata Maheshwari highlighted in their study *Use of ICT by Farm Women: A Step Towards Empowerment* that women in rural communities generally have lesser levels of political and economic influence compared to men. The different elements of ICT, including software, keyboards, online information, and training materials, are not accessible in local languages and are frequently inaccessible to women due to variables such as lower levels of education. Access to technology can enhance the quality of life for both rural women and men. By providing concrete evidence of women's substantial impact on agricultural and household earnings, as well as the favorable enhancements in their quality of life, gender dynamics have improved and women's role in the community has gained greater recognition [4]. ICT is a long process, but it will certainly empower women.

In their book, *The Invisibility of Seeing: A Study on the Empowerment of Rural Women by Online Self-Media,* Wei Xiaojiang, and Huang Yuqing argue that online platforms have allowed rural women to overcome their invisibility and demonstrate empowerment. These platforms have enabled women to take initiative, express their perspectives, and shape their society. However, it is important to note that traditional gender norms and power dynamics still influence the visibility provided by online platforms. Nevertheless, internet platforms continue to be influenced by traditional gender rules and power structures, which manipulate and restrict rural women's self-expression. As a result, efforts to empower rural women may not truly or fully achieve their intended goals [2]. In their work "*Self-presentation and Discursive Practices of Chinese Rural Women's Short Videos,*" Luan Yimei and Zhang Xing argue that the short videos created by this group feature a range of complex characters and varied content

creation. However, they highlight that beneath the appearance of free expression, there are underlying ideological constraints and manipulation. This can be seen as the concealed structure that governs the discourse and behavior within these videos [5]. What are the determinants influencing this situation? What is the impact of these factors? How significantly do they impact the living situations of rural women? What gender-specific tactics do rural women employ to garner attention through their self-media platforms? There are still areas of inquiry where certain concerns have not been fully explored and require attention.

4. Reinforcement of Traditional Gender Concepts through 'Doing Gender'

Historically, rural women were frequently shown in a fabricated manner in the public perception, typically as 'malevolent mothers-in-law who create obstacles for their daughters-in-law' and 'elderly rural ladies who speak negatively about them'. When considering rural women, common associations include tasks such as 'laundry and food preparation' and 'childcare responsibilities'. Does self-publishing dismantle the conventional perception of individuals by granting them the autonomy to determine whatever facets of their lives they wish to exhibit and enabling them to assume the role of their directors? This chapter examines the signals and voices expressed in short video content created by rural women. It does so by analyzing the online accounts of various important rural women.

'Nongcunhuijie' is a popular figure in rural areas who has amassed a following of 13.64 million people on the Kuaishou platform. The film showcases multiple sons expressing their desired meals to their mothers, prompting Huijie to willingly commence the food preparation. Subsequently, the family will collectively savor the meal once it is prepared. Although the comment section typically commends 'Huijie's resilience in the face of adversity' and her devotion as a daughter-in-law, there are also individuals who criticize her physical appearance and choice of attire. Through her videos, she appeals to the societal perception of the country woman who oversees domestic affairs, attends to her in-laws, and cares for her children, all while emphasizing the importance of maintaining her appearance. Upon witnessing the derogatory remarks about Huijie's appearance, she has decided to incorporate skincare and make-up into her upcoming video. She acknowledges the societal scrutiny and is willing to embrace the expectations imposed upon her.

Another prominent Internet celebrity, known as 'Nong-cunhaoerxi', centers her videos around showcasing the amicable relationship between her daughter-in-law Yunzi and her mother-in-law. As an illustration, the video mostly showcases the mother-in-law assisting her daughter-in-law in establishing her own business, the mother-in-law preparing meals for her daughter-in-law, and assisting, and traveling on joint excursions to demonstrate the harmonious familial bond. The son Ding Ding and his father-in-law are rarely captured in photographs, and the comment section predominantly consists of expressions of "happy and harmonious family," "good mother-in-law, good daughter-in-law," and other forms of well-wishes and compliments. The video of 'Nongcunhaoerxi' has challenged the prevailing stereotype of the 'evil mother-in-law' who makes life difficult for her daughter-in-law, as portrayed on social media. Instead, it has presented a new image of rural women who assert themselves and advocate for their interests. This portrayal aligns with the public's belief that women should have autonomy in their households and be responsible for domestic affairs. Nevertheless, it aligns with the prevailing societal notion that women should have control over their households and assume responsibility for domestic affairs.

The blogger featured on the TikTok account 'Auspicious Days' is a 52-year-old woman who resigned from her employment and relocated to the rural areas to address her menopause. In contrast to other rural women bloggers who provide a fleeting account of their daily activities, her video content, which also centers on cooking and cleaning, frequently conveys her ideals and inner emotions. In the video, she expressed her intention to dedicate the first half of her life to diligently working to generate the majority of the funds allocated for her family. While she acknowledges that her previous career may not be considered poetic or distant, her ultimate goal is to raise two children who will subsequently attend school and reach adulthood. 'Meeting a lot of people in the process of doing self-publishing soothed my inner loneliness.' Her videos, which are both light-hearted and pleasant, chronicle her reintegration with her family, embracing the customary practices of a Chinese-style family, and experiencing contentment in her retirement.

West and Zimmerman's formulation of 'doing gender' posits that gender is not inherent in our identity, but rather in our actions and behaviours. Individuals will behave with the consciousness that they will be evaluated according to what is deemed suitable criteria of femininity or masculinity [3]. Video narratives by rural women, such as 'Nongcunhuijie', 'Nongcunhaoerxi', and 'Auspicious Days', centre around household tasks related to children, agricultural matters involving children, and the interpretation of family conflicts. Emphasizing the commitment

of women to their families and illustrating that tending to their family brings them happiness and satisfaction aligns with society's expectations for rural women, embodying the concept of the 'doing gender', and these actions help strengthen conventional gender norms.

5. Discussions

5.1 Asynchrony between the Empowerment of Women as Groups and Individuals

Presently, feminism and autonomous women's thought are gaining increasing popularity and acknowledgment, promoting women to venture outside the household and depend on themselves, and to pursue a profession to attain economic autonomy. Nevertheless, among certain categories of women, such as rural women, the majority of those who remain behind come from humble or even destitute origins and lack the financial means to register their children in school. Simultaneously, other families do not prioritize women's education and may even opt to provide restricted educational chances predominantly to boys, therefore impeding women's progress. Some women, under the parental agreement, opt to marry and have children at a young age, therefore establishing their households and becoming the next generation of left-behind women. The underdevelopment of cultural and knowledge systems, together with the absence of technical skills, have had a substantial impact on the life circumstances of left-behind women. Consequently, they often opt to remain at home on a full-time basis or pursue service-oriented occupations that demand less expertise, such as supermarket shopping guides or clothing guides [6]. Due to the limited employment opportunities in their villages and the stringent educational and age criteria for finding work in the city, they are constrained by their environment. Even if they do manage to secure a job, it is exceedingly difficult for them to establish themselves in the city by working part-time. Consequently, they are sent back to their hometowns when they reach the required age. Their brief video content emphasizes the attributes of exemplary spouses and mothers, so reinforcing the perception of women as 'caretakers' within the family and perpetuating conventional gender norms. This is not conducive for women to advocate for greater rights and interests in the workplace, society, and politics. However, for rural women, adhering to the expectations of 'doing gender' enables them to be acknowledged within their families and village communities, so providing them with some degree of respite to enhance their survival. Nevertheless, rural women might find certain relief and alleviate their predicament by fulfilling the criteria of 'gender' and being acknowledged as

such within their families and village groups. Research has demonstrated that the amelioration of women's position within the family may be attributed mostly to their increased consciousness of their rights and interests, as well as the increase in their economic level [7]. These aspects immediately bolster the negotiating power of women within the family. Furthermore, it illustrates the lack of synchronization between the empowerment of women as a group and as individuals.

5.2 The Influence of Internet Self-Publishing

The advent of online media has provided rural women with a method to break free from the situation of being reliant on their husbands and dads for the means of production. To fully understand the challenges faced by rural women, it is essential to examine the fundamental economic factors that form the foundation of the superstructure. While the legislation safeguards the rights and interests of rural women in the land, their autonomy to utilize the land has been historically disregarded in rural regulations and traditions. In rural regions, the prevailing practice is marriage, in which women are subordinate to their fathers before marriage and to their husbands after marriage. Consequently, women's property relations often suffer from dependency on either their dads or their husbands. Within male-headed households, when a woman remarries, divorces, or becomes widowed, her husband's village organization frequently reclaims her contracted land, while her mother's village often declines to restore her contracted land. Consequently, she forfeits her fundamental means of subsistence in the rural areas. This is why rural women in past generations, or some remote regions choose not to get divorced during prolonged periods of oppression [8].

The Internet self-media has provided rural women with a degree of empowerment by enabling them to reduce their reliance on others for a means of earning a living. The revenue generated by the majority of women through entrepreneurship yields a host of advantages for the family, particularly in the domains of sustenance, education, and apparel. Significantly, among the women who opted for other family benefits, the overwhelming majority of them specifically outlined perks primarily intended for their children. The prioritization of children's well-being by women underscores the beneficial influence of female economic empowerment on family well-being and children's development, as well as the significance women attribute to their families [9].

The advent of self-media has heightened the prominence of rural women on social media as an under-represented demographic in the physical realm. Rural women are

characterized by a relatively low level of social interaction, displaying a notable degree of introversion and reticence. Their life roles can be generically categorized as daughters, wives, mothers, and mothers-in-law. This is a survival strategy focused on the family and marked by caregiving, which is marginalized in the masculine hierarchy, and referred to as the 'invisible women' [2]. The advent of online self-media has heightened the prominence of rural women on the Internet. With the aid of different social media platforms, rural women have transitioned from being hidden talents to taking center stage, establishing their platforms. Previously relegated to silence, they have now transformed into 'anchorwomen' who excel in speaking, singing, and dancing on various social media platforms. The individuals in question openly communicate their rural lifestyles and recount distinctive life narratives, therefore establishing a "micro-center" of influence on the Internet that they may manipulate within the periphery of society. Rural short films serve to restore the connection between the characters and the land in the identity of 'new farmers'. Meanwhile, the farmers have transitioned from being just objects of storytelling in the conventional media age to being active participants in the narrative in the new media age, therefore gaining greater freedom of self-expression [10]. Farmers have greater rights to self-expression, self-assertion, and self-expression. This unquestionably constitutes a means of empowerment for women residing in rural areas, which not only improves their economic capabilities and social visibility but also reinforces the discussion on the Internet.

Although rural women who engage in online self-media reap its advantages, they also encounter the influence of online public opinion and social opinion pressure. Within the videos showcasing rural women who marry and have children at a young age, it is frequently observed that affluent young women express remarks that they fail to comprehend or even accuse them of. For instance, they may say, "I am the same age as her, and now I have to ask my parents when I open a carton of milk,' and so forth. These comments exhibit a naive cruelty that is rooted in unbalanced behaviors and information, and they tend to categorize them as ignorant." The conduct and provided information are unidirectional and they are stigmatized as unintelligent. Furthermore, apart from Internet public opinion, they also encounter the influence of public opinion in rural areas. Even if they refrain from openly expressing such sentiments to their fellow villagers, they may engage in covert conversations about them, claiming that they 'have a penchant for ostentatious displays' and 'dignify their appearance', and similar statements.

In conclusion, self-media has facilitated rural women in raising their consciousness of their rights and interests, augmenting their family income and societal visibility, and gaining more influence within the family unit. However, it has also subjected them to the influence of online public opinion and social critique.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that self-media platforms do contribute to the empowerment of rural women to some degree. However, the voices of rural women on these platforms remain passive and objective, so reinforcing conventional gender norms. This can be attributed to the impact of social gaze, public opinion pressure, and the efficiency of resource allocation. Therefore, the study asserts that the empowerment of rural women through internet media is insufficient and, in fact, detrimental from a feminist perspective, as it highlights the lack of synchronization between the empowerment of women as a collective and as individuals. Furthermore, more efforts are required to genuinely empower underprivileged groups, such as rural women, through self-media. This work offers significant references for future research in this area, particularly addressing the study of women's empowerment in various ways and effects among different groups of women. Future research should prioritize rural women through self-media to reinforce traditional gender notions of women's collective rights and interests. It is important to conduct in-depth research to address the conflict between these two dimensions.

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