Research on the influence of short video usage on the acculturation of returning youth in a small town

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Abstract: Since the 18th National Congress, the Party has led the people of all ethnic groups in China in accomplishing the historic task of eradicating poverty and building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, achieving the first centenary goal. Based on this, many young people from rural towns choose to return to their hometowns for development. Town returners: Means those who return to their hometown to start a new career after gain experience in metropolises. This research targets to the young group of them, and the average age of interviewees is between 18-35. Through in-depth interviews, and from a semiotic perspective and the theory of use and satisfaction, this paper will explore the root causes of the cultural adaptation problems of town returners, and illustrate how the use of short videos can help town returners to promote the process of urban-rural integration while "identity reconstruction" and that this positive effect is closely related to the initiative of the participants in using short videos. Finally, in view of the cultural dilemmas of town returners, various social groups need to jointly explore the solutions in the construction of rural revitalization.

Keywords: town returners, short video, cultural adaptation semiotics

1 Introduction

In recent years, with the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy in China, the economy in rural areas develops rapidly, more and more young people from small villages choose to start their career in their hometown instead of living straggly in big cities. After gaining life and work experience in metropolises, the so-called “returners” go back to live and work in small towns. Because this group has accumulated rich life experience and social work experience in the metropolis, they return to live and work in towns and villages, they show the characteristics of cultural and social integration are difficult to adapt. This is obviously different from the small town youth in the general sense, presenting a new social and cultural status quo. At the same time, with the rise of short video, many young returners choose to resolve their cultural conflicts with the environment by watching and using short videos, not only to maintain links with big cities, but also to record their own life in small towns, so as to alleviate the dilemma of cultural adaptation.

This research combined the short video communication context of Chinese urban and township society with the user's self-construction and symbol dissemination in the social scene of the Internet media era, adopting the in-depth interview method to illustrate the influencing factors that lead to cultural adaptation problems among town returners and the impact of short video use on cultural adaptation of town returners from the perspective of the journey of 10 "young returners". The research results have positive significance for how young returners can adapt to culture and hence support the development of township youth and society in today's media environment.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Literature Review on Cultural Adaptation of Town Returners

The concept of cultural adaptation was mentioned by Redfield in 1936. It was defined as the change of the original cultural type of one or both parties when people of different cultural groups have continuous direct contact. It is called cultural adaptation. Subsequently, it has attracted great attention from domestic scholars and abroad, it has achieved more research results.[5]

Berry (1990) [4] divided cultural adaptation into four types: Assimilation, Separation, Integration, and Marginalization, and proposed a two-dimensional cultural adaptation model to study the problems faced by individuals in the process of cultural adaptation. Finally, it was concluded that the problems of ethnic minorities in the process of cultural adaptation are summarized into the following two points: on the one hand, whether to maintain and develop the characteristics of the source culture; On the other hand whether to tend to conduct cross-ethnic communication with the dominant society to evaluate and establish a positive relationship.

Lin Danhua,[7] a domestic scholar, from a psychological point of view and based on the social phenomenon of a large number of surplus rural labor force pouring into cities in our country, his research shows that the social interaction of the floating population in cities maintains strong "geographical" and "consanguinity" characteristics. Aand their main communication objects are countrymen, relatives and friends. This survival characteristic intensifies the survival pressure of the floating population (Lin Danhua, 2006). Now, farmers are moving to cities for economic purposes, and in the current social structure of urban and rural dual construction in my country. It is difficult for migrant workers to change their inherent identities, so return has become the final choice for migrant workers (Wang Peixin, 2010).[6]

2.2 Literature Review on the Use of Short Videos by Small Town Youth

Small Town Youth generally refers to young groups who are living in the third and fourth tier cities, or even in county. Some of them work in their hometown and the others are distributed in many cities, whose consumption capacity is gradually increasing. When the younger generation steps into society, some small-town youth choose to return to their hometowns for development and become "Town Returners."

The phenomenon of town returners watching and using short videos has aroused multi-

perspective research in the academic circle. Wang Chenglong and Wu Xiaowei studied the different psychological and behavioral characteristics of town returners and other young people of the same age, and showed obvious urbanization characteristics in the integration of lifestyle and social culture (Wang Chenglong, Wu Xiaowei, 2021). Zhang Yuling used the framework theory to make a general analysis of the "de-stigmatization" road of town returners, pointing out that with the short video platform becoming an important platform for young people in small towns to shape their images, town returners have shown different images of "tenacity" and "leisure" with different stereotypes, which have won the public's approval (Zhang Yuling, 2021). However, on the other hand, in the construction and refactoring of identity, town returners not only have contradictions between ideal self and real self, but also construct a group imagination for the label of "town returners" to which they belong (Wu Shan, 2022).[3]

The theory of semiotics communication is mainly derived from semiotics. Semiotics is applied as a methodology to communication research to reveal the essence of phenomena from the perspective of symbols. Originated from the West, Pierce proposed the concept of three points of symbols, that is, reproducing body, object, and explanatory item, which enriches the structure of semiotics. The process of symbols has three meanings: the intention meaning of the sender, the textual meaning of symbolic information, and the explanatory meaning of the receiver. He Yanjie,[10] a domestic scholar, analyzed the language and other symbols of young people in small towns from the perspective of semiotics, and pointed out that the short video text system of town returners takes language symbols and action symbols as its main parts, and the accompanying texts associated with symbolic texts together form the ideographic system of short videos, which plays an important role in content expression.

The studies have respectively discussed the image construction of town returners, the life integration of small-town returning youth and the identity refactoring on the short video platform. But they have not formed a systematic connection, and also explored the cultural adaptation of town returners in the context of new media. Therefore, the impact of the use of short videos on town returners needs further research.

However, these studies do not study the cultural adaptation of town returners from the direction of short videos, so they do not answer the question of whether the use of short videos is conducive to the cultural adaptation of town returners.

Therefore, this article will try to answer the following questions from the perspective of semiotics:

RQ1: What are the factors cause cultural adaptation problems among town returners?

RQ2: Why do returned town returners choose short video platforms for identity refactoring? Whether the using of short videos conducive to the cultural adaptation of returned town returners?

3 Research Methodology

This paper uses the research method of in-depth interviews in an attempt to answer the above questions.

3.1 In-depth interview method

3.1.1 Interview outline production.

The interview questions are divided into three main parts.

In the first part, it mainly involves the basic information of the interviewees, including their gender, age, place of origin, marriage and the main work content before and after returning to their hometown.

In the second part, the dimension of research questions is reduced to interview questions. Including what are the demands of town returners? Are they satisfied with the current situation after returning to their hometown? Did they encounter any difficulties in interpersonal communication, integration into the local cultural and social environment, and other aspects after returning to their hometowns, and what were the specific manifestations? What other cultural adjustment problems did they encounter after returning home? What are the ways of solving them? And what kind of good social environment do they expect?

In the third part, based on respondents' answers in the second part, we further explore the role and impact of the use of short videos on the above-mentioned cultural maladjustment problems. During the interviews and the conduct of the study, the researcher tried to avoid the fourfold ethical issues and transgressions highlighted by scholar Alan Brightman: causing harm to research participation, using material without informed consent, violating the privacy of research participants, and deceiving research participants.

And if interviewees had any questions they did not want to answer or were unhappy during the interview, they could remain silent or withdraw midway through the interview. Interview materials that the interviewees did not want to disclose were not included or cited in this study.

3.1.2 Selection of interviewees

This study conducted 30-60 minutes of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 interviewees who had the identity label of town returners and the characteristics of in-depth short video use, aged from 18-35. The interviews began in September 2022 and ended in October 2022. The interviewees firstly included small town returning youth around the researchers, and secondly a larger research sample was recruited through short-form video platforms. According to the maximum sampling principle of the qualitative research method, by the time the 12th interviewee was recruited, all the interviews were sufficient to answer the research questions and the sample collection was closed. The 10 most representative and most varied interview outlines were then selected for discussion of the study results. The interviewees differed in age, occupation, education level, region they lived in, and short video usage behavior, with low homogeneity. Interviews were conducted as telephone interviews/WeChat text interviews/one to one face-to-face interviews. The interview results were organized into verbatim scripts, with a total of about 52,000 words in the interview scripts (see Table 1 for the basic profile of the interviewees).

Table 1 List of basic information of interviewees

Number	Gender	Age	Education background	Marriage status	The location of City- township	Occupation
A	Male	32	College degree	Married	Beijing—Shijiazhuang	Housing maintenance Engineer
B	Male	22	Bachelor's degree from top schools	Unmarried	Beijing—County seat of Xiamen	Inland Revenue Department clerk
C	Male	22	College degree	Unmarried	Mianyang—Ya'an	Freelance photographer
D	Male	27	Master's degree from top schools	Unmarried	Chengdu—Jianyang	Breeding entrepreneur
E	Female	30	Bachelor's degree	Unmarried	Beijing—Chongli	Coffee Shop entrepreneur
F	Male	24	Bachelor's degree	Unmarried	Changsha—County seat of Shaoyang	China Mobile office staff
G	Male	34	Vocational high school	Married	Wuhan—Xiangyang Shihua Town	Wedding company host
H	Female	32	On-the-job Master's degree	Married	Chengdu—Town seat of Ganzi	Township and village cadres
I	Male	33	Bachelor's degree	Unmarried	Wuhan—Xiantao, Qianjiang town	We media for agriculture
J	Male	23	Master's degree from top schools	Unmarried	Beijing—Sichuan guangyuan	Financial and credit industry practitioner

4 Research findings

The interviews revealed that the common reasons for town returners were family ties, the blow of the epidemic on urban jobs, changes in personal opportunities, and personal choices in favour of a stable life. Regardless of the reasons, the young returners have some degree of acculturation problems for some time or all along after returning to their hometowns.

4.1 The urban-rural gap and role conflicts are the main factors leading to cultural adjustment problems

The characteristics of young returners, such as employment and entrepreneurship, technological innovation, good education and environmental awareness, are highly compatible with the overall vision of rural revitalization. However, there is a large objective gap between the urban and rural living environment, both at the level of material foundation and cultural environment atmosphere. The contradiction between the significant urbanisation and the traditional rural living environment has caused a large "gap" in the experience of urban-rural living rhythm for town returners. In our in-depth discussions with interviewees, we found that many of the responses reflected this phenomenon.

"In the county town there is not as rich material resources and cultural and spiritual provision, the sense of distance and fragmentation between people is more prevalent after returning to the countryside, and there is a mixture of fish and dragons, and each other's spiritual realm and focus is different and different in frequency." (Interviewee B)

"I felt surrounded by excellent person in Beijing, but when I returned to a small city I was often noticed for my high level of education, and it was easy to lose motivation to move up after working in a small city for a period of time, which is a change of mentality." (Interviewee J)

It can be seen that the relaxed cultural environment of a small town is incompatible with the urbanised “hard struggle” qualities of young returners. The sudden change in both role and environment can create a sense of 'disconnection' among them. This sense of fragmentation is not only caused by the difference in their living environment, but also by the deconstruction and reconstruction of their social status and personal value.

4.2 The traditional social characteristics of acquaintances in townships affect cultural adaptation

With the rapid development of urbanisation in China, urban life is increasingly concerned with efficient working rhythm, protection of personal privacy, consumer diversification, modern public rules, etc. On the contrary, in such a society of acquaintances, it is difficult to protect personal privacy, social acquaintance is more important than rules. And social values are relatively homogeneous and conservative. On the other hand, young returners from small towns are burdened with more parental and social expectations in terms of social integration. The gap between personal and social values magnifies the cultural adaptation anxiety of young returners, thus creating a double dilemma in terms of cultural and social integration. In-depth interviews with our interviewees yielded responses are as follows.

"The anxiety of returning to the hometown is out of personal concern. Since I decided to leave the big city and returned to the hometown, if you don't do well you will lose the connect with big city as well. And there is a great risk of failure to start a business at hometown. On the other hand, there is the inevitable apprehension when face to the comments and the gossip of the old people." (Interviewee I)

"I can gain an deeper understanding of society, industry policies, and the logic of thinking in dealing with things when I work in the city . While people in small cities have relatively backward and pedantic views and are used to see how things develop with traditional conservative ideas. This is particularly reflected in the old-fashioned way of thinking about money management. People in small cities are risk averse and strive for peace and stability. " (Interviewee J)

"Smaller counties have more complex interpersonal relationships, present a dictatorial vernacular social atmosphere at the leadership level, and have stressful and blurred work boundaries that are not as clear as in larger cities." (Interviewee F)

It is evident that there is a "shallow social integration" characteristic in the cultural adaptation of young returners . There is a certain resistance in integrating their personal values into the process of social development. Faced with the social environment of a small city, young returners are not only worried about reconstructing new contacts, channels, resources and other material aspects. But also face obstacles such as social and cultural conservatism, restricted personality development and complex interpersonal relationships. As a result, they present isolated representations and individualised compartmentalisation when carrying the complex social expectations of hometown and family.

4.3 Identity Reconstruction: Using Short Video to Dissolve Urban-Rural Characteristics

Based on the theory of use and satisfaction, our interviews revealed that young returners need to use short videos as a media platform to express their emotions, opinions or find resonance. So as to alleviate the information gap and cultural adaptation problems between urban and rural life due to a series of anxieties such as the need to rebuilding interpersonal networks, confusion in future life and evaluation of traditional social environment at the beginning of the return. Regarding attitudes related to alleviating acculturation through the use of short videos, the interviewees' responses corroborate our thoughts.

"I hate the complex interpersonal relationships, I just simply like to record my life in words, and by making short videos to vent my inner anxiety and uneasiness, as if I am telling my other self that I am trying to persist in sending my works, striding forward on my own path, and gaining value in my life through recording." (Interviewer G)

"Besides posting videos, watch other popular short videos is also a way to open up the conversation between me and my friends, thus relieving anxiety, resonating and connecting with them." (Interviewer F)

It can be seen that in terms of the initiative of short video use: young returners not only satisfy their entertainment needs by swiping short videos, but also enhance interpersonal connections and continuously build a circle cultural environment between individuals and society through the active use of short videos to alleviate cultural adaptation problems.

It is worth mentioning that young returners choose short video platforms for "identity reconstruction", which is a kind of dissolution and reconstruction of the dual characteristics of urban and rural areas. According to the theory of symbolic interaction, as the communication form of social scenes shifts from real to virtual, users are given different identities and roles, and different relationships are formed. In the social scene, young returners achieve identity

recognition, identity transformation and identity of urban and rural characteristics, complete role-playing, integrate into roles, identify with role values, and activate the connection of urban and rural relationships, thus realizing self-construction and self-identity.

Through a more in-depth interviews and research on this phenomenon, we found that young returners often have a deeper understanding that the boundary of information dissemination between urban and rural areas is gradually being broken with the rise and development of short video platforms. In the past print media era, the level of media development in cities was much higher than that in towns, and information dissemination could quickly reach every corner of the city. While the relative isolation of information dissemination in towns has gradually formed the characteristics of slow information circulation, cultural solidification, and high stability of social environment. With the advent of the era of "everyone has a microphone", the boundary of information dissemination between urban and rural areas is gradually broken, and the decentralization of media and the rise of mobile short videos have lowered the threshold of information production and dissemination, allowing young people in both urban and rural areas to become content producers and information disseminators. Therefore, rural stereotypes are stripped of their heavy shells, a new rural landscapes are reflected in the eyes of the public. For young returners, the use of short videos has brought them a platform to construct their self-image, which is the best evidence to dissolve the traditional stereotypical label of " young returners".

However, in terms of the intensity of the use of short videos, we have come to a few conclusions that are contrary to the promotion of cultural adaptation.

"We can't watch too much and trust all the content of short videos. For example, many videos about workplace topics and urban-rural conflicts have a great deal of untruthfulness, and it is easy to have an incorrect perception of oneself and the surrounding environment." (Interviewer J)

With the advent of the communication revolution, the mass transmission of media information has gradually replaced the traditional "intuitive" way of knowing the world, and the media environment has replaced the information environment in people's perception. With the emergence of short videos, the mass and low threshold of information dissemination has weakened the authenticity of information to a certain extent, thus affecting the authenticity in people's conceptual world and generating media resistance. The young returners themselves retain the conservative characteristics of the original cultural environment, and are more likely to question and resist the current mixed culture, so as to deepen the anxiety of cultural adaptation under the double "weightlessness" of the regional environment and information environment.

4.4 Urban-rural connection: short video becomes a "watchtower"

Through the the in-depth interviews and the analysis of the content of the video works shared by the young returners in the short video platform, we found that a large part of the content created by them is showing the hometown, depicting the humanistic atmosphere and expressing their personal life feelings. Some of the interviewees mentioned that after analyzing the audience profile of the short video platform accounts. They found that the audience is not only some local people, but also some young people from the same hometown who are working in the city. Or young people in the city who also have the label of "small town youth " , and the common point

of these people is that they all have a sense of "roots" based on local culture. Today's short video platforms are filled with a lot of "urban pop culture", and there is less content to record the life of the small town community. However, the "small town youth" who work in the city have the attachment to their hometown, and what they need is the feedback on this emotional demand and the short video content post by young returners meets the special needs of this kind of people. As "young returners" records and tells the changes of their hometown through their own perspective, becoming the "eyes" of urban youth looking at their hometown and maintaining their relationship with it.

"I feel that the process of posting videos and browsing videos actually plays a role of dissemination of information and bridge, which allows me to maintain high input and output with the outside world. (Interviewer H)

"I found that in addition to the local people who follow me, there are also part of the young people who work outside of the same hometown, brush to my video and gave me comments and messages, sometimes I feel that they are like another self in the city. I also want to tell young people through short videos, although the hometown is not as prosperous as the big cities, but our roots of culture are here, the family ties are inseparable. " (Interviewer G)

"I am an online agricultural products seller, usually I can get in touch with many elderly people, their agricultural products are of good quality, but few people know about them, and their thinking are more traditional and old-fashioned. From this, I suddenly realized that I can do something to help them." (Interviewer I)

It can be seen that the young returners to their hometown find their own creative value in short videos by posting short videos that reflect the new changes of the township, playing the role of the "eyes" of the young people who work in the city to contact their hometown. And the creators not only ease their own adaptation to the local cultural environment, but also become a bridge of communication between urban and rural youths, enhancing the ties between urban and rural areas, and helping the communication and development of urban and rural cultures. In addition, some young returners who are engaged in online sales of agricultural products have also obtained the motivation for career development by operating short video accounts, which not only actively dissolve their own cultural adaptation problems and reconstruct the cultural environment of the township, but also realize the win-win situation of self-development and promoting national rural revitalization.

5 Summary and Reflection

Using the in-depth interview method and through the theoretical perspectives of use and satisfaction theory, the identity construction of short video users under symbolic communication theory, this study investigated the cultural adaptation phenomenon of young returners, trying to answer what factors lead to the cultural adaptation problem of young returners, why small-town youth returning to their hometown choose short video platforms for identity reconstruction, whether the use of short video is beneficial to the young returners. The in-depth interviews revealed that the increase in the initiative of short video use has a greater positive impact on

the cultural adaptation of young returners. However, it is worth noting that the increase in the intensity of their use also has a negative impact on the cultural adaptation of small town youth. This is mainly due to the massive amount of information and low threshold of short videos. Thus, the appropriate use of short videos can promote the cultural adaptation of young returners, but at the same time, we should also be alert to its negative effects.

In the context of the national strategy of rural revitalization, China's rural society, which is the most "vernacular", is undergoing a practical change towards urban culture. In recent years, there has been a trend of college students returning to their hometowns to start their businesses and college student village officials become a popular phenomena. Their urbanized characteristics make them a reserve force for the development of rural revitalization strategy, playing the role of urban culture disseminators, practitioners of scientific and technological innovation, and promoters of rural civilization. Based on this social phenomenon, this study proposes a new perspective on the use of short videos and the cultural adaptation of "young returners", and while promoting and supporting the development of youth returning to their hometowns, we also need to pay attention to the cultural adaptation of "young returners" brought about by the differences in urban and rural cultural environments and new changes in the development of townships.

However, this study is still inadequate in terms of measures and suggestions for the cultural adaptation of "young returners". The group young returners is becoming an emerging force that cannot be ignored in the process of modernization and transformation of the rural society, and needs a more solid social support system to provide cultural adaptation and social integration. On the one hand, it provides cultural soil for them to better complete cultural adaptation and social integration. On the other hand, it improves the policy assistance of young returners in the process of social reform and innovation. In the future, researchers should actively expand the research and practice of young returners, and put forward more suggestions and solutions to their cultural adaptation problems from the social level, so as to better gather youth power and promote rural revitalization.

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