

A Study on Rural Cultural Communication of Short Videos From the Perspective of Mediation—Taking the Popularization of “Village BA” (Village Basketball Association) in Qiandongnan as an Example

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With the rise of new media and short videos shaping the new communication environment, rural culture has been mediated and transformed to spread to a wider region. As a cultural achievement of rural revitalization, “Village BA” (Village Basketball Association) demonstrates Chinese modernization. The use of short videos, mass rural movements, and “spectacle” spaces to attract spectators has become a key issue in the dissemination of rural culture.

Keywords: new media mediated, rural culture, short video, “Village BA”

Taijiang County, Qiandongnan Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou Province, an obscure southern county, has become a dazzling “Internet celebrity county” in the past two years due to the popularity of “Village BA” (Village Basketball Association). On major short video platforms, issues and information about “village BA” spread rapidly and the heat does not abate. Basketball enthusiasts from all over the world have formed a consumer boom in Taijiang County, which has greatly driven the development of the local economy. The popularity of “Village BA” in Taijiang County can be regarded as one of the most representative cultural phenomena in China since 2022, which is very characteristic of China, and also contains the internal logic of the rapid spread of rural culture, which is worth exploring and analysing in depth. From the perspectives of social psychology, communication, and marketing, the reason why “Village BA” in Taijiang County has become a cultural landscape and a social phenomenon lies mainly in the fact that the mediated image of the countryside creates a spectacle of communication, and the mass movement of the countryside promotes the spread of emotions.

Attracting spectators who have never been to the real rural space by transforming it into a visual image, spectators can be guided to the actual location through this medium. Considering the deep-rooted role of culture in constructing the image of the countryside. This paper argues that the dissemination of rural culture through short videos is an important way to realise the creative transformation and creative development of rural culture in the new era. At the same time, it is also an important way to eliminate the “gap” between urban and rural culture, and even re-tribalisation.

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The Communication Spectacle: The “Mediumlization” of the Image of the Countryside

In people’s memories, Guizhou Qiandongnan is an autonomous minority state with a large area and a small population. It has a long history and a rich cultural heritage, with multi-ethnic cultures mingling and stirring in this place. Over the past two years, Taijiang County in Qiandongnan has become famous for its “Village BA”, a sports event that involves all the people of the county, and the most important reason behind it is to shape the image of the countryside through the media.

Hot keywords such as “Be filled to capacity”, “Fighting for the honour of the village”, and “Yao Ming begging for tickets” show the domestic media’s keen interest in the “Village BA” tournament. At the same time, Yahoo, NBC, CBS, and other foreign media have also “seen” this small county in the mountains of Southwest China through a variety of ways, and seen the cultural charm behind the “Village BA”. Domestic and international media swarmed to report on the success of the “Village BA” hot out of the circle. However, compared to this, the “mediatized” rural image is a more critical element that breaks out of the circle. It can be said that it is the “mediatized” rural image that creates the spectacular spread of rural culture.

Nowadays, in an era of rapid development of media technology, the country, society, and even rural culture are inevitably facing the reshaping of “mediumlization”. Anything shaped by “mediumlization” quickly becomes the focus of intense attention. The term “mediumlization” refers to a “cultural relationship that presents openness and interactivity, a cycle of reciprocity, and the possibility of linking multiple elements so that the medium becomes the centre of the issue” (Meng, 2023, p. 99). The attraction of “Village BA” in Taijiang County reflects a typical “mediumlization” shaping process, which has gone through three main stages of public opinion.

The first phase, in June 2021, is described as a period of accumulation and emergence of the “Village BA”. During this phase “‘Village BA’ (Beautiful Countryside Basketball League) was officially launched as a major IP tournament for the whole province of Guizhou” (Peng, 2022, p. 8), a folk sports event selected from the village, to the county, and then to the province, one level upwards, began to enter the public’s field of vision, which triggered a heated debate in Guizhou Province.

In the second phase, from July to August 2022, the climax of public opinion came with the semi-finals of “Village BA” in Taijiang County. The basketball game held by the people has attracted the attention of the whole people due to the spread of short videos. The different aesthetic experience has broken the horizon of expectations of “online” spectators. On the Internet, a public opinion field about “Village BA” has begun to form. On 22 July 2022, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhao Lijian liked and retweeted a video about “Village BA”, which brought “Village BA” into the international spotlight. Through Zhao Lijian’s recommendation, all kinds of mainstream media have come down to endorse “Village BA”, and nearly 100 domestic provincial and municipal-level integrated media centres as well as CCTV and other publicity and dissemination departments have also begun to follow up on the hotspot of “Village BA”. For many days in a row, the short video screen has become an Internet national carnival, and more and more spectators have begun to give birth to the image of Guizhou’s countryside in such a carnival. The third phase, from August 2022 to March 2023, is the period of public opinion diffusion. With the conclusion of the semi-finals and the arrival of the finals of “Village BA”, Taijiang County has once again gained the attention of the whole nation, and tens of thousands of people flocked to Taijiang County within a short period of time, so that “Village BA” has once again made itself a widely known outside of fixed circle, and has really extended its influence to the whole country and even overseas.

In the process of “mediumlization” of the rural image of Taijiang, people’s attention is not only focused on the sports events in which all the people participate, but also the unique culture of the ethnic minorities, which has become an important incentive to attract people to take a deeper look at the image of Guizhou’s countryside, and has demonstrated the important power of “mediumlization” in shaping the image of Guizhou’s countryside. In addition, The dissemination of short video media, recommendations from spokespersons of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, endorsement from mainstream media, and firsthand experiences of on-site spectators also play a very important role in multi-dimensional communication. Multi-dimensional and three-dimensional communication enables the public to build a “panoramic field” in their minds about “Village BA” and even Guizhou’s countryside, and keywords such as warmth, simplicity, and innocence become the public’s inner evaluation of Guizhou’s countryside, and from this, people construct hypothetical imaginations of Guizhou’s countryside, which ultimately transforms into their inner goodwill towards the image of Guizhou’s countryside.

Through the hotspot dissemination of short videos, coupled with the interplay of many dissemination individuals, a spreading spectacle that attracts widespread attention has been created. The hot topics of “Village BA” in Taijiang are constantly raised: “Beautiful countryside”, “participation of all people”, atmosphere, passion, food, basketball, and other keywords are constantly emerging, and then disseminated through various short video platforms such as Tiktok, Bilibili and so on, depicting the image of a diverse village in the new era. And through the combination and connection of public opinion and imagination, the positive effect of “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”, as Aristotle said, is produced, shaping a “mediatised” picture of the countryside in the new era, and realising the reconstruction, reproduction, and dissemination of rural culture.

Emotional Communication: Massification of the Rural Movement

From the perspective of Marketing Integration Theory, “Emotion is an important factor in consumers’ choice of whom to consume. Once a consumer identifies with a brand and invests his or her emotions in it, he or she will develop consumer dependence and stable loyalty to it” (Ren, 2014, p. 12). As a result, brands tend to stimulate an emotional knot that already exists in the consumer’s mind, in order to call upon the subject’s emotions and thus establish a close association between the consumer and the brand. For the “Village BA” of Taijiang County, the national participatory rural movement has aroused the spectator’s emotion and resonance from multiple angles and at a deeper level, and through the dissemination of short videos, it has constructed a community of emotions that spans both on and off the field and connects the online and offline worlds.

First of all, the participation of all people in “Village BA” in Taijiang County is reflected in the organisation of the tournament. Unlike highly professional and elitist basketball tournaments such as the NBA and the CBA, the Village BA, a basketball tournament based on the traditional festival “Chixin festival”, does not have a professional organising body to host the tournament, organise the process, and set the rules. Instead of organising the tournament, organising the process, and setting the rules, the organisation of the “Village BA” tournament is entirely the responsibility of the village members. Prior to the annual Chixin Festival, village basketball associations, senior citizen associations, and other private organisations, as well as members of the village, participate in the organisation of the basketball tournament on their own initiative, based on which a rationalised division of labour is carried out, with the government department only responsible for approving the tournament, but not intervening in the actual agenda of the tournament. Such a participatory event organisation greatly enhances the cultural value and social significance of the sports competition itself. For example, for the “Village BA” tournament to be held in 2022, from the organisation and coordination of the pre-game, to the refereeing

during the game, to the post-game ceremonies and celebrations, all the processes will be taken care of by members of the village and volunteers from the Basketball Association. The lively game site is no longer filled with scrolling electronic screens, players and onlookers no longer have eye-catching advertisements implanted on the body, and the “village BA” thus basically abandoned the interference of outside forces, no longer by the victory or defeat of the “vanity fair”, highlighting the beauty of sports for all.

Secondly, the participation of all people in the “Village BA” in Taijiang County is also reflected in the participating teams. In Qiandongnan, Guizhou, basketball is a very popular competitive sport, and whenever a basketball game is held, the whole village will participate. In addition, the registration conditions of the “Village BA” are very loose, almost no threshold, and the rules of the game are relatively simple, so players can register without special training and study. Therefore, most of the teams that sign up for the “Village BA” are made up of non-professional players who love basketball in each village. These players pick up their hoes and plough when they are busy, and then meet up to play on the court in their spare time. There are even some who usually work outside, but return to their hometowns to sign up for the game during festivals. Such a composition of the participating teams makes the selection of players and appearances in the “Village BA” game no longer held hostage by commercial value, and the choice of live screen is no longer subject to the interference of capital logic; the “Village BA” has thus become a pure and “non-utilitarian” tournament carnival. In addition, it is worth mentioning that in order to attract more people to participate in the “Village BA”, in addition to the regular grouping of the men’s group in the group setting, the Taijiang Village BA has also added a special women’s group and the junior group of two groups, which greatly meets the original intention of common participation, sports for all.

Finally, the participation of all people in the “Village BA” in Taijiang County is also reflected in the spectators. As a basketball tournament that has been held continuously for more than 60 years, the “Chixin Festival” basketball tournament provides a platform for villagers to communicate and integrate with each other (Kuang, 2023). In particular, the “Village BA”, which has evolved in recent years on the basis of the EatShin Festival Basketball Tournament, allows all people to participate in and watch, and does not require any additional fees, such as tickets, and at the same time, there are also sumptuous ethnic minority cuisines and unique folk cultures on display, which has made the “Village BA” the closest sporting event to the ordinary people. In the lively game scene, the enthusiastic spectator filled the entire basketball court all around, they either stood or sat, and shouting and shouting filled the entire space of the basketball court. In such a carnival atmosphere, professionalised and commercialised basketball games gradually become more approachable and relatable, becoming purer and more natural, and really allowing the spectator to participate in the game activities and feel the unique aesthetic experience.

Participatory sport for all evokes emotion and identity on all fronts. Through the dissemination of short videos, people can see measures such as non-professional event organizations, non-professional participating players, and non-commercial competition arrangements that are jointly organized by the whole nation, presenting the richness and simplicity of rural culture in a three-dimensional and multi-dimensional way. And the long-term nature of emotional dissemination quietly triggers spectators’ behavioral motivations, while spreading rural culture, it enables absent online spectators to have a real experience of crossing space in rural spaces.

Mediated Pilgrimage: The Landscaping of Rural Space

The term “mediated pilgrimage” refers to an “act of ‘symbolic travelling’ through a mediated gaze” (Tang & Wang, 2023, p. 10). According to Kudry, a professor of communication studies in the UK, “the act of travelling

to an authentic location after the public has participated in a mediated narrative such as a short video is a ‘mediated pilgrimage’” (Jiang & Guo, 2020, p. 13). In the context of the new media era, the concept of “the medium is the message” has been interpreted to the extreme, and the effect of rapid dissemination has infinitely enhanced the topic of the media, the attention, and the demand for niche markets. The spectator’s media gaze can give the medium a high level of online popularity in a short period of time, and while gazing at the medium, the spectator is able to fantasise about the geospatial space being gazed at according to his or her own personal preference, as well as to give meaning to it through symbols. As a result, real space begins to exist and propagate in a symbolic and landscaped form within a mediated virtual space.

The “Village BA” in Taijiang County has flowed in the virtual space of the media in the form of symbolisation and landscaping by virtue of the dissemination of short videos, which satisfies the symbolic imagination of the spectator of “virtual presence” on the “Village BA”. For example, the popular videos about “Village BA”—“Beautiful Village”, “The Most Pure Basketball Feast”, “Full of Village Flavor”, “Go Miao Clubbing”, “The Most Beautiful Card Punching Point”, “Wait for Me to Play”, and so on, spread on the short video platforms such as Tiktok, Bilibili, etc. These social symbols and symbolic discourses with private ideologies not only constitute a distinct narrative system of internet celebrity discourse with postmodern cultural characteristics, but also create a spatial field for virtual presence for online spectators, successfully connecting the media symbols of the virtual world with the spatial landscape of the actual society, and dissolving the material difference between physical absence and presence. And, when the spectator goes to the popular destination of Taijiang County in Qiandongnan, Guizhou in reality and completes the “media pilgrimage” of on-site check-in, in a sense, it completes the transformation from “absence symbol construction” to “on-site landscape experience” (Zhou, Lu, Zhu, & Zhang, 2023, p. 68). Thus, in the depths of the heart, we have given a new image to the virtual impression of Taijiang countryside, integrating the media fantasy before the pilgrimage with the current real perception, and realizing the “interactive ritual participation” between the body and the landscape. After the “media pilgrimage”, the spectator’s inner feelings and personal experiences become an important part of the rural image re-circulation, influencing the imagination and impression of the people who are “virtually present” on the image of Taijiang’s countryside through the media.

The explosion of “Village BA” in Taijiang County is to a large extent due to the fact that “absent” spectators go to Taijiang County, a regional landscape that keeps appearing and being talked about in the media narrative, in order to experience the pure basketball culture, to feel the different local people and to witness the unique countryside, or to go to Taijiang County, a regional landscape that keeps appearing and being talked about in the media narrative, in order to fulfil the group rituals of “Village BA” for the purpose of achieving the final purpose of “media pilgrimage” for the sake of their own personal social needs and circle identities. And after the “pilgrimage”, the personal experience will be posted on the Internet, through the likes, comments, retweets, one-click trifecta, and sharing to the circle of friends and other ways to make a “lost” image of the southwest countryside to be discovered, to be recognised, to be landscaped. As a new cultural phenomenon, “Village BA” in Taijiang County also provides a space for the public to release their emotions, imagination, and emotional experience, connecting people with the countryside to create an emotional bridge of connection and identity, making the countryside a place where the spectator aspires to be, and a place where cultural images can be expressed and spoken.

Inspiration and Prospect: The Rural Image of the New Era Constructed by All the People

The “Village BA” in Qiandongnan has successfully stimulated the emotions and resonance of spectators both domestically and internationally through the dissemination of short videos, becoming one of the most representative cultural phenomena in China since 2022, with strong Chinese characteristics. Specifically, as one of the national festivals, Qiandongnan “Village BA” has become a popular cultural landscape and social phenomenon. The first reason is that through short video communication, it has created a media image of the countryside, created a new scene of communication on the Internet, and portrayed a new image of the countryside for the public in a new era. Secondly, the popularization of rural sports highlights the initial charm of sports competition, reflects the simplicity and purity of rural culture, and promotes the emotional dissemination of short videos. Finally, the “landscaped” rural space attracts “absent” spectators to complete the “media pilgrimage” through on-site check-in. While the spectator’s body interacts with the real landscape, it can spread a new era of rural image with diverse cultural values.

In today’s era of rapid development of communication technology, the emergence of new media has changed traditional communication methods, short video communication has shaped a new communication environment, and a media society is opening up. For the “Village BA” in Qiandongnan, how to turn instant revelry into constant joy and spread the new and vibrant rural image of the new era has become an unavoidable new issue at present. It is not difficult to find that the dissemination of rural culture through short videos and other Internet media is only the first step to promote rural culture, and more importantly, the active participation and cultural consciousness of rural cultural subjects. When the dissemination subject of rural culture has a subjective cultural consciousness, it will spontaneously present excellent rural culture to the outside world in a resolute and down-to-earth way, while actively speaking to the world and awakening its own cultural value, so as to spread a vibrant new era rural image in the era of rural revitalization.

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