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FRAMING RETURNING ENTREPRENEURIAL YOUTH IN RURAL CHINA: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF SHORT VIDEO CREATORS

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Abstract:

This study investigates how returning entrepreneurial youth are framed within Douyin's "Three Rural Issues" short video sphere. Drawing on a purposive sample of eight creators and a corpus of sixteen first-person narrative videos, we conduct narrative analysis grounded in framing theory. Coding proceeded along four dimensions: personal background, return motivations, self-positioning, and narrative focus, to examine how creators frame self-identity, articulate value orientations, and intervene in the "Three Rural Issues" discursive field. Findings show that short video creators have constructed a new youth image within rural revitalization through self-narratives: creators shift from rural documentarians to rural guardians, cultural trendsetters, and agents of revitalization. Educational and professional trajectories underpin entry into the field; diversified backgrounds provide unique material for creation, while media and marketing experience clarifies entrepreneurial direction. Return motivations combine policy and economic opportunities with intrinsic value commitments, producing narrative reorientation—from an early emphasis on economic returns to the increasing integration of cultural heritage and public-interest elements. Self-positioning evolves from individual entrepreneurs to participants in collective rural development, accompanied by a shift from traffic acquisition to the assumption of social responsibility. Narrative perspective expands from individualized lenses to multi-angled depictions that foreground rural vitality while acknowledging structural constraints and developmental challenges. The study extends framing theory to first-person digital storytelling and illuminates the communicative practices through which returning entrepreneurial youth negotiate subjectivity and agency within China's rural revitalization discourse.

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Framing Theory, Returning Entrepreneurial Youth, "Three Rural Issues" Short Videos, Self-Narrative, Short Video Creator



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Introduction

Against the backdrop of China's Rural Revitalization Strategy and the widespread popularization of mobile Internet technology, an increasing number of "new-generation youths" armed with new knowledge, capabilities, skills, and experiences are returning to rural areas. They document rural changes and contribute to rural development through "Three Rural Issues" short videos (TRI short videos). As defined by Li and Du (2020), TRI short videos refer to short videos focusing on agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. These videos typically range from 30 seconds to 10 minutes in length. Their content themes are diverse, covering aspects such as rural life, folk culture, agricultural techniques, and rural governance.

In contrast to traditional rural videos, TRI videos not only enjoy the advantage of fragmented dissemination but also innovate in themes and content. They integrate modern popular elements, thus constructing a dynamic and multi-dimensional image of "new agriculture, new rural areas, and new farmers" (Li & Dai, 2022). By the end of 2024, there were over 80,000 active TRI video creators on Douyin, each boasting more than 10,000 followers (Douyin, 2025). These young returnees, equipped with urban skills, digital literacy, and social networks, blend modern entrepreneurial practices with local rural characteristics. They project an image of "New Farmers" that combines traditional heritage and modern charm.

Preliminary observations by Xu (2025) suggest that young people who have returned to rural areas do far more than just adapt to rural life. They actively engage in the development and transformation of rural areas. These young individuals consider themselves as witnesses documenting rural realities, guardians of cultural heritage, and pioneers of rural revitalization (ESCAP, 2023). These videos depict daily life, entrepreneurship, cultural heritage, intergenerational ties, and rural civilization, reshaping rural identity and challenging stereotypes of backwardness (Xu & Zhu, 2023). However, Xu and Wang (2021) argue that in the current media image construction of the youth group in short videos, there exist issues such as distortions from over-beautification, over-commercialization driven by capital, and dramatized presentations that mock or highlight the grotesque.

Although increasingly studied, prior research has largely emphasized content narration, communication strategies, and rural product marketing in short videos, while neglecting how creators—especially through first-person narratives—reveal return motivations, identity transformation, value construction, and creative practices. In examining role construction and evolution, Framing Theory provides a solid theoretical foundation. Yet Van Dijk (2023) criticizes that personal frames rooted in individual experiences, beliefs, and values are often obscured by broader social frames.

Personal narratives are subjectively meaningful accounts of life events that shape individuals' experiential structures (Furman, 2023). Viswanathan (2025) posits that in the digital age, personal narratives, serving as tools for "reconstructing identity and conveying resilience," have seen their careers expand to include social media posts, personal blogs, short videos, etc. Despite this expansion, their core essence remains "authentic experiences + subjective expressions + thematic focus." Self-narrative videos are narrative video texts primarily in the first person that center on the experiences, motivations, identities, and value expressions of the narrative subject, combining the features of in-depth interviews and digital storytelling. As such, they are suitable as qualitative materials for identity construction and meaning-generation. Internet-enabled self-narratives, by facilitating the recollection and organization of life stories in the process of self-definition, provide opportunities for these narratives to gain social responses and recognition, thereby supporting the construction and development of narrative identity (Bortolan, 2024).

The self-narrative videos of TRI video creators, as semi-structured "video interview" texts, not only contain the creators' emotional expressions and personal experiences but also imply their understandings and expectations regarding the social environment, personal development, and the future of rural areas. Based on this premise, this paper selects 16 self-narrative videos from 8 returning entrepreneurial youth active in short video creation as research samples. Guided by Framing Theory, it deeply analyzes the formation mechanism of TRI video creators' personal frames. Specifically, these research questions are:

- RQ1: How do returning entrepreneurial youth present and frame their self-identities in self-narrative videos?
- RQ2: How do young entrepreneurs returning to rural areas use elements of Framing Theory to convey their value orientations?
- RQ3: What are the significance and impacts of returning entrepreneurial youth's identity positioning on the discourse field of TRI videos?

The research objective of this study is to extend the application of Framing Theory from traditional news and text analysis to first-person digital narratives through a micro-narrative approach. It aims to provide theoretical and empirical insights into the role transformation of individual creators in constructing digital rural spaces, and to inform strategies that encourage young returnee entrepreneurs to contribute to rural revitalization.

Literature Review

Research on Returning Entrepreneurial Youth

The phenomenon of young people returning to rural areas to start businesses has been widely discussed in rural sociology and migration research. As Thuy et al. (2025) point out, returning to rural areas for entrepreneurship has the potential to promote the sustainable development of rural areas across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. According to Riethmuller et al. (2021), returnees are primarily driven by factors such as lower living costs, entrepreneurial opportunities, family responsibilities, and place attachment. They value the significance of rural settings through place-related dimensions, including the living environment, interpersonal relationships, and cherished memories. Furthermore, Atkočiūnienė and Šimkienė (2023) indicate that rural communities should strive to build interconnected networks and sustainable employment opportunities. However, relevant discussions and empirical achievements remain scarce in communication studies.

In China, some research has focused on the digital practices of youth returnees under the Rural Revitalization Strategy. As Wang and Shi (2024) argue, the Rural Revitalization Strategy encourages young people to return and contribute to rural economic growth, cultural rejuvenation, and community resilience. Current research predominantly zeroes in on the practical hurdles encountered by young entrepreneurs returning to rural areas, for instance, incomplete policy support, insufficient entrepreneurial resources, an underoptimized entrepreneurial environment and human capital, as well as a lack of diversity in cross-actor collaborative entrepreneurship. To address these issues, Xu (2025) proposes that it is essential to fortify policy guidance and incentive mechanisms, innovate rural revitalization models to mobilize young people, set up exemplary cases to exert a demonstrative effect, and guide more young individuals to participate in rural development.

Liu et al. (2022) note, young returnees typically possess advantages in capital, skills, and social networks. These assets enable them to propel the development of non-agricultural sectors, entrepreneurship, and e-commerce in rural regions, thus creating jobs, increasing incomes, and supporting poverty alleviation. Live-streaming e-commerce has become a core model for their rural entrepreneurial activities. According to Xu and Zhu (2023), short video creation has evolved into a crucial instrument for young returnees to reconstruct and affirm their identities. They use short videos to enhance the positive digital visibility of rural areas and re-fashion previously rustic or neglected rural images. As Xu and Wang (2021) point out, rural youth actively reshape the social image of rural areas and disseminate rural culture on short video platforms, which constitutes an important means for them to achieve self-identification and pursue cultural belonging. However, Cao et al. (2025) indicate that while short videos confer a certain degree of discursive power and visibility on young returnee entrepreneurs at the action, expression, and relationship levels, such entrepreneurs still face multiple practical challenges, including constraints in social networks, funding, operational planning, and content innovation. Consequently, the efficacy of digital empowerment remains limited, revealing a “rift between digital aspirations and reality”. Existing research, however, tends to treat short videos merely as an “identity tool”, with little focus on how young rural returnees actively reshape their roles through digital media—especially via short video narratives. It fails to analyze, from the self-narrative perspective of video creators, how they define their roles and values and translate these into concrete narrative practices, while overlooking how such practices restructure the

relationship between young people and rural areas. This lacuna leads to a lack of logical closure in the existing literature on short videos and youth rural development.

Research on the Dissemination of "Three Rural Issues" Short Videos

The Social Functions Of "Three Rural Issues" Short Videos

The development of digital technology has revolutionized human communication and information access, with short video platforms such as Douyin, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts being the most influential. As Febrina et al. (2024) note, their short videos quickly capture users' attention and engage audiences within seconds. In rural areas, this makes short video platforms the "daily infrastructure" for information, social interaction, and the economy (Sun et al., 2025).

In rural development, social media breaks geographical boundaries, alleviating farmers' social isolation and facilitating collaboration among farmers, enterprises, and consumers (Ramavhale et al., 2024). Under "Internet + Agriculture", the integration of short videos and rural products has driven rural revitalization progress (Zhao, 2024). Similarly, Sun and Jiang (2019) indicate short videos serve as a new approach to poverty alleviation, rural image shaping, and governance model construction.

Specifically, Liu and Jiao (2023) argue TRI videos inject new ideas into rural revitalization by stimulating collective memory resonance and rural identity. Zhang and Deng (2024) further note they drive the convergence of people, goods, capital, and information to empower rural modernization. Additionally, short video platforms showcase rural landscapes, customs, and products (Genkai, 2023).

However, existing research has a critical gap: it focuses on short videos' "macro-effects" but ignores how creators use self-narrative to reveal the deep logic behind their social functions.

Image Construction in "Three Rural Issues" Short Videos

TRI video creators combine real-life recordings with brand building to present rural media images, which vary in style and connotation. On the one hand, Wang (2022) points out many depict booming rural economies, culturally rich landscapes, and livable environments. On the other hand, Zhang (2023) notes some rural images are free-form, casual, and fragmented, failing to convey rural comfort. Instead, they are filled with grotesque elements that evoke alienation.

Beyond the overall rural image, the group image of rural residents is also an indispensable part of rural image research. As identified by Wang (2022), six typical media images frequently appear in TRI videos: returning new farmers, successful strugglers, potential consumers, disoriented individuals, representatives of rural aesthetics, and capital boosters. Among these groups, rural grassroots cadres and rural women are also frequently examined. Liu (2023) indicates that short videos showcase modern rural women's pursuit of self-realization and their adherence to positive values, while Jin (2024) puts forward that short video platforms have actively constructed the social image of rural grassroots cadres and highlighted the enterprising and innovative traits of new farmers in contemporary rural China.

Notably, returning young people are a particularly prominent group portrayed in TRI videos, depicted through diverse roles such as rural documentarians, rural cultural communicators, and leaders of rural revitalization. Yet the act of returning to rural areas itself is a process of identity adjustment. As Xu and Zhu (2023) state, these young creators need to shift from "recipients of modern experience" to "promoters of rural development", constantly adapting to shifts in self-positioning between these two contrasting roles. Here again, existing research has a clear limitation: it has paid very limited attention to how such shifts and adaptations in self-positioning are discursively constructed. Most studies adopt an external, third-person perspective and lack first-person narrative accounts that examine how returning youth complete self-identity construction through short video blogging.

Case Studies of "Three Rural Issues" Short Videos

These short videos depict rural life from an "ordinary-people's perspective", a characteristic that has spawned numerous rural internet celebrities with millions of followers, such as Li Ziqi, Kangzai Nongren, and Mai Xiaodeng. These celebrities act not only as content creators but also as disseminators of rural culture and drivers of rural industries, making them typical cases for studying TRI short video dissemination.

Taking these cases individually, Liu and Jiao (2023) propose that Li Ziqi's representation of an idealized rural life in Chinese short videos has provided a new paradigm for the international communication of rural China. As Lian (2023) points out, the short videos of "Kangzai Nongren" convey symbolic elements such as farming techniques, rural cuisine, and rural landscapes, presenting a three-dimensional and multi-faceted new image of TRI. As noted by Li (2022), the short videos of "Mai Xiaodeng" feature innovative family interaction narratives and female image construction, performing key value functions: displaying a multi-dimensional countryside, disseminating images of new rural areas, new farmers, and new agriculture, and attracting online traffic to support agricultural development.

Despite these insights from individual case studies, existing research on the intersection of returning entrepreneurs and short videos still has significant shortcomings. At present, such research mainly focuses on the communication content, strategies, and functional impacts of TRI videos, with nearly no individual-level analysis of short video creators. Such research has two major limitations. First, the sample selection is narrow: most rely on single-case analysis and fail to derive general patterns from multiple cases. Second, the analytical perspective is superficial: existing work only addresses "what content is presented" without delving into the deeper meanings embedded in creators' self-narratives. Few studies systematically explain how returning youth complete the transformation of identity construction and value cognition—from rural returnee entrepreneurs to public-interest contributors—through personal narrative practices.

Theoretical Foundation: Framing Theory

Goffman (1974) defined "frame" as a cognitive structure that individuals use to simplify and categorize social experiences, making them more easily understandable. He emphasized the importance of frames in individual cognition and social interaction. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) put forward the concept of "frame definition", arguing that a frame is a set of standards used in selecting, emphasizing, and presenting issues related to "what exists, what has happened, and what is important". Research progress of Framing Theory indicates that frames

are multi-level and multi-dimensional: the personal experience frame, the issue frame, and the institutional/system frame are nested within one another.

However, Framing Theory in communication has long been trapped in the "institution" and "audience" dichotomy (Entman, 1993). This perspective simplifies individual narratives to an intermediate link in frame communication, rather than regarding them as active agents. Carter's (2013) research shows that communicators' frames, including language, images, and narrative structures, not only influence the audience's cognition but also participate in the construction of social reality. As a "socio-cultural discursive convention", the frame was dominated by authors in the era of traditional media.

In the era of social media, it has evolved into a dynamic process of "co-construction through user negotiation", integrating the characteristics of both mass communication and interpersonal communication (Güran & Özarlan, 2022). In the view of Cho et al. (2024), current frame analysis is usually based on mass media and focuses on analyzing common content. In fact, social media literacy, that is, an individual's choices and values, affects the reality constructed by individuals on social media. This makes it necessary for us to direct our research towards personal frames.

In current research, the return of TRI video creators to start businesses in rural areas is often attributed to the driving effect of national policy support and the traffic dividends of platform algorithms. However, their own motivations and pursuits, such as their active concern for rural development and their internal need for self-value realization, are often overlooked. Also neglected is the dynamic development and value reconstruction of personal frames in the process of returning to start businesses in rural areas. The self-narrative videos of young people who return to rural areas are actually a frame revolution of self-awareness.

Therefore, this study selects the TRI video creators' personal self-narrative videos. It intends to deeply analyze the underlying logic of their value transformation in rural areas from four dimensions: personal background, returning motivations, personal positioning, and narrative focus. The aim is to reveal how individual narratives reconstruct the self-meaning system within the urban-rural binary structure.

Methodology

Research Design and Paradigm

Narrative research, as Clandinin and Caine (2013) point out, enables in-depth exploration of an individual's life experiences. Baumeister and Newman (1994) argue that people's efforts to make sense of their experiences usually take the form of constructing narratives (stories). This study adopts a qualitative research approach from an interpretivist perspective, mainly using narrative analysis, supplemented by framing coding. The aim is to uncover how TRI video creators construct the image of returning entrepreneurial youth in their personal self-narratives, and to explore the profound meaning in the process of transition from individual concerns to rural concerns.

Sample Selection

This study employed a purposive sampling approach to select 16 self-narrative TRI videos (two videos per creator) from eight creators on the Douyin platform as its analytical sample. These eight creators were intentionally selected because they explicitly identify as returning entrepreneurial youth and center their content on first-person rural self-narratives—an alignment that directly addresses the study’s core inquiry into how this group constructs rural identities and images. The rationale for this sample size is rooted in the exploratory, qualitative orientation of the study: rather than aiming for statistical generalizability, the design prioritizes interpretive depth and theoretical saturation. Given the study’s focus on thematic analysis of rural image construction—an inquiry centered on unpacking nuanced, context-dependent storytelling—a sample of eight creators was deemed sufficient to achieve saturation in core thematic patterns, as iterative review of additional content did not reveal novel theoretical insights. Specifically, in our pre-analysis of 12 potential creators, no new thematic categories emerged after reviewing the 8th creator’s content, confirming theoretical saturation at this sample size.

To ensure representativeness and diversity, creators were recruited from rural areas in China’s underdeveloped central and western regions (Shaanxi, Chongqing, Henan, Ningxia, and Gansu provinces); this focus imbues the research with heightened social value by centering regions frequently marginalized in mainstream media narratives. Regarding creator backgrounds, variations in educational attainment, professional histories, video production styles, thematic focuses, and audience reach—encompassing top-tier creators (over 1 million followers), mid-tier creators (500,000–1 million followers), and emerging creators (100,000–500,000 followers)—were intentionally incorporated to capture a broad spectrum of rural storytelling practices. All selected creators maintain consistent posting activity (≥ 2 videos/month) and content visibility ($\geq 10,000$ views), thereby enhancing the cultural resonance of the sample.

Data Sources and Processing

The main data sources are the self-narrative videos of the TRI video creators. These can be categorized into two types: one is the original self-narrative videos created by the bloggers themselves, and the other is interview videos. All videos are publicly released on their self-media accounts or social media platforms and all video data, including subtitles and voices, are transcribed into text to facilitate analysis.

Table 1: Profiles of Sample TRI Short Video Accounts

Account Name	Gender	Account Type	Follower Count (Million)	Province
Creator 1	Female	Rural Service & Optimism	9.21	Henan
Creator 2	Female	Rural Entrepreneurship & Assistance	6.22	Shaanxi
Creator 3	Male	Domestic Rural Life & Daily Routines	5.61	Ningxia
Creator 4	Male	Elderly-Centered Storytelling & Agricultural Product Promotion	2.52	Shaanxi & Gansu
Creator 5	Male	Community-Centered Humor & Cohesion	1.43	Chongqing

Creator 6	Male	Authentic Rural Life Documentation	0.90	Shaanxi
Creator 7	Female	Rural Customs & Agricultural Promotion	0.65	Shaanxi
Creator 8	Male	English-Language Promotion of Local Scenery & Specialties	0.19	Ningxia

Coding frame and Analysis Process

Coding

Based on Framing Theory, this study constructs an analytical framework from the perspective of short video creators' personal frames to analyze the narrative construction of images of youth returning to rural areas for entrepreneurship. The framework comprises the following four dimensions:

- Personal background. This dimension includes the creator's native place, family background, educational attainment, and work experience prior to returning to rural areas. These elements constitute the foundation of their narratives about rural return and shape their perceptions and representations of their own roles in rural development.
- Returning motivation. This dimension centers on the incentives for creators to return to rural regions, covering emotional motivations, economic motivations, and social motivations.
- Self-positioning. This dimension explores how creators define themselves across different stages, as well as their gradual shift from pursuing individual-centred self-value to pursuing higher social value as innovators and promoters of rural revitalization.
- Narrative focus. This dimension investigates the core content and themes that creators select and articulate in their TRI video narratives. It constitutes critical evidence of the translation of their value orientations into subjective practice.

Table 2: Coding Scheme for the Four-Dimensional Personal frame

Dimension	Operational Definition	Example from Sample Videos
Personal background	Demographic and experiential indicators, including family background, educational attainment, and prior work experience	University graduated; I used to work in a photo studio.
Returning motivation	Driving forces for returning to rural areas, including urban disengagement, family care, entrepreneurial intention, and other related incentives	I'm lost and I don't know where I want to go; My parents are old and the family business needs me to carry it on.
Self-positioning	Core goals articulated by young returnee creators, covering economic, emotional, idealistic, and other types of aspirations	Start businesses; Do something meaningful.

Narrative focus	Core concerns, emotional orientations, and viewpoints that creators intend to communicate in their videos	I want to help them sell more produce; These old people should live happily.
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According to the four research dimensions, sentences related to the four dimensions in the text are first marked with different colors and symbols, and corresponding labels are established. Then, first-level labels under the same dimension are merged into categories based on semantic similarity. Next, the logical relationships among the second-level categories of the four dimensions are analyzed. Finally, the image characteristics of the bloggers are induced and summarized.

Data Analysis

This study adopts a qualitative analysis method to examine the language, rhetoric, and emotional expressions embedded in the narratives. It explores how creators employ metaphors to depict their experiences of returning to rural areas, and how they convey their commitment to advancing rural and TRI development through emotional appeals. This analytical process fully excavates the potential significance and theoretical implications of such narratives in reconstructing the images of young rural returnee entrepreneurs.

Ethics and Limitations

This research adheres to standard academic ethics. Only publicly accessible video materials are used, and all identifiable information of the bloggers (e.g., usernames, avatars) has been anonymized. This study complies with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020) and respects relevant intellectual property rights. To enhance research reliability, data triangulation is adopted to cross-verify the consistency of evidence from self-narrative videos and interview videos. Statements that appear in both types of videos are regarded as having greater authenticity and credibility.

Results and Discussion

Personal Background: The Breakthrough Point in "Three Rural Issues" Video Track

Individuals realize their self-value in society by playing different roles. Their educational backgrounds and professional experiences influence their perception and ways of performing these roles.

As an important part of personal background, educational attainment significantly affects creators' knowledge reserves, cognitive abilities, and thinking patterns. Among the 8 creators, 6 have a university degree, with majors covering various fields such as sociology, English, photography, and management. In terms of professional experience, 3 had worked in Internet-related jobs, 3 in sales and management, and 2 in photography-related work. Their educational backgrounds have enabled them to make differentiated choices and presentations in the field of TRI short videos. Young people with higher levels of education who return to rural areas give full play to their professional expertise. They integrate this expertise into the unique style of their TRI videos.

...I graduated from a foreign studies university... When I returned to my hometown, I tried to combine English with the vast land of the northwest and tell the stories of my hometown (Creator 7).

...I studied photography in college, and my sister studied journalism... Making short videos is our advantage (Creator 8).

Creators with a relatively lower educational level, on the other hand, tend to focus more on practical experiences and tell their entrepreneurial stories in a simple and down-to-earth manner. These differences in narrative styles and content resulting from educational background enrich the diversity of the images of young people returning to rural areas.

The creators mentioned their past work experiences, which mainly fall into two categories. One is work in film, television, and cultural fields (such as photographer, film and television production, studio photography). The other is work in marketing (running a restaurant, working in market sales, etc.).

Creator 4 worked as a freelance photographer for many years after graduating from college. Later, he switched to making short videos. He said:

...I wanted to add some new content to make the stories I tell more substantial. So, I came up with the idea of adding a segment of taking pictures of the elderly (Creator 4).

Creator 1 had several jobs after graduating from junior high school. She worked as a photography assistant in a studio and sold vegetables at a street stall.

...I filmed the scenes of myself going around the countryside to sell things and made them into short videos. Unexpectedly, they became popular all of a sudden (Creator 1).

Creator 7 once ran a film and television company. This experience has made his short videos reach a film-and-television-level quality both in terms of the visuals and the content narrative. He said:

...for the story's development, some transitions need to be set off by the characters' environment and atmosphere. The short video must be able to resonate with the audience, have its own style, and be of high quality (Creator7).

Returning Motivations: The Driving Force behind the Construction of Young People's Images

Facilitation from Market Environment Changes and Rural Revitalization Policies

Employment pressure in cities has been rising. Many people have turned to rural areas to seek entrepreneurial opportunities, and this phenomenon has become more prominent since the COVID-19 pandemic. Four creators explicitly stated that their work was severely affected during the pandemic. Their former companies went bankrupt or made large-scale layoffs, so they chose to return to rural areas and launch new businesses.

...because of the disasters in 2020... I decided... I want to promote the walnuts on the mountain through short videos (Creator 6).

...with the changes in the market environment, my business failed... I decided to return to my hometown... and start my own mountain-running journey (Creator 2).

Meanwhile, amid the implementation of China's rural revitalization strategy, the government has attracted talents to return and start businesses. It has provided support through policies including e-commerce poverty alleviation, rural tourism, and youth entrepreneurship programs. This has formed an important institutional logic for young people to conduct TRI video entrepreneurship and participate in rural revitalization. Policy support plays a mediating role between startup costs and rural e-commerce entrepreneurship among returnee farmers (Huang et al., 2022).

...with the advancement of the national rural revitalization strategy, rural themes have become popular in short video creation... I can create development opportunities for myself and contribute to my hometown (Creator 8).

...with the promotion of the national rural revitalization strategy in recent years... This vast loess land still provides a big stage for us to start businesses (Creator 7).

Breakthrough from Urban Predicament and Self-Exploration Based on Rural Attachment

The formation of this endogenous motivation for returning to hometowns is rooted in the creators' genuine experiences and emotional choices during the transition between urban and rural spaces. In the creators' narratives, there are many expressions of the pressure and confusion of urban life.

...I couldn't find a job for a long time after graduation, and I was very confused (Creator 5).

...five years ago, I was a very decadent person... I returned home from the outside, and unexpectedly, my family healed me (Creator1).

...after graduating, I worked in a big city... I couldn't find a sense of existence, and I was confused inside, so I wanted to go home (Creator 3).

These narratives reflect their maladjustment after moving from rural areas to cities, including work pressure, an unfamiliar pace of life, and the sense of loneliness as outsiders who find it difficult to integrate into the city. The deep-seated emotions towards the countryside and family, which are distinct from those in the city, formed during their childhood, are an attachment to their hometown that they can't forget no matter where they are.

...the trees are covered with round persimmons. From a distance, they look like red lanterns... My grandma's cooking is especially delicious. The chewy

saozi noodles, the warm sour-soup dumplings, and the refreshing liangpi... (Creator 4).

...I chose to return to my hometown, perhaps because I prefer the simplicity of my hometown, or maybe because the apples at home are sweeter (Creator 8).

The detailed descriptions and proud expressions when talking about their hometown fully demonstrate their deep affection for their hometown and their eagerness to return. Disorientation in urban environments, coupled with strong hometown attachment, drives creators' decisions to return to the countryside.

Place attachment emphasizes the emotional connection between people and places. It is an emotional bond between humans and the physical environment, including deep-seated emotions such as a sense of belonging to "home", memory sustenance, and livelihood dependence (Tuan, 1990). Only by returning to the most familiar and cared-about place can they open their hearts and reflect on their self-value. This drives TRI video creators to engage in returnee entrepreneurship, and the local customs and scenery also become the main scenes and background colors of TRI video narratives.

And in fact, these motivations are not singularly reflected in the short video creators' narratives. Their motivations for returning to entrepreneurship are often diverse. Responding to national policy calls, increasing personal income, and pursuing self-value are intertwined with one another. Returning entrepreneurship is not only about creating jobs, raising income, and seizing economic and market opportunities. It is also a way to experience the world through self-creation and life storytelling (Chen & Barcus, 2024).

Self-positioning Transformation: From Individual Entrepreneurs to Rural Revitalization Facilitators

In the initial stage of entrepreneurship, creators generally positioned themselves as individual entrepreneurs, with the narrative focus centered on personal efforts and exploration. They recounted how they faced challenges such as harsh environments, financial difficulties, and market expansion. Despite contradictions and struggles, they continuously challenged themselves, presenting the image of brave entrepreneurs.

Creator 6 returned to the countryside with the intention of selling the walnuts on the mountain through short videos:

...At the beginning, I just wanted to sell oranges through short video, but the results were not good... The live-streaming had no unique features. So... I shot some funny videos... Unexpectedly, the video traffic gradually improved (Creator 5).

At first, some short video creators simply recorded the rural daily life they liked, such as their mothers cooking. Others promoted agricultural products. In their expressions, it was basically the representation of the "individual self". Words like "traffic", "followers", and "wanting to make money" appeared with a relatively high frequency.

...at that time, I thought that if I had 1 million followers, it would be amazing, and I wanted to earn more money (Creator 1).

The growth of short video traffic has attracted more attention and solved the problem of rural agricultural product sales. Creators have gained recognition, which has made them reflect on the significance of making short videos. As Goffman (1974) pointed out, people will constantly adjust their self-presentation strategies according to attention feedback to maintain the consistency and credibility of their roles.

Xu and Zhu (2023) note that with changes in circumstances, people need to rely on new self-presentation and image adjustment to embed themselves in new spatial interactions and meaning contexts. In the process of integrating into the countryside and creating value, TRI video creators have gradually clarified and reconstructed their self-identities. They have gradually shifted their self-positioning from making money for themselves to being navigators of rural development—providing more help for others and creating greater value for society.

...I turned the camera towards the left-behind elderly in the village... They have interesting souls, I want to continue the joy with them (Creator 5).

...we want the people...open up sales channels and let the outside world see the changes in our hometown (Creator 2).

...I'm the beneficiary... The qualities of these elderly people in the village, their kindness, they deserve to be praised by countless people...it's something more meaningful than making money (Creator 1).

...one shouldn't only live for oneself ...should do something for others... Let the elderly get rid of loneliness and make them useful (Creator 4).

In their narratives, there is a shift from "I" to "we" and "folks", from recording themselves to paying attention to "the elderly", "others", and "hometown". Phrases such as "not just for myself", "do more meaningful things", and "let everyone see the changes in the hometown" reflect their role transformation—from focusing on themselves to caring about their hometown, others, and society. As he said:

...I hope I can become a bridge connecting my hometown and the outside world (Creator 7).

The creators have transcended the personal-level value pursuit, enabling them to truly become "rural guardians", "new farmers returning to start businesses", and "drivers of rural revitalization".

Narrative Focus: Enhancing Personal Value and Building Social Consensus

It is precisely the change in personal role positioning that leads to different contents in their narrative focus.

Expansion of the Narrative Frame

In the initial stage, creators generally took their personal entrepreneurial experiences and family lives as the starting points of their narratives, presenting the details of rural life authentically and establishing an emotional connection with the audience. In response to audience feedback, they continuously adjusted their narrative strategies.

...at the beginning, we presented our family life... everyone liked it... I realized that something more meaningful than money is self-value and social value. Later, we carried out a lot of activities to assist agriculture...to inherit intangible culture heritage (Creator 6).

On the other hand, creator 4 called on society to pay attention to vulnerable groups through public welfare activities. This reflects their transformation from focusing on personal private lives to paying attention to rural and social public issues, demonstrating the role evolution of young people returning to rural areas from "life recorders" to "public-issue constructors".

Reconstruction of the Value Dimension

The adjustment of narrative strategies has generated more frame resonance with the audience. The core of a frame is the meaning attribution to social phenomena, reflecting the value orientation of the communication subject. As Snow (2004) said, the frame resonance refers to the degree of fit between an individual's frame and mainstream social values, when an individual's narrative frame resonates with social and cultural expectations, it will trigger broader social recognition.

All creators have experienced a shift from a single economic-value narrative to the construction of a multi-dimensional value system. Most creators promote their hometowns through short videos, drive rural economic development via live-streaming e-commerce, and build network platforms for rural industrial cooperation. The creators have turned more of their attention to the left-behind elderly in rural areas.

In their narratives, the elderly are portrayed as kind, interesting, and valuable, breaking stereotypes of this group. They convey the meaning of life and the value of kindness and love to the public. They meet the audience's demand for warm-hearted stories and add an emotional dimension to the depiction of rural life. Their narrative content contains more insights and reflections, and they use positive discourse to construct rural and social consensus.

New narrative symbols have continuously emerged in their stories, such as images of young returnees, popular lifestyle elements, urban-rural interconnection, and even international symbols like promoting hometowns in English. These narrative symbols display the new transformations of traditional rural areas. While presenting the beautiful scenery and products of their hometowns, they do not avoid the shortcomings of rural development. This dialectical narrative helps to build a more three-dimensional understanding of rural values. As Creator 7 said:

...whether it is to promote the hometown or realize personal value, the most important thing is to show a three-dimensional and real countryside...the content should be high-quality, in-depth, and resonant (creator 7).

Conclusion

This study took 8 returning entrepreneurial youth active in the TRI video field on the Douyin platform as the research objects and selected 16 of their self-narrative videos as analytical samples. Based on Framing Theory, this study mainly conducted coding and narrative analysis from four dimensions: personal background, returning motivation, personal positioning, and narrative focus. It deeply analyzed how these youth constructed the image of returning entrepreneurial youth from the perspective of personal frames.

First, the study found that the personal self-narratives of TRI video creators are not simply statements of experiences. From a first-person perspective, they presented the mental journey of returning to rural areas to start businesses more vividly and meticulously, thus drawing a spiritual map of this young group. Furthermore, these micro-expressions with autobiographical nature have formed a resonance effect. Ultimately, they constructed a new type of young people's image in the practice of rural revitalization—from rural recorders to rural guardians, leaders of new rural trends, and drivers of rural revitalization.

Personal backgrounds such as educational and work experience are the basic factors for short video creators to enter the TRI entrepreneurship track. The personal backgrounds of these creators show diversified characteristics, and this differentiated growth path provides unique material sources for their creation. Notably, work experience in fields such as film, television, and marketing have made it easier for them to find their direction in the TRI video entrepreneurship track.

In addition, returning motivation is the core driving factor for the evolution of creators' narratives. External factors such as economic and policy opportunities, together with internal driving forces of personal pursuit and value realization, constitute the dual motivations for deciding to return to rural areas. These two motivations have shown a dynamic interplay in the process of returning to start businesses, significantly influencing the shift of narrative content. Meanwhile, self-positioning reflects the process of the narrative subject's role transformation. The identity perception of short video creators has evolved from individual entrepreneurs to participants and promoters of rural development. Starting as recorders of rural life, they initially pursued fan traffic and were eager for returns. Gradually, they stepped out of their personal circles, began to care about others, the countryside, and society, spread positive energy, strengthened their sense of social responsibility, and engaged in more valuable endeavors.

Notably, the transformation of self-positioning vividly demonstrates the integration of short video creators' personal development with social needs and represents their value orientation. The research shows that the narrative subject has shifted from a micro-individual perspective to a multi-faceted presentation of rural areas. Their creative orientation has transcended the one-sided romanticization of rural areas: they not only showcase the advantages and vitality of rural industrial development, new rural trends, and cultural inheritance but also do not shy away from the shortcomings and challenges in rural development. With content expressions combining humanistic warmth and real-world concerns, their narratives present a more three-dimensional understanding of rural values.

Importantly, the four-dimensional analysis of the personal frame constructed in this study—integrating personal background, behavioral motivation, subject cognition, and narrative strategies—provides a new analytical tool for examining the image of young returnee entrepreneurs in rural China.

Specifically, this study extends Framing Theory by unpacking three under-explored dynamics in rural media research: identity work (tracking creators' evolution from individual entrepreneurs to rural revitalization facilitators), agency (highlighting their active role in shaping rural narratives), and narrative evolution (documenting shifts from personal economic goals to social value realization).

Beyond theoretical contributions, this study also holds practical value: it provides actionable insights for leveraging TRI short videos to empower rural revitalization and advance rural digital transformation in China, while offering fresh perspectives for understanding rural short video narratives, media-driven rural development, returnee entrepreneurial identity, and contemporary rural changes in China.

However, this study still has limitations. First, the scope of sample selection is limited, and the sample size is small, which fails to comprehensively represent the diversity of narratives of young people returning to rural areas. Additionally, this paper mainly analyzes the role of personal frames in the construction of young people's images. Nevertheless, the construction of young people's images is the result of the joint action of multiple frames. Finally, follow-up research can be further enriched from aspects such as content frames, platform frames, and socio-cultural frames.

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