

Emotional Communication and Audience Resonance in Sannong Short Videos: A Case Study of Li Fugui

Zhang Xijing^{1*}, Awan Binti Ismail²

¹Centre for Postgraduate Studies, Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology, 43000 Kajang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia;

Department of Communication, Xijing University, 710023, Xi'an, China

Email: zhangxijing89@gmail.com

²Centre for Postgraduate Studies, Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology, 43000 Kajang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Email: clouduwan72@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

CORRESPONDING

AUTHOR (*):

Zhang Xijing

(zhangxijing89@gmail.com)

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With the rapid growth of short-form video platforms, Sannong (literally “agriculture, rural areas, and farmers”) short videos have emerged as key sites where affective narratives and mediated rural imagery intersect. Drawing on emotional communication theory, this study examines how emotional elements are embedded in Sannong short videos, how audiences experience resonance, and how affect-oriented communication shapes rural representations. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines content analysis of 100 videos by a prominent Sannong creator, Li Fugui, a viewer survey (N = 100), and in-depth interviews (N = 10). The analysis focuses on emotional embedding strategies, audience responses, and representational implications. Findings reveal that the creator employs three main strategies: personalized narrative construction, symbolic emotional expression, and staged warm interactions. These strategies produce rural imagery characterized by warmth, ordinariness, and resilience. Audience responses show a progression from cognitive empathy to emotional identification and behavioral response, with notable differences between urban and rural viewers and between those with and without rural life experience. At the representational dimension, everyday scenes are framed to emphasize warmth and mutuality while minimizing social complexity, reflecting the interaction of creators’ narratives, platform amplification, and audience expectations. By linking emotional embedding, audience resonance, and mediated rural imagery, this study extends emotional communication research into Sannong short videos and enhances understanding of how affective dynamics shape contemporary portrayals of rural life.

Contribution/Originality: This study is the first to systematically analyze the high-impact Li Fugui case, applying emotional communication theory with mixed methods to reveal three emotional embedding strategies, stratified audience resonance, and

affect-driven rural imagery construction, advancing Sannong short video research beyond stylistic descriptions.

1. Introduction

The rapid diffusion of mobile internet and short-form video platforms has profoundly reshaped how rural life is mediated, perceived, and discussed. In China, platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou have transformed rural representation from an externally constructed media narrative into a form of everyday, participatory visibility. Sannong short videos are no longer marginal supplements to mainstream media; they have become a primary channel through which urban and rural audiences encounter, imagine, and emotionally engage with the countryside.

According to [ByteDance \(2025\)](#) Agricultural Support Report, rural-related short videos on Douyin have reached an unprecedented scale, forming a relatively stable ecosystem of creators, content genres, and audience communities. More importantly, the communicative logic of Sannong short videos is increasingly affect-oriented. Rather than prioritizing information transmission or documentary realism alone, creators rely heavily on emotional storytelling, interpersonal interaction, and everyday micro-narratives to construct experiential proximity and affective engagement. Warmth, resilience, nostalgia, and mutual assistance have become dominant emotional motifs circulating within Sannong short video culture.

This affective turn distinguishes Sannong short videos from earlier media representations of the countryside. Traditional rural imagery in news reports and television documentaries often emphasized development achievements, poverty alleviation, or structural transformation ([Liang & Li, 2023](#)). By contrast, Sannong short videos foreground ordinary encounters, embodied labor, and interpersonal intimacy. Through visual vernaculars, vernacular speech, and platform-mediated interaction, rural life is rearticulated less as a socio-economic object than as an emotional landscape. As a result, emotional communication increasingly functions as a core mechanism organizing the production, circulation, and reception of Sannong short videos.

Within this broader ecology, the Douyin creator “Li Fugui” offers a particularly revealing case. A young woman from rural Henan, she builds her channel around “selling tofu and daily groceries while helping left-behind elderly villagers,” recording her everyday rounds in an almost unscripted, minimally edited style. In less than a year, her account has attracted over 13 million followers, with multiple videos surpassing one million likes, and her work has been profiled by [People’s Daily \(2025\)](#) and reposted by overseas consular accounts. In terms of representational strategy, her videos differ both from the highly aestheticized, artisanal rural imagery associated with figures like Li Ziqi, and from the traffic-driven “misery narratives” adopted by some other creators. Instead, she combines a strong sense of “realness” with a persistent warm tone ([People’s Daily, 2025](#)), and has gradually formed a relatively complete chain of emotional embedding, audience resonance, and downstream behavioral response.

Despite growing scholarly attention to rural digital media, existing research has primarily examined stylistic features, narrative themes, and socio-cultural functions. Less attention has been paid to how emotional elements are systematically embedded into Sannong short video texts, how they structure differentiated audience resonance,

and how they contribute to the construction of mediated rural imagery. In particular, the mechanisms through which affect-oriented production logics shape both audience response and representational orientation remain underexplored.

This study addresses these gaps by examining emotional communication in Sannong short videos through a mixed-methods approach, taking Douyin creator Li Fugui as a focal case. Drawing on emotional communication theory, it investigates how affective strategies are embedded in short-form video production, how audiences experience and interpret these emotional cues, and how emotional communication contributes to patterned constructions of rural imagery. Empirically, the analysis centers on Li Fugui's video practices not as a biographical portrait of an individual, but as a representative site through which the emotional communication mechanisms of Sannong short videos can be examined. This study focuses on the following three questions:

- i. How are emotional elements embedded in Sannong short videos, and what affective strategies structure their narrative and representational forms?
- ii. What patterns of emotional resonance do audiences exhibit when engaging with Sannong short videos, and how are these patterns differentiated by experiential background?
- iii. How does affect-oriented communication shape mediated rural imagery, and what tensions emerge between emotional representation and social complexity?

2. Literature and theory framework

2.1. Emotional Communication and Affective Turn in Media Studies

Emotional communication originates from early social psychological and persuasion research that foregrounded the role of affect in attitude formation and message reception. Although [Heider's \(2013\)](#) balance theory and [Hovland's et al. \(1953\)](#) early persuasion studies did not explicitly formulate the concept of "emotional communication," they established that emotions and affective attitudes play a fundamental role in how individuals interpret information and form social judgments, laying important groundwork for later research on emotion in communication ([Heider, 2013](#); [Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953](#); [Dillard & Nabi, 2006](#); [Nabi, 2010](#)). Building on this tradition, [Bartsch and Hübner \(2005\)](#) systematically conceptualized "emotional communication," emphasizing that communication is not merely an exchange of information and meaning but also a process of emotional activation, regulation, and negotiation between communicative subjects. This perspective marked an important shift from cognition-centered paradigms toward an affect-oriented understanding of mediated interaction.

With the expansion of digital and social media, emotional communication has become increasingly central to contemporary media environments. [Kou \(2025\)](#) argues that new media logic has gradually shifted from information transmission to emotional connection, as platforms privilege content capable of stimulating affective engagement. Visual storytelling, narrative tone, and multimodal symbols jointly construct emotional cues, which structure audience perception, interpretation, and participation ([Wang et al., 2023](#)). In this sense, emotion is not ancillary to content but embedded within the communicative architecture of platforms.

In studies of media representation and narrative communication, emotional communication has been empirically linked to audience involvement, memory, and behavioral orientation. Research shows that embedding emotions such as warmth, nostalgia, and resilience into mediated narratives enhances empathic understanding and value alignment, thereby increasing persuasive effectiveness and participatory willingness (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2018). Emotional mobilization studies further indicate that affective strategies—realized through visual framing, narrative design, and interactional cues—intensify resonance, stimulate comment cultures, and facilitate emotional diffusion across platformed publics (Cao, 2024). At the same time, scholars caution that excessive emotionalization or over-stylized affective expression may undermine perceived authenticity and weaken sustainable resonance (Huang & Cui, 2025).

International scholarship has increasingly addressed the contextual and cultural specificity of emotional communication. Pathak-Shelat and Deshano (2021), examining rural new media practices in India, found that emotionally framed content exerts stronger appeal to urban audiences than to rural ones, reflecting differentiated experiential structures and affective expectations. Onitsuka (2019) similarly notes that quotidian realism and experiential proximity are crucial for rural digital media to transcend communicative barriers. However, despite this growing body of work, emotional communication within the context of Chinese rural short-form video remains under-theorized, particularly regarding how affective strategies are systematically embedded and how they structure audience resonance and mediated rural imagery.

2.2. Emotional Communication in Rural Short-Form Videos

Recent Chinese scholarship increasingly recognizes emotion as a core operational logic of rural short-form videos. Existing studies generally converge on the view that “authenticity” and “warmth” constitute the dominant aesthetic and affective features distinguishing rural short videos from entertainment-oriented content (Zhang & Ning, 2025). As Shao (2023) notes, Through narrative composition and audiovisual design, agricultural labor, village routines, and interpersonal relations are rearticulated as emotionally charged texts, capable of activating rural imagination and sustaining audience attention.

Several studies approach rural short-form video through the lenses of nostalgia and emotional compensation. Ai and Xie (2025) argues that by visualizing everyday rural life and neighborly interaction, such videos provide urban audiences with affective relief and symbolic anchoring. Similarly, Liu (2022) demonstrates that memory narratives and vernacular symbols not only reconstruct lived realities but also participate in shaping collective remembrance and cultural imagination. These findings indicate that rural short videos operate not simply as representational media but as affective infrastructures through which emotional experience and social meaning are co-produced.

Nevertheless, much of the existing literature remains concentrated on stylistic features and functional descriptions. While emotion is frequently identified as important, fewer studies systematically decompose how affect is embedded into short-form video texts, nor do they sufficiently examine how such emotional configurations translate into differentiated resonance patterns and behavioral responses among audiences. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to the implications of emotional

communication for mediated rural imagery, particularly the potential tension between affective representation and social complexity.

2.3. Emotional Embedding and Audience Resonance

“Emotional embedding” refers to the intentional incorporation of affective cues into media content through narrative construction, symbolic selection, audiovisual design, and character configuration, in order to guide emotional experience and participation. In advertising and persuasion research, emotional appeals have long been shown to enhance message memorability and attitudinal influence (Aaker, Stayman, & Hagerty, 1986). Within short-form video environments, emotional embedding assumes an intensified multimodal character: music, visual rhythm, vocal expression, and everyday micro-narratives jointly constitute affective stimuli.

Audience resonance constitutes a central outcome of emotional communication. Resonance encompasses both cognitive empathy and emotional synchronization, emerging when mediated scenarios align with personal memories, value orientations, and experiential frameworks (Jenkins, 2006). Given the brevity and algorithmic circulation of short videos, resonance often relies on highly condensed situations and recognizable emotional symbols, enabling rapid affective engagement (Wei et al., 2024).

Empirical studies show that when short videos activate identity recognition or autobiographical memory, audience participation and diffusion behaviors increase significantly. Li et al. (2025), analyzing influencer content and user comments on Douyin, found that emotions circulate between creators and audiences through textual and interactive affordances, gradually producing affective reciprocity and collective resonance. Platform interaction spaces thus function not merely as feedback channels but as amplification arenas of emotional communication.

However, current research largely remains at the level of correlation, emphasizing that emotional content generates higher engagement without sufficiently differentiating emotional strategies or examining their implications for mediated social imagery. In the context of rural short videos, systematic investigation is still needed into how specific affective configurations organize audience resonance and shape perceptions of rurality.

2.4. Research Gaps and Analytical Framework

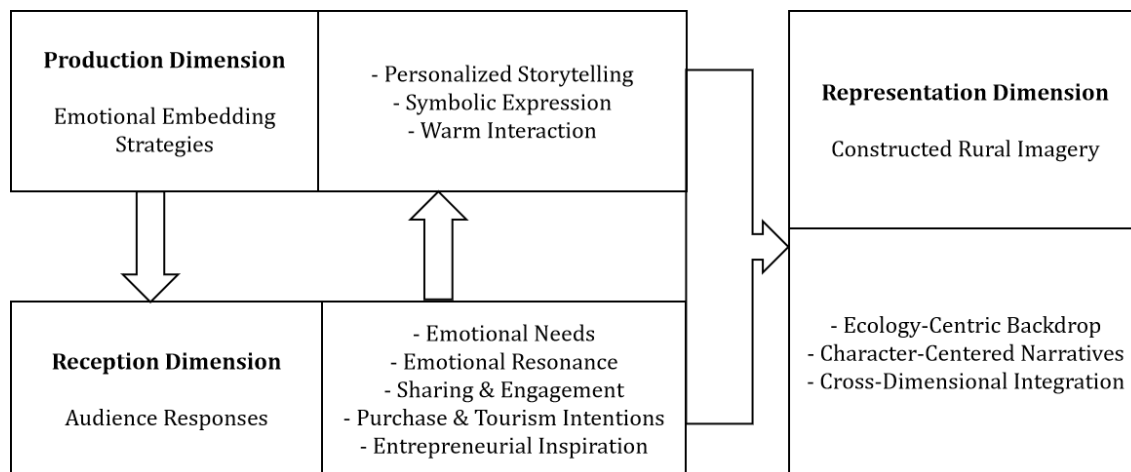
Synthesizing existing scholarship reveals three primary limitations. First, emotional communication research in rural short-form video contexts has yet to articulate a complete analytical chain linking emotional embedding, audience resonance, and mediated representational outcomes. Second, audience differentiation—particularly regarding urban–rural backgrounds and lived rural experience—remains insufficiently theorized and empirically tested. Third, limited attention has been given to how affect-oriented production logics may generate patterned biases in mediated rural imagery.

To address these gaps, this study adopts emotional communication as its core theoretical perspective and constructs an integrated analytical framework organized around three interrelated dimensions: production, reception, and representation (Figure 1).

At the production dimension, the study examines how creators embed emotional strategies into short-form videos—through personalized storytelling, symbolic expression, and warm interactions—to shape emotionally oriented rural narratives. At the reception dimension, it analyzes audiences' emotional needs, emotional resonance, and engagement and behavioral intentions, understood as layered processes from cognitive empathy to emotional identification and response. At the representation dimension, it explores how affect-oriented production practices and audience orientations, under conditions of platform amplification, stabilize recurrent patterns of mediated rural imagery.

This framework structures the subsequent methodological design and analysis, enabling an integrated examination of emotional communication across production practices, audience reception, and mediated rural representation in Sannong short videos.

Figure 1: Analytical Framework of Emotional Communication in Sannong short videos



3. Methods

To examine emotional communication in rural short-form videos in an integrated manner, this study adopts a mixed-methods design combining content analysis, questionnaire survey, and in-depth interviews.

3.1. Case Selection: Douyin Creator Li Fugui

The study focuses on Douyin creator “Li Fugui,” a young woman from rural Henan whose account centers on selling tofu and daily groceries while assisting left-behind elderly villagers. Her videos are shot in a largely unscripted, minimally edited style and have rapidly attracted wide attention: within less than a year, the account gained over 13 million followers, with multiple videos surpassing one million likes, and has been featured by [People’s Daily \(2025\)](#) and reposted by overseas consular accounts.

Li’s account is not treated as a biographical object but as an analytically productive site. It is representative in at least three respects: it exemplifies a “warmth- and authenticity-oriented” style distinct from both highly aestheticized rural imagery and traffic-driven “misery narratives”; it has built a relatively complete chain of emotional embedding, audience resonance, and behavioral feedback; and it has become a recognizable

reference point in public discussions of Sannong short videos. All data analyzed in this study derive from publicly available content and interactions on Douyin.

3.2. Content Analysis: Emotional Embedding on the Production Side

3.2.1. Sampling and Corpus Construction

The content analysis focuses on videos posted on the “Li Fugui” Douyin account between 24 December 2024 and 4 November 2025. All videos in this period were first identified as the population. From this corpus, 100 videos were selected using a purposive strategy that combines three criteria: (1) all pinned videos (5 in total); (2) all videos with more than 10 million views (35 videos); (3) a stratified selection of 60 regular videos from different months to capture everyday content. This sampling approach aims to reflect both the account’s “flagship” content and its mundane, routine output.

3.2.2. Coding Scheme and Procedure

Guided by emotional communication theory, the coding scheme was constructed along two dimensions: emotional embedding strategies and emotional element types. As summarized in Table 1, the former includes personalized storytelling, symbolic expression, and warm interaction; the latter distinguishes positive, negative and neutral emotions with more fine-grained subcategories.

Table 1: Emotional Embedding Coding Scheme for Li Fugui’s Videos

Dimension	Category	Operational Definition	Example Scene/Detail
Emotional Embedding	Personalized Storytelling	Narratives centered on creator or rural characters’ personal experiences, building vivid personae	Creator helping elderly villager with groceries
	Symbolic Expression	Use of typical rural symbols (e.g., farm tools, courtyards, dialect, traditional customs) to convey emotion	Dirt roads, second-hand trucks, Henan dialect
	Warm Interaction	Recording sincere interactions between creator and villagers	Villagers giving produce or calling her by nickname
Emotional Element Types	Positive Emotions	Warmth, being moved, resilience	Neighborly care, persistence in hardship
	Negative Emotions	Hardship, loneliness	Elderly left-behind, difficulty in labor
	Neutral Emotions	Ordinary everyday life scenes without clear affective valence	Daily labor, casual conversations

For each video, coders identified the presence and frequency of the three embedding strategies and coded the emotional elements by type, recording both occurrence counts and approximate share of screen time. Two trained coders conducted the coding

independently after a pilot phase. Inter-coder reliability, assessed using Cohen's kappa, reached 0.82, indicating high reliability.

3.3. Questionnaire Survey: Audience Resonance and Behavioral Response

3.3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

The survey targeted viewers who had watched or followed the “Li Fugui” account. A combination of online distribution (via a major Chinese survey platform) and offline recruitment (in urban and rural locations) was used to obtain a diverse sample. Screening questions ensured that respondents had at least some exposure to Li's videos.

A total of 115 questionnaires were collected. After excluding responses with unrealistically short completion times, highly patterned answers, or internal logical inconsistencies, 100 valid responses remained, yielding a valid response rate of 87.0%. The sample covers different gender, age, regional (urban/rural), occupational, and rural life experience backgrounds (Table 2), providing a basic foundation for comparing key subgroups.

Table 2: Survey Respondents' Demographic Characteristics ($n = 100$)

Variable	Category	n (%)
Gender	Male	45 (45%)
	Female	55 (55%)
Age	18–25	22 (22%)
	26–35	38 (38%)
	36–45	25 (25%)
	46+	15 (15%)
	Urban	62 (62%)
Region (Residence)	Rural	38 (38%)
	Student	18 (18%)
Occupation	Company Employee	42 (42%)
	Farmer	12 (12%)
	Grassroots Rural Official	5 (5%)
	Freelancer	20 (20%)
	Other	3 (3%)
	Yes	58 (58%)
Rural Life Experience	No	42 (42%)

3.3.2. Instrument Design and Measures

The survey instrument was developed on the basis of the analytical framework and existing scales in emotional communication and media effects research, adapted to the context of rural short-form video. It focuses on four dimensions: emotional needs, emotional resonance, behavioral response, and perceived image bias.

Emotional resonance was measured using six Likert-type items (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), such as “I often feel moved when watching Li Fugui's videos” and “I can understand the warmth conveyed in these videos.”

Behavioral response was captured through five items, including “I am willing to share her videos with friends or family” and “I have purchased agricultural products featured in the videos.”

Emotional needs included items related to emotional comfort, nostalgia, and desire for “rural warmth.”

Perceived image bias was measured through items such as “The videos beautify rural life” and “The countryside shown in the videos basically corresponds to the overall reality of rural China.”

Internal consistency tests indicated satisfactory reliability: Cronbach’s α coefficients for the key scales were all above .70.

3.3.3. Analytical Strategies

Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Descriptive statistics were first used to examine overall viewing motives, levels of emotional resonance, and behavioral patterns. To explore group differences, independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted along two main axes: (1) region of residence (urban vs. rural); (2) rural life experience (with vs. without).

Comparisons focused on emotional resonance, emotional comfort needs, nostalgia-related needs, key behavioral intentions (e.g., sharing, purchase, rural tourism, return-to-countryside entrepreneurship), and selected items on perceived image bias. All tests were two-tailed, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$ and $p < .01$ indicating a higher level of significance.

3.4. In-depth Interviews: Lived Resonance and Perceptions of Bias

3.4.1. Participant selection and interview procedure

To complement and deepen the survey findings, in-depth interviews were conducted with a subset of respondents. Based on survey profiles, 10 participants were purposefully selected to maximize variation in gender, age, region, and rural life experience.

Among them, 6 participants had rural life experience, including 2 returnee entrepreneurs, 1 long-term rural resident, and 3 individuals who grew up in the countryside and later relocated to cities. The remaining 4 participants had no rural life experience, including 2 urban university students and 2 frequent rural tourists. All participants had watched Li Fugui’s videos multiple times and reported at least moderate emotional resonance in the survey. Semi-structured interviews were used, organized around three clusters of questions: (1) Resonance triggers: What specific scenes, details, or narrative elements in Li’s videos most strongly moved you or stayed with you? (2) Emotional needs: What were you looking for emotionally when watching these videos (e.g., comfort, nostalgia, curiosity, inspiration)? (3) Perceived authenticity and bias: How do you see the relationship between the countryside shown in the videos and the countryside you know or imagine? In what ways do you feel the videos are “true,” and in what ways might they be idealized or selective?

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via video calls depending on participants’ locations, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. With participants’ consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.4.2. Coding and Analytical Approach

A grounded-theory-inspired coding strategy was employed. In the open coding stage, segments of text related to emotional triggers, viewing motives, evaluations of authenticity, and perceptions of bias were identified and labeled. In the axial coding stage, these codes were grouped into higher-order categories such as “seeking emotional refuge,” “recognizing familiar rural logics,” “idealized expectations of the countryside,” and “awareness of selective representation.” In the selective coding stage, these categories were integrated into core themes that spoke directly to the analytical framework: emotional embedding as perceived by audiences, resonance trajectories, and constructions (and contestations) of rural imagery.

Qualitative insights were then triangulated with content-analysis and survey findings. Rather than being treated as separate evidence streams, the three methods were used to mutually inform and refine the interpretation of emotional communication mechanisms in Li Fugui’s rural short-form videos.

4. Results

4.1. Production dimension: Emotional Embedding Strategies and the Rural Emotional Imaginary

The content analysis suggests that the emotional tone of Li Fugui’s videos is not a matter of scattered sentiment but is organized through three interlocking strategies: personalized storytelling, symbolic expression, and warm interaction. Together they construct a rural emotional imaginary that can be summarized as “mutual help, simplicity, and resilience”. As shown in [Table 3](#), symbolic expression has the highest usage frequency (40%), followed by personalized storytelling (35%) and warm interaction (25%); among all strategies, warm interaction accounts for the highest positive emotion frequency (74%), fully reflecting the creator’s focus on conveying interpersonal warmth through interactive scenes.

Table 3: Emotional Embedding Strategies in Sannong short videos ($n = 100$)

Strategy	Positive Emotions (%)	Negative Emotions (%)	Neutral Emotions (%)	Strategy Usage Frequency (%)
Personalized Storytelling	68	24	8	35
Symbolic Expression	52	18	30	40
Warm Interaction	74	12	14	25

4.1.1. Personalized Storytelling Anchored in the Creator’s Persona

Li Fugui consistently positions herself as “the young villager walking the lanes to sell tofu and groceries,” rather than as a polished “influencer.” Her videos follow her through everyday rounds: chatting with elderly villagers, helping those with mobility difficulties, teaching them how to use smartphones, patiently answering questions, and being visibly moved by small gestures such as a boiled egg or a bowl of rice. Over time, these fragments coalesce into a persona that viewers read as sincere, kind, hardworking, patient, and resilient.

Coding results show that emotional expressions directly tied to the creator's persona appear in 68% of the sampled videos, making personalized storytelling the dominant embedding strategy. In practice, viewers' feelings about "the countryside" are largely mediated through their identification with this embodied figure. The rural emotional landscape and the creator's persona are deeply entangled rather than clearly separable.

4.1.2. Symbolic Expression through Recurrent Rural Images

Across the corpus, behavioral, visual, and auditory symbols recur with high frequency.

Behavioral symbols. Li Fugui's videos construct a patterned repertoire of transactional micro-practices, including the rounding down of prices and the addition of extra portions after weighing goods before handing them to villagers. These actions function as behavioral emotional codes through which affective values are embedded into routine economic encounters. Rather than portraying generosity as an exceptional moral gesture, the repeated staging of these practices softens the logic of market exchange, foregrounds relationality, and naturalizes kindness as an ordinary condition of rural life.

Visual symbols. Elements such as second-hand trucks, uneven dirt roads, weathered courtyard walls, simple meals, and villagers' wrinkled faces, worn clothes, and somewhat stiff postures collectively construct a rural texture that is simultaneously "rough yet warm." The camera neither fully conceals poverty nor decay, but persistently seeks moments of smiles and light within these settings.

Auditory symbols. Li's distinctive Henan dialect calls, combined with the sounds of wheels, chickens, dogs, farm tools, and casual conversation, form an immersive acoustic environment. Across these three symbolic layers, core emotional cues appear on average 3.2 times per video, and their repeated presence stabilizes a recognizable "warm countryside" imagery in viewers' minds.

4.1.3. Warm Interaction and Reciprocal Relationships

Beyond narrative and symbolic strategies, Li Fugui's videos systematically stage interpersonal interactions that convey warmth, attentiveness, and community cohesion. These interactions include casual greetings, checking on villagers' well-being, light-hearted banter, shared laughter, and small acts of care such as helping with daily chores. Through repeated presentation, these micro-interactions establish relational norms and signal mutual recognition, embedding affective meaning into everyday rural life.

The interactions are often framed in close-up shots or mid-shots, allowing viewers to perceive facial expressions, gestures, and tonal inflections, which amplifies emotional salience. Li's consistent presence as both participant and narrator positions him as a relational anchor, enabling audiences to experience a sense of familiarity and trust. These staged moments create a performative logic where kindness and reciprocity appear routine, not exceptional.

Audience responses indicate that these interactions facilitate a layered emotional resonance trajectory. Viewers first engage cognitively by understanding the intentions and context of Li's actions, then experience emotional identification, and finally, in some cases, translate affective engagement into behavioral responses, such as sharing the

videos, visiting rural areas, or supporting local products. This staged interpersonal warmth, when combined with narrative and symbolic strategies, reinforces a stable “warm countryside” image while highlighting the relational and affective dimensions of rural life.

4.2. Reception dimension: Emotional Resonance Pathways and Group Differences

Survey and interview data indicate that viewers typically follow a three-stage emotional pathway when engaging with Li Fugui’s videos: first, cognitive appraisal of the content (“understanding what is shown”); second, affective engagement (“being emotionally moved”); and third, behavioral inclination (“feeling compelled to respond”). This trajectory can be summarized as cognitive empathy → emotional identification → behavioral response. As presented in Table 4, emotional needs ($M=4.26$) and emotional resonance ($M=4.05$) score highest among all dimensions, while entrepreneurial inspiration ($M=3.08$) is relatively lower—indicating that the core appeal of Li’s content lies in emotional satisfaction rather than practical guidance, consistent with her warm narrative style. Notably, both the intensity and direction of this pathway vary according to viewers’ social backgrounds and rural life experience.

Table 4: Audience Emotional Response and Behavior
(Mean, SD; Likert 1–5, $n = 100$)

Dimension	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Notes
Emotional Needs	4.26	0.57	Desire for warmth and nostalgia
Emotional Resonance	4.05	0.57	High cognitive and emotional identification
Sharing Behavior	3.76	0.68	Willingness to repost Sannong short videos
Rural Product Purchase	3.34	0.81	Interest in products featured
Tourism Interest	3.21	0.77	Intention to visit rural areas
Entrepreneurial Inspiration	3.08	0.73	Influence on starting rural businesses

Note. “Emotional Needs” and “Emotional Resonance” reflect self-reported affective engagement; other dimensions reflect behavioral intentions or past behavior.

4.2.1. Emotional Comfort as the Primary Entry Point

The survey results indicate that audiences exhibit a generally high level of affective orientation when watching Sannong short videos. The overall mean score for emotional needs ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.57$) suggests that viewers strongly expect short videos to provide emotional comfort and affective experiences. The emotional resonance scale is similarly high ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.56$), indicating that audiences generally establish strong emotional connections with the video content.

At the item level, within the emotional resonance scale, “I often feel moved when watching the videos” received the highest agreement ($M = 4.26$), followed by “I can perceive the warmth conveyed in these videos” ($M = 4.21$), and “Watching the videos makes me think of my hometown or rural life” ($M = 3.89$). These results suggest that Sannong short videos effectively elicit immediate emotional responses, while activation of autobiographical memories and deeper experiential associations varies across viewers.

In terms of viewing motives, “emotional comfort” and “experiencing rural warmth and everyday life” rank higher than informational motives such as “understanding rural conditions” or “learning agricultural techniques.” For many urban viewers, Li’s account functions as an emotional buffer within high-pressure work and social environments. As one interviewee, an urban white-collar worker, noted: *“watching these videos provides a moment of emotional relief, creating the perception that social life is not entirely cold or impersonal.”*

4.2.2. Urban–rural and Experiential Cleavages in Resonance

Emotional resonance and underlying emotional needs are not evenly distributed across audience groups. Two cleavages are particularly salient: region of residence (urban vs. rural) and rural life experience (with vs. without).

Along the regional axis, urban respondents report stronger emotional resonance than rural respondents ($M = 4.23$ vs. $M = 3.61$), as well as higher emotional comfort needs ($M = 4.45$ vs. $M = 3.58$). Urban viewers appear especially sensitive to scenes of warm interaction, often using them as a foil against their own work and social environments. For them, “the countryside” readily becomes a symbolic space of relative simplicity and emotional density. Their behavioral responses, however, are concentrated primarily in online practices (liking, commenting, sharing), supplemented by a heightened interest in rural tourism.

By contrast, rural respondents’ resonance is more grounded in recognition of everyday realities. They identify overlaps between the videos and their own lives, while remaining attentive to what is absent from the representations. Although they may also be emotionally moved by particular scenes, their responses tend to be less intense and more pragmatic. They are more inclined to treat the videos as sources of practical information and possible inspiration for livelihood strategies. Within the rural subsample, 25% of respondents reported having considered selling products through short-video platforms, a proportion higher than that among urban respondents.

Rural life experience further shapes both the direction and depth of resonance. Among viewers who have lived in the countryside, details such as “rounding down small amounts,” “adding extra weight,” and “neighbors helping each other” evoke vivid personal memories. Many describe their viewing experience as one of being “taken back,” making it difficult to remain purely detached observers. While they generally affirm the emotional authenticity of the videos, they are more cautious in assessing their representational completeness: only 16% agree that “the countryside shown in the videos basically corresponds to the overall reality of rural China.”

Among viewers without rural life experience, by contrast, 45% endorse this statement. For them, Li’s videos more readily function as a stand-in for “the countryside as a whole.” Their emotional identification is often stronger, but also more idealized. In other words, the less direct rural experience viewers have, the more likely they are to treat mediated rural images as comprehensive portrayals.

4.2.3. From Emotional Identification to Layered Behavioral Responses

Behavioral responses to the videos can be analytically divided into three layers, moving from low-threshold platform engagement to more consequential life intentions.

The first layer consists of everyday platform interactions, including liking, commenting, and sharing. Most respondents report having liked and shared Li's videos, and many leave supportive comments expressing that they feel "touched" or "healed," or reminding her to "take care" and "not work too hard." These micro-interactions function as forms of emotional feedback and contribute to the continued circulation of emotional communication within the comment space.

The second layer involves economically consequential behaviors, such as purchasing and small-scale material support. About one-third of respondents report having bought agricultural products associated with Li's videos. Interviewees frequently emphasize that such purchases are not driven solely by functional needs, but also by a desire to "support a good person" or "respond to this kind of warmth." Emotional identification thus translates into a form of "voting with the wallet," playing a non-trivial role in enabling rural e-commerce practices.

The third layer entails life-course and place-based intentions, including interest in rural tourism and even returning to the countryside for work or entrepreneurship. Nearly half of respondents express a desire to "visit the countryside" after watching the videos, and around 30% report having begun to pay more attention to rural revitalization policies. Among respondents with rural life experience, approximately 38% indicate that they have considered "returning to the countryside for entrepreneurship or long-term work," compared with around 10% among those without such experience. Even if only a fraction of these intentions ultimately materialize, they illustrate how emotional communication can open up new imaginaries of possible life trajectories.

At the same time, the data also point to clear limits. Emotional resonance and stated intentions do not automatically translate into sustained or deep engagement. Emotional communication may create openings and possibilities, but it does not in itself close the gap between being emotionally moved and taking concrete action.

4.3. Representation Dimension: Idealized Rural Imagery and the Logics of Affective Selection

Mediated rural realities in Li Fugui's videos reflect a selective stabilization of certain images, rather than a simple "truth versus falsehood" distinction. Three recurrent representational patterns emerge. Ecology-centric backdrops consistently foreground landscapes, farming scenes, and seasonal changes, emphasizing rural nature and agrarian life. Character-centered narratives highlight personal stories, interpersonal warmth, and ethical behaviors, such as helping the elderly or engaging in community events. Cross-dimensional integration connects industry, culture, and social organization, exemplified by linking tofu production with local festivals or volunteer work. Together, these patterns create a warm, relational, and emotionally resonant portrayal of rural life.

4.3.1. "Mediated Reality" and "Lived Reality" in Tension

On the surface, Li's videos employ a documentary style: handheld shots, natural lighting, and on-location sound combine to create a sense of "just filming what happens." This aesthetic makes it easy for viewers to read the content as "real life." Yet, like any media product, the videos are the outcome of multiple layers of selection: what to film, what to keep, how to sequence, what to foreground.

Survey results show that 70% of rural respondents agree that the videos “beautify rural life,” compared with 48% of urban respondents. Interviewees with rural experience frequently point out what is not seen: conflicts between neighbors, difficulties in accessing healthcare, tensions within families, or the structural challenges of sustaining livelihoods. These issues do appear occasionally in Li’s videos, but they are rarely the center of sustained narrative attention and are often quickly folded back into a warm tone.

In this sense, the videos enact a form of “curated reality”: one that is affectively truthful in many moments but partial in scope. The countryside becomes a space where hardship is acknowledged but softened, and where contradictions rarely dominate. This contributes to the construction of a countryside that is “good to look at and good to feel about,” but not necessarily fully aligned with its lived complexity.

4.3.2. Three Intertwined Logics Behind Idealization

The idealizing tendency observed in Li’s videos and audience perceptions can be traced to three intertwined logics.

First is the creator’s own narrative practice. Li Fugui’s creative orientation centers on “conveying warmth and positive energy,” with a narrative logic aimed at maximizing emotional resonance. This narrative logic aligns with the platformized logic of short-video dissemination, in which emotionally charged content is more likely to generate likes and shares and thereby circulate as viral material. At the same time, this narrative orientation is closely related to her personal life trajectory: Li Fugui’s own experiences incline her toward highlighting the beauty of rural life and the benevolence of human nature. As a rural entrepreneur, her creative practice also fulfills the function of “promoting agricultural products and attracting resources,” and positively affective representations are more conducive to realizing a convergence of commercial value and social value (Qu, 2024). As interviewee F stated, “*Li Fugui’s original intention is to convey beauty. Audiences are more willing to pay for warm content, and it is also more beneficial for promoting local agricultural products, so her short videos do not deliberately depict rural conflicts and difficulties.*” This narrative logic directly produces an idealizing tendency in media representations of reality.

Second is the disciplining effect of platform algorithms and traffic logics. Platform metrics consistently reward emotional content with higher visibility. In Li’s account, videos with strong warm tones and touching moments typically achieve much higher engagement rates than more mundane or problem-focused clips. Over time, this creates a feedback loop: creators learn, consciously or unconsciously, what “works,” and adjust their production accordingly. Platform labels such as “rural warmth” or “supporting agriculture” further frame the expectations with which viewers approach such content, narrowing the perceived legitimate range of rural stories.

Third is the audience’s own emotional demand and selective identification. For many urban viewers facing high-intensity work and precarious living conditions, Li Fugui’s videos are free from workplace anxiety and urban complexities, instead showcasing neighborhood solidarity, the fulfillment of labor, and human kindness, which serves as a “spiritual sanctuary” for viewers (Shao, 2023). As several interviewees frankly stated,

they are *“aware that reality is more complicated,”* but still *“prefer to see this side.”* This self-aware selectivity reinforces the idealized image rather than challenging it.

Together, these logics suggest that the idealization observed is not a one-sided manipulation but a co-produced outcome of creator choices, platform infrastructures, and audience desires. Emotional communication, in this sense, is both a source of resonance and a subtle force shaping what kinds of rural realities are repeatedly brought into view—and which are left in the shadows.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how emotional communication operates in rural short-form videos, structures audience resonance, and contributes to the mediated construction of rural imagery, using Douyin creator Li Fugui as a focal case with a mixed-methods design. The findings offer several points of discussion.

First, the communicative strength of Sannong short videos lies in a form of “gentle strength”: an emotional mode that acknowledges hardship while sustaining warmth. In Li’s videos, personalized storytelling, recurrent rural symbols, and scenes of reciprocal interaction depict the countryside as materially challenging yet affectively rich. This combination of low-script everyday recording and carefully managed emotional tone avoids both hyper-aestheticized distance and crude sentimentalism, explaining her sustained audience engagement and offering guidance for other Sannong creators.

Second, audience resonance is strong but stratified. Urban viewers often treat the countryside as a symbolic refuge or imagined escape, whereas rural viewers relate content directly to lived experience and practical concerns. Similarly, those with rural life experience resonate more deeply but assess idealization more critically, while those without such experience are more likely to equate mediated imagery with rural reality. Emotional communication thus refracts rather than erases social differences.

Third, the effectiveness of affective communication entails a risk of patterned image bias. Warm, hopeful narratives dominate attention, while emotionally neutral or structurally critical content struggles to gain visibility. Creators, platforms, and audiences all have incentives—emotional, economic, and psychological—to sustain “good-feeling rurality,” which can foreground certain lives and marginalize others.

Fourth, balancing emotional resonance with representational complexity remains a challenge. Creators may continue to prioritize positive framing, but narrative strategies can integrate structural issues—such as service access, industrial change, or generational tensions—within emotionally engaging stories. Platforms could modestly adjust algorithmic incentives to elevate content addressing rural challenges without sacrificing affect. Audiences, meanwhile, benefit from media literacy that recognizes both emotional experience and its partiality.

In sum, emotional communication provides a lens for understanding how Sannong short videos mediate urban–rural relationships. The countryside is being not only economically revitalized but also emotionally reimaged—sometimes illuminating social realities, sometimes smoothing over them. Attending to both aspects is essential to understanding digital media’s role in rural transformation.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single creator, Li Fugui, whose personal trajectory, gender, and follower base shape specific conditions that may not generalize to smaller accounts, technically oriented creators, or policy-focused Sannong content. Comparative multi-case studies could illuminate commonalities and differences in emotional strategies and rural image construction.

Second, the survey sample is limited in size and geographic coverage, underrepresenting migrant workers, remote rural residents, and ethnic minorities. Broader, multi-province surveys and fieldwork would enhance generalizability and capture regional and social diversity.

Third, the cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot in time, while emotional strategies, platform algorithms, and audience responses are dynamic. Longitudinal studies, potentially combining qualitative approaches with computational methods such as comment sentiment analysis, could reveal how emotions circulate and evolve across platforms.

Despite these constraints, the study highlights the centrality of emotion in rural short-form video communication. As China's digital countryside continues to develop, questions about who narrates rural life, how it is portrayed, and which rural realities are foregrounded remain critical, with emotional communication at the core of these dynamics.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study analyzed publicly available videos and comment interactions from the Douyin creator "Li Fugui" and collected survey and interview data from adult participants who provided informed consent. No private or non-public information was accessed, and all interview participants' identities were anonymized. Any potentially identifying details have been removed from reporting, ensuring confidentiality and ethical compliance.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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