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**Visible but Unreachable: Identity Expression of Post-90s Rural-Origin Chinese Women
Living Abroad on Xiaohongshu**

Master Thesis

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I have written this master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the identity expression of Chinese women born in the 1990s, from rural backgrounds and currently living abroad, on Xiaohongshu. It explores how they construct their digital identities through visual presentation, emotional narratives, and hashtag (#) strategies, and how they manage boundaries between visibility and un-reachability. Based on content analysis of posts from 28 users, the study finds that they commonly highlight upward mobility trajectories. By contrasting “starting points” with “end points,” share experiences in a “high emotion/low information” manner and use hashtags for identity expression and visibility management. Their widespread refusal to participate in research reflects a protection of narrative ownership. “Visible but unreachable” is not only a strategy of identity expression but also prompts methodological and ethical reflections on digital fieldwork by highlighting the boundaries between public visibility and private autonomy in digital environments.

1.Introduction

1.1. Research Background: Starting from Personal Experience

Born in 1993 and raised in a rural village in Henan Province, China, I spent a decade as a left-behind child while my parents worked away from home. After completing high school, I relocated to a provincial capital for university studies and subsequently worked in Shanghai for seven years. At 30, influenced by work pressure, burnout, and the easing of pandemic-related policies, with personal savings providing financial support, I chose to pursue a master's degree in Europe. In my rural hometown, remaining unmarried at this age was already a subject of widespread gossip, and pursuing further studies abroad was considered unconventional. This reflects broader social pressures and discrimination faced by single women in China, including traditional expectations rooted in Confucian values that women should fulfil “the roles of ‘wives’ and ‘mothers’” (Gong, Guo, & Jiang, 2018,p.120), the stigmatizing label of leftover women applied to women over 27, and parental interference in marriage decisions under the one-child policy, especially in rural areas with deeply entrenched traditional values (Gong, Guo, & Jiang, 2018).This decision was further reinforced by social media platforms, particularly Xiaohongshu¹, where hashtags such as #重启人生(reboot life)played a subtle but significant role in solidifying my decision to pursue studies abroad. The idea of rebooting life was also reflected in the posts analysed in this study, through expressions such as “starting my own business abroad and rebooting my life”, “giving myself a new beginning” and “rebooting my life through studying overseas”. Consequently, I relocated to Estonia, due to acceptance in master's program.

Estonia is relatively small country with a smaller number of Chinese citizens abroad. But upon encountering several women of similar age and experience, I felt a strong resonance with them on various topics. I also noticed that an increasing number of post-1990s rural-born Chinese women are sharing their overseas life and growth stories on Xiaohongshu. Compared with their mothers' generation, whose mobility was largely confined to domestic rural-urban migration and was more constrained by family responsibilities at a similar age (as

¹ Xiaohongshu (小红书, official English name rednote).

discussed in the literature review section), these women's mobility crosses national borders and prioritises their own aspirations. In contrast to those who follow traditional paths with family support, these women often rely on their own savings and independent planning to go abroad, often against societal expectations. This trend reflects a delay in traditional life stages and a conscious break from established trajectories. Such mobilities can also be understood as a part of a broader migration phenomenon, where individual choices challenge social norms. Yet, the experiences of this group have received limited scholarly attention. Combined with my own motivation to study abroad and the emotional difficulties I encountered during my time in Estonia—such as challenges in immersing myself in the local culture, experiences of self-doubt, emotional breakdowns related to differing views on intimate relationships, and changes in my relationship with my family due to geographical distance—these factors shaped my initial research interests. I was particularly interested in whether these women chose to go abroad for similar reasons, what kinds of emotional entanglements they experience in their overseas lives and how they cope with them, and how such experiences might shape their self-awareness and processes of self-actualisation. However, as discussed in the next chapter, the failure to carry out the planned interviews and questionnaires made it impossible to continue the original research design, which ultimately prompted a shift toward the current research topic.

1.2. The Rejected Field: Reflections Triggered by a Social Media Post

The initial plan for this study involved distributing questionnaires, followed by in-depth interviews with participants who consented to be interviewed. Participants were recruited through two main channels: via relevant Xiaohongshu hashtags and through a snowball sampling method based on personal networks. After several months, only 12 valid questionnaires were collected, with few participants recruited directly through social media. Of the 40 individuals contacted via Xiaohongshu, most did not respond, and some who initially consented later ceased to respond without explanation.

While searching for participants, I encountered a post in which the author directly responded to my private message, expressing discomfort and resistance to the research invitation. The response highlighted perceived inequalities in the research approach and even

accused it of exploiting others' trauma for self-gain. This experience prompted a reconsideration of both research methods and ethical issues, emphasising that research interactions may have unintended emotional impacts on participants. Although they willingly share their stories on public platforms, they often resist being observed or analysed as "research participants"—in the digital space, they are "visible" but remain "unreachable" to the researcher. Consequently, I adopted a non-interventionist analysis of public posts. This approach addresses the challenges encountered in fieldwork while respecting participants' digital autonomy, allowing the study to explore the logic behind their willingness to share their stories publicly while avoiding direct interaction with the researcher.

1.3. Transforming "Fieldwork Failure" into a Research Question

As discussed earlier, after setbacks in the planned questionnaires and interviews, I reframed this "fieldwork failure" as the research question itself. These individuals are not unwilling to share; they actively narrate their experiences abroad and daily life on social media, using hashtags to mark their identities and convey a sense of affiliation. However, this storytelling occurs within a space they control, aimed at potential "peers" or "understanders," rather than a researcher who intend to ask questions and record answers. The contradiction of being comfortable to share publicly but reluctant to engage directly with the researcher became the main motivation of this study.

The sample included 28 Xiaohongshu users who either did not respond to my private message inviting them to complete the questionnaire or initially expressed interest but later ceased to respond. This sampling approach was not chosen for convenience but arose from a problem-oriented perspective: their refusal to "become research participants" highlighted significant boundaries within today's digital space. These refusals defined a special "visible field"—the public domain they choose to reveal—allowing the researcher to examine their identity expression and self-narration through the posts they share publicly. The 28 posts analysed in this study are the very posts that were identified via relevant keywords when these users were initially approached as potential research participants.

The main analytical methods include:

Mixed-method Content Analysis: By collecting, consolidating, and analysing

hashtags in the sampled users' posts, examining how these users employ hashtags for self-categorization and identity expression, and explores their functional and strategic roles.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis: By conducting in-depth analysis of the sampled users' posts (text and images/videos), this study examines how these users construct their self-image and interpret personal experiences. It also examines how they negotiate external expectations and identity-related stereotypes within their online narratives.

The theoretical framework includes two parts:

Self-Presentation Perspective: Goffman (1959) points out that individuals manage others' perception of the situation through "expressions given and expressions given off" (Goffman, 1959, p.4) in face-to-face interactions. In other words, people strategically disclose certain information while strategically withholding or masking other information to maintain the desired boundaries of visibility. This study extends this theoretical perspective to the social media environment, focusing on how the sampled Xiaohongshu users choose which stories to put on the table and which emotions to hide backstage in their posts, thereby establishing the boundaries of their digital identity expression.

Hashtags and Identity Construction: Zappavigna (2011, 2013) points out that hashtags on social media are not only information-search tools but also linguistic means to achieve "ambient affiliation" (Zappavigna, 2011, p.801). The use of hashtags allows users to create virtual communities with others by sharing topics, values, or emotional stances without direct interaction. Therefore, hashtags not only have social functions but also become an important means of identity construction. On this basis, this study explores how the sampled Xiaohongshu users actively select hashtags such as #农村(rural), #大龄留学 (late-age study abroad), and #逆袭² (against all odds), transforming these social symbols into resources for self-narration and making them an important medium for constructing and expressing identity on social media.

Taken together, this methodological shift should not be seen as a second-best compromise.

² 逆袭(nì xí) – According to *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (7th ed., 2016, p. 950), 在逆境中成功反击, 也泛指扭转不利的局面 (To successfully counterattack in adversity, also generally refers to reversing an unfavourable situation).

On the contrary, it provides a more reflective and sensitive approach, allowing researcher to take a marginal position and observe with minimal interference how they construct their selves, express their emotions, and negotiate their identities in digital space. This approach is both a response to the failed fieldwork and a positive turn towards the digital content path.

1.4. Research Overview

This study originated from a contradiction observation: post-90s Chinese women from rural backgrounds, currently living abroad, actively share their stories on Xiaohongshu while avoiding direct interaction with the researcher. This “visible but unreachable” phenomenon became the core motivation of the study. This initial curiosity did not stop at speculating about individual psychology; rather, it pointed to broader theoretical and practical questions. Accordingly, this study approaches the phenomenon as a form of situated digital practice, suggests that in the specific social media context, identity expression and management are not simply acts of “self-sharing,” but strategic practices. Therefore, in order to systematically explore the logic behind this phenomenon, the study translates this initial curiosity into the following three interrelated and operationalizable research questions:

1. How do post-90s Chinese women from rural areas, currently living abroad, construct and express their identities on Xiaohongshu through multimodal content and hashtags?
2. What aspects of self-awareness and social strategies are reflected in their “visible but unreachable” digital presence?
3. How do they manage their sense of belonging and social image by activating, avoiding, or redefining hashtags?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to reveal the unique digital identity practices of a group that actively expresses themselves publicly while remaining distant from being “researched” or “interpreted.” This contributes to the understanding of identity construction on social media and prompts reflection on field ethics and digital autonomy. Additionally, the study addresses a gap in the existing literature by focusing on post-90s rural-origin Chinese women living abroad—an underexplored group in migration and digital identity research. Beyond contributing to the understanding of identity expression on social media among minority groups, the study also reflects on methodological challenges and ethical

considerations, offering new perspectives for research on online self-representation and fieldwork ethics.

The structure of this paper is organised as follows. Chapter 2, Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives, examines the body of existing scholarship on women's migration, social media and identity construction. It maps the theoretical frameworks that inform this study, highlighting how feminist migration studies, digital ethnography, and identity theory work together to shape understanding of transnational womanhood and online self-presentation. Chapter 3, Research Methods and Ethical Reflections, provides a detailed account of the methodological design, including data sources, participant selection, data collection and analysis procedures, and the rationale behind methodological choices. This chapter also addresses the ethical dimensions of conducting digital ethnography and discusses the researcher's positionality and reflexivity in relation to the participants and fieldwork contexts. Chapter 4, Identity Expression on Xiaohongshu, presents and analyses the core research findings. It explores how rural-origin, post-1990s Chinese women living abroad construct, negotiate, and express their identities on the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu. Through thematic analysis of user-generated content, this chapter uncovers the strategies, contradictions, and cultural negotiations embedded in their digital self-presentations. Chapter 5, Conclusion: An Incomplete Dialogue, discusses the study's contributions to the literature, reflects on methodological and ethical limitations, and outlines directions for future research, encouraging further dialogue between feminist digital studies and transnational identity scholarship.

Keywords: China, Women, Identity, Rural, Xiaohongshu

CERCS: S220

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives

2.1. Women's Migration and the Intergenerational Challenges of Rural Origins

Since the market-oriented reforms in 1979, China has experienced rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, accompanied by large-scale internal migration. For rural women, this process has brought economic opportunities while also reinforcing the

constraints of gender roles and family responsibilities on their migration choices (Fan,2003; Huang,2001; Zhang,2014).

Domestic research in China shows that the migration of rural women is restricted by both institutional and family structures. Huang (2001), based on the 1985–1990 Chinese population census, found that rural hukou³ (household registration) women are constrained by both gender and the hukou system in occupational mobility, with institutionalised “outsider status” (Huang,2001, p.261) significantly constraining their upward mobility. Based on the 1990 population census data and field surveys, Fan (2003) further points out that although rural women have gained some economic independence and social space through migration, marriage and family responsibilities give their migration a transitional characteristic. Most women are forced to return to the countryside after marriage to take on domestic and agricultural labour, reflecting the deep impact of gender role challenges and the rural-urban dual structure on the shaping of women's identities. Chiang et al. (2012), based on survey data from 100 villages in Gansu Province, also showed that rural women face more restrictions in educational and migration decisions, which are significantly influenced by gender, family structure, and academic performance, reflecting the differential impact of family gender preferences and family obligations on young men and women.

The following research has supplemented the understanding of identity negotiation in the migration process. Zhang (2014), through interviews with rural women migrants in Beijing, Shantou, and rural areas of Hebei and Henan, revealed the process by which they actively “negotiate, construct and perform their identities” (Zhang,2014, p.18) during the rural-urban migration. The study shows that their identity is dynamic, shifting according to different contexts and social backgrounds. Despite many challenges, they show a certain degree of agency in identity construction, providing an important perspective for understanding the identity negotiation of rural-origin women in cross-regional (or international) migration. Similarly, Martin (2014) found that Chinese women international

³ hukou(户口), refers to China’s household registration system. According to the *Regulations on Household Registration of the People's Republic of China* (1958), every citizen is required to register in a single place of permanent residence, which determines their legal residential status.

students, in their pursuit of independence and self-actualisation, both desires to broaden their horizons and achieve personal value through international migration and face traditional gender role expectations for family. They continuously reshape their gender identities through migration, seeking a balance between tradition and modernity.

Gender, as a social construct, plays a key role in migration. Boyd & Grieco (2003) point out that women's migration motives and experiences are often different from those of men. Gender involves identity, behaviour, and power relations and is constantly redefined in different socio-cultural contexts. In the context of rural women's migration, gender roles and social expectations can influence their migration decisions, path choices, and adaptation experiences. Therefore, understanding how gender is constructed and reconstructed in the migration process is essential for fully grasping the complexity of rural women's migration. Pessar&Mahler (2003) proposed the "gendered geographies of power" (Pessar&Mahler,2003, p.815) framework, pointing out that gender is a dynamic process rather than a static variable. Women's migration is shaped by multiple factors such as economy, family responsibilities, national policies, and social imagination. These factors both constrain and enable women's migration paths and identity construction at different spatial scales. Nawyn et al. (2009) further point out that women can bypass patriarchal control through women's networks to obtain information, resources, and support during the migration process, thereby expanding their migration paths and identity choices. This perspective reminds us that in the intercity or international migration of Chinese rural women, social networks not only provide material assistance but also create autonomous space for them within the gendered power structure.

An intergenerational perspective is equally important. Fan & Chen (2020), through the stories of Yingyue and Shuang, demonstrate the complexity of Chinese rural women in migration and family roles. Although both generations of women participated in migratory work, their primary roles remained caregivers, reflecting the persistent influence of traditional gender norms. At the same time, inequalities in education and economic opportunities limit their scope for development.

For the sampled Xiaohongshu users of this study, their rural origin and the fact that they can achieve short- or long-term international migration through personal effort positions

them as a small minority. Women born in the 1990s in China grew up in an era when higher education was gradually becoming more accessible and under the one-child policy. Their family structures and social expectations are significantly different from the previous generation. By sharing their experiences on social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu, they are not only resisting their pre-determined destinies but also reshaping their identities and encouraging other women who face similar challenges. However, their refusal to become traditional research participants demonstrates a cautious attitude towards self-expression and privacy boundaries. This contradictory attitude reflects the complex negotiation between traditional gender norms and modern self-awareness.

Despite the rich insights provided by existing research, there are still limitations. On the one hand, domestic studies often focus on samples concentrated in specific regions or limited to intercity migration, with insufficient attention on international experiences. On the other hand, studies conducted abroad tend to focus on describing gendered dilemmas, paying little attention to agency in the migration process, as well as self-presentation and identity management in digital spaces. Traditional research methods that rely on interviews fail to capture groups that actively engage in digital self-expression but avoid academic research. This suggests that we need new research methods to understand the identity construction and social strategies of rural women in digital spaces.

Thus, domestic and international studies have shown that rural women's migration is influenced by multiple factors such as institutions, family responsibilities, gender norms, and social networks. For the international migration of Chinese rural women born in the 1990s, these studies prompt us to pay attention to how they negotiate their identities in new social and cultural contexts, create autonomous spaces through social networks, and seek a balance between traditional and modern gender expectations. The popularisation of higher education and the background of the one-child policy in China also provide them with more possibilities to shape themselves and express their subjectivity in international migration. This "visible but unreachable" phenomenon not only challenges traditional research methods but also offers a new analytical perspective and approach for this study.

2.2. Social Media and Online Identity Construction: Hashtags, Visibility, and Strategies

2.2.1. Dramaturgical Theory

Goffman (1959) views social interaction as a form of dramaturgical performance, where individuals use self-presentation to influence others' perception of the situation. People switch between the "front region" (Goffman, 1959, p.107) and the "back region or backstage" (Goffman, 1959, p.112), managing others' impressions by controlling the disclosure and concealment of information. This process is constrained by the cultural context and social norms, and individuals are expected to follow social expectations and role norms; otherwise, they may face social pressure or sanctions. Scheff (2005) argues that Goffman's dramaturgical theory was heavily influenced by Cooley's "looking-glass self" (Cooley, 1922, p.184). According to Cooley (1922), people monitor their behaviour by imagining the perspectives of others and thus generate emotions such as pride or shame. Building on this, Scheff (2005) suggests that Goffman further explores how individuals use impression management to avoid embarrassment and shame, laying the foundation for dramaturgical theory.

Rawls (1989) proposes the constitutive role of interaction order and language, and emphasising how commitments and sequential relevance in interactions contribute to the construction of social order. This extension provided a new theoretical framework for understanding Goffman's dramaturgical theory and deepened the understanding of individuals' role-playing and impression management in social interactions.

With the rise of digital media, dramaturgical theory has been increasingly applied to online contexts. Ross (2007) introduced the theory into the study of online learning communities, emphasising that anonymity creates a space akin to a backstage for individuals, allowing them to engage in self-presentation, comparison, and knowledge sharing in an environment free from external pressures. Hogan (2010), building on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, distinguishes between performance and exhibition, arguing that self-presentation on social media is closer to exhibition than to the traditional notion of performance. This distinction highlights the fragmented and uncontrollable character of the audience in the digital media environment, offering a new lens for understanding online identity construction. It is especially useful for this study, as Hogan's notion of exhibition

frames self-presentation as display rather than interaction, thereby helping explain why users may be willing to publicly share curated narratives and emotions while resisting direct engagement with researchers.

Davis (2011) builds on Goffman's dramaturgical theory to explore the complexity of identity performance in the digital age. The research indicates that online identities are not mere replications of Goffman performances but rather strategic self-presentations within multiple, overlapping social contexts. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) applied Goffman's dramaturgical theory to examine individuals' online identity presentation and found that participants tended to recreate their offline selves online instead of adopting entirely new identities. However, they selectively highlighted or concealed certain self-traits to edit and shape their online images, indicating that the online environment offers enhanced potential for self-editing.

The concept of the "spatial self" (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2014, p.2) extends Goffman's theory by emphasising how social media users share geolocation information to display physical activities and construct spatially related self-narratives. This perspective reveals how users shape and communicate their identities through selective sharing, offering an important lens for understanding identity performance on social media. Chen et al. (2023) applied Goffman's dramaturgical theory to examine women's self-presentation on social media, finding that women with higher levels of self-objectification are more likely to engage in strategic self-presentation to gain others' approval. This study not only validates the applicability of impression management in social media but also introduces the concept of "approval motivation" (Chen et al., 2023, p.267), thereby expanding the scope of dramaturgical theory.

These theoretical developments show that Goffman's dramaturgical theory is applicable to both face-to-face interactions and digital spaces. The theory provides an analytical framework for understanding how individuals construct their identities through self-presentation and impression management in specific social contexts, which is particularly relevant to this study. Post-90s Chinese women from rural areas currently living abroad use hashtags, visual contrasts, and strategic narratives to highlight their achievements

and upward mobility while selectively withholding detailed information about their current struggles and offline lives. This selective sharing aligns with the concept of exhibition rather than traditional performance, as discussed by Hogan (2010). By doing so, they create a curated digital self that is highly visible to resonant peer communities yet strategically unreachable to researchers. This study extends Goffman's dramaturgical theory to the context of rural-origin women's transnational digital identity construction, revealing how they navigate the interplay between visibility and privacy in the digital environment. Through silence and boundary management, they maintain narrative sovereignty and personal boundaries, demonstrating that "visible yet unreachable" is a deliberate identity strategy.

2.2.2. Zappavigna: Hashtags and the Theory of Ambient Affiliation

After exploring Goffman's dramaturgical theory and its application in digital spaces, we further introduce Zappavigna's theory of hashtags and ambient affiliation to gain a more comprehensive understanding of identity construction on social media. Based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Zappavigna (2011) argues that social media discourse is not only a tool for information dissemination but also a resource for ambient affiliation. She emphasises the interpersonal function of social media language, that is, the establishment and reinforcement of community belonging through the expression of emotions, evaluations, and positions. This perspective offers a new lens for understanding language use on social media and provides a theoretical basis for studying the formation and development of online communities.

In her subsequent research, Zappavigna (2013) analyses the use of hashtags on Twitter, revealing how users construct identities, establish social connections, and share emotions and values with a broader audience through this simple form of tagging. As a result, hashtags are not only a tool for topic marking but also a powerful social and identity-building tool that allows users to form emotional communities based on shared values without direct interaction.

Furthermore, Zappavigna (2015) employs Halliday's concept of meta function in language to point out that the use of hashtags in social media serves three simultaneous communicative functions: First, the experiential function, which is used to mark and classify

topics; second, the interpersonal function, which builds social relationships by expressing emotions and value positions; and third, the textual function, which organises the structure of the text and the flow of information. This analysis reveals the multifunctionality of hashtags in social media texts and their significant role in constructing social relationships and expressing attitudes.

Zappavigna's research provides a solid theoretical foundation for this study. On the one hand, her theory is universal, capable of explaining how users across different social platforms and contexts establish connections and express their identities through linguistic resources. On the other hand, it is highly relevant to the focus of this study. For Chinese women born in the 1990s, originating from rural areas and currently living abroad, hashtags such as #农村(rural), #大龄留学 (late-age study abroad), and #逆袭 (against all odds), are crucial resources for identity narration and emotional regulation on social media. Through these hashtags, users align themselves with resonant peers while maintaining control over interactional boundaries. This form of affiliation allows them to be socially present and emotionally connected without becoming personally accessible. Zappavigna's framework not only helps reveal how these hashtags function experientially, interpersonally, and textually but also explains how they use these hashtags to establish symbolic emotional communities with others and reshape and express their identities in the digital space.

3. Research Methods and Ethical Reflections

3.1. Data Sources and Collection Methods

To study a social media phenomenon, centred around the online self-expression of post-90s rural-origin Chinese women living abroad, this study chose to employ Netnography (Kozinets ,2015) as a methodological tool. Netnography offers a systematic framework for collecting and interpreting social media data, enabling researchers to capture the cultural and social dynamics within digital communities. This approach is particularly advantageous for studying populations that are challenging to access through traditional research methods such as interviews or surveys due to geographical dispersion or other barriers. In this study, the participants publicly share content on Xiaohongshu but explicitly refuse direct academic

interaction. Netnography allows the analysis of these publicly visible narratives while respecting participants' boundaries, capturing patterns of selective self-expression, visibility management, and identity negotiation that would otherwise be inaccessible. Following the approach of Langer and Beckmann (2005), this study did not conduct member checks and did not disclose the researcher's identity, due to the shift in research design following participants' initial refusal, as this would have undermined the unobtrusive nature of content analysis and potentially affected the authenticity of the findings.

The data for this study is sourced from Xiaohongshu, a social media platform centred around the lifestyle of young people. According to data from Xiaohongshu's official English website, the platform had over 200 million monthly active users by October 2021 (Xiaohongshu, n.d.). A 2025 research report by Qian Gua Data reveals that the platform's monthly active users have reached 300 million, with a community gender ratio of 3:7 (male to female), and users aged 18–34 accounting for as high as 80% of the total (Qian Gua Data, 2025). Predominantly female, especially those born in the 1990s, the user base of Xiaohongshu is highly familiar with and active on the platform. Among Chinese international students, Xiaohongshu also enjoys high engagement, with many students sharing their overseas experiences and daily lives, as well as seeking information and advice, through the platform.

The selection of Xiaohongshu as the research platform is primarily based on the following considerations:

User Demographics Alignment: Xiaohongshu's user base is predominantly young women, which closely matches the focus of this study on overseas Chinese women born in the 1990s and originating from rural areas. Compared to platforms like Douban⁴ and Zhihu⁵, Xiaohongshu has a more concentrated target audience.

Content Diversity: As a lifestyle community, Xiaohongshu users share content across a wide range of topics, including study, work, emotions, fashion, and beauty. This diversity provides

⁴ Douban (豆瓣), a Chinese online cultural community, focused on books, films, and music, which enables users to share opinions and engage in discussions on various topics.

⁵ Zhihu (知乎), a Chinese online knowledge-sharing and Q&A community.

rich and multidimensional data for the research.

Researcher's Insider Status: As an active user and blogger on Xiaohongshu with over 450 followers, researcher is well-acquainted with the platform's ecosystem. This insider knowledge not only enhances the feasibility of the research but also aids in building understanding and empathy with the research participants, thereby facilitating more effective analysis.

Platform Influence: Xiaohongshu has a significant influence among young women. Its user interaction patterns, and content characteristics offer an important window for understanding the identity construction and self-expression of contemporary young people.

Given Xiaohongshu's strengths in user demographics, content features, and influence, coupled with the researcher's insider status, it emerges as the ideal platform for this study. Through this platform, we can gain a deeper understanding of how overseas Chinese women born in the 1990s and originating from rural areas construct their identities and express themselves in digital spaces. The 28 Xiaohongshu users analysed in this study were identified through a phased process of keyword search, locating, and screening over a period of six months. Prior to the research design shift, these users were invited by the researcher via direct message to participate in a questionnaire survey.

Keyword search: Relevant terms related to the research topic, such as 农村女孩(rural girls), 海外留学(studying abroad), and 90后(post-90s), were used to locate potential participants through the platform's search function.

Preliminary screening: Users' activity levels and the relevance of their content to the research topic were assessed based on their posts and profile information.

Final selection: Based on the above criteria, 28 users were selected. These users not only actively shared content related to the research topic on the platform, but their responses to the survey invitation (either did not respond or initially expressed interest but later fell silent) also provided valuable observational insights.

Among the initially collected 40 users, 12 users were excluded for the following reasons:

Users deleted content or cleared their profiles (6).

Users were no longer residing abroad, thus ineligible (1).

Users' ages fell outside the study range (1).

Privacy settings made access impossible (1).

Users' content was irrelevant or only loosely related to the research topic (3).

Through this screening process, the representativeness of the samples and the reliability of the data were ensured, providing a solid foundation for subsequent analysis. Consistent with Kozinets' (2015) emphasis on naturally occurring traces, the selected 28 posts—produced without any researcher intervention—are unobtrusive cultural artefacts. This phased keyword-screening procedure follows Netnographic sampling logic, ensuring that the posts are representative, systematically collected, and ethically accessible without direct contact.

3.2. Data Analysis Methods

The analysis follows Netnography's interpretive process (Kozinets, 2015): coding naturally occurring traces, identifying key patterns, and interpreting their meanings within the online community. This study uses two main types of data—post content and hashtags—which together reveal how research participants express and manage their identities on Xiaohongshu, through narrative and symbolic dimensions respectively.

Post Content: The posts located through keyword searches when identifying the potential research participants, including the title, text, and images/videos of each post, which are the required elements when publishing content on Xiaohongshu. These posts are not only the entry point for establishing connections with sampled Xiaohongshu users but also the core contents for their identity expression and self-narration. By conducting textual and visual analyses of these posts, examine how they narrate personal experiences, construct self-images, and respond to external expectations of their identities, thereby identifying commonalities and differences behind these narratives.

Analysis Methods: Content Analysis: Focusing on how users narrate their rural origins, growth experiences, and overseas study experiences, identify self-positioning, values, and emotional attitudes reflected therein. To systematically process the content (title, text, and image/video), a structured coding table was designed, extracting quantifiable and comparable indicators organized into three main categories fourteen indicators:

Category	Indicators	Description
Title	Emotional Tone of the Title	Core emotions and purpose conveyed in the post
Visual Contents	Visual Elements	Whether the post includes images or videos
	Appearance on Camera	Whether the author appears in the content
	Contrast Strategy	Whether contrast techniques are used
	Geographic Symbol	Whether recognisable overseas location symbols are included
Textual Contents	Narrative Type	Narrative style of the post
	Mobility Path	Life or career mobility path described in the post
	Origin Reference	Personal origin/background reference mentioned
	Achievement Reference	Personal achievement/status reference mentioned
	Motivation & Values	Personal motivation and values expressed
	Emotional Tone	Overall emotional tone of the post
	Challenge Type	Challenges mentioned in the post
	Audience Orientation	Orientation or attitude toward the audience
	Privacy Strategy	Level of personal information disclosure

Table 1. Coding Framework for Post Content Analysis

Source: Compiled by the author

Coding Process:

Anonymous identification numbers (ID01–ID28) were assigned to each user.

The full content of the posts was organised into Word documents for analysis, without making the original content public.

Trial coding of the posts was conducted to revise and finalise the coding manual.

Each post was coded according to the finalised coding manual, and the results were recorded in an Excel table.

Frequency statistics and cross-category analysis were performed after coding was completed

to draw conclusions.

Hashtag Data: The hashtags used by users in their posts, which serve both as a summary and categorisation tool for content and as an important means for posts to gain visibility.

Additionally, hashtags are a form of symbolic self-presentation, reflecting the social identities and value orientations that users wish to highlight in their identity construction. By statistically analysing and comparing high-frequency hashtags, identify the recurring themes and focal points in their identity construction and explore the role of hashtags in identity expression and visibility management.

Hashtag Frequency Statistics: The hashtags from the posts of the 28 users are collected and organised, resulting in a total of 172 unique hashtags. Their occurrences across all samples are then counted to generate a preliminary list of high-frequency hashtags, which is used to observe the keywords most employed by users in identity expression.

Hashtag Consolidation and Categorization: To avoid excessive dispersion and semantic redundancy, the hashtags are consolidated in two rounds. In the first round, semantic merging and redundancy removal reduces the 172 hashtags to 107. For example, #出国留学(overseas study), #留学(study abroad), and #一年制硕士(one-year master's program) were unified as study abroad; hashtags containing country or city names, e.g., #澳大利亚 (Australia), #河南 (Henan), were grouped under region. In the second round, these are further consolidated into 68 hashtags and categorised into five major groups. Some example hashtags in each group include (but are not limited to):

Study abroad & Education: #读博(PhD study), #读书(studying), #教育(education);

Identity & Growth: #女性成长(female growth), #个人成长(personal growth), #小镇女孩逆袭 (rural girls against all odds);

Region & Travel: #移民 (migration), #旅行推荐官 (travel recommender);

Everyday Life: #生活美学 (lifestyle aesthetics), #记录生活 (life documentation);

Others: #高考(college entrance exam).

Frequency and Category Comparison: After categorisation, the frequencies of each major category and its sub-hashtags are calculated and compared to reveal the themes and identity markers most frequently emphasised by users. The relative importance of each

category is visually presented using bar charts.

Function and Strategy Analysis: The potential functions of high-frequency hashtags in identity construction are also explored (e.g., for searchability, identity expression, and privacy management). For example, hashtags such as #女性成长(female growth) and #留学(study abroad) are frequently used, highlighting educational background and gender identity. In contrast, some hashtags, such as #大龄留学(late-age study abroad) and #农村(rural), appear less frequently but are still employed, indicating that these dimensions of identity are expressed in diverse ways in users' self-expression.

Coding and Organisation: To ensure data consistency, each user is assigned the same anonymous ID (1–28) used in the post content analysis. All hashtags under each ID are organised into an Excel table to form the initial hashtag dataset. To ensure transparency and traceability of the merging and classification process, each round of semantic merging and categorisation is completed in a new sheet within the same table, with the previous version retained for comparison.

Through the above analysis methods, this study comprehensively explores the identity expression and self-presentation strategies of the sampled users on Xiaohongshu from both post content and hashtag dimensions, providing a data foundation for the analysis and discussion in Chapter 4.

3.3. Ethical Principles and Boundaries

In conducting social media research, ethical considerations are crucial. To ensure the legality of the research and protect the safety and privacy of sampled Xiaohongshu users, this study adheres to several key principles and boundaries. The analysis is restricted to publicly available content on Xiaohongshu, which users have voluntarily posted and made accessible in accordance with the platform's terms of use and privacy policies. Despite the public nature of the content, users retain control over their information. To safeguard their privacy, this study takes several measures: it avoids using materials that can directly identify users, such as usernames, avatars, and geographical information; it generalises post details, including events, locations, and dates, to prevent tracing back to individuals; it paraphrases rather than quoting verbatim to minimise identifiable features; and it handles sensitive information, such

as family background and school details, with care to avoid identification risks.

To ensure privacy and methodological transparency, all original post contents were stored privately in Word documents for the researcher's analysis and were not made public as appendices. Coding results were compiled into anonymised Excel tables, included in the appendices to show how the data were systematically analysed. The original hashtag data and the results from the first round of integration are not presented, as they could potentially reveal the identities of specific users. Instead, only the final versions, after the second round of semantic integration and classification, are included. This approach maintains both data transparency and participant confidentiality. The role of the researcher is carefully defined to respect these boundaries. The researcher analyses only public post content, avoiding any direct contact, personal inquiries, or interference that could compromise user privacy. As both a platform user and an external observer, the researcher leverages the familiarity with the platform to understand user behaviour while maintaining objectivity and neutrality in the analysis. Continuous self-reflection is essential, as the researcher shares a similar background with the users, which facilitates empathy but also requires alertness to mitigate potential bias. Balancing the roles of "similar user" and "external observer" ensures both critical analysis and the protection of users' privacy and safety. In terms of data presentation, ethical considerations are paramount. The data tables in the appendices contain only anonymised and summarised content, which illustrates the coding and analysis process while ensuring transparency and protecting participants' privacy.

4.Identity Expression on Xiaohongshu

4.1. Visual and Linguistic Narratives

Based on the content analysis of the posts from 28 Xiaohongshu users, this study finds that Chinese women born in the 1990s of rural origin and currently living abroad, construct and express their identities that transcend geographical and social boundaries on the platform through coordinated visual and linguistic strategies. The following analysis is unfolded from three dimensions: visual presentation, linguistic narration, and audience management.

4.1.1. Visual Presentation Strategy: The Construction of “Curated Reality”

The use of visual elements is an essential part of their identity expression. The coding results show that their visual strategies are characterised by three dimensions, essentially a form of front stage performance.

Narrative Function of Contrast and Selectivity: Approximately 21.4% of the posts (6 out of 28) adopt a visual strategy of contrast. Such contrast is marked by a high degree of selectivity: select contrasting “starting points” (e.g., photos of very poor living conditions and childhood pictures wearing old clothes in rural areas) and “end points” (e.g., current photos showing fashionable outfits, and joyful photos laughing during overseas travels), supplemented by gradual developments in between. In doing so, they construct a clear and linear upward trajectory. The remaining posts that do not use the contrastive technique mostly directly present images of current overseas life, visually emphasise the current “overseas” status.

Strategic Differences in Self- Appearance: There are strategic differences in self-appearance in the posts, which are related to the purposes of narration. Posts with the author appearing on camera (18 out of 28, 64.3%) mostly serve to directly display the transformation of appearance and life, and to enhance authenticity and trustworthiness. In contrast, posts without the author appearing on camera (10 out of 28, 35.7%) focus more on highlighting achievements through surroundings, protecting personal privacy, or concentrating on the sharing of experiences and information, with the individual hidden behind the content.

Display of Geographical Symbols: In all the posts, 22 out of 28 (78.6%) of the images or videos contain identifiable overseas locations. Whether or not the creator appears on camera, most of the visual content is set against the backdrop of overseas environments. By repeatedly presenting geographical elements, they reinforce the presence and authenticity of their transnational experiences. By displaying recognisable overseas locations and everyday scenes, they convert their real-world experiences (studying, working or living abroad) into online visibility assets, to make sure the targeted audience know that “rural-to-global” mobility is not only possible but already achieved, and thus inviting admiration, emulation, and continued attention.

Through these visual strategies, the women present themselves as resilient, upwardly mobile and transnationally experienced. By contrasting their rural origins with their overseas lives and deciding whether to appear on camera, they craft a proactive image that crosses social and geographic borders. Geographical symbols and everyday scenes highlight their achievements and growth, conveying pride, confidence, and optimism. Viewed through Goffman's (1959) front stage performance lens, these selective visuals constitute a staged self-expression: via carefully curated images and settings, the women narrate a story of transformation while controlling the boundaries of what is revealed. This aligns with Hogan's (2010) distinction between performance and exhibition, where the images are not designed for direct interaction but for display before a fragmented and largely uncontrollable audience, while simultaneously signalling toward a resonant peer audience. In this sense, visual content serves as an exhibition of achievement and mobility, while backstage struggles and vulnerabilities remain largely absent. Moreover, the repeated use of recognisable overseas locations echoes the concept of the spatial self (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2014), transforming geographical markers into symbolic resources for identity construction. Together, these visual practices demonstrate how the women selectively share their visual contents with peer audience while maintaining control over narrative boundaries. The visual front stage thus becomes a space where they convey their aspirations, demonstrate their authenticity, and maintain a distance from being "researched."

4.1.2. Linguistic Narrative Patterns: Self- Definition, Story Framing, and Emotional Expression

The analysis at the linguistic level reveals common strategies and tendencies in self-definition, story narration, and emotional expression within this group.

The use of identity reference reveals clear symbolic patterns: 20 out of 28 users (71.4%) incorporated origin-related reference, which frequently co-occurred with achievement-oriented reference, highlighting a shift from ascribed identity to self-earned accomplishments. Examples of paraphrased posts:

ID02: 从穿着朴素的农村小姑娘到欧洲，去了很多地方，和不同的人谈天说地

From a modestly dressed rural girl to traveling in Europe, interacting with people from many

different backgrounds.

ID03: 农村女孩靠自己到南半球, 接触不同的风景和文化

A rural girl went alone to the Southern Hemisphere, experiencing diverse landscapes and cultures.

ID14: 出生在农村, 留学经历比想象中更值得

Born in a rural area, studying abroad turned out to be even more rewarding than expected.

ID17: 农村上学到公派留学

From rural school to state-sponsored study abroad.

ID28: 小村庄到加拿大的故事

Journey from a small village to studying in Canada.

Growth Against All Odds (17/28, 60.7%) serves as the dominant narrative framework. Some posts combine “empowerment and role model” narratives with personal stories, extending beyond mere self-recording and offering a blueprint of hope for others—For example:我希望自己的经验能帮助更多女孩子(I hope my experiences can help more girls); 只有让自己越来越好, 才能去看更大的世界, 也才能靠自己走出不一样的人生路(Only by improving myself can I see the bigger world and create a different path in life on my own); 大胆去尝试以前没做过的事, 新的机会才会降临(Boldly trying things I’ve never done before often brings new opportunities).

Approximately 4/28 posts (14.3%) adopt a “reflective and evaluative” narrative, actively deconstructing societal scrutiny of unconventional choices such as being “older” or “single,” thereby demonstrating reflection on and negotiation with mainstream expectations.

The overall emotional tone is predominantly positive, accounting for 64.3% (18/28). They generally exhibit a positive attitude towards their life trajectories and future development, showing strong proactivity and resilience when facing challenges. For instance: 只要坚持下去, 人生就会有希望
As long as you keep going, there will always be hope in life.
即使起点很低, 只要敢于追梦、勇敢面对未知, 也能改变自己的人生
Even with a humble starting point, one can change their life by daring to dream and face the unknown.

年龄并不是障碍，重要的是有勇气追求自己想要的生活方式

Age is not an obstacle; what matters is the courage to pursue the life you desire.

Although most posts convey optimism and confidence, some also reveal a complex mix of emotions beneath the surface. The emotional tone coding reveals that 35.7% of the posts (10/28) exhibit a “complex mixture”, often reflecting difficulties and hardships in the past: 高中时期是迄今为止人生中最黑暗的时光(High school was the darkest period of life so far); 常因原声家庭的影响感到自卑和缺乏安全感(Often felt a sense of inferiority and insecurity due to the influence of my family of origin), while the “present tense” tends to be linked with positive emotions like “pride,” “calmness,” and “hope”: 留学毕业后人生顺畅(Life began to proceed smoothly after graduation from study abroad);十年努力，世界越来越宽广(After ten years of effort, my world has become increasingly expansive). This emotional strategy based on the temporal dimension not only effectively highlights the turning points and transitions in personal growth but also reinforces the narrative effect of “breakthrough” and “transformation.”

On the level of motivation and values, in addition to individual motives such as “education changes destiny” and “personal struggle,” motivational hashtags like “escaping discipline” (9/28), “pursuing freedom/self” (12/28), and “seeing the world” (14/28) reveal the structural forces (such as escaping the pressure of the family of origin, gender roles, or social clock) and pulls (such as the pursuit of freedom) behind their actions. These provide a deeper motivational explanation for their transnational movements. This motivational structure indicates that their transnational movements are not only a geographical relocation but also a social breakthrough.

“Economic pressure” (15/28) is the most frequently mentioned type of challenge, followed by “disparity in educational resources” (9/28), which highly corresponds to the reality of their rural origins. For example: 家庭条件非常一般 (Family conditions were very modest);在贫困的家庭里，出国留学被视为遥不可及的想法(In a poor family, studying abroad was considered an almost impossible idea);因为经济拮据，父母没有能力买新衣服(Due to financial constraints, parents could not afford new clothes);小学五年级才开始学习普通话，初一才接触英文(Only started learning Mandarin in grade five and English in grade seven);进入

重点高中后，才第一次真切地意识到人与人之间的差距(Entering a top high school, truly realised for the first time the gaps between people). A noteworthy narrative strategy is that these challenges are mostly presented within the temporal framework of “the past that has been overcome.” As for the difficulties they are currently experiencing (such as cultural adaptation and psychological stress), they tend not to elaborate or only make limited mentions, preferring to focus the narrative on the process of coping and adjustment. This narrative arrangement is not about concealment or avoidance, but rather an emphasis on self-resilience and the maintenance of a growth-oriented narrative, thereby shaping an identity image that is continuously moving forward and actively responding.

In sum, the women linguistically recast themselves as self-driven, globally mobile individuals, transforming their rural origins into markers of effortful upward mobility. The dominant “past-dark → present-proud” emotional arc provides a hopeful script for audiences, while strategic use of hashtags and temporal framing keeps present vulnerabilities off-stage, ensuring that resilience, agency, and optimism remain visible and shareable.

4.1.3. Audience Orientation and Information Management: Targets and Boundaries

The analysis shows that the content creation of this group demonstrates a clear sense of audience and systematic information management strategies. These strategies are both adaptations to the characteristics of digital space and protections of their own privacy and safety.

Clearly Defined Audience Orientation: The audience orientation coding indicates that most posts (27/28, 96.4%) target a “community of resonance” as the primary audience. In terms of expression, they tend to adopt a collective perspective of “we” rather than “I,” using shared identity phrases such as “女生一定要” (Girls must), “农村女孩也可以” (Rural girls can also), “普通家庭女孩” (Girls from ordinary families), and “迷茫的小伙伴们” (To friends who feel lost) to construct a highly cohesive and exclusive digital community space. This narrative strategy strengthens empathy and identity within the group, with communication focusing more on mutual affirmation and support within the group rather than external self-display.

Highly Controlled Information Disclosure Strategy: This characteristic is highly consistent with the results of the privacy strategy coding. Most posts (25/28, 89.3%) adopt

“strategic sharing” as the primary method of privacy management. The core of this approach is a combination of “high emotional disclosure - low specific information”: that is, deeply sharing emotional experiences and inner journeys (such as insights into setbacks or personal struggles), while simultaneously blurring specific details that could reveal personal identity (such as precise times, locations, and interpersonal relationships). Considering the protection of their real-life social circles, they often do not want others around them to know too much about their personal details. This strategy effectively resonates with readers while maximising the protection of privacy boundaries in real life, achieving a balance between emotional connection and self-protection. This strategy interestingly echoes their refusal of research requests: they are willing to share emotions and experiences under their own control but refuse to become passive research participants. This refusal can be understood as a defence of narrative autonomy—sharing is meaningful only when they can control the manner, audience, and purpose of the narrative.

In short, by orienting their content toward a resonant peer community and carefully managing information disclosure, these women construct themselves as “rural born yet globally mobile” subjects who speak collectively (“we”) while preserving individual inaccessibility. Their linguistic strategies—combining high emotional openness with minimal personally identifiable details—create a curated digital front stage where narratives of upward mobility are performed for peers, while vulnerabilities and real-life contexts remain off-stage. This bounded visibility foreshadows their broader approach to boundary management: while these women actively engage in public self-expression on Xiaohongshu, access to the individuals behind these narratives remains selectively restricted. This visible-but-unreachable stance functions not merely as protection but as the expression of identity sovereignty, enabling controlled and autonomous self-expression within Xiaohongshu’s participatory emotional economy.

4.2. The Choice and Meaning of Hashtags

On Xiaohongshu, users construct and express their identities through the selection of specific hashtags, which serve not only as content classification tools but also as markers of self-identification and social belonging. Drawing on the data analysis methods outlined in

Chapter 3, this section examines hashtag usage in terms of frequency, categorisation, and functional strategies, highlighting their role in identity construction.

High-Frequency Hashtags and Identity Construction: A total of 172 unique hashtags were collected from 28 users, with the most frequent including #女性成长(female growth) (7 times), # 留学(study abroad) (6 times), and #出国(go abroad) (5 times). This preliminary finding reveals two notable trends: first, users emphasise educational and transnational mobility, positioning themselves within narratives of social and geographic advancement. Second, gender and personal growth are salient, with hashtags like #女性成长(female growth) linking personal development to collective female identity. These patterns show that hashtags do more than label content—they function as identity signals and social-positioning tools, enabling users to curate a recognisable self and elicit peer emotional resonance within their transnational-girl network (Zappavigna, 2012).

After the first round of consolidation, 107 items were retained, covering both original and merged categories. The most frequent hashtags were 留学(study abroad) (17 occurrences), 区域(region) (15), 女性成长(female growth) (7), 出国(go abroad) (6), and 逆袭 (against all odds) (5). It highlights three preliminary trends: first, education and transnational mobility dominate users' identity narratives; second, spatiality and locality serve as important markers of identity; and third, gendered growth and personal struggle continue to be central themes, resonating both individually and within peer communities.

In the second round of consolidation, hashtags were further categorised, resulting in five major categories comprising a total of 68 items. The classification and frequency distribution are as follows:

Study Abroad and Education (21 occurrences): Includes hashtags such as #留学(study abroad), # 出国 (go abroad), and #留学申请 (study abroad application), highlighting educational background, transnational learning, and academic achievements.

Identity and Personal Growth (20 occurrences): Includes hashtags such as #女性成长(female growth), #逆袭(against all odds), and #大龄留学 (late-age study abroad), reflecting personal growth and self-actualisation.

Region and Travel (19 occurrences): Covers countries, regions, or transnational experiences,

e.g., #欧洲(Europe), illustrating users’ geographical and cultural positioning.

Daily Life (6 occurrences): Includes hashtags such as #记录生活(documenting life) and #职场日常(workplace routine), presenting users’ everyday experiences and lifestyle.

Others (2 occurrences): Hashtags not directly related to core identity, such as #情感树洞(emotional confessional space) and #种地吧(farming), primarily reflecting community participation.

Over 90% of hashtags fall into the first three categories, indicating that academic achievement, personal growth, and transnational mobility constitute the core of identity expression. The bar chart below clearly illustrates this distribution. Daily life and community participation tags supplement this, maintaining a sense of ordinary experience and preventing the self-expression from appearing solely aspirational.

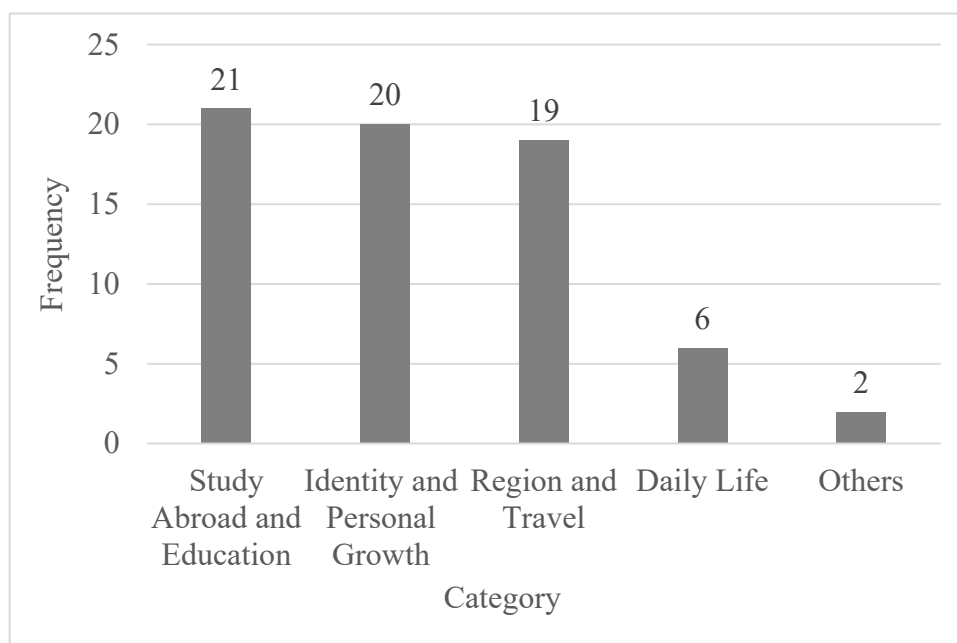


Figure 1. Category and Frequency Distribution of Users’ Self-expression Hashtags

Source: author’s calculations

Functions and Strategies of Hashtags: An Analytical Perspective

Searchability and Visibility: High-frequency hashtags such as #留学(study abroad) and #出国 (go abroad) not only summarise post themes but also allow users with similar experiences to locate and engage with each other. This strategy enhances visibility among peers while reinforcing shared narratives of educational and transnational mobility.

Identity Expression and Self-Identification: Hashtags convey users' core identity dimensions. For example, #逆袭 (against all odds) signals upward social mobility or academic striving, while #女性成长 (female growth) highlights gendered personal development. Less frequent hashtags such as #大龄留学 (late-age study abroad) or #农村 (rural), indicate the diverse layers of identity expression beyond the core narrative. Through this selective deployment, users craft a recognisable persona while connecting with a peer community that resonates with similar experiences.

Contextual Adaptation and Redefinition of Hashtags: The same hashtag can carry different meanings in different posts. For example, #逆袭 (against all odds) may refer to academic or career success, or to social mobility from a rural area to abroad. Through this practice, users construct unique identity narratives on the platform and oriented toward a peer community.

In sum, hashtag usage on Xiaohongshu allows these women to construct and communicate layered identities that foreground academic achievement, transnational mobility, and personal growth. By selecting and adapting hashtags, they both signal their social positioning and curate a coherent narrative that resonates within a peer community. At the same time, this selective deployment of hashtags also functions as a boundary-management strategy: visibility is enhanced within a self-defined interpretive frame, while access to personal details and offline contexts remains limited. This selective, context-sensitive deployment transforms hashtags into tools of identity performance, enabling users to assert a visible, aspirational, yet controlled self while maintaining boundaries around personal details and offline life. Hashtags thus function not merely as organisational markers, but as instruments of self-definition, narrative construction, and mediated belonging in the digital space.

4.3. “Visible but Unreachable”: Identity Negotiation and Strategic Silence

Building on the analyses of visual and linguistic narratives (4.1) and hashtag strategies (4.2), this section shows that post-90s Chinese women from rural areas, currently living abroad, construct digital identities that transcend geographic and social boundaries through visual presentation, emotional narratives, and strategic use of hashtags. Their

identities are multiple and often contradictory: rural background versus global perspective, traditional daughter versus independent woman, age-related pressure versus self-actualisation. Through selective identification and reinterpretation, these hashtags are transformed into resources for personal growth—for instance, the “rural girl” becomes a measure of striving, while “late-age study abroad” signals courage to challenge societal expectations.

Their widespread refusal to participate in research (non-response, explicit rejection, or indirect avoidance) should be understood as an extension of the same boundary management strategies observed in their online self-expression. While these women actively share curated narratives and emotional experiences on Xiaohongshu, such sharing is conducted under conditions they can define and control. Research engagement, by contrast, represents a shift in narrative authority, in which interpretation, framing, and representation are no longer fully governed by the content creator.

In this case, refusal doesn't mean avoiding or being hostile toward visibility, but rather reflects a strong awareness of the unequal in the research relationship and a deliberate protection of narrative ownership. The platform's visibility logic enables users to regulate their accessibility through selective hashtag use, algorithm-oriented posting, and information filtering, allowing them to remain visible within a self-defined framework while limiting deeper external access. “Unreachability,” therefore, functions not as withdrawal but as an active strategy of visibility management—one that preserves agency, safeguards personal boundaries, and resists becoming an object of external scrutiny or academic extraction.

Theoretical perspectives help illuminate these practices. Goffman (1959)'s dramaturgical theory explains how the women manage self-expression through front stage performances, while Hogan (2010)'s distinction between exhibition and performance clarifies why sharing is often public yet not interactive, emphasising display over direct engagement. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) show that online users selectively highlight or conceal aspects of themselves, which helps explain why these women emphasise achievements while downplaying difficulties. Zappavigna (2011)'s ambient affiliation highlights how hashtags enable users to connect with like-minded peers and foster affiliation within a community.

Overall, being “visible but unreachable” is not a contradiction but a core strategy of digital identity construction, allowing these women to share curated narratives with peers while protecting personal boundaries and agency.

5. Conclusion: An Unfinished Dialogue

5.1. Key Findings

This study explores how post-90s Chinese women from rural backgrounds, currently living abroad, construct and express their identities on Xiaohongshu, with particular attention to how visibility and boundaries are managed. Through analysis of posts and hashtags from 28 users, the study finds that their digital identity construction and boundary management are reflected in three main aspects:

First, identity construction is shaped by selective visual curation and narrative framing. Users frequently contrast rural origins (starting point) with overseas life (end point) to present trajectories of upward mobility, either explicitly through before-and-after imagery or implicitly through repeated visual emphasis on life abroad. These visuals function as active identity constructions rather than neutral records, foregrounding both origin and achievement as key elements of a legitimate self-image.

Second, emotional expression is central but carefully controlled. Posts often link past hardship with present achievement, mobilising emotion to produce resonance and affiliation, while following a “high emotion – low information” pattern that protects privacy. By orienting content toward a resonant peer community, they share curated narratives of upward mobility while keeping vulnerabilities and real-life details private, reflecting deliberate narrative autonomy and boundary management.

Third, hashtags operate as strategic identity resources. Beyond enhancing visibility, they enable users to reposition themselves by combining ascribed identities (such as rural background) with achieved ones (such as overseas study or personal growth). Through this selective deployment, hashtags support both self-definition and belonging within resonant peer communities.

Across these practices, silence and refusal emerge as forms of agency. Non-response

and avoidance of research engagement reflect deliberate boundary work aimed at protecting narrative ownership. By managing reachability through selective disclosure and hashtag use, users construct a presence that is visible within a specific frame yet resistant to full external access.

Overall, their digital identity construction is not linear storytelling but a negotiation of multiple identities and strategic boundary management. They leverage visibility logic to gain peer connection while maintaining subjectivity through silence and refusal. This “visible yet unreachable” practice demonstrates agency and prompts methodological and ethical reflection for digital fieldwork research.

5.2. Research Limitations, Reflections and Future Directions

Sample and Platform Limitations: This study analysed only 28 users on Xiaohongshu, with a limited sample size and focus on a single platform, which affects the generalisability of the findings. Xiaohongshu’s user demographics, algorithmic mechanisms, and community culture specifically shapes content presentation and identity expression. Therefore, the conclusions primarily apply within the “Xiaohongshu context.” Future research could consider cross-platform comparisons, for example, examining how these women express identities on Xiaohongshu versus Western platforms such as Instagram. Such comparisons could reveal whether they maintain similar identities across platforms or adapt their self-expression according to different audiences. An interesting observation from my own experience is that neither I, with a similar rural-origin and overseas background, nor those who previously agreed to be interviewed for my initial research design, share these kinds of personal narratives on Xiaohongshu. This suggests that the platform itself, along with its community norms and audience expectations, may play a unique role in shaping identity expression, highlighting the need to consider platform-specific affordances in future research.

Subjectivity in Coding and Analytical Frameworks: Coding of titles, visual content, and texts, as well as statistical analysis of hashtags, inevitably carries subjective bias. Merging similar hashtags to avoid identifying individuals may result in subtle semantic differences being lost. Additionally, the researcher’s chosen coding and analytical framework may obscure other potential interpretations. Future studies might incorporate collaborative

coding with multiple researchers to triangulate interpretations and reduce subjectivity.

Absence of Comments and Interaction Analysis: Due to the large data volume, dissertation length, and research depth limitations, this study did not analyse comments or the users' responses to comments. Examining how users selectively respond, ignore, or privately interact with commenters would more fully reveal the dynamics of identity construction and boundary management. Future research including comment interactions could provide a more comprehensive understanding, particularly regarding the types of comments these women choose to engage with. This could shed light on whether they are specifically targeting a resonant peer audience. From my own observations while reviewing these posts, the women tend to reply more often to comments that are encouraging or come from users with similar backgrounds seeking advice, suggesting that engagement appears to be carefully managed to maintain a positive image.

Unidirectional Researcher Perspective: This study did not involve direct interaction with users, analysing their public content from a third-party perspective. While this maintains objectivity, it may result in interpretations that do not fully align with users' intentions, weakening their narrative sovereignty. Conclusions should thus be viewed as interpretations within a specific theoretical framework, rather than a direct representation of users' true intentions. Framing texts academically, while aiding expression, may unintentionally reinforce asymmetries of scholarly power. Future research could explore alternative methods to establish interaction or dialogue with users—such as participatory observation, or co-creation approaches—to gain a deeper understanding of their intentions while respecting narrative ownership.

Field Ethics, Power Relations, and Methodological Shifts: Despite employing a non-intervention approach, the researcher's choices in sampling, coding, and analysis inevitably carry subjective judgment and academic power. Transitioning from failed field work to content analysis responds to participants' silence but may still impinge on narrative ownership. Public accessibility does not imply consent for academic use, presenting a potential "overstepping": the researcher's reconstruction of narratives exercises representational power that may conflict with participants' subjective intentions. To mitigate

potential harm, this study anonymised data and merged hashtags, emphasising that analysis represents the researcher's perspective, not users' self-expression. Future research could explore collaborative methods, aiming to engage users in ways that respect their narrative sovereignty while generating richer insights into their identity construction.

5.3. Writing Significance and Reflexivity

Transitioning from the “rejected field” to content analysis not only opens new avenues for research but also prompts a critical reflection on the research process itself. In this shift, silence and refusal do not signify an end; rather, they become a new starting point. Analysing public content does not bypass silence but responds to the logic behind it—how participants negotiate boundaries between public and private spaces and manage their visibility in digital environments. Thus, the focus of this study is not on revealing everything, but on understanding the boundary practices reflected in these selective presentations.

Building on the discussion of selective self-expression and boundary practices, silence and refusal reveal another form of research value: they are themselves narrative practices, responding not only to researchers but also reflecting participants' management of visibility in digital spaces. Their “unreachability” partially resists symbolic violence and safeguards narrative autonomy. Acknowledging this in writing is itself an ethical stance. This study emphasises methodological reflexivity: researchers need to be aware of the potential intrusiveness in the pursuit of information, respect the boundaries defined by participants, and interpret behaviour within participants' self-expression frameworks. As a researcher with a background like that of the participants, I also experience the tension of a dual positionality—this tension helps to understand participants' struggles while potentially introducing emotional bias. It is treated here as a reflexive resource, reminding the researcher not to overstep participants' narrative authority and to remain as faithful as possible to their choices.

Ultimately, this study presents an unfinished dialogue, inviting readers and future researchers to reflect on “refusal and silence” in digital research. Writing is not merely representation of facts but an ongoing negotiation with participants. “Visible yet unreachable” is both an identity condition of participants and a reflection of the researcher-participant relationship, providing insights for future digital research methods and ethics: research should

not attempt to “decode” silence or capture a complete identity, but seek to understand strategies of silence and identity negotiation, respecting the ethical value of “unreachability” as an essential component of digital autonomy.

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Appendices A

帖子内容编码规则（中文）

编码类别		编码说明	编码选项
标题	标题情感基调	标题所传达的核心情感与目的	【单选】赋能激励型、探索分享型、反思协商型、中性记录型、消极挫败型
视觉内容	视觉元素	贴文是否配有图片或视频	【单选】图片、视频
	出镜情况	作者本人是否在画面中出现	【单选】出镜、未出镜
	对比策略	是否使用对比手法	【单选】使用对比(今昔对比、中外对比等)、未使用对比
	地理符号	是否包含可识别的海外地点标志	【单选】是、否
帖子内容	叙事类型	帖子的叙事方式	【可多选】成长逆袭、探索体验、身份协商与抵抗、困难挑战、赋权与榜样、内省权衡
	流动路径	帖子描述的生活或职业流动路径	【可多选】城乡流动、跨省流动、跨国流动、其他
	出身标签	帖子中提到的个人出身或背景标签	【可多选】农村/底层、小镇青年、小地方、其他
	成就标签	帖子中提到的个人成就或身份标签	【可多选】优等生、留学生、探索者、经济独立、数字游民、大龄留学、其他
	动机与价值观	帖子表达的个人动机和价值观	【可多选】教育改变命运、个人奋斗、看世界、逃离规训（原生家庭/社会期待）、追求自由/自我、其他
	情感基调	帖子整体的情感基调	【单选】积极乐观、中性平静、消极挫败、复杂混合
	挑战类型	帖子中提到的个人面临的挑战	【可多选】经济压力、教育资源差、家庭阻力、政策限制、心理压力、文化适应、情感创伤、性别歧视、信息差、年龄焦虑、职场压力、其他
	读者指向	帖子内容对读者的指向或意图	【单选】共鸣群体、构建共同体、对外宣告、自我记录、不明显
	隐私策略	帖子中对个人信息的披露程度	【单选】高暴露、策略性分享、高度隐私、不明显

Post Contents Coding Rules (English Translation)

Coding Category		Coding Description	Coding Options
Title	Emotional Tone of the Title	Core emotions and purpose conveyed in the post	【Single Choice】 Motivational, Exploratory Sharing, Reflective Negotiation, Neutral Record, Passive-Defeated
Visual Contents	Visual Elements	Whether the post includes images or videos	【Single Choice】 Image, Video
	Appearance on Camera	Whether the author appears in the content	【Single Choice】 Appears, Not Appears
	Contrast Strategy	Whether contrast techniques are used	【Single Choice】 Used (e.g., present vs past, domestic vs abroad), Not used
	Geographic Symbol	Whether recognisable overseas location symbols are included	【Single Choice】 Yes, No
Post Contents	Narrative Type	Narrative style of the post	【Multiple Choice】 Growth & Against All Odds, Exploratory Experience, Identity Negotiation & Resistance, Difficult Challenges, Empowerment & Role Model, Introspective Deliberation
	Mobility Path	Life or career mobility path described in the post	【Multiple Choice】 Rural-Urban, Inter-Province, International, Other
	Origin Reference	Personal origin/background reference mentioned	【Multiple Choice】 Rural/Lower Class, Small Town Youth, Small Place, Other
	Achievement Reference	Personal achievement/status reference mentioned	【Multiple Choice】 Honour Student, Overseas Student, Explorer, Financially Independent, Digital Nomad, Late-Age Study Abroad, Other

Motivation & Values	Personal motivation and values expressed	【Multiple Choice】 Education Changes Destiny, Individual Effort, Seeing the World, Escaping Constraints (Family/Social Expectations) ,Seeking Freedom/Self-Realization, Others
Emotional Tone	Overall emotional tone of the post	【Single Choice】 Positive, Neutral, Negative, Defeated, Mixed
Challenge Type	Challenges mentioned in the post	【Multiple Choice】 Economic Pressure, Limited Educational Resources, Family Resistance, Policy Constraint, Psychological Stress, Cultural Adaptation, Emotional Trauma, Gender Discrimination, Information Gap, Age Anxiety, Workplace Stress, Others
Audience Orientation	Orientation or attitude toward the audience	【Single Choice】 Resonant Group, Community Building, External Declaration, Self-Documentation, Not Apparent
Privacy Strategy	Level of personal information disclosure	【Single Choice】 High Exposure, Strategic Sharing, Highly Private, Not Apparent

Source: Compiled by the author

Appendices B

帖子内容编码表 (中文)

	标题	视觉内容				帖子内容								
ID	标题情感基调	视觉元素	出镜情况	对比策略	地理符号	叙事类型	流动路径	出身标签	成就标签	动机与价值观	情感基调	挑战类型	读者指向	隐私策略
1	反思协商型	图片	未出镜	未使用对比	是	成长逆袭	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生	教育改变命运、看世界	积极乐观	经济压力、教育资源差	共鸣群体	策略性分享
2	赋能激励型	图片	出镜	使用对比	是	成长逆袭、赋权与榜样	跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、经济独立、探索者	个人奋斗、看世界	复杂混合	经济压力、家庭阻力、文化适应	共鸣群体	策略性分享
3	探索分享型	图片	未出镜	未使用对比	是	探索体验、赋权与榜样	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层、小地方	留学生、探索者	个人奋斗、看世界、追求自由/自我	积极乐观	经济压力	共鸣群体	策略性分享
4	赋能激励型	视频	未出镜	未使用对比	是	成长逆袭、赋权与榜样	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、优等生	教育改变命运、个人奋斗	积极乐观	经济压力、家庭阻力	共鸣群体	策略性分享
5	赋能激励型	图片	出镜	使用对比	是	成长逆袭、身份协商与抵抗	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、经济独立	教育改变命运、看世界、逃离规训	复杂混合	经济压力、家庭阻力、情感创伤	共鸣群体	策略性分享

6	赋能激励型	图片	出镜	未使用对比	否	成长逆袭	跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、经济独立	教育改变命运、个人奋斗	积极乐观	经济压力、文化适应	共鸣群体	策略性分享
7	探索分享型	图片	出镜	未使用对比	是	探索体验	跨国流动	小地方	留学生、大龄留学	看世界、追求自由/自我	积极乐观	无	共鸣群体	策略性分享
8	探索分享型	图片	出镜	使用对比	是	成长逆袭、探索体验	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层、小镇青年	留学生、经济独立、探索者	个人奋斗、看世界	积极乐观	经济压力、教育资源差	共鸣群体	策略性分享
9	赋能激励型	图片	出镜	使用对比	是	成长逆袭、赋权与榜样	跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、经济独立、探索者	教育改变命运、个人奋斗	积极乐观	经济压力、文化适应	共鸣群体	策略性分享
10	中性记录型	图片	出镜	未使用对比	是	成长逆袭、探索体验	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、经济独立、探索者	看世界、追求自由/自我	积极乐观	教育资源差	自我记录	策略性分享
11	探索分享型	图片	出镜	未使用对比	是	探索体验	跨国流动	无	留学生、探索者	看世界、追求自由/自我、逃离规训	复杂混合	信息差、政策限制	共鸣群体	策略性分享
12	反思协商型	图片	出镜	未使用对比	是	身份协商与抵抗	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、经济独立	追求自由/自我、逃离规训	复杂混合	文化适应	共鸣群体	策略性分享

13	中性记录型	图片	未出镜	未使用对比	否	探索体验	跨国流动	无	数字游民、探索者	追求自由/自我、逃离规训	积极乐观	信息差、政策限制	共鸣群体	高度隐私
14	中性记录型	图片	未出镜	未使用对比	是	成长逆袭、困难挑战	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、经济独立	教育改变命运、个人奋斗、看世界	复杂混合	经济压力、家庭阻力、教育资源差	共鸣群体	策略性分享
15	中性记录型	图片	出镜	未使用对比	是	成长逆袭、赋权与榜样	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、经济独立	教育改变命运、个人奋斗	积极乐观	经济压力、教育资源差、文化适应	共鸣群体	策略性分享
16	中性记录型	图片	出镜	使用对比	是	成长逆袭	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、优等生	教育改变命运、个人奋斗	复杂混合	经济压力、教育资源差、政策限制	共鸣群体	策略性分享
17	反思协商型	图片	未出镜	未使用对比	是	成长逆袭、身份协商与抵抗	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、优等生、探索者	教育改变命运、逃离规训	积极乐观	教育资源差、性别歧视	共鸣群体	策略性分享
18	赋能激励型	图片	未出镜	未使用对比	否	探索体验、赋权与榜样	跨国流动	无	数字游民、经济独立	追求自由/自我、逃离规训	积极乐观	信息差、政策限制	共鸣群体	高度隐私

19	赋能激励型	视频	出镜	未使用对比	是	探索体验、身份协商与抵抗	跨国流动	无	留学生、大龄留学	追求自由/自我、逃离规训	积极乐观	职场压力	共鸣群体	策略性分享
20	赋能激励型	视频	未出镜	未使用对比	是	成长逆袭	跨国流动	无	探索者、经济独立	追求自由/自我、逃离规训	积极乐观	家庭阻力	共鸣群体	策略性分享
21	中性记录型	图片	出镜	未使用对比	是	内省权衡	跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、大龄留学	教育改变命运、看世界	复杂混合	情感创伤、年龄焦虑	共鸣群体	策略性分享
22	赋能激励型	图片	未出镜	未使用对比	否	成长逆袭、赋权与榜样	跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、优等生	教育改变命运、个人奋斗	复杂混合	教育资源差、心理压力、政策限制	共鸣群体	高度隐私
23	探索分享型	图片	出镜	未使用对比	是	探索体验、赋权与榜样	跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、探索者	教育改变命运、看世界	积极乐观	经济压力、心理压力	共鸣群体	策略性分享
24	反思协商型	图片	出镜	未使用对比	是	成长逆袭、内省权衡	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、经济独立	教育改变命运、个人奋斗、看世界	积极乐观	经济压力、文化适应	共鸣群体	策略性分享
25	中性记录型	视频	出镜	未使用对比	是	探索体验	跨国流动	农村/底层	探索者	看世界、追求自由/自我	积极乐观	经济压力	共鸣群体	策略性分享

26	中性记录型	图片	出镜	未使用对比	是	成长逆袭、内省权衡	城乡流动、跨国流动	小镇青年	留学生、探索者	教育改变命运、追求自由/自我	复杂混合	心理压力	共鸣群体	策略性分享
27	消极挫败型	图片	未出镜	未使用对比	否	内省权衡	跨国流动	无	留学生、探索者	看世界、追求自由/自我	积极乐观	文化适应	共鸣群体	策略性分享
28	中性记录型	图片	出镜	使用对比	否	成长逆袭、困难挑战	城乡流动、跨国流动	农村/底层	留学生、探索者	教育改变命运、逃离规训	复杂混合	经济压力、教育资源差、性别歧视	共鸣群体	策略性分享

Post Contents Coding Table (English Translation) A1

	Title	Visual Contents			
ID	Emotional Tone of the Title	Visual Elements	Appearance on Camera	Contrast Strategy	Geographic Symbol
1	Reflective Negotiation	Image	Not Appears	Not Used	Yes
2	Motivational	Image	Appears	Used	Yes
3	Exploratory Sharing	Image	Not Appears	Not Used	Yes
4	Motivational	Video	Not Appears	Not Used	Yes
5	Motivational	Image	Appears	Used	Yes
6	Motivational	Image	Appears	Not Used	No
7	Exploratory Sharing	Image	Appears	Not Used	Yes
8	Exploratory Sharing	Image	Appears	Used	Yes
9	Motivational	Image	Appears	Used	Yes
10	Neutral Record	Image	Appears	Not Used	Yes
11	Exploratory Sharing	Image	Appears	Not Used	Yes
12	Reflective Negotiation	Image	Appears	Not Used	Yes

13	Neutral Record	Image	Not Appears	Not Used	No
14	Neutral Record	Image	Not Appears	Not Used	Yes
15	Neutral Record	Image	Appears	Not Used	Yes
16	Neutral Record	Image	Appears	Used	Yes
17	Reflective Negotiation	Image	Not Appears	Not Used	Yes
18	Motivational	Image	Not Appears	Not Used	No
19	Motivational	Video	Appears	Not Used	Yes
20	Motivational	Video	Not Appears	Not Used	Yes
21	Neutral Record	Image	Appears	Not Used	Yes
22	Motivational	Image	Not Appears	Not Used	No
23	Exploratory Sharing	Image	Appears	Not Used	Yes
24	Reflective Negotiation	Image	Appears	Not Used	Yes
25	Neutral Record	Video	Appears	Not Used	Yes
26	Neutral Record	Image	Appears	Not Used	Yes
27	Passive-Defeated	Image	Not Appears	Not Used	No

28	Neutral Record	Image	Appears	Used	No
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Post Contents Coding Table (English Translation) A2

ID	Post Contents								
	Narrative Type	Mobility Path	Origin Reference	Achievement Reference	Motivation & Values	Emotional Tone	Challenge Type	Audience Orientation	Privacy Strategy
1	Growth & Against All Odds	Rural-Urban, International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student	Education Changes Destiny, Seeing the World	Positive	Economic Pressure, Limited Educational Resources	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
2	Growth & Against All Odds, Empowerment & Role Model	International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student, Financially Independent, Explorer	Individual Effort, Seeing the World	Mixed	Economic Pressure, Family Resistance, Cultural Adaptation	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
3	Exploratory Experience, Empowerment & Role Model	Rural-Urban, International	Rural/Lower Class, Small Place	Overseas Student, Explorer	Individual Effort, Seeing the World, Seeking Freedom/Self-Realisation	Positive	Economic Pressure	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
4	Growth & Against All Odds	Rural-Urban, International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student,	Education Changes Destiny, Individual Effort	Positive	Economic Pressure, Family Resistance	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing

	Empowerment & Role Model			Honour Student					
5	Growth & Against All Odds, Identity Negotiation & Resistance	Rural-Urban, International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student, Financially Independent	Education Changes Destiny, Seeing the World, Escaping Constraints	Mixed	Economic Pressure, Family Resistance, Emotional Trauma	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
6	Growth & Against All Odds	International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student, Financially Independent	Education Changes Destiny, Individual Effort	Positive	Economic Pressure, Cultural Adaptation	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
7	Exploratory Experience	International	Small Place	Overseas Student, Late-Age Study Abroad	Seeing the World, Seeking Freedom/Self-Realisation	Positive	N/A	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
8	Growth & Against All Odds, Exploratory Experience	Rural-Urban, International	Rural/Lower Class, Small Town Youth	Overseas Student, Financially Independent, Explorer	Individual Effort, Seeing the World	Positive	Economic Pressure, Limited Educational Resources	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
9	Growth & Against All Odds, Empowerment	International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student, Financially	Education Changes Destiny, Individual Effort	Positive	Economic Pressure, Cultural Adaptation	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing

	nt & Role Model			Independent, Explorer					
10	Growth & Against All Odds, Exploratory Experience	Rural-Urban, International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student, Financially Independent, Explorer	Seeing the World, Seeking Freedom/Self-Realisation	Positive	Limited Educational Resources	Self-Documentation	Strategic Sharing
11	Exploratory Experience	International	N/A	Overseas Student, Explorer	Seeing the World, Seeking Freedom/Self-Realisation, Escaping Constraints	Mixed	Information Gap, Policy Constraint	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
12	Identity Negotiation & Resistance	Rural-Urban, International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student, Financially Independent	Seeking Freedom/Self-Realisation, Escaping Constraints	Mixed	Cultural Adaptation	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
13	Exploratory Experience	International	N/A	Digital Nomad, Explorer	Seeking Freedom/Self-Realisation, Escaping Constraints	Positive	Information Gap, Policy Constraint	Resonant Group	Highly Private
14	Growth & Against All Odds, Difficult Challenges	Rural-Urban, International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student, Financially Independent	Education Changes Destiny, Individual Effort, Seeing the World	Mixed	Economic Pressure, Family Resistance, Limited Educational Resources	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
15	Growth & Against All Odds, Empo	Rural-Urban, International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student, Finan	Education Changes Destiny, Individual Effort	Positive	Economic Pressure, Limited Educational	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing

	werment & Role Model			cially Independent			Resources,Cultural Adaptation		
16	Growth & Against All Odds	Rural-Urban,International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student,Honor Student	Education Changes Destiny,Individual Effort	Mixed	Economic Pressure,Limited Educational Resources,Policy Constraint	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
17	Growth & Against All Odds,Identity Negotiation & Resistance	Rural-Urban,International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student,Honor Student,Explorer	Education Changes Destiny,Escaping Constraints	Positive	Limited Educational Resources,Gender Discrimination	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
18	Exploratory Experience, Empowerment & Role Model	International	N/A	Digital Nomad,Financially Independent	Seeking Freedom/Self-Realisation,Escaping Constraints	Positive	Information Gap,Policy Constraint	Resonant Group	Highly Private
19	Exploratory Experience,Identity Negotiation & Resistance	International	N/A	Overseas Student,Late-Age Study Abroad	Seeking Freedom/Self-Realisation,Escaping Constraints	Positive	Workplace Stress	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
20	Growth & Against All Odds	International	N/A	Explorer,Financially Independent	Seeking Freedom/Self-Realisation,Escaping Constraints	Positive	Family Resistance	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing

21	Introspective Deliberation	International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student,Late-Age Study Abroad	Education Changes Destiny,Seeing the World	Mixed	Emotional Trauma,Age Anxiety	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
22	Growth & Against All Odds,Empowerment & Role Model	International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student,Honor Student	Education Changes Destiny,Individual Effort	Mixed	Limited Educational Resources,Psychological Stress,Policy Constraint	Resonant Group	Highly Private
23	Exploratory Experience, Empowerment & Role Model	International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student,Explorer	Education Changes Destiny,Seeing the World	Positive	Economic Pressure,Psychological Stress	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
24	Growth & Against All Odds,Introspective Deliberation	Rural-Urban,International	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student,Financially Independent	Education Changes Destiny,Individual Effort,Seeing the World	Positive	Economic Pressure,Cultural Adaptation	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
25	Exploratory Experience	International	Rural/Lower Class	Explorer	Seeing the World,Seeking Freedom/Self-Realisation	Positive	Economic Pressure	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
26	Growth & Against All Odds,Introspective	Rural-Urban,International	Small Town Youth	Overseas Student,Explorer	Education Changes Destiny,Seeking Freedom/Self-Realisation	Mixed	Psychological Stress	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing

	ective Deliberation								
27	Introspective Deliberation	International	N/A	Overseas Student,Explo rer	Seeing the World,Seeking Freedom/Self- Realisation	Positive	Cultural Adaptation	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing
28	Growth & Against All Odds,Difficu lt Challenges	Rural- Urban,Internat ional	Rural/Lower Class	Overseas Student,Explo rer	Education Changes Destiny,Escaping Constraints	Mixed	Economic Pressure,Limited Educational Resources,Gender Discrimination	Resonant Group	Strategic Sharing

Source: Compiled by the author

Appendices C

第二次合并后的标签列表 (中文)

ID	合并标签 1	合并标签 2	合并标签 3	合并标签 4
1	留学与教育	身份与成长	地域与旅行	
2	留学与教育	地域与旅行		
3	留学与教育	身份与成长	地域与旅行	
4	留学与教育	身份与成长		
5	留学与教育	身份与成长	生活与日常	地域与旅行
6	身份与成长			
7	留学与教育	地域与旅行		
8	留学与教育	地域与旅行		
9	留学与教育	地域与旅行	身份与成长	
10	留学与教育	身份与成长		
11	留学与教育	地域与旅行		
12	留学与教育	地域与旅行	身份与成长	
13	地域与旅行			
14	留学与教育	身份与成长	生活与日常	地域与旅行
15	地域与旅行	身份与成长		

16	留学与教育	身份与成长		
17	留学与教育	身份与成长	生活与日常	
18	地域与旅行	生活与日常	其它	
19	留学与教育	身份与成长		
20	身份与成长	地域与旅行		
21	留学与教育	身份与成长	地域与旅行	
22	留学与教育	身份与成长		
23	留学与教育			
24	地域与旅行	生活与日常		
25	地域与旅行	身份与成长	其它	
26	留学与教育	身份与成长	地域与旅行	
27	留学与教育	身份与成长	生活与日常	
28	留学与教育	身份与成长	地域与旅行	

Hashtags After Second Merge (English Translation)

ID	Merge Hashtag 1	Merge Hashtag 2	Merge Hashtag 3	Merge Hashtag 4
1	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth	Region and Travel	
2	Study Abroad and Education	Region and Travel		
3	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth	Region and Travel	
4	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth		
5	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth	Daily Life	Region and Travel
6	Identity and Personal Growth			
7	Study Abroad and Education	Region and Travel		
8	Study Abroad and Education	Region and Travel		
9	Study Abroad and Education	Region and Travel	Identity and Personal Growth	
10	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth		
11	Study Abroad and Education	Region and Travel		
12	Study Abroad and Education	Region and Travel	Identity and Personal Growth	
13	Region and Travel			
14	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth	Daily Life	Region and Travel
15	Region and Travel	Identity and Personal Growth		
16	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth		

17	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth	Daily Life	
18	Region and Travel	Daily Life	Others	
19	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth		
20	Identity and Personal Growth	Region and Travel		
21	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth	Region and Travel	
22	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth		
23	Study Abroad and Education			
24	Region and Travel	Daily Life		
25	Region and Travel	Identity and Personal Growth	Others	
26	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth	Region and Travel	
27	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth	Daily Life	
28	Study Abroad and Education	Identity and Personal Growth	Region and Travel	

Source: Compiled by the author

Resümee**NÄHTAV, KUID KÄTTESAAMATU: 1990. AASTATEL SÜNDINUD MAAELU TAUSTAGA VÄLISMAAL ELAVATE HIINA
NAISETE IDENTITEEDIREPRESENTATSIOON XIAOHONGSHUS**

Ruyu Bai

See uurimus analüüsib 28 avalikult kättesaadavat postitust platvormil Xiaohongshu, mille autoriteks on 1990. aastatel sündinud Hiina naised, kes on pärit maapiirkondadest ja elavad praegu välismaal. Uurimuse põhieesmärk on uurida, kuidas need naised väljendavad ja konstrueerivad oma identiteete Xiaohongshu platvormil ning kuidas nad strateegiliselt tasakaalustavad nähtavust ja piire. Uurimus tugineb autori isiklikule kogemusele välismaal õppimisest ning kollektiivsele keeldumisele, millega ta puutus kokku küsitluse ja intervjuude osalejate värbamisel: kuigi need naised on valmis platvormil avalikult jagama „elu taaskäivitamise“ narratiive, keelduvad nad selgesõnaliselt saamast akadeemilise uurimistöo objektideks. See „ebaõnnestunud välitöö“ mõtestati hiljem ümber keskseks uurimisküsimuseks ning see viis mittekumist eeldava netnograafilise lähenemisviisi kasutuselevõtuni. Sisuanalüüsi ja multimodaalse diskursuse analüüsi kaudu uuritakse, kuidas visuaalsed kontrastid, emotsionaalsed narratiivid ja hashtag’ide strateegiad koos kujundavad piire avaliku nähtavuse ja isikliku autonoomia vahel.

Tulemused näitavad, et osalejad kasutavad sageli „alguspunkt–lõpp-punkt“ visuaalseid kontraste, et tugevdada lineaarset ülespoole liikuvuse narratiivi. Keeleliselt rakendavad nad mustrit „kõrge emotsionaalsus / madal informatiivsus“, mille puhul emotsionaalseid väljendusi käsitletakse detailselt, samas kui konkreetne teave, mis võiks paljastada isikliku identiteedi, on teadlikult varjatud. See tekitab empaatiat, kaitstes samal ajal privaatsust. Hashtag’ide kasutuse osas suurendavad sellised märksõnad nagu #naiselik kasv, #välismaal õppimine ja #vastu kõiki tõenäosusi mitte üksnes algoritmilist nähtavust, vaid toetavad ka identiteedinarratiive, muutes potentsiaalselt stigmatiseeritud tunnused – nagu maapiirkonnast päritolu või hilises eas välismaale õppima minek – saavutuste sümboliteks. Märkimisväärne on see, et nende kollektiivne vaikus

vastusena akadeemilisele värbamisele ei ole passiivne vältimine, vaid aktiivne piiride haldamise praktika: hashtag'ide kaudu muudavad nad end platvormil nähtavaks, kuid jäävad uurijate suhtes vaikseks, säilitades seeläbi narratiivse suveräänsuse ja isiklikud piirid.

Teoreetiliselt ühendab uurimus Goffmani lava-esise ja lava-taguse raamistiku Zappavigna „ambientse seotuse“ (Ambient Affiliation) kontseptsiooniga, väites, et hashtag'id ei toimi pelgalt otsinguvahenditena, vaid ka mehhanismidena afektiivsete sidemete loomiseks kogukondadega otsese suhtluse puudumisel. „Nähtav, kuid kättesaamatu“ kujuneb digitaalse eneseesitluse keskseks strateegiaks: saavutused ja püüdlused eksponeeritakse lava-esises ruumis, haavatavus ja isiklikud detailid varjatakse lava-taguses ruumis ning vaikusest endast saab identiteediesitluse lahutamatu osa. Metodoloogiliselt mõtiskleb uurimus traditsioonilise välitöö piirangute üle digikeskkondades ning pakub „keeldumist kui andmeid“ eetilise hoiakuna, rõhutades, et osalejate vaikus ja piirid tuleks käsitleda tähenduslike tekstidena, mitte takistustena, millest tuleb üle saada.

Uurimus tunnistab ka oma piiranguid: valim piirdub Xiaohongshu platvormiga, kodeerimisprotsess hõlmab subjektiivsust ning kommentaaride interaktsioonide dünaamikat ei kaasata analüüsi. Autor reflekteerib pidevalt oma positsiooni kui „sarnase taustaga siseringi kuuluja“ üle ning tuletab akadeemiale meelde, et avalik nähtavus ei tähenda automaatselt akadeemilist kasutatavust. Tulevased netnograafilised uurimused peaksid püüdlema teadmiste loomise ja narratiivse suveräänsuse austamise tasakaalu poole. Lõppkokkuvõttes esitab see uurimus „lõpetamata dialoogi“, kutsudes lugejaid ümber mõtestama, kuidas digiajastul identiteete ja mobiilsust mõista ja esitada, jäädes samal ajal truuks osalejate teadlikult valitud kättesaamatusele.

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