



Retrospection and separation: Narratives of nostalgia among rural students in Chinese universities

Retrospeksi dan keterpisahan: Narasi nostalgia di kalangan mahasiswa pedesaan di universitas Tiongkok

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of rural-origin university students expressing nostalgia and sharing it through online platforms has become a growing behavior amid rapid globalization and urbanization. This study aims to explore the factors influencing this behavior and its impact on the social and psychological identity of these students. A total of 32 rural-origin university students were selected as informants for semi-structured interviews lasting between 20 and 50 minutes. The data collected were analyzed using Nvivo14 software through three stages of coding: open coding, principal axis coding, and selective coding. Using a grounded theory approach, this study analyzes five key factors influencing nostalgia behavior: emotional factors, real-life situations, interactive participation, technological support, and information diffusion mechanisms. The findings reveal that academic pressures intensify their sense of separation from rural life, and social challenges in the urban environment, intensify their longing for a simpler and more familiar way of life. Online platforms provide a space for students to express themselves, form virtual communities, and seek solidarity in shared experiences. Technology and anonymity enable freer expressions of nostalgia and its rapid dissemination, creating a collective narrative that strengthens their emotional bonds with their past. This study sheds light on the psychosocial challenges rural students faces in adapting to urban environments and the tension between rural traditions and the demands of urban life. Consequently, nostalgia serves not only as an emotional coping mechanism but also as a means for students to maintain their identity amidst the rapid social changes they encounter.

Keywords: digital nostalgia, identity formation, information diffusion, rural college students, retrospection

ABSTRAK

Fenomena mahasiswa universitas berlatar belakang pedesaan yang mengekspresikan nostalgia dan membagikannya melalui platform daring telah menjadi fenomena yang semakin umum di tengah pesatnya globalisasi dan urbanisasi. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi perilaku tersebut serta dampaknya terhadap identitas sosial dan psikologis mahasiswa. Sebanyak 32 mahasiswa berlatar belakang pedesaan dipilih sebagai informan untuk wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan durasi antara 20 hingga 50 menit. Data yang dikumpulkan dianalisis menggunakan perangkat lunak Nvivo14 melalui tiga tahap pengodean: open coding, principal axis coding, dan selective coding. Dengan pendekatan grounded theory, studi ini menganalisis lima faktor

utama yang memengaruhi ekspresi nostalgia: faktor emosional, situasi kehidupan nyata, partisipasi interaktif, dukungan teknologi, dan mekanisme difusi informasi. Temuan penelitian ini mengungkap bahwa tekanan akademik memperkuat perasaan keterpisahan mereka dari kehidupan pedesaan, sementara tantangan sosial di lingkungan perkotaan semakin memperdalam kerinduan mereka akan kehidupan yang lebih sederhana dan akrab. Platform daring menyediakan ruang bagi mahasiswa untuk mengekspresikan diri, membentuk komunitas virtual, serta mencari solidaritas melalui pengalaman bersama. Teknologi dan anonimitas memungkinkan ekspresi nostalgia yang lebih bebas serta penyebarannya yang lebih cepat, membentuk narasi kolektif yang mempererat ikatan emosional mereka dengan masa lalu. Studi ini memberikan wawasan mengenai tantangan psikososial yang dihadapi mahasiswa pedesaan dalam beradaptasi dengan lingkungan perkotaan serta ketegangan antara tradisi pedesaan dan tuntutan kehidupan urban. Dengan demikian, nostalgia tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai mekanisme koping emosional, tetapi juga sebagai sarana bagi mahasiswa untuk mempertahankan identitas mereka di tengah perubahan sosial yang cepat.

Kata kunci: *nostalgia digital, pembentukan identitas, difusi informasi, mahasiswa pedesaan, retrospeksi*

Introduction

At present, China's higher education has entered the popularization stage. By the end of last year, the gross enrollment rate exceeded 60%, ranking first in the world. Simultaneously, the Chinese government has introduced various special college enrollment plans for rural students. In 2017, 100,000 students from rural and poverty-stricken areas were admitted through these plans (Xie, 2015). This marks a significant increase in opportunities for rural students to receive higher education.

Consequently, the number of rural college students in Chinese Universities is also on the rise. However, rural students in Chinese universities are a relatively unique group. They were born in rural areas of China and have received higher education (Li, 2017). Despite this, they must leave their hometowns due to academic and work requirements, which creates a unique rural complex toward rural China (Yu et al., 2022).

As a result, they may lose their sense of belonging and often find themselves in a state of cultural dislocation. With the continuous development of the Internet, various social platforms have provided new channels for rural college students to express their emotions. An increasing number of them post nostalgic content online, sharing their yearning for their hometowns. This trend resonates with a growing number of people, as they collectively miss the peaceful, familiar scenes of rural life. This form of expression serves as a spiritual comfort in the urban environment where they often feel alienated.

In China, research on rural college students mostly focuses on aspects such as social resource allocation, talent cultivation, and returning to hometowns for entrepreneurship (Chung & Mason, 2012; Li, 2015; Xie & Reay, 2020). Fei Xiaotong provided a classic perspective for in-depth understanding of the structure and characteristics of traditional rural society in China (Barbalet, 2021). Some sociological and educational studies also focus on the impact of the development of China's urbanization level on the enrollment opportunities of rural students in higher education (Hamnett, 2020; Shen, 2022; Yue et al., 2022). These studies indicate that the continuous development of China's urbanization has both positive and negative impacts on rural students' access to higher education. The positive impacts include changes in educational concepts and integration of educational resources. However, despite the implementation of the national education digitalization strategy in recent years, aiming to build an efficient and fair education system, due to the imbalance of educational resources between urban and rural areas, rural students still face relatively high academic and psychological pressures.

With the development of the internet and the rise of social media platforms, netizens can express various views on the internet, achieving a certain degree of discourse equality. Against this background, self-media bloggers themed on rural students have become popular and received a great deal of attention, prompting many scholars to explore the reasons for their popularity and analyze the

narrative strategies of their works (Xinge & Shuyi, 2023). Moreover, some scholars have also paid attention to the online narratives of certain specific netizen groups, such as the rural cultural group, and analyzed how their quotes and emojis are spread (Chouliaraki, 2016). Regarding the rural college student group, in previous studies, scholars mostly focused on their educational and growth backgrounds, psychological problems, employment and career development, and value orientations. However, few scholars have conducted detailed research on the online dynamics and emotional narratives of rural college students in China. This deficiency not only limits our comprehensive and in-depth understanding of this group but also makes it difficult to provide accurate bases for relevant policy - making and educational guidance.

Research on the nostalgia narrative of rural college students actually involves two aspects of theoretical research. One is narrative theory research. Generally speaking, narrative refers to "the presentation of one or a series of real or fictional events in language, especially written language", or "the detailed description of a series of facts or events and the sorting out of the relationships between them". Narrative theory has expanded across various fields, incorporating elements such as social dynamics and cultural shifts, enriching our understanding of how narratives shape identity and collective memory (Singh & Goyal, 2024; Peetz, 2024).

Plato expounded on the concepts of "pure narrative" and "imitation" in "The Republic", and the study of "narrative" began more than 2,500 years ago (Halperin, 2013). Narratology officially got its name when Tzvetan Todorov mentioned in his work "The Decameron" that "this work belongs to a science that does not yet exist. We will call it narratology, that is, the science of narrative works" (Todorov & Weinstein, 1969). Narratology is divided into two stages: the classical narrative stage and the post - classical narrative stage. The former mainly focuses on the research of the structural relationships and constituent elements of works, while the latter pays more attention to interdisciplinary research and combines with fields such as art and feminism, giving rise to theories such as feminist narratology and social narratology (Park, 2023; Wang, 2024).

In the field of communication, narrative has also been widely and deeply applied. Many scholars focus on exploring the narrative strategies of movies (Bradbury & Guadagno, 2020). They conduct research from dimensions such as movie theme exploration, narrative structure analysis, and narrative perspective analysis. Through detailed interpretation of movie texts, they reveal the narrative techniques of movies and the generation mechanism of their artistic charm, providing important theoretical support for the theoretical research and creative practice of film art.

Some scholars pay attention to the communication narrative strategies of news reports. They use the theories and methods of narratology to explore aspects such as the narrative framework, plot setting, and character portrayal of news texts, aiming to reveal how news reports enhance communication effects through effective narrative means, thereby improving the influence of news reports (Ilan, 2021; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2020).

In the field of advertising and publicity, relevant scholars are committed to the research on the narrative characteristics of advertisements. Through the analysis of aspects such as symbol use, story construction, and emotional appeal in advertising texts, they summarize the innovative expression strategies of advertisements at the narrative level, providing valuable theoretical guidance for the advertising industry in creative conceptions and communication strategy formulation, and helping advertisements better achieve the dual functions of commercial promotion and cultural communication (Chang, 2009).

Despite the extensive application of narrative theory across various fields such as film, news media, and advertising, research on nostalgia narratives specifically within the context of rural Chinese students remains underdeveloped. Existing studies largely overlook how these narratives are influenced by the unique socio-cultural experiences of rural students, particularly in the context of their educational migration to urban centers. While past research has focused on the narrative structures in Western or urbanized settings, there is a notable gap in understanding how rural students in China construct and express their nostalgia as a result of their social mobility and cultural dislocation. This study fills that gap by investigating the intersection of nostalgia, identity, and

mobility within the Chinese rural-to-urban migration context, offering new theoretical insights into the social and emotional dynamics of this specific group.

The second is emotional communication research. At the beginning of this century, an important shift occurred in the research paradigm of Chinese social sciences. Among them, "emotion" and "feeling" became important research objects. China's emotional communication research shifted from the spread of public emotions and the resulting consequences under specific social events to the research on emotional communication in the social media era.

It mainly focuses on online public opinion and gradually turns to the research on the communication mechanism of emotional communication at the detail level. Scholars have increasingly focused on how emotions are transmitted through digital platforms, examining the role of algorithms in shaping emotional expression and the implications for public opinion and social interactions (Döveling et al., 2018). Nowadays, the research field has a deeper integration with China's social foundation and information technology, and new fields such as "AI technology", "interactive communication", and "health communication" have emerged.

At the same time, it continuously absorbs emerging technologies such as algorithms and big data, and the research methods have also turned towards intelligence. Digital technology has broken through the limitations of time and space, and individual emotions enter the public domain and spread rapidly through interactive behaviors such as likes, comments, and sharing, as well as the algorithm recommendation mechanism.

In the social media era, emotional communication has become a new form of communication, promoting social interaction and providing a platform for social issues and moral evaluation. However, it has also brought about the possibility that the social field formed by human - machine interaction and human - machine empathy may become a new "isolated island" of communication, the "emotional follicle" formed under the algorithm, and even an public opinion means of interest groups. This is where the intersection of emotional communication and nostalgia narratives offers a new opportunity for exploration, especially in the context of rural college students navigating the complexities of their identities and cultural heritage (Kurlinkus & Kurlinkus, 2018).

The rural college student demographic is especially unique in terms of their nostalgic narratives, as they experience a particular tension between their rural origins and their urban academic life. The shift from rural to urban living presents a stark contrast in terms of lifestyle, values, and social expectations, making the feeling of nostalgia a natural emotional response. Nostalgia among rural students is not just about yearning for their hometowns; it is often tied to a desire to reconcile the social and cultural gap between their rural past and urban present. This emotional connection to rural life, rooted in family and community ties, plays a significant role in the formation of their online identities and self-expression.

In contrast, the nostalgia felt by urban middle-class individuals tends to focus more on a personal, emotional longing for past experiences or phases in their lives, often related to leisure or lifestyle changes. For rural students, nostalgia carries a stronger collective and cultural weight, as it is tied to deep-rooted social structures, family bonds, and a sense of belonging to a community that contrasts sharply with the individualistic, competitive nature of urban life. Therefore, the nostalgic narrative among rural students in Chinese universities is an expression of both personal longing and a broader search for social integration and identity affirmation in an urbanized, fast-paced environment.

Based on the previous research progress, this paper starts from the perspective of communication, focusing on the nostalgic narrative of rural students in Chinese universities on the Internet. By applying grounded theory as the research method, this study explores the causes and impacts of their nostalgic narratives online, aiming to understand the real spiritual world of this group and recognize the specific impact of social and cultural changes on individuals (Charmaz, 2016; Seaman, 2008). Previous studies have highlighted how the Internet serves as a platform for self-expression and identity construction, especially among marginalized groups (Niezen, 2005; Van Dijck, 2013). By integrating narrative theory with emotional communication, this study adds a new layer of understanding to the psychological and cultural experiences of rural college students in China. This research provides a

new perspective for the study of rural college students in China, enriching the understanding of this group in the context of rapid urbanization (He, 2015). At the same time, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychology of rural college students, providing support for the formulation of policies aimed at alleviating the difficulties faced by rural students in China (Main et al., 2011). Furthermore, this study promotes the psychological adaptation of rural college students to college life and the urban environment (Zhang et al., 2021).

Method

Rooted theory refers to the research method in which researchers carry out bottom-up progressive descriptive interpretation, refinement of concepts as well as clustering of categories on empirical materials involving processes and interactions, and construct relevant theories by analysing the logical relationships between core categories. Since this study needs to analyse the causes and effects of nostalgic narratives of Chinese rural college students on the Internet, the programmatic rootedness theory is able to consider the narrator, audience and rootedness as a holistic conceptual framework, which can help to comprehensively consider the interactions of various elements in nostalgic narratives.

Therefore, this study follows Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin's programmed rootedness theory approach and proceeds according to the following steps. First, a group of Chinese rural university students was selected for semi-structured interviews to obtain comprehensive perspective information. Semi-structured interviews are flexible interviews in which the interviewer and the interviewee have the ability to express their views freely on the basis of the interview outline. In this type of interview, sometimes the scope of discussion may go beyond the predetermined questionnaire, thus making the information obtained more comprehensive. Secondly, open-ended coding was conducted to extract initial concepts and categories from the primary data. Thirdly, principal axis coding was carried out, aiming to establish links between the initial concepts and to form the main categories. Finally, selective coding was carried out to generalise the main categories into a theoretical framework. This study follows the principle of theoretical saturation, i.e., determining whether information is saturated by determining whether new initial concepts and categories are generated.

In this study, 32 interviewees were identified as interviewees, and the following two principles were followed in the sample selection process of this study. First, the interviewees must be Chinese rural university students. Social media (Weibo) user groups can provide rich data and opinions, which can help this study obtain a representative and influential sample. Second, the gender, age, and institution of the interviewees need to satisfy the principle of random distribution in order to ensure the diversity of the research sample and avoid the errors caused by homogenisation.

Regarding the duration of the interviews, each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, allowing for in-depth discussions while respecting the participants' time constraints. The interviewees came from different universities across China, which helped to capture a broader range of experiences and perspectives. This diversity in both institutional background and interview length contributed to the richness and validity of the data collected.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to obtain first-hand information, and one-on-one interviews were conducted with the interviewees, which lasted for 20 to 50 minutes. At the end of each interview, the interviewer collated the interview content into textual information and gave timely feedback to the interviewees in order to further supplement and improve the relevant information. The forms of interviews used in this study mainly include Internet telephone interviews and a small number of Internet text interviews, which were recorded in voice and text with the consent of the interviewees, and finally analysed and collated using the research software Nvivo14. In this study, during the interview process, the dialogue with the interviewees enabled them to actively express their experiences and feelings, and based on the interviewees' answers, new questions were added to the interview outline in a timely manner to ensure the richness and completeness of the interview data. Focusing on the main purpose of this study as well as the reasons and views of Chinese rural college students 'nostalgia narratives', this paper conducts semi-structured interviews in three main areas: factors affecting interviewees' nostalgia narratives, interviewees' nostalgia narratives in the Internet,

and the impacts of interviewees' nostalgia narratives brought about by them after they have narrated their nostalgia narratives.

Open coding is the first step in the coding process of rooted theory and is the first level of coding that conceptualises and labels the raw data. In the ongoing process of analysing and comparing the raw interview data, a number of initial concepts are extracted and the logical relationships between them are identified, which are grouped and organised to construct a number of categories that are more general in nature. In this paper, in the process of compiling the raw utterances, only some meaningless stop words were deleted, and then the raw utterances were refined into phrases and used as initial concepts to ensure the accuracy of the respondents' real expressions. Due to the large number of coded raw utterances, only some examples of initial concepts from the raw data are listed. After integrating the above raw statements and concepts through open coding, and discarding invalid concepts that were not clear and appeared too infrequently (less than 2), 38 concepts and 9 categories were finally defined.

Principal axis coding is a secondary coding process whose main purpose is to analyse and categorise the underlying logical relationships between the different categories obtained in the open coding stage, and to further categorise them into main categories and subcategories. In this paper, the nine categories obtained in the open coding stage were analysed by clustering, and five main categories, namely, emotional factors, real-life situations, interactivity, technological support, and information diffusion, were finally derived.

Selective coding is a theoretical construction process that aims to identify the core categories that can synthesise the other categories, and systematically link the core categories to the other categories through the typical relationship model, and analyse in depth the logical relationships between them to form a model of the factors influencing the nostalgia narratives of Chinese rural college students. Based on this category vein, it is found to be in line with the SIPS theoretical model through in-depth analyses of the logical relationships.

The SIPS model is a model of consumer behaviour in the social media era (Xiong & Su, 2023), which suggests that consumer behaviour occurs through four stages: Sympathize, Identify, Participate, and Spread, which means that the receiver resonates with the corresponding information released by the sender of the message. Identify, i.e., the receiver will confirm the trustworthiness of the information released by the message sender through various external information sources. Engagement, i.e., the receiver's buy-in and attention will ultimately be translated into user actions. Sharing and Diffusion, i.e., the receiver will eventually spread the information twice.

The interview records of rural college students in China were coded using the grounded theory research method, which consists of three primary coding steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This approach allows for a systematic and iterative analysis of qualitative data, ensuring that emerging concepts are grounded in the participants' experiences.

Open coding is the initial stage in the grounded theory coding process, representing the first level of analysis where raw data is systematically conceptualized and labeled. During this phase, a continuous process of analysis and comparison was conducted on the interview transcripts. Several initial concepts were identified, and logical relationships among them were examined through constant comparison to construct broader categories. This process ensured that recurring themes were recognized while maintaining flexibility in refining conceptual labels.

As part of this process, additional steps were taken to preserve the authenticity of the participants' responses. Only non-meaningful filler words were removed, while core expressions were refined into concise phrases and used as initial concepts. This approach ensured that the statements accurately reflected the perspectives of the interviewees without altering their intended meanings. Given the extensive number of coded excerpts, only a selection of initial concepts derived from the raw data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Open coding categorization

Categorization	Partial concept source material (initial concept)
C1 Privacy environment	D1 I use Xiaohongshu quite a lot now. It is very convenient. My name on Xiaohongshu is Momo. I feel that I will not be easily discovered among the large number of Momo users.
C10 Social Commentary	D2 I will post on WeChat Moments that I miss home, and I may not post on Xiaohongshu, but I will comment on other people’s posts.
C12 Life difficulties	D3 I miss my family, or my exams don’t go well. Or I encounter situations that I can’t understand, or situations that I can’t get over, and I want to post.
C19 News content	D4 When I see news about my hometown, it has a negative impact on my emotions and makes me miss home a lot.
C22 Emotional catharsis	D5 When you feel very uncomfortable and have no one to talk to, you want to post it online.
C23 Psychological comfort	D6 I like seeing people posting this kind of stuff on social media. It gives me a sense of belonging and makes me think that there are a lot of people like me, and I’m not the only one who is troubled by life.
C24 Film and television influence	D7 For example, some TV programs will spread some anxiety-generating remarks to the public, which will put people under great psychological pressure and make them feel that they are not as good as others in every way, which will deepen my homesickness.
C25 Platform Aggregation	D8 Because these platforms allow me to find many friends who are in the same situation as me, and Douban and Weibo also have groups, and interacting with members in the group can reduce my negative emotions to a certain extent.
C30 Media preaching	D9 If the media content is completely from their perspective, such as what young people are like, this may cause me to rebel and feel disgusted, and then my homesickness may be even deeper.
C32 Celebrity influence	D10 At that time, I thought that the reason I liked to express homesickness was because there was a celebrity who often recommended his hometown on social platforms.

Through the open coding process, raw statements were categorized, and irrelevant concepts with vague meanings or low frequency of occurrence (fewer than two instances) were excluded. Ultimately, 38 concepts and 9 categories were identified, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Open coding results

Category	Concept
B1 Platform Support	C1 Privacy environment、 C24 Platform Aggregation、 C25 Platform push
B2 Online invisibility	C37 Anonymous Features、 C38 Private social
B3 Get involved	C5 Comments comfort、 C7 Self-made memes、 C9 Social Commentary、 C14 Browse Likes、 C36 Interactive Support

B4 Spread and share	C3 Forward content、C32 Published content、C15 Share with friends
B5 Real dilemma	C2 Escapism、C11 Life is not going well、C13 Life difficulties、C20 Depression、C27 Family Conflict、C28 Study work pressure
B6 Expectations not met	C12 Disillusionment、C16 Feeling powerless
B7 Emotional Needs	C4 Self-mockery、C6 Self-sensitivity、C17 No one to talk、C19 Save Yourself、C21 Emotional catharsis、C22 Psychological comfort、C33 Reduce psychological stress
B8 Resonance Infection	C26 Seeking resonance、C34 Similar interests、C35 Empathy
B9 Information Impact	C8 Network Information、C10 Feeling of human indifference、C18 News content、C23 Film and television influence、C29 Media preaching、C30 Media Content、C31 Celebrity influence

Axial coding is the second stage of the grounded theory coding process. Its primary objective is to analyze and categorize the potential logical relationships among the categories identified during the open coding phase. This step further refines and consolidates these categories into broader themes, allowing for a more structured interpretation of the data.

In this study, the nine categories derived from the open coding stage were systematically clustered based on their conceptual similarities and interconnections. Through this process, five core categories were identified: emotional factors, real-life circumstances, interactive ability, technological support, and information diffusion mechanisms. These main categories serve as the foundation for a deeper exploration of the factors influencing extremely violent attacks against children. The results of the axial coding process are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The main categories formed by the principal axis coding

Main Category	Category
Emotional Factors	B7 Emotional Needs
	B8 Resonance Infection
	B5 Real dilemma
Reality	B6 Expectations not met
	B9 Information Impact
Interactive capabilities	B3 Get involved
Technical support	B1 Platform Support
	B2 Online invisibility
Information Diffusion	B4 Spread and share

The application of the SIPS theoretical model in the domain of emotional consumption is relatively mature and has been widely used in various fields. Nostalgia narratives, as a form of emotional communication, contribute to large-scale diffusion and actions, which are interlinked with

consumption behaviors driven by the emotional marketing strategies targeted by the model. The application of this theory in this study helps to construct the relationship between the factors influencing the causes of nostalgia narratives among Chinese rural college students, and ultimately form the mechanism of their diffusion. To validate this relationship, a rigorous data verification process was employed. Firstly, the results from the selective coding phase were cross-checked through member checking, wherein a subset of participants was asked to review and confirm the accuracy of the emerging codes and categories. Secondly, data triangulation was conducted by incorporating multiple sources of data, such as interviews and online posts, to ensure the consistency and robustness of the findings. Thirdly, peer debriefing was utilized, wherein experts in the field were invited to review the findings and provide feedback on the interpretation of the data. This process helped to enhance the credibility of the constructed model. Based on these validation procedures, this study constructs a model of the transmission mechanism of Chinese rural college students' nostalgia on the Internet, framed by the four dimensions of “resonance, acknowledgement, participation, sharing, and diffusion.”

Results and Discussion

Nostalgia as a coping mechanism and self – expression

Nostalgia functions not only as a means of emotional catharsis but also as a powerful form of self - expression (Sedikides et al., 2008). Notably, the rural college students who frequently share nostalgic content online are often the first in their families to pursue higher education, marking a significant socio - cultural transition (Batcho, 2013). These students leave their hometowns to seek educational opportunities in urban centers, where the simplicity and close - knit nature of rural life sharply contrast with the dynamism and complexity of city living (Zhang & Li, 2019). In rural settings, the tranquility, strong community bonds, reduced daily stress, and a harmonious connection with nature are markedly distinct from the demanding realities of urban survival. Within metropolitan environments, these students encounter a pronounced dichotomy between the fast - paced, multicultural cityscape and the slow, traditional customs of their rural origins, often questioning their true sense of belonging. In the city, differences in accent and lifestyle may result in their perception as "outsiders," whereas a return to their rural roots can lead peers to view them as "urbanized"—a duality that exacerbates feelings of alienation and intensifies homesickness.

Against this backdrop, nostalgia becomes a way for them to search for their roots and confirm their sense of identity. By posting content about their hometowns, traditional customs, or past experiences, rural college students can maintain a connection with their identity roots and retain a sense of self - identity in a rapidly changing environment. Through sharing nostalgic content, they can express and externalize their longing for their hometowns, which encompasses both the material and emotional elements of their rural growth experiences, giving them a sense of continuity. Even in the process of adapting to urban life, it constantly reminds them of who they are and where they come from. Nostalgia is a haven for these students and also a way for them to reconstruct their personal identities.

The participation of these students in nostalgic narratives is not only an expression of their homesickness but also a resistance to the sense of alienation they experience in the urban environment. It represents an attempt to maintain a sense of identity and coherence between two distinct worlds: one rooted in rural traditions and the other driven by the demands of modern urban life.

After facing the geographical distance from their hometowns, students also have to confront the cultural, social, and psychological gaps between the familiar rural environment and the prosperous yet indifferent urban landscape. The lack of the close - knit communities, natural landscapes, and traditional customs they relied on during their growth may lead to feelings of loneliness and disorientation. Besides the emotional loneliness from the transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar, they also face great external environmental pressure in urban survival. The external environmental pressure includes the intense academic competition in college, the economic burden brought about by the high cost of living in the city, and the broader social pressures associated with urban life.

The rural past, with its familiarity and stability, stands in stark contrast to the academic pressures, anonymity of urban life, and the transience and indifference of urban interpersonal relationships. Consequently, nostalgia serves as a potent emotional tool for rural students to navigate the complexities of the new social and educational environment. In the face of these challenges, they often experience cultural dislocation, caught between their rural roots and the demands of their new urban surroundings. This dislocation, in turn, acts as a catalyst for nostalgic yearnings. Nostalgia becomes a psychological coping mechanism, providing comfort and emotional relief amidst the overwhelming pressures of urban life. Importantly, the role of specific social roles—such as the student role, the rural identity, and the emerging urban social role—plays a significant part in shaping the way rural students construct and express their nostalgic narratives online. These social roles are not only influenced by the individual's personal background but also by the dynamics of their social relationships within both the rural and urban contexts. For example, rural students' nostalgic expressions online may serve to reinforce their sense of belonging to their rural communities, while simultaneously negotiating their position within the urban academic system. The relationships between these roles—such as the tension between rural identity and the need to adapt to urban social expectations—can directly impact the content and intensity of their nostalgia narratives.

The expression of nostalgia, therefore, can be understood as a complex interaction between five interrelated factors: emotional influences, situational realities, participatory engagement, technological support, and information dissemination mechanisms. These factors collectively shape how rural students express and manage their nostalgic emotions. For example, the emotional depth of nostalgia is influenced by the personal and collective feelings of alienation, while the situational realities—such as the transition from rural to urban life—further deepen the emotional significance of nostalgia. The participatory nature of social media, facilitated by technological tools such as algorithms, allows these emotions to be externalized, shared, and amplified through interaction. The technological infrastructure behind social media also supports the widespread dissemination of nostalgic content, enabling it to reach a broader audience and foster a sense of shared experience. Together, these factors form a cohesive framework that explains the dynamics of rural students' nostalgic narratives.

The online sharing of nostalgic content, therefore, is not merely a personal reflection of homesickness, but a multifaceted coping strategy that strengthens social connections, affirms rural identity, and facilitates emotional expression during a period of significant personal and social transition.

The social and cultural impacts of online nostalgia

The Internet has become a crucial space for rural students to seek emotional comfort and connect with the past (Batcho, 2013; Sedikides et al., 2008). Online platforms provide abundant information about the familiar rural environment and past life narratives, which serve as vital resources for alleviating homesickness. Through digital content, these students actively reconnect with their past, seeking both emotional and spiritual solace. This process not only reaffirms their personal history but also asserts a cultural tradition that is frequently underestimated within mainstream urban discourse.

On Internet platforms, rural students encounter peers with similar life experiences, thereby reinforcing and amplifying their emotional needs. By posting and disseminating nostalgic content on social media, they obtain recognition and resonance through likes and comments from those who share comparable backgrounds (Joinson, 2001). Moreover, the anonymity inherent in these platforms offers a psychologically safe space—free from real-world social expectations and judgments—for rural students to disclose their genuine inner emotions (Suler, 2004). This freedom encourages candid emotional expression and the revelation of vulnerabilities that might otherwise remain concealed in face-to-face interactions. This study makes several novel contributions to the extant literature. It integrates established theories of nostalgia (Batcho, 2013) with the unique digital behaviors of rural Chinese college students, an underexplored demographic in the context of online self-expression. It elucidates how the anonymity and interactivity of online platforms not only facilitate emotional catharsis but also foster the reconstruction of cultural identity amidst rapid urbanization.

In addition, the strong connectivity provided by these platforms enables rural college students to find and integrate into groups with similar experiences and emotions. Their online posts full of nostalgic content provide them with a platform to reconnect with their roots, express their vulnerabilities, and

maintain a sense of self - continuity amidst the disorienting changes of college life. They can quickly connect with people who understand their sense of drift, enhancing their sense of belonging and resonance. This virtual kinship network creates an atmosphere of collective nostalgia, where students not only share personal memories but also jointly construct a grand narrative of urban - rural changes. The social bonds formed in these online spaces act as an emotional buffer against the alienating effects of urban life, making them feel a sense of continuity with the past and providing comfort during stressful times.

Furthermore, these nostalgic emotions expressed online also highlight broader social and cultural contradictions. In an era of rapid modernization and increased urban - rural population mobility, rural students often have to balance traditional values with the pressures of contemporary urban life. Therefore, the content they share may not only reflect personal yearnings but also embody the broader social transformation from rural to urban life, symbolizing a longing for simpler times or a desire to reconnect with values that are gradually fading in the process of modernization. This process gives us a deeper understanding of the psychological, cultural, and social dilemmas faced by rural students in bridging the gap between their past and present lives.

Culturally, the nostalgic expressions of rural college students on the Internet reveal the conflict between traditional and modern cultures. Modern urban culture emphasizes efficiency, competition, and individualism, while rural traditional culture values collectivism, human relationships, and inheritance. Rural college students, while studying and living in the city, have to be influenced by modern culture, but deep down, they can't let go of the nourishment of rural traditional culture. For example, in the city, interactions between people may be more focused on interests, while traditional values such as neighborhood mutual assistance and family unity in rural areas seem purer and warmer. This cultural collision makes them reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of the two cultures in their nostalgia, yet it is difficult for them to find a perfect way of integration.

The sharing of nostalgia on the Internet not only reflects a longing for the past but also conveys a sense of helplessness regarding the disparities between urban and rural development. Cities enjoy abundant resources in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, whereas rural areas face significant shortages in these domains. Rural college students, while benefiting from the opportunities offered by urban life, often feel sorrowful about the backwardness of their hometowns. This sense of nostalgia, however, is not merely an expression of longing for an idealized rural life; it also represents a moral obligation to contribute to the development of their hometowns. Rural students may feel a deep responsibility to improve the conditions of their communities, yet they often encounter frustration and a sense of powerlessness when faced with the challenges of realizing these aspirations. Thus, the emotions expressed in their nostalgic narratives are complex, encompassing both a desire to return to an idealized version of rural life and a moral drive to help their hometowns progress, even when the circumstances appear overwhelmingly difficult.

Concerns about online nostalgic narratives

There are several critical concerns associated with the online nostalgic narrative practices of rural college students. Although nostalgia can serve as an outlet for emotional catharsis and facilitate a connection with their cultural roots (Recuber, 2012), an overindulgence in nostalgic reminiscence may impede effective integration into urban environments (Nikelly, 2004). Excessive immersion in idealized memories of rural life can foster psychological barriers that deter individuals from engaging fully with the dynamic opportunities and challenges inherent to urban living (Dang et al., 2024). By incorporating recent literature, this study provide evidence that digital self-expression in the form of nostalgic narratives plays a complex role in shaping identity during the rural-to-urban transition. This nuanced perspective not only deepens understanding of the interplay between digital communication and emotional well-being but also highlights potential psychological constraints associated with overreliance on idealized memories of the past.

In addition, excessive nostalgia may lead to an escapist behavior, where students are unable to face the current severe reality. Instead of developing coping mechanisms to deal with academic competition pressure, high living costs, and the pressure to succeed, they may rely on comforting but unrealistic memories of the past. This escape from reality may perpetuate a sense of helplessness and stagnation,

especially when students are emotionally bound to a time and place that no longer exists in their current experiences. From a socio - cultural perspective, this nostalgic behavior may signal a deeper disconnect between urban and rural life. As rural students increasingly access digital platforms and are exposed to various cultural narratives, their nostalgic expressions reflect a longing for a past that may never fully align with the realities of their current lives. This tension between the past and the present may trigger an identity crisis, as students struggle to reconcile their rural roots with their urban present. This inner conflict may affect their sense of belonging and social integration, leading to a sense of isolation or alienation in the city.

In extreme cases, this behavior pattern may exacerbate the existing social divide between urban and rural populations. The idealization of rural life, often depicted through a lens of simplicity and authenticity, may mask the complex social and economic challenges faced by rural communities. Moreover, it may perpetuate some stereotypes, hindering students from fully participating in urban society, where their rural background may be both romanticized and looked down upon. This social exclusion, in turn, may reinforce students' emotional withdrawal into nostalgic narratives, creating a cycle of isolation that limits their potential for personal growth and contribution to society.

Facing these dilemmas, the online nostalgia of rural college students should not merely stop at emotional expression but should become a force for social change. All sectors of society should pay attention to their voices, increase investment in rural areas, and promote balanced urban - rural development, enabling rural traditional culture to find new vitality in modern society. At the same time, rural college students themselves need to actively explore, draw on the essence of modern culture while inheriting and promoting excellent rural traditional culture, realize their self - value, and contribute their wisdom and strength to rural revitalization. Only in this way can the gap between the past and the present, and between rural and urban areas, be truly bridged, allowing rural college students to find their own solid coordinates in the tide of the times.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that rural Chinese college students often share nostalgic content on the Internet as a means of self - expression and to cope with the emotional and psychological challenges arising from their separation from the countryside. This is the result of the combined effects of five factors: emotional factors, real - life situations, interactive participation, technical support, and information dissemination.

The phenomenon of rural college students expressing nostalgia and sharing it online arises from the complex interplay of five key factors: emotional drivers, real-life circumstances, interactive participation, technological support, and the mechanisms of information diffusion. These factors not only explain why nostalgia has become a widespread online behavior but also reveal the underlying identity challenges faced by rural college students in China. Specifically, the emotional drivers, rooted in feelings of separation and disconnection from their rural roots, create a longing for the simplicity and familiarity of their previous lives. This longing is further intensified by the stark contrast between their rural past and the urban present they now inhabit, where the pressures to assimilate and succeed academically are often overwhelming. Furthermore, the real-life circumstances, including the rural-urban divide in access to resources, play a significant role in shaping their nostalgic feelings. The interaction with peers and online communities (interactive participation) provides a platform for sharing these emotions, thus reinforcing the sense of nostalgia. Technological support, in the form of social media and online platforms, amplifies the reach and accessibility of these nostalgic narratives. Lastly, the mechanisms of information diffusion ensure that these narratives spread across networks, gaining wider visibility and influence, thereby fostering a collective nostalgic identity among rural students. Each of these five factors contributes to the broader nostalgia phenomenon, intertwining individual experiences with broader social and technological dynamics.

Moreover, real-life situations such as economic challenges, social isolation, and the struggle to establish a stable identity in the fast-paced, competitive urban environment contribute to the intensification of these nostalgic expressions. The longing for rural life becomes not just an emotional refuge but a coping mechanism to deal with the difficulties faced in their new surroundings.

Interactive participation on social platforms allows these students to form virtual communities, where they find solidarity in shared experiences, reinforcing the emotional bond with their past lives and amplifying the emotional resonance of their nostalgia.

Technological support plays a significant role in enabling and enhancing this process. The internet, with its anonymity and widespread connectivity, provides a space where rural students can express themselves freely, without the constraints of real-world social judgments. The ease with which content can be shared and disseminated allows nostalgia to spread rapidly, creating a collective narrative that reinforces their emotional ties to the rural past. Information diffusion, therefore, is not merely a process of transmitting memories, but of constructing and maintaining a collective identity that may contrast with the urban identities they are trying to form.

This study adopts the rooted theory of qualitative research to examine how these five factors interact to shape the narratives of nostalgia among rural students. By exploring these dynamics, the study illuminates the broader social and psychological challenges these students face, particularly in relation to their struggle for identity and belonging in an urbanized society. This duality—between their rural origins and urban present—reflects the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity, the individual and society, and the past and the future. It is this tension that forms the core of the rural college students' nostalgic expression and offers a lens through which to understand the broader societal shifts occurring in contemporary China.

The nostalgic expressions of rural college students in urban settings can be understood through the lenses of cultural displacement and liminality. Cultural displacement theory posits that migration between cultural settings often leads to identity dissonance and detachment, especially when new social norms contrast with one's origins. For rural students, urban universities disrupt their established sense of belonging, fostering a longing for familiarity and emotional security. Digital spaces thus become key platforms for negotiating identity, where nostalgia helps bridge the gap between past and present.

Similarly, liminality theory explains how these students exist in a transitional state, neither fully belonging to their rural backgrounds nor completely assimilated into urban society. This ambiguity intensifies their reliance on nostalgia to maintain psychological continuity and cope with identity uncertainty.

By applying these sociological frameworks, this study deepens our understanding of how rural-urban migration influences digital identity expression. Future research could examine whether nostalgia remains a temporary coping mechanism or evolves into a lasting aspect of identity negotiation.

The innovative contribution of this research lies in its integration of five key factors—emotional drivers, real-life circumstances, interactive participation, technological support, and information diffusion—into a comprehensive framework that explains the complex phenomenon of nostalgia among rural college students. This multi-dimensional approach enriches our understanding of how nostalgia functions as a mechanism of identity negotiation and emotional coping in the context of rural-urban migration. Furthermore, by focusing on the online expression of nostalgia, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital communication and the role of social media in shaping modern identity. It also highlights how nostalgia serves as a space for rural students to navigate the pressures of urban life, reinforcing their sense of self and community despite the challenges they face in adapting to new environments.

However, there are several limitations to this study. First, the research sample is limited to rural students from a few Chinese universities, which may not fully represent the experiences of all rural students across China. Further studies with larger, more diverse samples from different regions could provide more comprehensive insights. Second, this study primarily relies on qualitative methods, which may introduce researcher bias and limit the generalizability of the findings. Incorporating quantitative data in future research could help corroborate the results and offer a more balanced perspective. Lastly, while this research explores the nostalgic narratives within an academic context, it does not fully consider other factors, such as socioeconomic status or family dynamics, which may also play significant roles in shaping rural students' nostalgic experiences. Addressing these limitations in future research would help to deepen our understanding of the complex phenomenon of nostalgia

among rural college students in China, particularly by exploring its intersection with other social and personal variables.

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Statement of Originality and Free of Plagiarism

We inform that this article is an original article and free from plagiarism.

Competing Interests

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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