

# Operation and Efficacy of Self-Expression by Disadvantaged Groups on Douyin: An Empirical Study Based on Representative Accounts

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## **Abstract:**

Against the backdrop of short-video platforms' deep integration into social life, Douyin has become a significant arena for disadvantaged groups to break through traditional discursive barriers. This study examines representative self-media accounts of three disadvantaged groups on Douyin—rural women in distress, youth from struggling families, and women with disabilities—using a combination of case analysis, questionnaire surveys, and in-depth interviews over a six-month period. It analyzes the operational mechanisms of their self-expression and constructs a hierarchical social impact evaluation framework encompassing “awareness-building, mutual support, and real-world problem-solving.” The findings indicate that authentic storytelling, algorithmic adaptation, and collaboration with public welfare initiatives form the core operational logic of self-expression for disadvantaged groups. While these efforts successfully reshape stereotypes at the cognitive level and foster small-scale, short-term support behaviors at the mutual assistance level, their effectiveness in resolving real-world problems remains limited. From the perspective of empowerment theory, self-media provides significant individual empowerment for disadvantaged groups. However, due to constraints such as platform-driven traffic logic and the lack of robust social support networks, societal empowerment exhibits a “fragmented” character. This study highlights the limitations of new media empowerment and offers empirical insights for the development of self-media by disadvantaged groups and future research.

**Keywords:** Douyin; Disadvantaged groups; Self-media; Self-expression; Media empowerment

## 1. Introduction

In the current era where short-video platforms are deeply embedded in daily life, Douyin, with its low barriers to creation and dissemination, has become a crucial space for disadvantaged groups to overcome traditional discursive barriers and achieve autonomous expression. However, the long-standing bias in traditional media's agenda-setting has hindered the effective communication of the genuine appeals of these groups (Li Liangrong, 2020). There remains a lack of systematic empirical research on the operational logic of self-expression by disadvantaged groups on Douyin and whether its social impact genuinely addresses the core issue of "solving real-world problems." To address this gap, this study adopts "platform-adapted autonomous expression" as its research focus, selecting three representative self-media accounts of disadvantaged groups on Douyin as case studies. Through a mixed-methods approach involving case analysis, questionnaires, and in-depth interviews conducted over six months, it aims to dissect the operational mechanisms of their self-expression and establish a practical framework for evaluating social impact.

In sociological research, Wang Sibin (2001) defines disadvantaged groups as those disadvantaged in social resource distribution and power structures, with limited self-development capabilities, susceptibility to social exclusion, and a lack of effective discourse power. Based on this definition, this study focuses on three types of groups characterized by economic deprivation and weak social capital: rural women in distress, youth from struggling families, and women with disabilities. Three Douyin accounts were selected as core research subjects: Li Fuzhen, a rural woman in distress with 10 million followers, whose content focuses on filial piety and rural entrepreneurship; Su Xiaoyu, a youth from a struggling family with 2 million followers, documenting the hardships of supporting his family and combating online violence; and Nuozi Miaowu, a woman with disabilities with 1 million followers, centering her content on daily life with disabilities and expressing life demands. These accounts' follower bases and content specificity are representative, reflecting the expression status of various disadvantaged groups on self-media platforms. Unlike commercial accounts that pursue profit and traffic, these accounts originate from genuine life experiences, presenting a more grassroots and realistic narrative style that distinguishes them from other content creators on the platform.

## 2. Research Methods and Sample Analysis

To delve into the operational logic of these accounts, the

study first conducted a comprehensive analysis of 128 short videos published by the three accounts from January to June 2024, identifying patterns across three dimensions: content creation, dissemination metrics, and interaction behaviors. The analysis revealed that authentic storytelling is the core attraction for audiences. Scenario-based videos depicting fieldwork or details of life with disabilities garnered an average of 86,000 likes, significantly higher than the average of 21,000 likes for content on general topics. Additionally, strategies tailored to Douyin's algorithm were crucial for maximizing reach. Su Xiaoyu's video integrating "combating online violence" with trending platform topics achieved over 52 million views. All three accounts enhanced user stickiness through frequent interactions in comments and regular livestreams, with repeat visitor rates exceeding 40%. Furthermore, collaborations with public welfare organizations expanded their reach. Li Fuzhen's agricultural support videos were reposted by 20 local media accounts, while Nuozi Miaowu connected with disability support resources through public welfare organizations, forming a preliminary "content dissemination-resource linkage" loop. These operational strategies reflect the spontaneous exploration of disadvantaged groups in adapting to platform rules, rather than professional team operation, which also determines the uniqueness and limitations of their communication effects.

To assess the social impact of these accounts, a questionnaire was distributed to followers, yielding 90 valid responses from 92 distributed (97.8% response rate). Among respondents, 82.2% were aged 18-45, 68.9% were female, and 71.1% were from Tier 2 cities and below, aligning with Douyin's user demographics in lower-tier markets. Results showed that 89% of respondents reported a shift in perception of disadvantaged groups from "passive recipients of aid" to "autonomous strivers" after following the accounts, and 76% believed the videos broke stereotypes about these groups. For more detailed feedback, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 followers and 5 public welfare organization staff, each lasting up to 20 minutes, providing additional insights from both audience and professional perspectives. The combination of quantitative data and qualitative materials ensures the reliability and depth of the research conclusions, making the analysis of self-expression effects more comprehensive and objective.

## 3. Analysis of the Efficacy of Self-Expression by Disadvantaged Groups

Survey data and interviews collectively outline the social impact of self-expression by disadvantaged groups: At the cognitive level, change is particularly notable. The concrete expression in short videos liberates the authentic

image of disadvantaged groups from stereotypes, with interview comments like “I never knew the lives of people with disabilities could be so rich” and “the entrepreneurial wisdom of rural women is beyond imagination” evidencing actual cognitive restructuring. This cognitive change is of great significance in reducing social prejudice and promoting inclusive understanding between different groups. At the mutual support level, online support and small-scale assistance prevail. 31% of respondents participated in activities like agricultural product purchases or donations initiated by the accounts. Su Xiaoyu’s followers raised 32,000 yuan for his family’s medical expenses, and Li Fuzhen’s videos generated 150,000 yuan in agricultural sales. However, such support is mostly small-scale and short-term, lacking long-term systematic backing. Most assistance behaviors are driven by temporary emotional resonance, lacking stable mechanisms and sustainable resource input.

At the core level of real-world problem-solving, impact is limited. Only 18% of respondents believed the content directly facilitated solutions to practical issues. Problems raised by Nuozi Miaowu regarding inadequate community disability facilities received only verbal responses without concrete action, and Su Xiaoyu’s online harassment issue was temporarily alleviated but not fundamentally resolved. This outcome contrasts with initial expectations. The study initially hypothesized that high-traffic self-media expression could effectively leverage solutions to real-world problems. However, reality reveals a mismatch between platform traffic logic and the actual needs of disadvantaged groups—traffic can bring attention and short-term aid but struggles to drive institutional or structural solutions. This discrepancy clarifies the study’s core objective: not only to analyze the expression logic of disadvantaged groups’ self-media but also to establish a hierarchical impact evaluation method (“awareness-building, mutual support, real-world problem-solving”) for future research and practice.

#### 4. Deep-Seated Dilemmas from the Perspective of Empowerment Theory

Viewing the results through the lens of communication studies’ empowerment theory reveals the deeper challenges in self-expression by disadvantaged groups. Empowerment theory emphasizes the enabling role of media technologies, suggesting that new media can facilitate both individual and societal empowerment by providing discourse power and platforms for expression (Castells, 2009). This study finds that self-media indeed brings significant individual empowerment. Through their accounts, Li Fuzhen, Su Xiaoyu, and Nuozi Miaowu not only improved their economic situations but also transitioned

from being “silent” to “expressive” figures in the public eye, achieving enhanced self-identity and social visibility—key aspects of individual empowerment. They have gained a stronger sense of self-worth and social recognition, which is a vital breakthrough for groups that have long been marginalized.

However, at the societal empowerment level, which involves leveraging media voice to advocate for policy adjustments and institutional improvements for fundamental change, the study exposes clear limitations. Issues like disability facility upgrades and eliminate online harassment saw no substantial progress through self-media expression, underscoring the “fragmented” nature of new media empowerment (Couldry, 2010). The roots of this fragmentation lie primarily in the inherent constraints of platform traffic logic. Douyin’s algorithm favors entertaining and emotional content, often forcing the profound appeals of disadvantaged groups into brief, simplified videos to gain traction. This confines expression to “displaying life” rather than addressing “solving demands,” as evidenced by Nuozi Miaowu’s 10-minute proposal on disability facilities receiving less than one-tenth the views of her regular shorts. Secondly, self-media empowerment lacks a systematic social support network. Most operators of disadvantaged groups’ accounts lack professional policy advocacy skills and resource linkage channels, making it difficult to translate visibility into tangible societal change. Public welfare staff noted collaborations often stop at “content dissemination” without deeper policy or institutional engagement. Lastly, audience interactions are limited; likes, shares, and small donations are often individual acts based on emotional resonance rather than organized social actions, resulting in fragmented support insufficient for driving systemic solutions.

#### 5. Research Limitations and Future Directions

While this study sheds light on the patterns of self-expression by disadvantaged groups on self-media, it is limited by its focus on three Douyin accounts, excluding cases from other platforms like Xiaohongshu or Bilibili for comparative analysis. Future research could expand the sample scope and track the long-term sustainability of expression, observing whether attention persists after traffic diminishes. Practically, the development of self-media for disadvantaged groups requires content strategy optimization by account holders, deeper collaboration with public welfare organizations, and coordinated efforts from platforms and society. Algorithm adjustments, institutional safeguards, and other measures are needed to transform self-media expression into a bridge connecting disadvantaged groups with social support, turning digital expres-

sion into real-world change.

In the future, with the continuous evolution of digital media technology and the improvement of social governance systems, the self-media practice of disadvantaged groups is expected to obtain more standardized guidance and more substantial support. This study also calls for more scholars to pay attention to the digital survival and discourse rights of grassroots vulnerable groups and promote the healthy development of inclusive digital communication through continuous academic exploration.

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