

Algorithmic Discipline and Subject Emancipation: Performance Strategies of Disabled Short-Video Bloggers

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of short video platform, disabled people gradually get rid of the passive position of being watched in traditional media and gain new space to be watched and express their identity in the media. Taking the disabled content creators on the short video platform as the research object, this study combines Goffman's impression management theory, Mediated Discussion Analysis (MDA) and the perspective of digital work to explore the physical expression strategy, discourse construction and subjective formation of the disabled group in the digital media space. This study identified three main types of online roles of disabled bloggers: inspiring performance centered on "overcoming disability", daily performance emphasizing authenticity and normality, and value-driven performance based on professional skills and entrepreneurial spirit. These strategies not only help disabled people gain media exposure and rebuild their identity, but also reveal the challenges brought by emotional and digital work shaped by platform algorithms and commercial capital. The study also shows that although the short video platform provides new opportunities for the disabled to integrate into the society and participate in the economy, preferring algorithms and finding the logic and authenticity of traffic may also lead to self-loss and new sense of shame. Therefore, more inclusive algorithms and more accessible digital ecosystems should be encouraged in the future. This will enable disabled people to participate in public communication in a more diversified, authentic and equal way. Therefore, the way the public views them may change from "curiosity-driven audience" to "sympathy and equality".

Keywords: Short-Video Platforms; Disabled Groups; Self-Presentation; Media Visibility; Algorithmic Discipline; Digital Labor; Impression Management.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of digitalized everyday life, short-video platforms, characterized by low participation thresholds, high interactivity, and strong visuality, have reconstructed the expressive space and identity-building pathways of marginalized social groups^[6]. For more than 85 million disabled people in China, short videos are not merely technological tools, but also a form of social integration practice that shifts them from "invisible" to "visible."^[1] In the age of traditional mass media, representations of disability were long monopolized by mainstream discourse, often reduced either to inspirational symbols of "overcoming disability" or to pitiable "others" in need of sympathy. This one-dimensional portrait reproduces the structural exclusion and stereotype in the public sphere^[8].

With the rise of platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou and Bilibili, disabled bloggers have gradually broken the double constraints of physical limitations and social prejudice. Through self-disclosure, physical expression, daily narration and emotional mobilization, they actively strive for media exposure and transform themselves from "observation object" to "narrative object"^[17].

From a personal point of view, the short video platform provides space for the disabled to rebuild their identity and feel stronger psychologically. Through compensatory intimate interaction in virtual space, they can get emotional support and reduce loneliness and shame^[1]. From the social point of view, the visibility of disability blogs challenges the dominant position of visualization, and promotes de-labeling by showing real obstacles, daily difficulties and ordinary happiness, thus contributing to a more equal understanding of disability^[7].

However, the participation of disabled groups in short-distance culture is not without problems. The flow logic of recommendation algorithm and the disciplinary power of commercial capital make disabled creators face the risk of self-exploitation and secondary humiliation^[5]. In order to satisfy the audience's curiosity or follow the platform's preference

for “positive energy”, some blogs magnify their physical disabilities or are too optimistic, leading to homogenization and authenticity crisis^[2].

Therefore, this study discusses the performance strategies of disabled blogs on short video platforms, and examines their subjective construction, discourse negotiation and moral dilemma. The study also raises a question: How do disabled bloggers break down structural barriers through physical and discourse strategies? Under the dual constraints of algorithm and business logic, what kind of alienation risk will appear in their identity construction? How to balance the tension between traffic acquisition and real expression, so as to build a more diversified and equal media ecology?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 From “Invisibility” to “Visibility”: The Paradigm Shift in Disability Media Representation

The research on the media performance of the disabled group has undergone a paradigm shift, from “others’ construction” in the traditional media to “self-construction” in the new media era. Research shows that the mainstream media coverage of the disabled is extremely limited, mainly focusing on specific events such as the Paralympic Games and policy announcements, while daily life is largely ignored.

In terms of image building, disabled people are often portrayed as binary opposites of “painful stories” or “superhero stories”: either helpless victims waiting for help or heroes who have overcome all difficulties. Although the label of “overcoming disability through perseverance” looks positive, it actually exerts a moral pressure and conceals the diversity of disability as a universal human experience. In addition, the plastic views embedded in media discourse often make people with disabilities on the edge of social cognition (Runxi Zeng,2024)^[12].

The rise of short video platform has changed this situation by giving disabled people the right to speak from the bottom up. The researchers say that the technical empowerment of short video platform reduces the barriers to self-expression and enables disabled people to change from passive communication objects to active communication objects. The core of this change is to strive for “visibility”. Guo Weiting and Jiang Hongwei (2021)^[17] explained that the disabled blogs have changed from “invisibility” to “visibility” through their video logs. Instead of relying on other people’s media expressions, they use first-person self-expression to transform their subjective experience into visible media reality. Ruihe Yan and Xu Hu (2026)^[11] further defined this visibility as a necessary condition for “gradual social integration”. They say that disabled uploaders gradually accumulate public attention by actively showing their true selves, which breaks social isolation and promotes the dynamic process from recognizing personal identity to social acceptance.

2.2 Performance Strategies and Subjectivity Construction of Disabled Bloggers

Body is the most important narrative symbol of disabled blogs. It is found that young vagrants with disabilities often use a physical expression strategy called “self-disclosure”. They directly show their artificial limbs, their hearing AIDS, their white walking sticks and other auxiliary equipment. They also recorded their daily activities, such as eating, dressing or walking around, to show their physical difficulties and inconveniences intuitively. This strategy has two meanings. On the one hand, it uses physical differences to attract attention, satisfy the public’s curiosity and get traffic. This is a form of “body politics”. It attempts to challenge the concealment and prohibition of the disabled’s body, publicly display imperfections, and re-create an aesthetics in which “disability is normal” (Duan Yongjie and Zhang Yuanyuan,2024)^[2].

In terms of discourse, disability blogs show complex strategic practices. Based on the study of subculture, the researchers explained that the visual presentation of disabled blogs contains elements of “collage” and “homology”: while retaining the traditional painful narrative to arouse sympathy, they also show makeup, travel, work experience and other life scenes, which are the same as those of non-disabled people to emphasize ordinary identity (Yang Ning, 2023)^[3]. Based on the actor network theory (ANT), some researchers say that disabled people carry out “heterogeneous element transfer” in their practice, which shifts the public’s attention from the external physical differences to the inner spiritual world. By emphasizing “spiritual equality”, they seek to avoid discrimination and establish a subjectivity that transcends physiological boundaries (Shen Xiao&Guo Peihao,2025)^[4].

In order to track what the platform algorithm likes, that is, “positive energy”, many bloggers try to talk only about positive things. Xu Sheng and Zhang Fujuan (2010)^[18] explained that in order to prevent their videos from being blocked or deleted, disabled creators often pay attention to what they display. They don’t talk about difficult social problems. They only tell personal stories and give courage. They hide their sadness. They do this in order to have more views and be more visible.

Although this “positive” way of speaking helps to avoid being too different from others, it can also cover up the real life of some people and make people forget the great difficulties faced by disabled people.

Emotion is an important link between disabled blogs and their audience. Disability blogs skillfully use the dialectics of “sympathy” and “refusing sympathy”: they show the difficulties in life to arouse sympathy, and at the same time they show the power to win respect. This kind of emotional work not only creates “social interaction” between bloggers and their followers, but also creates “compensatory intimate social interaction” within the disabled community. This forms an emotional community based on shared experiences, thanks to the mutual support of the comments. At the same time, some blogs turn emotional traffic into economic and social capital, which is attributed to commercial live broadcast and disabled assistance teams. Therefore, they changed from “helping recipients” to “helpers”.

2.3 Self-Presentation in the Context of Disability Short Videos

Erving Goffman compared social life to a stage on which individuals act as performers who guide others to form particular impressions through “performance”^[16]. In disability short-video studies, this perspective suggests that bloggers’ video creation is not merely simple recording, but rather a carefully orchestrated process of “impression management” (Amal Nazzal, 2024)^[13].

The characteristics of digital media have blurred the boundaries between frontstage and backstage (Lesedi Kgatla, 2025). Disabled bloggers sometimes actively expose what would traditionally be considered “backstage” content, such as the painful process of wearing orthotic devices, difficulties in using the restroom, or moments of emotional breakdown. Such a strategy of “bringing the backstage to the frontstage” is both an attempt at destigmatization through breaking secrecy and a strategic performance designed to gain traffic by displaying vulnerability.

Some disabled bloggers intentionally conceal signs of disability through “social camouflaging” in order to avoid discrimination and be regarded as “normal people” (Iris Schneid, 2020)^[14]. Although this strategy may reduce immediate conflict, it is often accompanied by tremendous psychological pressure and self-alienation. Another group of bloggers chooses to actively disclose disability identity, using video narratives to reconstruct “bodily defects” as “unique experiences” or “symbols of resistance.” By taking control of narrative authority, they transform previously negative stigma into moral capital or markers of community identity (Lesedi Kgatla, 2025)^[19].

For disabled groups, self-presentation through short videos may represent the only available means of rebuilding subjectivity and gaining social visibility. Therefore, one should not simply regard the “frontstage” as false and the “backstage” as real; instead, attention should be paid to the dynamic process of meaning production within performance itself.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study aims to systematically analyze the content production practices of disabled creators on short-video platforms from three dimensions:

- (1) Bodily performance strategies, including direct disclosure, concealment, instrumentalization, and anthropomorphization of disability;
- (2) Discursive frameworks, including inspirational narratives, everyday-life narratives, rights advocacy narratives, suffering narratives, and ironic narratives;
- (3) Multimodal coordination mechanisms, examining how visual, auditory, and textual elements complement, anchor, explain, or conflict with one another in emotional mobilization and persuasive communication.

The research adopts online ethnography by treating the online spaces of disabled bloggers as “virtual fields.” Over a three-month period, the study continuously observed ten disabled bloggers and their core fan communities, focusing on content production, publishing schedules, titles, covers, captions, background music, comments, likes, shares, and cross-platform interactions.

The study also applies Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA), viewing every like, comment, repost, and bullet-screen message as a mediated action. Through these symbolic practices, abstract disability identities are transformed into tangible forms of collective belonging and social participation.

4. SUMMARY

4.1 Inspirational Personas: Idealized Performances under Mainstream Discipline

The inspirational persona of “disabled but strong-willed” constitutes the most common and mainstream-value-aligned performance form on current short-video platforms. Its core logic lies in gaining visibility and social capital by catering to society’s moral expectation of “unwavering self-improvement” from people with disabilities.

Bloggers such as Li Senlin and Xiao Qingyun take the initiative to place physical impairments-like uncoordinated movements from cerebral palsy, traveling in wheelchairs, or operating with one arm-at the center of the camera. Li Senlin’s content mainly shows him overcoming physical limitations caused by cerebral palsy, hiking in rural areas to shoot scenery with handheld devices, and proving through exquisite photography that his mind and aesthetic are not restricted by his body, constructing the identity of a spiritually rich, artistic and inspirational individual.

Xiao Qingyun documents his growth from slurred speech to fluent expression by filming daily language rehabilitation and behavior correction over a long period, shaping the inspirational identity of a teenager growing toward the sun and striving for transformation. Sun Tutu breaks the limitations of wheelchair travel, travels alone to explore cities, films the difficulties and successful moments of accessible travel, and constructs the inspirational traveler identity of brave exploration and breaking travel barriers.

All core hit videos are created around “overcoming physical limitations to complete difficult behaviors”, forming a fixed narrative template. By visualizing physical impairments, they break the “invisible” status of people with disabilities in traditional society and attract initial attention through visual spectacles.

In terms of narrative, they construct a strong contrast reversal framework from “cerebral palsy patient to photographer” and “wheelchair user to traveler”, defining “overcoming suffering” as the core of life value, frequently displaying positive emotions such as smiles and gratitude, and deliberately filtering out pain and complaints.

Sunny Girl Qingqing conveys courage in the face of adversity by sharing her rehabilitation journey and positive life attitude after spinal cord injury. Zhao Yuming, a cerebral palsy patient from Shandong Province, expresses his desire to support himself and help more people with disabilities by documenting his college graduation and entrepreneurship journey.

This performance is essentially acquisitive impression management^[13], designed to cater to society’s stereotyped imagination of people with disabilities as “superheroes” or “inspirational models”. By hiding their vulnerability and presenting the image of “good disabled people” in line with social ideas, they seek to be accepted and make money from transportation.

According to Goffman’s theory^[16], this is called idealization. In order to maintain a perfect moral image, people must hide the “behind-the-scenes” facts, which are not what we want. But this strategy also masks their true feelings. The data shows that few bloggers dare to show great sadness in their videos, and the real difficulties of the disabled are hidden behind the filter of “positive energy”.

This simplistic and inspiring story may make disabled people feel different, just like “others”, and make effective people feel superior or better^[15]. Their work has also become very hard emotional work-they must control their emotions so that the audience has sympathy or admiration, and thus there will be more traffic^[2].

4.2 Everyday-Life Personas: Backstage Fronting and Subjectivity Reconstruction

Faced with aesthetic fatigue and lack of sincerity from too much inspiring content, some blogs use the strategy of “standing out”. They tried to dismantle the oppressive framework of “disability” as the only identity label and show the unpolished reality of life.

This role represents the background strategy in the differentiated competition. The blog “Loving Disabled Couple” focuses on intimate and gentle moments in daily life, amplifying the emotional warmth: mutual assistance and support between husband and wife in ordinary years, sincere interaction with the youngest family, and daily mutual assistance of peers in welfare facilities.

Cameras give priority to slow plans and affectionate and intimate plans, minimizing physical disabilities and emphasizing emotional depth. Short video with content corresponding to the audience’s daily life and partner type, without dramatic conspiracy or conflict. The continuous warm content creates the emotional attachment of the audience and consolidates the identity of the treatment partner.

Bloggers are turning to “disenchanted” daily narration, focusing on ordinary moments, such as eating, chatting and quarreling. They want to neutralize the program in an ordinary way and claim that disabled people are normal people. For example, “those who are hurt” share inspiring stories and positive attitudes, telling the recovery process and daily life. This not only inspired the disabled community, but also showed the ordinary human experience.

They kept the original audio of dialect and the original texture of life. They show moderate “imperfect background” moments, usually personal, such as marital conflict or helplessness when traveling alone. This makes the content more real and touching. This is a print protection management. They use conventional and positive strategies to shorten the psychological distance from the public, create a common sense of sexiness, and attack the image of the disabled, whether sacred or demonized.

The strategy challenges the stereotype that people with disabilities are “others”. It helps to change from “looking at others” to intersubjectivity. As the research says, the emergence of disability blogs is a pioneering effort of the disabled community. They are committed to self-construction, self-identity and reconstruction of media image. This is a rediscovery of the cultural value of institutions and disabilities^[3].

However, the line of authenticity is fragile. If the content is too negative (such as complaining about accessible infrastructure), it may trigger platform traffic restriction or censorship. This forces bloggers to conduct self-censorship^[18]. In addition, mainstream media continue to perpetuate stereotypes when talking about the disabled community. The “real ordinary” characters on the short video platform slightly corrected these problems. This provides a “bottom-up” space for discourse interaction^[8].

4.3 Skill- and Entrepreneurship-Oriented Personas: Capital Conversion

With the development of platform economy, some disabled blogs have gone beyond emotional mobilization and turned to value demonstration based on professional skills, seeking to transform their disability identity into sustainable economic and social capital. Bloggers like Wang Zhifang and Xiao Yulian downplay tragic stories, emphasize professional knowledge and productivity, and present their live studios, seminars or creative processes as performances, thus showing the subjectivity of disabled people as workers.

Xiao Yulian filmed the whole process of hook-shaped handicraft creation and collective work of employees in the disabled workshop. These images focus on sewing technology, finished product manufacturing and order packaging. This enabled him to establish a professional identity as a craftsman and workshop manager of intangible cultural heritage. Wang Zhifang bases his content on rural and farm warehouses, shooting on-site harvest, product selection and quality control. It goes beyond the simple sales strategy and establishes the identity of local rural entrepreneurial streaming media and agricultural aid practitioners.

These blogs combine their personal career development with collective welfare and social benefits^[10]. This improves their professional identity and helps to gradually eliminate the public prejudice against the disabled, that is, the disabled are “dependent and unable to find employment^[9].” By demonstrating their professional skills, they gain a more independent social status and link traffic monetization with social values. In addition, physically handicapped photographer Xia Ye captures the beauty of life through the lens. He won the vocational skills competition and plans to promote culture and landscape through short films. Beijing Shanshui Folk Music Art Troupe uses live short films to realize re-employment and protect people’s livelihood.

Through narratives such as “supporting the disabled” or “helping agriculture”, they promote personal success to social value, thus transforming cultural capital (such as identity of the disabled, physical differences and inspiring stories) into social capital (such as public trust) and finally into economic capital (such as product sales and tips for live broadcast)^[2]. Disabled blogs use digital platforms to turn physical differences and identity narratives into identifiable cultural resources, and then turn these resources into social recognition and economic returns.

In this process, disabled people have changed from passive “helping recipients” to active “digital workers”^[9], redefined their social connections through digital technology, and transformed their physical differences into spiritual equality. National short video training programs for the disabled, such as Chongqing’s initiative of “recording stories, exercising, and moving towards the light”, also aim to bridge the digital gap between the disabled and establish new digital expression channels for the disabled.

4.4 Labor Alienation under Algorithmic Discipline

However, the deeper integration into platform capitalism also makes disabled creators face new forms of work. In order to maintain the image of “capable”, “positive” and commercial attraction, bloggers must constantly produce emotionally attractive content to meet the expectations of the audience and adapt to the recommendation mechanism of the platform. Therefore, their body narratives, emotional expressions and daily experiences are increasingly shaped by algorithmic disciplines and traffic-driven logic.

From the perspective of digital labor force, the narrative platform, symbolic architecture and capital alienation of disabled young vagrants are becoming more and more obvious^[2]. Their initial performance intentions may be eroded by profit incentives, from identity claims to compulsory adherence to algorithmic disciplines, in order to maximize profits^[5].

In short, it is a dynamic and situational negotiation process to build the identity of the disabled on the short video platform. Whether following inspiring mainstream performances, returning to real daily life, or proving its value through skills, these are the strategic choices for the disabled to strive for visibility while solving the algorithm discipline and social prejudice.

However, these performances are constantly exposed to the risk of platform business logic alienation. First of all, the discipline of algorithm profoundly affects people’s choice and consolidation^[5]. Algorithms tend to recommend content with strong emotional elements, forcing bloggers to adjust their strategies to meet traffic rules, which may even lead to the distortion of their original intentions. Through data-driven monitoring and algorithm planning, the platform is integrated into the whole workflow, forming a new discipline logic that is more effective, cautious and oppressive than traditional factory discipline.

Second, authenticity crises and ethical risks cannot be ignored. Recent staged incidents, such as the “blind farce,” serve as a warning: when personas become completely detached from real life and reduced to mere traffic tools, they not only deplete social goodwill but also inflict secondary stigma on the genuine disabled community. Worse still, there exists an industrial chain where MCN agencies recruit visually impaired individuals to film sentimental content and fabricate scripts, reducing people with disabilities to profit-making tools.

Finally, structural barriers persist. Although short videos have provided new livelihoods and employment opportunities for people with disabilities^[9], enabling them to break free from geographical confinement and achieve “re-embedding,” issues such as the digital divide and the lack of accessible environments still restrict the participation of more people with disabilities^[7]. True care is not deliberate performance in front of the camera, but translating online attention into offline action and promoting the construction of accessible environments and institutional guarantees.

Future research and practice should focus on moving beyond superficial persona building, urging platforms to establish more inclusive algorithmic mechanisms that support people with disabilities in presenting more diverse, complex, and subjective life experiences—including expressions of vulnerability and anger—thereby achieving a genuine shift from “curious voyeurism” to “equal empathy.” Meanwhile, strengthened digital governance is needed to mitigate risks in employment and ensure the resilient development of young people with disabilities in digital practices^[5,9].

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