From "Loving Your Weary Self" to "Loving Our Community": A Study on the Discourse Transformation and Emotional Community Construction of Military Short Videos

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Abstract: This paper takes the online popular cultural psychology of "Loving Your Weary Self" as its analytical entry point. By examining how military short videos facilitate the transformation of individual emotions into community identity through strategic discourse evolution, it proposes a comprehensive analytical framework of "emotional transformation." Through multimodal discourse analysis and in-depth case studies, the paper dissects how military short videos employ the pathways of "symbolic dimension reduction," "narrative empathy," and "playful participation" to convert the inwardly oriented self-care prevalent among youth into an outwardly connected identification with and protection of the national community. The research findings indicate that this process transcends simple propaganda; it represents a fundamental reconstruction of emotional infrastructure on digital platforms, offering a new paradigm for the endogenous internalization of mainstream values among younger generations in contemporary China. This study contributes to broader theoretical conversations regarding emotional governance, digital participation, and identity formation in an era of media convergence, while illuminating the innovative strategies through which state media engage with increasingly individualized youth audiences.

Keywords: loving your weary self; emotional community; military short videos; discourse transformation; participatory culture

1. Introduction: When the "Self-Love" Narrative Encounters National Discourse

1.1 The Emergence of "Loving Your Weary Self" as a Cultural Phenomenon

"Loving Your Weary Self"—a phrase encapsulating the sentiment "to accept and care for this slightly tired version of oneself right now"—swept across Chinese social media platforms between 2024 and 2025, generating billions of views and spawning countless derivative memes, discussions, and personal testimonials [1,2]. More than a passing internet fad, it serves as a revealing window into the contemporary social psychology of young people navigating the complexities of modern Chinese society. The phrase emerged organically from digital youth culture, resonating deeply with a generation facing intense educational competition, precarious employment landscapes, and the psychological toll of rapid urbanization and social transformation.

Against the current socioeconomic backdrop, the psychological mechanism of turning inward and cherishing concrete emotional value has emerged as a significant cultural trend. This manifests in various forms: the popularity of "healing" content across platforms, the emphasis on self-care routines and mental health awareness, the rejection of relentless self-optimization in favor of self-acceptance, and the celebration of small, everyday pleasures over distant, grandiose achievements [2,3]. The narrative focus of the younger generation has progressively shifted from grand, linear stories of collective struggle and future-oriented achievement toward the care, healing, and validation of their own authentic, moment-to-moment experiences. This represents not mere narcissism but a sophisticated psychological adaptation to conditions of uncertainty and pressure—a way of preserving mental well-being in a demanding environment [4].

Scholars have noted that this inward turn parallels similar developments in other late-modern societies, where individualization processes and the erosion of traditional support structures have led to increased emphasis on psychological self-management. However, the Chinese context lends this phenomenon distinct characteristics: it emerges alongside continued expectations of social contribution and national development, creating a productive tension between self-care and collective responsibility that this paper seeks to explore [1,4].

1.2 The Transformation of Military Short Video Discourse

Concurrently with the rise of "Loving Your Weary Self," official military short video accounts represented by "CCTV Military," "China Military Online," and "Dongfeng Express" achieved remarkable "cross-circle" communication breakthroughs, reaching audiences far beyond traditional military enthusiasts [5,6]. Their content underwent a fundamental transformation, moving

away from traditionally grand and "hardcore" discourse styles—characterized by martial music, imposing imagery, and authoritative narration—toward markedly "cute-ified," "interesting," and "empathic" modes of expression [7]. This shift was not incidental but strategic, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of changing media consumption patterns and audience psychology.

For instance, in training clips released by the Chinese Military Network, the camera intimately follows a soldier's frostbitten hands in icy conditions, sweat dripping in the scorching sun, and a relieved smile after completing a grueling mission [5]. These videos deliberately foreground vulnerability and humanity alongside strength and capability, presenting military personnel not as invincible heroes but as ordinary young people performing extraordinary duties [6]. This narrative approach deeply resonates with the mindset of "accepting imperfect struggle" inherent in "Loving Your Weary Self." Comments like "tearing up" and "this is the feeling of security" in response sections reflect the audience's emotional trajectory: transforming admiration for individual soldiers into gratitude and trust toward the collective "us" protected by this military force.

The statistics are striking: military short videos employing these new discursive strategies consistently outperform traditional formats in engagement metrics, with sharing rates, comment volumes, and positive sentiment scores significantly higher than conventional propaganda content [5]. This empirical reality demands theoretical explanation.

1.3 Research Questions and Significance

This convergence of cultural phenomena raises a compelling question: Is there a deeper connection between these two seemingly parallel cultural developments—the inwardly focused "self-love" culture and the outwardly projecting national narrative? This paper argues that the discourse transformation of military short videos represents a profound engagement with and creative reimagining of the social psychology embodied by "Loving Your Weary Self" within mainstream discourse [7]. The core logic lies in strategically guiding and sublimating the private emotions young people hold for their "selves" into identification with and emotional investment in the "national community" as an expanded "greater self," through a series of deliberate communication strategies.

This study systematically examines the specific mechanisms, practical pathways, and socio-cultural significance of this transformation process, offering a novel theoretical perspective for understanding the evolution of communication innovation and identity construction in mainstream ideology within the digital age [5,7]. The significance of this inquiry extends beyond media studies to encompass broader questions of social cohesion, political communication, and cultural change in contemporary China. By illuminating how state media adapt to individualized youth audiences, we gain insight into the evolving relationship between individuals and collective identities in late-modern societies more generally [8,9].

1.4 Methodological Approach

This paper employs a multi-method qualitative approach combining multimodal discourse analysis with in-depth case studies [6,8]. Multimodal discourse analysis examines how meaning is constructed through the interplay of visual, auditory, and textual elements in military short videos, attending to camera angles, editing techniques, musical choices, and linguistic features [5]. Case study selection focuses on particularly influential videos that exemplify the three pathways identified in our analytical framework, with attention to audience reception as evidenced in comment sections and derivative content. This methodological pluralism enables rich description of both production strategies and reception practices, capturing the dynamic interaction between media creators and audiences that characterizes contemporary digital communication.

2. Theoretical Basis and Analytical Framework: Three Mediating Pathways of Emotional Transformation

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

Drawing on theoretical resources from multiple disciplines, this paper constructs an analytical framework for the process of emotional transformation from "Loving Your Weary Self" to "Loving Our Community." Three theoretical traditions are particularly relevant.

First, the sociology of emotions, particularly the work of scholars such as Arlie Hochschild on emotional labor and Randall Collins on interaction ritual chains, provides tools for understanding how emotions are socially cultivated, managed, and transformed through collective practices [4]. Hochschild's insight that emotions are not merely private experiences but socially shaped and managed phenomena is crucial for analyzing how military short videos deliberately cultivate particular emotional responses. Collins' emphasis on how shared emotional experiences generate solidarity and group identity illuminates the mechanisms through which individual viewers become connected to collective projects.

Second, James Carey's ritual view of communication offers an alternative to transmission models of media effects. Rather than focusing narrowly on information transfer, the ritual view emphasizes how communication constitutes shared reality through symbolic processes [7]. From this perspective, military short videos are not simply conveying messages about national defense but are enacting rituals of collective belonging that position viewers within meaningful communities. This theoretical orientation directs attention to the performative dimensions of media consumption and the ways in which viewing practices themselves constitute forms of participation.

Third, participatory culture studies, associated with Henry Jenkins and others, provides concepts for understanding how digital media enable audiences to move beyond passive reception toward active

engagement, creation, and community formation [5,9]. Jenkins' work on convergence culture highlights the increasingly blurred boundaries between producers and consumers, while his analysis of spreadable media explains how content circulates through networks of affective investment. These concepts are essential for grasping how military short videos leverage user participation to deepen emotional engagement [8].

Synthesizing these theoretical resources, the "Loving Your Weary Self" mentality constitutes the psychological starting point for this emotional transformation, encompassing three key dimensions: the acceptance of "ordinary reality," the prioritization of "emotional value," and the need for "certainty" in emotional connections [1, 2]. Military short videos primarily facilitate emotional sublimation through three interrelated pathways—symbolic dimension reduction, narrative empathy, and playful participation—each building upon and reinforcing the others [5,6].

2.2 The Psychological Starting Point: Understanding "Loving Your Weary Self"

Before analyzing the transformation pathways, it is essential to understand the target psychology with which military short videos engage. "Loving Your Weary Self" encompasses several interconnected dimensions that together constitute a coherent emotional orientation [1, 4].

The acceptance of "ordinary reality" involves a rejection of perfectionist standards and an embrace of life as it is actually lived, with all its compromises, disappointments, and small satisfactions [2]. This dimension responds to the intense pressures for achievement and optimization that characterize contemporary Chinese society, offering psychological respite from relentless self-improvement demands. It validates the experience of simply coping, of doing one's best under difficult circumstances, without requiring extraordinary outcomes [3].

The prioritization of "emotional value" reflects a shift from instrumental rationality toward affective considerations in evaluating experiences and relationships. Young people increasingly ask not simply "what will this achieve?" but "how will this make me feel?" [2]. This orientation elevates subjective experience as a criterion of worth, valuing activities and connections that generate positive emotional states.

The need for "certainty" in emotional connections expresses a desire for reliable, authentic relationships in a world characterized by rapid change and social fragmentation. This manifests in appreciation for loyalty, consistency, and genuine care, whether in personal relationships or in the imagined relationship between citizens and state institutions [4].

These dimensions are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing, together constituting a coherent emotional orientation that military short videos strategically engage [5,7].

2.3 The Transformation Pathways: An Overview

The three pathways identified in this paper operate through distinct but complementary mechanisms [6]. Symbolic dimension reduction addresses the problem of psychological distance, transforming abstract institutions into approachable objects of affection. Narrative empathy addresses the problem of identification, enabling viewers to see themselves in the stories of military personnel. Playful participation addresses the problem of agency, transforming passive spectators into active participants in meaning-making [7,8]. Together, these pathways create a comprehensive emotional infrastructure for transforming self-directed care into community-directed commitment.

2.4 Symbolic Dimension Reduction: From Distant Objects to Approachable Emotional Companions

2.4.1 Conceptual Elaboration

"Symbolic dimension reduction" involves concretizing, personifying, and even "cute-ifying" abstract military symbols that typically carry psychological distance due to their association with state power and institutional authority [5]. This process narrows the psychological gap created by the inherent solemnity of mainstream media, establishing accessible "interfaces" for emotional projection [6]. The concept draws on scholarship in visual communication and political symbolism, which has long recognized that abstract symbols must be rendered meaningful through association with concrete, emotionally accessible representations [7].

The mechanisms of symbolic dimension reduction operate at multiple levels. Linguistically, it involves the use of diminutives, nicknames, and familiar address forms that transform distant entities into intimate acquaintances. Visually, it employs anthropomorphism, playful aesthetics, and domestic imagery that domesticate the foreign and unfamiliar. Narratively, it constructs origin stories and developmental trajectories that invite audiences to participate imaginatively in the life course of military assets. These mechanisms work together to create what might be termed "affective affordances"—opportunities for emotional investment built into the symbolic structure of media content [8].

2.4.2 Case Analysis: The Fujian Ship Phenomenon

Practical manifestations of symbolic dimension reduction include affectionately nicknaming aircraft carriers or employing playful visual effects like "cat ear" filters when showcasing cutting-edge equipment, thereby humanizing technological marvels [5]. In 2025, short videos related to China's third aircraft carrier rarely piled up technical specifications and performance parameters. Instead, they frequently employed evocative, almost intimate expressions like "[Ship Name], we've been waiting for you for so long!" This personifying address transforms a naval vessel into a long-anticipated companion, someone whose arrival has been eagerly awaited [6].

In one highly popular video, the breathtaking footage of a carrier-based aircraft taking off and landing was paired with the warm subtitle and accompanying music of "A child going out independently for the first time."

This symbolic reframing transforms a complex military operation into a developmental milestone, inviting audiences to respond with the same mixture of pride, anxiety, and affection they might feel toward a young person's first venture into the world. The aircraft carrier becomes not a weapon of war but a maturing entity requiring collective support and celebration [5].

This symbolic processing reduced the national strategic asset from a cold news concept into a "child of our own" or "shared pride" requiring collective attention and emotional investment. When netizens flood the comments with expressions of support and pride, they are engaging in a form of emotional investment, implicitly identifying the national asset as "our" emotional asset, thereby laying the psychological groundwork for deeper forms of collective identification [6]. The language of family—of children, pride, and collective responsibility—creates emotional stakes that technical specifications alone could never generate.

2.4.3 Broader Applications

This case exemplifies a broader pattern observable across military short video content [5]. Tanks are given affectionate nicknames, missiles are framed as express delivery services, and military exercises are depicted as training camps for beloved personnel. Each instance of symbolic dimension reduction creates an emotional bridge between abstract military capability and concrete affective response, enabling audiences to experience national defense assets as extensions of personal emotional worlds [7].

This strategy resonates deeply with the "Loving Your Weary Self" orientation because it validates emotional investment as a legitimate mode of relating to national institutions [1]. Rather than requiring technical knowledge or strategic analysis, it invites audiences to respond affectively, trusting that their emotional reactions constitute meaningful forms of engagement [2]. This democratization of relationship to military power—making it accessible through feeling rather than expertise—aligns perfectly with a cultural moment that prioritizes emotional value as a criterion of worth [3].

2.5 Narrative Empathy: From Grand Stories to Relatable Life Stories

2.5.1 Conceptual Elaboration

"Narrative empathy" entails a fundamental shift in narrative perspective, moving decisively away from depicting unattainable "heroic myths" and abstract collective achievements toward telling the life stories of soldiers as ordinary individuals with whom audiences can identify [6]. It focuses intimately on their hardships during training, their tenacity in the face of adversity, and their exhaustion and genuine smiles after success [5]. This narrative strategy functions by showcasing the "protectors" as flesh-and-blood beings whose ordinariness and sacrifices mirror those of the audience themselves [7].

The theoretical grounding for narrative empathy draws on scholarship in media psychology regarding

transportation and identification. When audiences become "transported" into narrative worlds, they temporarily adopt the perspectives of characters, experiencing emotions congruent with those characters' situations [8]. This transportation effect is enhanced when characters are perceived as similar to oneself, sharing ordinary human concerns and limitations [4]. Military short videos strategically cultivate this perceived similarity by foregrounding precisely those aspects of military life that most closely resemble civilian experience: physical exhaustion, emotional vulnerability, the desire for connection and rest [5, 6].

2.5.2 Mechanisms of Empathic Engagement

The mechanism of this narrative strategy lies in its ability to stimulate profound audience identification and emotional resonance by revealing the shared humanity of military personnel [6]. It directly responds to the respect for "authentic struggle" embedded within the "Loving Your Weary Self" culture, allowing the audience to perceive "their" stories as stories "we" ourselves could potentially experience [1]. This perceptual shift emotionally bridges the psychological distance between ordinary civilians and their guardians, transforming abstract national protection into tangible, relatable human connection [7].

Several specific techniques facilitate this empathic engagement. First, the foregrounding of physicality—sweat, tears, exhaustion, pain—grounds military experience in universal bodily experience. Viewers may never have flown a fighter jet or commanded a warship, but they have certainly experienced physical exhaustion and pushed through difficult tasks. This shared bodily experience creates a foundation for empathy [5].

Second, the inclusion of "backstage" moments—soldiers relaxing after duty, calling family members, sharing meals together—reveals the ordinary humanity beneath the uniform. These moments of vulnerability and informality invite viewers to see military personnel as people like themselves, with similar needs, desires, and concerns [6].

Third, the structuring of narrative arcs around recognizable human challenges—overcoming difficulty, persevering through hardship, finding meaning in demanding work—aligns military experience with universal themes of human striving. The specific content may be unique to military life, but the underlying narrative structure resonates with anyone who has faced and overcome challenges [8].

2.5.3 Case Analysis: Training Clips and Humanizing Representation

When viewers witness soldiers' struggles and triumphs presented not as superhuman feats but as extensions of ordinary human endurance, the emotional boundary between "them" and "us" begins to dissolve [6]. A training clip showing a soldier completing an obstacle course while visibly exhausted, collapsing at the finish line before being helped up by comrades, generates

empathy not through heroic portrayal but through honest depiction of human limitation and mutual support [5]. Comments sections fill with expressions of care—expressions of concern and appreciation—that mirror the language of "Loving Your Weary Self" applied to others [1].

This empathic connection then becomes a bridge to broader identification. When audiences care about individual soldiers, they become invested in the institutions and missions those soldiers serve [6]. The emotional investment in persons extends to investment in the collective project those persons embody [8]. This transfer is facilitated by the symbolic connection between individual soldiers and the national community they protect: if "they" are like "us," then protecting "us" becomes an extension of caring for "them."

2.6 Playful Participation: From Ritual Viewing to Co-constructed Meaningful Play

2.6.1 Conceptual Elaboration

"Playful participation" involves designing, packaging, or tacitly endorsing serious national defense topics as a "digital playground" freely accessible for public entry, interaction, and user-generated content [5]. This manifests concretely in initiating short video challenges like uniform transformation challenges, opening creative spaces for secondary creation when releasing high-energy montage videos, or operating accounts with approachable personas that encourage netizens to engage playfully in comment sections [6].

The concept of play here draws on scholarship regarding digital play as a mode of cultural participation [7]. Play is not trivial or opposed to seriousness but constitutes a fundamental mode of human engagement with the world, characterized by freedom, creativity, and the suspension of ordinary rules [8]. By framing national defense topics within playful contexts, military short videos invite audiences to engage with seriousness through the modality of enjoyment, lowering psychological barriers to participation [5,6].

2.6.2 Case Analysis: "If Battle Comes Tonight"

The dissemination of the Southern Theater Command Navy's video "If Battle Comes Tonight" serves as an exemplary case study for the "playful participation" pathway [5]. Following its release, this serious topic—the preparedness of naval forces for potential conflict—rapidly evolved into a fully participatory "digital carnival" [6]. Netizens not only actively discussed the video's content but also engaged in detailed interpretation of details and secondary editing, imbuing it with new emotional nuances using different background music selections [7].

The original video presented sobering content: naval forces training intensively, weapons systems being prepared, soldiers maintaining combat readiness. Yet the response transformed this serious material into an occasion for collective creativity and play. Users created remixes set to upbeat music, juxtaposing the video's serious imagery with playful soundtracks that generated ironic or uplifting effects [5]. They engaged in detailed analysis of equipment and tactics, sharing expertise in comment threads that resembled collaborative knowledge-building more than passive reception [8]. They created memes referencing specific moments from the video, generating an internal language that marked participation in the interpretive community.

In this spontaneous participation, the national defense topic ceased to be a matter reserved for elite discussion and became a digital ritual for publicly expressing personal stance and collective emotion [6]. The video became not simply content to be consumed but an occasion for performance, a stage upon which users could enact their relationship to national defense through creative engagement [7].

2.6.3 Mechanisms of Participatory Engagement

By engaging in playful behaviors such as sharing, meme creation, and developing derivative content, users perform an emotional stance-taking and co-construction, thereby embedding themselves within the meaning network of the community through interactive participation [5,6]. The mechanism of this pathway is the most profound, as it empowers users with genuine agency for creative participation, transforming passive, one-way ritual viewing into active, multi-directional meaning co-construction [7,8].

Several factors explain the effectiveness of this pathway. First, participation generates investment: when users contribute creative effort to engaging with content, they develop psychological ownership over both the content and the meanings associated with it [6]. A user who creates a remix or generates a meme has invested themselves in the topic, creating stakes in its continued significance.

Second, participation enables performance: public engagement with national defense topics allows users to display their identities and values to their social networks, generating social recognition and reinforcement. Sharing military content becomes a form of identity performance, signaling one's position within broader cultural and political alignments [8].

Third, participation builds community: through shared engagement with content, users develop relationships with fellow participants, creating social bonds that attach them to the interpretive community [5]. Comment sections become spaces of interaction where users recognize familiar names, develop inside jokes, and generate collective meanings.

In the playful behaviors of sharing, editing, commenting, and meme creation, users are essentially executing a public emotional declaration and identity encoding, thus weaving themselves into the community's meaning network through lighthearted participation and completing the internalization of identification in an organic, self-motivated manner [7]. The playfulness of the engagement should not obscure its seriousness as a mechanism of identity formation; play is, as scholars have long recognized, among the most profound modes of human learning and becoming.

2.7 The Closed Loop of Emotional Transformation: The Ultimate Goal of the "Three-Step Sublimation"

2.7.1 The Three-Step Process

The synergistic effect of the three pathways described above ultimately guides the audience's emotions through a structured "three-step sublimation" process [6]. This process is not linear but cyclical, with each stage reinforcing and deepening the others, creating an ascending spiral of emotional investment and collective identification.

"Seeing and Acknowledgment" allows the audience to witness the praise of the "tenacity of the ordinary" in military short videos, feeling that their own value and fatigue are seen and validated by mainstream discourse [1,5]. This initial stage addresses a fundamental psychological need: the desire for recognition [2]. When young people see military content that celebrates ordinary endurance rather than extraordinary heroism, they experience their own daily struggles as similarly worthy of acknowledgment [3]. The validation flows both ways: just as the videos validate soldiers' ordinary efforts, they implicitly validate viewers' ordinary efforts by establishing a framework in which such efforts are seen and celebrated.

3. Conclusion

This study has traced the trajectory from "Loving Your Weary Self" to "Loving Our Community" as manifested in the discourse transformation of contemporary military short videos. Through the analytical framework of emotional transformation, the paper has examined how state media strategically engage with the inward-turning psychological orientation of young audiences, channeling self-directed care toward collective identification with the national community.

The three pathways identified—symbolic dimension reduction, narrative empathy, and playful participation—operate synergistically to create what might be termed an emotional infrastructure on digital platforms. Symbolic dimension reduction transforms abstract military institutions into approachable objects of affection, establishing emotional interfaces where previously there was psychological distance. Narrative empathy bridges the gap between civilian audiences and military personnel by foregrounding shared humanity, enabling viewers to see themselves in the stories of those who serve. Playful participation empowers audiences to move beyond passive consumption toward active meaning-making, embedding themselves in communities of interpretation through creative engagement.

These pathways guide audiences through a three-step sublimation process: "Seeing and Acknowledgment" validates ordinary experience within mainstream discourse; "Empathy and Connection" extends self-care to others; and "Identification and Sublimation" generates recognition of shared destiny and collective belonging. The result is that "Loving Our Community" emerges not as an externally imposed obligation but as an endogenous emotional choice, organically grown from the psychological soil of self-care.

The significance of this transformation extends beyond military communication. It represents a fundamental shift in political communication logic: from value indoctrination to emotional connection, from prescribing what audiences should love to responding to what they are currently feeling. This approach reconstructs the imagined community into an experienced community, made tangible through shared emotional rituals on digital platforms. It offers a resilient paradigm for social cohesion in an era of heightened individualism, embedding collective belonging within the daily emotional fabric of digital life.

In sum, the discourse transformation of military short videos demonstrates how mainstream values can be endogenously internalized when they engage authentically with existing psychological orientations. It provides a crucial sample for understanding the innovative integration of national narratives and individual life narratives in contemporary Chinese society—and offers insights for broader theoretical conversations about identity formation, emotional governance, and digital participation in late modernity.

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