

FROM DOCUMENTARIES TO SHORT VIDEOS: THE EVOLUTION OF "STREET INTERVIEWS"

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ABSTRACT

From a historical perspective, "street interview" videos have experienced notable evolution across distinct formats, including documentaries, television news, and short videos. Within each format, "street interviews" have cultivated unique characteristics. The production of "street interview" videos adheres to identifiable conventions, with critical attention paid to the design of interview questions, the selection of interview subjects and locations, and the regulation of the number of interviewees.

KEYWORDS

Short videos, Documentaries, Street interviews.

INTRODUCTION

"Street interview" videos refer to videos that center around street interviews on a specific theme. The same question runs through the entire video, where the interviewer unexpectedly enters the daily lives of interviewees, who are required to respond to questions on the spot, showcasing diverse attitudes and viewpoints. These videos may take the form of documentaries, television news, short videos, and are sometimes referred to as "mass interviews" (a large volume of interviews). However, not all street interviews can be classified as "street interview" videos. If street interviews are merely secondary or supporting elements within a video, they do not qualify as "street interview" videos.

The Historical Evolution of "Street Interview" Videos

Documentaries: The Origins of "Street Interviews"

"Street interview" videos originated from documentaries, with the earliest known instance dating back to the French anthropologist Jean Rouch, who produced the documentary *Chronicle of a Summer* (released on October 20, 1961) in 1960. In this film, the interviewers held microphones and stopped random pedestrians on the streets of Paris, asking them the question: "Are you happy?" People responded to this question in various ways:

some offered evasive responses, some were moved to tears, some spoke eloquently, while others remained silent. In the end, the director gathered the interviewees together to watch the filmed footage. *Chronicle of a Summer* became a prominent example of *cinéma vérité*. For the film industry at the time, this work was regarded as a "pioneering experimental piece" (Wanli, 2001). It also became a landmark in the history of documentary filmmaking and was widely emulated by subsequent filmmakers and television producers.

There are three representative documentary films of this genre in China, as shown in Table 1. Among them, *Where is Happiness* and *What Do You Want* were produced by the China Central Television (hereinafter referred to as CCTV) program *Chronicle*. The documentary *Where is Happiness*, which aired on New Year's Day in 2005, closely resembles *Chronicle of a Summer*. Although the director Cheng Yong stated that the idea was directly inspired by Krzysztof Kieślowski's documentary *Talking Heads*, *Talking Heads* is a 1980 film directed by Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski that presents individuals of various ages, professions, and backgrounds responding to identical questions, offering insights into their perspectives on life, values, and attitudes. Cheng Yong posed two questions: "Are you happy?" and "What is happiness?" Random interviews were conducted in representative regions across the country, starting on a bus heading to "Happiness Beach" in Qinghai Province. "This documentary captured a collective portrait of happiness in contemporary Chinese society through the authentic answers of nearly a hundred ordinary people" (Lingling et al., 2013). Overall, these documentaries failed to garner significant attention from the audience and were largely overlooked.

Table 1. Representative "Street Interview" Documentaries in China

Title	Director (Producer)	Year of Production	Main Interview Questions
The Wind in Beijing is Strong	Sui Anqi	1999	"Do you think the wind in Beijing is strong?"
Where is Happiness	Cheng Yong	2005	"Are you happy?" "What is happiness?"
What Do You Want	Cheng Yong	2005	"What year were you born?" "What do you do?" "What do you want?"

Television News: The Witty Responses of "Street Interviews"

After a 50-year hiatus, "street interviews" gained widespread attention during the 2012 National Day holiday due to the special survey *Are You Happy?*, launched by CCTV's *Go to the Grassroots: The Voice of the People* series. This survey triggered profound reflections on happiness among contemporary Chinese society, making the phrase "Are you happy?" a viral phrase on the internet. It also sparked a wave of enthusiasm for "street interviews" across China, representing the high point for this format. Since the *Are You Happy?* street interviews, the format has seen increasing adoption in news programs. CCTV alone produced a series of themed interviews, including *Where Do I Come From?*, *What Is Your Dream?*, *What Are You Missing?*, *What Do Your Parents Care About Most?*, *What Is Patriotism?*, *Talk About Qingming*, *My Name is National Day*, *What Is Family Tradition?*, *To Whom Did You Devote Your Youth?*, and *Who Would You Like to Give a Thumbs-Up To?*. Local television stations followed suit, and the trend continued until 2015, turning "street interviews" into a popular topic of academic research in journalism. The integration of "street interviews" with television news highlighted their enduring relevance and impact.

The most prominent feature of "street interviews" during this period was the frequent occurrence of "witty responses." For example, when asked "Are you happy?" one respondent answered, "My surname is Zeng"; to

"What comes to mind when you think of a patriot?" another replied, "Missiles." Other responses to "What are you lacking in 2013?" included "Money!", "Love!", "Calcium!", and even "I'm just missing a water meter." Many similar exchanges appeared in the reports. Although these replies might seem less serious, they quickly became popular internet memes(Haiyan, 2012). The reason "street interviews" became such a widely discussed topic was precisely because of these hilarious "witty responses," especially since they were broadcast on CCTV, a traditionally serious and authoritative platform. Often, the answers themselves were not the most important part; what mattered more was the interviewee's demeanor and behavior in front of the camera. "The camera is not merely a tool for observation but a method for investigating and examining human behavior and relationships"(Chen Gang & Xiaozhe, 2013).

Short Videos: The Revival of "Street Interviews"

While "street interviews" seem to have faded from the television scene, they have remained vibrant in the world of short videos, becoming a major genre in this format, thanks to the rise of mobile internet. "Over the past two decades, we have witnessed the emergence of low-cost, easy-to-use smartphones with cameras, drones, and portable cameras, giving billions of people around the world the opportunity to record their lives and make videos accessible and storable"(VILLELA, 2021). "Every technological innovation unleashes new narrative energy and opens up new possibilities" (Ryan, 2019, p. 326).In the world of short videos, "street interviews" are typically produced by non-professional organizations, with content generated by ordinary users (UGC). "The appeal of user-generated content lies in the fact that viral, high-quality content is not artificially designed, but rather resonates with the audience, earning their likes and recommendations" (Chew, 2023).

In short videos, "street interviews" exhibit two prominent characteristics: First, there is a trend toward content verticalization, with clear positioning and a precise target audience, focusing on a specific niche to attract a particular group of people (see Table 2). For example, the Douyin account "Foreigners' Research Society" (with 8.103 million followers) primarily interviews foreigners living in China. In each episode, Israeli content creator Gaoyousi interviews people from different countries on a specific theme. Second, the content has taken on an increasingly entertainment-oriented, and at times, even vulgar tone. If traditional "street interviews" were known for witty responses, in short videos, it is the "witty questions" that stand out. Examples include: "What would you say if your boss farted in the elevator?", "Do women prefer virgins or non-virgins?", "Are you planning to have sex on Qixi Valentine's Day?", "Why are young people no longer dating?", "How many men should a woman have before marriage to be considered perfect?", and "Would you call your ex to borrow money?". Some of these questions touch on privacy, while others reflect crude tastes. Compared to traditional "street interviews," the emphasis has shifted from "importance" to "amusement," and from "seriousness" to "entertainment."

Table 2. "Street Interview" Short Videos

Video Account Theme	Representative Accounts on Douyin
University Students	"Please, Junior" (4.088 million followers)
Relationships Among Young Men and Women	"Liuliu Street Interviews" (1.658 million followers), "Little Qige" (1.979 million followers), "Daren Street Interviews" (1.366 million followers)
Everyday Life in Beijing	"Beijing Sister Rui" (1.906 million followers), "Chatting Beijing" (803,000 followers)
Retired Life in Beijing	"Beijing Daming" (1.608 million followers)

Foreigners Living in China	"Foreigners' Research Society" (8.103 million followers)
Street Interviews in English	"Li Meiyue" (6.557 million followers)

Characteristics of Short Videos Featuring "Street Interviews"

Designing Interview Questions

The design of the questions is crucial to the success of "street interview" videos, as it determines both the theme and impact of the video. When selecting questions, three aspects must be considered. First, the relevance of the question should be assessed by choosing topics of public interest, such as pressing issues like the high cost of education or housing. Alternatively, questions can be aligned with significant events or holidays, for example, asking "What do your parents care about most?" on the Double Ninth Festival or "What is love?" on Valentine's Day. Second, the questions should be concise to facilitate responses from interviewees; typically, only two questions are asked, and the number should not be excessive. These two questions should have a logical connection to ensure the video's coherence and depth. For instance, the first question might be, "Are you happy?" followed by "What does happiness mean to you?" Similarly, questions like "Do you have any dreams?" and "What are your dreams?" provide meaningful continuity. By asking such questions, the camera can metaphorically act like an X-ray, revealing a cross-section of social life or the mental states of individuals through the video format. Lastly, the questions should be open-ended rather than closed yes/no queries, allowing for a range of diverse answers. Each person's response will be unique, touching on aspects such as happiness, ideals, aspirations, dreams, regrets, unforgettable moments, love, anger, and so on, which is the true appeal of this format. Nevertheless, in the era of short videos, the variety of questions posed is ever-changing and often unconventional, but it is crucial that the questions remain aligned with public decency and social norms.

Selection of Interview Subjects

"Street interviews" resemble survey questionnaires, except that the medium has shifted from text to video. Although the selection of interviewees may appear random, to ensure the scientific validity and diversity of the responses, stratified sampling should be used to categorize and select participants. For example, interviewees can be grouped according to factors such as gender, occupation, region, or age, and then randomly selected from each group. This method enhances the credibility of the findings. However, it is important not to be overly strict about the scientific rigor of "street interviews." Additionally, since street interviews are conducted through video, the selection of interview locations must take into account factors such as foot traffic, aesthetic appeal of the environment, characteristics of the crowd, and relevance to the topic. Typically, interviews are conducted at locations with landmark significance or representativeness, creating a "visual hammer" in the interview footage.

Interviews Full of Uncertainty

"Street interviews" involve gathering material from the unknown, and they are inherently filled with uncertainty. There are two main uncertainties. First, the subjects being filmed are unpredictable, as they are randomly selected, and there is a strong element of chance; one never knows what kind of people will be encountered on the street. Second, how the interviewees will respond to the questions is also uncertain, as their answers are likely to vary greatly and cover a wide range of perspectives. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a large number of interviews to make the uncertain material more statistically reliable. In other words, a sufficient number of participants must be interviewed to ensure a more concrete dataset. For example, in CCTV's "Family Traditions" report, a "sea collection" approach was used. The term "sea" here refers primarily to the sheer number of interviewees—over 4,000 individuals from all walks of life were included(Zhanfan, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Since its inception, "street interview" videos have remained a vibrant and dynamic category within the visual media world. From the 1960s to the present, street interviews have gone through three distinct phases: documentary, television news, and short video. Acting like a social probe, they reflect the mental outlook of people across different eras. In fact, the evolution of "street interviews" has closely paralleled advancements in media technology, resulting in changes to both their style and production methods. In the era of short videos, "street interviews" have established video channels targeting specific audiences, and the variety of content covered has surpassed that of any previous period. While retaining their fundamental format, long videos are now often divided into multiple short, fragmented clips, with each video typically lasting around 60 seconds. Looking ahead, the three forms of street interviews—documentary, television news, and short video—will continue to coexist, with short video interviews, in particular, maintaining strong vitality in the digital age.

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