

Chinese original ecologically style videos on YouTube: Breaking the stereotype and non-verbal symbol intercultural communication

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Keywords: Rural China, National image, Stereotype, Intercultural communication, Digital media, Media culture;

Abstract: With Li Ziqi and her videos popular among both Chinese and Westerner internet active users, it triggers the split-new trend of rustic themed Chinese original ecological videos under the intercultural communication context. This research takes the qualitative research methodology to analyze the non-verbal symbol rustic themed Chinese original ecological videos on the international YouTube video platform. Since the stereotypes of rural China remain negative, this research studies how the stereotypes form and how the rural themed Chinese original ecological videos broadcast through the non-verbal symbol audio-visual.

1. Introduction

YouTube is the most popular video platform founded in America and has the largest number of users in the English-first language countries worldwide. Under further development, YouTube offers multiple language videos including, but not limited to, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Japanese, Korean, Etc.

The firewall built by the Chinese government forbids access to Westerner internet websites such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter (Keane 2016), etc. The firewall leads most of the local Chinese to not connect to YouTube and upload videos on the YouTube platform in Chinese. As a result, the English native Westerner users on YouTube can only gain a public national image of China through videos produced by Westerner users, not local Chinese users. The perspective of the videos could vary by cultural background, language, political views, and nationalities.

Rural China, for a long time, has gained a stereotype, not only from local Chinese people but also from the Westerners. The stereotype could include but is not limited to, the keywords: less developed, dirty, and lacking in facilities, uncivilized, Etc. However, with the urbanization progress in modern China (Cunningham *et al.* 2019), the real situation is changing drastically in a certain sense. On the other hand, China's request for a great power identity (Rozman 1999) creates the demand for rebuilding the national public image.

From the user-generated content (hereafter as UGC) to professionally generated content (hereafter as PGC) and occupationally generated content (hereafter as OGC) (Cunningham *et al.* 2019), the YouTube platform offers diverse videos with multicultural perspectives, from both verbal and non-verbal production methods. The non-verbal production method creates more opportunities for video broadcasting through intercultural communication.

2. Rustic theme: Chinese original ecologically authentic videos

Unlike massive style English videos on YouTube, Chinese videos on YouTube platforms play a minority role, which has fewer categories than English native speakers' videos. According to Cunningham *et al.* besides China, the YouTube platform attracts more than 3 million video creators worldwide to produce and upload videos (Cunningham *et al.* 2019). Since China is a developing

country with a large agricultural population and many rural places, rural China becomes a popular theme for video producers and live-streaming. Original ecologically authentic videos originate from the rural China theme's videos, which contribute to social media entertainment and gain apparent separation from other themes' videos by showing the original ecological lifestyle of rural villages in China.

Generally speaking, the Chinese original ecologically authentic videos constitute the elements: rural scenes, rural narrative, original lifestyle, all items with rural original, Etc. Opposite to the popular game theme videos, original ecologically authentic videos focus on depicting the real outdoor scenes compared to the whole digital-analog image. The original ecological videos record the country's lifestyle and describe the beauty of artistic conception from healthy daily country life. Furthermore, the original ecological videos prefer to represent the real lifestyle rather than elaborate dramatic videos. Simultaneously, the actors show the original ecological lifestyle in the videos, as opposed to the quick-paced urban cities' lives, setting video viewers' imagination from the heavy pressure urban lives with more original vegetation and lively animals instead of indoor studios. The original outdoor audio stimulates the video viewers' expectations for the original rural life and encourages the "back to basics" lifestyle. The video producers tend to avoid breaking the videos' beauty of the artistic conception, and the original ecologically authentic videos tend to have less character dialogue and commentary. This way, it encourages the broadcast of the Chinese original ecologically authentic videos on the global YouTube platform under the intercultural communication background.

3. Rural stereotypes of China

Stereotypes gain diverse definitions in multiple ways (Gardner 1994). Lippmann regards the concept of stereotypes as the perceptions built up in people's heads" (Lippmann 1992), and Webber argues that stereotypic thinking is the antipode to critical thinking (Webber 1990). Hilton and Von Hippel believe that stereotypical thinking plays multiple roles in demonstrating bunches of cognitive and motivational processes (Hilton & Von Hippel 1996). The expostulations of social connections, which participate from a social group's cultural dimension, are called stereotypes (e.g., Stangor & Schaller 1996). Based on the works of literature in the past, some scholars devoted their studies to why stereotypes exist (e.g., Smith 1993). Dimensions craft the stereotypes including nationals (e.g., Madon *et al.* 2001), races (e.g., Brigham 1971), cultures (e.g., Kumaravadivelu 2003), genders (e.g., Basow 1992), age (e.g., Posthuma & Champion 2009) and so on. However, this study's scope does not aim to cover all dimensions to analyze the stereotypes. National stereotypes will be the leading dimension for further research, which had already gained an absolute basis in the past.

The stereotypes of China's public national image do not originate from China's country but also the geographic correlation from the international perspective. Meanwhile, national stereotypes also represent the national public image. "Public relations and marketing practices are based on the belief that stereotypes of a nation create psychological consistency and bolster bias" (Lawrence, Marr, & Prendergast 1992). Kashima *et al.* hold the view that the citizens of China and another East Asia countries, Japan, gain mutual stereotypes due to historical issues and past conflicts (Kashima *et al.* 2003). Even between China and Sweden, the two countries lack close geographic connections; the stereotypes reflect on acknowledging national political cultures (Lodén 2006). The national public relations strategies could take full advantage of the stereotypes from international dimensions and amplify the positive stereotypes to establish a positive national reputation. On the other hand, they could decrease and transform the negative stereotypes subtly through the first aspect mentioned above.

Besides, the national stereotypes existing among different countries could shape the national public image and national branding, both negative and positive. The regional stereotypes vary from region to region, including, but not limited to, the broad regional, provincial, and county and sub-county levels (Young 1988). Eberhard points out that China's regional stereotypes have existed for more than 2000 years (Eberhard 1965). The broadest stereotypes are of the Northern Chinese

from the Southern Chinese; foreigners do not only observe this but also can be felt by themselves. (Eberhard 1965). Discrimination follows regional stereotypes (Sipei 2018). Sipei states that Subei people experience discrimination and stereotypes in Shanghai (Sipei 2018). Zhao & Zheng consider the stereotypes between the undergraduates from Hong Kong and mainland China and Hong Kong undergraduates hold heavier stereotypes against undergraduates in mainland China (Zhao & Zheng 2016).

In modern China, especially after the year 2000 with entering the World Trade Organization (hereafter as WTO), the rapid increase and development of the economy has sped up the distinction between rural China and urban China. The study of stereotypes of rural religions mainly lies in the below aspects, including rural migrant workers (e.g., Wang *et al.* 2011), rural-urban migrants (e.g., Kong 2010, Li *et al.* 2006), and so on. With many rural migrant workers bursting into the urban cities serving in industries where less education is required, the stereotypes form gradually. According to Sipei, words like “inadequate, vulgar, discriminated, uncivilized, and backward” are used to stereotype the Subei people (Sipei 2018). These are the most common and frequently used words to stereotype the rural Chinese, not only within the regional stereotypes in China but also the national stereotypes of rural China.

The stereotypes of rural China are mainly negative words. The rural stereotypes in China originate from the disadvantage of the system. *Hukou* system is the unique citizenship system in China, which separates the rural Chinese from the urban Chinese; furthermore, it is the crucial cause of the rural-urban migrants (Kuang & Liu 2012). Kuang & Liu point out that one's *hukou* is inherited from the mother's side and predetermined (Kuang & Liu 2012). However, Western countries do not use this type of citizenship system to restrict citizens' migration.

Additionally, the *hukou* system even restricts one's place of educational opportunities. Based on the unequally-distributed environment of education in China, *hukou* promotes the social facilities imbalance. As a result, rural China has gained religious stereotypes, both internally and externally.

4. Non-verbal symbol Intercultural communication videos on YouTube

Gudykunst summarizes that intercultural communication is the interpersonal communication “between people from different cultures” (Gudykunst 2005). The effect of intercultural communication is a synthesis of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and religion, which requires a systematic analysis (Chen & Starosta 1996). Under the globalization context and background, intercultural communication is bound to become an unusual way to broadcast ideas, concepts, and thoughts (Samovar *et al.* 2014). Bennett reckons that the process of intercultural communication includes language and the related experience, perceptual relativity, non-verbal actions, communication methods, values, and assumptions (Bennett 1998). Jones & Quach identify ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudice, language, and non-verbal communication as obstacles to intercultural communication (Jones & Quach 2007).

Based on the views from Bennett, non-verbal symbols play a key and unavoidable role in the process of intercultural communication (Bennett 1998). Jones & Quach describe the non-verbal behavior as the communication method without vocabulary; it expresses the information through eye contact, gestures, behavior, sound, color, etc. Which leads to misunderstanding quickly (Jones & Quach 2007). Edward Sapir, the anthropologist, wrote that, as a “secret code” of a cultural crowd, gestures play an essential role in it, which is “written nowhere, known by none and understood by all” (Edward 1949). One of the examples is that the meaning of shaking one’s head varies between different cultures and countries. When one shakes the head in India and Sri Lanka, it presents the positive points opposite to the negative points in most Asian countries, not to mention the Western countries. The color green indicates more profound representation in Chinese culture than other cultures, typically speaking, the green hat expresses betrayal and cheating in one's marriage. However, the green hat non-verbal symbol does not acquire such bountiful expression in other countries. Hattori believes that non-verbal symbols play the same role of importance as the verbal symbols regarding the intercultural communication situation (Hattori 1987). Most of the time, the Japanese avoid direct eye contact, especially when they have a conversation with someone of a

higher position. However, Americans interpret indirect eye contact as the representation of insincerely (Hattori 1987).

Vargas-Urpi states how non-verbal symbols play a crucial role in face-to-face public intercultural communication situations among the Chinese migrants in Catalonia, especially gestures (Vargas-Urpi 2013). Also, gender presents different actions regarding non-verbal symbolic intercultural communication (Hall 1987). Briton & Hall discovered that compared to men, women more frequently use the non-verbal symbol, and women have a better understanding of non-verbal symbols than men (Briton & Hall 1995).

Within each minute, there are more than 300 hours of videos uploaded to the video website YouTube (Zadeh *et al.* 2016), raising YouTube's status as one of the most popular video platforms worldwide. With extensive coverage of topics ranging from fashion, pets, politics, and diaries to military, the YouTube platform transcends all language, location, and national boundaries. The videos produced on the YouTube platform, in general, appear to be the type combining verbal symbols with non-verbal symbols and verbal symbols, which are the lines spoken by the narrators. However, due to the limitation of YouTube narrators' language abilities, the Chinese background active video producers prefer to use more non-verbal symbols to convey their ideas in order to avoid the pronunciation of English and attract Western subscribers under the intercultural communication context. Vergani & Zuev treated YouTube as a highly efficient cultural and religious community's communication platform (Vergani & Zuev 2011), which could facilitate the minority culture's intercultural communication.

Assume that a YouTube video does not gain any, or gains little, on-site synchronization and visual-verbal vocabulary and subtitles on the screen. It could be considered a non-verbal symbol video. Additionally, if this non-verbal symbol video's authentic style is different to the viewers, it is the non-verbal symbol of intercultural communication. From the opinion of Molyneaux *et al.*, video viewers do not accept information passively; instead, the viewers interpret the symbols with their comprehension (Molyneaux *et al.* 2008). As the user-generated content platforms, multiple narrative visual arts keep on appearing on different YouTube channels and cause interpretations from many perspectives. Stuart Hall reckons that even under the multiple comprehension method of visual information for viewers, the visual information's decoding is still within the the leading significance's limited boundaries (Hall 1999).

Upon visual analysis of the videos on the YouTube platform from the intercultural communication perspective, the non-verbal symbol appears through visual format, including the color, movement of the narrators, behavior, gesture, narrators' gender, and the background environment in the video. The non-verbal symbols listed above construct the artistic concept of the rural original ecological Chinese YouTube videos. Furthermore, the video's audio context mainly constitutes the on-site synchronization and background music, which edits through post-production. Typically, the non-verbal symbol video for broadcasting prefers to omit the on-site synchronization in the intercultural communication context. It is tough for the intercultural viewers to decode without the subtitles on the screen. Moreover, YouTube video's background music follows the comprehension principle suggested by Stuart Hall, in which listeners and viewers are more active in grasping the significance of the non-verbal symbol than we assumed within the circle of the primary meanings (Hall 1999). As the audio-visually authentic, videos on YouTube's narrative style varies from case to case. Pace reckons that the narrative style in advertisement and communication is easy to indicate (Pace 2008). As the platform to broadcast yourself within the story frame of the non-verbal symbolic videos, YouTube expresses the musical, artistic concept and more profound significance according to the effortless narrative style.

5. Li Ziqi on the YouTube platform: A case study

Li Ziqi, a female YouTuber with no detailed information to show her real age, location, and mysterious background, became a YouTuber in 2017. She gradually accumulated over 11 million subscribers through her continual posting of original ecological videos on YouTube since the year 2017. According to the video added date, on 24 August 2017, Li Ziqi posted her first YouTube

video, which showed the whole hand-made process that she colored a dress into purple only using grape skins. Since this is a totally original ecological method to dye the cloth material, it caused attention successfully among the YouTube video active users with the particular video authentic style and original ecological lifestyle presenting to the video viewers. As of now, Li Ziqi has uploaded 114 videos in total (through 30 July 2020). Her videos convey natural rural China's daily life, mainly through food and hand-made goods.

According to the simple counting of her YouTube videos, among the 114 videos, 11 videos' thumbnails contain the Chinese verbal symbol on it, 38 videos' captions are written in Chinese, and all contain quite condensed vocabulary to help Chinese viewers who share the same cultural background to get the inner meaning at a glance. Excluding one video, which is the clear announcement of Li Ziqi's nationality, the rest of her videos focus on depicting the rural slow-paced life with preparing and cooking different cuisines, combined with the record of the rural farm work process. Meanwhile, checking each video's comments, though, you will notice some Chinese vocabulary on thumbnails and captions and English comments occupy the central portion among all comments.

Under the lens of Li Ziqi, the stereotype of rural life in China is broken, and the whole channel maintains the traditional fantastic tale style. Li Ziqi's fashion style, though not the most popular or trendy, still distinguishes her from most ordinary rural females. Usually, rural China's stereotypical dress style is associated with negative connotations, influenced by rural China's stereotypes. However, since Li Ziqi videoed some of her hand-made clothes on YouTube; it created a new trend opposite to chasing New York or Paris's fashion. Second, rural China's scenes featured in her videos are fantastic compared to rural China's average views. They reveal more rural life in detail naturally than the deliberate propaganda videos aiming to build up the positive image of rural China was put forth by the Chinese Government. Third, spending most of the time depicting food preparation, planting, harvesting, handling, cooking, and eating is a slow and enjoyable process. While under the government's call for the acceleration of urbanization, it is the opposite of the young generation who are enthusiastic about chasing real estate ownership. Fourth, she even builds up the whole rural yard by herself, though all through the camera lens, it is still rare for female hosts to achieve this.

Because the identity of Li Ziqi is still undercover, her popularity is gaining rapidly, which arouses the video viewers' great curiosity, and, later on, the public media. What amplifies Li Ziqi's videos and the Chinese rural lifestyle is the media coverage, both in China and internationally. Most of the journalists and reports focus on digging into and tracing the issues that cannot be reflected in non-verbal symbol videos under the intercultural communication context. The media coverage's topics include Li Ziqi and her family's location, the authenticity of Li Ziqi's rural identity, the nationality of Li Ziqi, and so on. Li Ziqi is seldom talking in her video; her life aspects are mysterious to her subscribers and the public. Faced with all the guessing, rumors, and inaccurate reports, on 5 March 2019, Li Ziqi posted her only video verbally clarifying her nationality, proving that she comes from China and is a Chinese citizen.

Even with the announcement, the public and the media still hold doubts about her identity. Excluding the issue listed above, the new issue relates to her real identity. Whether she is actually a rural female or just an actress playing a rural female role, does she have a business team assisting her in building up this image through YouTube? The famous Chinese media Time-weekly even dropped by for an interview visit to seek out Li Ziqi's hometown during the Spring Festival of 2020. However, it gained nothing and did not obtain any useful information to prove or disprove Li Ziqi and her family's real location.

The difficulty in revealing personal characteristics and background via only non-verbal symbol communication attracts more video producers who lack the language ability to engage in video production. With the popularity of Li Ziqi and her non-verbal symbol videos to broadcast in the global intercultural communication context, more and more imitators continue to appear. One of the Vietnam imitators confused the Chinese viewers with her non-verbal symbol videos since Chinese and Vietnamese have so much shared culture and daily life habits.

The success and influence of Li Ziqi explicitly reveal the indications to active video producers on the YouTube platform. On the one hand, compared to the videos full of detailed verbal symbols, non-verbal symbol videos leave more to video viewers' imagination, which constitutes the space of rural beauty through the original ecological scenery. They provide the new video theme combed with reconstructing the original audio-visual elements, aiming to broadcast the new rural lifestyle under the background of acceleration of urbanization. On the other hand, it presents the ancient female beauty and sets up the new rural female image jumping across the language barriers with non-verbal symbol communication skills. Furthermore, it demonstrates a new channel to broadcast the traditional Chinese culture, which could influence destination tourism's image and boost the entire tourism industry.

6. General Conclusion

The verbal symbol and non-verbal symbol are both relevant elements of audio-visual videos, not only in domestic but also in international communication background. Comparing domestic communication environment and intercultural communication requires the Chinese video producers on the YouTube platform to overcome the language barriers and the possibility of non-verbal symbol misunderstanding. Unlike the verbal symbol videos that pay more attention to the talking parts, non-verbal symbol videos maintain the overall atmosphere to video viewers through background music, the actors' movements, and narrative cues, targeted towards delivering the theme framed by the core meanings.

Rural China is not a new topic since China is the biggest developing country worldwide with 900 million agricultural population; it has already attracted scholars analyzing rural China from multiple perspectives. With the low income and the lack of education stereotypes that come along with the image of rural China and rural Chinese, it is not easy for either the domestic communication context or the intercultural communication background to get rid of these stereotypes. Rural theme videos reflecting rural life are not rare on YouTube; however, with the different ideologies of producing these videos, distinct results are achieved. From the UGC to PGC, the YouTube platform encourages more diverse videos to a higher standard. Hence, Chinese original ecological audio-visual videos can express more profound meanings even without the on-site synchronization by catching viewers' attention on the exquisite visual pictures.

The breaking and rebuilding of rural China an image through Li Ziqi and her videos provides a successful example of the new communication method to broadcast a rural Chinese lifestyle with Chinese cooking and eating cultures. Meanwhile, it remolds the Chinese rural female portrait by illustrating the female knight's inner beauty, leading the new rural beauty style to cyberspace, with the rural food's new style. Due to the qualitative methodology adapted by this research, there is still room to analyze the rustic theme of Chinese original ecological videos from other academic dimensions through the quantitative methodology.

Significantly, as an international video platform, YouTube provides the international horizon for active users through domestic and intercultural communication videos. Li Ziqi originated from the YouTube platform, populated from YouTube first, and later gained a reputation among Chinese internet users. Hence, it indicates a new intercultural communication circle. The first level is to broadcast the Chinese theme video under the intercultural communication background. The second level is to broadcast back to the original cultural context from the foreign culture. This circle triggers a split-new intercultural communication closed circle, which can be applied not only in the attractive personal building but also in the macro national public image construction.

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