

Li Ziqi's Chinese Idyllic Dream - Analysis of the Symbolic Characteristics of Vernacular Culture from Symbolic Aggregation Theory/Semiotic Theory

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Abstract

Li Ziqi is a video blogger who shares his daily life in the Chinese countryside on YouTube. Within his videos, he covers typical vernacular cultural topics such as Chinese countryside life, traditional food preparation, family records, and Chinese seasonal life. The popularity of Li Ziqi on YouTube highlights the cultural interoperability of human idyllic dreams. This study aims to use Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to analyze the invisible and explicit messages in the videos of Li Ziqi's channel and explain the symbolic features of vernacular culture embedded behind them.

Keywords: *vernacular culture, idyllic dreams, semiotics, Video Platform*

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of Internet technology in the digital information era, the dissemination of information has transcended geographical boundaries and developed into a global, multilingual, and multicultural communication platform. In 2023, the ITU (International Telecommunication Union) released data showing that the number of global Internet users is 5.4 billion, accounting for 67% of the world's population, which is an astonishing figure. This is a staggering number, and the huge user base provides an unprecedentedly convenient channel for cultural communication. Through social media, such as YouTube, a global social media platform for video and music, the release of graphic videos, music, and language, and then extended to more analogical ways of expression: virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and other technological means, greatly enriched the visual presentation of culture, so that the visual expression of culture is more vivid, three-dimensional, and broaden the visual expression of the space and dimensions of time and space. Social media is more popular than traditional media. Compared with traditional media, social media can capture and disseminate local cultural knowledge more effectively (Blank, 2013). Video has become the mainstream means of information dissemination in social media due to its fast-paced and highly informative characteristics.

YouTube, the most popular video social media platform, has more than one million users from all over the world uploading and posting videos or watching them for hours every day (Park et al., 2017). Thus the YouTube platform is also regarded as a social media platform for cross-cultural communication and understanding that helps people to be able to connect globally (Hande ULUSOY, 2023). In response to the need for fast-paced information dissemination, YouTube's shorts channel further solidifies its position in the video social media space. The results of an imaging study on video's effect on memory retention in 2024 proved that video content and hybrid presentations are more effective in enhancing memory retention time than static images or textual information alone, which will further enhance user engagement and cultural preservation. (Aishwarya Maran. J. Michal Raj, 2024)

Generally speaking, designers need to fully consider users' cultural backgrounds, aesthetic preferences, usage habits, and other factors in the creative process, and enhance user experience by optimizing visual design. The elements and symbols in culture can often trigger users' emotional resonance and cultural identity, thus enhancing the attractiveness and infectiousness of the design. According to the theory of visual culture, vision is one of the important carriers and expressions of culture, and specific cultural information and values can be conveyed through visual design. Li Ziqi, an influential Chinese video channel blogger from the YouTube platform, has more than 16 million followers on YouTube and a cumulative global fan base of more than 100 million, which gives her a strong influence on the Internet platform. Interestingly, Li's videos rely on Chinese rural life to express the Chinese vernacular culture of village life, food culture, traditional intangible culture, and Chinese family relationships to construct a desirable Chinese idyllic dream, realizing a breakthrough in cross-cultural communication, and these videos have triggered emotional resonance among viewers, as well as inspired a wave of imitations and re-creative works (data as of January 2024). Unlike rural documentary videos, videos on the theme of idyllic life use mimetic rural scenarios to stitch together the symbols of "rural life" to realize associations with the past, home, countryside, and peace, and through fantasizing about the scenarios, the missing sense of stability, security, or sense of belonging is placed in place to make up for loneliness and confusion felt in real life. the confusion felt in real life. Ernest Bowman's theory of symbolic convergence explains that the visual symbols provided in Li's video resonate with the audience and achieve "diffusion of innovations" within the group and spontaneous dissemination into a group theme, ultimately creating a group consensus. Therefore, viewers from different cultural backgrounds will resonate with Li's video - she provides a perfect template that contains the visual symbols of the idyllic dream, and the content can be copied based on Li's visual symbols of the idyllic dream (Zixuan Liao, 2021).

Roland Barthes categorized symbols into two levels of energy and reference, each of which is rich in cultural meaning, which is influenced by the social interpretation of culture and myths (Zakharova, 2021).

In Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, cultural signs are centered on meaning, including the analysis of the generation of meaning and the ultimate referent of the sign, not only in its visual appearance but also in relation to the received social phenomena, philosophical and socio-cultural values (Moerdisuroso, nd). People target a particular conceptual association through "referents", which include but are not limited to words, sounds, images, smells, etc. The "referent" is the symbol that is used to refer to a specific concept, and the "referent" is the symbol that is used to refer to the concept. The "referent" helps to construct the meaning behind the symbol: the emotional meaning of verbal symbols in poetry, the rule or cultural meaning of pictorial symbols. This is a way to dismantle the symbols from different perspectives, and ultimately to realize a comprehensive interpretation. Of course, the interpretation of referent and denotation is arbitrary, subjective, and non-arguable, and is judged by social conventions or social customs. Roland Barthes' semiotic approach tends to learn about the phenomena, philosophies, and socio-cultural values of society from the meanings behind visual symbols.

METHOD

The current study used descriptive qualitative methods combined with Roland Barthes's semiotic theory to analyze Lee's video content in depth. The descriptive qualitative approach aims to describe the meaning of an object through qualitative data (non-numerical data or numbers) and then explain it with references, quotes, or scientific references based on clues or assumptions about the situation, conditions, and facts of the scene (Putri et al, 2022). The research strategy used is a case study, this is because the problem and the focus of the research have been actualized. It is now determined, i.e., in analyzing the scope of the sign's energy and reference using semiotic methods.


To further demonstrate the information contained in the visual symbols in the core scene frames, the researchers used the hierarchy of meanings of energetic (exoteric), referential (connotative), and meaningful roles for the molecules, in which there are a total of three phases of the derivation process. The first stage of the energetic (intelligence-external) and referential (intelligence-external) describes the external display of information by the intelligence symbols; the energetic (cultural-public) and referential (cultural-public) describes the external display of information by the symbols in combination with the background culture in which Lee lives, and the third stage of the information is obtained by the in-depth analysis based on the content of the analysis after the completion of this stage. Finally, the role of meaning is the third level of meaning, in which the visual elements are given a meaning and it has an expression to convey the information.

Data analysis in qualitative research is an ongoing research process. This study used an interactive model analysis that included three phases: data reduction, data presentation, and deriving roles. Data reduction focused on the process of simplifying all the rough data that emerged from the references. After collecting data using observation and document analysis techniques, the next step was data presentation, which was presented in a tabular + narrative format. The most commonly used form of data presentation in qualitative research is narrative text, which is a series of sentences arranged logically and systematically and rich in data (Yang et al., nd) (as shown in Figure 1).

The yellow cow is a typical farmin' method in Asian farming countries, which reminds people of the peaceful farming life in the countryside, and the female character has a strong affinity. The composition of the picture places the characters at the golden section point, with the characters and the environment each occupying half of the picture, the tone of the picture is bluish, the color ratio is mainly blue and green, and the emotions of the colors are calm, hope, wisdom, vitality, etc., which symbolize the beginning of the peaceful and idealized rural life.

Table 1. "Example-01" Semiotic Meaning Analysis Table

Video Name: Example-01

Signifier (Intelligence-explicit)	Signified (informative-explicit)	notation
Close-up view of paddy field, man and plow ox standing, countryside field distant view of distant mountains	A woman pulling a plow ox in the quiet countryside farming	
Signifier (culturally – publicity)	Signified (cultural-public)	
Rural Asia; farming	Close to nature; Stress-free labor	
Signifier (Cultural – Publicity – 2)	Signified (Cultural – Publicity – 2)	
A woman farms in the serenity of rural China using traditional methods of production, free from urban pressures and spam.	No pressure to perform; traditional life; no distraction from oneself	
Significance of the role: to show the geographical location, the content of the work done to explain the background information		

All in all, the researcher found it easier to help the readers make sense of the table by summarizing it. The final analysis activity is an activity that is validated by drawing conclusions. The conclusion of the findings is defined as the theoretical extraction of the findings through the chosen theoretical approach.


RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The most viewed video (132M views) on Li's YouTube channel, "Peanut and melon seeds, dried meat, dried fruit, snowflake cake-snacks for spring festival" (hereafter referred to as snack for spring festival), was chosen as a case study. "(hereinafter referred to as snacks for spring festival) is used as a case study, with a duration of 10:11 minutes, and the theme of this video is traditional snacks making for spring festival. in China, traditional snacks have basically been industrialized, making people generally feel that there is a lack of traditional snacks. In China, traditional snacks have largely been industrialized, leaving people with a general sense of lack of traditional festival rituals.


The main narrative of the video is centered around "the combination of traditional Chinese festivals, festive food, village life, and ethnic culture" and follows this structure in the narrative. The filming is centered around two scenes, Li's house and the village surroundings. The theme of the video is the making of traditional Chinese New Year snacks, one of the essential foods of traditional Chinese festivals, the choice of ingredients follows the seasonal ingredients, and the method of making them is very tedious and handmade, focusing on demonstrating the warmth of a traditional Chinese family in the preparation of traditional festivals. The visual elements of the video are composed to give a sense of visual perception and aesthetic style comfort. Shot from a third-person point of view, the composition includes the rule of thirds, the rule of thirds, and natural framing. The rule of thirds is the division of a sequence of frames in an image or video into 3*3 parts. It aims to emphasize the harmony and beauty of the overall composition.

The video content shows the production process of 8 traditional snacks, averaging 1.25 minutes a piece of content, using close-ups paired with medium shots, interspersed with panoramic views of natural scenery and characters in the middle of the period. The researchers extracted six scene frames for analysis according to the classification of the video content, namely, the main character (Li Ziqi), the natural environment, the close-up of ingredients, the finished product, the close-up of pets, and the parent-child group portraits, and presented the analyzed content in the form of a table.

The figure is centered to better focus on the subject. Li is dressed in the traditional Chinese Han rural women's everyday clothes, the color of which is dark blue, partly because in rural China this fabric is relatively cheap and easy to obtain and is strong and durable, and partly because the dark color highlights the figure's appearance in contrast to her surroundings. The natural surroundings bring a sense of tranquility to the viewer.


Video Title: snack for spring festival - Labor Characters		
Signifier (Intelligence-explicit)	Signified (informative-explicit)	notation
Medium shot of a woman carrying a basket, picking up fruit, with a pet	In the fall and winter, a woman in the mountains collects raw nuts for snacks.	
Signifier (culturally - publicity)	Signified (cultural-public)	
Fall and Winter, Cold, Harvesting Fruits	Natural food ingredients; Laboring with a traditional Chinese portable backpack-pannier	
Signifier (Cultural - Publicity - 2)	Signified (Cultural - Publicity - 2)	
A Chinese woman in a traditional dress goes into the mountains in the fall and winter to gather ripe fruits for a Chinese New Year snack.	Abandoning sophisticated industrial food and reusing traditional production methods to make snacks evokes fond memories of the traditional Chinese New Year	
Meaningful role: clear character subject, picking natural food to let the audience produce pure, healthy feelings		

In Lee's video, you can often see distant views used to show the positional relationship between the environment and the person, using color or sound to emphasize the focal point. The characters occupy a relatively small area compared to the surrounding environmental area, but this enables the viewer's gaze to be automatically drawn to the moving characters. Natural framing is a common means of utilizing a scene for mood rendering, accounting for detailed information about the environment, the season, and where the characters are located. Natural framing will leave a natural impression between the object and the background or surrounding objects (white, Peter A, 2005). In Lee's video, the natural framing technique is used at the beginning of the video, chapter switching, and at the end. The use of natural framing enhances the rendering of emotions.


Video Title: snack for spring festival - natural environment		
Signifier (Intelligence-explicit)	Signified (informative-explicit)	notation
Distant view of a woman with a basket on her back, walking along a country road	A woman carrying a basket on her back on a country road in the fall and winter.	
Signifier (culturally - publicity)	Signified (cultural-public)	
Fall and winter, country roads, empty backpacks	Cold fall and winter months; Go somewhere with a traditional handmade backpack	
Signifier (Cultural - Publicity - 2)	Signified (Cultural - Publicity - 2)	
A Chinese woman in a traditional dress goes into the mountains in the fall and winter months	Collection of raw materials for the production of traditional snacks	
Significance: The display of the natural environment combined with the background sound effects can better relieve the audience's stress.		

Close-ups of ingredients in the video can bring viewers a sense of order and compliance with nature, with strong typical Chinese cultural decorations. Focusing the viewer's attention on the overall shaping of the environment makes it easier for the viewer to get a message or a clear meaning from it, so the choice of composition is centered on the content of the expression. After making preparations for the production of raw materials will be displayed, of course, this display is not out of thin air, can be found in this picture in the last scene preparing the raw materials in this scene to be displayed, and will appear in the next production of some of the ingredients, tools and other symbols required for the production of the scene is used to carry out the visual narrative of the series.

Video Title: snack for spring festival - Ingredients Featured		
Signifier (Intelligence-explicit)	Signified (informative-explicit)	notation
Close-up, plate with food, wooden utensils	On a wooden table were many kitchen items, and inside the serving trays were five different ingredients	
Signifier (culturally - publicity)	Signified (cultural-public)	

<p>The tray holds the ingredients for the next snacks.</p>	<p>The table is decorated with bright flower arrangements to accent the picture, and the rest of the decorations are more uniform in color. The variety of raw materials varies greatly, from natural foods to industrially processed foods</p>	
<p>Signifier (Cultural - Publicity - 2)</p>	<p>Signified (Cultural - Publicity - 2)</p>	
<p>The maker has finished the preparation for the presentation of the ingredients</p>	<p>In the production of traditional snacks in the fusion of modern life eating habits, the use of scenic layout gives modern industrial food the perception of a natural feel</p>	
<p>Meaningful Role: Introduces the preparation behind the preparation of food, while stimulating the imagination and creating a sense of gastronomic rituals</p>		


In the 10-minute-long video, the production of each snack is eventually showcased, and this arrangement serves as a summary of the previous content and provides an opportunity to open the next chapter. This draws on the filming techniques of food documentaries (Lu Sun, 2022). The presentation of the finished food utilized textual symbols to name the finished product, creating a seasonal atmosphere by decorating the food to fit the theme more closely. Although some of the food was not the most traditional of recipes.

<p>Video name: snack for spring festival - finished product display</p>		
<p>Signifier (Intelligence-explicit)</p>	<p>Signified (informative-explicit)</p>	<p>notation</p>
<p>Close-up with a line in Chinese on the left side of the screen and food on a wooden tray</p>	<p>The text on the left side of the screen is the name of the food: snowflake crisp, and the tray contains food made from strawberries, marshmallows, chestnuts, and milk cookies.</p>	
<p>Signifier (cultural - publicity)</p>	<p>Signified (cultural-public)</p>	


Snowflake crisp is a Chinese snack that appeared in Taiwan five years ago, combining sweet and savory flavors that are popular among diners	Snowflake Crisp has a rich texture, and because it has the word snow in it, it uses powdered milk to simulate the visual sensation of snow when it is displayed	
Signifier (Cultural - Publicity - 2)	Signified (Cultural - Publicity - 2)	
Snowflake crisp has a rich texture and is perfect for Chinese New Year snacking!	Traditional eating habits are added to the popular snacks in the current market so that viewers can watch while having the opportunity to taste, a more immersive sense	
Significance of the role: the final display of the link as a turning point appeared, has the role of carrying on to the next		

In addition to scenes that show the natural environment, some close-ups center around animals. In this, the pet dog is mainly used as the main subject. The theory of attachment in psychology helps us better understand that despite the presence of pet symbols on the Internet helps the viewer to relieve anxiety and feel healed (Putilina, Elena S., 2019), the burning heating stove using wood from nature had the same effect (Barbara J. Huelat, AAHID, FASID, IIDA, 2008). To show two typical symbols of psychological comfort, placing them both in one scene ensures that viewers from different cultures can resonate with them because they convey the same meaning and message and have a commonality with the human psyche.

Video name: snack for spring festival – pet close-ups		
Signifier (Intelligence-explicit)	Signified (informative-explicit)	notation
Medium shot, open field, white puppy, wood-burning fireplace	Using wood, which is readily available in rural areas, as a heating tool, the puppy sleeps next to the fireplace to keep warm because of the cold	
Signifier (cultural – publicity)	Signified (cultural-public)	

Mountainous, tree-lined rural areas use wood as fuel, and puppies without leashes will only be common in rural areas	Natural heating sources and open fireplaces are common in Southwest China and puppies are free to rest anywhere without a leash.	
Signifier (Cultural – Publicity – 2)	Signified (Cultural – Publicity – 2)	
ibid	The pet dog symbol can simulate the companionship of pets to help viewers regulate cortisol levels and relieve anxiety, with soothing flute music as background music, bringing viewers a warm and calm visual experience	
Significance: The sleeping dog combined with the warmth of the heating stove symbol brings psychological comfort to the viewer.		

The application of parent-child group symbols fills the long-term lack of interaction with family members or the lack of emotional gap in modern society. The vicarious psychology, the interaction between the two parties displayed in the video's cozy images resonates with the viewer. The scene shares similarities with the pet close-up and they convey the same feelings.

Video Title: snack for spring festival - parent-child group portrait		
Signifier (Intelligence-explicit)	Signified (informative-explicit)	
Distant view, open field, grandmother and granddaughter waiting, a male at work	The snack maker is helping Lee and her grandmother make a snack using grains, and to avoid the loud noise Lee helps her grandmother cover her ears	
Signifier (cultural - publicity)	Signified (cultural-public)	
Lee helps Grandma protect her ears from the shock of making cereal snacks with tools that require open flames and make a lot of noise outdoors.	Influenced by the Chinese culture of respecting the elderly and loving the young, he will protect the elderly around him in the face of potential danger.	
Signifier (Cultural - Publicity - 2)	Signified (Cultural - Publicity - 2)	
Lee helps Grandma protect her	Chinese society follows the	

ears in the face of potentially loud noises	blood order, and young people in the family respect and help the elders in the family. A very stable hierarchical relationship is formed	
Meaningful role: to show the atmosphere of care between families to fill the emotional gap		

CONCLUSION

Li Ziqi's video "Snack for Spring Festival" is a kind of cultural promotional video, and his compositional skills, focus on scene construction, natural framing, and use of colors aim to leave the viewer with a sense of beauty and comfort. The video gives Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to the interpretation of the typical symbols appearing in the video three important messages, namely, the cultural presentation of the traditional Chinese countryside, the fact that viewers from different cultural backgrounds can empathize with the traditional Chinese countryside life, and the cultural fusion of the Chinese tradition, the modern life, and the new culture. These three key points convey a message about how human beings can empathize with people from more cultural backgrounds while maintaining their cultural uniqueness. In the context of Internet culture, the "vernacular aesthetics" derived from Chinese vernacular culture has had a profound impact on modern visual design. It is hoped that the logic and mechanism behind this phenomenon can be seen in the future through more in-depth discussions of semiotic research and visual design methodology and theory.

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List of Resource Persons

Jiang Junbo (30 years), YouTuber, interview on 12 June 2024 at his home, Wenzhou, Zhejiang, China.

LiuYaya (28 years), PhD Candidate, interview on 23 June 2024 at her home, Beijing, China.

Li Kejing (20 years), college student, interview on 27 July 2024 at her home, Xian, Shaanxi, China.