Exploring Cultural Meaning Construction in Social Media: An Analysis of Liziqi's YouTube Channel

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Abstract: Hall's encoding/decoding model has been widely used in mass media, but its potential in social media studies has not been explored thoroughly. To this end, this paper aims to broaden the fundamental principles and assumptions of the model and apply them to audience engagement and interaction in constructing cultural meaning through social media. By analysing the YouTube channel of Liziqi (Vlogger), this study adopts a two-stage content analysis to investigate the possibility of textual coding frameworks and audience engagement processes in the construction of cultural narratives. The study reveals that Liziqi represents Chinese culture through various symbols and constructs a micro-narrative coding framework that influences audience perceptions. The audience interprets the content in proactive and diverse ways, resulting in four types of decoding: pleasuring, reflective, empathic, and questioning. This research expands Hall's encoding/decoding model by exploring the production and reception processes in a multicultural context, revealing a shared cultural framework between sender and receiver. This paper provides a tool for scholars to use new conceptual tools for encoding/decoding to explore the meaning dimensions of social media interaction.

1. Introduction

A nation's culture is increasingly being represented through media in the digital landscape. Although mass media serves as a crucial intermediary between cultural practices' producers and consumers (Lamour & Lorentz, 2021), social media excels in its function of cultural diffusion compared to mass media by promoting and disseminating both national cultural heritage and popular culture across various social platforms (Hammou, Aboudou & Makloul, 2020; Khalid & Chowdhury, 2018; Ohiagu & Okorie, 2014). In fact, it is believed that social media has the ability to capture and disseminate indigenous cultural knowledge more effectively than traditional media (Nicolas-Rocca & Parrish, 2013). It was demonstrated by Liziqi, who broke the Guinness World Record for the Chinese YouTube channel with the most subscribers.

Liziqi's achievement of a new Guinness World Record in 2021 with 14.1 million subscribers, which she still holds today, highlights her success as a Chinese cultural influencer. However, while Liziqi's research has shed light on various aspects such as rural vlogging, urban-rural discrepancies, and rural revitalisation (Li, 2020; Liang, 2022; Zou, 2022), it lacks exploration of Chinese culture. Although the studies provide practical information about China's rural areas, they lack theoretical insights. Therefore, researchers aim to connect Hall's encoding/decoding theory with Liziqi's case to expand the scope of the theory and understand how audiences interact with cultural narratives on social media.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model is a paradigmatic representation of the transition from mass communication research to cultural research in the 1970s and has since become a fundamental pillar in modern media reception analysis. The fundamental concepts of encoding/decoding theory remain applicable in today's era of social media, allowing individuals to encode their messages to a broad audience. The rise of social media has provided people with unprecedented opportunities to share their personal experiences and create new cultural narratives (Xu et al., 2016; Chang, 2021). However, it has also made the decoding process more intricate and challenging, as audiences play an increasingly active role in the cultural construction (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2021; Wolfgang, Blackburn & McConnell, 2020). As a result,

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this study extends some of the key principles and assumptions of Hall's theoretical model to social media and emphasises the importance of audience interactivity in cultural practices and engagement activities. This enables scholars to explore novel ways of understanding cultural practices and audience involvement on social media.

Specifically, using Liziqi's YouTube channel, which set a Guinness World Record for the most subscribed Chinese YouTube channel, as a case study, this paper examines the additional possibilities of textual coding frameworks and the processes of audience engagement and interaction through two stages of content analysis. The current study advances our understanding of the cultural characteristics of a country that are given significance on participatory digital platforms. Moreover, it contributes to extending the theoretical applicability of Hall's encoding/decoding model, enhances our knowledge of social interaction and meaning construction in a new cultural practise, and prompts scholars to use new conceptual tools to investigate the dimensions of meaning involved in interacting with social media.

2. Theoretical Background

Hall's encoding/decoding model (1973) was proposed in the study of television and is concerned with the production and interpretation of meaning in mass-media texts, and it refutes communication models in which the public passively receives the encoded meanings of texts in a direct and uniform manner. According to Hall (1973), meaning is created in the interaction between the coder as a producer of information and the decoder as an audience. Hall emphasises the complexities of meaning construction. The central premise here is that the nature of information or symbols is polysemous (Fiske, 2010; Jensen, 1995), such that communication is defined by its ambiguities. From this perspective, meaning is not given but is seen as a social practice and product.

In the encoding stage, Hall (1973) argues that the dominant consciousness or preferred meaning is embedded in the connotative layer and is produced by the hegemonic framework that dominates the mass media production process. The sociocultural implications it presents primarily serve the dominant social group and signify domains of social life as well as the division of culture, power, and ideology. These connotative codes are more open or unrestricted than denotative codes and are likely to be the "preferred reading" of the decoder. Decoders are both information "sources" and "receivers" which exist within a larger cycle of transmission, consumption, and "meaning-making." Hall depicts three decoding positions, dominant/hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional, which reflect the underlying tensions among political and social classes. Thereafter, Morley (1980) critically applied Hall's coding/decoding model to pioneer the "class" perspective on audience decoding ethnographic analysis. Liebes and Katz (1990) applied ethnographic methods to further illustrate the audience's ability to actively engage with and critique the text, providing ample evidence for the validity of Hall's encoding/decoding models.

Subsequently, the focus of mass media research on coding/decoding models has been on text analysis in attempts to explore the encoding frameworks of various television programs and their influence on audience interpretation. Fukuda (2018) proposed a racialised oppositional dichotomy encoding framework to represent Japanese cultural nationalism hidden in various television programmes. This coding framework has also been demonstrated to apply to the construction of messages in social media. For example, the themes encoded in the Nature Is Speaking campaign on YouTube (Olausson, 2020) and the content posted by Latvian populist parties on Facebook (Rozukalne, 2020; Habes, Al-Adwan, Al Rabat, Shatnawi, & Al Jwaniat, 2022).

An alternative method of visual encoding outside the dichotomous framework has emerged, which appears to have a more positive impact based on audience decoding results (Rajan & Venkatraman, 2021; Salibian, 2012). The visual coding framework can be a sensitive instrument for ideological representation processes. Because the visual signifier in the form of specific images creates the illusion that there is no encoding or ideological intervention, in reality, it is simply more "natural," as the apparently "natural" visual signifier is also culture-specific (Hall, 1973). Current research on the visual representations of individuals on social media is limited. Hence, this study explores the representation meaning of images by relating visual symbols to ideologies. We investigate not only the encoding frameworks of texts but also their hidden connotations and links to the broader culture.

We find that the application of Hall's encoding/decoding model to social media is flexible and that research on the model has shifted from a focus on textual analysis to an emphasis on open-ended media practices. There has been a significant shift in the media ecology following the explosive growth of social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube. Social media have become an alternative, supplement, and interpolation of traditional mass communication media (Bødker, 2016; Rajan & Venkatraman, 2021), creating new conditions for the production and circulation of meaning. As a new form of communication, social media challenges the traditional distinction between media production and consumption in numerous ways.

Through social media, a "new governance of meaning" (Langlois, 2014: 41) has emerged, in which meaning circulates through interconnected processes. For instance, clicking the "like" button on certain posts, videos, or images aims to make such products visible to others and create a connection with friends, people with shared preferences, or others (Bødker, 2016; Rodrigues, Niemann & Paradies, 2021). As Fuchs (2015) stated, software-assisted and nonhuman creation of more meaning takes the form of constant affinity production. The resulting shared "participatory culture" provides audiences with a new virtual space for public discourse (Jenkins, 2012).

This transformation offers a wealth of resources for the study of social interaction and meaning construction influenced by the technological provision of social media.

The development of social media technologies has shifted our understanding of audiences to more positive concepts such as contributors or producers. Social media "allows us to better recognize the multiplicity of ways that media users experience media in everyday life" (Woodstock, 2016: 400). In this dynamic space, the preferred reading of the audience plays a more active role in revealing the implicit message (Padovani, 2016). However, social media's ability to intervene and interpret enables audiences to counteract the dominant hegemonic voice of the elite (Bødker, 2016; Sender & Decherney, 2016) and demonstrate negotiated or oppositional positions toward the dominant message (Mudavanhu, 2021; Wright & Roberts, 2013). Actual audience reading is more complex, but these studies have failed to break through Hall's three decoding positions. In fact, in the "participatory culture" provided by the Internet, social media users not only fundamentally alter preexisting cultural products, but also invert Hall's model from an encoding/decoding model to a decoding/encoding model (Grusauskaite, Harambam & Aupers, 2022). Consequently, what are the various modes through which audiences engage with social media, and how does their interaction contribute to the construction of meaning? Based on the questions, this study investigates the different patterns of audience interaction on social media, analysing the intricate dynamics and complexities in their participatory practises. The ultimate objective is to gather more comprehensive empirical evidence, thereby enhancing the credibility of theories that elucidate the meaningful patterns of individuals' engagement in social media interactions.

3. Methodology

This study followed an interpretive paradigm and used an online ethnographic approach (Kozinets, 2006) to investigate the formation of a virtual space culture and communication phenomena. Specifically, the study examined YouTube as a virtual space platform and analysed Liziqi's YouTube channel, including her videos and audience comments. Liziqi was chosen as a case study due to her Guinness World Record-setting YouTube channel, her significant presence on the platform with over 3 billion views between 2017 and 2022, and her intercultural communication incorporated into the discourse of promoting Chinese cultural confidence and soft power. This makes her a typical and noteworthy case study that deserves thorough investigation.

Data collection for this study involved two parts. Firstly, a purposive sampling technique was utilised to select one video from each of the five themed albums curated by Liziqi, resulting in a total of five videos for analysis. These albums included "Kumiss and roasted whole lamb," "Spring festival dish," "Make a peach blossom crown with silk flowers," "Scholars' four treasures," and "Shu embroidery." The symbolic elements of these videos were manually recorded. Second, we wrote a Python programme to crawl 100 comments for each of the five sample videos, using the YouTube channel's "popular comments" ranking to select them. In total, 500 comments were collected, and NVivo12 was used to manage the data.

Data analysis in this study consisted of coding analysis and decoding analysis. The coding analysis is based on Drisko and Maschi's (2016) content analysis approach of conveying the author's intent by closely reading, understanding, and interpreting the content of the text. This approach emphasises a comprehensive, objective, and honest enquiry into the original meaning of textual content. The analysis focused on the "preferred meanings" encoded in the textual material and examined them in detail at both explicit (denotative) and implicit (connotative) levels.

The decoding analysis followed the textual analysis approach, which takes a bottom-up construction path based on a three-level coding strategy to elucidate the audience's contribution to the cycle of meaning as decoders. The approach involved several steps. Firstly, the material was read repeatedly to create memos and consider the deeper connotations behind them. Secondly, the initial tags were compared to identify differences between them. The text of the audience comments was then encoded using the "node" function in NVivo12 to conceptualise the material in the comments that had a coding value. Third, the concepts were optimised, analysed, and filtered to combine concepts of the same genus to form clusters of concepts belonging to the same category. Finally, classification involved further abstraction and naming of concept clusters. The entire interpretation process was supported by citations from authentic material to clarify the connections between analytical concepts, empirical findings, and interpretation, ensuring transparency and reliability of the analytical process.

4. Results

4.1 Content Analysis of Liziqi's Videos

Using videos as a communication medium, vlogger Liziqi has built a cultural landscape of oriental living aesthetics and Chinese characteristics through natural symbols, utensil symbols, food symbols, and craft symbols while paying close attention to colour matching to represent the connotative or "preferred meaning" of Chinese "Yi" culture embedded in it.

The "Yi" culture is deeply rooted in Chinese traditions and values. It encompasses core ideas from Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which have shaped Chinese society for centuries. The "Yi" culture reflects a holistic approach to life and contains various aspects of individual behaviour, relationships with others, and

harmony with nature. Liziqi's videos bridge the gap between past and present traditions, showcasing the ongoing relevance and value of "Yi" culture in contemporary society.

4.1.1 Explicit Meaning: Chinese Traditional Life Aesthetics

Natural symbols (e.g., sun, lakes, mountains, forests, grasslands, and snow-capped mountains) are used in Liziqi's videos to illustrate a different kind of rural life from that of the city. Together, these symbols represent China's magnificent natural landscape and distinct geography, depicting unspoiled natural beauty and an oriental wonderland on earth. In addition, bamboo baskets, bamboo sofas, wooden cutlery, and wooden coat hangers are among the utensil symbols that the vlogger uses to reproduce the primitive way of life and production in rural western China. In particular, Liziqi uses herself as a practical subject to present activities of daily life, including farming, breeding, gathering, harvesting, grinding, brewing, cutting, cooking, steaming, stewing, frying, and seasoning. Apart from that, her more complicated activities (e.g., woodcutting, weaving, sewing, repairing, and making furniture) demonstrate a self-sufficient life that adheres to the laws of nature and makes rational use of natural resources. The utensil symbols symbolically represent environmentally friendly, green, healthy, and idyllic rural living. Liziqi's inventive use of these tools further reflects a rational consideration of the relationship between nature and humans.

Liziqi's objective is to showcase an authentic and environmentally sustainable portrayal of rural life in China. However, her depiction of authenticity relies on the construction of an idealised pastoral dream. Certain scholars have raised concerns about this seemingly idyllic representation, arguing that it overlooks the harsh realities of rural existence and serves to conceal instances of exploitation and oppression (Shucksmith, 2018). However, despite its criticisms, this representation is significant for providing a platform to address the contradictions and anxieties arising from development. It offers a means to mitigate the impulse of urban dwellers to escape the increasingly demanding and intricate urban lifestyles they encounter.

Liziqi uses food symbols, the most common symbols in her videos, to represent Chinese culture to her audience. She usually chooses traditional and ancient techniques to demonstrate the process of planting, harvesting and cooking food. Through the videos, we can see the process of how a seed sown on the land becomes a meal on the table, the differences in foods across the alternating seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, and the wonders of food presented under the laws of nature. Food is a vehicle for the aesthetics of life and the culture of culinary art; Liziqi has given it a Chinese dimension and meaning and imbued it with artistry and vitality. She enjoys adorning dishes with leafy vegetables, radishes, purple cabbage, osmanthus, and other greens. For instance, her golden fried lotus root slices are accompanied by green vegetables and flowers to make the dish look fresh and elegant, while brightly coloured flowers accompany her crispy chicken to depict a fantastic dish. By altering the colour and shape of food, Liziqi improves its artistry and aesthetics. She also ingeniously imbues the names of her dishes with humanistic connotations and values. For example, 福气满满 "fuqimanman" means bags full of good fortune; 金银满仓 "jinyinmancang" implies gold and silver filling people's warehouses; 笑口常开 "xiaokouchangkai" refers to a smile full of happiness and joy every day. In Chinese food culture, naming dishes with auspicious meanings is common, which contributes to food becoming symbolic representations of profound emotions and ideas.

Through cultural symbols such as seals, Shu embroidery, silk quilts, Chinese Hanfu ("Hanfu" is the traditional clothing worn by the Han Chinese, the largest ethnic group in China.), and Chinese brushes, Liziqi's videos demonstrate the practicality and aesthetics of traditional Chinese handicraft culture, along with intangible Chinese cultural heritage. The vlogger selects a variety of raw materials (e.g., gold foil, musk, pearl powder, borneol, oxhide gelatin, and bone glue) and puts them through more than a hundred processes (e.g., burning, washing, grinding, mixing, drying, polishing, and trimming) to produce one of the four treasures, the inkstones. By peeling, soaking, boiling, cleaning, cutting, pounding, drying, and baking bark, she restores and exhibits the historical origin and production steps of the traditional Chinese papermaking craft. Liziqi has also learnt inherited embroidery techniques and recreated the process of making Shu embroidery, an important intangible cultural heritage of China. Her video records the whole process, from dying the embroidery fabric to tracing the embroidery pattern, picking and splitting the thread, tying the needle, piercing the sand, and haloing, rolling, stacking, and slanting the thread. Liziqi's profound appreciation, understanding, and presentation of China's traditional culture, such as woodblock printing, silk weaving, and paper cutting, are powerful symbols of Chinese civilization. Drawing inspiration from nature, she surpasses the inherent characteristics of these traditional crafts and imbues them with a transformative quality that enhances people's lives. Through her reenactment of traditional handicrafts, she brings to the forefront the ancient and distinctive aspects of Chinese culture, expanding the audience's understanding of "Chineseness" and "Eastern culture" while addressing their concerns about disengagement from tradition (Li, 2020).

Liziqi's videos disrupt prevailing global narratives that often prioritize rapid economic growth and urbanisation at the expense of traditional values and the environment. In a refreshing approach, her videos present modernity while highlighting the significance of harmony between humans and nature, hard work, and traditional knowledge. However, some scholars contend that the presentation of traditional Chinese aesthetics may reinforce Western perceptions of China as an exotic and enigmatic culture (Li, 2016). This can occur when cultural representations prioritize the fusion and coexistence of reality and imagination while neglecting the diversity and

regional variations within Chinese culture. Nevertheless, Liziqi's videos challenge conventional modes of representation and demonstrate the dynamic and intricate nature of Chinese culture (Hall, 1997; Whyke, Chen & Lopez-Mugica, 2022).

4.1.2 Implicit Connotation: Chinese "Yi" Culture

Through the use of nature, utensils, food, and craft symbols, Liziqi conveys the denotative meaning of Chinese culture while paying close attention to colour matching to represent the connotative, or "preferred," meaning embedded in it. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple, the vivid colours of nature, are concentrated in various common and rare plants, such as pink peach blossoms, white pear blossoms, red strawberries, purple grapes, yellow peaches, golden rice, and brown chestnuts. These colours provide a natural tone for the vivid images in the videos. With the addition of light and shadow shots, the dazzling colours reveal a vibrant and dynamic China that represents not only a poetic and idyllic way of life, but also a harmonious blend of natural, personal, and ecological beauty. History has assigned each nation a colour with diverse meanings. As a result, the symbolic meaning of colour is no longer a one-way form of interaction between natural phenomena and people, but also a component of historical and national cultural content, making it more intricate.

When clothing colours are combined and matched with various environmental tones, a variety of rich connotations are generated. Consequently, Liziqi alters the colour and style of her clothing at different times and places to represent her pursuit of spiritual freedom and liberation. The profile photo on her YouTube channel is that of a typical oriental woman, with a red dress, a veil covering her face, a red mark between her eyebrows, and deep eyes, akin to a mysterious and free hermit. In the Kumiss video, Liziqi wears a long red cloak and black boots, riding a horse through the mountains and forests with unrestrained joy. In the video on the peach blossom, Liziqi stands atop a mountain wearing a long grey and white cloak, gazing into the distance. Snow-covered tree branches surround her, while clouds encircle and flow around the mountain. Merging herself with the surrounding natural beauty creates a sense of ethereal harmony between man and nature.

It is further noted that Liziqi prefers to wear brightly coloured Hanfu and cheongsams when gathering flowers or tasting food and black and indigo cotton and linen clothing when working. In spring and summer, plain, light-coloured dresses appear to be prevalent, whereas bright capes dominate in fall and winter, emphasising freedom, harmony, and comfort. Cotton linen clothes and Hanfu or cheongsam are not as heavy and tight as they used to be, and her overall style of dressing aims for elegance and comfort, resulting in a unique neoclassical style. The different colours of her clothing symbolise Liziqi's diverse life experiences, attitudes, and values. She takes the initiative to reflect on man's relationship with nature and the world and, in doing so, searches for the essence of life and spiritual belonging.

Liziqi's videos convey the connotations of Chinese "Yi" culture, a value that encourages people to live in harmony with nature and seek spiritual freedom. "Yi" is a state of being, a way of life, and a philosophy for dealing with things; importantly, it is also an aesthetic form. The genetic origins of 'Yi' can be traced to the unifying force of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Corresponding to this concept, Liziqi's videos explore the construction of an ecological civilisation that pursues a healthy life of environmental protection and greenery. The videos convey the philosophical concept of abstaining from unnecessary material desires, closely linking labour and survival needs. As a result, they champion one's freedom from being suppressed by material desires to develop oneself comprehensively and freely. In today's impetuous times, the ecological philosophy of the Chinese "Yi" culture and its pursuit of individual freedom and liberation can calm people and inspire them to reflect on who they are and what they are living for.

However, it is essential to contextualize these values within the framework of contemporary Chinese discourse. Over the past few decades, China has undergone significant economic and social changes, leading to the expansion of the middle class and the emergence of consumerism. Consequently, there exists a tension between traditional values, such as those manifested in the "Yi" culture, and the modern values associated with consumerism and materialism (Ioane, 2016). Liziqi's videos can be viewed as a response to this tension, promoting a lifestyle that opposes mainstream consumer culture. Through an emphasis on simplicity and a harmonious relationship with nature, Liziqi presents an alternative vision of modernity that prioritizes sustainability. Moreover, her videos align with the global trend of sustainable development and environmentalism, which have gained momentum in recent years. This indicates that the values encapsulated in the "Yi" culture extend beyond China and reflect a broader shift toward adopting more sustainable and ethically conscious ways of living.

4.2 Textual Analysis of Audience Interpretation

Our analysis demonstrates that audiences express their attitudes or thoughts regarding Liziqi's videos through four distinct interpretations: pleasuring decoding, reflective decoding, empathic decoding, and questioning decoding. Each of these modes of interpretation emerges from the audience's close interaction with the text; together, they create a space for sharing meaning, and the diversity of meaning is gradually unified through multiple levels of interaction and participation.

4.2.1 Pleasuring Decoding

Pleasuring decoding is an expression of identification that achieves comfort and pleasure on a physiological and psychological level due to sensual stimulation (Biswas-Diener et al., 2015). Sensual pleasure is an intuitive feeling towards the aesthetic object, where the rational function is hidden, lacks the characteristics of permanence and variability, and is at a lower level of the realm.

The audience's aesthetic enjoyment of Liziqi's videos is expressed in their visual and auditory sensory pleasure. According to commenter Raewal, "Wow! 😍 This video is a feast for the eyes and ears! Liziqi's attention to detail in the scene settings and editing style creates a truly immersive experience. It is like stepping into a dream world filled with serenity and beauty." Integration of the visual and auditory senses, such as lens design, scene setting, colour distribution, music sorting, and montage editing, stimulates the aesthetic pleasuring of the viewer and elicits positive emotions of admiration, appreciation, and happiness.

Regarding shooting techniques, Liziqi uses fixed-lens framing and time-lapse photography to depict changes in space and time. The growth of plants and the gradual transformation of the natural landscape are condensed into a shorter timeframe, providing the audience with an exceptional perspective on the changing seasons and the growth of produce. The images are further enriched with highly saturated and contrasting hues, which strengthen the visual mood and generate the broadest colour identity. Many viewers describe the video's images as follows: "colourful, brilliantly shot, and instructive;" "every shot is like a painting;" "the colours are so vivid and vibrant;" "it is like life in Technicolor;" and "the video's tones and images are absolutely gorgeous."

On the auditory side, background music and environmental sounds have become essential perceptual elements to attract an audience. Traditional Chinese instruments, such as the lute, bamboo flute, and guqin, are used as background music in Liziqi's videos, complementing the characters' dialogue and cooking sounds in a soothing and relaxing manner. The commenter Marivane Nunes De Souza said, "The background music relaxes you, and see how beautiful the place is, plus the dexterity and delicacy and pleasure that makes all the dishes, it is very beautiful!!! Watching your videos brings me nostalgia and relaxes me." The audience appears to be transported to another world and completely immersed in the scene. The authentic sounds of raindrops, hens clucking, objects chirping, and vegetables being chopped awaken the minds of the audience and evoke feelings of nostalgia.

Observing viewer comments makes it apparent that they convey positive emotions by utilizing emoticons and exclamation marks. These symbols effectively represent their enthusiasm and active engagement with the visual and auditory aspects depicted in the videos. The comments are typically brief and focus on expressing emotions rather than providing extensive analysis or critique. The substantial number of likes these comments receive indicates that other viewers resonate with the expressed emotions and share a similar positive experience. This high level of engagement, demonstrated through likes, further reinforces the idea that the audience positively responds to content that exhibits exceptional aesthetic qualities.

The audience exhibits an apparent inclination towards high-quality video presentations that encompass diverse elements, including object texture, a realistic scene, and skilful utilisation of light and shadow effects. The incorporation of these components has the potential to evoke a profound perceptual impact on the audience, resulting in sensations of relaxation, enjoyment, and serenity. Furthermore, the audience's ability to derive a pleasurable experience and establish a psychological connection with the artistic value of the content further underscores the significant influence of these aesthetic qualities. Consequently, this critical analysis highlights the importance of understanding pleasuring decoding as a mechanism that shapes audience responses and enhances their appreciation of artistic stimuli.

4.2.2 Reflective Decoding

Reflective decoding is associated with a lower level of emotional expression and a higher level of rational involvement. Our analysis indicates that this decoding type often unconsciously ignores cultural differences between communities, subsuming perceived cultural differences to human universals and agreeing with the text's content expression.

The interpretation of Liziqi's videos by the audience is a dialogue between the indigenous culture and a different culture. Typically, audiences choose to use their inherent cultural schema to recognise the content. When confronted with cultural differences, they subconsciously compare them to their original cognitive schema, thereby overcoming or altering them. When analysing comments, it becomes evident that viewers actively participate in a conversation that bridges their own local culture with diverse cultures. This interaction takes place through cross-cultural references, reflexions on cognitive frameworks, and an appreciation of Chinese culture. The comments serve as a testament to the audience's deep involvement with the videos, using them as a means of exploring and understanding different cultures, and fostering personal growth in the process. Examples of such comments include: "The videos have sparked my curiosity about Chinese cuisine and the profound connection between food and culture," or "I appreciate how Liziqi's videos blend traditional Chinese customs with elements from other cultures, creating a rich cross-cultural dialogue."

Liziqi utilises social media platforms to create an equitable interaction between the encoder and the decoder via technical means, thereby facilitating cultural exchange and mutual learning between nations. Reflecting on

one's own culture through contact with other cultures is a crucial step in the communication and mutual understanding between civilizations. Indeed, in the reception of Liziqi's videos, some foreign audiences drew parallels between Chinese culture and their own. A comment states: "Your life is replete with Zen. If only our American life could be so tranquil; in fact, technology now prevents us from living in peace even in the countryside."

Reflexion decoding can also be found in the audience's thoughts about man and nature. Advancements in technology and the economy have contributed to the modernization of human society. In this process, however, man's desire to conquer nature is growing. As a result, people are trapped in a cycle of demand imbalance and revenge. The audience's comments suggest that the concept of harmonious co-existence between man and nature in Liziqi's videos provokes reflexion on the contemporary living environment. A remark shows that "Actually, she represents the best of all mankind: the connection with nature, the power of our hands and minds, the true beauty of ourselves."

Comments highlight how the videos act as a reminder of the significance of living harmoniously with nature, inspiring viewers to adopt sustainable practices and become more environmentally conscious. Viewers often share personal anecdotes in the comments section, demonstrating how the videos have influenced their thoughts and actions. They discuss implementing practices depicted in the videos, such as growing their food or engaging in DIY projects, to cultivate a sense of independence and self-sufficiency. The immense popularity and widespread dissemination of Liziqi's videos suggest a larger societal shift where individuals actively seek content that resonates with their values of simplicity, nature, and community. The audience demonstrates a high level of identification with the videos' values, which include harmony with nature, environmental protection, independence, freedom, and mutual help. Through Liziqi's videos, they do not stop at merely appreciating external things, but also seek to comprehend their meaning and reconsider their living environment and state of life.

4.2.3 Empathic Decoding

Faced with cultural differences, the emotional expression of empathic decoding is more prominent. It is possible to immerse oneself in the sociocultural environment, experience "the other's" emotions, and generate resonance. This form of decoding reveals a high degree of empathy and psychological identification with the text's content.

Liziqi's practice of reverting from modernity to tradition reconciles the contradiction between the real and the ideal. Through her channel, almost all those who are anxious, angry, or depressed become calm and peaceful, letting go of their strife and appreciating everything in the videos with gratitude and love. Viewers express strong emotional connections and personal experiences related to the content, often mentioning being deeply moved or touched. Comments frequently describe feelings of nostalgia, tranquility, and a yearning for a simpler, more natural lifestyle. The commenter Melyssa Mitcham said: "Whenever I am stressed, I watch her videos and they immediately calm me down and give me some peace." The videos create a dream space for viewers to temporarily escape from reality and the pressures of modern society.

According to Benjamin (1968), humans are destined to exist in a fragmented reality that comprises time, history, and self. In this shattered reality, nostalgia represents the reconciliation of the present with the past and the self with the world, as well as the identification with the many identities of the self. People seem to appreciate the substantial freedom afforded by contemporary technology as it advances at a breaking pace. In actuality, they are consumed by the oppression and powerlessness that such speed conveys, since speed separates traditional and modern systems (Delannoi, 1995). Consequently, nostalgia transports people back to a controlled environment where they live in anti-speed harmony with the world (Dames, 2001). In this sense, for those under the stress of modern life, Liziqi's videos offer a nostalgic emotional refuge. She evokes people's inner emotional resonance to yearn for the past through her perspective of rural life scenery and rich aesthetic experience. Examples of such comments include "Her videos remind me of the village life in Greece. That is so beautiful to watch; she lives the best life someone could ever live! " or "My dad and I have been watching your videos a lot lately as a sort of bonding time. He is really impressed with everything you have done! I think it makes him nostalgic, since he came from the mainland."

As a result of the accelerated development of modern society, crises such as environmental pollution, food safety, privacy breaches, and apathy toward interpersonal relationships are emerging. People long for a green, healthy, simple, and natural lifestyle. In response to this call, Liziqi perfectly preserves a traditional poetic and idyllic life in her videos, which portray a peaceful existence away from the noise and electronic intrusion of the city. Supportive reviews often demonstrate emotional resonance as viewers express how the videos evoke the same emotions and create a connection with the lifestyle depicted. Viewers often share personal experiences, reflecting on how the videos inspire them to reevaluate their living environment and embrace a simpler, more natural way of life. Collectively, these reviews reveal a longing for harmony with nature and to escape the complexities of modern society. The Liziqi channel, therefore, forces people to re-evaluate their living environment and way of life.

4.2.4 Questioning Decoding

The audience comments include a questioning tone in their decoding. This style of decoding is more sensitive to cultural differences and results in direct psychological conflicts. Primarily based on rational evaluation and

interpretation, it is also accompanied by emotional involvement, showing a questioning, cautious, or defensive attitude toward the authenticity and rationality of the text content.

Some negative expressions in the comments, such as "dislike," "hate," and "angry," do not reflect negative reactions toward the videos' content, but rather indicate a lack of comprehension and questioning of those who dislike the video. For example, the commenter Ẩm Thực Mẹ Làm said, "Some evil people became so jealous of her that they even pressed the dislike button on her YouTube channel."

Through the convergence of views that "group up" to resist the "dislike" in the comments, a circle effect is seen. This effect does not only deepen the original emotional attitude but also rejects the "other" with opposing views. We find that this group of users is a relatively closed "homogeneous group" with a high level of engagement and a relatively uniform emotional structure (Rozukalne, 2020). It is true that emotional responses have replaced rational discussion as the primary form of online audience participation. Specific messages, emotions, and beliefs are concentrated outside of the participants' traditional cultural identity, resulting in an echo chamber effect where emotions play a significant role, and it is difficult for other opinions to enter (Wang & Hickerson, 2016).

Due to a lack of understanding and knowledge, the audience would inevitably fall into a parochial view and confine the other's culture to the projection of "my perspective" when interpreting the said culture, resulting in the phenomenon of misinterpretation. By encoding the comments, we find that the viewers' misunderstanding has nothing to do with national interests and ideology but rather involves a discussion of commonplace topics such as life and eating habits. Examples of such comments include, "I am vegetarian, and those shots of the dead animals are hard for me to watch," or "One thing I noticed is that when you wash vegetables and fish with that kind of tube, well, there is no option to stop the water. This is a huge waste of water. Please take the necessary steps. Edit: I did not know that the water was from the waterfall. It's okay then."

The YouTube platform's comment editing and comment reply function can be used to bridge the gap in comprehension. In addition, comments from Chinese viewers or those with extensive knowledge of Liziqi are instrumental in dispelling such confusion. The majority of their comments are translations and explanations of unfamiliar or incomprehensible symbols in the video for foreign viewers. In reality, these comments play a crucial role, as they reduce cultural discounting to a certain extent, eliminate misunderstandings, and facilitate the export of cultural meaning. For instance, the commenter HCui explains, "8:38 in case people don't understand what she is doing: she is splashing the wine into the air to show respect to her deceased elders (like her father, grandpa, etc.) so that they can enjoy the wine before she tastes it. In some other places, people may pour a small cup of wine into the soil before drinking for the same reason. Those are all old Chinese traditions."

Audience misunderstandings are generally limited to the current horizon. Through interaction with other users and the accessibility of social media platforms, individuals test their own biases and gain a deeper understanding, thus dispelling misconceptions and ultimately building a relationship with the culture behind the text based on knowledge and tolerance.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper began by noting that Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model remains an important guide to explaining cultural practices in social media. We revisit the model and apply it to coding specific national cultures by social media users, taking into account a more complex audience: productive individuals. The data analysis in this paper focuses more on the role of audience-text interaction in the construction of cultural value. Exploring the link between production and reception aims to extend the productive use of Hall's encoding/decoding model. Overall, this paper seeks to expand the applicability of the model to better understand the complexities of cultural practises in social media.

Liziqi has constructed an idealised traditional rural life through harmonious interpersonal relationships, food culture, traditional handicraft culture, and Chinese "Yi" culture. This vision of rural life aligns with the ideal state that people living in modern cities remember or fantasize about, as reflected in the four types of audience decoding: pleasurable decoding, reflective decoding, empathic decoding, and questioning decoding. While questioning decoding may show inconsistent attitudes, this is mainly due to cultural differences and represents only a tiny proportion of the overall decoding.

This case presents a conflict between "traditional and modern," with Liziqi, a social media influencer, representing "traditional" and the YouTube audience representing "modern." Despite the significant differences and contradictions between these two perspectives, Liziqi manages to reconcile them, providing the audience with an outlet to balance reality. According to Hall's encoding/decoding model (1973), there is a tension between the "encoder" as the producer of information and the "decoder" as the viewer. However, in this case, we see a harmonious relationship between the encoder and decoder, resulting in the alignment of ideas. We discuss the factors that contribute to this congruence.

In social media, text meaning is constructed by both encoders and decoders, where producers encode in a specific way, and audiences decode from a variety of positions. This is consistent with Hall's (1973) description of the process of interpreting the meaning of television discourse. The distinction is that the encoder's identity has shifted from television mediums to individuals. Previously, encoders possessed professionalism and authority; for

example, television media and professional institutions incorporate a series of audiovisual symbols into television discourse in accordance with specific code-making rules, and the discourse (text) that is symbolised conforms to particular narrative patterns and performance techniques. Currently, encoders on social media are liberated from the constraints imposed by the specific coding framework of professional institutions. The majority of social media encoders appear as individuals with anonymity, personalization, and diversity, and their coding methods have become arbitrary. Consequently, narrative and presentation styles have noticeable individual colours.

Liziqi's encoding strategy affects the audience's cognition and interpretation; mainly, its effectiveness attracts their attention to China and Chinese culture. She incorporates various representations of daily life elements in the images' language, thereby transmitting Chinese cultural connotations through visual symbols. This coding strategy removes the dominant ideology of the Chinese government's cultural diffusion, replacing it with a micro-narrative led by visual coding on a global social platform with cross-cultural characteristics.

Liziqi's encoding strategy diverges from the "cultural diffusion" strategy employed by the Chinese government in several significant ways. Firstly, while the government focuses on promoting specific values and narratives, Liziqi prioritizes a subjective and individualistic standpoint, showcasing her unique experiences and skills in a rural context. Secondly, Liziqi relies heavily on visual symbols and representations of daily life elements to effectively convey Chinese cultural connotations, whereas the government's strategy may rely more on explicit messaging and overt promotion. Additionally, Liziqi's encoding strategy aims to create a captivating micronarrative that engages her global audience on a social platform with cross-cultural characteristics, facilitating more organic and grassroots dissemination of Chinese culture. This contrasts with the government's commonly observed top-down approach to cultural diffusion.

Micro-narratives are evolving into a trending form of expression in the new media era; the fundamental areas of human life are the entry points for such narratives. The popularity of social media, in particular, is seen as an emerging field of micronarratives, aiming to tell stories using digital tools that combine text, images, video, and sound (Venditti, Piredda, & Mattana, 2017). Common global themes are hidden within them as a presentation of the cultural psyche. The micronarrative capabilities of social media form an important power for presenting oneself, comprehending one's experiences, and connecting with others (Georgakopoulou, 2022). Through the use of micronarratives, the communicator and the audience co-create a shared space of meaning wherein new forms of interaction are created to reinforce (Padovani, 2016), negotiate and understand the dominant message (Mudavanhu, 2021).

The audiences have become active decoders as they reconstruct the text's meaning in a manner that is no longer mechanical but dynamic. They show casual nomadism across various media texts, interrupting the flow of meaning from point to surface in the social network and producing more complex outlines. Text decoding thus goes far beyond the meaning interpretation of the text itself to shape a complex socio-cultural phenomenon or landscape. Identification and misunderstanding occur simultaneously, but the audience produces aesthetic identification, value reflection, and emotional empathy through pleasurable decoding, reflective decoding, empathic decoding, and questioning decoding, accompanied by correctable misinterpretation. The ability to reply to comments on YouTube has removed some viewers' doubts or misunderstandings, thereby forming a multilevel dialogue to reduce barriers to the spread of culture to some extent.

The proactive nature of decoders on social media is consistent with Padovani's (2016) findings. Decoders can now choose when, where, and in what order to receive messages, but their interpretations are still influenced by how the encoder encodes them while releasing more open and ambiguous meanings based on the audience's initiative (Olausson, 2020). The interactive and participatory nature of social media blurs the distinction between public and private dimensions, such that viewers have an active role in uncovering implicit messages, further making the meaning of embedded texts more explicit (Padovani, 2016). The meaning of symbols is stabilised through the operation of interpretive communities and remains relatively unified within the diversity of meaning (Fish, 1980). In intercultural contexts, the influencer generated by social media platforms, exemplified by Liziqi, constructs a shared meaning space with the audience and shapes a new paradigm of cultural diffusion.

Liziqi effectively communicates specific messages by skillfully utilizing visual and auditory elements, narrative structures, and cultural references. Her encoding strategy emphasises professionalism, authenticity, intimacy, and sustainability, showcasing an alternative lifestyle diverging from mainstream consumer culture. Various contextual factors influence the decoding process, including social, cultural, and ideological backgrounds, which significantly shape the audience's understanding and acceptance, empowering them to engage in open discussions, debates, dialogues, and even criticism. Drawing upon collective knowledge, experiences, and social interactions, they can comprehend the meaning of the content. This reciprocal feedback loop establishes a continuous dialogue between the encoder and the decoder, influencing subsequent encoding strategies and the evolution of meaning. As a result, the collective understanding and acceptance of Liziqi's videos are shaped accordingly. By applying the encoding/decoding theory to analyse Liziqi's case, we enhance the comprehension of the cultural production process, encoding strategies, the role of the audience in decoding, and the contextual factors that contribute to meaning formation. This analytical approach regards communication as a dynamic and interactive phenomenon, emphasizing the constructive roles played by both social media influencers and the audience in shaping the meaning and reception of information.

To summarise, this study expands Hall's encoding/decoding model by examining the encoding and decoding processes in a multicultural context and discovering a common cultural framework between the sender and the receiver. Although cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings, collaborative efforts for social media operation and communication can be more effective and inclusive. Additionally, we move away from the linear process of encoding and decoding assumed by the model and consider the dynamic and iterative nature of the communication process, which demonstrates that receivers adjust and improve their messages in response to multiple feedbacks, thus more effectively achieving the communicator's intended outcomes.

6. Limitations and Future Suggestions

This research has certain limitations. Methodologically, the best way to investigate audience reading is through an ethnographic approach which examines the explicit relationship between audience interpretation and their cultural background and daily lives. Due to the difficulty of meeting or engaging directly with Liziqi's overseas audience, this paper may not be able to go further in terms of audience demographics and content depth by selecting only video reviews as data for audience reception analysis. A further limitation of this study is the small number of online commentary texts, which collected few negative attitudinal texts and may not fully reflect the misunderstanding factor. Therefore, this study recommends ethnographic research on such cases in order to investigate in depth the various ways in which audiences interpret their meanings and the ideological structures underlying them. This study also suggests analysing the technological and cultural characteristics of social media platforms to understand the context of the new paradigm of cultural diffusion.

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