

The Cultural Transmission and Commercial Monetization of Human Brands: A Case Study of Li Ziqi

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Abstract. With the rapid expansion of the digital economy and platformized media, individual creators have increasingly become both cultural producers and market actors. In this context, the rise of influencer culture has made "human brands" an important subject in the study of digital communication, cultural representation, and commercial conversion. This paper uses Li Ziqi as a case study. It states that the global spread and commercial success of a human brand depend on three things: the symbolic translation of local culture, the development of audience attachment, and the creator's ability to control content rights amid platforms and capital. The study finds that Li Ziqi's brand influence depends not only on the aesthetic communication of rural Chinese culture, but also on the transformation of emotional trust into commercial value through platform-based monetization. It further shows that the long-term sustainability of a human brand requires effective protection of authorship, intellectual property, and creative control.

Keywords: Cultural Transmission, Human Brand, Multi-Channel Network, Influencer Marketing, Rural Aesthetics

1. Introduction

The expansion of the digital economy has transformed individual creators into highly visible cultural producers and market actors. Within platform-based media systems, influencers increasingly operate as "human brands," whose personal identity, aesthetic style, and emotional appeal function as valuable symbolic and commercial assets [1]. This transformation is especially important in cross-cultural communication, where creators can bypass institutional channels and directly shape the global visibility of local culture [2].

Among Chinese content creators, Li Ziqi represents a particularly influential case. Her videos gained wide recognition not through verbal persuasion or direct cultural explanation, but through a highly stylized portrayal of rural life, traditional craftsmanship, food preparation, and seasonal rhythms [3,4]. This mode of communication differs from top-down cultural diplomacy because it works through atmosphere, affect, and visual symbolism rather than explicit national discourse [2,3]. As a result, her content offers a useful case for examining how a local cultural aesthetic can become globally legible and commercially valuable.

At the same time, Li Ziqi's case also exposes tensions within the creator economy. The more successful a human brand becomes, the more likely it is to be drawn into MCN operations, e-commerce systems, licensing arrangements, and equity disputes [5,6]. Her trajectory therefore allows this paper to connect three issues that are usually discussed separately: cross-cultural cultural transmission, influencer monetization, and the governance of creator-owned intellectual property.

This paper explores how Li Ziqi constructs a globally resonant rural aesthetic through digital media, and analyzes how such cultural communication is transformed into a commercialized human-brand model. It also discusses the conflicts that emerge when creative labor becomes entangled with capital and MCN management. The study combines case analysis, semiotic reading, and comparative interpretation of platform reception to further examine the relationship between cultural transmission, brand monetization, and creator autonomy. The paper contributes to the study of human brands and digital cultural production while also highlighting the importance of content sovereignty and IP governance in the influencer economy.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Human brand theory and brand attachment

Human Brand Theory proposes that individuals can function in ways similar to conventional brands: they embody symbolic meaning, generate recognition, and establish durable emotional relationships with audiences [1]. In creator economies, the person is not merely the spokesperson of a brand but often the brand itself. The creator's style, values, lifestyle, and public image become central resources in both audience growth and commercial conversion.

This framework is especially relevant to Li Ziqi because her brand value mainly depends on brand attachment, which develops when audiences repeatedly associate the creator with a stable emotional world. Her videos invite viewers into a recognizable universe of patience, authenticity, domestic warmth, and artisanal dignity. Such repeated exposure encourages trust and symbolic loyalty, allowing followers to move from admiration of content to identification with the creator's broader value system.

Brand attachment also helps explain monetization. Consumers do not simply buy products because they are advertised; they buy because the products appear to extend the emotional and symbolic experience already established by the content [1]. In this sense, the commercial value of a human brand is inseparable from the perceived sincerity and consistency of the creator's cultural persona.

2.2. Cross-cultural communication and semiotic theory

Semiotic theory provides a useful framework for understanding why Li Ziqi's videos travel effectively across cultural boundaries. Rather than relying on explicit explanation, her videos generate meaning through visual repetition, symbolic objects, labor processes, and affective atmosphere. In Li Ziqi's case, everyday practices such as farming, weaving, dyeing, cooking, and building are transformed into a coherent symbolic system.

This symbolic system constructs what can be described as an idyllic mythology. Rural life is presented as calm, harmonious, and aesthetically complete rather than materially harsh or socially conflicted. Such representation is culturally specific in its use of Chinese ingredients, architecture, and customs, but universal in its emotional appeal. Viewers from different backgrounds can read the same images as signs of simplicity, sustainability, healing, and respect for labor.

The semiotic perspective is also important because Li Ziqi's content relies heavily on non-verbal meaning. Rather than explaining Chinese culture in abstract terms, the videos make it visible and sensible through objects, textures, gestures, and rhythms [3,4]. This allows culture to be transmitted not primarily as information, but as experience.

3. Cultural transmission strategy of the brand

3.1. Construction of rural aesthetics and idyllic mytholog

A key feature of Li Ziqi's brand is the systematic construction of rural aesthetics. Her videos repeatedly depict fields, courtyards, mountains, handmade tools, home-grown ingredients, and labor-intensive techniques. These are not isolated visual decorations. Together, they form a complete symbolic environment in which village life appears ordered, peaceful, and meaningful.

A recurring theme in her content is "handmade everything." Materials are shown across their entire life cycle: bamboo becomes furniture, plants become dyes, grains become food, and cloth becomes clothing. This process-based storytelling is crucial because it emphasizes continuity, labor, and transformation. Instead of focusing only on finished commodities, the videos highlight making itself. The audience is invited to appreciate not merely the object, but the time, skill, and care embedded in it.

This rural aesthetic also functions as a contrast to modern accelerated life. In a digital environment dominated by speed and fragmentation, Li Ziqi's visual world foregrounds slowness, repetition, and sensory attention. The result is a form of idyllic mythology that does not document rural life in a sociological sense, but reimagines it as a cultural refuge [3,4]. That symbolic refuge helps explain why the content resonates with both domestic viewers seeking nostalgia and international viewers seeking an alternative to industrial modernity [2].

3.2. Application of auditory symbols and non-verbal communication

Another major strength of the brand lies in its use of non-verbal communication. Li Ziqi's videos often minimize speech and rely instead on image, gesture, editing rhythm, and natural sound [3]. This strategy significantly lowers the threshold for international understanding. Viewers do not need to understand Chinese language or context in order to follow the action or feel the intended mood.

Auditory design is particularly important. Sounds such as boiling water, chopping vegetables, firewood burning, birds singing, and cloth rustling contribute to a calming sensory atmosphere. These sounds strengthen immersion and enhance the sense of authenticity, environmental embeddedness, and material proximity conveyed by the videos [4].

By reducing dependence on language, the brand bypasses one of the major barriers in cross-cultural communication. At the same time, the sensory richness of the videos deepens audience attachment. Viewers do not merely watch the content; they experience it bodily and emotionally. This strengthens the creator's distinctiveness in a crowded attention economy [3].

3.3. Cross-platform audience reception

Audience reception varies across platforms, but this variation confirms rather than weakens the effectiveness of the brand. On global platforms such as YouTube, Li Ziqi's videos are often interpreted through universal categories such as beauty, peace, sustainability, and emotional healing [2,7]. Supported by a global distribution and search-oriented mechanism, audience interaction on

YouTube is mainly expressed through likes and multilingual comments, and viewers tend to emphasize universal aesthetics as well as philosophical and emotional values.

On domestic platforms such as Bilibili, audience reception is shaped more strongly by community interaction and cultural familiarity [7]. Compared with YouTube, Bilibili places greater emphasis on participatory engagement, especially through real-time bullet comments and community co-creation. As a result, viewers on this platform are more likely to associate Li Ziqi's videos with cultural identity, nostalgia, family warmth, and vernacular continuity.

This cross-platform difference reveals a major advantage of Li Ziqi's symbolic strategy: the content remains culturally identifiable without becoming culturally closed. It is rooted in Chinese vernacular forms while still allowing audiences from different interpretive communities to project their own emotional and philosophical meanings onto it.

4. Commercial monetization path

4.1. Implementation of the "Selling by Contributing" mode

The commercial logic of Li Ziqi's brand can be understood through the "Selling by Contributing" model. In this model, creators first provide audiences with sustained cultural, emotional, and symbolic value through free content. Only after trust and attachment have been established does monetization become effective. The sale is therefore not a starting point, but the result of accumulated contribution.

This model fits Li Ziqi well because her commercial appeal was built on perceived authenticity rather than direct promotion. The videos did not primarily function as advertisements. Instead, they generated a sense of admiration and emotional intimacy, which later made audiences more willing to purchase products linked to the brand [1]. The products gained value because they appeared to embody the same aesthetic and moral world as the videos themselves.

4.2. Multi-platform e-commerce conversion

The emotional capital produced by the videos was gradually transformed into purchasing power. Once the human brand had become stable and recognizable, e-commerce channels allowed that symbolic value to be materialized in food products and related commodities [1,5]. Existing case analyses suggest that the brand's store performance and product influence reached a significant scale, especially during the peak phase of its commercial expansion [5,8]. Table 1 illustrates the major commercial milestones of the Li Ziqi brand, including the early online store launch, the rapid growth in sales volume, and the high valuation of the MCN parent company .

What matters analytically is not only the size of sales but also the mechanism behind them. Audiences were not simply buying functional goods, but participation in a trusted symbolic system. The products acted as extensions of the creator's identity and as material evidence of the brand relationship already formed through content [1].

Table 1. Key commercial milestones and sales performance of the brand [6,8]

Year	Milestone and Product Category	Estimated Sales Volume and Valuation (RMB)
2018	Online store launch (first 6 days)	> 150,000
2020	Total sales volume (driven by flagship products)	1.6 Billion
2021	MCN parent company valuation (Weinian)	5 Billion

5. Capital game and IP management crisis

5.1. Imbalance of equity structure in the MCN cooperation

Behind the brand's success lay a structural contradiction between creative labor and capital management. Reports and case analyses suggest that in the joint business arrangement, the creator did not hold decisive control over the relevant company, while the MCN institution retained the majority position [5,6]. This imbalance meant that the creator who generated the symbolic and traffic value of the brand did not necessarily control its strategic direction.

Such a structure reveals a common risk in the creator economy. Human brands are often built on personal authenticity, but once they are formalized as commercial assets, decision-making may shift toward institutions concerned primarily with scale, licensing, and short-term returns [6,8].

5.2. Over-commercialization and profit siphoning

The dispute also illustrated how excessive commercialization can damage brand integrity. Analyses of the case indicate that brand authorization and profit distribution became major sources of conflict, with concerns that the commercial system was extracting value from the creator's image while diluting her control over how that value was used [5,6]. In such conditions, the human brand risks becoming detached from the very creator whose labor and authenticity made it meaningful in the first place.

This problem is not merely financial. When a culturally influential creator becomes over-commercialized, the symbolic purity of the brand may also be undermined. The audience's trust depends on the perception that the creator remains the genuine center of the brand. Once that perception weakens, both cultural legitimacy and commercial performance may suffer [1].

5.3. Defense of content sovereignty

Li Ziqi's prolonged suspension of updates became a powerful demonstration of content sovereignty. The interruption showed that the economic and symbolic value of the brand was inseparable from the creator's own labor, presence, and authorship. No matter how developed the surrounding business structure was, the brand could not fully sustain itself without the creator who embodied it.

The later settlement is widely understood as a rebalancing of the relationship between creator and capital [6]. In analytical terms, the case demonstrates that human-brand value cannot be reduced to trademark ownership or organizational control alone. It is rooted in creative authenticity, symbolic coherence, and audience recognition of authorship. These are forms of value that institutional capital may commercialize, but cannot completely replace.

6. Strategic suggestions for human brand management

To reduce conflict in creator-capital partnerships, a more dynamic operational model should be adopted. Rather than fixing equity and rights allocation too early, governance arrangements should be periodically reassessed according to changes in audience scale, symbolic value, and commercial contribution. Because the market value of a human brand often increases rapidly with platform visibility, static governance structures may easily produce a mismatch between creative labor and institutional control [5].

At the same time, creators should strengthen intellectual property protection in the early stage of commercialization. Core trademarks, licensing rules, and veto mechanisms over sub-authorization

need to be clarified before the brand enters large-scale market expansion. This is especially important for human brands because the boundary between personal identity and marketable intellectual property is often blurred. Clear legal and contractual arrangements can reduce later disputes over profit distribution, licensing, and authorship [6].

More importantly, the long-term sustainability of a human brand depends on preserving its irreplaceable creative core. In Li Ziqi's case, this core lies in aesthetic consistency, handcrafted authenticity, and relatively slow-cycle content production [8]. Rapid industrial expansion may increase short-term revenue, but it can also weaken the symbolic uniqueness on which audience attachment depends. Sustainable commercialization therefore requires not only operational efficiency but also continuous protection of the creator's originality and cultural authority [9].

7. Conclusion

This paper has shown that Li Ziqi's success as a human brand is shaped by the interaction of semiotic cultural transmission, emotional audience attachment, and commercial conversion. Her videos transform vernacular Chinese culture into a sensory and affective form that can be understood globally while remaining rooted in local aesthetics. Through repeated exposure to this symbolic world, audiences develop trust and attachment, which later support commercial expansion.

At the same time, the case reveals the institutional vulnerability of creator brands in platformized and capitalized media environments. When MCN institutions obtain disproportionate control over licensing, equity, and profit distribution, the creator's authorship and cultural authority may be weakened. The Li Ziqi case therefore demonstrates that content sovereignty is not a secondary issue but a central condition for the long-term sustainability of human brands.

This study is limited by its reliance on existing case materials and comment-based interpretation rather than multimodal quantitative measurement. Future research may further examine creator brands through platform analytics, affective computing, and comparative studies of IP governance in influencer economies.

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