

The Making of a Local Internet Celebrity in a Low-Income Region: A Sociological Analysis of Ding Zhen and Dishu

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Abstract. Celebrity economy, as a rapidly emerging form of digital economy, has developed alongside the expansion of internet platforms and social media. This study examines the process of persona construction in the celebrity economy by comparing two Chinese internet celebrities, Dishu and Ding Zhen. Dishu is known for his adventurous travel vlogs across China, while Ding Zhen became famous for his sincere and simple image as a young Tibetan man from Li Tang in western China. Through both structural and thematic content analysis, this study explores how different media strategies contribute to the formation of distinct online personas. The findings show that Dishu constructs an adventurous and reflective traveler image through long self-recorded videos, casual language, and personal storytelling. In contrast, Ding Zhen presents an authentic and pure native image through short professionally produced videos highlighting local scenery and culture. These contrasting personas attract different audiences and demonstrate how authenticity and media presentation shape celebrity success in the digital era.

Keywords: Celebrity Economy, Celebrity Persona, Digital Culture

1. Introduction

After the pandemic, a brand-new type of economy is emerging around the world. As data shows, the market size of cross-border live-streaming e-commerce in China reached 36 billion RMB in 2021, with an annual growth rate of 50% [1]. Celebrity economy, which refers to the promotion and dissemination of the image of young and beautiful fashionistas, has accumulated a large number of fans on social media and has built up a huge potential both culturally and economically [2]. With this huge potential in promoting economic development, this research discusses how an internet celebrity was constructed, and explores it as a potential way to improve people's income and accelerate economic development in low-income regions.

2. Literature review

Celebrity economy is about creating a celebrity and building up a unique persona to attract fans. To be more specific, creating celebrities involves the meticulous integration of talent, marketing expertise, and media arrangement [3]. For example, a musician will try to build up a persona of a talented and highly skilled person to attract their audience to listen to their music. Moreover, to build

an attractive persona, a celebrity needs to pay attention to a few points, ranking from the highest to the lowest are constant attention with fans, their kinship with family, and publicity with the media [4]. Fans are the main purchasing power in a celebrity economy. Why and how can a celebrity attract such an enormous population of fans who believe in them as well as purchase their product? Wen et al. [1] argue that the celebrity economy has become popular because it has significantly reduced consumers' transaction trust costs, shortened the process of converting social value, enhanced consumers' shopping experience, and thereby improved the real-time sales performance of cross-border e-commerce platforms. Moreover, Geng et al. [5] state that the influence of a celebrity is not that superficial. The interaction between marketers and consumers can significantly affect e-commerce sales performance, which refers to only the first-order effect of online celebrity endorsements. In addition, the interaction among fans will have a second-order effect on content marketing's sales performance.

Regarding the audience profile, research indicates that young audiences are prone to being overly attracted [6]. Reputation affects the degree of trust and the willingness to purchase in these young people. Wang et al. argue that a celebrity should build up a diverse persona to attract different groups of people, instead of focusing just on young audiences [7].

To wrap up, the current literature review shows that the celebrity economy has already become a rising new form of economy. Celebrities build up their persona and use their reputation to sell products to their fans. Often, women celebrities and people with diverse personas are more welcomed online. Moreover, most existing studies focus on general marketing effects and fan behaviors, while few compare persona construction between different types of internet celebrities [8]. Few studies link celebrity persona building to regional economic development. This study fills these gaps by analyzing Dishu and Ding Zhen.

3. Methods

This study analyzes a sample of short videos produced by Dishu and Ding Zhen, two well-known male influencers in China. The dataset includes a total of 5 long videos from Dishu and 20 short videos from Ding Zhen, selected based on their popularity, number of "likes", number of forwards, and some specific ending or beginning of a series. All videos are selected from the time period between 2020 and 2025 for both Dishu and Ding Zhen. A structured codebook was developed to capture key dimensions of content, including a total of 11 important elements for Dishu and 10 elements for Ding Zhen. Each video was coded according to predefined categories.

The analysis combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative analysis summarizes patterns in the two celebrities' videos and analyzes their similarities and differences. Qualitative analysis builds on these patterns to identify the persona and identity Dishu and Ding Zhen are trying to create through the different content of their videos.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative analysis

A quantitative content analysis reveals several notable patterns across the sampled videos. On one hand, there is a notable difference between the themes of Ding Zhen and Dishu's video. On one hand, Ding Zhen is most likely to share details and short events about his own life with the audience through short videos that last around 2 to 3 minutes. For example, Ding Zhen's videos are mostly about the culture and scenery in his hometown, Li Tang (理塘). On the other hand, Dishu is trying to

tell a story through each of his long videos, which last for about 20 minutes. To be more specific, Dishì, in some of his series, either conveys some messages and ideologies of himself, or tries to build an impressive figure of a stranger that he thinks is meaningful.

On the other hand, the filming technique of Ding Zhen and Dishì had a huge difference. As for Ding Zhen, most of his videos are taken by others, and the cameras they use are more professional. On the contrary, Dishì's videos are mostly taken by himself, using a small and portable camera such as Insta360 or DJI. Compared to Ding Zhen's, Dishì's equipment might be less advanced in image quality but higher in convenience. Also, different equipment brought differences in the style of Dishì and Ding Zhen's video. For Dishì, portable equipment like Insta360 or DJI allows him to film himself wherever he is and whenever he wants to, therefore promoting his videos to be more informal and continuous. As for Ding Zhen, he mostly uses professional cameras, which are heavy and vulnerable; thus, most of his videos are filmed in a fixed place, allowing the image quality to increase while limiting mobility.

Third, their types of videos are different; Dishì makes long vlogs while Ding Zhen mainly makes short videos. In most of Dishì's vlogs, he made videos in series, and one single video usually lasts for about 20 minutes, making one series last for over an hour. With the help of Dishì's filming style, he can provide the audience not only with an introduction about where his travel or observation happens but also his ideas and some ideology about things he met and saw on the way. By contrast, Ding Zhen's videos are much shorter and seldom express contexts in depth. To be more specific, Ding Zhen's Videos, most of the time, are about scenery, short videos with only some pictures about his hometown and the places he went. Ding Zhen does not speak in some of his videos and just shows the beautiful nature to attract his fans.

4.2. Quantitative analysis

4.2.1. Identity contrast: adventurer vs. farmer

After quantitatively analyzing videos by Dishì and Ding Zhen, we can also draw qualitative conclusions by examining the contrasting images these two online celebrities present. Dishì's identity in his video is more like an adventurer; he went all over China and introduces everywhere he went to his audience with context in depth, which involves many of his own ideologies on events and objects. For instance, in some of his videos, Dishì uses colloquial expressions like "brothers" and some other slang to praise the beauty of native people. To sum up, Dishì tends to present and express the feature of the place in a colloquial, informal way, to let his fans and audience get the point he is expressing quickly, and then offers context more deeply.

In contrast, Ding Zhen's identity in his video is more like a farmer. Both before and after he became famous, most of his videos were taken in his hometown, and the context he wanted to express was how beautiful his hometown is. The style of Ding Zhen is just like a kind, old farmer who is eagerly selling his product to customers in an unadorned and simple way. His videos highlight his good faith. This is seen in one of his videos, where he said "I truly welcome everyone to visit my hometown. My life has changed a lot, but I still hope to live in my own..." by simply and directly expressing what he wants to say, Ding Zhen fits perfectly into the stereotype of people coming from a relatively poor place, which also helped him to attract many fans.

The contrasting identities represented by these two influencers reflect two different presentation strategies in short video culture: one based on one's knowledge and a desire to share one's own trip, and the other on the simple style and the belief that sincerity can touch people the most. Taking a further step, Dishì and Ding Zhen are actually representing two typical paths of becoming popular in

the celebrity economy. Dishu stands for the self-made, experience-driven influencer who gains attention through personal stories and independent creation. Ding Zhen represents the authentic, region-rooted celebrity who wins public affection with pure personality and local cultural charm. Together, they show that successful online persona construction can be achieved either by rich personal experience or by genuine local identity, providing valuable references for understanding the diversity of celebrity formation in the digital era.

4.2.2. Exploration of the place: curious explorer vs. knowledge sharer

There is also a contrast in the way they express their ideas. While Dishu probably has more experience and sees more about the world, and his thoughts are more comprehensive and profound, Ding Zhen spends most of his time in his hometown, which is relatively isolated from the rest of the world, so people can identify his temperament directly by the way he talks. In addition, Dishu's contexts in his videos are about exploring; he is always interested in things and would be glad to learn about them. For instance, when Dishu's team went to Xinjiang province once, he asked the question, "What makes our 'nang' different from other places?", which represents his curiosity about new things that he might share with his audience later on, and "nang" (饕) is a traditional Xinjiang food. In contrast, Ding Zhen's style of speaking is more straightforward. His videos highlight his sincerity in speaking. This is seen in one of his videos, where he introduces his hometown as "My hometown, Li Tang, is the county with the highest altitude on the 318 National Highway". This sentence is so straightforward and gives the audience a feeling that he, himself, is the storyteller of the changes and history of his hometown.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the impact of internet celebrity as well as the different influence that a different persona can make. First, the contrast between Dishu and Ding Zhen reflects that different personas make totally different people online, shaping their identity and also attracting different groups of people to follow them as fans.

Second, these representations align with existing literature. For example, this research supports the idea as in [3]: creating a celebrity is difficult and complex; we need to consider their personality and characteristics, marketing strategies, and their potential fan population. Moreover, Geng et al.'s [5] article would be another great explanation for the mechanism behind the celebrity economy; the impact is not as superficial as people may think, but it involves a whole chain in the economic system.

Finally, the study suggests that while this trend of internet celebrity is already becoming pervasive, regions that are relatively poor and left behind in their economic development can seize this chance, create some kind of celebrity in their own community, just like Ding Zhen, and hopefully could improve their development greatly.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on persona construction in the celebrity economy by comparing two Chinese internet celebrities, Dishu and Ding Zhen. The analysis shows that different content choices, filming methods, and ways of speaking help them build clearly different online images. Dishu creates an adventurous traveler image through long self-recorded vlogs, casual language, and deep personal reflections, which attracts viewers who enjoy travel stories and thoughtful sharing. By contrast,

Ding Zhen presents a simple, sincere native image with short, professionally shot videos that show the scenery and culture of his hometown. His authenticity and purity are highly welcomed by the public.

These findings are consistent with previous research. Building a popular online celebrity requires careful planning of personality, marketing strategies, and target audiences. The celebrity economy also creates deeper influences than simple product promotion, including fan interactions and the transformation of social value. More importantly, this study suggests that the celebrity economy can help less developed regions improve their visibility, promote local tourism and culture, and increase local income, as seen in Ding Zhen's case.

With the continuous development of digital media, the celebrity economy will keep growing and changing. Future research can include more types of influencers, explore persona-building models in different areas, and study how to make the celebrity economy support regional development in a sustainable and healthy way.

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