

Leading Content Producers in Chinese Social Media Platform: Theories and Case Study on Bilibili Vloggers

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Abstract: The rise of social networks has changed the way people live and see the world. Because it is easy for many people to reach, it has given independent people a chance to be heard. Every year, there are more and more outsiders living in China, and there are more and more foreign vloggers on social media. This group is getting bigger and more influential, and its unique character and wide range of creative material is opening up new ways for people from different cultures to talk to each other. Many foreign vloggers have settled on Bilibili, making it one of the most popular platforms. This makes it a good place to look at how foreign vloggers and their viewers are different. So, this study will look at the personal traits, image-building processes, and how well the public accepts the image-building of foreign vloggers on Bilibili. It picks “I am Guo Jerry,” who shows the impact and content, and “Vlad,” who is also a foreign YouTuber but gets bad reviews from the public, to do a comparison audience study. The foreign vloggers’ community is looked at critically in this study. This can help protect against the bad effects and outcomes it causes and bring its social value. At the global level, videos made by foreign vloggers are a new way for people from different cultures to talk to each other. They share Chinese stories and encourage cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world. At the micro-level, the group of foreign vloggers can teach Chinese content producers from their experiences.

Keywords: vlogger, social media, China

1. Introduction

With the deepening of the reform and opening-up, many foreigners are migrating to China. According to the results of the 7th Census, the number of foreigners living on the mainland reached 850,000 by 2020, an increase by 40.24% compared to 2010 [1]. Many foreigners record short videos showing the authentic experience of living in China and the enthusiasm for Chinese culture and customs [2]. These people are known as foreign vloggers. The foreign vloggers have built a bridge for communicating the different cultures between China and other countries. The videos are also helping China break down prejudices and improve understanding at an accelerating rate. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, the competition for reporting rights has intensified which has been intensified by misinformation spread by US officials. Zhang Dingyu, a deputy director of the Hubei Provincial Health Commission and director of Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, said that in the early days, Wuhan suffered from a high mortality rate, which was later significantly reduced with the establishment of Fangcang Shelter Hospital and the promotion of ‘early detection and early

treatment' measures. These are the values of Chinese crisis management practice that the Western media choose to ignore. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has repeatedly referred to the new outbreak of coronary pneumonia as the 'Wuhan virus' [3, 4]. Some foreign vloggers living in China showed real social phenomena by recording short videos. These videos are posted on foreign websites to reduce the bias caused by the incomplete reporting of foreign media. For instance, the social media account named YChina recorded a short video titled 'How to make a documentary in the BBC style' on Youtube, satirizing the narrow-mindedness of the foreign media in reporting on social phenomena in China amidst Covid-19. In the short video, YChina interviewed local passers-by to hearten stories happened during the epidemic, which reflects the rapidity of recovery of Covid-19 in China as well as hardship [5].

Although many foreign vloggers appear on the social media, the video contents they create and their strategies to gain popularity among Chinese audiences are similar. Some vloggers attract much attention and reap profits quickly, reflecting the effectiveness and rationalism of image construction. Others, who receive less recognition and even suffer from cyberbullying, reflect the downside of image construction. To better understand the construction of the successful cases, two foreign vloggers are chosen for comparison, who have not only some similarities but also differences. In this research, two relatively popular foreign vloggers are selected, both of whom have distinctive foreign appearances and demonstrate devotion to Chinese culture while receiving markedly different comments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Analysis of Cross-cultural Communication Theory

Simmel Greg was the first to propose a theoretical account of cross-cultural communication which referred to 'the main ideas of the interactions between two or more individuals at a perceived distance' [6].

The cultural anthropologist Edward Hall was an American anthropologist who has been described as the first person to systematically study cross-cultural communication activities. The *Silent Language*, published in 1959, specifically outlined several principles of the cross-cultural communication research paradigm: participation and experience in cross-cultural communication training; a shift from the study of the single-cultural social level to the study of transcultural interpersonal communication; emphasis on nonverbal communication and cultural unconsciousness; adherence to non-judgmental ethnorelativism; emphasis on the relationship between communication and culture; and the first use of the word 'cross-cultural communication' [7].

Argyle believed that there are six significant problems or difficulties in cultural communication: language, non-verbal communication, rules of social behavior, the relationship between family and colleagues, and motivation to do things and ideas [8]. Larry Sommerv and Richard Porter, professors at the University of San Diego, claimed that 'cross-cultural communication refers to a situation in which people from different cultural backgrounds communicate with each other' [9].

Who is speaking and who is speaking to whom are the helpful questions to be clarified in the study of cross-cultural communication, and clear boundaries between subjects and objects usually appear in previous studies. The philosophical analysis of intersubjectivity constructs the theoretical possibility of subject-object integration. It is evident from some recent studies that the application of new media in cross-cultural communication forces theories to reinterpret the role division and respective boundaries of subject and object [10].

2.2. Summary of Previous Studies on Foreign Vloggers

Jin believes that with the development of the Internet, various social media platforms initiate different languages and nationalities and turn to the construction of new global media platforms where communication subjects can autonomously output cross-cultural content [11]. With the rapid expansion of China's economy, more and more foreign vloggers have become active on China's self-media platforms, attracting millions of fans with various original video content that has bridged Chinese and foreign cultures. Guo Jerry posted the first video on the social media platform Bilibili in 2017; in 2019, Guo won the title of 'Top 100 Vloggers 2018' on the Bilibili platform and was listed again in 2020. In the same year, Guo Jerry recorded 'Diary of overseas epidemic combat' in a short video, and CCTV interviewed Jerry on 'the front line of the global fight against COVID-19'. As of 15 March 2023, Guo Jerry has posted 472 videos on the Bilibili platform, covering topics such as his experiences traveling in China, tasting Chinese food, introducing the Fibo coffee company he founded in the United States, and the difference between Chinese and American lifestyles. To date, the number of fans of 'I am Guo Jerry' on Bilibili has reached 6.902 million. The cumulative number of likes has reached 44.269 million, which has received a good audience response and spread effects on domestic short video platforms.

Jin argued that some foreign vloggers are rapidly gaining popularity on domestic social media platforms: adapting to the fragmented viewing habits of the audience, selecting appealing story themes, and the ability to adapt to the new characteristics of Internet culture [11]. Taking 'I am Guo Jerry' as an example, the length of the videos is mainly distributed around 5 minutes, corresponding to the audience's habit of receiving fragmented information in modern society. During daily breaks, the audience can watch the complete videos in their spare time. Guo Jerry usually uses vivid colored texts to display the titles on the covers of the videos so that the viewers can clearly understand the main contents of the videos, and the titles can attract potential viewers to watch the videos. Second, the short video of 'I am Guo Jerry' appreciates the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, hot social issues, and among others. In the video, Guo Jerry usually appears in the center of the video as a 'reporter', holding a radio microphone to interview passers-by related to the events and report the whole event objectively. By benefiting from the unique objective perspective, the audience will refrain from expressing a strong psychological conflict with foreign cultures while watching the video. Thirdly, the videos uploaded by 'I am Guo Jerry' conform to the new characteristics of Internet culture - low context and regional weakening.

Edward Hall divided contexts into high and low contexts, i.e., an obscure and implicit context compared to a comprehensible and direct context [7]. Due to the limited length of short videos, it is doomed that vloggers will tend to convey information at a low context level if they expect to give viewers fantastic visual impressions. Regarding the spatial dimension, 'I am Guo Jerry' has preferred Bilibili. This video platform sends bullet comments, which reduces the psychological distance between anonymous communication providers in keeping with the regional weakening characteristics of Internet culture. On such platforms, viewers can interact with vloggers and other viewers by posting bullet comments while watching videos, which undoubtedly increases viewers' stickiness.

Zhou suggests that in the era of short videos, everyone is allowed to become a short video creator and disseminator, as the entry threshold for content production is decreasing [12]. Most foreign vloggers have not lived in China for long, and their understanding of Chinese reality, history, and culture is not deep and comprehensive. Meanwhile, foreign vloggers need more relevant professional awareness, skills and training than professional news media. This may contribute to the uneven quality of vloggers' choice of content, interpretation of current events, and overall level of creation of short videos, which reflect several issues worthy of attention. Firstly, in

terms of content, the videos made by foreign vloggers can lead to a superficial choice of topics, aesthetic fatigue due to homogenization, and a ‘cultural discount’ due to one-sided interpretations or misunderstandings. Secondly, in terms of ideas, some foreign vloggers are starting to learn and skillfully adopt Chinese marketing ideas. Some may be aware that as long as foreigners speak Chinese, they can master the ‘secrets of attracting traffic by fair means or foul’.

To attract more Chinese viewers and quickly increase their fan base to achieve traffic realization, some foreign vloggers rely on blindly exaggerating and bragging about Chinese technological items and traditional cultures to cater to Chinese viewers. Their pompous expressions have made rational Chinese netizens feel uncomfortable. In addition, some foreign vloggers may have problems ‘insulting China’ and stepping on China’s political ground, which has aroused the anger and criticism of Chinese netizens. The particular group of foreign vloggers has become an essential part that must be addressed in promoting communication between China and foreign countries in the Internet era. Foreign vloggers emissaries of cultural exchange between countries. At the same time, through the lens of third perspectives, they provide Chinese people with the foreigners’ views on Chinese culture, economy, society, and other aspects, to correctly recognize their shortcomings and gaps. However, Zhou pointed out that the ventures existing in developing foreign vloggers should be treated seriously, properly guided, and managed standardized, while those who insult China should be firmly prohibited [12].

Although previous studies have summarized the characteristics of cross-cultural communication and foreign vloggers, they have not analyzed in relation to the needs of audiences. Understanding the needs of audiences can help foreign vloggers to produce higher quality and more popular videos, and also to avoid video contents that audiences dislike. Therefore, it is necessary to get access to the needs of the audiences, which is analyzed in the later section of this paper.

3. Leaders of Foreign Vloggers

According to the standards, this research focuses two foreign vloggers - ‘Vlad’ and ‘I am Guo Jerry’. The social account ‘Vlad’ was created in November 2018 by a Russian named Vladislav Yuryevich Kokolevskiy. Vlad has 13.616 million followers on TikTok, 91000 followers on Bilibili, and more than 180 million accumulated likes. Viewers deride Vlad’s exaggerated performance style in the video as a ‘secret to gain traffic by fair means or foul’, which allows the bloggers to gain more followers and likes. In February 2022, Vlad suffered from cyberbullying by Chinese netizens for praising Chinese technology and traditional cuisine with weak arguments while receiving huge profits from advertisements, making Vlad a negative prototype worthy of investigation.

Another ID, ‘I am Guo Jerry’, was created by an American named Jerry Kowal in May 2017 and gained 6.9 million followers on Bilibili. Jerry uploads most of the videos on this platform and receives the most views and likes. Jerry has won the ‘Top 100 Vloggers’ in 2021 and ‘Famous Vloggers’ on Bilibili, and has been covered by and collaborated with state media such as CCTV and China Daily. Jerry has set up a business in New York called Fibo, which sells coffee drinks made from coffee beans harvested in Yunnan, China, and has helped the destitute get out of poverty. In addition, the series of Jerry’s videos cover a wide range of topics, including traditional Chinese cuisines, such as hotpots, and new technology, such as Alipay, and the personal feelings of experiencing Chinese conventions, such as traditional Chinese medicine.

Both ‘Vlad’ and ‘I am Guo Jerry’ conform to the standards and definitions of popular vloggers in new media, attracting many followers. The videos’ content genres are diverse, while the public evaluation is the opposite. There are internal connections between ‘Vlad’ and ‘I am Guo Jerry’ as similarity exists, but the comments generated ultimately reflect the difference in image construction. This research adopts comparative analysis through a questionnaire to analyze the audience analysis of foreign vloggers, the preferences of Chinese netizens, and the respondents’ views on the video

styles of ‘Vlad’ and ‘I am Guo Jerry’. To further investigate their content in the future, questionnaire and interview methods should be carried out. Despite the proliferation of several foreign video bloggers on various social media platforms, there exists a notable similarity in the video material produced by these individuals and the techniques they apply to attain popularity among Chinese viewers. Certain YouTube content creators get significant attention and earn substantial financial gains within a short timeframe, therefore highlighting the effectiveness and logical basis of the strategies they use to cultivate their online personas. The adverse consequences associated with the construction of a personal image are reflected in other persons, a subset of whom get less recognition and may even become targets of cyberbullying as a consequence. A comparative analysis is undertaken between two foreign vloggers who exhibit comparable characteristics but also demonstrate significant disparities, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the elements that contribute to their effectiveness as exemplars. The objective of this comparative analysis is to enhance our understanding of the constituent elements that constitute the exemplars of success. In the course of this inquiry, it has been determined that the involvement of two internationally renowned YouTubers, who possess a considerable amount of online prominence, will be necessary. Both individuals possess physical attributes that may be readily recognised as indicative of a cultural background distinct from that of China. Nevertheless, they elicit a diverse array of reactions.

4. Conclusion

This study employs a theoretical framework informed by contemporary academic analysis to examine the customary content of ‘I am Guo Jerry’ and ‘Vlad’. Additionally, this study aims to investigate the statistical attributes of the foreign vlogger community on Bilibili, as well as their image construction, original nationality characteristics, and educational backgrounds. It is likely that the statistics will indicate that a majority of foreign vloggers possess a high level of education, are relatively young in age, and either come from or now dwell in economically developed regions. This outcome has the potential to be one of the possible possibilities. Chinese internet users exhibit a notable inclination towards foreign video bloggers who possess the ability to maintain an impartial stance on Chinese culture and effectively communicate the underlying disparities that exist between Chinese society and other cultures. The aforementioned characteristics may be seen in worldwide video bloggers hailing from many nations, exemplified by the notable figure “I am Guo Jerry,” who garners significant admiration from Chinese online users. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that overseas YouTubers, like the individual referred to as “Vlad,” may lack impartial perspectives and unique viewpoints because to the criticism and harassment they get from Chinese internet users. China’s comprehension of other nations should be characterised by a global outlook and a forward-thinking approach, rather than being limited to certain countries, regions, or ethnic groups. Given the prevailing characteristics of contemporary social media society, individuals must recognise the need of actively pursuing cultural universality while also embracing the inherent diversity that occurs within different cultures.

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