

# Ethnic Cultural Representation in Digital Media: Motivations of Short Video Creators from Minority Groups

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## Abstract

Based on the classic theory of communication, the uses and gratifications theory, this study takes the Naxi ethnic group of southwestern China as an example to explore the motivational mechanism of ethnic minority groups participating in short video creation. A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was adopted to select 16 Naxi short video creators as the research subjects. Semi-structured interviews and the scroll back method were innovatively used to collect textual and visual data from the interviews, and in-depth analysis was conducted using textual-visual thematic analysis. The study found five main creative motivations: cultural dissemination and inheritance; coping with misunderstanding and marginalization; seeking expression and belonging; career development and economic incentives; and interests and entertainment. The results reveals a paradoxical dynamic: while digital media empowers cultural expression, it also creates pressures that can lead to digital inequality and cultural homogenization.

**Keywords:** digital empowerment, ethnic minority media participation, uses and gratifications theory, cultural dilemma

## 1. Introduction

New media technology makes it possible for information to spread across time and space, and it even empowers disenfranchised groups to make their voices heard. Such breakthroughs demonstrate the power of digital media in expanding cultural perspectives and creating new social contexts (Kramer, 2022). Since previous studies have shown that ethnic minorities lack a voice of expression in mass media and that their opportunities for expression are limited, the richness and diversity of ethnic minority groups are also ignored (Dunn, 2013). Even the presentation of indigenous groups in traditional media will aggravate stereotypes about them. People and media from non-indigenous groups have become the main informants in indigenous issues, further marginalizing the voices and views of indigenous peoples (Thomas, 2021).

Therefore, the changes in media brought about by the development of communication technology have enabled indigenous and ethnic minority groups, which were originally marginalized, to gain a certain right to speak and make their own voices heard. In a study on the digital documentation preservation of oral traditions in Indonesian indigenous villages, digitization enabled the preservation of oral traditions, not only resolving the problem of the sustainability of traditional culture but also realizing the visibility of traditional culture through digital dissemination(Hogan-Brun & O'Rourke, 2019; Palar et al., 2021).

In recent years, the global popularity and spread of short video platforms, especially TikTok, have provided new opportunities for cultural dissemination by ethnic minority groups. For example, these groups post content related to traditional ethnic culture—such as language, traditional costumes, and music—on social media platforms (McKenzie, 2022). These studies have shown that short video platforms, as represented by TikTok, play a role in protecting and promoting the ethnic culture of vulnerable groups (Falgoust et al., 2022).

Given the influence of digital media on the self-identity and cultural pride of creators, this study focuses on creators of short videos from ethnic minority groups in China. From the perspective of the uses and gratifications theory, the study focuses on the Naxi ethnic minority living in the northeast of Yunnan Province on the southwestern border of China. The study also explores the reasons why Naxi short video creators participate in short video creation. This study enhances the understanding of how ethnic minorities can master and use digital media to express themselves, as well as presenting differences in the global digital field.

## 2. Related Work

### 2.1 Minorities and Social Media Platforms

The role of the development of digital media technology in promoting ethnic minority groups and their culture has been verified in many works in the literature. Ethnic minority media is not just an alternative to mainstream media; it is also an important part of the entire media ecosystem, empowering their communities (Matsaganis & Katz, 2014). Through the application of digital media technology, the recording and cross-time and -space dissemination of traditional music, dance, and traditional handicraft techniques have been realized (Wang et al., 2024). Through the application of digital media, indigenous communities have protected oral traditional cultures that are on the verge of extinction, which has greatly resolved the problem that some traditional cultures may disappear due to the aging of oral communicators in indigenous communities (Palar et al., 2021).

Social media is also regarded as a key platform for the survival and revitalization of minority languages. Through the virtual communities established on social media, ethnic minority groups are free to use it to share resources, and communicate their culture without being restricted by time or space (Belmar & Glass, 2019). A researcher pointed out that TikTok has become an important platform on which ethnic minority youths can express themselves, while the use of the platform affects their identity and cultural representation (Fu, 2024).

Research results showed that user-generated content provides ethnic minority groups with new opportunities for self-expression, social participation, and community connection (Correa & Jeong, 2011). Recent studies have shown that short video platforms provide marginalized groups with channels to challenge mainstream narratives while promoting cultural diversity. For example, research examined how, through short video narratives, TikTok had increased the visibility of the black community, provided this group with a channel for self-expression, and provided new space for grassroots narratives (Jiang et al., 2022).

Over a decade ago, some optimistic researchers believed that new media technology affected not only the form and content of information dissemination but also, more importantly, mutual understanding and people's ways of communicating (Chen, 2012). The rise of digital platforms has made content creation more democratic, especially for minority groups such as ethnic minorities. They can bypass the mainstream traditional media, become spokespersons for their own culture, directly contact and interact with audiences across time and space. Moreover, compared with the communication barriers that language may bring, the rich "visual and auditory elements" of short videos make these videos an effective tool for the protection of ethnic minority culture and spread ethnic culture to a wider audience due to their low cost and high impact (Li et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, the high sociality of short video platforms also makes it more likely that ethnic minority creators will establish "virtual communities" while creating and disseminating content (Belmar & Glass, 2019). In a survey on social media content consumption intentions, it was found that ethnic minority groups were more inclined to interact with people of similar races to themselves (Bozkurt et al., 2021) and consume similar cultural content. Therefore, based on the platform characteristics of short videos and the characteristics of the creative behaviors of ethnic minority groups, their creative motivations may reveal different characteristics.

### 2.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory in the Digital Media Era

The uses and gratifications theory (UGT) explains how people choose and consume media to satisfy their needs, the motivations behind media behavior, and the possible outcomes of media use (Katz et al., 1973). Katz (1973) categorized people's motivations for using media into five broad categories: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension-release needs. Currently, with the popularity of social media applications (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Shake), users are also integrating various types of social media into their daily lives. Therefore, while continuing to develop this theory, a number of studies have emerged that address, from the UGT perspective, consumers of social media applications such as radio, television, web, and the Internet (Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Finn, 1997; Laor, 2022; Rubin, 1983).

Especially regarding the current uses of social media, the results of this research related to the UGT are still rich. As some studies have pointed out, the UGT remains an important research framework for understanding media consumption, especially in the digital media era (Ruggiero, 2000). Moreover, the motivations for using different social media platforms may vary. In a study on the motivations for using the three major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), researchers pointed out that the use of different platforms may have an interactive complexity, so the motivations for using media platforms also vary (Pelletier et al., 2020).

A study of YouTube video viewing showed that entertainment, social interaction, and information acquisition remained the main motivations for YouTube users to select and consume video content (Khan, 2017). It is evident that entertainment and leisure are still some of the main reasons driving the use of social media platforms (Meng & Leung, 2021). In a study on the

use of TikTok among young people, the researchers stated that the platform's algorithm-driven design and participatory culture led to the discovery of four motivations in addition to the traditional UGT: fame, self-presentation, memory preservation, and representativeness (Falgoust et al., 2022). Thus, the UGT provides a theoretical basis for social media research, continues to highlight its applicability, and effectively explains the diverse motivations of social media users.

In the context of ethnic minority groups using social media, digital media has served as a tool for cultural expression. Ethnic minorities try to attract audiences through unique cultural elements such as their language, costumes, dance, and handicrafts (Li & Kang, 2021). Short videos combine the form of audio-visual elements which, in a sense, breaks the boundaries of communication and allows them to contain more ethnic cultural information (Lyu, 2022), so their own cultural narratives can be better controlled. The latest application of the UGT shows that the media participation behaviors of users are divided into consumption, contribution, and creation according to the different levels of participation (Meng & Leung, 2021). These different levels mean that the creative expressions of ethnic minority creators will also be unique.

### *2.3 Motivation of Ethnic Minority Short Video Creators*

Few studies have examined the motivation of ethnic minority groups to participate in social media use. In academic discussions of the purposes of ethnic minority social media use, such as using the rich audio-visual experience of short videos to spread ethnic music (Lyu, 2022), social media is mainly used to confirm a group's own identity and allow them to participate in mainstream culture (Lai et al., 2022). In most studies, ethnic minority groups use social media for cultural communication and promotion purposes.

In Chen's (2023) study on how ethnic minorities used short videos to seek the sustainable development of ethnic culture, he pointed out that the motivations for creation differ according to the different identities of the groups participating in short video creation. Cultural experts participate in creation primarily to spread ethnic culture, and their motivation for creation is mainly driven by a sense of responsibility to protect traditional culture and promote the development of ethnic culture. However, for non-cultural experts, their motivation for creation is mainly driven by personal needs, and their creative behavior happens more due to financial reasons (Chen et al., 2023). This study subdivided the purpose of social media use by ethnic minority groups to a certain extent in order to enable a deeper understanding of the motivations of ethnic minority groups to create short videos.

In addition, ethnic minority groups use digital media as an empowerment tool. As a minority group, ethnic minority groups are also marginalized. There are many cases where ethnic minorities, such as the Naxi, are stereotyped in the mainstream media and their culture is misrepresented (Li et al., 2023). The influence of ethnic minority cultural content remains weak compared to that of mainstream culture (Li, 2024). Moreover, many young people are more inclined to accept mainstream culture, leading to the further weakening of traditional minority cultures (Li & Kang, 2024). By creating content that reflects their true cultural identity, these creators aim to break the stereotypes and challenge mainstream cultural narratives. More than a decade ago, early research on this topic showed that ethnic minority groups use creative behaviors to address prejudice and promote an appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015).

Through an understanding of the multiple purposes of and motivations for social media use among ethnic minority groups, previous literature has shown that ethnic minority groups have diverse motivations for media use, and even the motivations for using different media may vary depending on the user or context of use. Therefore, this study innovatively employed the uses and gratifications theory as a research perspective and adopted the Naxi ethnic group as the research object to answer the following research question: What are the motivations of the Naxi people to participate in the production of ethnic cultural short videos?

## **3. Research Methodology**

### *3.1 Research Design*

In this study, 16 Naxi short video creators were interviewed in semi-structured interviews and using the scroll back method to explore their motivations for participating in the creation and dissemination of ethnic cultural short videos. The scroll back method is a way of collecting digital traces of longitudinal social media usage history and obtaining rich media narrative opportunities (Møller & Robards, 2019). It helped in understanding, from a longer-term historical dimension, the motivations of Naxi creators to pursue their creative practice activities. The interview questions centered closely on the research topic and considered the changing factors during the creative process.

While conducting the interviews, the scroll back method was used to invite the informants to trace back to their short video creation practice. Studies have shown that the scroll back method can play a major role when used in conjunction with other research methods (Moran et al., 2024). During the interviews, the informants sometimes actively browsed their social media accounts (such as TikTok or WeChat Channels), or the researcher used own devices to access the creators social media accounts and asked questions related to their personal creative motivations. During this process, the

informants were asked to scroll back in their own social media accounts, find short video content related to their creative motivations, and tell the stories behind this content.

Then, the researcher further discussed with them the short videos they had provided in order to gain a deeper understanding of the content related to their creative motivations. The researcher could also continue to shuttle through a participant's digital space to capture data that could not be obtained in the interviews (Moran et al., 2024). By scrolling back the creators' content, the researcher observed how the informants' content had evolved over time and the changes in their creations.

Visual methods have become an innovative research method widely used in qualitative research (Glaw et al., 2017). Visual information can promote dialogue, inspire interviews, and enrich textual data collected through interviews. Importantly, visual information, especially generated by informants, has become a powerful tool to amplify their voices (Trombetta & Cox, 2022). So, during the interviews, the researcher also shown some screenshots of informants' short videos and this became important prompts for subsequent interviews. Through a multi-method validation approach, interviews and visual data were integrated to ensure the reliability of the data and the credibility of the research (Natow, 2020).

### 3.2 Recruitment and Research Ethics

This study was conducted with consideration of the informants' ability to effectively answer the research questions while taking into account the diversity of the research subjects. The study recruited research subjects through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Aziz, 2024). There were several criteria for recruiting informants: informants must be Naxi, have a short video social media account, and create and post content related to ethnic culture on the account.

The researcher first searched for short videos of Naxi ethnic culture on TikTok and WeChat Channel. By viewing each video, the researcher determined whether it was posted by a Naxi. Finally, the researcher sent messages to 15 people and received 10 responses from those willing to be interviewed. Then, during the interview process, the researcher received recommendations from the informants and found 6 more informants, finally obtained 16 informants.

Table 1. The Demography of Informants

Category	Subcategory	Number of Informants (N=16)	Percentage
Age	20 (inclusive) - 40	7	43.8%
	40(inclusive) -60	6	37.5%
	≥60	3	18.8%
Gender	Female	4	25.0%
	Male	12	75.0%
Education Level	Bachelor's	7	43.8%
	Associate's	3	18.8%
	Middle School	1	6.3%
	Primary School	5	31.3%
Operational Model	Full-time	2	12.5%
	Part-time	14	87.5%

To protect the information about the research subjects to the greatest extent, all the informants were anonymous and codes were used for them instead of names. Before the interviews began, their informed consent was obtained. All the informants were informed of the purpose of the study and that the interview process would be recorded. The researcher also promised the informants that their information would be processed and that they could withdraw at any time during the interview or refuse to answer questions that made them uncomfortable.

Due to the use of screenshots of some short videos created by the informants, the use of visual data also has ethical risks (Bäckman, 2025). The verbal consent of the informants was obtained for the use of their screenshots. Any screenshots appearing in the article that contained information about the research subjects were processed to avoid revealing their information.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The interviews were mainly conducted from March to June 2024 in a face-to-face format. The time set for each interviewee was about 1-2 hours, depending on their interests and the interview situation. After obtaining the informants' consent, the interviews were recorded to facilitate subsequent data transcription and analysis. The language of the

interview was Naxi or Mandarin, choose the language used in the interview according to the interviewee's expression habits. After each interview, it was transcribed word by word and translated into English for subsequent data coding.

Since the study involved textual interview data and the visual data of the short video screenshots, textual-visual thematic analysis (Trombetta & Cox, 2022) was used to analyze the data. This method is used to identify patterns or themes when analyzing qualitative data. Thematic analysis can be used to explore the explicit and implicit meanings in data and find the motivations of Naxi creators to create short videos on ethnic culture. The coding process involves several stages: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and conducting the final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). By repeatedly reading the transcribed interview data, the researcher became fully familiar with the interview materials, and the first round of coding was conducted in the form of theoretical coding. Then, the researcher determined the final theme through repeated cyclical searching and checking.

Some researchers have pointed out that pictures are not only data but also part of research, so they can shape the research results to a certain extent (Bäckman, 2025). Therefore, it was inevitable that the screenshots of the short videos created by the informants represented important data for this research. In the second stage of data analysis, combined with the coded themes of the interview data, the short video screenshots were viewed, the picture information was coded, and the visual data information was checked to determine whether it supported, supplemented, or contradicted the interview data (Trombetta & Cox, 2022). By reading and coding the interview text and visual data, the diversity of data sources was ensured, and the triangulation of research data was achieved (Aziz, 2024).

#### 4. Findings

Through data analysis, the study found that compared with the general population, ethnic minority groups have unique features when creating and posting ethnic culture short videos. Finally, five themes were identified as the main motivations for this group's use of short videos to produce ethnic culture.

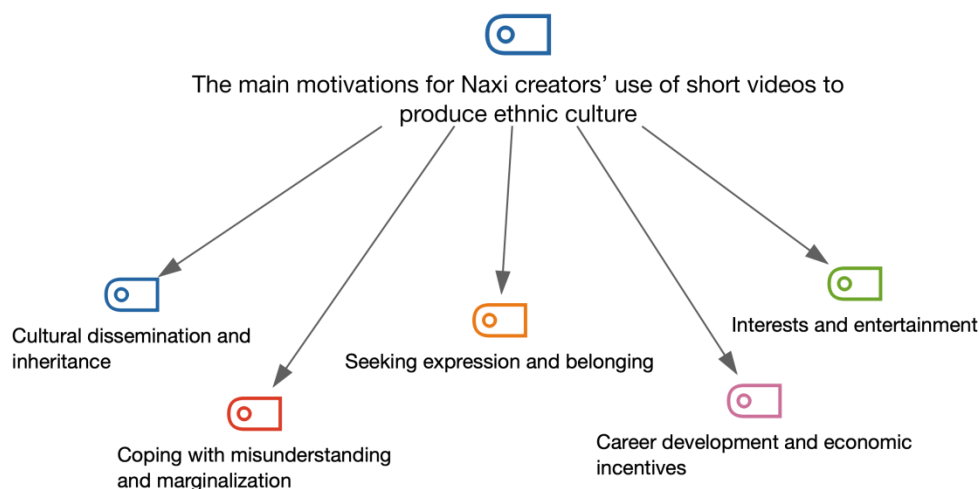


Figure 1. Research topic map

##### 4.1 Cultural Dissemination and Inheritance

Research shows, as an ethnic minority, the Naxi creators can create and disseminate various content according to their wishes. For most Naxi short video creators, the starting point for creating ethnic culture-related short videos is to spread their own ethnic culture (N=14).

Due to national pride, they want their ethnic culture to be seen and understood by more people, so they use short videos as a vehicle for external cultural dissemination. The informants hope to convey their ethnic culture through excellent audio-visual methods so that more people can see and understand their culture.

*Many people don't know about the Dongba culture, but by publicizing it in this way, the Dongba culture has been publicized quite strongly. (R15)*

Global dissemination has brought opportunities for the international spreading of ethnic minority cultures that lack dissemination channels; at the same time, however, it has further aggravated cultural homogeneity. Mother tongue inheritance, as the core of cultural inheritance, is the focus of attention. Before the study started, the researcher launched an online survey on the Naxi mother tongue, collecting more than 800 questionnaires. The statistical results show that more than 40% of the youngest generation of Naxi people no longer speak the Naxi language, and nearly 30% "can understand but can only communicate in a simple way." The specific results are shown in the Figure 2:

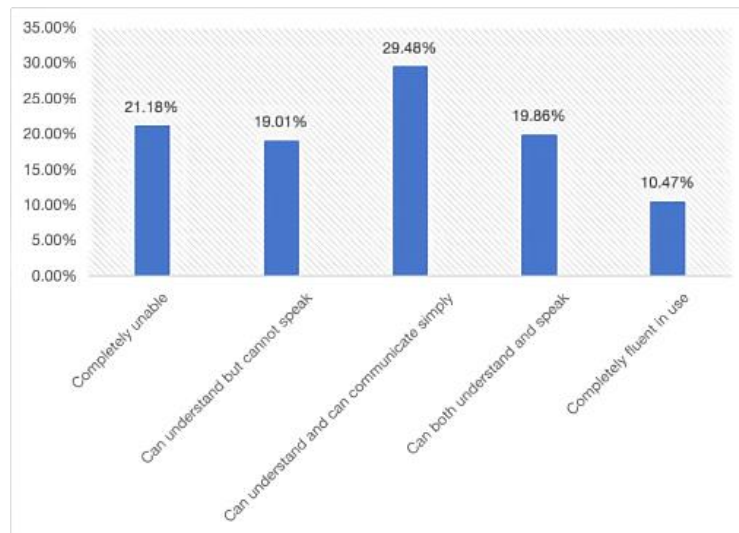


Figure 2. Statistics on whether the younger generation still speaks Naxi

Naxi creators have also truly felt the crisis facing the Naxi mother tongue. R6 stated that the youngest generation of her family no longer spoke Naxi. She was worried that the language would slowly disappear. Therefore, she began to use video to make short programs to teach the Naxi language or to dub the language onto cartoons, hoping to use various forms to attract the younger generation to learn their Naxi mother tongue.



Figure 3. Screenshot of the cartoon dubbing produced by R6

In addition, the cloud storage function on social media has provided new motivations for Naxi creators, with short video platforms becoming digital storage spaces for ethnic culture. In addition to song and dance videos, some creators uploaded book content in the form of short teaching video fragments to achieve online dissemination while also archiving them as cultural materials. Respondent R8 said that short video platforms can be used as a medium for cultural recording and storage. He described this as a "cloud art museum".

#### 4.2 Coping with Misunderstanding and Marginalization

Due to the development of social media and tourism, the dissemination and exchange of ethnic culture has been

accelerated to a certain extent. Searching for keywords such as Naxi, Naxi culture, and Dongba culture on social media, a large amount of relevant content can be found, and the posters are not only Naxi but also from other ethnic groups, with some accounts having considerable influence. It is worth noting that one-sided or incorrect information might aggravate misunderstandings about and stereotypes of ethnic minority groups in the process of widespread dissemination.

In addition, even the information presented by official media often contains stereotyped descriptions of ethnic minorities, and the dynamic development of these groups is often ignored (Lin & Jackson, 2022). In this context, Naxi short video creators hope to use their voices to actively express the true face of national culture through the emerging medium of short videos and to correct society's misunderstandings about their group (N=8).

*For example, outsiders to Lijiang ... will give you a definition at the very beginning, that Naxi men are too lazy, and only Naxi women in the suffering. In fact, they are very one-sided in their perception, so I hope I can make a little change about this. (R5)*

R5 observed that external perceptions of Naxi men often involve certain stereotypes. In response, he created videos integrating local daily life and traditional Naxi cuisine, showcasing his skills in agricultural work and cooking. Through these portrayals, he sought to challenge and dispel such biases and misconceptions. While R5 primarily addressed cognitive misconceptions, the dissemination of misleading information online has further exacerbated the public's misunderstanding of Naxi culture.

R4 produced short videos specifically aimed at correcting misinformation circulating on the Internet, some of which not only shaped external perceptions but also contributed to misunderstandings within the Naxi community itself. R4 created a short video debunking the misconception that "frogs are the totem of the Naxi people". Using concise language and visually engaging content, he effectively clarified the facts. Motivated by such concerns, these creators have sought to leverage the accessibility of short videos to rectify social misinterpretations and biases regarding Naxi culture.



Figure 4. "The frog is not the totem of the Naxi people"

Within the digital landscape, Naxi creators have become active informants in content production, yet their influence remains relatively limited. The research findings indicated that among the surveyed Naxi content creators, the most influential account had fewer than 100,000 followers—significantly lower than mainstream internet influencers, who have millions of followers. Despite this disparity, Naxi creators remain committed to amplifying their voices and enhancing the visibility of their cultural heritage.

*This era has given you such good modern technology. Lijiang is marginalized, and Naxi culture is marginalized. Our young people should actively use it to spread Lijiang and Naxi culture. (R12)*



These creators acknowledge the limitations of their current influence, but their deep concern for the preservation of their cultural identity has intensified their efforts. They view their short video initiatives as merely a starting point, hoping to inspire more young Naxi to engage in content creation, expand the reach of cultural dissemination, and contribute to the long-term preservation of their ethnic heritage.

#### 4.3 Seeking Expression and Belonging

Another key motivation driving Naxi creators to share ethnic cultural short videos is their pursuit of a sense of belonging and community. The trans-spatial dissemination characteristic of short videos enables Naxi individuals scattered across different regions to connect virtually, fostering an online cultural space (N=13).



Figure 5. Shows that a video of R2's Naxi cuisine received positive feedback from fans

Digital media cannot directly determine identity, but it creates a communicative space in which users can construct identity and a sense of belonging (Dhoest et al., 2012). Naxi creators aim to ensure that younger generations inherit their ethnic culture, and short video platforms provide an interactive space conducive to such cultural exchange. As demonstrated in Figure 5, R2 posted a video featuring traditional Naxi cuisine, which received numerous comments from viewers reminiscing about their various hometowns and local flavors.

This interaction fosters an emotional resonance between creators and audiences. Additionally, in response to the gradual decline of the Naxi language, the dissemination of mother-tongue content in short videos strengthens emotional connections among ethnic members, fostering a sense of familiarity and identity. Meanwhile, such videos serve as an effective means of transmitting the Naxi language online.

Short videos featuring mother-tongue songs, folklore, and dramatic storytelling not only appeal to youths but also enhance the accessibility of cultural heritage. Some creators have observed that compared to traditional textbooks, engaging short-form videos are more effective in teaching Naxi culture. Consequently, educational content in short videos, such as language lessons, calligraphy tutorials, and traditional singing techniques, has become an essential method of cultural preservation.





Figure 6. Screenshot of a short video showing Naxi language teaching

The dissemination of ethnic culture through short videos remains a creator-driven initiative. Some creators have gone further by establishing fan communities within these platforms, bringing together individuals who appreciate and engage with Naxi culture. The formation of such communities enhances the sense of belonging for both creators and audiences, providing them with a tangible and interactive cultural identity. Ultimately, through short video creation and community-based cultural exchanges, Naxi creators not only transmit their cultural heritage but also reinforce their ethnic identity and collective belonging.

#### 4.4 Career Development and Economic Incentives

Through data analysis, the researcher found that while Naxi creators exhibit a strong sense of ethnic identity and a responsibility to share their cultural heritage, they also have other motivations. These vary based on the professional backgrounds of the creators, with some linking their short video production to career development or direct economic incentives (N=10).

Among the 16 informants interviewed, only two were full-time content creators, while the remaining 14 engaged in short video production as a part-time endeavor. This indicates that producing ethnic cultural short videos is a viable career option. For full-time creators, financial sustainability was a key motivation. R5, for instance, became a full-time short video blogger in April 2023. Initially, his content lacked a clear direction and primarily consisted of personal life vlogs.

However, after one of his food preparation videos gained significant attention, he shifted his focus to food content. Compared to other food creators, R5's videos are distinctive due to his use of the Naxi language, traditional clothing, and highly localized lifestyle elements. His consistent use of his mother tongue has become a defining characteristic of his videos, reflecting his dedication to cultural preservation. However, beyond cultural preservation, he must also consider economic factors. He strategically aligns his video content with his products to promote sales effectively.



Figure 6. Shows a screenshot of a short video of R5 selling pomegranates and pomegranate products.

Similarly, R10, another full-time creator, co-founded a studio with friends to enhance the professionalism of and creative techniques in their short video production. Their broader range of services allows them to generate a more stable income. Since their entrepreneurship is closely linked to short video production, financial incentives also play a crucial role in their creative process. However, they have found a successful balance between economic viability and cultural preservation.

*We are basically using this kind of humor method to do some policy propaganda for government departments, such as legal propaganda combined with ethnic, [profiting] through this way. (R10)*

These examples illustrate that while ethnic cultural short video production is deeply rooted in cultural preservation, economic and career considerations also shape the content strategies of creators, demonstrating the intersection of heritage dissemination and financial sustainability.

#### 4.5 Interests and Entertainment

For Naxi creators, posting short videos is a way of not only documenting their daily lives but also showcasing and preserving their ethnic culture. Among the informants, "personal interest" was frequently cited as the primary reason for initiating short video creation (N=9).

*It was purely my hobby. I feel very happy when I perform in the video. So, when I first came into created short videos, I feel happiness. (R5)*

The intrinsic motivation derived from personal interests allows these creators to find joy and sustained enthusiasm in the process of video production and sharing. Their passion fuels their engagement, making the creative process a fulfilling experience. Naxi creators, in particular, aim to present their culture in an engaging and lighthearted manner, enhancing its appeal and accessibility (N=7).

*When we sing songs in our mother tongue, we are passing on our mother tongue invisibly. It plays a certain role in passing on the mother tongue, and it is very crucial. (R16)*

From their perspective, cultural dissemination need not necessarily adopt a formal or serious tone. Utilizing entertainment as a medium can lower the barriers to cultural transmission and acceptance, making it easier for younger generations from their ethnic group to engage with their heritage. Additionally, this approach can transcend cultural boundaries, allowing individuals from other ethnic groups to connect with and appreciate Naxi culture. For instance, R10's short videos are highly entertaining, incorporating personalized elements such as background music, humorous and recognizable voiceovers, and culturally resonant features.

Thus, entertainment-driven cultural content serves as an effective bridge for engaging both intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic audiences. By blending cultural authenticity with enjoyable and relatable storytelling, these creators enhance the visibility of their ethnic traditions while ensuring that cultural preservation remains a dynamic and evolving process.

## 5. Discussion

This study innovatively applies the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) to examine the digital media content creation practices of ethnic minorities. Through an exploratory study of Naxi cultural short video creators, five key motivations were identified: cultural dissemination and inheritance; coping with misunderstanding and marginalization; seeking expression and belonging; career development and economic incentives; and interests and entertainment. These findings not only expand the application boundaries of the UGT in cross-cultural contexts but also provide a new theoretical perspective for understanding the media practices of ethnic minority groups in the digital age.

First, Naxi creators exhibit a strong sense of cultural pride and a responsibility to preserve and share their heritage. This motivation has been corroborated by previous studies (Chen et al., 2023). While prior research has established that self-presentation and memory documentation are common motivations for young people's use of social media (Falgoust et al., 2022), such practices are often individually focused. In contrast, Naxi creators center their expressions and recordings around their community and collective identity.

Traditional mainstream media often fail to adequately represent the cultural diversity and distinct identities of ethnic minorities, leading to their underrepresentation and limited visibility in the public sphere (Le, 2015). In this regard, digital media empower these groups with a platform for self-representation and agency. Many studies have shown that short video platforms provide ethnic minorities with a space in which to showcase their unique cultures, enabling widespread dissemination through user-generated content (Li et al., 2021). Consequently, Naxi creators' use of short video platforms to disseminate cultural content aims to increase cultural exposure, claim discursive space, and counteract the risk of further marginalization. This also reveals that cultural resistance in the digital age is no longer just about correcting content but also an effort to reconstruct the communication power structure.

The simplification and homogenization of ethnic minority representation in traditional media can reinforce cultural stereotypes (Lai, 2024). Such portrayals not only shape public perceptions of these groups but also influence their self-identification. Prior research has demonstrated that media representations impact self-perception and self-esteem among ethnic minorities (Behm-Morawitz, 2020), which in turn weakens national pride and creates a group inferiority complex (Ramasubramanian et al., 2017). By narrating their cultural heritage through their own lens, Naxi creators actively challenge the biases inherent in the mainstream media and correct misleading information on the Internet. This act of self-representation combats prejudices and fosters mutual understanding among different communities, contributing to cultural diversity.

As discussed above, the strong motivation among ethnic minority groups to share their cultural heritage stems from their identification with their cultural and ethnic identity (Behm-Morawitz, 2020). Relevant research shows that ethnic minority media can effectively construct an "imagined community", promote national identity, and correct stereotypes in the mainstream media (Yu & Atrchian, 2024). Beyond dissemination, Naxi creators aim to create virtual spaces where dispersed members of their ethnic group can reconnect and collectively engage with their heritage. Some informants expressed a desire to produce short videos that would resonate with their ethnic community. Comments on their videos further highlight the positive reception of their content, reinforcing their sense of cultural identity and belonging.

This study also found that while short video creation is a casual aspect of everyday life for many Naxi creators, sustained and high-quality content production requires continuous effort and investment. For dedicated content creators, producing spontaneous, unstructured videos is insufficient to maintain audience engagement and achieve broader objectives. Career aspirations and financial considerations serve as key drivers for account growth and content quality. Chen (2023) differentiated between cultural experts and non-experts in digital content production, noting that cultural experts primarily create short videos for cultural preservation, whereas non-experts often have economic motivations (Chen et al., 2023).

However, this study suggests that even cultural experts may have career-related motivations and that, conversely, non-expert creators also navigate a balance between cultural preservation and economic sustainability. This complex motivation shows that in the context of the highly economicized digital platforms, it is difficult for the national cultural dissemination behaviors of individuals to maintain the attribute of "de-commodification".

A study on the role of digital media in preserving minority cultures in southeastern China highlighted how digital media practices could inject new vitality into traditional cultures, fostering innovation through the integration of modern elements (Liu & Zheng, 2023). Similarly, the revitalization of Naxi culture necessitates the blending of tradition with modernity. This form of media practice requires economic support and policy backing, making career development and financial incentives an integral component of the creative pursuits of Naxi creators.

Compared to the other motivations, interest and entertainment are more individualized. In previous studies on social

media usage motivations, entertainment needs have always been the core motivation for users to use media (Camilleri & Falzon, 2021). Social media users are not only consumers but also content producers. While entertainment is the primary motivation for media consumption (Falgoust et al., 2022), this study focuses on Naxi creators as media producers. Nevertheless, some creators engage in short video production primarily for enjoyment, treating it as a personal interest rather than a strategic effort. Their creative process involves continuous experimentation, learning, and adaptation to enhance the reach and engagement of their videos while also keeping up with evolving digital landscapes.

Currently, the reach of Naxi creators' short videos remains relatively limited since they are largely confined to their ethnic community and often even to local Naxi speakers. Language barriers and technical limitations in video production hinder cross-cultural dissemination. To overcome this issue, it is imperative for ethnic minority creators to enhance their digital skills and media participation capabilities. For minority cultural dissemination—by carefully balancing tradition and modernity, minority groups can innovate their cultural expressions while safeguarding against excessive cultural homogenization.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore the motivations behind Naxi creators' participation in ethnic cultural short video production through the lens of the uses and gratifications theory (UGT), providing insights into the media behavior of ethnic minority groups. The findings indicate that while Naxi creators share some common motivations with the general population regarding their use of social media, their engagement also exhibits distinct characteristics.

The primary motivations identified are cultural dissemination and inheritance, with these creators demonstrating a strong sense of cultural identity and responsibility. For them, the creation and sharing of cultural content are integrated into their daily lives as a natural extension of self-expression. This proactive sharing behavior represents a means of self-representation and a response to the challenges of globalization, urbanization, and cultural homogenization. Furthermore, by sharing their cultural heritage, these creators help reunite dispersed members of their ethnic community, fostering a shared cultural narrative and strengthening ethnic identity.

However, sustaining content creation requires both time and financial investment. As a result, the linkage between short video production, career development, and economic incentives is essential to ensure the continuity of content generation. This study also revealed that despite the uniqueness of Naxi creators' practices, interest and entertainment remain important motivations for their engagement with social media, as observed in broader digital media consumption patterns.

In the digital era, although ethnic minorities can access platforms for cultural expression, the digital divide remains a persistent issue. More critically, this divide has evolved beyond access to technology and now encompasses disparities in digital skills and the ability to leverage digital media for meaningful engagement and tangible benefits, necessitating further exploration of potential solutions.

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## **Authors contributions**

Li Li designed the research, was responsible for data collection, and wrote the manuscript. Dr. Aishah supervised the research, reviewed the manuscript. Dr. Hani reviewed the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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