Exploring the Role of Productive Audiences in Promoting Intercultural Understanding: A Study of Chinese YouTube Influencer Liziqi's Channel

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Abstract

This exploratory study on YouTube videos investigates the role of Chinese YouTube channels created by influential individuals in facilitating intercultural communication and understanding. Specifically, it explores how YouTube viewers respond, interact, and express their views on Chinese culture. The nature of audience engagement with intercultural communication was explored through the lens of creative textual engagement using a qualitative research approach and textual analysis of five hundred video comments on one of the most subscribed Chinese YouTube channel (i.e., Liziqi). Audience's interpretation goes through a logic of consumption from cognition to emotion to attitudinal change and behavioural intention; the process by an audience promotes intercultural understanding and acquires an identity. Additionally, the interactive relationship between the text and the audience is reciprocal and democratic. Audiences can incorporate and form interpretive communities, regardless of their cultural composition, and cooperate to produce a common meaning regardless of varying interpretations. This study contributes to extending the concept of Fiske's productive audience to intercultural communication and broadens the path for an audience to negotiate and understand Chinese culture.

Keywords: productive audience, intercultural communication, China, social media influencer, YouTube

1. Introduction

As social media expands globally with the widespread popularity of many platforms, it has become a significant conduit for intercultural communication. The dissolution of physical boundaries places individuals within an intercultural society, fosters mutual learning and growth, and facilitates the development of meaningful relationships by promoting understanding and respect for diverse cultures. Numerous social media influencers utilize these platforms to enhance their cultural visibility thus impacting on intercultural communication (Kim, Caidi & Chah, 2019; Lee, 2021; Lee & Cho, 2021). In Korea, Japan, and China, for instance, influencers such as *sweetandtastyTV*, *Sharmeleon*, 李子柒 *Liziqi*, and 滇西小哥 *DianxiXiaoge* have made significant contributions to local cultural communication. Despite this, there have been varied reactions to their videos. The comments posted in response to their videos can shed light on the audience's perception and comprehension of diverse cultures.

In 2019, Liziqi, a Chinese social media influencer, gained a significant following on account of her unique style, approach, and subject matter. Presently, she ranks as the top influencer in China on the global social media platform YouTube, with over 17.1 million subscribers and a total of 3 billion views. Liziqi's content covers diverse topics ranging from sowing and harvesting grains, to the preparation of seasonal foods across spring, summer, autumn, and winter, consolidating traditional Chinese cultural narratives of everyday life and offering insights into China's rich civilization from the perspective of an ordinary citizen. Thus, she has unlocked a new dimension of intercultural communication, wherein individuals function as representatives of diverse communication subjects.

Many studies of social media influencers focus solely on their activities and related content (Castillo-Abdul, Romero-Rodríguez & Balseca, 2021; Kolo & Haumer, 2018; Zou, Zhang & Tang, 2021), but do not the interact with their followers. This approach assumes that social media influencers behaviours' primarily drive audience behaviour and influencers' followers have no motivations that influence their engagement with influencer content. Likewise, many previous studies primarily focused on Western cultures, particularly those in the US and Europe, which overlooks significant differences in audience behaviour and attitudes across diverse cultures and on topics such as lifestyle and life attitudes. Although research on social media influencers has provided valuable insights into influencer behaviour and its

impact on consumer behaviour, further research is needed to consider the complexities of multicultural audiences.

This qualitative study explores how productive YouTube audiences can promote Chinese cultural understanding by interacting with Chinese culture-related content. It emphasizes the 'bottom-up' production and consumption behaviour of viewers as producers and focuses on the process of meaning construction by viewers and their intercultural interaction with social media influencers. By applying the concept of productive audience, this paper examines how YouTube viewers respond, interact, and express their views on Chinese culture: a method that can be used to identify and study new forms of intercultural communication. This study goes beyond the 'quantified audience' (Tandoc & Thomas, 2015, p. 247), examines practices from a micro perspective, and provides information to help understand the diversity and differences hidden behind small things and their potential through empirical analysis. It is anticipated that the results of this study will broaden the path for the YouTube audience to negotiate and understand Chinese culture and advance the influence of Chinese culture beyond Asia.

2. YouTube as a Platform for Intercultural Communication

YouTube is rapidly transforming into an important platform for intercultural communication, a new global cultural realm where global audiences can share experiences, opinions, and collectively watch, evaluate, and interact with others (Burke & Snyder, 2008; Lange, 2007; Traynor, 2020). This exchange of information allows for a more interactive and dialogic approach to communication, where both content creators and their audiences have the opportunity to learn from each other and build relationships based on shared interests (Sundstrom & Levenshus, 2017).

YouTube enables the expression and sharing of cultural diversity, including traditional practices, beliefs, and values, which can help to preserve and promote cultural heritage. Viewers can also learn about different cultures thus fostering intercultural understanding and empathy. Additionally, YouTube users can access and engage with cultural products and create new symbols and concepts that enhance the significance of an original culture (Shifman, 2012; Xu et al., 2016; Xu, Park & Park, 2015). The rise of Chinese YouTubers, who leverage the country's rich cultural resources to create innovative content, is an increasingly prominent novel global trend. Top Chinese content creators such as 李子柒 *Liziqi*, 办公室小野 *Ms Yeah*, and 滇西小哥 *Dianxi Xiaoge* have innovated a form of discourse expression on YouTube and established a new channel for China's global communication through personal influence.

Liziqi, a Chinese girl, set the Guinness World Record for 'the most subscribed Chinese YouTube channel' with 11.4 million subscribers in July 2020. Her YouTube channel currently has 17.1 million subscribers, considerably more than any other Chinese media account. Many YouTubers, such as *Bếp Trên Đỉnh Đồi*, 낭숲 *nyangsoop*, and *Kimi*, regard this girl as an amiable role model. Chinese media has recently included her intercultural communication into the official discourse of boosting cultural confidence and national cultural soft power. Liziqi is now a representative of China who possesses a distinct national colour and national cultural identity, and her video is a symbolic presence (viewed more than 3 billion times on YouTube between 2017 and 2022) similar to how The Dancing Horse Gangnam Style (GS) became synonymous with K-pop culture in 2012 (with over 2 billion views online in 2012 and 2013) (Kim, 2013; Xu, Park & Park, 2017).

YouTube has the potential to foster tolerance, respect, and cooperation among people of different cultural backgrounds by promoting intercultural understanding. The Chinese YouTuber Liziqi showcases a 'pre-industrial' utopia with elements of traditional Chinese culture, where viewers participate in a ritual of viewing, discussing, and sharing. Carey (2007) argues that a ritual is a model in which communication becomes a formalized process that allows a community to share a common belief. This process involves constructing, sustaining, and transforming reality, with the primary goal of sharing ideas, experiences, and values. The YouTube cultural field has been utilized globally to facilitate complex discussions and co-construction of meaning through the internet, particularly on social media platforms.

So why are Liziqi's videos universally appealing? How does a girl from rural China and her video end up being analysed and interpreted by international audiences? How well do people from various cultural backgrounds and frameworks comprehend the Chinese culture and stories portrayed in Liziqi's videos? It is important to scrutinize complex interactions between videos and their audiences.

3. The Interaction and Engagement of a Productive Audience

Audiences are most often conceptualized as 'a large, loosely connected mass on the receiving end of the media' (Webster & Phalen, 2013, p. 1). They are portrayed as skilled cultural readers and meaning-makers who transcend ideological manipulation (Harms & Dickens, 1996) and also participants in the dynamics of social and institutional structures (Webster, 1998). But the development of social media technologies has shifted our understanding of audiences to more positive concepts such as 'contributors' or 'producers' (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2021; Wolfgang, Blackburn & McConnell, 2020). Audiences create positive content in a variety of ways (Ji et al., 2019; Raney et al., 2018), demonstrating the audience is not simply a passive group of people who consume content, but rather an active group that can generate and share ideas, information, and creativity.

As social media has evolved globally, it has introduced new features that facilitate audience participation and discussion, creating opportunities for intercultural contact and communication. This increased participation has also led to a greater appreciation of individual contributions, which has helped to promote diversity in a modern media society (Chen, 2012). Additionally, audiences now play a significant role in interacting with, engaging with, and interpreting media content, utilizing various symbolic resources to decode information (Das, 2017).

Fiske proposed (2010) the concept 'productive audience' as a new audience type. The productive audience subverts communicator-centred theory by claiming that when people consume cultural goods, they can connect their existing cultural knowledge and the video text based on their social experiences, thus creating their culture. The Internet is an excellent 'breeding ground' for productive audiences (Baya, 2013). The blurring of lines between producer and audience expands the possibilities for audience involvement in media production (Graham, 2018). There is room for all interpretations in the open web production text: a mobile space where netizens create and link the site and its meaning. The audience can free themselves from ideology's control, freely spread information, and enjoy themselves in their small media circle.

Currently, audiences generally interact and participate using online comments. An analysis of online audience interpretation allows a researcher to investigate the mutual understanding of YouTube audiences from various cultural backgrounds and comments texts to demonstrate that audience behaviour is a thoughtful way of interacting. Audiences can actively produce content and form new connections and communities through text (Ford, Green & Jenkins, 2013). The need for participation from a growing number of people can motivate them to create valuable products that can be disseminated by leveraging the power and possibilities of networked collective action.

Productive audience research has shifted away from television and radio to social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter (Martinez-Martínez & Martínez-Espinosa, 2016; Orbegozo-Terradillos, Larrondo-Ureta & Morales-I-Gras, 2020; Salonen et al., 2022; Sciarretta, 2019). Comparatively, less attention has been paid to YouTube. Although audience research is still an important field in the Internet era, research projects involving active audiences are limited (Livingstone, 2015). This paper aims to investigate the consumption practice of productive audiences, with a particular focus on the bottom-up approach that emphasizes audience interaction and engagement. The study explores the meaning that audiences create and connect with the text to gain a deeper understanding of how audiences actively participate in the consumption process.

4. Methodology

The foundation of this study lies in a constructivist perspective that emphasizes how sociocultural contexts shape the production and reproduction of experiences (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2015). This research study adopted a flexible design utilizing an inductive qualitative method to explore the interpretations of YouTube viewers from different cultures. This approach is highly sensitivity towards textual materials, and generates insights, concepts, and understandings from data patterns. The study employed a bottom-up construction path for textual analysis (McKee, 2001) primarily focusing on clarifying the audience's role as decoders. Moreover, the entire interpretation process to establish connections between analytical concepts, empirical findings, and interpretations was supported by citations from authentic sources.

The information utilized in this investigation was gathered from the remarks' segment of Liziqi's YouTube channel. The audience's comments are a valid source of insight into their perspectives, emotions, and beliefs. YouTube offers two options for checking comments: 'Latest comments' and 'Popular comments.' The 'Latest comments' option sorts comments based on their posting date, while 'Popular comments' sorts comments according to the number of 'thumbs up' and 'thumbs down' they receive, their posting date, and the number of replies they generate. When comments are sorted by 'popularity,' users often engage in discussions by replying to one another's comments like a 'discussion post.' These interactions, known as 'discussion posts,' are valuable to users, and researchers alike who can use them to uncover valuable insights. Python software was used to write the program that used YouTube channel's 'popular comment' ranking to crawl user IDs and comment content for data controllability and in-depth research.

Purposive sampling was used to select five videos (Kumiss and roasted whole lamb, Spring festival dish, Make a peach blossom crown with silk flowers, Scholars four treasures, Shu embroidery) from Liziqi's content that had a high cognition of foreign viewers. The aim was to obtain a diverse sample of Liziqi's videos and gather more information from audience comments. Python software program was used to crawl 100 comments from each of the five videos using the 'popular comments' ranking, resulting in a total of 500 comments. Subsequently, the researcher captured various audience perspectives and opinions and gained insight into their attitudes and behaviours by individually coding each of the 500 comments. The researcher also translated 17 languages into English for uniform coding to ensure consistent coding during the data analysis phase. Finally, collected comments were managed using NVivo12.

In this study, we used NVivo12 to code important words, phrases, and expressions from 500 comments, extract relevant concepts, and test the inter-coder reliability. Firstly, we familiarized ourselves with the data by repeatedly watching the

videos and reading its comments to identify the text's significant aspects. Secondly, we generated a list of codes through open coding, a process which involves breaking the data into smaller segments, labelling them with codes, and organizing them into categories or themes. Thirdly, generated themes were reviewed and refined by critically examining the codes and categories to identify commonalities and differences. Finally, the researcher wrote up the results by clearly and concisely presenting the themes and their supporting evidence. These steps ensured that the textual analysis was systematic, rigorous, and accurately represented the data.

NVivo software was used in the text analysis phase to test inter-coder reliability. Two coders who were trained on the coding categories independently coded the audience comments. NVivo's 'coding comparison query' was then used to calculate the agreement between their codes and yield a percentage of agreement for each node and file combination. We then exported the results to MsExcel to calculate the average agreement for each coding node. The inter-coder reliability was 98.95%, indicating highly reliable coding.

5. Results

Three overarching themes emerged: audience's cognition, audience's emotional tendency, and audience's attitude. The overarching themes were drawn from 11 main themes and 69 sub-themes. The number and frequency of reference points and the number of node material sources in NVivo reflect a node's importance in the comments' text.

5.1 Audience's Cognition

'Audience's cognition' refers to an audience's varying comprehension of the videos' content through the perception of symbols, i.e., the new meaning generated from interacting with the text. This overarching theme has three main themes: 'The image of Liziqi,' 'Chinese culture,' and 'Idyllic lifestyle,' drawn from 21 sub-themes and 379 reference points.

5.1.1 The Image of Liziqi

Liziqi presents the perfect image of a hardworking, versatile, independent, powerful, and knowledgeable woman; an image that allows the audience to see a woman's endless possibilities. She lives a healthy, free, simple, and happy life in the beautiful countryside away from the city's noise. Despite experiencing numerous adversities, she maintains her reverence for nature, appreciation for life, and commitment to love, thus giving those who are suffering great strength and spiritual inspiration.

> *HoHoBa LOVE*: Under all the difficulties, you can still stick to your dreams, and take action to overcome all kinds of obstacles and difficulties around you. I have to admire Ziqi's extraordinary perseverance!

The audience praised this all-powerful girl and deemed her a treasure, role model, and worthy object of study for the entire world especially in spreading Chinese culture. She ceaselessly explores China's rich culture, particularly its intangible cultural heritage, and devotes a great deal of time and effort to acquire skills from traditional artisans. She has been regarded as the typical representative of China and an inheritor, transmitter, and protector of Chinese culture. The audience has praised her for promoting local culture since she spreads a wealth of new knowledge.

> *Wayward Idjit*: I know Liziqi is the pride of China, but I think she is a treasure to all of humanity as well. She is absolutely incredible.

> *Mikaela Madrigal*: She's like an heir of a traditional Chinese family that went from generations to generation. Art, culture, medicine, martial arts, culinary and everything traditional in Chinese has been passed down to her....

In the global film and television works, Chinese culture portrayed an image that was backward, lacked humanity, and placed women under the oppression of feudal forces. For example, the first nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film: *Ju Dou*; the Silver Lion at the 48th Venice International Film Festival: *Raise the Red Lantern*. The female images were cowardly, bullied, and oppressed. In comparison, Liziqi appears different because she depicts an ancient hermit living in the mountains with the personality of a strong and independent modern woman. Liziqi's varied style gives the audience a new perspective on women: women who work on the land are not necessarily oppressed but are more likely to be free and joyful. In the eyes of the audience, Liziqi is hardworking, optimistic, free, independent, beautiful, intelligent, persistent, and versatile, keeping with the modern pursuit of female values and the fantasy of perfect feminism.

5.1.2 Chinese Culture

The audiences were keenly aware of cultural symbols, and developed a new cognition of Chinese food culture, handicraft culture, filial culture, Mongolian culture, and rural culture. They mostly talked about Chinese food culture and handicraft culture.

The audience began gaining knowledge of the diversity of Chinese food culture, including the selection of ingredients, preparation methods, the use of utensils, the matching of colours, and the naming of dishes. They were interested in various ingredients and condiments, such as potatoes, persimmons, lotus roots, strawberries, and chestnuts, which they

often used. Nevertheless, the utensils shown in the video, such as bread kilns, clay stoves, Chinese kitchen knives, and chopping boards were unfamiliar to most viewers. They then asked: 'Can someone tell me the name of the pot she used at the beginning of the video?' 'What is that bear-like thing? Is it an oven?' Some audiences favoured certain utensils with unusual shapes and functions. They adored the frequently used kitchen knife, not because of its sharpness or design, but because Liziqi used it to prepare all kinds of food; a task that seemed unbelievable to the audience.

Eating is the most basic behavioural activity among humans. Food symbols shown in videos draw people with shared experiences, create shared spaces of cultural meaning, and promote intercultural communication. Based on an analysis of the comments, audiences worldwide have similar eating habits and food preparation methods. These similarities allow audiences them to assess and comprehend Chinese food culture despite their cultural differences. The food culture in China is very rich. Everything from the ingredients used, the method of preparation, colour combinations, or the names of dishes, reflects the Chinese people's philosophy of life and wisdom. After watching Liziqi's videos, her audience advanced their understanding of Chinese culture.

> *Walter Tian*: Culinary arts in its highest form. It's no longer about food, but Chinese poetry, Chinese culture, and Chinese tradition, all combined into one masterful presentation. This is the best video out of all Ziqi's production.

As regards Chinese handicraft culture, cultural symbols such as 'Shu embroidery,' 'peach blossom hair crown,' and 'paper cutting' also broadened the audience's awareness of the diversity of Chinese culture. The audience's grasp of Chinese cuisine was better than that of Chinese handicrafts. Nonetheless, their curiosity was piqued, and they developed a cognitive thirst that was regarded as a catalyst for intercultural communication. A portion of the audience had a basic understanding of Chinese culture but lacked in-depth knowledge. This cognitive gap was filled by Liziqi's videos which further sparked a greater interest in Chinese culture.

> *Raya Holder* deepened her knowledge of the 'Four Treasures' by watching the video: I have seen the Chinese ink being used many times on banners during cultural festivals in (Chinatown NY). I had no idea that it took years to be made!

Liziqi constructs a scene with strong oriental characteristics using daily symbols that stimulates the audience's cognitive thirst. In general, cultural content related to people's lives, such as food and clothing, is more likely to attract an audience's attention and promote discussion. Such cultural symbols are more approachable in international communication. Culture is never abstract but concrete and vivid. Culture is the pattern of meaning inherited from history and embodied in symbols. It is a system of inherited concepts expressed by symbols by which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their perceptions and attitudes toward life (Geertz, 1973).

5.1.3 Idyllic Lifestyle

Every shot and frame, such as the blue sky, the layered mountains, the fresh vegetation, the golden rice fields, and the colourful flowers, mesmerised the viewers. Audiences found Liziqi's drawing spring water in the hills, picking seasonal vegetables in the area, fishing in the pond, raising sheep in the yard, designing, cutting, and sewing her clothes, and taking the initiative to learn traditional skills from the master a desirable lifestyle. In the eyes of the audience, this kind of life was 'paradise,' 'fairy tale,' 'fairyland,' 'utopia,' and 'dream,' which was exactly how city dwellers who wished to escape the city aspired to live. Urbanisation and industrialization result in severe consequences such as global warming, environmental pollution, and resource depletion which were brought to realization by some audience members. The natural, eco-friendly, green way of life depicted in Liziqi's videos and the friendly interaction with animals provoked audiences' reflection on the significance of respecting nature, caring for nature, and conforming to natural laws.

> *Emma*: I like her video so much because she treats nature like her friends. See how she picks up the flowers without damaging them. This is really the ideal way to live with our nature.

Viewers envied Liziqi's ability to get free food for using her skills. They also learnt about the origin and growing process of food ingredients. Societal development and the alteration of the natural environment have increased the demand and need for healthy food. People are willing to spend a great deal of money to obtain pure and natural ingredients that do not contain additives. The video's organic food and eco-friendly lifestyle inspire the audience to discuss environmental protection.

> *Mustofa Umarella*: No waste at all, if everyone could live like this with raw natural materials, the earth would be a better place.

> *Wendy White*: Greatest pre-modern culture I have ever studied, seen, or witnessed. This is a culture that really knows how to manage our Earth environment.

Liziqi's videos allow viewers to experience the simplicity and beauty of traditional rural life, guide them to slow down, follow nature, and savour the essence of life as opposed to the modern life of pursuing immediate consumption and fast

fashion. When the busy and trivial life became simple and the dinner table was filled with a warm atmosphere, people could temporarily escape from the confusion and panic brought by the epidemic and enter a self-controlled life state. Beautiful natural scenery, original fresh ingredients, environmentally friendly eating utensils, subsistence farming, and close interaction with animals were the ideal idyllic life for the audience. Liziqi's videos have become a buffer for life, comforting the tired souls of modern people.

5.2 Audience's Emotional Tendency

'Emotional tendency' refers to an audience's physical and mental experiences while watching a video. Emotional tendency is a complex but stable physiological evaluation and experience that is in harmony with introverted feelings including happiness, love, hate, fear, and others. The overarching theme 'audience's emotional tendency,' had three main themes, 16 sub-themes, and 336 reference points. The study illustrated three types of viewers' emotional expressions: positive, neutral, and negative displayed by 92.3%, 5.9%, and 1.8% of comments, respectively.

Liziqi's videos provide the audience with pleasurable visual and auditory sensory experiences. Dynamic images, graphic elements, and symbolic symbols promote viewers' perception about Chinese culture. By integrating visual and auditory senses, including lens design, setting the scene, distributing colours, sorting music, and editing montage, the videos provide a positive aesthetic experience to the viewer and elicit favourable feelings of love, gratitude, and happiness.

> *Татьяна Сорокина*: Excellent videos, I watch with pleasure!

> *Ayman Qureshi*: The video, editing, angles, composition and cinematography make the video look so beautiful but trust me this is not all beauty it's hard work.

> *WANG TT*: Thank you for the video, let us feel the temperature of life.

Regarding the shooting techniques, most content adopted fixed lens framing and time-lapse photography was used to show changes in time and space. The growth of plants and the gradual transformation of the landscape were condensed into a shorter time frame, giving the audience a powerful visual effect and a superb perspective of growth of everything and the changing seasons. Highly contrasting and saturated colours enriched the picture, strengthened the visual mood and created the broadest colour identity. Many viewers described the video's images as 'colourful, brilliantly shot, and instructive,' 'every shot is like a painting,' 'the colours are so vivid and vibrant, it is like life in Technicolor,' and 'the video's tones and images are absolutely gorgeous.'

As regards audition, background music and actual sound were crucial perceptual factors in attracting an audience. Traditional Chinese instruments such as the lute, bamboo flute, and guqin provided background soothing and relaxing music to the characters' dialogues and cooking sounds. Audience members were transported to another world and immersed in the scene. These authentic sounds of hens clucking, objects smashing, raindrops, and vegetables being chopped, aroused the audience's memories, and evoked nostalgic emotion.

> *MARIVANE NUNES DE SOUZA*: The background music relaxes you and sees how beautiful the place is, plus the dexterity and delicacy, and pleasure that makes all the dishes, it is very beautiful. Watching your videos brings me nostalgia and relaxes me.

> *Free spirit Spirit free*: The background sound of her videos reminds of my grandmother as well. my grandmother passed away 20 years ago. my grandmother was so loving and kind person. she did her embroidery, she cut paper flowers like ziqi Li, she made shoes for us, she made clothes for us, she did a lot of things like Ziyi Li. I miss my grandmother so much.

The audience preferred high-quality video expression. The video's elements, including item texture, a realistic plot, and light and shadow effects, generated a profound perceptual effect and evoked positive emotions, such as love, relaxation, enjoyment, and calmness. The viewer had a pleasant experience and identified with something of artistic worth on a psychological level.

The audience's reflective and nostalgic emotions are also seen in thoughts of modern society's development. According to Benjamin (1968), humans are destined to exist in a fragmented reality that comprises time, history, and the self. In this shattered reality, nostalgia is the reconciliation of the present and the past, the self and the world, and an identification with the numerous identities of the self. People appear to appreciate the maximum freedom afforded by rapidly advancing contemporary technology but in actuality they are consumed by the oppression and powerlessness that speed conveys. Audiences miss the green, healthy, simple, and natural lifestyle. Liziqi's practice of returning to tradition from modernity served as a model for the audience to reconcile the contradiction between reality and ideal. Almost all the people who felt anxious, angry, or sad became quiet and peaceful, letting go of their strife and appreciating everything shown in the video with gratitude and love while watching her channel. The video built a 'dream space' for viewers to temporarily escape from reality and the pressures of modern society. Like a saviour from

the East, she possessed the ability to heal people's hearts.

> *Melyssa Mitcham*: Whenever I am stressed I watch her videos and they immediately calm me down and give me some peace.

> *Atalu Dozo*: This video takes me to another world, it's so calm and peaceful.

Liziqi's videos gave a nostalgic emotional refuge to those living under the stresses of modern life. She evoked people's inner emotional resonance to yearn for the past through her portrayal of rural life sceneries and rich aesthetic experience. Her videos permitted immersive viewing, communicated the hidden spiritual and aesthetic values to the audience, and combined more traditional Chinese cultural content to convey the connotation of Chinese culture and provoke the audience to identify with its hidden values.

5.3 Audience's Attitude

'Audience attitude' is a tendentious psychological state, a reactive expression towards a video, including a behavioural tendency. It is a psychological construct, a mental and emotional entity that is inherent or characterises an individual (Perloff, 1993). The overarching theme 'audience's attitude' had five main themes: 'attitude towards China and Chinese culture,' 'attitude towards videos and channel,' 'attitude to life,' 'express good wishes,' and 'comprehension barriers,' accounting for 30.6%, 25.1%, 21.5%, 13.7%, and 9.1% of comments, respectively.

Audiences gradually move towards identification, accumulation and expansion of intercultural communication effects from stimulus perception to emotion formation and then generation of behavioural intention. The audience's interpretation of China and Chinese culture moved from an initial understanding to gradual liking, to attitudinal change and finally a desire to inherit and protect the local culture; akin to an of identification process from the surface to the interior.

China is the second-largest economy globally with a history dating back to 5,000 years and an excellent traditional culture. However, in movies, TV series, documentaries, or media reports, there was a tendency to ideologize China resulting in poor audience responses and acceptance, non-interaction or ineffective interaction and even misinterpretation. Liziqi provides the world with information about China that her audiences appreciate. Her viewers have expressed gratitude to her for letting them see such a beautiful country and learn about the excellent ancient Chinese culture.

> *ash s*: I have learned so much through your videos and also learned to appreciate the work and effort behind the items, example the Chinese calligraphy brush.

> *Phoebe Shuen*: Hope that through your video, we overseas Chinese can still understand and understand China's history and culture. Although in a foreign country, I don't forget where my roots come from.

Audiences drawn from different cultural backgrounds and social structures could easily perceive and understand Chinese culture by watching videos. They not only stayed at the cognitive level but also emotionally connected with the videos using descriptions such as 'love,' 'like,' and 'amazing.'

> *Hi!*: So amazing! Beautiful! Her life is the most inspirational piece of art ever! Falling in love with her culture and tradition!

> *Elise L*: This is absolutely Gorgeous, I really love these contents about Chinese Cultures!

The positive emotions heightened the audience's interpretation of China and Chinese culture. Some viewers had a change in attitude, others had their common memories awakened, while others intended to practise something after watching the videos.

> *Kathleene vlogs*: By watching liziqi videos, my perception of China has changed. Their country is so beautiful.

> *Phoebe Shuen*: Hope that through your video, we overseas Chinese can still understand and understand China's history and culture. Although in a foreign country, I don't forget where my roots come from. I am Malaysian Chinese, a girl who likes Chinese traditional culture.

> *Ci Chips*: Not kidding I hope that someday I can also learn and preserve the culture of my country from a Master. Amen.

Audience members moved from perception and emotional investment to behavioural intention. This process was not an ephemeral evolution but a synchronised development. The visual stimulation from the videos and the lively discussion atmosphere had an impact on the behavioural intentions of the audience. Many viewers had offline intentions of learning to speak Chinese, cooking Chinese food, and travelling to China.

> *ser Tracy M*: We are learning Mandarin, and this video will help us learn more about traditional Chinese food.

> *Veineihoi Haokip*: watching Tis gorgeous woman liziki, I became really hard working planting all sorts of flowers

vegetables in my lil balcony inside my room in New Delhi.

In the age of social media, liking, retweeting, and commenting are now regular online interactions. Subsequent offline behaviours are considered beneficial proof of online communication. One interesting finding in the thesis was that Liziqi's videos increased the frequency of people's offline communication. By reviewing the comments, we found that many netizens who watched Liziqi's videos generated online 'likes' and 'forwarding' or 'sharing' behaviours that extended to offline recommendations and sharing. 'My Swiss colleague recommended me to watch this video, and now I am a new fan of Liziqi's.' 'I am going to show this video to my wife so she can see how to make furniture.' The influence of Liziqi's videos on the audience from online to offline, from online information extraction to offline behavioural experience, reflects the current networked society.

Some questioning voices are evident in the comments. This type of audience was more sensitive in the face of cultural differences and would engage in direct psychological conflicts. However, the emotional expression was mainly through rational judgement and interpretation, showing a questioning, cautious, or defensive attitude toward the authenticity and rationality of the text content.

Each of Liziqi's videos had a few 'dislikes' ranging from five thousand to sixteen thousand. Nonetheless, this negative attitude was displayed by a minority of viewers. By coding the comments, we found that some negative words, such as 'dislike,' 'hate,' and 'angry,' expressed a lack of understanding and questioning and not a negative attitude toward the video but rather.

> *Ẩm Thực Mẹ Làm*: Some evil people became so jealous of her that they even pressed the dislike button on her YouTube channel.

> *carlos enrique arteaga tellez*: I am ashamed of being a miserable urban, that having great cultures that exalt our country, I know very little about them.

Negative comments were few, confirming that the fan group was a 'homogeneous group' with a relatively closed user base. Members with converging views 'grouped' to resist the members who 'disliked.' This circle effect deepened the original emotional attitudes, but also the rejected 'others' with opposing views. In the context of Liziqi's videos, the 'echo chamber effect' (Nguyen, 2020) was observed in the comments section, where a relatively closed user base shared specific messages, emotions, and beliefs that were concentrated beyond their traditional cultural identities.

Words like 'bad,' 'can't accept,' and 'can't understand' were used by some viewers to express negative emotions. Such debates were usually sparked by cultural and lifestyle differences.

> *Manda Anarase*: I can't understand what type of food she added in her dish.

> *caroline swan*: I am vegetarian, and those shots of the dead animals are hard for me to watch.

Due to a lack of understanding and knowledge, the audience would inevitably fall into a parochial view and confine others' cultures to the projection of their own perspectives resulting in misinterpretation. However, the audience's misunderstanding focused on everyday life issues like living and eating habits and not national interests, ideology, or values. Such differences that originate from cultural cognitive blind spots can be changed through the YouTube platform's comment editing function and reply function. Because these differences were reconcilable factors, a few audience members were receptive to some alternative things presented in the videos and wanted to try them.

> *Татьяна Сорокина*: One thing I noticed is that when you washed Vegetables and fish with that kind of tube well there is no option to stop the water. This is a huge wastage of water. Please take a necessary step. Edit: I didn't know that water was from the waterfall. It's okay then.

> *Liliana Verrocchio*: Even if I do not understand your language and very little English, I would like to understand more about the ingredients you use and try to make some simple recipes, is there a book where I can find them?

The Chinese audience, or those with detailed knowledge of Liziqi in the video, provided helpful information to the foreign audience by translating and explaining incomprehensible symbols. These vital comments reduced cultural discounting to a certain extent, eliminated some misinterpretation and promoted the output of cultural meaning.

> *HCui*: 8:38 in case people dont understand what she is doing: She is splashing the wine into the air to show respect to her passed away elders (like her father, grandpa, etc), so that those can enjoy the wine before she taste the wine. In some other places, people may pour a small cup of wine into the soil before drinking for the same reason. Those are all Chinese old traditions.

There were various degrees of misinterpretation which however, were limited to audiences' immediate point of view. Individuals would test their prejudices or gain a deeper understanding and gradually develop cultural relationships based on understanding and tolerance from continuous testing of old points of view, or the merging of old and new points of view.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Academic research, both practically and semantically, has increasingly tended to focus on 'productive audiences' (Anderson, 2011; Bruns, 2008; Clay, 2010; Hermida et al., 2012; Padovani, 2016; Philo, 2008; Picone et al., 2019), or 'audience enrichment' (Conner, 2004; Walmsley, 2016). The present study extends the concept of 'productive audiences' to cultural studies. This study further argues that in intercultural communication on social media, a productive audience is receptive to new ideas and engages with content from different cultures. As opposed to merely consuming media content, productive audiences seek to comprehend and interpret it in a manner that is relevant to themselves and respectful to other cultures. Productive audiences can contribute to developing a more inclusive and interconnected online community, thereby fostering intercultural understanding and empathy.

The Chinese content creator Liziqi's use of platforms such as YouTube to increase the visibility of Chinese culture represents a rising trend of globalization and cultural exchange. Through such platforms, she can showcase Chinese culture, reach previously inaccessible audiences and facilitate cultural exchange by introducing novel ideas, practices, and customs to individuals from different cultures. This development is a testament to the potential of social media and technology to bring people together and facilitate the exchange of ideas and perspectives.

Wolfgang, Blackburn and McConnell (2020) and Janicke-Bowles et al. (2021) argue that social media technologies have turned viewers into valuable producers. They are proactive, they generate new meanings through the consumption of cultural symbols, and some viewers may even participate in the dissemination of texts, profoundly enhancing the 'meaning making operation' (Conner, 2013, p. 79). One main benefit of YouTube is viral communication (Shifman, 2012), an attribute that through dissemination exposes the public to a cultural phenomenon or a specific cultural product and facilitates the diffusion of the original culture (Xu et al., 2016). The authors present various ideological practises in the original discursive field that change, complement and reinforce the producer's original communication intentions and further detail the meaning embedded in the text (Padovani, 2016). The audience's interpretation of the text goes through a logic of consumption (from cognition to emotion to attitudinal change and behavioural intention), a development process that is closely linked and gradually deepened and accumulated, which is closely linked to their previous experiences and knowledge, and the new meanings they create become a part of their accumulated understanding of the content. This interpretive process is not a static one but rather an ongoing and evolving one. It is also regarded as the means by which the audience fosters intercultural comprehension and forms an identity.

The emergence of multicultural audiences watching Liziqi's YouTube channel have created a new space for cultural dialogue which promotes a greater understanding of China: an understanding achieved through dialogue and cooperation between both the sender and receiver. Intercultural communication relationships have the potential of moving beyond the limitations of treating 'other' cultures as merely a need to be met. Unlike government-led Confucius Institutes in the West which have faced criticism (Liu & Zeng, 2017; Lueck, Pipps & Lin, 2014), the audiences' comments on Liziqi's YouTube channel are mainly positive and their impact radiates throughout social media. Arguably, Liziqi's channel provides a virtual public space that facilitates intercultural dialogue (Sobré-Denton, 2016) between Chinese culture and other cultures, hence serving as a powerful tool for promoting intercultural understanding (Xu et al., 2016). The audience can actively construct and reconstruct their perceptions of intercultural stories they receive through dialogue.

Liziqi's videos are typical of 'productive text,' where montage and narrative rhythm left sufficient gaps and blanks for audiences to interpret the text and construct meaning. A complex interaction is formed between the text and the audience, and the audience's interpretation extends beyond the interpretation to become a complex socio-cultural phenomenon or landscape. Audience interaction is reflected in the dialogues held using digital text symbols akin to Bourriard's '*intersubjective encounters [...] in which the meaning is collectively stated*' (cited in Bishop, 2004, p. 54). Such interaction can also be regarded as a ritual process of determining identity, obtaining recognition, and sharing meaning (Carey, 2009).

A democratic and reciprocal atmosphere emerged in the comments' section of Liziqi's YouTube channel: thanks to digitalization and the nature of the content (Vlieghe & Rutten, 2013; Walmsley, 2016). The audience's reciprocal understanding is characterized by the formation of complementary knowledge of cultural differences, mutual confirmation of cultural concepts, and dialogic understanding of prejudice and exclusion based on the facts presented and the dynamic development of the community. While multi-semantic interpretation may lead to conflicts, audiences can form interpretive communities and cooperate to create a common meaning, regardless of their cultural backgrounds (Cotrau, 2005). Cultural resources related to daily life experiences easily resonate with an audience, promote participation and understanding, while effective digital participation supports the co-creation of meaning and value, democratizing creative dialogue.

Although social media comments' sections tend to form an echo chamber effect (Cinelli et al., 2021; Ji, 2020; Padovani, 2016; Vicario et al., 2016), the analysis of the audience's comments on Liziqi's YouTube channel revealed a positive phenomenon. Unlike other platforms, Liziqi's YouTube videos do not promote a strong ideology or a tendency to

criticize other cultures. Instead, they record Chinese culture from the perspective of self-culture or varying individual standpoints. This approach allows the audience to obtain specific information and emotions, and form an emotional echo therefore strengthening their positive perception and understanding of Chinese culture. Emotional decoding seems to be far more infectious and contagious than the decoding method supported by rational views (Niesyto, Buckingham & Fisherkeller, 2003). In intercultural contexts, Liziqi's YouTube channel has shaped a cultural phenomenon in collaboration with the audience, enhancing viewers' perceptions and positive understanding of Chinese culture.

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