

**COMMODIFICATION OF TIBETAN CULTURE BY
SOCIALY MEDIATED PLACE BRANDING**

Yuanke Miao
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Faculty Humanities and Social Sciences	Department Language and Communication Studies
Author Yuanke Miao	
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Abstract <p>This study analysed the tourism-oriented place branding videos of a state-controlled Tibetan celebrity published via social media. The analysis applied multimodal discourse analysis as the methodological tool to examine the features and settings to discursively construct Tibetan culture on popular digital media. Then this study connected them to explain how the video producers balance the traditional elements and practices with modern identities. The data set consisted of two official tourism promotional videos and five vlogs of Ding Zhen (丁真) from Bilibili and TikTok. The multimodal analysis focused on several modes (clothing, objects, activities layout, sound effects, and visual effects) in three different settings; the natural environment, modern city, and Ding Zhen's hometown. The study found that Tibetan traditional elements were strongly associated with the natural environment and hometown setting in official tourism promotional videos, while modern features were emphasized in vlogs. Both Tibetan traditional identity and modern Chinese identity were highlighted in Ding Zhen's videos. However, some stereotypes like the masculinity of Tibetan men were reinforced by modern activities, while the religious part was weakened and hidden.</p>	
Keywords commodification of culture, tourism, place branding, multimodal discourse analysis, social media	
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Additional information	

FIGURES

Figure 1 Home in Sichuan	2
Figure 2 My home is really in Sichuan.....	2
Figure 3 Screenshots from <i>Ding Zhen's world</i>	21
Figure 4 Ding Zhen with Tibetan clothes.	21
Figure 5 Ding Zhen's ornaments.....	22
Figure 6 Ding Zhen and his horse, Pearl.	23
Figure 7 Genyen Mount as background.	23
Figure 8 Genyen Mount as focus.	23
Figure 9 Fixed prayer wheels and hand-cranked style.	24
Figure 10 Stone skipping and Wurdor. From <i>Ding Zhen's World</i>	25
Figure 11 Ache Lhamo, Lungta (wind horse) offering, and Sang (incense smoke) offering.	25
Figure 12 Airport, car, street, and gym.....	27
Figure 13 Short winter coat with delicate pattern.	27
Figure 14 Elementary school setting.	29
Figure 15 Clothing during the new year celebration.	30
Figure 16 Food and drink.	30
Figure 17 Tibetan circle dance (Kordo) and light offering.....	31
Figure 18 Layout of official promotional videos.	32
Figure 19 Layout of vlogs.	33
Figure 20 Visual effects of vlogs.	34
Figure 21 Visual effects of vlogs (avatar and meme).	35

TABLES

Table 1 List of official tourism promotion videos	15
Table 2 List of vlogs.	15

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	1
1.1	Context: Cultural background	1
1.2	Social media regulations	5
1.3	Research questions	6
2	LITERATURE REVIEW	8
2.1	Culture as a commodity in place branding	9
2.2	Social media in place branding as a semiotic technology	12
3	METHODOLOGY	14
3.1	Data collection	14
3.2	Multimodal discourse analysis	16
3.2.1	Discourse	17
3.2.2	Modes and meaning making	17
3.3	Critical approach	18
3.3.1	Analysis tools	19
4	FINDINGS	20
4.1	Natural environment	20
4.1.1	Clothing	21
4.1.2	Objects	22
4.1.2.1	Horse	22
4.1.2.2	Mount Genyen	23
4.1.2.3	Tibetan artefacts	24
4.1.3	Activities	24
4.2	Modern city	26
4.2.1	Clothing	26
4.2.2	Activities	27
4.3	Hometown	28
4.3.1	Clothing	28
4.3.2	Activities	30
4.4	Comparison of the two types of videos	31
4.4.1	Layout	32
4.4.2	Sound effects	33
4.4.3	Visual effects	34
5	ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS	36
5.1	Hybrid identity	36

5.2	Clothing codes	38
5.3	Masculine Tibetan men	38
5.4	Hidden religion	40
6	CONCLUSION	41
	REFERENCES.....	42

1 INTRODUCTION

Modern tourism has compressed time and space due to new technologies. Social media promotion and cyber experiences became the highlights of modern tourist campaigns. This thesis investigated a new form of place branding which is conducted by the team of a Tibetan social media influencer who works for a state-owned tourism company.

On 11th, November 2020, a video of a 20-year-old young Tibetan man, Ding Zhen, suddenly went virus on Chinese social media TikTok by a 7-second video clip. Chinese audience admired his sweet smile and exotic good-looking under the highland sunlight. He became popular among young girls because his image catered to the modern image of young men, at the same time he reserved some natural features.

In the beginning, people thought it was just another boring story that a poor boy got fame overnight. But this story became different because the local tourism bureau utilized him in a campaign to promote Litang, his hometown. Ding Zhen became an employee of that company very soon. Then the local government titled him the tourism ambassador of Litang County and the tourism and culture ambassador of Sichuan Province. In a month, a 4-minute promotion film named "*The World of Ding Zhen*" took every social media headline. Journalists from all over China came to Litang, to interview him and his families, even his neighbours (Yu & Yang, 2020).

This thesis chose his video as the research data to investigate the commodification of culture in place branding. Next I will introduce the cultural background first.

1.1 Context: Cultural background

Ding Zhen's real name is Tenzing Tsondu (བཟུང་འཛོན་བཙོན་འབྲུག་ in Tibetan), his name's Chinese transcription is Ding Zhen Zhen Zhu (丁真珍珠 in Chinese). He is known professionally as Ding Zhen (丁真), so in this thesis, I use Ding Zhen to refer to him.

His hometown is Litang County, Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. His videos on social media are mainly about his life in his hometown. Then I would first explain the geological and administrative issue of Litang, a Tibetan County located in Han Chinese province and why it relates to the



identities.



Figure 1 Home in Sichuan

Figure 2 My home is really in Sichuan

Litang is a small county with a population of only 47,500. Garzê belongs to the *Kham* of Tibet in the past. Traditionally, Tibet contains three areas: the Ü-Tsang, *Kham*, and *Amdo*. Tibetans in these three areas speak different dialects. After the People's Republic of China was founded, the mainland of Tibet became a Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) which equals to the province officially. Modern TAR contains Ü-Tsang and the western part of *Kham*. Another part of *Kham* is mostly located in modern

Sichuan Province, and small portions are located in Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan Provinces. *Amdo* is mostly in Qinghai province, with small parts in Sichuan and Gansu provinces¹.

So, this post-colonial redistricting made a problem with the belonging of Ding Zhen. In the beginning, many Chinese were confused about the administrative divisions and the pan-Tibet area. Because usually, people call TAR as Tibet in short, so many people assumed Ding Zhen's hometown was in TAR. On Twitter, Chinese spokesperson Chunying Hua posted Ding Zhen's picture and introduced this Tibetan boy, a user asked in the comment, "He's from Tibet, isn't he?", and another user replied that "No, He's from Szechuan Province" (Szechuan is a variant of Sichuan). To reply to this controversy, Ding Zhen posted a photo on Sina Weibo², in which he was holding a red paper with the words "home in Sichuan (家在四川)" and his name both in Chinese and Tibetan. His post calmed down this dispute. On the same day, he posted another photo on Sina Weibo³, in which he was holding another piece of red paper with the words "my home is really in Sichuan, please stop photoshopping, thanks (我的家真的在四川 你们不要再 P 了, 谢谢)" and his name both in Chinese and Tibetan to reply some users edited the texts on the previous red paper. In the second photo, he was even holding a panda toy which is the symbol of Sichuan province.

This bi-national identity crisis is very common among Tibetans. Kehoe (2015) argued that Tibetans developed different self-identity, like pure identity, hyphenated identity, and creole identity. Pure identity is a conservative opinion that the criteria of group member is based on clearly cultural markers. Hyphenated identity is based on the hybridity between two groups with clear boundaries. Creole identity is a state of cultural mixing that there are no boundaries and hyphens. In the case of my thesis, Ding Zhen is identified as a hyphenated identity with both Tibetan and Chinese.

Ding Zhen's identity got attention because the identity of Tibetan is always a sensitive political issue. Different identity strongly associates with different political views. As an employee of a state-owned tourism company as well as a celebrity in China, he needed to claim his Chinese identity by emphasizing his non-TAR hometown.

Ding Zhen's hometown belongs to the *Kham* area in Sichuan province. *Kham* is famous in China because of its macho men, Khampa. Chinese people call them True Khampa Men (Khampa Hanzi). Khampa men are renowned for their bronze skin, broad shoulders, sturdiness, and bravery. A study (Hillman & Henfry, 2006) found

¹ During the era of 13th Dalai Lama, the Qing Dynasty (1636 - 1912) of China occupied parts of Amdo and Kham, which became an official part of China later. Ü-Tsang and the rest parts of Amdo and Kham are still under Tibetan's control until the People's Republic of China occupied Tibet completely and rearranged the administration in 1959 (Sam Van Schaik, 2011).

² <https://weibo.com/7524392184/JvPIRslYZ>

³ <https://weibo.com/7524392184/JvTrMEFc0>

that both Tibetans and Chinese view Tibetan men as robust and masculine with large knives and fierce horses. Tibetan men are willing to describe themselves as “travelers, good horsemen, and masters of the mountains” (Hillman & Henfry, 2006).

The local tourism industry was willing to accept this stereotype and even markets it. The local tourism bureau launched several festivals to select some local men competing with the title “Khampa Hanzi”. In 2005, the local tourism officials even registered a trademark as “Khampa Hanzi” which means this label officially became the label for Khampa (Xu, 2021). In 2020, the Garzê tourism bureau hold the Most Beautiful Khampa Hanzi Competition in Ding Zhen’s hometown, Litang county. In this way, the stereotype of Tibetan men became a commodity in the tourist industry in the campaign of place branding.

Ding Zhen became the representative of handsome Khampa, people called him a “sweet-wild boy”. A local state-owned tourism company quickly signed a contract with him because they realized his huge potential (Red Star News 红星新闻, 2020). However, because Ding Zhen was uneducated and barely spoke Chinese at that time, they arranged lots of courses for him to help him get used to this “modern” world (Du, 2021). His team quickly published many vlogs and promotional films after his rise to fame. These videos are collective creations by a state-owned company for place branding purposes. In their video, Ding Zhen was playing with his horse in the wild and snow mountains, he was singing traditional Tibetan songs with his friends, he was talking about nature, the animal, the mountains, the plateau, the old Tibetan traditions, the true Tibetan cultures. This kind of image satisfied modern urban Chinese’s appetite for an unspoiled, innocent, uncivilized, and natural indigenous image. Thus, Tibetan culture in his videos became a symbol to sell the local tourism and fulfil the fantasy of the model Tibetan.

Ethnic minority groups in China are usually exoticized and eroticized, while their real image and voice are hidden (Gladney, 1994). Even in the 2008 Beijing Olympic games, a group of children was wearing 55 ethnic minority groups’ customs in the opening ceremony (Kim, 2011). However, the children were not actually the representatives of minority groups. All the children came from the same troupe, and they were all Han Chinese. In other words, they presented the customs of different groups to pretend all ethnicities were participating in the Olympic games and all ethnicities had an equal opportunity to participate in sports. It revealed the truth that ethnic minority groups lack representatives and voices, they were represented by the majority group, Han Chinese, which constitute 91.11% of the total population (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). So, most people always equate Han Chinese with “Chinese” (Mackerras, 2003), then the ethnic minority groups are invisible in this expression.

1.2 Social media regulations

In the case of this thesis, Ding Zhen's performance and voices on social media were not free, he was strongly associated with Tibetan tourism and national image (I analysed how they connect him with authentic Tibetan culture in Section 4 of this thesis). Different audience perceive different image. His followers regarded him as a cute indigenous boy, other people regarded him as a representative of Tibet, the Chinese government regarded him as a model Tibetan, a governmental media even defined Ding Zhen as "a successful government marketing" (Red Star News 红星新闻, 2020). This difference is because this image was delicately constructed by local tourism bureau for commercial purposes. So, it must cater to more audiences and the government. In his videos, his team avoided all potential controversial topics. There were no politics, no Tibetan Buddhism, no identity crisis, and no ethnic minority issues. There was only the peaceful Tibetan traditional lifestyle, processed Tibetan culture, wonderful Tibetan landscapes, and a "True Khampa Man", which was the perfect image that everyone wanted.

On one hand, Ding Zhen's videos went viral and became a representative of Tibetan culture, people know Tibet from this kind of social media narrative which were created for place branding purposes to attract people's attention. On the other hand, common Tibetan's voices on social media were neglected and even suppressed by mainstream society due to Han chauvinism and racism (Grant, 2016). Tourism became the only safe topic related to Tibet. So, it is very important to investigate how do they construct Tibetan culture through Ding Zhen's videos for tourism purposes.

Ding Zhen's main active social media is TikTok where he has over 8 million followers until March 2022, and he is also using Bilibili (a YouTube-like video platform), Sina Weibo (Twitter-like), Kuaishou (TikTok-like) and WeChat (one app for all) official accounts. Every official accounts' name is Litang Ding Zhen (理塘丁真) to show his close bond with his hometown. His videos are available on all platforms. Some of his promotion films are even available on YouTube although he does not have an official YouTube account. Due to China's strict Great Firewall and internet censorship (Roberts, 2018, p.74), most foreign websites and international social media are not available in China, even though TikTok, the popular social media made in China, has the international version and Chinese version. The internet of China is in a huge bubble or a huge local internet. These restrictions on internet are the continuation of restrictions on speech and media since 1949, when People's Republic of China was founded. In 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping created a new administration called the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) to regulate the internet deeply (Roberts, 2018).

This censorship situation influences every netizen and the whole online environment. In this sense, all the online expressions are intertwined with state power and ideology. Social media platforms have to fit into the expectation of the Chinese government of social and political stability (Lin, 2020). This is the bottom logic of all the social media in China. So, users must consider what is allowed to express online. For example, political issues and Tibetan Buddhism are two of the most discussed topics related to Tibet. However, almost all political issues are highly sensitive in China, so this topic is strictly not allowed. Religious topics are ambiguous, only the positive part is allowed. Based on the constitution, Chinese citizen has the freedom of religious belief, but according to the new religious regulations, the freedom of religious belief is not equal to religious freedom (Hu & Zheng, 2019). According to the latest *Internet religious information service management regulations*, anyone who provides religious information including “religious doctrine and regulations, religious knowledge, religious culture, religious activities” should obtain permission for Internet religious information services and have lots of strict conditions (National Religious Affairs Administration, 2021). Thus, posting religious culture is not allowed on Chinese social media even though Tibetan Buddhism has already been embedded in Tibetan culture. The mystery religion is also a popular selling product in tourism. So, it was a big challenge how Ding Zhen’s team reconstructed Tibetan culture without involving religious culture and religious knowledge. I discussed this part in Section 5 of this thesis.

1.3 Research questions

Ding Zhen’s videos as a tourist destination branding catered to and reinforced many stereotypes to sell the tourist experiences. This expression by visual and verbal resources in these videos was considered a type of “discourse”, though it is non-textual discourse. So, in this thesis, I analyzed Ding Zhen’s videos from a critical perspective to research how the commodification process discursively constructs the image of Tibetan culture. In specific, this study investigated two main questions:

- How Tibetan culture is discursively constructed through Ding Zhen, a digital mediated Tibetan representative, in Chinese society?
- How do the Tibetan tourism agency balance traditional and modern identities in their performativity on social media?

Through the literature background, I found that culture plays an important role in place branding. So, in the next section, I focused on the literature review to explain

the relations among place branding, culture, commodification, and social media. Then in the third section, I introduced the method of my data collection and the analysis framework, multimodal discourse analysis. The fourth section is the finding part, I showed my analysis process and my findings. At last, I reflected my discussions and conclusion.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism industry is special, consumers purchase tangible services (hotels, restaurants, airlines) to experience intangible products (scenery, exotic culture, mood), while the tourist agents promote the intangible products to sell the tangible services (Debbage & Ioannides, 2004). Thurlow & Jaworski (2011) stated that, “as a service industry, tourism is fundamentally – and, at times, solely – semiotic in nature because, like advertising and marketing, a key part of what is actually produced and consumed is the semiotic context of the service” (p. 287). For example, Qantas and Air New Zealand published a series of tourist promotion videos that utilized indigenous symbols and culture as a marketing strategy (Maydell, 2020). However, airline companies are selling flight services as their direct product. The same with Litang, Ding Zhen’s hometown. In an interview, Ding Zhen’s manager as well as the CEO of the local tourist company, Du Dong, talked about his plan. He launched a project to activate local tourism by increasing the quality and quantity of dining and accommodation services to be prepared for the tourists who are attracted by Ding Zhen (Red Star News 红星新闻, 2020).

Tourist’s tour, consume, landscapes, places and cultures are produced, presented, and represented through tourism marketing (Morgan, 2004). Culture as an intangible product plays a key role in place branding. Here, I would first figure out the differences among several terms: place branding, place promotion, and place marketing. These terms overlapped in use because it is difficult to find clear definitions, even the definitions in academia exist conceptual confusion (Boisen et al., 2018). In this thesis, I used Boisen et al (2008)’s investigation of these conceptions. In their frame, place promotion is a supply-driven approach to get more attention from all kinds of audiences, place marketing is a demand-driven approach to get a specific target customers’ choice, place branding is an identity-driven approach to improve the place’s reputation.

However, place branding sometimes is overlapped with destination branding and the border is usually blurred. Generally, destination branding targets solely tourists and place branding targets all groups (Zenker et al., 2017). The audience will perceive a general reputation of a certain place in successful branding. Place branding has different goals, such as to increase the confidence of residents, to get advantages in business, to attract immigrants, and to attract tourists (Sang, 2021).

The communication and multimodal representatives in Ding Zhen's videos were regarded as place branding according to the categories above. Because the main aim of his videos was to improve the reputation of Litang city and Tibetan culture. He was not selling any specific tourist service but building the reputation of Litang city via the lifestyles and landscapes in Litang. According to an interview (Yu & Yang, 2020) with Ding Zhen's CEO, Du Dong, his company was running him as an "intellectual property"⁴ not only for tourism but also as an online influencer/celebrity. The content of his video was not directly about tourism introduction videos but his personal life like many online celebrities. So, the audience of his videos was all groups of people not only potential tourists, but of course, his team planned to use his fame to bring more tourists to Litang. So, in this thesis, I defined his video as tourism-oriented place branding.

In the process of place branding, culture as a product in a capitalist market was reconstructed and highly commodified to cater to the expectation and fantasies of potential tourists. The reconstruction was conducted by stereotyping and Othering which denies the complexity of another group of people, usually the indigenous people. The modern instant communication tool, social media, amplified and reinforced this effect.

In next section, I explained why culture is very important in place branding, then I showed how culture is commodified in tourism industry. In the last of literature review, I connected it to the modern context of social media.

2.1 Culture as a commodity in place branding

From a critical perspective, this promotional place image construction "immobilizes our dynamic world, changing it to spectacle and straitjacketing it in cliché and stereotype" (Morgan, 2004, p.174), especially for the local cultures. In the

⁴ In the cultural industry of China, Intellectual Property represents "an intellectual property with its own value, cultural concept, influence and fan base" (Liao et al., 2021).

process of place branding, culture is treated as a resource, and is commonly misinterpreted and oversimplified (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2015). In a critical view of intercultural communication studies, culture is discursively constructed by an imagined community. This community is usually based on nationality, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. It is too big for a real community that no member can know all the members, thus we call it an imagined community (Piller, 2012). So, we do not ask what culture is, but ask how culture is produced in discourse, or how the tourist agency/representative constructs local culture through a performance expression (Dervin, 2011).

Of course, as one of the most complicated words (Williams, 1976), the definition of culture depends on the purpose of using this word. In this thesis, I mainly focus on the feature of culture which relates to indigenous tourism, that is intangible cultural heritage (ICH). According to UNESCO's (2018) definition, intangible cultural heritage refers to "oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts". ICH represents the authenticity of the culture. However, it can be easily commodified as a tourism product (Kim et al., 2019).

Indigenous culture and ICH are usually important topics in tourist place branding, many scholars already investigated them. Maydell (2020) studied the tourism campaigns in Australia and New Zealand, which revealed that indigenous people are always portrayed as uncivilized, primitive, unspoiled, and waiting to be discovered or even saved by the majority tourists. In tourism promotion, indigenous culture is harnessed for commercial purposes, and a reconstructed ethnicity (Gotham, 2019) is used to fulfil travelers' desire for the "exotic" and "extraordinary". Westberg (2021) investigated the Sami tourism promotion in Sweden, this research showed that Sami culture is construed as the Other through multimodal discourse. Sami traditions are regarded as goods and services in the commercial field and Sami is detached from modernity.

Similar to Maori in New Zealand and Sami in Sweden, the image of Tibetan was also reconstructed for commercial purposes. Sun & Xie (2019) argued that the contradiction between the reality of Tibet and the image created by the tourist gaze revealed a concept of "internal orientalism". Tibet was created as an ideal, romantic, and fantasy-like land, where both the culture and the environment are unpolluted. This image has been internalized and reproduced in tourism industry (Zhou & Grimwood, 2018).

So, indigenous cultures are discursively (re)constructed and reproduced by tourism-orientated place branding for commercial purposes. Thus, we could ask, in tourist industry what are they selling exactly? What is the commodity? It is commonly accepted that the tourist experience including a bundle of services and goods is the

main product of tourism. (Lew et al., 2008, Shaw and Williams, 2004, Devine, 2016). But in cultural studies, the commodification process is not only about a series of products like accommodation or souvenirs (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2008, p.291). Tourism is more like an act of performance rather than some services or goods.

Scholars mainly focused on the result of commodification, usually it was regarded as the loss of authenticity. For example, Pettersson & Viken (2007) investigated Sami tourism in Nordic countries, they found that to satisfy the customers, many tourism providers would adjust some traditional practices to make the services more comfortable and safer. The meaning of many cultural practices like the Sami folk song was changed or even lost when they become entertainment. In China, Tibetan culture is regarded as a type of indigenous culture, as other indigenous cultures, the whole “authentic” Tibetan experience is the aim of tourists. Sometimes, Tourists tend to regret that the indigenous area has been modernized (Pettersson & Viken, 2007) because the pre-modern (authentic) experience is the core commodity of the tour. Tourists expect to observe traditional rituals, lifestyles, and natures. Research in Honduras (Kirtsoglou & Theodossopoulos, 2004) also showed that indigenous dancing was adjusted to cater to western tourists and the dancing show was very far from the authentic ones.

However, although much research showed the destructive side of commodification, many scholars demonstrated that commodification would be supportive for local culture. Su’s (2018) empirical research showed that as long as the practitioners can participate in the ICH product freely, commodification can be seen as indispensable to the ICH-making process. Cole (2007) argued that the commodification of culture is not always negative. Although the government and tourists reflected the disappointment of the loss of authenticity, villagers had a different interpretation. They got the confidence of cultural identity through tourism, and a political resource to empower their group. Research in Honduras (Kirtsoglou & Theodossopoulos, 2004) showed that the indigenous community members desired to become an attraction and satisfy tourists’ quest for authenticity if the cultural resources were controlled by themselves which were not. What they requested was self-representation of their own culture, not be represented by tourism companies.

In this thesis’ case, Ding Zhen is a Tibetan young man working in a local state-owned company. Based on the public report (Red Star News 红星新闻, 2020), Ding Zhen’s team members are mainly young Tibetans. Thus, we could say that Ding Zhen and his team were self-representing their own culture. However, the expression was not free because Ding Zhen was working for a state-controlled company and the strong influence of Chinese regulations. So, I would not interpret the commodification of Tibetan culture as negative or positive, but I analyzed how Ding Zhen and his team,

the young Tibetans, constructed and commodified their own culture in their visual expression.

2.2 Social media in place branding as a semiotic technology

In the past, the public could only learn about a destination from commercials on television, newspaper, magazines, and other traditional media platforms. Individuals are using social media to seek multiple sources of information now. Thus, in modern place branding, lots of branding messages are displayed on social media. Social media as a marketing and branding tool influenced the decision-making of tourists (Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2015) and the participation of residents (Senyao & Ha, 2020). Some scholars even argued that due to the popularity of social media, tourist industry has been an information-intense industry now. Potential tourists tend to look for more tourist information before deciding. (Narangajavana et al., 2017).

Tourism organizations, including national organizations, are using social media as a budget and efficient marketing method now (Hays et al., 2013). An online report of TikTok (Toutiao Index & City Branding Studio, Tsing Hua University, 2018) showed that TikTok has been an important platform for city branding. This report investigated the data of short videos about more than 20 cities on TikTok, and found that city images were displayed through four symbolic carriers (BEST): BGM (background music), eating, scenery, and technology. The image planners and local governments encouraged residents and tourists to publish short videos to interpret and construct a unique city image. To differentiate from other cities, those cities that had successfully built their brands have their own unique personalities and labels – or “stereotypes”. Through the branding videos, the city reinforced its stereotypes continuously and made the city image strongly associated with some positive stereotypes. Those videos were created by common users, internet celebrities and governmental organizations.

Social media as a semiotic technology has been investigated by many scholars. Semiotics resources were defined by Van Leeuwen (2004, p.3) as “the actions and artefacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically or by means of technologies”. The resource can be textual, verbal, visual, gestural, and so on. Thus, the study of multimodality in social media describes digitally mediated resources and their meaning potentials. Different from other semiotic systems, the resources in digital platforms are deliberately designed which means the display of selected resources is important for the multimodal analysis (Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018).

Social media contains different types of resources like texts, images, audio, videos, and emojis, so multimodal discourse analysis has been used in many place

branding studies related to social media. Wang & Feng (2021) used multimodal discourse and semiotic analysis to investigate how Xi'an, a developing city in China, constructed its attraction as a metropolis and historical city via short videos on TikTok. These videos exploited semiotic resources to build a unique city imaginary, and then created an emotional link with the audience. Xi'an Tourism Bureau commodified this city as a landscape of mass entertainment, tourism, and investment. Another study (Isti'anah et al., 2021) analyzed the governmental tourism promotion of Indonesia via Instagram to recover the local tourism from COVID-19. This study emphasized the differences between social media promotion and Indonesia official tourism website, that is the exploitation of multimodal resources on social media made an intimate relationship between users and the destination.

For content generators of social media, the content they published is not completely decided by themselves. Like all media industries, social media influencers also rely on public interest and viewership to sustain their business, so their behavior has to be performative (Abidin, 2018). It means, in order to gain more subscriptions and views which are highly related to their incomes, they would adjust the content to cater to the audience. So, different from the normal place branding videos, Ding Zhen's videos are both place branding videos and self-branding videos. As an internet celebrity, he connected his self-image to the place image strongly. The visual and audio resources as a discourse in his video were displayed performatively. I defined Ding Zhen's case as a tourism-oriented place branding by a national organization via video-focused social media. This study used a multimodal perspective to analyze various semiotic resources in Ding Zhen's videos. In next section, I introduced the multimodal discourse analysis as my methodological framework.

3 METHODOLOGY

This thesis aims to gain a better understanding of how place branding discursively constructs local culture through social media. My research is conducted by analyzing a state-controlled Tibetan online celebrity's promotional videos. For this purpose, I used multimodal discourse analysis in this thesis. The methodological framework is suitable because my data involves different types of representational modes and semiotic signs in its communication. Next, I introduced my data collection, and where and how I collect data. Then I introduced the multimodal discourse analysis and how I apply it in my thesis.

3.1 Data collection

I collected my data from Ding Zhen's TikTok (Chinese version: Douyin) account, “理塘丁真”(Litang Ding Zhen) using purposive sampling. I categorized the sample into two types, promotional tourism films and short vlogs. The promotional films were cooperative works by Ding Zhen's team (which can be seen as a representative of Litang tourism bureau), Time Island (时差岛, a professional tourism media), and Garze tourism bureau, while short vlogs were made only by Ding Zhen's team.

There are two promotional tourism films that are available on most social media with video functions, like YouTube, Bilibili, TikTok, Kuaishou, and Sina Weibo. I chose Bilibili as my data source because the video resolution on Bilibili is the highest. The first video is *Ding Zhen's World*, narrated the daily life of a Tibetan boy in his hometown. The second video is *Ding Zhen's New Year*, narrated the life of this Tibetan boy after he became famous and the celebration of Tibetan New Year. Both have bilingual subtitles, Simplified Chinese and English, which indicates an international

potential. Ding Zhen is the main character and the only monologue narrator of the two videos.

I listed the information in the following table.

Title	Published Date	Length	Link
Ding Zhen's World	25 th Nov. 2020	05:35	https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1rt4y1a7oQ
Ding Zhen's New Year	30 th Dec. 2020	03:18	https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Zt4y1k7SU

Table 1 List of official tourism promotion videos.

Another type of Ding Zhen's social media videos is vlog. Vlog is the form of blog in the medium of video which is very popular in recent years. Ding Zhen mainly published his vlogs on TikTok. I watched Ding Zhen's published video on TikTok from the earliest one, and I stopped until the saturation point was reached and there is no new information developed in his videos. The first video was uploaded on 19th November 2020, and there are 143 videos up to 1st March 2022. I investigated 6 of them which provided me with enough data for my research. I skipped some videos because they are trailers of the two promotional films, so the content overlapped. I listed the videos in the following table.

Published Date	Kudos	Length	Link
19 th Nov. 2020	2,620,000	00:15	https://v.douyin.com/NXvsB7c/
2 nd Dec. 2020	506,000	2:47	https://v.douyin.com/NXvVv6y/
7 th Dec. 2020	350,000	4:00	https://v.douyin.com/NXvHujH/
23 rd Dec. 2020	834,000	0:56	https://v.douyin.com/NXv43cs/
27 th Dec. 2020	362,000	1:31	https://v.douyin.com/NXvBpnR/

Table 2 List of vlogs.

I mainly followed Norris's video data collection method "A Step-by-Step Guide to Analyze a YouTube Video" (2019, p.86-92). After I decided on my data source, I watched several videos first, and took field notes about the highlights including the language use, clothing, camera angle, etc. Then, I produced a data collection table in

order to keep track of my data. Thirdly, I re-evaluated my research questions as the topic of my data.

However, my data collection still has some limitations. Firstly, I only investigated a case that may not enough for the sample amount of Tibetan tourism branding. But he is the only famous Tibetan popular celebrity until now, so his video has different effects compared to other user-generated videos. Second, I investigated the samples in chronological order, so there might be some information in the lasted videos that are neglected. Third, although Ding Zhen and his team published the same videos on many different social media platforms, there are still slightly different to cater to different audiences. But due to the time limit of the master's degree thesis, I only focus on Bilibili and TikTok.

For the research ethical concerns, here is some declaration. Firstly, all my data was collected from public videos via social media platform Bilibili and TikTok (mainland China version), which were viewed billions of times. These videos were released for commercial purposes, so I am legible to investigate Ding Zhen and his team's video and use his photos for academic purposes without permission from himself and his company. Secondly, I critically investigated his videos from a researcher's perspective, and I focused on how these videos construct Tibetan culture through multimodal discourse. It is not a study to evaluate, criticize, or endorse any individual and cultural product.

3.2 Multimodal discourse analysis

Multimodality became a part of linguistics since the works by Kress and van Leeuwen: *Reading Images* (1996) and *Multimodal Discourse* (2001). In the beginning, they noticed that textual resources make meaning not only by language, but also by the visual feature of texts, like the page layout, typography, font, color and so on. Then, more non-linguistic resources were included. In the late twentieth century, there was a "multimodal turn" in discourse analysis (Hart, 2020) due to the popularization of media technologies. Communication through new technologies is conducted multimodally rather than monomodally, visual features are used to express complex ideas and opinions. Thus, MDA is very suitable to analyze modern online videos.

There are two main frameworks of MDA, *Multimodal interaction analysis* by Norris (2002) and *Multimodal social semiotics* by Kress & van Leeuwen (1996). Norris's framework focuses on multimodal action and interaction, while Kress & Theo Van Leeuwen's framework focuses on the meaning of semiotic resources. In this thesis, I adopted Kress & van Leeuwen's framework to analyze my data, because I was interested in the semiotic meanings of the cultural elements in tourism branding

videos and the sociocultural contexts. While the interaction in communication is not visible in my data, so Norris' approach is less suitable for my analysis.

In this thesis, my data was in the form of promotion short films and vlogs which is a video-medium blog. It involved many different types of performance, linguistic expressions (text, speech, and lyrics), visual expressions (filmmaking techniques, cultural symbols, clothing, etc.), and audio expressions (music, song, sound effect, soundtrack, etc.). They combined to make meaning in different themes. For example, to express the "snow mountain", the video showed the image of mountains in the background with the speech and captions about "snow mountain" to reinforce this element. Or in another case, the speech was talking about "hometown" while the image was snow mountain. They used this combination to reinforce the connection between Ding Zhen's hometown and snow mountain. Thus, I chose to use multimodal discourse analysis as my framework.

Not all the meanings of the modes are visible and important for my research questions, so I dived into the videos and selected the key representational elements for analysis. In my data, I found the linguistic modes (speech and texts), natural elements, traditional culture and clothing are more visible, so I mainly focused on these parts. In next section, I introduced the semiotic analysis framework I used in this thesis for reading linguistic and visual modes.

3.2.1 Discourse

Before I started with MDA, I would first define what constructs a discourse and how to analyze a discourse since it is a very commonly deployed concept in social studies. According to a recent textbook on discourse research (Hart, 2020), I adopted a general definition of discourse as,

The body of statements, analysis, opinions, etc., relating to a particular domain of intellectual or social activity, *esp.* as characterized by recurring themes, concepts, or values; (also) the set of shared beliefs, values, etc., implied or expressed by this. Frequently with *of* or modifying word. (p.7)

Kress & van Leeuwen (2001) described discourse as "socially constructed knowledges of (some aspect of) reality (p.4)", while "socially constructed" means that they are developed in specific social contexts no matter broad or not. So, generally any kind of communication can be seen as a discourse, no matter whether it is linguistic or non-linguistic. This notion is the base of my research.

3.2.2 Modes and meaning making

Communication on social media contains linguistic and non-linguistic expressions, like visual, audio, and textual. People use a variety of semiotic resources

to construct meaning in specific social contexts, and these semiotic resources create multimodality. Visual images, videos, and audio are often used in conjunction with language to dynamically construct meaning. These resources are usually referred to *modes*, and the analysis approach of their use in communication is multimodal analysis (Lyons, 2016). According to Kress's definition (2010, p.79), a mode is "a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning". Hart (2020, p.146) understood mode as "any set of resources which is systematically exploited to communicate meaning". In other words, semiotic resources like text, writing text, layout, image, moving image, music, soundtrack, gesture, architecture, and 3D material are examples of modes (Kress, 2010, Machin, 2013).

Modes do not exist alone, they exist in the materialization, representation, and communication to make meaning. Correspondingly, meaning is established in the materialization of sign-making (Kress, 2010, p.108). In this sense, the mode is meaningful, "it is shaped by and carries the 'deep' ontological and historical/social orientations of a society and its cultures with it into every sign (Kress, 2010, p.114)". From a multimodal perspective, all communication is conducted through multiple modes. Language and other non-linguistic modes are equal but play different roles and contribute different meanings. Every mode has its potential and affordance, so in multimodal communication, different modes are integrated together, modes are not operating separately. Each mode provides a specific lens on the world (Machin, 2013, Kress, 2020, p.96, p.155).

In this thesis, I mainly focused on the interpretation of semiotic signs in the modes. The interpretation must be put in a specific context because multimodality is highly context-dependent. Multimodal meanings are constructed in specific cultural and social contexts (Lyons, 2016). Thus, all the analysis in this thesis were discussed in a certain sociocultural context.

3.3 Critical approach

This thesis used a critical approach to analyze the videos not only descriptive. The aim of descriptive discourse analysis is to describe how language works in order to understand it (Gee, 2010), while critical discourse analysis tries to provide deeper explanations and speak to social and political issues. Gee (2010) argued that all discourse analysis needs to be critical because language itself is political. To get a complete understanding of discourse, the analysis must consider all the possible contexts and be critical.

As we defined before, in a critical view, discourse is socially and culturally constructed. Discourse represents the modes of the world and why they are

reasonable. We should be aware of how different types of semiotic resources are deployed in the abstracted discourse (Machin, 2013). In this process, participants, processes, causality, and settings are 'recontextualised'. Machin (2013) concluded that four different situations are very important in the critical analysis: deletion, addition, substitution, and evaluation. We could ask questions like 'what element is deleted/added/substituted/evaluated in a representation in what purpose and in what method'.

3.3.1 Analysis tools

Speech as a verbal language has already been investigated deeply in discourse analysis. Gee (2014) provided several sets of useful analysis tools for discourse analysis. I adopted some practical tools in my thesis, they are identities, relationships, and politics. These tools are not only suitable for linguistic analysis, but also for other modes like images and sounds. So, I used them as a set of general analysis frameworks.

(1) Identity

A person has multiple identities but would only act like some of them at the same time. People are building identities and roles via language in different contexts. I was interested in how Ding Zhen expresses his Tibetan identity, Chinese identity, Sichuanese identity or even horseman identity in the speech and texts, and in what situation he would express which identity in which way.

(2) Relationships

Language is used to build and sustain different relationships. This task is related to identity construction since the constructed identity is partially defined by the relationships with others. What I was interested in is how Ding Zhen constructed the relationships with his audience and how they related to his identity in that certain context.

(3) Politics

Politics is about the social distribution and power relationship. For example, who has the power to define what is authentic Tibetan culture? Who defined normal culture and indigenous culture? I was interested in how Ding Zhen constructed his hometown as a tourism destination in what power relationship.

4 FINDINGS

In the in-depth analysis of Ding Zhen's videos, I recognized three different contexts: natural environment (outdoor), modern city (indoor), and hometown (indoor). And two different genres: official promotional videos and vlogs. In different contexts, the producer(s) showed different symbols, like different clothing, objects, sounds, and layouts for the commercial purpose. In the following section, I described the symbols based on these three settings through all the data. Through the analysis of data, I tried to map out how they discursively construct a commodified Tibetan culture through their videos.

4.1 Natural environment

The most common outdoor context in Ding Zhen's video contains snow mountains, sunny weather, blue sky with white clouds occasionally, clear water, and grassland. These elements are the "default" outdoor setting in Ding Zhen's video. As the two long shots in figure 3 show, the left picture is the title page of Ding Zhen's world which represents a typical outdoor setting: sunny weather, snow mountains in the background, grassland with a lake, and a herd of yaks in the middle ground. The right picture shows a similar setting: a bit cloudy day but still sunny, snow mountains in the background, grassland with a river, and some hills in the middle ground. Because the videos I selected as my data were shot during November and December, so the grassland is yellow in the video, and the snow on top of the mountains is more visible than in summer.

I focused on the clothing of Ding Zhen and other characters in his videos, the objects they choose to show, and the activities they display in this natural setting.



Figure 3 Screenshots from *Ding Zhen's world*.

4.1.1 Clothing

Every time when Ding Zhen is outside, he is wearing Tibetan traditional robes, I did not find any exception in my data. His typical dressing is a Tibetan robe or coat, a pair of riding boots, and a pair of dark color trousers. The robe is in different colors and styles, in his early videos like *Ding Zhen's World*, his robe can coat are simpler and more basic. While in his later videos like *Ding Zhen's New Year* and TikTok short video 27th Dec 2020, his robes are more gorgeous with more complicated patterns and a woolen collar or special patterned collar.

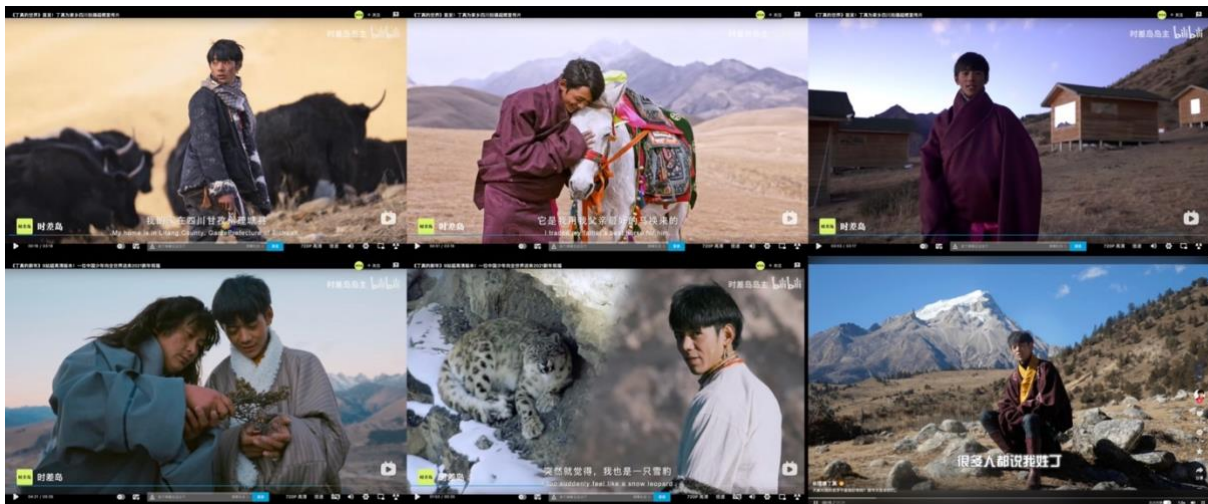


Figure 4 Ding Zhen with Tibetan clothes.

His typical ornaments are a red Japamala (a loop of Buddhist prayer beads) with counting markers hanging on his neck, a turquoise earring on his left ear, and a Dzi bead ring wearing on his left middle finger. Dzi is a stone with special patterns made from natural agate, Tibetan people believe it can provide positive spiritual benefits.

Turquoise is also considered as a sacred mineral in Tibetan traditions. So, his ornament combination is a very common one in Tibet.



Figure 5 Ding Zhen's ornaments.

4.1.2 Objects

There are many objects repeatedly appearing in Ding Zhen's videos, mostly in natural settings. I recognized that the horse, Mount Genyen, and Tibetan artefacts are the most visible ones.

4.1.2.1 Horse

The horse is the most appeared object in an outdoor setting. In his monologue of Ding Zhen's World, he described that (These English subtitles are the official translation from the video):

"I'm very fond my pony. He is called Pearl. I traded my father's best horse for it. I'm the happiest when I race horses with my brothers. I'm very good at riding horses. Won a lot of races in my village. They call me Prince on a Horse. Many people ask me about my dream. I never give it too much thought. I just want to ride my pony across mountains and over hills." (Ding Zhen's World)

In his monologue, he describes himself as the Prince on a Horse very proudly. In his video, Ding Zhen is wearing a dark red Tibetan robe with long riding boots which is a typical Tibetan traditional riding suit. His horse also has a colorful saddle with Tibetan decoration. The frame always has a foreground of Ding Zhen riding his horse, a middle ground of winter grassland, and a background of snow mountains and a clear sky.



Figure 6 Ding Zhen and his horse, Pearl.

4.1.2.2 Mount Genyen

Mount Genyen is another repeatedly displayed element. It is the highest and holiest mountain in the region of Liang. Ding Zhen mentioned Mount Genyen many times in his videos, like “my home is at the foot of Genyen snow mountain”, “Mount Genyen is one door-opening away”, and “from here (the airplane) you can see the Mount Genyen of hometown”.

The image of Mount Genyen is also shown many times. Usually, it is displayed as the background of outdoor context that indicates the location is Litang County as figure 7 shows. The herding, gathering, Sang offering, riding the horse, playing and many other activities are happening in front of Mount Genyen. But it is not only the background that provides a context and location. Sometimes, it is in the central position of the camera as figure 8 shows.



Figure 7 Genyen Mount as background.



Figure 8 Genyen Mount as focus.

4.1.2.3 Tibetan artefacts

The prayer wheel is a very common symbol of Tibetan Buddhism. Usually, a prayer wheel is a cylindrical wheel on a wood or metal axle. Mantras are densely written millions of times on a long slice of paper and tightly wrapped around the axle inside the wheel shell. There are many types of prayer wheels using different power to spin them.

In Ding Zhen's video, two types of prayer wheels appeared (figure 9). The first type is the hand-cranked style. There is a handle connected with the axle and a small pendant attached to the wheel so that when the prayer swings the handle, the pendent will drive the wheel to spin around the axle. Another type is the fixed prayer wheel. Usually, they are very big and fixed around the temples, people can pull the wheel to spin them. In this way, Tibetan people believe that every time they swing the wheel, it equals to chanting millions of times mantra. Usually the mantra is "Om mani padme hum", on some occasions there are prayer wheels with other mantras.



Figure 9 Fixed prayer wheels and hand-cranked style.

In the left picture, Ding Zhen is standing downtown in Litang County, there are four fixed prayer wheels on his left side, they are made of bronze, decorated with Tibetan traditional patterns and the mantra "Om mani padme hum" in Sanskrit. In the right picture, an old Tibetan person is spinning a small prayer wheel under the strong sunlight. The prayer wheel is made of brass, also decorated with Tibetan traditional patterns and the same mantra in Sanskrit. This framing deliberately places the sun behind the prayer wheel, giving the image an overexposed appearance.

4.1.3 Activities

Some outdoor activities and Tibetan rituals are presented in Ding Zhen's videos. Some of them are strongly related to pasture lifestyles, like stone skipping and Wurdor (figure 10). In the left screenshot, Ding Zhen is standing next to a crystal-clear lake, and skillfully threw a stone into the lake, then the stone jumped several times before dropping into the water. The camera changed several shots from medium shots

to wide long shots. The whole scene shows a Tibetan boy playing alone in the mountains and lakes, under the blue sky.



Figure 10 Stone skipping and Wurdor. From *Ding Zhen's World*.

The right image shows the traditional Tibetan stone-throwing, Wurdor. Wurdor is a traditional herding tool, usually Tibetan herders use Wurdor to guide yaks' direction. "Wur" means loud sounds, and "dor" means stone. A Wurdor is a rope with a diamond-shaped piece in the middle, usually made from yak's wool. When Tibetans use wurdor, they would fold it from the middle to make a small pocket and put a stone in the pocket (Tenzin Woebom, 2014). Ding Zhen's video did not show the preparation part. In the video, Ding Zhen swings it until the speed is high enough even the camera cannot catch it, we can only see a blurred image. Then he loses one end of the rope, thus the stone is thrown away at a very high speed, then the stone hit the ground with loud sounds. The video did not explain this Tibetan pasture activity, only the monologue indicated that it is a part of herding.

Ding Zhen's video also showed some traditional rituals in the wildness. The first one is Ache Lhamo, or Tibetan Opera. It is a classical theatre of Tibet with dance and music. Stories of Ache Lhamo are mostly from ancient Indian and Tibetan folk tales and historical events. The characters usually wear colourful masks with different meanings. In my data, Ding Zhen is wearing a bright yellow mask with performance clothes in the same colour. He is dancing under the sunny and blue sky. The camera followed his dancing and changed several shooting angles.



Figure 11 Ache Lhamo, Lungta (wind horse) offering, and Sang (incense smoke) offering.

The second traditional ritual is the Lungta offering. Lungta means wind horse which is the symbol of well-being and good fortune in Tibetan Buddhism. It also represents the prayer flags with five good animals and mantras. Tibetan people believe that when the Lungta flags are flapping in the wind, the wind will spread the spiritual power from mantras and sacred images everywhere. In the second scene, Ding Zhen is throwing the Lungta flags made of paper. This scene was shot from a low shooting level, we can notice that the camera is much lower than the eye level of Ding Zhen.

The third traditional ritual I recognized is Sang offering, or incense smoke offering. Sang means cleansing or purifying. In Ding Zhen's video, he and his family are burning cypress branches and leaves to offer the gods the smoke. They were doing this ritual at dusk; we can notice it from the shadow of the mountains. In the Sang offering, they also did the Lungta offering at the same time.

4.2 Modern city

There are several TikTok videos in my data where Ding Zhen is in Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan province with a 20 million population. In this context, most scenes happen in indoor settings, like inside a workshop, a car, a plane, a gym, a balcony, or a store. Occasionally, it happens on the street. In the next section, I explored the features of a modern setting to describe the cultural construction process.

4.2.1 Clothing

Most of the time, Ding Zhen is wearing modern clothes with his ornaments in Chengdu, except when he was in their photography workshop to take some official artistic photos. As figure 13 shows, there are several typical scenes where Ding Zhen is wearing modern clothes. In the first scene, he is in the airport to check-in for the plane from Garze to Chengdu. He is wearing a shiny dark grey puffer jacket with a pair of jeans, as well as medical face masks due to the COVID-19. In the second scene, he is sitting in a car from Litang to Chengdu. He is wearing a black and green puffer jacket and a black beanie with a medical face mask. In the third scene, he is walking on the street in Chengdu, while he is wearing the same clothes as picture two because it was the same day. In the fourth scene, he is doing warm-up with a group of co-workers and a trainer in a gym, while he is wearing an Adidas sports jacket and New York Yankees baseball cap.

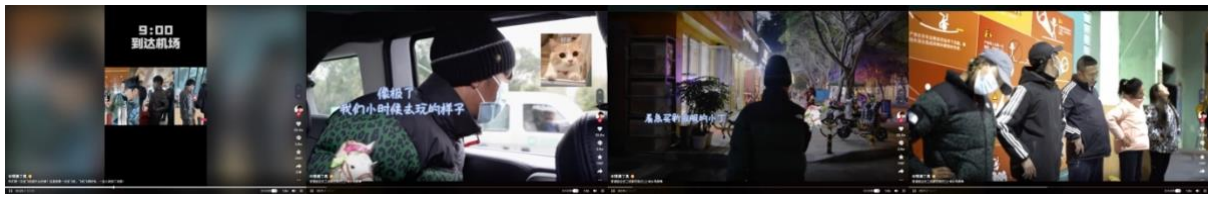


Figure 12 Airport, car, street, and gym.

Sometimes he is wearing Tibetan clothes, not the long robe but a short winter coat with a very delicate pattern. Based on the description of the video, in the first scene of figure 13, he was working in their workshop – taking pictures for promotion, etc. the image is very bright here. In the second scene, he was standing on the balcony of the workshop and calling his family after a whole day’s work. The environment is dim on the balcony, we can see the city light in the background.

In the gym, he is wearing a golden earring without a pendant when he is sporting. I think this choice is a consideration for safety because the trainers would request everyone remove the dangerous ornaments before taking exercises. When he is in the VR store, he is wearing his typical ornaments: red prayer beads, turquoise earrings, and a Dzi ring. So, his ornaments did not change much, no matter what clothes he is wearing.



Figure 13 Short winter coat with delicate pattern.

4.2.2 Activities

The video displayed lots of indoor activities of Ding Zhen, like indoor snowboarding, rock climbing, VR game playing, adventure in a haunted house, buying new clothes, drinking milk, and writing.

For example, in the gym, Ding Zhen tried indoor snowboarding and rock-climbing under the instruction of a trainer and with a safety device. The captions emphasized that the rock wall Ding Zhen chose is the most difficult one, “only less

than 20% of people can reach the top in the first try, deserve to be our herding boy". The camera changed several angles and shots to capture Ding Zhen's climbing process. The most impressive angle is from the top of a rock wall, where he raised his head and then had eye contact with the camera. At this time, the video added some sound effects and visual effects which I will describe in the next section.

In the VR game playing, Ding Zhen is wearing a tight black sweater with his red prayer beads while using the VR devices - a VR helmet and two handles. The video displayed his playing process in a funny way to make him look clumsy with new technologies. The same strategy is used in "haunted house". They were shot by a night vision camera so the video is not very clear, but we can still see Ding Zhen showed his unfamiliarity with modern amusement facilities.

4.3 Hometown

In Ding Zhen's hometown, there are not only natural sceneries, but some videos are also shot in a home setting and indoor setting. For example, in a video, Ding Zhen visits a local elementary school and sits in the classroom. In another video, Ding Zhen is celebrating the New Year with his family at home. So, this section explores the features when the contexts in the hometown, Litang, but not in natural settings.

4.3.1 Clothing

Generally, in the setting of his hometown, Ding Zhen shows his Tibetan clothes to the camera. When he is visiting the elementary school in his hometown, he was wearing a gorgeous Tibetan robe and a pair of riding boots in the same color. Interestingly, the teacher, a Tibetan woman, is wearing "modern" clothes, and the students are wearing typical Chinese school suits. The first scene is a long shot from the middle of a classroom from the view of students.



Figure 14 Elementary school setting.

So, we can see the front of the classroom is also a very typical Chinese-style classroom with a stage for teaching and a blackboard for writing. Above the blackboard, in the middle there is a Chinese national flag, on both sides of the flag, there are Chinese and Tibetan slogans to encourage students to work hard. In this classroom, the slogan is “read ten thousand books 读万卷书” on the left and “travel ten thousand miles 行万里路” on the right side. Based on my personal empirical experiences working in Tibetan *Kham* region, this kind of classroom is very typical.

Usually, students are mandatory to wear school suits in the same style as Chinese students in the whole country. Traditional Tibetan robes are only allowed in special events for performance purposes⁵. So Ding Zhen wearing a gorgeous robe and sitting among students is very outstanding.

In the video *Ding Zhen's New Year*, he and his family gathered in their home and celebrate the new year together. Almost everyone is wearing a traditional Tibetan robe and some Tibetan ornaments. They gave a close-up shot of a set of new clothing with ornaments for Ding Zhen, including a yellow Tibetan shirt, grey stripes robe, a red belt, a dark brown prayer beads with side beads and counting markers, and a Gau box. The right image is a close-up shot of the Gau box. Usually, Tibetan people put a small Buddha statue in the Gau box and wear it to get Buddha's blessing and protection. Ding Zhen's female family member (the second image) also wears a very fine golden earring with red jewelry pendants.

⁵ I did not find governmental files or research to support this requirement, but in my empirical experiences, it is the rule of all Chinese schools. An in my personal working life in a Tibetan elementary school in *Kham*, students are allowed to wear traditional robes on weekends and in special events for performance purpose.



Figure 15 Clothing during the new year celebration.

4.3.2 Activities

Cooking is always an important topic in the new year's celebration. In Ding Zhen's video, they showed Tsampa, Yak meat Baozi, and butter tea, three representational food and drink in Tibet. They gave lots of close-up shots of the preparation of food and drink, especially when they are holding and transferring the bowl and plate.



Figure 16 Food and drink.

Traditionally, butter tea is made from tea leaves, milk, yak butter, water, and salt. In Ding Zhen's video, the delicate yellow teapot with red decorated metal bowls are displayed. Another video shot in Chengdu emphasized him drinking a glass of milk but keeping the same habit of drinking butter tea. Tibetan Baozi is a steamed or roasted bun stuffed with yak meat. However, in Ding Zhen's video, the Tibetan Baozi is dumpling-shaped rather than bun-shaped. The video used several close-up shots showing people making Baozi together and taking Baozi from the steamer, then lining the Baozi on plates and serving the plates on the table.



Figure 17 Tibetan circle dance (Kordo) and light offering.

Tibetan circle dance (ཀོར་དོ་ Kordo) is another important activity displayed in the video about the Tibetan new year. That video focused on the legs of dancing people showing they are dancing together. Everyone is wearing a traditional Tibetan robe, but they keep the top part hanging down and fixed by the belt. The camera changed several different angles and levels to show the sense of space shifting. Ding Zhen's monologue emphasized that they are fond of Kordo. He said in the monologue that they danced the whole night until all the photographers went to sleep.

Another activity the video delicately shot was light offering. Hundreds of butter candles are set up on the ground in the flower shape, and Ding Zhen is lighting them one by one. In the beginning, the shot angle is a bit higher than the flames, similar to Ding Zhen's ankle level. Then the camera changed to a bird's view so that audience can easily recognize the pattern of candles.

4.4 Comparison of the two types of videos

It was easy to recognize two types of videos although both are available on TikTok. I recognize them as vlogs, a kind of typical social media videos, and traditional place branding videos. For typical social media videos, they used a livelier and more relaxed presentation style. They even used many popular jokes and buzzwords which usually more popular among young social media users. For the traditional place branding videos, they used a more serious and film-like style. Then, I analyzed the difference between these two types of videos in layout, sound effects, and visual effects.

4.4.1 Layout

As Kress (2010) argued, “The organization of material through layout produces and realizes specific social and ontological arrangements in the world of this interaction”. The layout represents meanings in communication.

The layout of the two official promotional videos (*Ding Zhen’s world* and *Ding Zhen’s New Year*) are similar. It used a formal and traditional layout with a prologue, title page, and credit page. For example, as figure 12 shows, the title of the film is in big and Chinese Calligraphy style font “丁真的新年 Ding Zhen’s New Year” and locates in the center position of the frame. Under the title, it is the producers. In this film, they are Garze Tourism Bureau and Time Island. The background of title page is a scene from of film in which Ding Zhen is changing the new robe.



Figure 18 Layout of official promotional videos.

The right image of figure 12 is the credit page of this video. On the top of the image, there is the title in the same font but a little bit smaller than on the title page. Under the title, there are copyrights, directors, photographers, and editors. The background of the credit page is completely black while the texts are white. Only the title uses an artistic font, other texts are using a common printing font.

The whole video also followed a serious style. There is no conversation but only Ding Zhen’s monologue. He used a very steady and slow tone to speak, with an obvious Tibetan accent. The silence between sentences is long, usually it is four to five seconds, sometimes it is longer.

Ding Zhen’s vlogs used a very different layout. For example, in one of his vlogs, the prologue is displayed on an old film tape. The frame is on a dark green background, with an artistic English sentence “Track of time” on the left side, and an avatar of Ding Zhen’s horse on the left bottom. The main video is located on the right side. Under the video there is a fake video control pane. On the video, there’s the text of “Camera1” in the left-top corner, under the text is “Play” with a play icon, under the “play” is the recording time. In the left bottom corner, there is the date and time. However, it is a

fake date and time which is in 1997. On the right-top corner, there is the text “Source iPhone” which indicates this video was shot by an iPhone.

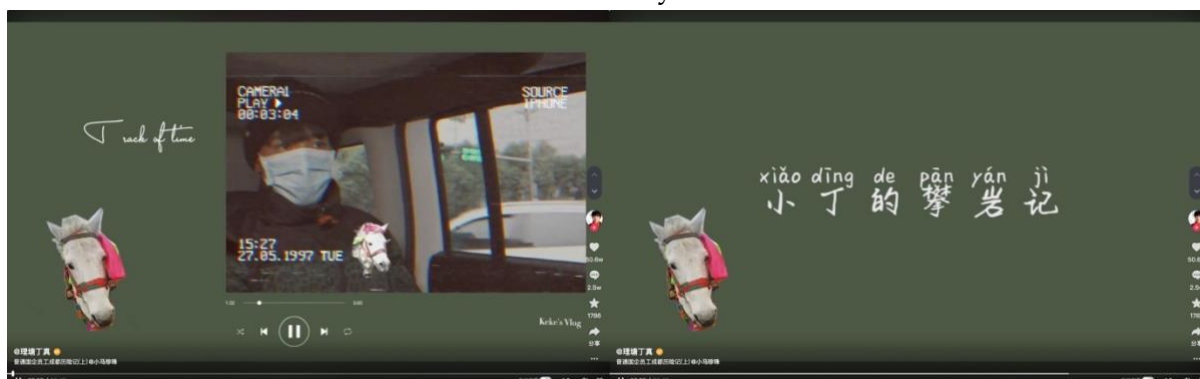


Figure 19 Layout of vlogs.

Between different sections of the vlog, they also used a similar style transition page. For example, the right image is one of the transition pages of Ding Zhen’s vlog. The background is the same dark green as the prologue, and the avatar of horse in in the same position. In the center of the image, there is the subtitle of this section in simplified Chinese and Pinyin (the romanization of Chinese characters) in a hand-written font.

4.4.2 Sound effects

The official promotional videos did not use any special sound effects, only background music and sometimes the original sounds like water flowing, people murmuring. However, the vlogs used a lot of popular TikTok-style sound effects.

For example, in the video *The adventure of Ding Zhen, an ordinary state-owned enterprise employee in Chengdu (I)*, when Ding Zhen is curiously watching out of the window from a car, the sound effect is a person’s awe (00:11). Then he go to a Tibetan clothing store. Before he changes his clothes, the sound effect is a series of tensive alarms followed by a countdown from five to one (00:15). When he is in the gym doing warm-up with his co-workers and trainer, the sound effect is a well-known audio clip “The Third Set of National Radio Gymnastics for Secondary School Students - Fly the Dream, now start! 第三套全国中学生广播体操 - 放飞理想,现在开始! ”. This clip is the beginning of the third National Broadcast Gymnastics for secondary school students in China as the national fitness project started in 1998. Every Chinese secondary student is mandatory to practice every school day in the playground following this audio. It means Chinese young people who were born after 1990 must be very familiar

with this audio clip. Sadly, Ding Zhen himself might not know it because he did not even finish elementary education.

When he reaches the top of indoor rock-climbing wall, the sound effect is a piece of canned clapping and cheering (02:40). I recognized this sound effect is a very popular and common one embedded in short-video platforms. When users edit a short video via TikTok application, they can easily find thousands of free sound effects in the library of the application. These kinds of build-in sound effects are widely used in his TikTok short videos. For example, on some transition pages, they use an AI voice to read the subtitles. I recognized this AI voice is from the main character of a famous Japanese anime called *Crayon Shin-chan*. Usually, people use this voice to represent a simple and innocent personality. It is also a very popular sound effect on TikTok (mainland China version).

4.4.3 Visual effects

The official promotional videos did not use any special visual effects. Maybe there are some aftereffects to make the scenery more vivid. However, the vlogs used a lot of popular TikTok-style visual effects, and also avatars and memes. For example, in the left image, a fancy visual effect with colorful hearts and shiny stars is shown. The context of this fancy effect is the time when Ding Zhen reached the top of indoor rock-climbing. In the right image, a pair of cartoon hands clapping with three stars as a clapping effect is displayed. The context is the same with left image.



Figure 20 Visual effects of vlogs.

Avatars and memes were also used in the vlogs. For example, in the left image, there is an avatar of Ding Zhen's horse, Pearl, in the bottom left corner. Above the horse, there is a sentence spoken in his horse's tone, "like the same way we went to play when we were kids". There is also a meme of a cute cat with the text "curious" in the right-top corner. While in this shot, Ding Zhen is sitting in the backseat of a car, watching out of the window curiously. In the right image, the same horse avatar appeared on Ding Zhen's shoulder to indicate he was walking fast. This time he just

bought some new Tibetan robes and carried lots of bags while walking on the street. The cat meme on the left side has a text “sneakily happy” on it which indicates it is the inner thought of Ding Zhen.

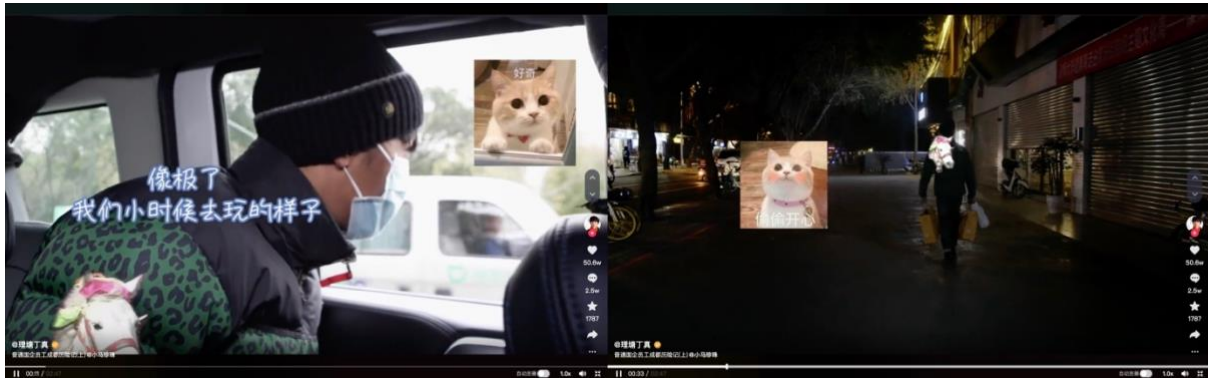


Figure 21 Visual effects of vlogs (avatar and meme).

5 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

In a critical view, the power relations in tourism play a key role in deciding which culture and place are commodified and how (Devine, 2016). Tibet as a post-colonial region has for a long time been essentialized and stereotyped by western imagination (Dibyesh Anand, 2007). This process is also happening in the cross-ethnic interactions within China (Sun & Xie, 2019). Tibetan as a marginalized ethnic minority group in China is always strongly Othered and objectified as exoticized, colorful, and indigenous (Galdney, 1994) by mainstream narratives referring to Han Chinese narratives. It means Han Chinese mainstream narratives have the power to define what is authentic Tibetan culture and what is modern culture, and the power to separate Tibetan culture from modernity.

In Ding Zhen's videos, the traditional and modern representatives are very easy to recognize, and they are displayed in different settings for different purposes. Firstly, hybrid identity is used to emphasize Ding Zhen's Chineseness and Tibetanness. Secondly, the choice of clothing according to different contexts strengthens different aspects of Ding Zhen as a celebrity. Thirdly, the stereotype of masculine Tibetan men constructs a fantasy-like image both in a traditional way and a modern way. Fourthly, religious elements are hidden behind the name of culture. Next, I will explain them through my discussion.

5.1 Hybrid identity

As a Tibetan celebrity in China, Ding Zhen has to face double pressure on his identity. The first one is his Chinese identity. Because of the historical issue of Tibetan independence and China's rising patriotism, the national identity of a Tibetan

celebrity is very crucial. Meanwhile, Ding Zhen's Tibetan identity and the potential Tibetan culture behind this identity is the core value of him as an "intellectual property". So, their promotion has to draw attention to both sides, so that Ding Zhen can be distinguished as an authentic Tibetan representative and, at the same time, he can be recognized as a real Chinese.

Ding Zhen's Chinese identity is highlighted by his Sichuanese identity. He is the tourism ambassador of his hometown, Litang County and Garze Prefecture. However, his hometown caused a controversy in the beginning. He is living in the Tibetan autonomous prefecture in Sichuan province, not in TAR. So, to emphasize his Sichuanese identity, every time his video mentions his hometown, Sichuan would be highlighted. After his Chinese identity, his Tibetan identity is allowed to present. Based on Chinese ethnic policy, we can conclude that in his display, the Tibetan identity must be included in Chinese identity.

The description of *Ding Zhen's World* on Bilibili is "Ding Zhen shot a hot promotional video for his hometown Sichuan". In the description and title, there is no clue about Tibet. Ding Zhen's fame is the only way people could realize the relationship between this video and Tibet from the title. At the beginning of this video, the first sentence Ding Zhen said was the self-introduction. He said, "my home is in Litang County, Garze Prefecture of Sichuan". Garze Prefecture is the short version of Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. In his introduction, he weakened the Tibetan part but strengthened the Sichuan province.

Ding Zhen's Tibetan identity is stressed by his pasture lifestyle. Zenz (2014) described that in *Amdo* and *Kham*, which are closer to Han China than TAR, there is a strong stereotype of the authentic Tibetan lifestyle. In their view, only the pasture lifestyle is considered as true Tibetan life; the farming lifestyle represents more Han-ness rather than Tibetanness. Even those Tibetans who come from farming families describe themselves as less "authentic" Tibetan. In the video *Ding Zhen's World*, yaks and pasture as the symbol of true Tibetanness appear frequently.

Ding Zhen described his lifestyle in Tibet as "Most of the time, I just pasture cattle with my brother (*Ding Zhen's World*, 00:32)". Based on Zenz's study (2014), the pasture lifestyle represents a true authentic Tibetan life in *Kham*, Ding Zhen's hometown. In the video, Ding Zhen stands in the centre, the middle ground is a herd of yaks, the background is mountains and cloudy sky. Then they used a long shot to show the yaks grazing and running. Humans are rare compared to yaks so that this scenery constructs a peaceful world isolated from our modern earthly life.

5.2 Clothing codes

Behind the successful marketing of Litang tourism, Ding Zhen's team is very cautious. According to an interview with Ding Zhen's manager, Du Dong (杜冬), he metaphorically describes Ding Zhen as an "Intellectual Property (IP)" and his hometown, Litang, is a stockholder. This IP includes rural revitalization, poverty alleviation, and western Chinese sceneries. He represents his hometown, the Tibetan plateau, even the tourism of China and an image of distant lands. So they must be very cautious not to over-abuse his fame through unhealthy commercialization (Red Star News 红星新闻, 2021). Du Dong considered a lot about Ding Zhen's performance in the videos and photos, even the costume. He has to determine in what situation Ding Zhen should wear Tibetan clothes and in what situation they could publish Ding Zhen's modern clothes photo (Du, 2021).

In Ding Zhen's videos, most of the time he is wearing traditional Tibetan clothes, but in his vlogs, Ding Zhen presents himself in casual "modern" clothes. In section 4.1.1 and 4.3.1, I describe some situations when he is wearing traditional clothes. Generally, when he is presented with yaks, horses, traditional rituals, wild animals, and Tibetan natural landscapes, he is wearing Tibetan traditional clothes and jewellery.

When he is associated with modern cities, he presents the modern image. As Section 4.2.1 described, when he was playing as VR game, doing warmups in a gym, checking in at an airport, he was wearing "modern" clothes, like jacket, jeans and cap. It is worth noting that he never wears the so-called modern clothes in official promotion videos, only in these non-official vlogs. Because in the official videos, he represents the image of a Tibetan, so he has to wear the traditional clothes to show his Tibetan identity. But in real life, maybe wearing "modern" clothes is more convenient and invisible as a celebrity. Thus, traditional clothing is more like a promotional performance.

5.3 Masculine Tibetan men

"True Khampa⁶ Men" has been a hot tourism event in *Kham*. In the summer of 2020, the tourism bureau of Garze held a contest of "the most beautiful Khampa Men" (喜热布 Xi Re Bu, 2020) which was criticized by Tibetans as an eroticization of minority

⁶ Khampa means "natives of Kham".

groups⁷. Usually, southern minority females are more likely to be eroticized by Han Chinese men. However, Mongols and Tibetans in the northern and western borderlands of China are more frequently masculinized (Hillman & Henfry, 2006). Ding Zhen's videos displayed the strong relationship between a horse and Ding Zhen and the good athletic ability of Ding Zhen to show the masculinity of Tibetan men and to confirm the stereotypes of "True Khampa Men" even in a modern standard.

Ding Zhen and his horse are tightly connected. In the first video of TikTok and Bilibili, Ding Zhen introduced his horse, Pearl. He said in *Ding Zhen's World* that "I'm the happiest when I racehorses with my brothers. I'm very good at riding horses. (I) Won a lot of races in my village. They call me Prince on a Horse". Then he describes his dream life as "I just want to ride my little horse across mountains and over hills". In his video, Ding Zhen is wearing a dark red Tibetan robe with long riding boots which is a typical Tibetan traditional riding suit. His horse also has a colorful saddle with Tibetan decoration. The video producer made a fantasy-like scenery that represents running free in the wilderness as a something that "True Khampa Men" do.

In modern life, horses are not that common, so athletic ability is constructed as a talented gift for Tibetan men to show masculinity. In section 4.2.2, I described Ding Zhen climbing the indoor rocks in a gym. The captions say in a proud tone, "the owner (of this gym) said that the rock wall Little Ding chose is the most difficult one, only less than 20% of people can reach the top on the first try, (he) deserves to be our herding boy". Thus, the link between pasture lifestyle and good athletic ability is constructed. The football playing scenery in video of 27th Dec 2020 is remarkable because football is usually considered as a modern and western sport, while Ding Zhen is playing football in a traditional Tibetan robe. All the sports display a strong, energetic, and lively Tibetan young man's image in a modern way, which indicates that he is competent not only in traditional Tibetan men's ability like horse riding, but also modern masculine men's ability like rock-climbing, playing football, snowboarding, etc.

⁷ A famous Tibetan writer Tsering Woenser commented the Khampa Men promotion as "male sexual economy 男色经济" and "male prostitutes' mindset promotion '鸭心态' 宣传". <https://twitter.com/degewa/status/1505016631738580994?s=20&t=IUrCOqNiYd-2yNSK42CIA>. She also commented Ding Zhen as "Tibetan mastiff-like pet" and "innocent yak" for Han Chinese. <https://twitter.com/degewa/status/1505823586472189952?s=20&t=IUrCOqNiYd-2yNSK42CIA>.

5.4 Hidden religion

There is no direct religious content in Ding Zhen's video, even though Tibetan Buddhism is a large part of Tibetan life. Since it is not easy to avoid this part completely when introducing Tibetan culture and lifestyle. So, interestingly, although there are still lots of religious elements in Ding Zhen's video, there is no introduction of them. They just simply display the religious elements as a part of Tibetan life without any verbal or textual explanation.

I recognized several common Tibetan Buddhist elements, like the prayer wheels, prayer beads with counting markers and cords, Gau box, and Dzi beads. I also recognized some common Tibetan Buddhist rituals, like praying, Ache Lhamo (Tibetan Opera), light offering, Lungta (wind horse) offering, and Sang/incense smoke offering. (See section 4.1.2.3, 4.2.2, and 4.3.2)

There are two possible reasons for the silent display of religious elements. The first one is the strict religious regulations in China. Introduction and promotion of any religion outside official religious places is not allowed in China now. The second reason is the commercial purpose. The main target audience of Ding Zhen's video is young Chinese people, and usually the religious practices, which are regarded as old traditions, are not very attractive to them. So, the producers include religious elements as a part of the whole cultural experience to promote it.

6 CONCLUSION

Since the pandemic, people's lives have moved more and more online, the same with tourism branding. Indigenous cultures are spreading and reconstructing via social media. Through this process, we have seen how culture as a social practice can be constructed and reconstructed for commercial purposes. No matter whether it is supportive or destructive to the substantiality of local cultural heritage and tourism, the construction itself has already influenced the local image. Thus, it is important to approach this study from a critical perspective.

In summary, through the analysis and discussion of Ding Zhen's place branding video, I tried to investigate how a state-owned tourism agency utilizes a young Tibetan celebrity to brand the local tourism. I conclude that they skillfully used modern communication media and modern narratives to represent the so-called "authentic" Tibetan culture and Tibetan lifestyle. Meanwhile, they also showed the modern part of this Tibetan young celebrity to keep connections with modern audience. During this process, different identities are selectively displayed based on different contexts, even different aspects of Tibetan culture are selectively displayed for better commercial purposes.

There are still some limitations of this research. First, the sample size is small because I only selected 7 videos from the same producer. But this is a very representative case and contains different genres and settings, so it is an extensive case which give me enough materials. Second, I cannot make sure in what extend the internet regulations and political relations in China influenced their expression. This influence is difficult to quantify, so I can only analyze it based on current expression.

This thesis is not criticizing the commodification of culture in tourism. This analysis aims to highlight the cultural image constructed by modern online tourism branding and the pervasiveness of this discourse. I hope this study will contribute to the awareness of cultural commodification in tourism.

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