PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP:

AN ANALYSIS OF LI ZIQI AND HER AUDIENCES

by

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ABSTRACT

Li Ziqi, as a successful Chinese influencer, already obtained 9.66 million

subscribers on YouTube and more than 69 million fans in China by April 11, 2020. This

thesis explored why Li Ziqi is popular around the world. Using textual analysis, the

construction of three of her videos and selected comments (1332 in total) on YouTube

were analyzed. This thesis argued that the audiences had positive attitudes and affective

connections with the life and the lifestyle portrayed in her videos, as well as with the Li

Ziqi as a character in the films and the Li Ziqi as a real person in reality. Furthermore,

they helped the audiences build a parasocial relationship with Li Ziqi's world and Li Ziqi

herself through legalizing the authenticity of them. This kind of long-term relationship

contributed to the popularity of Li Ziqi.

Keyworks: Li Ziqi, parasocial relationship, parasocial interaction, social media

influencer, culture exchange, culture export

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INTRODUCTION

On December 5, 2019, an influential blogger @雷斯林 Raist posted an article "Why can't Li Ziqi be counted as cultural export" on Sina Weibo[1] and triggered a huge discussion on the Internet in China. This discussion mainly revolved around whether Li Ziqi's works could be considered as a cultural export.[2] In addition to many ordinary Internet users and social media influencers, some official media also participated in the discussion, including CCTV (China Central Television) News, People's Daily, China Daily, etc. Subsequently, several hashtags were created successively on Sina Weibo. For example, the hashtag #whether Li Ziqi belongs to cultural export# had 111 thousand discussions and 900 million views by March 3, 2020, and the hashtag #CCTV commented on why Li Ziqi is popular all over the world#[3] had 124 thousand discussions and 1.14 billion views.

Li Ziqi (Chinese: 李子柒) was born in rural Pingwu, Mianyang City, Sichuan Province in 1990 (Mao, 2019). She is a Chinese food and country-life blogger and social media influencer (Yamaguchi, 2019). Li Ziqi had already been popular for three years in China, with 24 million followers on Sina Weibo, 40.5 million on Douyin[4], and 5.2 million

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[1] Sina Weibo, a Chinese microblogging website, is one of the biggest social media platforms in China.

[2] The "cultural export" here was literally translated from Chinese by the author. What it wanted to express here was sharing and communicating Chinese culture to the world.

[3] Note: the hashtag on Sina Weibo has two signs "#" which is different from the social media in the United States. Also, they were translated from Chinese to English by the author.

[4] Douyin is a Chinese video-sharing social media platform owned by ByteDance. Douyin and Tik Tok are similar and owned by the same company.

on bilibili[5]. After she joined YouTube, she had 9.66 million subscribers on YouTube by April 11, 2020, and was estimated to be worth 8.7 million dollars (Goldthread, 2019). This is rare in the field of the short video that is always changeable and unpredictable (uuwatch.com, 2019). Therefore, this thesis explored why Li Ziqi is popular around the world.

The success of social media influencers depends on their fans. Building a stable and sticky relationship with fans is one of the keys to the fan economy (Zhang & Fung, 2017). Parasocial relationship describes a "seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Using parasocial relationship as its theoretical framework, this thesis employed the following research questions: What did Li Ziqi's video generally construct; How did the audience respond to her video? Using textual analysis, this study analyzed nine comments and 1332 replies to Li Ziqi's top three videos on YouTube.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parasocial Relationship & Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial relationship (PSR) and parasocial interaction (PSI) were firstly proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe users' responses to media content. Horton and Wohl (1956) did not specifically distinguish the two concepts, but described the parasocial relationship and parasocial interaction as long-term and short-term

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[5] Bilibili is a Chinese video-sharing website based in Shanghai.

responses in one process of building relations, respectively. However, during the last two decades, some researchers called for a clear definition of PSI and PSR (Cohen, 2009; Dibble & Rosaen, 2011; Dibble et al., 2016; Gile 2002; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Klimmt et al., 2006).

Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial interaction is viewed as a "simulacrum of conversational give-and-take" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Horton and Wohl (1956) mainly focus on television causing this kind of parasocial interaction between audience and media figures. Since television could zoom in on a variety of details, such as subtle expressions or gestures, audiences could perceive and pay attention to them and thus establish an interaction with the media figures (including actors, presenters, and celebrities, etc.).

Furthermore, parasocial interaction refers to a kind of "faux sense of mutual awareness" that appears instantly during the viewing process (Dibble et al., 2016, p. 25). Parasocial interaction makes media consumers produce an illusionary perception that they are like in a real social interaction with the media figures (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Dibble et al., 2016; Horton & Strauss, 1957). Although the media consumers may understand the media figures are fictional, they are still willing to make media figures become "anthropomorphic" (Gardner & Knowles, 2008, p. 157). The more emotions a media user has towards a media figure, the more "real" that the media figure becomes (Gardner & Knowles, 2008). "[T]hey experience the seemingly social encounter as

reciprocal" (Hartmann, 2017), but the reciprocal does not exist in the reality (Hartmann

& Goldhoorn, 2011), because PSI is a "one-sided communication" between audiences

and media figures, specifically indicating that actors' behaviors can reach audiences but

audiences' responses cannot approach to media figures (Schramm & Wirth, 2010). Also,

viewers produce a sense of mutual awareness only during media exposure; when viewing

stops, this interaction stops (Dibble, et al., 2016; Hartmann, 2017; Hartmann &

Goldhoorn, 2011).

Parasocial interaction is a short-term, one-sided affection and response to media

figures, which occurs immediately during media consumption. The affection and

response are triggered by the "forms of addressing like eye-gazing" of the media figures,

which can be positive (such as favorite) or negative (such as angry) (Hartmann, 2017, p.

135).

Parasocial Relationship

Similarly, parasocial relationship refers to a "seeming face-to-face relationship

between spectator and performer" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Schramm and Wirth

(2010) argue that parasocial relationship is a "cross-situational relationship…[including]

specific cognitive and affective components" between viewers and media figures (p.27).

Foss (2019) argues that fictional television has power to influence viewer's perceptions

and behavior through building a parasocial relationship. Compared to parasocial

interaction, which only occurs during viewing, parasocial relationship is a "long-term

association" that can develop during media exposure but also can be without any parasocial interaction (Dibble et al., 2016).

There are various forms of parasocial relationships, such as worshiping relationship, friendship, or negative relationship (Hartmann, 2017). For example, Schramm and Wirth (2010) argue that viewers build a parasocial relationship with characters to interact with them like a "friendship." Foss (2019) posits that the reason why viewers show their grief to the fictional character Jack in *This Is Us* is because they built a parasocial relationship with this character who is portrayed as a hero. Ingram and Luckett (2019) examine that viewers' PSR with their "friend" Harry, a fictional character in *Harry Potter*, has individual differences and media differences. Moreover, some researchers have studied the parasocial relationship with unfavorable characters (Russell et al., 2006; Knoll et al., 2015; Gardner & Knowles, 2008). For example, Knoll et al (2015) explore the influence of parasocial interactions with positive and negative characters on brand placement effects, finding that audiences interacted slightly less with the positive character compared to the negative character.

Parasocial relationship is a long-term response. It can happen not only during media consumption or after parasocial interaction, but also without any parasocial interaction. Also, parasocial relationship is not only an instant communication and feedback with media figures, but a long-term relationship and affectional establishment, which is usually positive (Schramm & Wirth, 2010; Foss, 2019; Ingram & Luckett,

2019).

In general, although these two concepts sometimes overlap, it is necessary to distinguish them. Under this theoretical framework, this thesis discussed why Li Ziqi is popular all over the world. The focus was around the long-term affectional association of the audiences towards Li Ziqi and the long-term impact of Li Ziqi towards her audiences.

Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers are described as "people who built a large network of followers and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches" (De Veirman et al., 2016, p. 1). Some researchers call "social media influencers" as "micro-celebrities," arguing that the two terms can be conceptually identical (Abidin, 2016; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). Abidin (2016) defines micro-celebrities as "ordinary internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in 'digital' and 'physical' spaces, and monetize their following by integrating 'advertorials' into their blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events" (p. 3). Compared to the traditional celebrities who depend on film, TV shows, and other traditional forms to become popular, social media influencers are those who became famous through social media presence, such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, etc. (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; Khamis, et al., 2016). Similarly, Freberg et al. (2011) argues that social media influencers refer to "a

new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (p. 90).

Research on social media influencers mostly focuses on marketing (Glucksman, 2017; Booth & Matic, 2011; Jin et al., 2019; Coates et al., 2019; Gulamali, 2017). For example, Glucksman (2017) analyzes the influence of Internet celebrity Lucie Fink, arguing that social media as a new type of advertising platform play a great role in promoting products and building a brand image. Coates et al. (2019) explore the food and beverage cue presentation in YouTube videos posted by influencers who are popular among children. They argue that less healthy items are more frequently displayed and described in relatively positive way in YouTube videos, and children's eating behaviors can be impacted easily by these influencers (Coates et al., 2019). Evans, Hoy, and Childers (2018) explore the child influencer unboxing videos, arguing that pre-roll advertising blurred the boundary between content and advertising. Children may not have ability to figure out that child influencer unboxing videos are advertising. This study is beneficial to discussing theoretical, managerial, and public policy implications (Evans et al., 2018).

Some researchers have studied the reasons and ways that influencers influence audiences (Xiao, et al., 2018; Glucksman, 2017; Bakshy et al., 2011; Scheer & Sterm, 1992). For example, Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted (2018) explore the influential factors affecting consumers on YouTube, and showing that trustworthiness, social

influence, argument quality, and information involvement are main influential factors to affect consumers perceiving information credibility. Similarly, Glucksman (2017) argues that the number of the followers is not the only factor that determines the success, but the ability of influencers to influence their fans in terms of authenticity, confidence, and interactivity is also an important consideration.

In addition to the area of marketing, social media influencers also play an important role in politics. For example, Michael Bloomberg took advantage of social media influencers in the U.S. election (BBC, 2020; Culliford, 2020; Derysh, 2020), because political groups and marketers believe that voters have a closer and more trusted association with social media influencers than with traditional celebrities, and "they can also reach specific local or niche communities" (Culliford, 2020). Although he ended his presidential campaign on March 4, 2020 (Merica, 2020; Burns, 2020), this example still can reflect the influence of social media influencers on political campaign. However, the Federal Trade Commission casted a ballot recently to dispatch a "close and careful review" of its non-restricting endorsement guides, which may foresee that social media influencers, advertisers and technical platforms will be restricted (McQueen, 2020).

Parasocial relationship & social media influencers

According to Horton and Wohl (1956), parasocial notion occurs mainly on television and is non-reciprocal. Currently, social media have offered new opportunities for research. Some scholars have extended this theory to social media. For example, Giles

(2002) posits that two-person conversations on the Internet can be classified as social; and the more people participate, the more parasocial the interaction is. Also, it is found that parasocial relationship can be enhanced through referring to audiences by their usernames (Labrecque, 2014). Sokolova and Kefi (2019) explore how the parasocial interaction and perceived credibility with social media influencer impact the intention of purchase, and they argue both credibility and parasocial interaction have significantly positive relationships with purchase intention. Bond (2016) argues that exposure to media personae on Twitter has positively related to the strength of PSRs. These articles provide some useful perspectives that examine the parasocial relationship between viewers and social media influencers.

For the parasocial relationship or interaction, some scholars point out several elements that can impact the audience's experience (Tran and Strutton, 2014; Stefanone et al., 2010; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Jin et al., 2019). The first one is authenticity. Researchers have found consumers consider social media influencers more authentic comparing to traditional celebrities, and audiences have a stronger and deeper connectedness with them, which leads that audience are willing to imitate them (Tran & Strutton, 2014; Stefanone et al., 2010). Jin et al. (2019) argue that when viewers believe influencers are real, they tend to produce more emotion of envy and are more desired to have the products the influencers display.

Furthermore, Jin et al (2019) argue that perceived sociability is the crucial reason

why audiences prefer social media influencers. Abidin (2019) studies a case of three Australian gay YouTubers to explore the relationship between discursive activism of gay influencer, commercial activity, and relational intimacies with audiences, arguing that the gay influencers build an intimal relationship with their audiences through a series self-exposure, and then constitute a feeling of community. Social media influencers use a unique way to connect with audiences and have a deeper interpersonal intimacy (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).

A high consumer perception of information credibility is considered as the core of the success of YouTube influencer marketing (Xiao, et al., 2018). Similarly, Jin et al. (2019) argue that the audience thinks the source of an Instagram celebrity is more trustworthy than a traditional celebrity, and the audiences in Instagram celebrity condition has a more positive brand attitude, social presence, and envy than in traditional celebrity condition. Glucksman (2017) argues that social media influencers can help brands influence their audience through authenticity, confidence, and interactivity, in other words, when an influencer becomes a reliable and confident "friend" of her/his audience, their fans would listen to their opinion. Coates et al. (2019) argue that the influencers of food and beverages build a relationship with children who know the influencer at a personal level and trust their content and then influence children's behaviors by this kind of relationship.

Li Ziqi

Li Ziqi (Chinese: 李子柒), whose real name is Li Jiajia (Che, 2019), was born in rural Pingwu, Mianyang City, Sichuan Province in 1990 (Mao, 2019). She is a Chinese food and country-life blogger and internet influencer (Yamaguchi, 2019). Currently, Li Ziqi mainly posts her videos through Weibo (24 million followers) and YouTube (9.66 million subscribers). The market of Li Ziqi estimated to be worth 8.7 million dollars (Goldthread, 2019).

Li Ziqi often wears modified Hanfu (a kind of Han Chinese traditional clothing) and uses the traditional ways and tools to make Chinese food and crafts (Guan, 2019). Her product materials are all self-sufficient, so the time span of her videos is large. Her videos value high-quality visual effects, often showcasing the natural beauty of the Chinese countryside. She seldom speaks in the video, but the Xanadu-like aesthetic of her video is impressive (Mao, 2019).

Figure 1. *A video "Congee with pickled mustard plant stem and plum blossom pastries, a simple home-cooked breakfast" posted on Li Ziqi's YouTube channel on February 25, 2019.*

By April 11, 2020, Li Ziqi already had 9.66 million subscribers on YouTube, which she joined YouTube on August 21, 2017. A data website indicates that Li Ziqi's global rank by subscribers is top 1%, the total views of her channel is 1.28 billion, and the average video views is 13.7 million by April 11, 2020 (Influencer, 2020). The estimated audience age is mostly among 18-34, and the number of males is more than females. In terms of estimated audience geography, most viewers are from the United States (23%), 12% are from India, and 11% are from Indonesia.

Alfred (2019), a Chinese civilian group of data analysis, conducted a quantitative

analysis of 69,970 comments and 63,768 information of commenters under the three videos that have the most views (AlfredWu, 2019), claiming that the influence of Li Ziqi's video has broken out of the Confucian cultural circle and has been recognized by other cultures (see figure 2). There are 90 languages in total of the comments, and the top ten respectively are English 37,475, Chinese 7,611, Vietnamese 3,028, Russian 2,736, Spanish 2,093, Japanese 1,647, Portuguese 1,385, Arabic 1,361, Korean 993, and Thai 882.

Through picking up and analyzing all English comments from the 69,970 comments, Alfred (2019) summarized the reasons that English speakers like Li Ziqi's videos: (1) Li Ziqi showed her personal charm in the video - both feminine beauty and tenacious beauty; (2) she has an impressive ability of crafting; (3) and the idyllic scenery and aesthetics exhibited by Li Ziqi are desirable, enabling the busy modern people to get spiritual escape. Both Chinese and English studies lack academically quantitative analysis on Li Ziqi; however, this non-academic data analysis provided a good insight into this thesis.
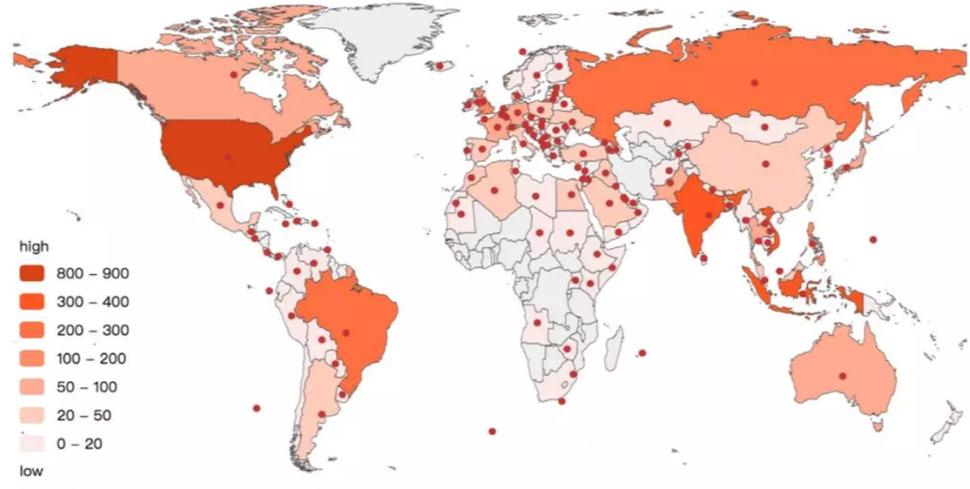
Figure 2. *This figure shows the distribution of Li Ziqi's audience in the world. The figure is from Alfred.*

Li Ziqi's Biography

Although Li Ziqi is currently famous all over the world, she had a miserable childhood and tough experience. Li Ziqi's parents divorced when she was very young. She lived with her father, but, according to her, her stepmother mistreated her. Her father died unexpectedly when Li Ziqi was eight years old, so she began to live with her grandparents (Li, 2020). Li Ziqi left the countryside to the city for work in 2004 and has done various jobs, such as being a restaurant waitress. Later she started to learn music and became a bar DJ (Mao, 2019). In 2012, Li Ziqi quitted her job and returned to the hometown to take care of her ill grandmother. In order to make a living, she started an

online business selling agricultural products in Taobao[6] (Liang, 2019).

In 2016, in order to improve her business, she got involved in the short video area with the encouragement of her younger brother. In March 2016, she released the first video named "Peach Blossom Wine" on Meipai, a Chinese application analogous to Tik Tok in the United States (Mao, 2019). In November 2016, "Hand-Pulled Noodles with Beef" became the first popular video of Li Ziqi, with 50 million views and 600,000 likes on the entire Internet. In April 2017, a video about making a swing chair was over 10 million views on Meipai, and the entire network has reached 80 million views and more than 1 million likes. At this time, Li Ziqi also began to receive some criticism (Mao, 2019; Liang, 2019; Goldthread, 2019). Some Chinese netizens thought that Li Ziqi was not able to make such crafts and foods that showed on her videos, and she was just an internet celebrity made by a brokerage company. Li stopped posting new videos because of these negative comments on May 13, 2017. Afterward, she searched for an appropriate videographer to enhance the quality of her videos (Wang, 2018; Initium Media, 2019; Guan, 2019).

On July 20, 2017, Li Ziqi and Hangzhou Weinian Technology Co., Ltd. jointly established Sichuan Ziqi Culture Communication Co., Ltd. At the same time, Li Ziqi built a team which only included an assistant and a videographer. In terms of the video content, Li Ziqi herself is responsible for that. The company is only responsible for the

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[6] Taobao is a Chinese online shopping website owned by Alibaba Group.

business development, promotion, and daily affairs. On August 17, 2018, Li Ziqi's Tmall[7]

flagship store opened and launched five gourmet products, with sales exceeding 150,000

within six days of launch (Mao, 2019; Liang, 2019; Initium Media, 2019; Guan, 2019).

METHOD

This thesis has constructed a theoretical framework of parasocial relationship, and

all analyses were operated under this framework. Parasocial relationship refers to a

"seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" (Horton & Wohl,

1956, p. 215). It was used in this thesis to analyze why Li Ziqi is popular all over the

world. Nine selected online comments and their 1332 replies were analyzed in this thesis.

Research Questions

This thesis examined why Li Ziqi's popularity around the world. Specifically,

these following research questions guided this thesis:

1. What did Li Ziqi's videos generally construct?

2. How did the audience respond to her videos?

Methodology and Operationalization

Although Li Ziqi is more famous in China and her biggest platforms are Weibo

and Douyin, YouTube was chosen for the study because its target audience is wider. All

kinds of people with different cultural backgrounds are on YouTube, while most users of

Weibo are Chinese. In this case, this study was analyzed from a multicultural perspective,

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[7] Tmall.com, owned by Alibaba, is a Chinese online shopping and retail website spun off from Taobao.

which was more suitable for the research questions of this thesis.

This study applied textual analysis that "allows the researcher to discern latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions, and omissions of a text" (Fürsich, 2009). Also, the systematically textual analysis can help researchers "understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live" (McKee, 2003, p.1). Nine selected online comments and their 1332 replies were analyzed to answer the above research questions.

Data were collected from Li Ziqi's YouTube Channel named "李子柒 Liziqi" that opened from 2017 to the present. The "sort by" function on YouTube was used to sort Li Ziqi's videos by popularity. The top three videos that had the most views were chosen to be the units of the data. Afterward, the top three comments with the most "likes" and "replies" under each video as well as their replies were selected as the data of this thesis. Because the most popular videos and comments represented that they were recognized and liked by most people. This also meant that they were widely representative and worth studying. This thesis only focused on English comments. The comments in other languages were not included because of the language barrier. Since foreign language comments were the minority (around thirty) under the selected videos, this may not affect the analysis of this paper. It was worth noting that all the selected comments were written as they were original, including the grammar mistakes, emoticons, etc. The total

comments were nine, and the total replies of the nine comments were 1332 (see appendix A).

It was critical to analyze the text as a whole (Fisher, 1985), "any instance of discourse is always more than the individuated forms that may compose it" (p. 347). The analysis of texts should not be fixed but should be linked to other texts, contexts, and discourses, as well as cultures and ideologies (Larsen, 1991). The thesis examined the selected videos and the selected comments. In terms of the selected videos, a surface analysis applied to examine the research question one. Specifically, an analysis explored the narrative structure, the character relationship, the plot, the sound, and the visual express of Li Ziqi's videos. In terms of the selected comments, the thesis focused on the audience's emotional, affective, and subjective connection with her videos and her in order to answer the question two. The analysis examined the language, latent and manifest meaning, assumptions, emoticons, etc. The purpose of the analyses was to explore the visual and emotional connections associated with the parasocial relationship between the audience and Li Ziqi and her videos.

RESULTS

Li Ziqi's video

In regard to the research question one, Li Ziqi's video uses a non-dramatic narrative structure, showing the production process of traditional Chinese cuisine and handicrafts, and creating a world of tranquility and peace and present a reclusive life that

is away from the hustle and bustle. This section gives a general summary of Li Ziqi's video construction and analyzes the three selected videos separately.

The general construction of Li Ziqi's video

The setting of Li Ziqi's videos are based on Chinese rural scenes, presenting a kind of country lifestyle. Most of her videos begin with a wide shot showing beautiful scenery, allowing viewers to immediately immerse themselves in a relaxing, beautiful and peaceful atmosphere. Her videos mainly include close-ups showing the process of her production and wide shots showing the beauty of the scenery (Yang, 2019).

Li Ziqi's works all have similar narrative characteristics. They are non-dramatic without strong conflicts but follow a narrative style of "adhering to the laws of nature" (Liu, 2020, p. 30). Generally, each episode consists of a series of processes – planting and/or collecting raw materials, producing products, and displaying finished products. The content of the videos basically shows the process of making Chinese food or traditional craftsmanship. Li Ziqi shows her talents in the videos, and she can use almost any natural resources to make any food and handicrafts, and the product materials are all from her garden or nature.

The character relationships in her videos are generally her and her grandma. At the end of each video, Li Ziqi always shares and shows her food or crafts to her grandmother. Video sounds are generally composed of ambient sounds, sound effects, and background music. Li Ziqi rarely talks in her videos. When she does speak, she

usually uses local dialects. The subtitles of Li Ziqi's original videos are Chinese, but users have voluntarily translated her videos in other languages, most of which are in English on YouTube.

Although each video describes different stories or content, the visual experience and narrative style they convey to the audience are generally similar. There are three selected videos and the associated comments to be analyzed in this thesis – "Peanut and melon seeds, dried meat, dried fruit, snowflake cake – snacks for Spring Festival," "It's a red mountain, and in the fall, it's natural to make some sweet persimmons," and "Using bamboo to make some sophisticated old furniture – Bamboo Sofa." These three videos were specifically analyzed below as samples, and the comments selected in the next parts were also from these three videos.

Peanut and melon seeds, dried meat, dried fruit, snowflake cake – snacks for Spring Festival

The preparation of snacks for the Spring Festival, the most important holiday in China, is used as the storyline in this episode. This episode obtained the most views than others – more than 50 million. This episode begins with Li Ziqi picking up chestnuts in the woods. This and the storyline of collecting fruits (pomelo and orange) in the woods later constitutes the process of collecting raw materials. After that, Li Ziqi shows a series of process of making traditional food for the Spring Festival, and the products include roasted chestnuts, sesame and peanut candy, and sugar-coated haws on a stick, etc. These

production processes are mainly presented through some close-up shots.

There are three people appearing in this episode – Li Ziqi, her grandma, and a popcorn guy. Li Ziqi is the main character in the video, taking on all the work of collecting and making products as well as taking care of her grandma. Grandma plays the role of onlooker or helper. The popcorn guy is not a resident character, and he only appears in this episode to provide services. At the end of the video, Li Ziqi and her grandmother sit around the fireplace enjoying the snacks made by Li Ziqi, which constitutes the process of displaying the finished product. It is worth mentioning that the animal image appears in this video. For example, when Li Ziqi collects the chestnuts, two puppies and a little goat accompany her; at the end of the video, when Li Ziqi and her grandmother sit by the fire, there are also puppies beside them.

It's a red mountain, and in the fall, it's natural to make some sweet persimmons

In this episode, the video begins with a beautiful wide shot, showing the beautiful scenery of the mist surrounding the mountains. Li Ziqi goes to the woods to collect persimmons, which constitutes the collection process. She and her grandmother peeling the persimmon skin and she air-drying the persimmons forms the process of producing. Displaying the finished food through close-up shots constitutes the display process. It is worth mentioning that the time span of this video has gone through autumn and winter. The practice of the persimmon shown in the video requires a period of low temperature storage. Therefore, the persimmon is picked and made in autumn and then the final

product is finished in winter.

Using bamboo to make some sophisticated old furniture – Bamboo Sofa

Similarly, in the episode, the video's narrative is divided into the process of collection, production, and display. Gathering the raw materials (bamboo) in the bamboo forest is the process of collection, making bamboo into sofas and tables is a production process, and showing the finished product to grandma is the display process. There are no new elements occurring in this episode. As normally, the sound is combined with ambient sounds, sound effects, and background music.

Although the various videos may be different, the overall style of Li Ziqi's videos is basically similar. The narrative structure of Li Ziqi's videos is usually non-dramatic, only to naturally show the process of producing food or craftsmanship. The process includes collecting and/or planting, producing, and displaying. The raw materials are basically from nature or her garden, showing a self-sufficient lifestyle and the harmony between man and nature. In terms of character relationships, Li Ziqi and her grandma take care of each other, creating a sense of happiness of family. In terms of visual communication, her videos show a lot of pleasant scenery, mainly using wide shots. While, for the production process, close-up shots are usually used. As for sound, Li Ziqi normally doesn't say much in videos. In addition to ambient sounds and sound effects, brisk music without lyrics always runs through her videos from beginning to end. Also, English subtitles are available in all three selected videos.

Constructed PSR with Li Ziqi's world

Li Ziqi's videos describe a poetically pastoral world and lifestyle. The non-dramatic narrative style and production activities which obey the laws of nature created a world of tranquility and peace and present a reclusive life that is away from the hustle and bustle. In "Li Ziqi's world," the lifestyle of human beings can be self-sufficient and can live in harmony with nature. The textual analysis of audience comments on these three videos found audiences establish parasocial relationships with the world that Li Ziqi created in her videos. Three dominant themes were discovered in this parasocial relationship: praise for the life in "Li Ziqi's world," praise for the lifestyle in "Li Ziqi's world," and debate over the authenticity of "Li Ziqi's world" (please see the Appendix B about the number of replies of each themes). Some viewers showed a positive attitude towards "Li Ziqi's world." On the one hand, they yearned for the kind of life of peace and relaxation created in the video; they also praised the way of life in Li Ziqi's world and at the same time criticized the modern urban lifestyle. Furthermore, Li Ziqi's video also received some questions. Some viewers questioned the purpose of profit and whether Li Ziqi did false performance. But there are still quite a few viewers who indicated that they do not care about the authenticity and just enjoy the peace and relaxation brought by the videos itself.

Praise for the life in "Li Ziqi's world"

The world depicted in Li Ziqi's videos is different from the normal urban life. Her

video depicts a peaceful, quiet, and beautiful world. Therefore, some viewers expressed

their views on this different life. For example, one viewer commented:

fun with food: I actually thought this was the garden of eden!

The manifest meaning of the "Garden of Eden" refers to the place where Adam and Eve

lived in the biblical account of the Creation. It is a term from the Bible. But as time goes

by and culture develops, it also broadly refers to that kind of place of pristine or abundant

natural beauty and without stress. Similarly, another viewer said a similar sentence in

response to a selected comment:

Grace Bride: No. She is living in the Garden of Eden.

The Garden of Eden is also known as paradise, described in the Bible as the ideal

destination for humans. As an audience member commented:

Alex G9: I didn't know paradise in china still existed like this.

This kind of comment shows to some extent that the content presented in Li Ziqi's

videos is accepted by some viewers with a positive attitude. Also, some viewers more

directly called on people to return to this kind of life, for example:

little red riding heart: We should start building this life again, reminding the

people, actually making it happen, even if its just in small steps. Why are we

wasting our lives?

Similarly,

Amber Vitek: this channel brings me peace like ive never felt before. thank you

for doing these videos. makes my concrete world consumed by empty people who only have sad faces. chemicals in foods and single file lines. feel less like im here ...and more like im a place that we all should be a home with nature and family a place and life worth living

These audiences had a positive attitude towards the calm, peace and beautiful life portrayed in Li Ziqi's video. In addition to praising this life, they also called on people to return to it.

Praise for the lifestyle in "Li Ziqi's world"

Most of the audiences were impressed by Li Ziqi's quiet, peaceful and less stressful world. Besides, some audiences praised the lifestyle of "Li Ziqi's world" where human beings can be self-sufficient and can live in harmony with nature. For example:

Kathaleen Wood: Deep down, I know this is how life is actually supposed to be.

Also, some viewers indicated that they wanted to have this kind of lifestyle, such as:

Neko Natsumi: I really wish to experience lifestyle like this someday. If not now, then when I retire.

Similarly,

Mariana De Mari: I totally agree! This lifestyle is really healthy and calm. Just what we need in the actual days: health and calm

Or, some viewers directly raised the specific benefits of lifestyle,

sandra saba: She eats everything fresh like literally fresh right from trees 😭 I want to live like this

In addition to the desire of this lifestyle, some viewers compared the life of Li Ziqi with modern life in the city and criticized the latter. For example:

ToorTiemie #: Absolutely. We live in a system created by mankind that is designed for us to become "successful". I ask you. Being stressed, overworked, depressed is better than this simple, satisfying, honest, hardworking lifestyle?

A considerable number of viewers had a similar idea. For example, a viewer responded to ToorTiemie #:

LaMar: @ToorTiemie # Seems our idea of success, doesn't coincide with health and happiness too well. We are working for the man and government (which I thought was the other way around), period. Most of us will not be as financially successful as we'd like. In the process we've are ruining nature, instead of protecting it, and letting it provide it's best for us to live and enjoy.

Or, like the audience Kaege S who complained about the busy but monotonous life of the daily,

Kaege S: I wish my life was like this. I don't know how the hell life became this way with the 8-5 job and commuting and just constant go go go (in the US at least not sure how it is other places). I found this channel by accident and it is so relaxing and just wish I could live like this.

These commenters focused on the lifestyle of Li Ziqi's world, praising this

healthy and calm lifestyle. Also, some viewers compared this lifestyle with the lifestyle in

the city, and more often criticized the lifestyle in the city.

Debate over the authenticity of "Li Ziqi's world"

Li Ziqi's video were not always praised; she also faced questions and criticisms.

Some commenters doubted that Li Ziqi lived like the life portrayed in the videos. Also,

she was questioned whether did fake performance in her videos. For example,

Ke Gu: It is just a movie, she is an actor.

Similarly,

Jack Reacher: She doesn't really live like this. She's a famous reality YouTube

personality. Her net worth is 8.7 million a year and they live in a big beautiful

home that looks nothing like this. She is single and lives with grandma.

Also, some viewers had doubts about whether Li Ziqi did all the work herself. For

example:

Aria Freisang: Yes. That's what I thought and felt too. It looks amazing but also

it's a lot of hard work. Who works on the fields, planting, watering, who cuts the

trees, who prepares the fire places, cleans up all the tools, cleans the kitchen, the

oven after cooking. In the video, we only see the romantic side, with a very bussy

beautiful girl. It's a professional production and a bit like a fairytale.

Some audience members pointed out that Li Ziqi tried to only show the good side of the

rural life instead of what it really was. Some audience questioned this kind of romantic rural life,

> Park ChimMin: Maria Moonsoon THANK YOU! Edit: People need to start differentiating stuff seen on screen and stuff seen in real life. Yes, it looks beautiful on screen, but I doubt many people would truly enjoy this life style in real life. The stuff on screen only seems beautiful because it has scenes cherrypicked from reality.
>
> JusticeForNichole: @Park ChimMin One of my biggest issues with it is that people are saying that they should strive to be like that. It is a highly romanticized depiction of rural life. I see so much self hatred in the comments, and it makes me sad. I'm quite handy, so I know how much time it takes to do a lot of those things, and that you don't always feel like doing those things. I don't like that her videos make people feel bad about themselves, and that is a sentiment I have seen in the comments to all her videos.

But in the selected sample of comments, these kinds of criticisms were only a minority. Most viewers still expressed their favor for the scenes and lifestyle shown in her video, even if some people had doubts about the authenticity of the video. For example:

> Elizabeth B: Ẩm Thực Mẹ Làm It never occurred to me that they were fake. They are visually beautiful which I guess is why some people "internet trolls" think they can be fake. I DONT CARE either way. I find them beautiful and relaxing.

Be they real or contrived.

Or,

> Ex Cel: Liu Jeremy its kinda sad you know, but even if its true that everything
>
> was fake, im still glad to see their "fake life" right? At lease i somehow felt the
>
> countryside energy, and im grateful to see it in her chanel.😊😊 no hate ✌️

Some viewers thought that Li Ziqi's videos inspired them, for example:

> Mendoanz: Deep down...I know you're right...setup or not, paid actress or real
>
> person...somehow her video always makes me want to do better in everything I do

In addition, some viewers praised Li Ziqi herself,

> lee ann: In fact, I don't care how much she makes. But you can see her focus and
>
> creativity, especially creativity, which takes a lot of time

Generally speaking, in the selected data unit, although a small number of viewers questioned Li Ziqi, most viewers were positive about Li Ziqi's video. Specifically, some viewers yearn for this romantic and poetic world and lifestyle created by Li Ziqi and criticized the modern life in the city; while others thought that the content shown in the video itself could give them relaxation and calm, and they did not care about the arguments outside the video, such as whether the video is authentic.

Constructed PSR with Li Ziqi

In addition to expressing their favor toward the life and lifestyle in "Li Ziqi's world," the audiences also built a parasocial relationship with Li Ziqi. There were two

themes of this kind of parasocial relationship: "the Li Ziqi in the screen" and "the Li Ziqi

outside the screen." Specifically, "Li Ziqi in the screen" refers to the character portrayed

in the videos. Viewers focus more on the Li Ziqi in the video. They comment more on the

behavior and performance of the characters in the video. "Li Ziqi outside the screen"

means Li Ziqi in the real life. The audiences outline the public image that includes the

real experience of Li Ziqi outside the videos, mainly through interviews about Li Ziqi.

The Li Ziqi in the screen

Some audiences praised the hard-working, versatile, and kind Li Ziqi portrayed in

the video, sometimes connecting her with some fictional characters.

Logan Gibson: I am convinced that she is an ancient spirit, a fricken Druid of the

forest

a very loop: i am thoroughly convinced she is a forest spirit living with an old tree

spirit

Moreover, some audience linked her with the character in film, for example,

KillJoys Make Some Noise: @Olyvia Leonard more of mulan bcause mulan is

more of an independent woman like her

To some extent, these kinds of commenters tended to consider Li Ziqi as mysterious

figures, treating her as a fictional character from a beautiful world. However, some

viewers considered Li Ziqi in a relatively realistic way and tended to praise her for her

talents and diligence:

Olivia James: I like how feminine and strong and disciplined she is.

Prashanti Angani: She is really a wonderful women down to earth

Some viewers indicated that Li Ziqi inspired them. For example:

Bug Bug: You inspired me to clean my room today, sounds stupid but i've been

depressed for 5 years now, lived in pure garbage land and today... I cleaned, threw

away a lot a shit and took a shower hahaha thank you!

This comment received many kind replies. Many audiences supported the commenter on

their new lifestyle. In addition, some audience members remarked that Li Ziqi's lifestyle

inspired them.

Vanessa Wilson: I want my life to be like this. Trying to downsize....we have sold

a lot, and now downsizing my diet so it's cleaner. This makes me want to go live

here, and never have debt or cars or anything else unless it's self sufficient and or

self sustaining

Or,

not-yourlawn: @SwiftRaptor she has really inspired me tho into looking and

beginning the process of living a zero waste life through simple ways such as

switching to cloths instead of cotton pads and simple switches to a menstrual cup

These audiences had a good attitude towards the Li Ziqi on the screen. A part of

the audiences interpreted Li Ziqi in a mysterious way, linking her to the characters in

fairy tales. The other part of the audience treated her in a realistic way, thinking that her

proposed life and lifestyle inspired them.

The Li Ziqi outside the screen

With the increase in popularity, some personal information of Li Ziqi was exposed by the media. Li Ziqi is gradually becoming a public figure. The audience's understanding of Li Ziqi also began to be beyond "the Li Ziqi on the screen." For example, a loyal fan summarized Li Ziqi's experience and posted it in the YouTube comment area:

> Ẩm Thực Mẹ Làm: Guys, I hope that you can see my comment. I'm here to tell you something about her childhood and now. As far as I'm concerned, her mother passed away when she was little. Soon after, her father married another woman. Her stepmother was mean, she was like every stepmother you've read about in the fairy tales……. This is based on my own knowledge so if I'm wrong, let me know. You can support her by clicking the ads or watching it till the end. Thank you ❤️
>
> She inspired me to shoot a video of my mother ..Love From vietnamese.[8]

Under this comment, some viewers replied and expressed admiration for Li Ziqi's experience.

> Rose Janine: Wow...she sounds like Cinderella, but she's better than Cinderella.

---

[8] Note: For the sake of brevity, the original comment was partially cut. Please see the full comment in the Appendix A section.

Or,

> KJV1611. co: Heart breaking story. No wonder her videos are so beautiful. Her
>
> past has formed her into a masterpiece.

Some viewers wanted to prove the authenticity of the comment of @Ẩm Thực Mẹ Làm,

such as,

> windyhawk: this is from an media interview of her. I read the original interview
>
> transcript. Unless we think that what she said during the interview was fake, she
>
> did deserve a better life and all the respect. I chose to believe her because I have
>
> done some of the things shown in her videos while I was young. I could tell that
>
> the way she did those jobs is natural and experienced, definitely not fake posing
>
> for filming. Best wish to this talented, independent and beautiful girl
>
> In general, the audience generally commented positively on "the Li Ziqi in the

screen" and "Li Ziqi outside the screen." Some people were willing to believe the Li Ziqi

on the screen and interpret her in a kind of mysterious way, while other people treats her

in a realistic way, praising her personality and lifestyle she showed in the video.

Furthermore, some audience focused on "the Li Ziqi outside the screen," combining her

real-life experience with the Li Ziqi in the screen.

DISCUSSION

This thesis examined why Li Ziqi is popular around the world, using the

theoretical framework of parasocial relationship. Horton and Wohl (1956) firstly

proposed the parasocial phenomena including the parasocial interaction and parasocial

relationship. This thesis focused on the parasoical relationship between Li Ziqi and her

audiences.

Li Ziqi – an influencer

Li Ziqi is a Chinese social media influencer. By April 11, 2020, the total number

of her audience on Chinese platforms already was more than 69 million fans – Douyin

40.5M, Weibo 23.9M, Bilibili 5.2M, and other platforms. These platforms are mainly for

the Chinese market; therefore, most of her audiences had been Chinese people before

joining YouTube. On August 21, 2017, she joined YouTube and already got 9.66 million

subscribers on YouTube by April 11, 2020. YouTube is a platform for global audiences. A

data website (Influencer, 2020) analyzed Li Ziqi on YouTube and obtained the data of her

audiences' geography: United States 23%, India 2%, Indonesia 11%, Philippines 6%,

Malaysia 6%, United Kingdom 6%, Singapore 5%, Canada 4%, Thailand 2%, and others

11%. Also, a Chinese civilian group of data analysis (Alfred, 2019) conducted a

quantitative analysis of her comments and made a conclusion then that Li Ziqi has been

recognized by other cultures (see Figure 2). From these data, Li Ziqi is not only an

influencer for Chinese viewers but also for the global audiences. Many scholars gave

their definitions of social media influencers. For example, "people who built a large

network of followers and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches" are

considered as a social media influencer (De Veirman et al., 2016, p. 1); or it refers to "a

new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through

blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg et al., p. 90). Whether from the

perspective of data or academic definitions, Li Ziqi is undoubtedly a successful social

media influencer.

The audience in China conducted a discussion about Li Ziqi's success. The

discussion started with a blog post "Why can't Li Ziqi be counted as a cultural export" on

Weibo. According to incomplete statistics, the discussion reached 900 million views.

Netizens including some official media had an intense discussion on this topic. The Pro

side argued that Li Ziqi is a representative of successful cultural export. For example, the

writer of the blog post that triggered this discussion wrote:

> I think this is not only a cultural export, but also a high-level cultural export from
>
> the inside to the outside, from the spirit to the material, because the exported
>
> culture by Li Ziqi's videos is the culture that the Chinese nation had influenced
>
> the world for thousands of years, and is the most essence and most precious
>
> spiritual core of our culture.

He interpreted Li Ziqi from a historical perspective. He argued that China's traditional

farming civilization had influenced other cultures around the world for thousands of

years. It is also the core spiritual force that constitutes the Chinese civilization. Given the

current international environment, Communist Youth League Central commented on Li

Ziqi on Weibo:

Li Ziqi is undoubtedly a cultural communication, at least a chapter in the spread

of the rich Chinese culture. We need more "Li Ziqi," from different angles and

different sides, to show the world a rich, diverse and wonderful China that is not

only rich in unique traditional cultural connotations, but also constantly moving

forward to modernization.

However, the con side believed that it should not be over-interpreted. Li Ziqi is an

independently civil influencer for commercial purposes, not for politics, so it should not

be interpreted excessively from a political perspective. For example, a netizen

commented:

Li Ziqi's behavior is not "political" but purely "economic." Li Ziqi is essentially a

commercial brand and cannot be raised to the level of national policy. Therefore,

it is essentially impossible to be a "cultural export," but more precisely it should

be a cultural exchange or cultural communication. For Li Ziqi, a commercial

brand, whether it is "cultural export" is not important at all. It is important for her

whether her aesthetics can be used to transform into commercial value.

An official newspaper China Daily commented:

The reason that she is popular among international friends maybe because of

emotional resonance and the similar values, which also confirms that sentence,

"the more national, the more world." Don't praise it, and don't criticize it. Give

her world back to her. Everyone who loves life and struggles deserves to be

respected.

This discussion can be interpreted to a certain extent as a discussion of the relationship between national culture and the global audience. Hollywood and Disney are examples to show the successful spread of American culture to other cultures. The case of Li Ziqi is a small example to show that in the context of contemporary times, Chinese culture also has the potential to be accepted by other cultures. As can be seen from these examples, different cultures can communicate and understand each other. This exchange is of positive significance to the development of the whole human civilization, and the national border should not be used as a wall to block this cultural exchange. However, in this complex contemporary environment, how to tell the story of a culture in an appropriate and acceptable way has become a topic that communication scholars need to study. Establishing an emotional connection between the culture and the audiences in the form of stories will be a theoretical solution. This also is exactly what this thesis wants to explore.

The clarification of parasocial phenomena

Although the parasocial phenomena are to some extent conceptually interchangeable, it is still necessary to clarify the definition and characteristics of parasocial relationship and parasocial interaction respectively (Cohen, 2009; Dibble & Rosaen, 2011; Dibble et al., 2016; Gile 2002; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Klimmt et al., 2006). In short, parasocial interaction is a short-term response of the audiences

toward media figures, which is usually triggered by the "forms of addressing like eye-gazing" (Hartmann, 2017, p. 135). This kind of response occurs only during the process of media consumption and would disappear when the consumption stops. However, parasocial interaction is a long-term response and affectional establishment towards media figures (Dibble, et al., 2016; Hartmann, 2017; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Parasocial relationship means that audiences can not only build an interaction which is like a real social communication during the media consumption, but also can build an affectional association with media figures after the media consumption (Schramm & Wirth, 2010; Dibble et al., 2016; Ingram & Luckett, 2019). Furthermore, the parasocial relationship can influence viewers' perceptions and behavior through the long-term affectional association (Foss, 2019).

Therefore, this thesis mainly examined the parasocial relationship between Li Ziqi and her audiences, focusing on the long-term affectional establishment of audiences towards Li Ziqi and the long-term impact of Li Ziqi on her audiences.

What did Li Ziqi's videos generally construct?

The two operational research questions guided this thesis: What did Li Ziqi's videos generally construct; How did the audiences respond to her videos? For the first research question, an analysis of the narrative structure, the character relationship, the plot, the sound, and the visual communication of Li Ziqi's videos were applied in this thesis. Specifically, she succeeds at using the non-dramatic narrative structure and

following a style of "adhering to the laws of nature" (Liu, 2020, p. 30). The narrative helps her videos create a sense of unsophisticated and faring away from the hustle and bustle. Furthermore, the wide shots to show the beauty of the scenery, the nonlyric background music, and less dialogue enhance this kind of sense. The content of her videos is mainly showing the production process of Chinese cuisine and handicraft by using traditional ways and methods; the raw materials are all from her garden or nature. It shows a self-sufficient lifestyle and a sense of harmony between man and nature. Li Ziqi and her grandmother are the main character. The ending scene of most videos generally portray a happy family – she and her grandmother sit around the table and enjoy the food she made. Animal images also appear in her videos sometimes, such as pet lambs or puppies. These images contribute to creating a happy, warm and pure atmosphere. It is worth mentioning that Li Ziqi's videos are generally a few words and equipped with English subtitles, which can greatly reduce language barriers. All in all, Li Ziqi's videos create a world where is full of tranquility, happiness, peace, and relaxation, and she was presented as a talented and tough woman.

The applicability of parasocial relationship to YouTube & Li Ziqi

Li Ziqi is a social media influencer on YouTube. But parasocial notion was created for television and have been widely applied to television. Thus, it is necessary to discuss whether the theory of parasocial relationship can apply to YouTube and Li Ziqi.

Many scholars have tried to extend this theory to other new forms, especially

social media (Giles, 2002; Labrecque, 2014; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Bond, 2016). The online textual conversation can be classified as social; the more people participate, the more parasocial the interaction is (Giles, 2002). This is in line with YouTube, where viewers can conduct multi-person text discussions on a video. It is found that usernames can enhance the parasocial relationship (Labrecque, 2014). Furthermore, the authenticity, the perceived sociability, and information credibility are considered as the main influencing factors that parasocial relationship is present (Tran and Strutton, 2014; Stefanone et al., 2010; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Jin et al., 2019). Since the social media influencers are described as "people who built a large network of followers and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches" (De Veirman et al., 2006, p.1), the influencing factors mentioned above exist on YouTube. From this point, parasocial relationship can be applied to YouTube.

Li Ziqi's videos are actually similar to a television show. Obviously, all of Li Ziqi's videos are edited. Instead of showing the entire making process in her videos, she picks up several shots to artificially produce her videos. The content in her videos are filtered by the lens. Even if they are real existence, they still are "fictionalized" by the camera. Even for documentaries, the film theorist Grierson calls it "creative treatment of actuality" (Morris, 1987). Li Ziqi artistically processes her life, adding performances and cuts based on the script. It makes her videos in a swing between reality and fiction, which provides reasons for the audiences to build parasocial relationships with her.

How did the audience respond to her videos?

There is no doubt that this approximately ideal world is desirable and attractive (Mao, 2019; Liu, 2020). This determination informs the second research question – How did the audience respond to her videos? The question was answered from two aspects; that is, the responses toward the world Li Ziqi created in her video, and the response toward Li Ziqi herself. This thesis argues that audiences built parasocial relationships with both Li Ziqi's world and with Li Ziqi.

Li Ziqi successfully creates a poetic rural scenery and an ideal world, called "Li Ziqi's world." The world is constructed by a series of ways, such as the narrative structure, the plot, the character, etc. This thesis argues that audiences build parasocial relationships with Li Ziqi's world. Some audience uses "the garden of Eden" or "paradise" to describe Li Ziqi's world and call on people to come back to this kind of life. They use their familiar concepts to legalize Li Ziqi's world. Similarly, some audiences consider Li Ziqi as a mysterious figure from a beautiful world, such as "an ancient spirit," "a forest spirit," or "Mulan." Although the audience may understand the media figures are fictional, they are still willing to make media figures become "anthropomorphic" (Gardner & Knowles, 2008, p. 157). They are both to make media images more legal and more authentic.

In addition, some commenters praised the less-stressed lifestyle suggesting people can be self-sufficient and can live in harmony with nature, while they also

criticized the modern life in the city. This praise and criticism show that the audiences

have developed emotions toward Li Ziqi's world. Parasocial relationship is a "cross-

situational relationship…[including] specific cognitive and affective components"

between viewers and media figures (Schramm & Wirth, 2010, p. 27). The more emotions

a media user has towards a media figure, the more "real" that the media figure becomes

(Gardner & Knowles, 2008). Therefore, the audience poured affections on Li Ziqi's world

and endowed it the authenticity in order to establish a parasocial relationship. This was

the same for Li Ziqi. Some viewers praised the quality of Li Ziqi, such as her diligence,

talents, and kindness. This emotional expression towards Li Ziqi constructed the basis for

establishing the relationship. Also, these social attractions can enhance the parasocial

relationship (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Furthermore, some viewers commented that Li

Ziqi inspired them to change their lifestyle. When viewers believe influencers are real,

they tend to produce more emotion of envy and are more desired to have the products the

influencers display (Jin et al., 2019). Li Ziqi lets her audiences produce the emotion of

envy, for example, some audience praised and admired her life and lifestyle. They then

would imitate Li Ziqi, such as changing their lifestyle, because they built a parasocial

relationship with her through affectional association. This was how media influence

viewers' perceptions and behavior through building a parasocial relationship (Foss,

2019). It can be argued that the audience has established a long-term parasocial

relationship with Li Ziqi and her world, and this relationship can influence the audience

after the media consumption.

However, a small number of audiences questioned the authenticity of Li Ziqi's world on YouTube. Similarly, on Chinese social platforms, such as Weibo, Li Ziqi was also questioned (Wang, 2018; Initium Media, 2019; Guan, 2019). The criticisms were similar on both platforms. They believed that Li Ziqi does not live like that, or only showed the romantic side of the rural life. In addition, some people had doubts about Li Ziqi, arguing that she is a paid actress who does a fake performance. Obviously, they did not establish a parasocial relationship because they refuse to believe in Li Ziqi's world and Li Ziqi. They may not establish a long-term emotional relationship with Li Ziqi and may not imitate her to change their lifestyle. But most people responded that they did not care if she is real, they only enjoyed the tranquility and relaxation that the video itself brought. Furthermore, in order to prove the authenticity of Li Ziqi, some viewers started to learn about the Li Ziqi outside the screen. For example, some browsed the interview about Li Ziqi and learned her past experience. They combined the Li Ziqi inside the screen with the Li Ziqi outside the screen to make a conclusion that Li Ziqi is authentic. Also, they used this information as an argument to refute those doubts. This high level of trust and positive attitude towards Li Ziqi further strengthened this parasocial relationship.

CONCLUSION

The thesis examined why Li Ziqi is popular around the world and was guided by

two research questions: What did Li Ziqi's videos generally construct; and how did the audience respond to her videos? The theoretical framework was parasocial relationship.

A textual analysis was conducted to explore the narrative structure, the character relationship, the plot, the sound, and the visual communication of Li Ziqi's videos on YouTube, and the language, latent and manifest meaning, assumptions, emotions of comments. This thesis selected the top three videos and nine comments as well as 1332 replies.

Overall, the thesis argued that the audiences established parasocial relationships with Li Ziqi's world and Li Ziqi by legalizing the authenticity and investing in positive affections. For the Li Ziqi's world, the constructed parasocial relationship mainly occur in three aspects: praise for the life in Li Ziqi's world, praise for the lifestyle in Li Ziqi's world, and debate over the authenticity of Li Ziqi's world. For Li Ziqi, the audiences generally establish a relationship with the Li Ziqi inside the screen and the Li Ziqi outside the screen. This long-term parasocial relationship is one of the reasons why Li Ziqi can be popular globally.

This study was conducted through qualitative research, which made the sample size not enough. Also, the results are generalized. Therefore, future research on this topic can be considered for quantitative analysis. Furthermore, comments in other languages were not included in this thesis because of the language barrier. The translating issue should be considered in future research. But this thesis could provide a basic theoretical

solution for cultural exchange. Also, the influencer economy has been contributing to

economic development. This is an emerging industry, so by analyzing Li Ziqi's audience,

this thesis provided practitioners in this new industry a perspective of how to build an

affective connection with the audience.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SAMPLES OF SELECTED COMMENTS

It is worth noting here that all the selected comments are written as they were original, including the grammar errors, emoji, etc. The total number of these comments are 1332.

First Video

The most popular video with over 47 million views is "Peanut and melon seeds, dried meat, dried fruit, snowflake cake – snacks for Spring Festival" posted on January 31, 2019. There are three comments under this video that had the relatively most "likes" and "replies" than others.

- The first comment had 7.5k "likes" and 208 replies so far (by March 4, 2020):

  Ẩm Thực Mẹ Làm: Guys, I hope that you can see my comment. I'm here to tell you something about her childhood and now. As far as I'm concerned, her mother passed away when she was little. Soon after, her father married another woman. Her stepmother was mean, she was like every stepmother you've read about in the fairy tales. Ziqi was forced to do all the housework, she didn't even get to go to school usually. Her grandparents were very supportive to her and protected her, they are the most important people to her. Her father passed away then, and Idk what happened to her stepmother after that. She then quit school and came to the cities to work as much as she could to help her grandparents. She has been a waitress, a DJ and all the other stuffs. But then, her granddad passed away, and

her grandmother as you all see in the videos was sick. So she quit everything and came back to her hometown to take care of her grandmother although she knew that the finance would be a burden. She then figured out how to make a video. She made the video how to dye cloth by grapes' skin and people love it. She did all the work by herself and try again countless times. One video that is making Chinese noodles, everytime she has set the camera angle, the dough got dry and she cannot use it anymore. So she had to make the dough by scratch again and again to record. The dough that was dry, she then baked them into bread for her and her mother to eat. She then said that she was scared just looking at the bread for a while. When she had some money earned from the videos, she hired some camera men, just 2 or 3, to support her. But the fame and popularity have led to her lack of privacy. Papparazi, fly cams are all over her house, she feels really sorry and somehow guilty to her grandmother because of that. She suggested moving to another house but her grandmother told that she had lived in the house for her entire life, so she wouldn't want to move. Some people may say that the videos are fake, that she didn't actually do what was shown in the videos, she just shows her hardworking hands. She really has had an unfortunate childhood, so she deserves what she has today. Please, if you find my comment interesting, leave a like. This is based on my own knowledge so if I'm wrong, let me know. You can support her by clicking the ads or watching it till the end. Thank you ❤️

She inspired me to shoot a video of my mother ..Love From vietnamese.

- The second comment had 17K "likes" and 159 replies so far:

Kathaleen Wood: Deep down, I know this is how life is actually supposed to be.

- The third comment had 7.1K "likes" and 178 replies so far:

Bug Bug: You inspired me to clean my room today, sounds stupid but i've been depressed for 5 years now, lived in pure garbage land and today... I cleaned, threw away alot a shit and took a shower hahaha thank you!

Second Video

The second video with 39 million views posted on October 8, 2018 is "It's a red mountain, and in the fall, it's natural to make some sweet persimmons."

- The first comment had 4.7K "likes" and 70 replies so far:

Logan Gibson: I am convinced that she is an ancient spirit, a fricken Druid of the forest

- The second comment had 3.2K "likes" and 20 replies so far:

Amber Vitek: this channel brings me peace like ive never felt before. thank you for doing these videos. makes my concrete world consumed by empty people who only have sad faces. chemicals in foods and single file lines. feel less like im here ...and more like im a place that we all should be. a home with nature and family a place and life worth living

- The third comment had 2.8K "likes"and 81 replies so far:

Alex G9: I didn't know paradise in china still existed like this.

Third Video

The third video with 36 million views posted on September 25, 2018 is

"Using bamboo to make some sophisticated old furniture – Bamboo Sofa."

- The first comment had 25K likes and 452 replies so far:

Olivia James: I like how feminine and strong and disciplined she is.

- The second comment had 20K likes and 124 replies so far:

Lu~!: Me: I need new sofa. **Goes to IKEA**

   Her: I need new sofa. **Goes to forest**[9]

- The third comment had 7.5K likes and 40 replies so far:

a very loop: i am thoroughly convinced she is a forest spirit living with an old

tree spirit

---

[9] The original comment here was bold.

APPENDIX B: THE NUMBER OF CATEGORIES

Table 1

The total number of each category of all selected comments

Cat.	Life	Li Ziqi	Both Life & Li	Critical	Other
Total	82	181	61	55	953

Note. The data in this table is from the selected comments (see Appendix A for details about the

selected comments). "Cat." refers to the category of all selected comments. "Total" indicates the total

number of each category. "Life" includes audiences talking about Li Ziqi's life and lifestyle in a

positive manner, as well as criticizing modern life. "Li Ziqi" refers to audiences positively discussing

Li Ziqi, including Li Ziqi in the screen and outside the screen. "Both" indicates a comment that

mentioned both "Life" and "Li Ziqi," or a comment that discussed the whole video in a positive

manner. "Critical" represents critical comment on Li Ziqi's world and Li Ziqi. "Other" means that a

comment that is not related to "Life," "Li Ziqi," and her videos; a comment that does not appear with

keywords such as "Life" "Li Ziqi" are also included in the "Other," even if this comment is in favor of

other comments that praise for Life or li Ziqi.

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[10] Note: Punctuation * indicates that the source of literature is in Chinese.

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