

The Media Spectacle of Tujia Culture on Douyin: Homogenization, Feminization, and Decontextualization

(Spektakel Media Budaya Tujia dalam Douyin: Homogenisasi, Feminisasi, dan Dekontekstualisasi)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of Douyin in shaping the media spectacle of the Tujia ethnic group, an indigenous community from China. Through a case study analysis of popular Douyin bloggers representing Tujia culture, the research explores the challenges and consequences of cultural representation in the digital media landscape. By applying Guy Debord's theory of media spectacle, the paper critically examines the homogenization, feminization, and decontextualization of Tujia cultural symbols on Douyin. The findings reveal that Douyin contributes to the construction of a feminized, homogenized, and superficial representation of Tujia culture, detached from its historical and cultural context. The paper suggests strategies for addressing these issues, including promoting innovation in content creation, fostering gender balance, and advocating for collaboration between content creators and government bodies. This research offers valuable insights into the representation of minority cultures on digital platforms and provides a foundation for future research on ethnic media portrayal in China.

Keywords: *Tujia ethnic group; Douyin; media spectacle; cultural representation; cultural commodification.*

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menyelidiki peranan Douyin dalam membentuk spektakel media kumpulan etnik Tujia, sebuah komuniti pribumi dari China. Melalui analisis kajian kes terhadap blogger terkenal di Douyin yang mewakili budaya Tujia, kajian ini meneroka cabaran dan kesan perwakilan budaya dalam landskap media digital. Dengan menggunakan teori spektakel media oleh Guy Debord, makalah ini secara kritis menganalisis homogenisasi, feminisasi, dan dekontekstualisasi simbol budaya Tujia di Douyin. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa Douyin menyumbang kepada pembentukan perwakilan budaya Tujia yang feminis, homogen, dan bersifat dangkal, terpisah daripada konteks sejarah dan budaya asalnya. Makalah ini mencadangkan strategi untuk menangani isu-isu ini, termasuk mempromosikan inovasi dalam penciptaan kandungan, menyeimbangkan peranan jantina, dan menggalakkan kerjasama antara pencipta kandungan dan badan kerajaan. Kajian ini menawarkan pandangan yang bernilai mengenai perwakilan budaya minoriti di platform digital dan menyediakan asas untuk penyelidikan masa depan tentang penggambaran media etnik di China.

Kata Kunci: Kumpulan etnik Tujia; Douyin; spektakel media; perwakilan budaya; komodifikasi budaya.

INTRODUCTION

The Tujia ethnic group, referred to as *Bifzivkar* in their native language, is one of the largest ethnic minorities in China, primarily residing in the Wuling Mountain region, which spans the provinces of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, and Guizhou. With a population of over 9.5 million as of 2021, the Tujia people possess a rich cultural heritage, including unique traditions in music, dance, and craftsmanship. However, due to the region's geographical isolation and limited access to modern communication infrastructure, the dissemination of Tujia culture has faced significant challenges.

The rise of social media platforms such as Douyin (known internationally as TikTok) has presented new opportunities for minority cultures to engage with broader audiences. Douyin's short-form video format allows users to quickly share content and reach millions of viewers, transforming it into a powerful tool for cultural communication. For the Tujia ethnic group, Douyin has become a key platform for preserving and promoting their cultural identity. However, the portrayal of Tujia culture on Douyin is often filtered through the lens of the platform's algorithms and audience preferences, which prioritize viral content over authenticity.

This paper delves into how Douyin has shaped the media spectacle surrounding the Tujia ethnic group. Using Guy Debord's theory of media spectacle as a conceptual framework, we explore how Tujia cultural representations are homogenized, feminized, and decontextualized on the platform. Debord's theory of the spectacle emphasizes the role of media in transforming cultural and social relations into passive spectacles consumed by the masses. In the context of Douyin, this theory helps us understand how the platform's commercial imperatives influence the representation of minority cultures, often distorting their authenticity and reducing them to simplistic, commercialized forms.

The study employs a case analysis approach, focusing on ten popular Douyin bloggers who have gained prominence through their portrayal of Tujia culture. These bloggers' content is examined to identify patterns of representation and to understand the broader implications of media spectacle in shaping the cultural image of the Tujia ethnic group. By examining the ways in which Douyin users consume and interact with Tujia cultural content, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on media and ethnic representation in the digital age.

TUJIA ETHNIC

The Tujia people predominantly reside in highland regions characterized by hilly terrain, typically inhabiting altitudes between 400 and 1,500 meters (NEAC, 2010). These regions are rich in natural resources, such as Chinese medicinal ingredients, minerals, and timber, which serve as their primary sources of wealth. The term "Tujia" signifies the local populace embodying distinct regional traits (Archive.org, 2006).

The Tujia trace their roots to the ancient Ba State in the Chongqing region, dating back 2,500 years. Known as the ancient Ba people, they experienced a transformative period in 316 BCE when the Qin Dynasty annihilated the Ba Kingdom, leading to their transition from a sovereign state to a tribal community (Deason, 2018). The term "Tujia" first appeared in historical records in the 14th century, and during the Qing Dynasty (1728–1735), the Tujia were officially governed as part of ancient China.

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Communist Party recognized the Tujia as one of the nation's 56 ethnic groups in January 1957. This acknowledgment granted them autonomy, enabling the establishment of autonomous counties and prefectures to preserve their cultural identity (McLaren, 2008).



Figure 1: Tujia House - Diaojiao Lou.

The Tujia people are known for their artistic creativity, deeply rooted in their cultural traditions. One of their most celebrated cultural practices is the Baishou dance, which has a history of over 500 years (Li, 2020). This communal dance is characterized by over 70 intricate hand gestures, each symbolizing various aspects of Tujia life, such as hunting, warfare, agriculture, courtship, and celebration (Yang & Wang, 2012).



Figure 2: Baishou Baishou Dance.

Tujia folk songs are another cornerstone of their cultural identity, marked by powerful and vibrant vocal styles that resonate across their mountainous terrain (Guoliang, 2019). Similarly, their attire reflects artistic ingenuity. Tujia costumes are renowned for their floral motifs and pleats, with women's garments often crafted from gold and silver, showcasing a distinct aspect of Tujia costume culture (Tian, 2021).

The Tujia also possess a rich culinary heritage, featuring dishes such as sausages, sweet potato powder, tempeh, bamboo shoots, and kohlrabi (Tujia.org, 2021). Their craftsmanship, particularly in Tujia brocade weaving, holds a special place in Chinese intangible cultural heritage.



Figure 3: Tujia brocade.

Tujia brocade is not merely a craft but an artistic expression of emotion and cultural identity. Traditional brocade patterns depict flora, animals, and auspicious symbols, blending aesthetic beauty with cultural significance. For instance, the "24-hook" and "48-hook" designs symbolize blessings, protection, and prosperity (Hong, 2018). The Tujia attribute their favorable living conditions to ancestral blessings, which are honored through elaborate ceremonies involving dance, music, and offerings (Qiu, 2010). These ceremonies play a vital role in major life events such as weddings, agricultural rituals, and festivals.

However, with the increasing migration of Tujia people to urban areas in search of economic opportunities, their culture faces the dual challenges of neglect and erosion. The isolation of their highland regions and limited access to modern communication facilities further hinder the transmission of their rich traditions to younger generations. Despite these obstacles, the Tujia continue to adapt by documenting and promoting their traditions through various media platforms, ensuring their cultural legacy is preserved and shared with broader audiences.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE PLATFORMS IN SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

TikTok and Douyin, despite being essentially the same platform developed by the Chinese company ByteDance, operate in distinctly different ecosystems due to cultural, regulatory, and audience considerations. TikTok is the international version, tailored for a global audience, whereas Douyin is specifically designed for users in China, adhering to local regulations and cultural sensibilities. Both platforms exemplify the evolving nature of social media, where short, engaging, and algorithm-driven content plays a pivotal role in shaping user experiences and influencing global media trends.

Douyin, launched in China in 2016, predates TikTok and remains a separate

entity with a localized focus (Iqbal, 2024). It operates within China's regulatory framework, adhering to strict content moderation and censorship policies while offering features uniquely suited to Chinese users, such as integration with e-commerce platforms and educational content. TikTok, launched for the global market in 2018, adopts a more universal approach, providing a space for creative expression and viral trends (Zhang & Fung, 2021). However, it is not subject to the same regulatory constraints as Douyin and must navigate varying cultural and legal landscapes across different countries.

These platforms differ in how they contextualize content and engage users. Douyin's algorithms emphasize localized and culturally relevant content, ensuring users encounter material resonating with their regional context (Guo & Zhao, 2022). Conversely, TikTok adopts a broader strategy, fostering global trends and cross-cultural interactions while catering to a wide array of user preferences. Despite these differences, both platforms epitomize the essence of modern social media: interactivity, user-generated content, and real-time engagement.

Contextualizing TikTok and Douyin within the broader scope of social media highlights their transformative role in redefining communication, entertainment, and commerce. Social media has evolved from being a mere networking tool to a dynamic ecosystem for content creation, cultural exchange, and social influence (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Platforms like TikTok and Douyin leverage advanced algorithms to personalize user experiences, fostering high engagement levels and enabling creators to reach vast audiences (Lu & Hou, 2020). This shift underscores the increasing significance of short-form video content in capturing attention and shaping societal narratives.

Moreover, the rise of TikTok and Douyin reflects broader trends in social media, such as the prioritization of visual storytelling and the gamification of content consumption. These platforms encourage participatory culture, where users not only consume but actively contribute to content creation through challenges, trends, and collaborations. Their rapid growth and widespread adoption signify the changing preferences of social media users, who increasingly favor interactive and ephemeral formats over static, text-based content.

In this broader context, TikTok and Douyin are not just tools for entertainment but also powerful instruments for marketing, cultural dissemination, and social movements. Their impact extends beyond digital spaces, influencing global trends, shaping cultural identities, and redefining how individuals and communities interact in an increasingly interconnected world (Polanco et al, 2022).

MEDIA SPECTACLE AND ETHNIC REPRESENTATION

The concept of *media spectacle* originates from Guy Debord's theory of the *spectacle society*, a framework that explores the grand, media-driven representations designed to captivate public attention. Debord, founder of the French Situationist movement,

emphasized the communication characteristics of mass media images, particularly their "singleness" and "image substitution." He argued that mass media has become the primary driver and the most conspicuous manifestation of the spectacle society. As such, "media spectacle" reflects a universal mode of existence in both the spectacle society and real-world society (Debord, 1967). This concept captures the essence of contemporary media culture, which embodies societal values, adapts individuals to modern lifestyles, and dramatizes societal conflicts and their resolutions (Douglas, 2003).

In the digital media era, the notion of spectacle has evolved, especially with platforms like Douyin and TikTok. Douyin, China's counterpart to TikTok, operates within strict regulatory frameworks, offering tailored content for Chinese audiences. TikTok, in contrast, targets global markets with diversified content and policies. Both platforms prioritize creating viral, entertaining, and sensational content. Douyin has become the leading visual social media platform in China, with approximately 750 million daily users (Iqbal, 2024). Its short-video format allows users to alleviate stress, spend leisure time, access information, and enhance life satisfaction (Cai & Jin, 2021). It provides temporal and spatial flexibility, enabling consumers to engage anytime and anywhere via mobile devices and the internet (Zuo & Wang, 2019).

Douyin's dual-role model encourages users to be both creators and consumers (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). It also permits less innovative users to replicate, reinterpret, and distribute others' creations without legal or intellectual property concerns (Facca et al., 2022). This dynamic has facilitated the resurgence of ethnic minority handicrafts, with algorithm-driven content amplifying their reach (Yu et al., 2020). Douyin is recognized as a novel tool for disseminating intangible cultural heritage, including ethnic minority crafts (Wang & Fu, 2020). For instance, cultural exchange flourishes on Douyin as enthusiasts create and share diverse visual and audio content (Polanco et al., 2022).

However, the representation of ethnic minorities like the Tujia people on platforms such as Douyin often succumbs to the media spectacle mechanism, prioritizing aesthetic appeal and user engagement over cultural authenticity. Modern media frequently commoditizes complex cultural traditions, reducing them to simplified, marketable performances aligned with capitalist interests (Kong, 2007).

Historically, the Tujia ethnic group has played a significant role in China's governance under the *Tusi* (hereditary chieftain) system. This administrative framework, rooted in the Tujia tradition, allowed local ethnic rulers to pledge allegiance to the Central Plains dynasties while retaining autonomy (Chen, 2006). The Tusi system granted the Tujia elevated administrative recognition, including six high-status domains during the Ming Dynasty, such as Yongshun and Baojing (Cheng & Qin, 2010). Despite the rapid shifts in central dynastic rule, the Tusi system ensured the Tujia's governance continuity over 800 years (Cheng, 2014).

Ethnic representation in media has long been scrutinized for its tendency to marginalize or misrepresent minority groups. While platforms like Douyin provide

minorities with opportunities for cultural expression and global dissemination, they also prioritize content that aligns with corporate goals, often sensationalizing or exoticizing cultures (Li & Wang, 2021). For example, Douyin showcases visually captivating aspects of Tujia culture, such as traditional dances and attire, while often neglecting deeper cultural practices and meanings (Hu, 2024). This focus on spectacle-driven entertainment over cultural integrity highlights the broader challenges faced by ethnic minorities in digital media (Gao, 2022).

TRANSITION FROM TRADITIONAL TO DIGITAL REPRESENTATIONS

The representation of ethnic minority cultures on social media is shaped by several significant challenges, including homogenization, feminization, and decontextualization. These dynamics profoundly impact how Tujia culture is portrayed on platforms like Douyin, often distorting its original essence.

HOMOGENIZATION OF TUJIA CULTURE

Homogenization refers to the process by which diverse cultural expressions are reduced to repetitive, uniform images that lack depth and complexity. On Douyin, the portrayal of Tujia culture frequently follows a standardized template, characterized by similar themes, music, and visual aesthetics. For instance, videos often emphasize the hand-waving dance (“Bifzivkar”) as a defining element of Tujia identity, overshadowing other cultural aspects like traditional craftsmanship, spiritual practices, or storytelling traditions. This repetitive depiction limits the audience’s understanding of the multifaceted nature of Tujia culture, creating a narrow and oversimplified narrative. Similar trends have been observed in the representation of other ethnic groups, such as the Yi and Miao, where visual appeal often trumps cultural depth (Mi, 2021).

Before the rise of Douyin and similar platforms, Tujia culture thrived as a rich tapestry of diverse traditions rooted in the community’s agrarian and spiritual lifestyle. Historically, Tujia rituals and ceremonies were deeply connected to their environment, celebrating agricultural cycles, ancestor worship, and communal gatherings. These practices emphasized both masculine and feminine roles, with men often leading rituals involving strength and endurance, such as martial arts displays and hunting festivals, while women showcased intricate weaving and embroidery skills. The balance between these roles offered a holistic representation of Tujia life, now overshadowed by the platform’s preference for visually striking but superficial content.

FEMINIZATION OF TUJIA REPRESENTATION

Another prominent challenge is the feminization of Tujia culture on Douyin, where young women are frequently depicted as the primary representatives of their ethnic identity. These videos typically highlight traditional attire, focusing on the aesthetic

appeal of Tujia women, often in scenic backdrops. While such content may draw attention and celebrate feminine beauty, it inadvertently reinforces gender stereotypes by sidelining male figures and other aspects of cultural significance. This trend mirrors broader patterns in media representation, where women from ethnic minority groups are often portrayed as passive bearers of tradition rather than active cultural participants or innovators (Mei, 2011; Ge, 2020).

Before Douyin's influence, Tujia culture maintained a balanced representation of genders. Men played crucial roles in ceremonial dances and spiritual rituals, while women contributed through artistic expressions like crafting vibrant batik prints and performing folk songs that carried historical and moral lessons. The digital emphasis on femininity, however, marginalizes these traditional roles and narrows the perception of Tujia culture to a gendered and commodified image.

DECONTEXTUALIZATION OF TUJIA CULTURAL SYMBOLS

Decontextualization involves the removal of cultural symbols from their historical, spiritual, or communal contexts, presenting them in isolation for entertainment or commercial purposes. On Douyin, traditional elements like Tujia clothing or dances are frequently showcased without any explanation of their origins or significance. For instance, while the intricate embroidery on Tujia attire reflects centuries-old storytelling and spiritual symbolism, these deeper meanings are rarely conveyed in the short, entertainment-focused videos on Douyin. As Debord (2006) explains, the spectacle detaches cultural practices from their authentic settings, reducing them to consumable visual fragments for mass audiences.

Historically, Tujia cultural practices were deeply embedded in the community's way of life. Traditional dances, for example, were performed during harvest festivals and religious ceremonies, symbolizing gratitude, unity, and spiritual devotion. These dances often incorporated movements inspired by agricultural tasks or local wildlife, conveying stories of resilience and harmony with nature. By contrast, Douyin's representations strip these symbols of their narrative depth, transforming them into mere aesthetic spectacles.

DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE SPECTACLE OF ETHNIC REPRESENTATION

Digital platforms like Douyin have emerged as significant mediators of ethnic representation in contemporary China. With its short-video format and advanced algorithmic suggestions, Douyin enables users, including ethnic minorities, to achieve broad visibility and engagement. This accessibility has allowed groups like the Tujia to share their cultural heritage with wider audiences. However, Douyin's prioritization of entertainment and virality often leads to the commodification of cultural elements, reducing intricate traditions into simplified, visually captivating content tailored for mass appeal (Jia & Bie, 2021; Zhang, 2023).

As Douyin commercializes cultural content, traditional practices are frequently

sensationalized or distorted to fit the platform's requirements for brevity and engagement. This trend highlights a shift in how ethnic cultures, such as that of the Tujia people, are portrayed. While the platform has undeniably enhanced the visibility of minority cultures, the trade-off is often the loss of cultural authenticity in favor of material designed to attract viewers (Yuan, 2021).

The *media spectacle* framework provides a critical lens to understand these dynamics. Originally conceptualized by Guy Debord, the theory of spectacle addresses the commodification of cultural experiences into passive, consumable images. On Douyin, algorithms amplify content that generates high engagement, perpetuating the widespread circulation of superficial and sensational cultural representations. This aligns with Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality, where distinctions between authentic cultural practices and their mediated portrayals blur. The Tujia people's cultural identity on Douyin is often transformed into hyperreal spectacles—performances designed to entertain rather than reflect the lived experiences of the community (Cheng, 2021).

Furthermore, electronic communication has reshaped society, creating a fundamentally different environment where digital media dominates cultural narratives. This evolution has significant implications for ethnic representation, particularly in contexts where algorithms and commercial interests dictate visibility and engagement. For the Tujia, their presence on platforms like Douyin reflects a new form of hyperreality, where their culture is curated and consumed not as authentic heritage but as commoditized spectacle for viewer amusement (Li, 2023).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE

This study seeks to analyse the impact of Douyin on the media portrayal of Tujia culture. This study aims to analyse the depiction of Tujia culture through prominent Douyin bloggers. Subsequently, examine the impacts of homogenisation, feminisation, and decontextualisation on the portrayal of Tujia culture. Ultimately, propose strategies to improve the genuine and varied depiction of Tujia culture on digital platforms.

This study addresses a deficiency in the academic literature about the representation of ethnic minority cultures within the digital media sphere, specifically in China's swiftly transforming social media context. This study examines Tujia's presentation on Douyin, contributing to the discourse on media presentation power dynamics and the influence of digital platforms on cultural preservation. It offers pragmatic insights on the interaction between ethnic minority cultures and contemporary media instruments while preserving their cultural integrity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN AND CASE STUDY SELECTION

This study adopts a qualitative research design, leveraging a case study approach to

investigate the representation of Tujia culture on Douyin. Case studies are particularly effective for examining complex social phenomena within real-life contexts, providing a framework for exploring the nuanced interplay between Douyin's content dynamics and the portrayal of ethnic traditions. By narrowing the focus to specific creators, this research aims to uncover the ways in which platform algorithms and audience engagement shape the depiction of Tujia cultural identity.

The study centers on ten Douyin bloggers who have gained prominence for their portrayal of Tujia culture. These bloggers were selected based on criteria such as popularity, content relevance, diversity of representation, and levels of audience engagement. The selected creators reflect a variety of backgrounds, including professional cultural promoters and everyday users. For example, "Lina," a 25-year-old Tujia woman, uses her background in traditional dance to share performances and tutorials with her followers, while "Yang," a 32-year-old cultural enthusiast of mixed heritage, focuses on Tujia handicrafts and traditional rituals. This mix ensures a holistic representation of the cultural expressions explored on the platform.

To capture the diversity of Tujia cultural portrayals, the selected bloggers' content includes a wide array of themes, such as traditional clothing, music, dance, and ceremonies. These individuals have a significant following, typically exceeding 100,000 followers, which ensures that their content has broad reach and relevance. This targeted selection allows the study to delve into the most visible and impactful representations of Tujia culture, while also recognizing the potential limitations of focusing solely on popular creators.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data collection process involved analyzing video content uploaded by the selected bloggers over a six-month period, spanning from January to June 2024. A total of 150 videos were examined, with an average of 15 videos per blogger. These videos were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes, visual styles, and narrative structures. The textual elements, including captions and dialogues, were studied alongside visual content, such as costumes, settings, and choreography, to uncover patterns in how Tujia culture is represented.

Textual analysis was employed to explore critical dimensions of representation, focusing on themes such as homogenization, feminization, and decontextualization. Homogenization refers to the standardization of cultural portrayals, often influenced by platform algorithms that favor widely appealing content. Feminization examines the emphasis on young women as central figures in cultural narratives, highlighting how gender dynamics intersect with cultural representation. Decontextualization analyzes how traditional elements are presented in isolation, stripped of their historical or social significance, to create visually appealing but superficial content.

Audience analysis complemented the textual examination by focusing on user comments and engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and reposts. This approach

provided insights into how audiences interpret and interact with Tujia cultural representations. Comments were analyzed to understand audience perceptions, whether they viewed the content as entertainment, a form of cultural preservation, or an exotic spectacle. Additionally, engagement patterns were studied to identify which aspects of Tujia culture resonated most with viewers, offering clues about the types of content that gain traction on Douyin.

The integration of textual and audience analyses provided a comprehensive understanding of how Tujia culture is mediated through Douyin. While the textual analysis focused on the creators' content, the audience analysis shed light on the reception and interpretation of this content, bridging the gap between production and consumption in the digital space.

SCOPE AND LIMITATION

The scope of this study is confined to examining Tujia cultural representations on Douyin, focusing specifically on the content created by ten selected bloggers. The research offers a detailed exploration of how Douyin functions as a platform for cultural expression, emphasizing the dynamics of representation, audience engagement, and the commodification of ethnic traditions. By centering on Tujia culture, the study provides a focused case that contributes to broader discussions about digital media's role in shaping cultural identities.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the selection of popular bloggers introduces a potential bias, as their content is already amplified by Douyin's algorithm, which may not reflect the full spectrum of Tujia cultural representations on the platform. Less visible creators who produce more authentic or niche content may be underrepresented. Second, the study is platform-specific, analyzing content solely on Douyin without considering alternative social media platforms like WeChat or Kuaishou, where Tujia culture might be depicted differently. Future research could adopt a multi-platform approach to provide a more comprehensive view of digital representations.

Additionally, audience interpretation is primarily assessed through publicly visible user comments, which may not capture the full range of audience perceptions. While engagement metrics provide quantitative insights, they may not reveal the motivations or deeper cultural understandings driving user interactions. Despite these limitations, the study lays a foundation for future research on the digital mediation of ethnic identities, offering valuable insights into the intersection of culture, technology, and audience dynamics in the context of Douyin.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Here is a graphical representation of the research framework. The diagram illustrates the relationships between the key components of the study:

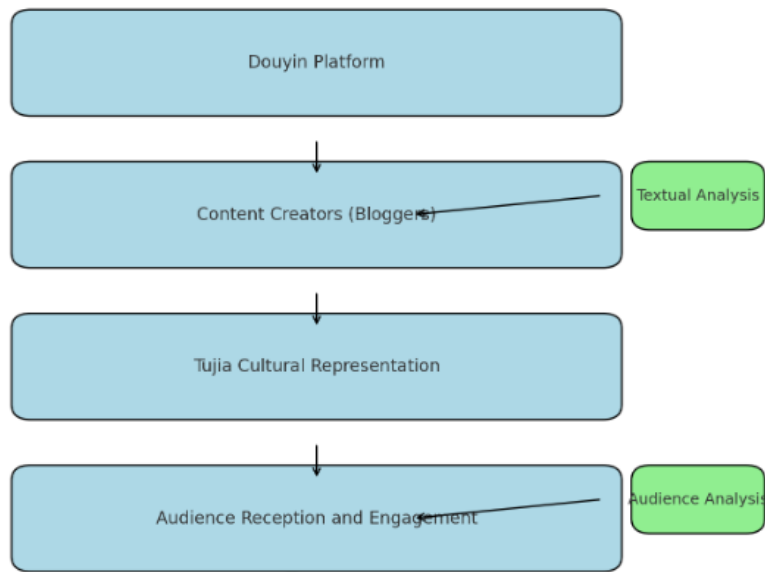


Figure 4: Research framework.

1. Douyin Platform: At the top, representing the source of content dissemination.
2. Content Creators (Bloggers): Connected to Douyin, showcasing their role in generating Tujia cultural content.
3. Tujia Cultural Representation: Highlighting how culture is portrayed on Douyin by creators.
4. Audience Reception and Engagement: Indicating how the audience interacts with and interprets the content.

Additionally, the research methods include:

- Textual Analysis: Analyzing the creators' content for cultural themes and patterns.
- Audience Analysis: Examining user interactions to understand reception.

Note: Arrows represent the flow of influence and analysis pathways within the research framework.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings from the case study and textual analysis of Douyin videos featuring Tujia cultural content. The analysis focuses on the themes of homogenization, feminization, and decontextualization, which emerged as dominant patterns in the representation of Tujia culture on the platform. The findings are organized around these themes, with supporting examples from the videos and insights from audience engagement.

HOMOGENIZATION OF TUJIA CULTURE ON DOUYIN

One of the most significant findings of this study is the homogenization of Tujia cultural representations on Douyin. Homogenization refers to the process by which diverse cultural expressions are reduced to standardized, repetitive forms that lack distinction. On Douyin, Tujia culture is often portrayed through a limited set of visual and thematic elements, which are repeated across multiple videos.

STANDARDIZED VISUAL AND NARRATIVE ELEMENTS

Across the 150 videos analyzed, certain visual and narrative elements were repeatedly emphasized, leading to a uniform portrayal of Tujia culture. Most videos featured bloggers dressed in traditional Tujia clothing, dancing or posing in front of recognizable landmarks or natural landscapes. The use of traditional Tujia music or popular Douyin soundtracks further contributed to the standardization of these videos.

For instance, a significant number of videos focused on the "Bifzivkar" hand-waving dance, a prominent aspect of Tujia culture. While this dance is an important cultural tradition, its over-representation on the platform reduces Tujia culture to a singular visual spectacle, neglecting other aspects such as traditional crafts, architecture, and spiritual practices. This pattern reflects a form of aesthetic conformity, where creators prioritize content that aligns with audience expectations and platform trends rather than providing a diverse representation of their culture.

IMPACT OF DOUYIN'S ALGORITHMIC SYSTEM

Douyin's recommendation algorithm, which promotes content based on user engagement, plays a key role in reinforcing the homogenization of Tujia culture. Videos that conform to popular trends and formats are more likely to be promoted by the platform, encouraging content creators to adopt a similar style in order to maximize their reach. As a result, more nuanced and diverse aspects of Tujia culture are often overlooked in favor of visually appealing, easily consumable content.

This finding is consistent with previous studies on the portrayal of minority cultures on digital platforms (Li & Wang, 2021), which have highlighted the tension between cultural diversity and the platform's commercial imperatives. The dominance of certain visual tropes, such as traditional clothing and dance, can overshadow other elements of Tujia identity, leading to a superficial understanding of the culture.

FEMINIZATION OF TUJIA CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Another key finding is the feminization of Tujia cultural representation on Douyin. Most of the analyzed videos featured young women as the primary representatives of

Tujia culture, often emphasizing beauty, fashion, and aesthetic appeal. This focus on femininity is closely tied to the platform's broader trends, where visually appealing content featuring women tends to attract higher levels of engagement.

THE ROLE OF FEMALE BLOGGERS

Female bloggers play a central role in the portrayal of Tujia culture on Douyin, with many videos showcasing young women dressed in traditional Tujia attire, performing cultural dances, or modeling in scenic locations. While these videos can generate significant attention and help raise awareness of Tujia culture, they also contribute to a narrow and gendered representation of the culture.

In many videos, the focus on traditional clothing and feminine beauty aligns with broader societal expectations of women as cultural bearers and symbols of ethnic identity. This emphasis on female imagery often sidelines the contributions of men and the broader community in preserving and promoting Tujia culture. Moreover, the portrayal of women in these videos is often framed through a commercial lens, where traditional clothing and cultural practices are commodified for the purpose of generating likes, shares, and followers.

REINFORCEMENT OF GENDER STEREOTYPES

The feminization of Tujia culture on Douyin reinforces existing gender stereotypes, where women are depicted as passive figures of beauty and tradition, rather than active participants in cultural preservation or innovation. This is consistent with previous research on the representation of ethnic minority women in Chinese media (Mei, 2011; Ge, 2020), which has shown how media portrayals often focus on the aesthetic and domestic roles of women, neglecting their roles as cultural leaders or innovators.

Audience engagement with these videos further reinforces these gendered representations. Comments on many of the analyzed videos often focus on the physical appearance of the female bloggers, rather than engaging with the cultural content of the videos. This suggests that for many users, the consumption of Tujia culture is mediated through the spectacle of feminine beauty, rather than an appreciation of the cultural practices being depicted.

DECONTEXTUALIZATION OF TUJIA CULTURAL SYMBOLS

The decontextualization of Tujia culture on Douyin is another prominent theme in the findings. Decontextualization refers to the process by which cultural symbols are removed from their original historical, social, or spiritual context and presented in isolation for entertainment or commercial purposes.

CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN ISOLATION

Many of the videos analyzed for this study featured isolated cultural symbols, such as traditional clothing or dance, without any accompanying explanation or context. For example, several videos depicted bloggers wearing traditional Tujia garments, but there was little to no information provided about the cultural significance of the attire, its history, or its role in Tujia ceremonies or daily life. Similarly, videos of Tujia dances were often presented as entertainment without any reference to the cultural meaning or the occasions on which these dances are traditionally performed.

This decontextualization is consistent with Debord's theory of the spectacle, where cultural practices are transformed into commodified images, stripped of their original meaning and repurposed for mass consumption. On Douyin, cultural symbols are often presented in a manner that prioritizes visual appeal and entertainment value, at the expense of cultural depth and authenticity.

LOSS OF CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY

The decontextualization of Tujia culture on Douyin raises concerns about the loss of cultural authenticity. While Douyin provides a platform for Tujia culture to reach a broader audience, the way in which this culture is presented often distorts its original meanings. For example, traditional clothing is frequently used as a visual prop in videos, without any acknowledgment of its ceremonial significance or its role in Tujia identity. As a result, viewers may come to associate Tujia culture solely with its visual elements, without an understanding of the deeper cultural and historical context that gives these symbols meaning.

Audience responses to these videos suggest that many users engage with Tujia culture as a form of exotic entertainment, rather than a meaningful cultural practice. Comments often focus on the visual appeal of the videos, with little reference to the cultural content or its significance. This highlights the risk of cultural commodification, where ethnic cultures are reduced to spectacles for entertainment, rather than being presented in a way that fosters cultural understanding and respect.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex relationship between digital platforms and the representation of ethnic minority cultures. While Douyin provides a valuable platform for Tujia culture to reach new audiences, it also contributes to the creation of a media spectacle that distorts and commodifies cultural practices. The homogenization, feminization, and decontextualization of Tujia culture on Douyin reflect broader trends in the digital media landscape, where platform dynamics prioritize engagement and entertainment over cultural authenticity.

PLATFORM DYNAMICS AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Douyin's recommendation algorithm plays a key role in shaping the representation of Tujia culture on the platform. The algorithm's preference for content that generates high levels of engagement incentivizes creators to produce videos that align with popular trends, leading to the homogenization of cultural representations. This research finding echoes previous research on the impact of platform algorithms on minority cultural representation (Zhang, 2023), which has shown how commercial imperatives often override the need for diverse and authentic cultural portrayals.

At the same time, the platform's focus on visual appeal contributes to the feminization of cultural representation, where young women become the primary symbols of cultural identity. This gendered representation reinforces existing stereotypes and limits the ways in which Tujia culture is understood by the platform's audience.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF CULTURE

The decontextualization of Tujia cultural symbols on Douyin points to a broader issue of cultural commodification in the digital age. As cultural practices are removed from their original context and repurposed for entertainment, they risk losing their cultural significance. This process of commodification is particularly problematic for ethnic minority cultures, which are already vulnerable to marginalization and misrepresentation in mainstream media.

Debord's concept of the spectacle is useful in understanding how digital platforms like Douyin contribute to the commodification of culture. In the case of Tujia culture, the platform transforms cultural practices into consumable images, detached from their historical and social context. This process not only distorts the meaning of Tujia cultural symbols but also limits the potential for these symbols to foster cultural understanding and respect.

IMPLICATION FOR CULTURAL PRESERVATION

The findings of this study have important implications for the preservation of Tujia culture in the digital age. While Douyin offers opportunities for cultural visibility, the way in which Tujia culture is represented on the platform raises concerns about the loss of cultural authenticity. If Tujia culture is to be effectively preserved and promoted on digital platforms, there is a need for greater attention to cultural context and depth in the portrayal of cultural symbols.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the representation of Tujia culture on Douyin through the lens of media spectacle. The findings reveal that the platform contributes to the

homogenization, feminization, and decontextualization of Tujia cultural symbols, transforming them into commodified images for mass consumption. While Douyin offers a valuable platform for the visibility of ethnic minority cultures, the way in which it shapes cultural representation raises important questions about cultural authenticity and preservation in the digital age.

To address these challenges, content creators, platform developers, and cultural institutions must collaborate to promote more diverse and authentic representations of minority cultures on digital platforms. By fostering a more nuanced and respectful portrayal of Tujia culture, Douyin can play a role in preserving cultural heritage while also engaging with the platform's global audience.

Future research could expand the scope of this study by examining the representation of other ethnic minority cultures on Douyin and other social media platforms. Comparative studies could provide valuable insights into the different ways in which digital platforms shape cultural representation and contribute to the commodification of ethnic identities. Additionally, further research on audience reception could shed light on how users interpret and engage with cultural content, providing a deeper understanding of the social impact of digital media on cultural preservation.

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