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Personal Branding through Social Media Videos: A Case Study of Li Ziqi
การสร้างแบรนด์บุคคลผ่านวิดีโอโซเชียลมีเดีย: กรณีศึกษาของหลี่จื่อฉี

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Abstract:

Background and Objectives: Social media videos have become an important medium for personal branding, allowing content creators to communicate their identities, values, and cultural perspectives through visual imagery, sound, language, and storytelling. In an increasingly competitive digital environment, the ability to establish a distinctive personal brand is essential for attracting audiences and maintaining a recognizable digital identity. Li Ziqi is a notable case of personal branding through videos that portray traditional Chinese culture, rural lifestyles, and handcrafted production processes. Her content combines aesthetic presentation with cultural narratives, creating a distinctive representation of traditional ways of life. This study aimed to (1) examine the personal branding strategies employed by Li Ziqi through social media videos and (2) analyze the core brand values embedded in her video content.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate the construction of personal branding through social media videos. Data were collected using content analysis of selected videos produced by Li Ziqi and in-depth interviews with key informants representing the target audience. The analysis focused on four dimensions of personal branding: visual aesthetics, symbolic representation, sound and language, and narrative structure. These dimensions were examined to understand how different communication elements contribute to the presentation of personal identity, the representation of cultural meanings, and the communication of core brand values. The interview data provided additional perspectives on the interpretation and significance of the brand elements presented in the videos.

Results: The findings revealed that Li Ziqi's personal branding was constructed through the integration of four essential dimensions. First, visual aesthetics played an important role through the presentation of natural landscapes, traditional attire, and handcrafted production processes. These visual elements communicated authenticity and established a strong association with rural cultural identity. Second, symbolic representation conveyed cultural heritage and self-sufficiency through the depiction of traditional practices and everyday activities. Third, sound and language contributed to the overall atmosphere of the videos through ambient sounds, minimal dialogue, and gentle tonal expression, which helped create an emotionally engaging viewing experience. Fourth, narrative structure emphasized women's empowerment, the intergenerational transmission of wisdom, and the preservation of traditional culture. The analysis identified five core brand

values: authenticity, cultural continuity, simplicity, craftsmanship, and emotional tranquility. Together, these values contributed to a coherent and recognizable personal brand that connected aesthetic expression with cultural meaning.

Application of this study: The findings provide practical guidance for content creators and digital marketers seeking to develop distinctive and sustainable personal brands on video-based social media platforms. Creators can apply these insights by aligning visual presentation, symbolic elements, sound, language, and storytelling with their intended brand identities and values. The findings also suggest that traditional knowledge, local cultural practices, and authentic representations of everyday life can serve as meaningful resources for developing differentiated digital content. These approaches may help creators communicate their identities consistently, strengthen audience engagement, and establish a recognizable presence in competitive digital environments.

Conclusions: Li Ziqi's personal branding demonstrates how visual aesthetics, symbolic representation, sound and language, and narrative structure can be integrated to communicate a distinctive digital identity and a coherent set of brand values. By combining cultural storytelling with aesthetic presentation, her videos connect personal branding with cultural continuity and the preservation of traditional knowledge. This study contributes to the understanding of personal branding and multimodal communication in social media video contexts and offers practical insights for developing culturally meaningful digital content.

Keywords: Personal Branding; Social Media Video; Multimodal Communication; Digital Identity; Li Ziqi

บทคัดย่อ:

ที่มาและวัตถุประสงค์: วิดีโอบนโซเชียลมีเดียเป็นสื่อสำคัญในการสร้างแบรนด์บุคคล เนื่องจากเปิดโอกาสให้ผู้สร้างสรรค์เนื้อหาสามารถถ่ายทอดอัตลักษณ์ ค่านิยม และมุมมองทางวัฒนธรรมไปยังผู้ชมผ่านองค์ประกอบด้านภาพ เสียง และการเล่าเรื่อง หลี่จื่อฉีเป็นกรณีศึกษาที่โดดเด่นในการสร้างแบรนด์บุคคลผ่านการนำเสนอวัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิม วิถีชีวิตชนบท และการเล่าเรื่องเชิงสุนทรียะ การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อ 1) ศึกษาการสร้างแบรนด์บุคคลของหลี่จื่อฉีผ่านวิดีโอโซเชียลมีเดีย และ 2) วิเคราะห์ค่านิยมหลักของแบรนด์ที่แฝงอยู่ในเนื้อหาวิดีโอ

ระเบียบวิธีการศึกษา: การวิจัยนี้ใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพแบบกรณีศึกษา โดยเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลจากการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาวิดีโอที่คัดเลือกจากผลงานของหลี่จื่อฉี และการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกผู้ให้ข้อมูลสำคัญซึ่งเป็นตัวแทนกลุ่มเป้าหมาย การวิเคราะห์มุ่งศึกษาการใช้องค์ประกอบด้านภาพ สัญลักษณ์ เสียง ภาษา และการเล่าเรื่อง เพื่ออธิบายกระบวนการสร้างแบรนด์บุคคลและการถ่ายทอดค่านิยมหลักของแบรนด์

ผลการศึกษา: ผลการวิจัยพบว่า การสร้างแบรนด์บุคคลของหลี่จื่อฉีประกอบด้วย 4 มิติสำคัญ ได้แก่ มิติด้านภาพลักษณ์เชิงสุนทรียะ มิติด้านการใช้สัญลักษณ์ มิติด้านเสียงและภาษา และมิติด้านการเล่าเรื่อง ในมิติด้านภาพ มีการนำเสนอภูมิทัศน์ธรรมชาติ เครื่องแต่งกายพื้นถิ่น และกระบวนการผลิตงานหัตถกรรม ซึ่งสะท้อนความแท้จริงและอัตลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมชนบท มิติด้านสัญลักษณ์สื่อถึงมรดกทางวัฒนธรรมและการพึ่งพาตนเอง ส่วนมิติด้านเสียงและภาษาใช้เสียงธรรมชาติ บทสนทนาที่ไม่มาก และน้ำเสียงนุ่มนวล เพื่อสร้างความผูกพันทางอารมณ์กับผู้ชม ขณะที่มิติด้านการเล่าเรื่องเน้นการส่งเสริมพลังของสตรี การถ่ายทอดภูมิปัญญาระหว่างรุ่น และการอนุรักษ์วัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิม นอกจากนี้ ยังพบค่านิยมหลักของแบรนด์ 5 ประการ ได้แก่ ความแท้จริง ความต่อเนื่องทางวัฒนธรรม ความเรียบง่าย ความประณีตในงานฝีมือ และความสงบทางอารมณ์

การประยุกต์ใช้: ผลการศึกษาสามารถนำไปประยุกต์ใช้เป็นแนวทางสำหรับผู้สร้างสรรค์เนื้อหาและนักการตลาดดิจิทัลในการพัฒนาแบรนด์บุคคลบนแพลตฟอร์มวิดีโอโซเชียลมีเดียให้มีเอกลักษณ์และมีความยั่งยืน โดยให้ความสำคัญกับการผสานองค์ประกอบด้านภาพ สัญลักษณ์ เสียง ภาษา และการเล่าเรื่องให้สอดคล้องกับอัตลักษณ์และค่านิยมที่ต้องการสื่อสาร นอกจากนี้ การนำเสนอเนื้อหาที่เชื่อมโยงกับวัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิมยังสามารถใช้เป็นแนวทางในการสร้างการมีส่วนร่วมของผู้ชมและเสริมสร้างอัตลักษณ์ของแบรนด์ในสภาพแวดล้อมดิจิทัล

บทสรุป: การสร้างแบรนด์บุคคลของหลี่จื่อฉีแสดงให้เห็นถึงการผสานการสื่อสารหลายมิติเข้ากับการเล่าเรื่องทางวัฒนธรรม เพื่อสร้างอัตลักษณ์ดิจิทัลที่โดดเด่นและสื่อสารค่านิยมของแบรนด์ไปยังผู้ชมได้อย่างมีเอกลักษณ์ การผสมผสานองค์ประกอบด้านสุนทรียะ สัญลักษณ์ เสียง ภาษา และการเล่าเรื่องช่วยเชื่อมโยงผู้ชมเข้ากับวัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิม ผลการศึกษานี้จึงช่วยขยายองค์ความรู้ด้านการสร้างแบรนด์บุคคลและการสื่อสารหลายมิติในบริบทของวิดีโอบนโซเชียลมีเดีย

คำสำคัญ: การสร้างแบรนด์บุคคล วิดีโอโซเชียลมีเดีย การสื่อสารหลายมิติ อัตลักษณ์ดิจิทัลหลี่จื่อฉี

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of social media, personal branding has emerged as a critical mechanism for self-presentation and social participation [1]. Individuals increasingly leverage digital platforms to communicate identities, values, and lifestyles through strategic content production [2]. While existing scholarship has examined influencers in commercial marketing, there remains a need to understand how micro-celebrities—who manage visibility and self-presentation online—mobilize cultural symbols and aesthetics to build coherent personal brand meanings in video-based environments [3-4].

Li Ziqi serves as a compelling case in this context. As of February 11, 2026, her official account on Sina Weibo shows approximately 27.75 million followers [5], and her official channel on YouTube shows about 30.1 million subscribers [6]. These publicly observable indicators support the suitability of this case for examining how personal brand meanings are built and stabilized through social media videos. Prior research has discussed her mediated rural authenticity and “digital pastoral” aesthetics, highlighting how her video-based self-presentation constructs a recognizable creator identity through craft labor, rural space, and carefully staged everyday life [7]. Related scholarship further suggests that such idealized rural aesthetics can be meaningful to urban viewers in contemporary China, where pastoral nostalgia and imagined rural comfort operate as cultural resources rather than purely individual impressions [7-8]. This audience focus provides a practical basis for selecting domestic interview informants to explore how the brand meanings communicated in the videos are interpreted and sustained [8].

To clarify the audience–persona alignment underlying this case, this study treats Li Ziqi’s videos as a form of multimodal personal branding that implicitly positions both a creator persona and an interpretive audience. Across her early-stage video corpus, the persona can be characterized as a craft-based rural lifestyle creator: a calm and competent female protagonist who completes time-intensive, skill-based making practices and embeds culturally coded domestic routines and seasonal practices into everyday storytelling [7-8]. Correspondingly, the target audience for this research is defined as adult urban viewers in China who have repeated exposure to her video content and are able to articulate how recurring visual, symbolic, auditory, and narrative cues translate into perceived identity meanings and brand values [8]. Defining the target audience in this way provides an explicit rationale for using domestic urban viewers as key informants in the present qualitative design.

Most existing studies on Li Ziqi emphasize macro-themes such as mediated authenticity, rural imaginaries, and cultural/national image representation [7, 9]. However, less is known about the specific multimodal strategies through which her videos systematically build a cohesive personal brand image—particularly how visual style, symbolic elements, sound and language, and narrative structure operate together to communicate core brand values. The objective of this study is to examine how Li Ziqi builds her personal brand through these four dimensions and to identify the core brand

values embedded in her content. Using a qualitative case study design that combines multimodal textual analysis with in-depth interviews with domestic audience informants, this study clarifies how a consistent digital identity is articulated and sustained in video-based social media environments.

Objective

1. To examine the personal brand {building} of Li Ziqi through social media videos.
2. To analyze the core brand values embedded in her video content.

Literature Review

1. Personal Branding Theory and Personal Brand Building in Social Media

Personal branding research often treats the individual as a "human brand," whose public meaning is deliberately shaped through ongoing self-presentation and reputation management across contexts [10]. In digital environments, this process becomes more intense because platforms continuously generate and circulate visibility, identity claims, and audience feedback [11]. Rather than a one-time image display, personal branding on social media is commonly framed as a strategic, cumulative process that connects identity articulation, value signaling, and relationship maintenance with audiences over time [12].

Recent integrative reviews show that the field has grown quickly but remains theoretically fragmented [10]. Many studies emphasize outcomes such as visibility, employability, or influence and examine tactical self-presentation, while fewer specify how brand meaning is constructed through concrete communicative resources in media texts [10]. In response, scholars have called for closer attention to communication mechanisms—how narratives, imagery, and symbolic cues function as brand signals that audiences can recognize, interpret, and use to stabilize a person's brand identity [11].

This gap is particularly evident in video-based social media. Video creators rarely rely only on declarative self-descriptions. Instead, they develop brand meaning through repeated aesthetic choices, cultural references, and recurring narrative patterns that become recognizable over time [12]. Studying personal brand building in video contexts therefore requires an approach that can describe brand meaning as an outcome of multimodal communication, while also considering how target audiences interpret and validate that meaning in practice [11].

2. Multimodal Communication as an Analytic Lens for Brand Meaning

Multimodal communication theory offers a useful lens for explaining how meaning is produced through coordinated semiotic resources, including image, language, sound, and narrative organization [13]. From this perspective, visual composition, color, gaze, setting, and material objects are not merely decorative. They operate as sign systems that convey social relations, cultural values, and identity positioning [13]. In audiovisual media, meaning is also shaped by sound design—ambient sound, music, voice qualities, and silence—which guides attention and emotion alongside the visual track [14].

Systemic functional approaches to multimodal discourse analysis further emphasize that different modes contribute different kinds of meaning and that coherence emerges through their integration [14]. This is relevant for social media videos where creators repeatedly combine visual aesthetics, symbolic artifacts, and narrative sequencing to construct a consistent experiential "world" and a recognizable identity style. From a branding perspective, these patterned multimodal choices can be treated as brand signals: they turn recurring content features into stable associations that audiences use to identify and evaluate a creator's brand identity [11].

Using multimodal communication as an analytic framework thus helps personal branding research move beyond broad thematic interpretations. It supports more precise description of how brand meaning becomes legible in video texts through specific resources. It also enables systematic coding across dimensions such as visual style, symbolic elements, sound and language, and narrative structure, which strengthens transparency and replicability in qualitative analysis [10].

3. Social Media Video, Digital Identity, and Audience Interpretation

Video-based platforms have become major arenas in which creators develop public identities and sustain attention through serial content production [15]. Within social media entertainment logics, creator identity is not simply expressed; it is performed, curated, and stabilized through recognizable styles and recurring narrative templates [15]. Research on internet celebrity and creator cultures also shows that visibility labor involves maintaining consistency across posts while adapting to platform norms and audience expectations [16].

For personal branding research, this means that brand meaning is shaped by both the creator's multimodal self-presentation and audiences' interpretive recognition of what that presentation stands for [11]. Although audience meaning-making is widely discussed, empirical work often under-specifies how audience interpretations connect to particular textual features. This motivates designs that link text-centered multimodal analysis with audience-facing data, such as in-depth interviews with viewers who align with the creator's intended or most salient audience positioning [10].

This connection becomes especially important for culturally coded lifestyle videos. Cultural symbols, aesthetics, and values may be read as authenticity cues, heritage markers, or aspirational lifestyles depending on viewers' social experiences. Combining multimodal textual analysis with interviews can therefore strengthen analytic validity by clarifying which brand meanings are most salient to the target audience and how those meanings are sustained through repeated viewing practices [11].

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine personal brand building through social media videos, using Li Ziqi as the focal case. A case study approach is appropriate for investigating how meanings are produced within a bounded context and for integrating multiple sources of evidence [1719-]. Accordingly, the study employs two tools: (1) textual analysis of Li Ziqi's Weibo videos and (2) in-depth interviews with audience informants. Using both sources supports triangulation of brand meanings and perceived core values [20].

1. Research Tools

Tool 1: Textual analysis. The videos are analyzed as communicative texts in which meaning is organized across visual, auditory, and narrative resources. Analysis is guided by four dimensions: visual style, symbolic representation, sound and language, and narrative structure.

Tool 2: In-depth interviews. Interviews are used to elicit viewers' interpretations and evaluations that cannot be reliably inferred from the videos alone [21-22]. They help clarify how domestic viewers perceive Li Ziqi's persona, recognize cues across the four dimensions, and articulate perceived core brand values.

2. Data Source

The video materials are drawn from Li Ziqi's self-produced videos published on Sina Weibo. Weibo was selected because it provides relatively complete access to early-stage uploads and preserves the videos in a consistent platform context.

The interview data were collected from domestic urban viewers in China, consistent with the study focus and fieldwork feasibility.

3. Sample Selection

3.1 Video Sampling and Selection Rationale

The video samples were drawn from Li Ziqi's Weibo uploads between September 1, 2016 and July 1, 2018, an early phase of her content development before the release of personal brand products. This period captures relatively comparable creator-led productions and is suitable for examining how recurring audiovisual patterns contribute to personal brand building.

During this period, Li Ziqi posted 61 videos on Weibo. To ensure temporal coverage while keeping the dataset feasible for close qualitative analysis, the study employed systematic sampling [23,24]. Videos were ordered

chronologically by upload date. Using $k \approx N/n$ with N = 61 and n = 21, the sampling interval was set to k = 3. A random start was selected within the first three videos (13-), and then every third video was sampled until the target was reached, resulting in 21 videos for analysis.

If a sampled video was unavailable (e.g., deleted) or did not meet the inclusion criterion of being a self-produced Weibo upload by Li Ziqi, it was replaced by the next eligible video in chronological order. All sampled items and replacements were logged to maintain an audit trail.

3.2 Interview Sampling, Participants, and Recruitment

Interview participants were recruited as key informants using purposive (criterion-based) sampling to identify information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives [18,19]. Eligibility criteria were: (1) adults (18+); (2) currently residing in an urban area in China; and (3) sufficient exposure to Li Ziqi's videos to provide reflective interpretations (e.g., having watched multiple videos, and being able to recall typical scenes, themes, or value messages).

Recruitment began with one eligible participant matching the intended audience profile and then proceeded through snowball sampling (participant referrals) to locate additional viewers meeting the same criteria. To reduce homophily in referrals, maximum-variation logic was applied by seeking diversity in viewing intensity and evaluative orientation, as well as in gender and age group.

All interviews were conducted in Chinese via WeChat audio calls. With participants' consent, the researcher took detailed notes during the interviews and expanded them into full interview records immediately afterward for analysis. The final sample size (N =17) was determined by thematic saturation [25-26]. Saturation was assessed iteratively by tracking the emergence of new codes after each interview; interviews continued until additional participants yielded minimal new themes relevant to the four analytical dimensions and the core brand values [26].

4. Analytical Framework

This study applies a four-dimensional analytical framework to examine how Li Ziqi's personal brand is built through social media videos: visual style, symbolic representation, sound and language, and narrative structure (Figure 1).

Dimension	Coding categories
Visual style	Composition & framing; Shot scale & camera distance; Color and lighting palette; Setting as visual environment.
Symbolic representation	Cultural artifacts/domestic objects; Craft tools & material practices; Traditional clothing & embodied identity cues; Seasonal and nature signifiers.
Sound and language	Ambient/diegetic soundscape; Craft/foley sounds; Music design; Speech/voice presence and minimal dialogue.
Narrative structure	Activity-chain sequencing; Pacing and rhythm; Temporal organization; Value framing and evaluative stance.

Figure 1. Li Ziqi's Personal Brand Building through Social Media Videos: A Four-Dimensional Analytical Framework. Four dimensions operationalized for video analysis and informed by multimodal and social semiotic approaches [13, 14, 27–30].

The framework is informed by multimodal and social semiotic approaches [14, 27] and supported by research on visual grammar [13], cultural signification [28], sound as a semiotic resource [29], and narrative structure in audiovisual storytelling [30]. In this study, visual style refers to observable visual-formal choices (e.g., composition/framing, shot scale, color/lighting, and setting routines), while aesthetic effects (e.g., tranquility or rustic authenticity) are treated as higher-level meanings emerging from recurring configurations of these choices.

Each dimension was operationalized into observable indicators for systematic coding. For visual style, coding focused on composition/framing, shot scale/camera distance, color/lighting palette, and recurring settings as stable

visual environments [13]. For symbolic representation, coding identified recurring cultural signifiers and material cues (e.g., artifacts/domestic objects, craft tools and practices, traditional clothing, and seasonal/nature signifiers) that index heritage, self-sufficiency, and rural imaginaries within scenes [28]. For sound and language, coding attended to ambient/diegetic soundscape, craft/foley sounds, music design (e.g., instrumental music and placement), and speech/voice presence or minimal dialogue, treating sound and limited verbal cues as meaning-making resources [29]. For narrative structure, coding examined activity-chain sequencing (e.g., preparation–making–completion routines), pacing/rhythm, temporal organization (e.g., seasonality and cyclical time markers), and value framing across episodes [30].

Pilot coding was conducted on a small subset of sampled videos to check indicator clarity and reduce overlap across dimensions. Code definitions were refined (e.g., distinguishing symbolic signifiers from purely visual-formal features) and then applied systematically to the full sample, with coded segments documented using timestamps and analytic memos to support traceability.

5. Analytical Procedure

Data analysis was conducted in three steps: (1) video analysis, (2) interview note analysis, and (3) cross-source integration.

First, video analysis began with open-ended viewing. Without applying predefined categories, the researcher watched all selected videos at least twice to identify recurring visual features, cultural symbols, emotional tones, and narrative cues. Based on this review, preliminary coding directions were developed under the four analytical dimensions. The researcher then conducted a structured textual analysis of the 21 video samples across the four dimensions, extracting key visuals, typical scenes, sound practices, and narrative pacing. For traceability, each coded segment was documented with written descriptions, time stamps, and screenshots, and all materials were organized in a self-designed analysis table (Word/Excel).

Second, interview data were analyzed to capture audience interpretations of Li Ziqi's persona, the salience of cues corresponding to the four dimensions, and perceived core brand values. Because interviews were not audio-recorded, the researcher took detailed notes during each WeChat audio call and expanded them into full interview records immediately afterward [21-22]. The records were reviewed iteratively, and relevant meaning units were coded and grouped into themes aligned with the four analytical dimensions and value statements.

Third, findings from the videos and interviews were compared to identify convergence and divergence. Core brand values were finalized only when supported by both repeated evidence in the video corpus and consistent audience meaning statements, strengthening credibility through cross-source triangulation [20].

Research Results

1. Personal brand building through four dimensions

Based on the textual analysis of 21 Weibo videos and in-depth interviews with seventeen domestic urban viewers, Li Ziqi's personal brand is built through an integrated multimodal system. Rather than relying on explicit self-promotion, her videos repeatedly organize meaning through four coordinated dimensions—visual style, symbolic representation, sound and language, and narrative structure—which together stabilize a recognizable creator identity and enable audiences to articulate what her "brand" stands for (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Example screenshots of visual style elements in Li Ziqi's videos

Source : Created by the author. Screenshots taken from Li Ziqi's official Weibo account.

1.1 Visual style

Across the sampled videos, visual style is characterized by orderly composition, controlled pacing of shot scale, natural lighting, and recurring settings. Many sequences employ front-facing, balanced framing that visually communicates stability and routine.

A key pattern is the alternation of wide shots that establish the environment (courtyard, mountains, fields, kitchen) with close-ups that foreground hands, tools, and materials. Viewers explicitly treated close-ups of handwork as a credibility cue because they make the production process visible step-by-step. For example, P2 summarized the visual logic as "wide shots establish the world, and close-ups emphasize the hands," adding that "close-ups of hands are the source of trust." P5 similarly noted that "the key is the close-ups—especially hands and materials," because "she loves filming textures like bamboo, wood, cloth, dough, and sauce; that makes people believe it." P9 also described the framing as "very steady, with objects placed neatly—it even feels like still-life photography," and emphasized that the "camera keeps returning to hands and tools," which made the work process "look real and checkable."

Color and lighting also function as consistent stylistic signals. The videos rely heavily on soft natural light with low saturation and minimal artificial enhancement. Seasonal shifts—spring greens, summer density, autumn harvest tones, and winter pale light—are visually legible and repeated across episodes. P1 explicitly linked this to a low-commercial feel: "The light is gentle, and the colors are restrained, so it doesn't feel like a commercial shoot." A more critical viewer (P13) still recognized the same stylistic pattern but framed it as deliberate design: "It looks 'clean' and 'orderly,' but sometimes it feels too arranged—like a set."

Finally, visual identity is reinforced through recurrent locations and spatial routines (e.g., courtyard–kitchen–stove–worktable circuits). Audiences associated these recurring spaces with familiarity and recognizability. As P2 put it, "the courtyard, kitchen, stove area, and the bamboo-wood-clay objects keep repeating; together they form a self-contained 'life-world'."

1.2 Symbolic representation

Symbolic representation is constructed through a stable repertoire of traditional domestic artifacts, craft tools, material textures, and nature/seasonal signifiers. Across the video corpus, objects such as bamboo baskets, sieves, winnowing trays, wooden boards and spoons, clay jars and crocks, iron woks, firewood stoves, and stone mills appear repeatedly in everyday production scenes (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Example screenshots of symbolic elements in Li Ziqi's videos

Source : Created by the author. Screenshots taken from Li Ziqi's official Weibo account.

Viewers often framed this object system as indexing durability, time, and know-how. P12 stated directly that these items are "not decoration," explaining: "When you see stone mills, clay jars, bamboo baskets, and the firewood stove, you feel she really uses them—those objects carry traces of time." P11 similarly linked the objects to craft legitimacy: "Tools like stone mills and clay jars make the making-process look 'old-fashioned but convincing'." Even participants who were more skeptical still recognized the same symbolic set. For instance, P17 described the clothing and tools as "a recognizable 'traditional package'," but added that it can also feel "like a costume," suggesting that the same repertoire can trigger both cultural recognition and authenticity doubt.

Symbolic meaning is also carried through clothing and embodied identity cues. Li Ziqi's frequent use of plain cotton/linen garments and aprons was noticed as signaling a "doing work" posture. P15 described it as "work clothes rather than fashion," because "the apron and cotton-linen outfits make her look like someone who is actually doing tasks." Seasonal plants, weather, and cyclical rural scenery further function as recurring signifiers. P9 emphasized that "lotus leaves, plum blossoms, snow scenes, and seasonal ingredients keep appearing," which made the imagery feel "tied to seasons and rural rhythms."

Overall, symbolic representation in the videos functions as a systematic meaning layer: it creates a culturally coded environment where "tradition" is communicated through repeated material signs embedded in practical activity.

1.3 Sound and language

Sound and language operate as a distinctive semiotic system in the sampled videos. The soundtrack typically combines ambient/diegetic environmental sounds (wind, water, birds, firewood crackling) and manual action sounds

(cutting, washing, stirring, pounding, frying) with restrained instrumental music, while maintaining minimal dialogue.

In interviews, sound was repeatedly identified as a primary mechanism of immersion and attention control. P12 described the soundscape as "very real," adding: "the chopping, washing, and fire sounds make you feel present; the music is there but not loud." P16, who often used the videos for relaxation, called it "almost like ASMR," explaining: "there's little talking, mostly hands-and-sound; you can watch without thinking." At the same time, some viewers explicitly recognized sound as edited design rather than raw capture. P13 commented that "the sound is 'too clean' and obviously designed," and P10 similarly noted that the audio is "selected and polished to create immersion."

Minimal dialogue also shapes interpretive openness and reduces language barriers. P9 said that "because she rarely speaks, you don't feel 'taught'—you just watch," while P14 emphasized that "silence plus ambient sound lowers the viewing threshold," especially for casual or background watching.

1.4 Narrative structure

Narrative structure in the sampled videos is organized around activity-chain sequencing, typically moving through a visible routine of preparation ⟶ making ⟶ completion, accompanied by slow pacing and a clear sense of closure. Interviewees repeatedly described the storytelling as "step-by-step" and "ending with a result." P11 characterized it as "a complete chain—from raw materials to a finished thing," and P15 highlighted the emotional effect: "you always get a finished outcome at the end; it gives satisfaction and a sense of completion." P14 similarly described the structure as "process documentary-like," because "the video follows a task until it is done."

Beyond sequencing, the narrative communicates recognizable storytelling themes that align with the brand meanings expressed in other dimensions. First, many episodes' foreground women's competence and self-sufficiency through solitary completion of long, technically detailed labor chains. P10 explicitly read this as a gendered theme: "it constructs an image of a 'capable woman' who can do everything calmly." However, interview data also reflect awareness of possible idealization. P13 cautioned that "the 'all-capable' image can feel too perfect," and P17 noted that the competence theme is persuasive but can also look "performative when everything is too smooth."

Second, the videos repeatedly embed intergenerational care through scenes involving family members—most notably the grandmother. P14 explained that "the grandmother scenes are not plot twists, but emotional anchors," because "food-making ends in sharing, not just showing." P9 similarly stated: "When she eats with her grandmother, it makes the whole process feel warm and grounded." (see Figure 4)



Figure 4. Screenshot of an intergenerational scene (e.g., sharing a meal with the grandmother) as a narrative anchor for care and cultural continuity.

Source : Created by the author. Screenshot from a video published on Li Ziqi's official Weibo account.

Third, the narratives stage traditional culture and handicraft transmission as lived practice rather than abstract explanation. P12 linked this directly to cultural continuity: "it shows 'tradition' through doing—tools, steps, seasons, and festivals are performed, not explained." This process-oriented narrative, paired with repeated symbolic repertoires and ambient realism, supports the interpretation that cultural continuity is communicated through visible work, time, and repeated routines.

2. Core brand values embedded in Li Ziqi's video content

Building on the multimodal patterns reported in Section 5.1, the analysis identifies five core brand values repeatedly communicated in the sampled Weibo videos and repeatedly named, explained, or evaluated by interviewees. The videos do not present these values as explicit slogans. They appear through recurring audiovisual and narrative cues and are articulated in viewers' value judgments.

2.1 Authenticity

Authenticity is tied to process visibility and sensory realism. The videos repeatedly show hands, tools, and step-by-step making; they keep diegetic work sounds and material textures; they avoid heavy verbal framing.

P2 linked trust to craft visibility: "The hand close-ups are the source of trust." P5 used embodied skill as a test: "I pay close attention to whether the movements look smooth—smooth means she's used to doing it; if not, it's easy to give it away." P15 contrasted her style with sales-driven creators: "She's quiet and working—not like some people who shout while making content to sell products."

Some interviewees questioned whether "authentic" viewing can coexist with industrial production. P8 called it "a carefully constructed media product" and said "the team and production capacity behind it are very strong." P10 rejected what they saw as "authenticity mythology": "What I dislike is the myth of authenticity… The messiness and pain of labor are systematically muted."

2.2 Cultural continuity

Cultural continuity appears through repeated objects, repeated procedures, and repeated time markers. Traditional tools, vessels, and clothing cues recur across episodes. Seasonal rhythms are built into planting, harvesting, preserving, drying, fermenting, and waiting.

P1 stressed that tradition is carried by everyday integration rather than explicit performance: "Traditional culture is not performed on purpose; it just naturally attaches to daily life—like a kind of temperament." P6 described continuity as recognition across generations: "Watching her makes me think of how our family used to live—drying things in autumn, pickling vegetables for winter." P17 named the continuity cues they noticed most: "She conveys solar terms, family care, and traditional skills."

2.3 Simplicity

Simplicity is communicated through restrained visuals, minimal speech, and routine work presented without spectacle. The videos favor natural light and low saturation. They keep the pace slow and the tone non-argumentative.

P7 framed this value as a contrast to fast urban routines: "It feels natural and quite plain… like going back to a simple life." P6 emphasized the non-exaggerated presentation: "She does things step by step—no fuss, not showing off." P15 described simplicity as "less talking," "not noisy," and "not like people who shout while filming to sell."

A few interviewees added a practical condition to this value. P15 said: "Slow is slow, and it's good—but the premise is you have the conditions for it."

2.4 Craftsmanship

Craftsmanship is built through long activity chains, repeated attention to manual technique, and visible completion. The videos show preparation–making–finishing as a full process, with fine-grained actions that viewers can watch, judge, and re-watch.

P5 connected craftsmanship to realism and instruction: "She doesn't only film an atmosphere; she shows the

steps." The same participant treated time and patience as central: "Craft has dignity… slow work produces fine results… real craft is built by time and patience." P15 described the structure as instructional: "Preparation–making–completion… it's like teaching. After watching, you roughly know how to do it."

2.5 Emotional tranquility

Emotional tranquility is communicated through slow pacing, low-conflict progression, minimal speech, stable camera work, and gentle soundscapes that foreground natural and work sounds. Interviewees repeatedly described the videos as calming and mentally "light."

P11 described relief from cognitive overload: "My brain is very noisy… I want something that doesn't require thinking to relax." P12 linked calmness to daily stress recovery: "I watch it at night after my child sleeps… this kind of quiet content makes my emotions more stable." P17 named the value directly: "What moves me most is the emotional quietness and stability." P6 described a direct affective transfer from quiet labor to the viewer: "She doesn't talk much—she just works quietly, and I feel quiet inside too."

Conclusion and Discussion

1. Conclusion

This study examined how Li Ziqi builds a personal brand through social media videos and what core brand values viewers perceive from that construction. Based on multimodal analysis of 21 Weibo videos (September 2016–July 2018) and interview evidence from domestic urban viewers in China (P1–P17), three conclusions are drawn.

First, Li Ziqi's personal brand is built through a coordinated multimodal system. Visual style, symbolic representation, sound and language, and narrative structure recur in stable patterns across episodes. These patterns make the creator identity easy to recognize and easy to re-enter for viewers.

Second, the core brand values are embedded in the videos through recurring multimodal cues rather than stated as explicit slogans. Across the corpus, these values are consistently encoded through visual style, symbolic representation, sound and language, and narrative structure, and they become more salient through repetition across episodes. In the interviews, viewers repeatedly named and explained five values—authenticity, cultural continuity, simplicity, craftsmanship, and emotional tranquility—and anchored these value judgments to concrete cues such as process visibility, recurring material repertoires, seasonal routines, minimal speech, and step-by-step completion.

Third, the case shows that personal brand meaning in video-based environments can be stabilized without overt self-promotion. Repeated multimodal patterning provides recognizable cues, while audience interpretation translates these cues into value judgments that consolidate the perceived brand identity over time.

2. Discussion

2.1 Personal branding in video-based platforms: from self-promotion to repeatable patterning

Personal branding research often emphasizes strategic self-presentation and outcome indicators such as visibility, influence, or employability. This case specifies a text-level mechanism that is especially salient in video-based environments. Li Ziqi's brand meaning is carried by repeatable multimodal patterns rather than declarative statements about the self. The interviews also show that viewers do not need explicit verbal claims to form brand judgments; they rely on cues they can repeatedly see, hear, and recognize.

The findings therefore support a view of personal branding as cumulative meaning-making. The "brand" emerges from consistent design choices across serial content and from the audience's recurring recognition of those choices as signals of who the creator is and what the creator stands for [2–4,10,11,15,16].

2.2 The four-dimensional framework as an operational model for analyzing personal brand meaning

The four-dimensional framework provides an operational way to connect multimodal resources with personal brand building. It helps keep analysis close to observable cues: framing, shot patterns, settings, object repertoires, soundscapes, minimal speech, and process sequencing. This increases traceability from the video text to audience

evaluations.

The findings also show that values are rarely anchored to a single mode. Authenticity and craftsmanship were commonly tied to the convergence of process visibility, material textures, ambient sound, and complete activity chains. Emotional tranquility was tied to pacing, soundscape, minimal speech, and stable camera work. Cultural continuity and simplicity were tied to repeated objects, seasonal time, restrained visuals, and non-argumentative narration. The framework therefore supports analysis of cross-modal reinforcement, where multiple dimensions jointly shape a stable brand meaning.

2.3 Digital identity and audience interpretation: value judgments as identity stabilization

Creator identity on video platforms is not only produced by creators; it is also stabilized through audience interpretation. The interviews in this study show a consistent translation process from cues to values. Viewers moved from “what is repeatedly shown” to “what it means,” using value terms such as authenticity, simplicity, and tranquility. These value labels function as a shared vocabulary that makes the identity coherent and discussable.

At the same time, the interview evidence also reveals interpretive boundaries. Some viewers questioned whether the “authentic” feel can coexist with industrial production capacity, and others noted that tranquility and simplicity can depend on what is omitted. These divergent readings do not weaken the personal brand; they clarify how brand meaning can remain stable while audiences disagree about the conditions behind it.

3. Practical implications

For video creators, this case highlights the effectiveness of stable multimodal patterning. Consistent framing routines, recurring settings, and process visibility can strengthen recognizability. Minimal speech and ambient realism can reduce cognitive load and support cross-context viewing. Clear activity-chain sequencing provides closure and re-watchability.

For digital marketing and brand communication, the findings suggest that value communication in video does not require explicit slogans. Values become legible when audiences can repeatedly connect cues to judgments. Designing for cue consistency across episodes can help audiences form stable value associations.

4. Limitations and future research

This study has four limitations. First, the video sample focuses on an early period of Li Ziqi’s Weibo uploads (2016–2018), which may differ from later production phases. Second, the analysis centers on Weibo and does not systematically compare cross-platform versions of the content. Third, the interview sample focuses on domestic urban viewers in China; other audience groups may evaluate the cues and values differently. Fourth, the study analyzes audience interpretation rather than production-side intention; future work could add interviews with production teams or platform professionals when access is possible.

Future research can extend the framework through cross-platform comparison, cross-cultural audience sampling, and longitudinal sampling across different stages of a creator’s brand development. Studies can also test whether the same cue-to-value translation process applies to other genres of social media video beyond rural lifestyle content.

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