Understanding Brand-Culture Interaction

A Social Semiotic Analysis of an Emerging Form of Brand Communications on Bilibili

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation project is an investigation of a form of brand communications, usually referred to as 'zhenghuo', emerging on the Chinese video platform Bilibili. Adopting a cultural approach to brands, this study is aimed at investigating the brand-culture interaction at two levels: the first is how brands draw on and become cultural resources circulating in the Bilibili community, and the second is how brands as symbolic texts mediate the influence of market forces on society and culture. Using a social semiotic approach, this study presents a detailed analysis and discussion of three cases from three brands well-known and representative for their zhenghuo campaigns. As for the results, three specific ways in which brand-culture interaction takes place are identified: the adoption of popular content, the use of anthropomorphic mascots and narratives, and the co-creation between brands and other users. Besides, the study argues that these zhenghuo campaigns belong to branded content marketing and should be regarded as part of businesses' efforts to adjust to the changing market situations and the cultural atmosphere of Bilibili. Through the communication efforts, brands attempt to naturalise and legitimatise their presence and operation in society, and ultimately pursue profit and economic growth. This dissertation project helps enrich the understanding of brand-culture interaction, while at the same time filling in the literature gap on promotional activities on Bilibili.

INTRODUCTION

Bilibili, first launched in 2009, used to be a subcultural video platform focusing on ACG (Anime, Comics, Game) content. After a decade, it is now one of the most popular pan-entertainment video platforms in China, with 294 million Month Active Users (Sina Technology, 2022; Song, 2021). As a relatively new video platform, the rapid growth of Bilibili in recent years makes it increasingly popular for businesses seeking to extend their influence on the young generation (Xiaoyu, 2021). Nevertheless, it has been argued by many promotional practitioners that branding on this platform should not just involve copy-pasting existing marketing materials on this platform, and there is no necessary correlation between the popularity of brands on Bilibili and their real-life scale or the number of videos they produce (Song, 2021; TK, 2021). Although brand marketing on this platform have evolved into different forms including redirect traffic advertising and social influencer marketing (Bilibili Marketing Centre, 2021), among all the 'methodologies' provided from the industry one concept is frequently brought to the fore and particularly interesting to me: *zhenghuo*, which literally means 'performing a trick' in Chinese. While this concept is not limited to brands but very common among all content creators on Bilibili, and no consensus has been reached in terms of its definition, in the context of brand communications some key features are frequently identified. Usually speaking, *zhenghuo* is initiated by the official brand accounts, involves the creation of entertainment content familiar and easily acceptable to Bilibili users, emphasises on interaction between brands and the audience, and most importantly is an active attempt to assimilate into the youth values and culture on Bilibili (Xiaoyu, 2021; TK, 2021; BOLT *et al*., 2022; SocialBeta, 2021). The complexity of this new form of brand communications, as well as its lack of academic investigation, inspires me to devote my dissertation project to this phenomenon.

This new form of brand communications has led me adopt a perspective of looking at brands which is attracting increasing attention in the academia, namely the 'brand culture perspective' (Schroeder, 2009). In comparison to the more traditional managerial and strategic

approach to brands and brand communications, the defining feature of this perspective is the recognition of the brand as a cultural and symbolic text which is constructed in a specific context. The potential value of this approach for the research topic lies in its emphasis on the cultural context and processes that shape the final presentation of brands in the public space. Following the same logic, I intend to investigate how the interaction between brands and culture actually takes place, from the cultural perspective, in the process of creating brand-related *zhenghuo* content. To be more specific, I want to understand how brands make use of existing cultural resources on this platform to produce their content and how the outcome contributes to the cultural space it circulates in. On the other hand, simply focusing on describing the interaction between brands and culture still lacks analytical depth. Therefore, I also plan to situate this phenomenon in the larger context of market society, which is basically the fundamental driver for brands and brand communications. Originally a sub-cultural community, the commercialisation of Bilibili is relatively new. Therefore, it provides a very interesting example for me to critically examine how market forces enter, adapt themselves to, and exert influence on a cultural space untouched before. In particular, considering that *zhenghuo* can be regarded as an innovative form of branded content or entertainment (Hardy, 2021), I intend to conduct the critical analysis relying on the ideological critique of this relatively new kind of promotional activities (Chmielewska, 2016).

Adopting a social semiotic approach, this dissertation project is aimed at examining a new and innovative form of brand communications on Bilibili which is usually referred as *zhenghuo*. As a qualitative research, this dissertation is intended to conduct an in-depth investigation of a small number of cases. Based on a cultural approach to brand communications, this study will try to present a detailed picture of how the selected brands interact with the cultural environment of Bilibili, as well as an examination of the implicit impact these communication activities might exert on the contemporary society. Hopefully, this dissertation project can provide some important insight into this emerging kind of promotional campaigns on Bilibili, and enrich the cultural approach to brand communications in the process of applying it in a new context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review starts with the cultural approach to brand communications, which locates this research as a cultural enquiry into promotional activities and outlines the two key questions that need to be answered. Then I will give a short introduction to Bilibili, which is the site of this dissertation project. The third section is a critical account of promotional activities in the market society, especially the ideological thinking behind branded content marketing. In the following three sections, literature on brand anthropomorphism, popular content, and co-creation of brand culture is reviewed to better understand how brand-culture interaction plays out at a micro level.

A Cultural Approach to Brand Communications

Brands, defined by Schroeder (2009), can be understood as communicative objects that brand managers want consumers to buy into. Guided by this ultimate objective, brand communications or branding include a variety of activities targeted at the public such as marketing, advertising, and social media management (Wijaya, 2013; Bhasin, 2021). From a strategic point of view, all the communication activities can be regarded a form of promotional practices aimed at advancing the mission of organisations, in this context, appealing to customers and gaining profit (Davis, 2013; Hallahan *et al*., 2007). However, brands are not separate from the other aspects of culture. Instead, as Klein argued in her widely cited book No Logo (2000), brands have become part of the culture. The growing recognition of brands' role in society has also changed the way they are understood in the academia. Traditionally studied in the field of marketing and management, brands are nowadays also attracting more and more attention from scholars in social sciences. The concept of brand culture, according to Schroeder (2009), fills in the theoretical gap between the strategic management of brand identity and the investigation of consumers' perception of brand image. This cultural approach to brand communications basically views brands as cultural texts that are produced and consumed in a specific context, and encoded with certain symbols and ideologies (O'Reilly, 2005). As Schroeder argues (2009), they are both valuable cultural artefacts

mediating cultural meanings and active actors in shaping norms, cultures, and society in general. In other words, brands are constantly interacting with the wider culture.

The recognition of the close relationship between brands and culture have led to two very important questions (Schroeder, 2009). The first is how brands draw on existing cultural resources, incorporate them into their own promotional activities, and become part of the popular culture itself. Holt (2004) described this phenomenon as 'cultural branding' and proposes a set of principles of successful cultural branding emphasising the importance of drawing cultural and ideological resources from the so called 'crowdculture' (Holt, 2016). The resources that brands rely on in their construction do not exist in a vacuum but instead have their own unique meanings, associations, and histories formed in a cultural space. Therefore, the investigation of the cultural, historical, political, and social grounding of brands allows researchers to situate and understand them in context. Second, it is necessary to understand how the promotional activities conducted by these brands impact the society in an implicit yet profound manner. More specifically for this dissertation, I intend to use the notion of 'culture as a critique of market society', which is the environment in which brands operate (Slater & Tonkiss, 2013: 150). That is to say, the logic and assumptions underlying the market economy are deeply embedded in promotional activities such as branding, and these promotional practices act as mediators through which the market economy shapes the social and cultural landscape. For instance, through the discursive and symbolic constructions of brands, marketers can legitimate their practices, fetishise the social relationships in production and consumption, develop prescriptive models for the way people think and behave, and even infuse myths and religions with their ideologies (Carah & Brodmerkel, 2020; Schroeder, 2009). In a word, the cultural approach to brand communications adopted in this dissertation aims to combine the investigation of more specific aspect of brands interacting with cultural resources and phenomena with the cultural-ideological critique of brands as symbolic texts through which market forces exert influence on the society.

Carnivalesque, Youth-oriented Cultural Atmosphere and *Danmu* Interface on Bilibili

Launched in 2010, Bilibili has now grown into one of China's major social media platforms specifically focusing on video. Originally a site devoted to ACG content, it has now expanded into a wide variety of themes including music, movie, science and technology and daily life (Song, 2021). As an emerging video platform, Bilibili has received relatively limited scholarly attention to this point in comparison to more dominant ones such as WeChat and Weibo (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2021). However, as the limited literature suggests, for any research targeted at Bilibili it is always helpful to pay attention to its unique cultural atmosphere as well as distinctive digital affordances (Yin & Fung, 2017; Li, 2017).

According to official statistics, Bilibili is a platform dominated by the young generation with an average user age of 22.8 (IT Home, 2021), which has made it a central stage for the creativity and participation of young people. Just like other Chinese social media platforms, Bilibili users are passionate about creating 'internet slang, memes, spoofs, and parodies' drawing on multimodal, cultural, and technological resources (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2021). However, the unique development trajectory of this platform has made it distinctive from others in terms of atmosphere and spirit. While the cultural practices of Bilibili users seem to be mostly humourous and entertaining, they also open up the possibility of public discussion, political participation, and cultural resistance (Yin & Fung, 2017; Schneider, 2021; Chen, 2020). Drawing on the concept of 'carnivalesque' from Bakhtin, Yin and Fung (2017) argue that the subculture origin and the tradition of self-production, remaking and parody exemplified by *guichu* (Darcy, 2018) have contributed to an alternative carnival atmosphere on Bilibili in which official hierarchy, dominant ideologies, and condescending preaching are resisted and subverted in the form of laughter and parody. In fact, there have been many cases Bilibili users clash with certain people or groups who attempt to supress their expressions and participation by force, for example the controversy surrounding a Chinese idol Cai Xukun (Yulechanye, 2019). As Bilibili grows from a niche site to a video platform open to people of all ages and social backgrounds, businesses are beginning to exploit its potential for promotional activities. The innovative form of promotional campaigns initiated by official brand accounts named

zhenghuo place special emphasis on the need to assimilate into the culture of Bilibili (Xiaoyu, 2021; TK, 2021). As will be explained in the following analysis, the carnivalesque, entertainment-oriented, and grassroot cultural atmosphere of Bilibili play a central role in this new form of brand communications.

Apart from the cultural analysis of Bilibili, some scholars pay attention to the digital affordances of Bilibili, especially the *danmu* interface that distinguishes Bilibili from many other platforms. *Danmu* is a type of superimposed comments scrolling from right to left of the screen as the video plays, originally designed for the Japanese video website Nico Nico. The temporality and anonymity of *danmu* creates a sense of pseudo-simultaneity and community, because the comments with no ID attached come right in front of the viewers and create 'a collective temporal experience of simultaneous viewing' (Li, 2017; BOLT *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the special semiotic design of the *danmu* function allows viewers to add paratextual elements to the original content, reinforces community formation and collaboration, and gives rise to a variety of unique communication practices, such as translation (Yang, 2020) and collective colouring (Teng & Chan, 2022). Considering the research focus on multimodal communications on this platform, *danmu* should be regarded as an indispensable part of the multimodal ensemble presented to Bilibili users.

Market Society, Branded Content Marketing, and Its Ideological Critique

In the modern market society, promotional campaigns such as brand communications and advertising are playing an increasingly important role in people's daily and cultural lives (Davis, 2013). When looking at brand communications from a cultural perspective, it is necessary to understand them in the larger social and cultural contexts. Although China does not recognise itself as a capitalist state, it nevertheless pursues a socialist market economy with significant capitalist features (Coase & Wang, 2013), which makes it possible to apply some of the cultural critiques of capitalist market society to the Chinese context. As brands are created and managed by businesses to help them compete in a marketplace for profit, this dissertation argues that the ideologies and assumptions of a market society and culture is crucial to understanding all kinds of promotional activities by businesses.

One of the most prominent traditions of ideological enquiry into promotional activities in a market society is centred around the notion of 'consumer society' or 'consumer culture', which stresses the creation of signs and myths around consumption and is usually based on the study of advertising (Baudrillard, 1998; Holm, 2017). Because of the hypervisibility of commodities and symbolic meanings attached to them, consumption in the marketplace has been celebrated and linked with success, self-fulfilment, and empowerment. However, the utopian picture conceals the exploitative production process and the inequality among different market actors (Slater & Tonkiss, 2013). Therefore, by selectively stressing and ignoring certain aspects of the process of production and consumption, consumerist ideologies help maintain the market economy and extend its impact on society (Ewen, 2008). Nevertheless, in recent years the effectiveness of traditional mass advertising has been significantly weakened by the increasing agency of consumers in determining their interaction with brands (Teixeira, 2014), consumers' doubt over traditional advertising (Rohampton, 2016), to the increasingly fierce competition in the marketplace and people's growing expectation for brands to provide utility apart from their products and services (Haberman, 2018). In this context, branded content or content marketing has become the most sought-after response from the promotional industry (Hardy, 2021). By definition, branded content marketing refers to 'creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content' to attract audiences (potential consumers) and ultimately generate profit (Content Marketing Institute, n.d.). Through content marketing brands seek to inform, educate, entertain, and share their perspectives and values with the audience (Lou & Xie, 2021). In the context of the pan-entertainment video platform, *zhenghuo* on Bilibili is usually in the form of branded entertainment, which is defined as the integration of brand promotion into entertainment content (van Loggerenberg *et al*., 2021). Certain unique and indigenous forms of entertainment on Bilibili, which will be discussed later, are particularly relevant in this study.

In a rare analysis of the ideologies behind content marketers, Chmielewska (2016) reveals how content marketing further develops consumerist ideologies while adhering to the ultimate goal of making profit and economic growth inherent in a market economy. Just as how

consumption is portrayed as desirable and indispensable to self-fulfilment and success, branded content marketing is trying to promote the belief that businesses and market economy can help consumers solve their problems and live their lives better (Schultz, 2016). What is different is that marketers no longer focus on the act of consumption but try to establish brands themselves as brands as a source of symbolic and cultural values. It is because consumers' attention is diverted from the buyer-seller relationship, that the usually unequal relationship between large corporations and ordinary consumers, the unethical and exploitative operation and production processes, and the corporations' profit-seeking objective are glossed over (Chmielewska, 2016). Thus, the naturalisation, legitimation, and even glorification of the presence and operation of businesses in society are made possible. While the brands' fundamental role as a provider of goods and services is intentionally concealed, consumers' loyalty and relationship with brands are strengthened. In the end, as suggested by the slogan 'selling more by promoting less' proposed by founder of Content Marketing Institute Joe Pulizzi, sales and profit might even increase. In a word, branded content marketing can be regarded as a response of the marketing doctrine to the critique it receives and the changing market situation, but the goal of profit-seeking and economic growth remains unchanged (Marion, 2006).

Brand Anthropomorphism

For brands to really become part of the Bilibili community, the first step would be to perform like other Bilibili users, particularly content producers (uploaders) native to the platform. Generally, this strategy can be understood as a manifestation of brand anthropomorphism, which is becoming more and more popular among businesses in recent years because of its positive influences on marketing outcomes (Sharma & Rahman, 2022). In a summary work on the topic of brand anthropomorphism by Maclnnis and Folkes (2017), the practice of humanising brands can be categorised into three sub-groups: presenting brands as having human-like features, human-like minds, and human-like personalities. Either by using verbal or visual tactics in self-description, or by liking, commenting, and joking like other Bilibili

users, brands can create human-like impressions on the observers, and consequently influence how brands are evaluated and treated (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017).

One specific aspect of brand anthropomorphism, the creation of brand mascot, has always been a popular option. By definition, brand mascots usually refer to animals and objects with anthropomorphic features which are used to represent certain brands. Making use of people's innate tendency to ascribe human characteristics to non-human objects, brand mascots help grab people's attention and create more enduring and relatable impressions (Bennett & Thompson, 2016). Apart from a managerial and psychological perspective, brand mascots can also be studied in socio-cultural terms. In other words, the creation of brand mascots is rooted in a specific cultural context, while they can also be used as a tool to promote certain messages, narratives, and ideologies in a covert manner (Kalliat, 2013).

Popular Content on Bilibili: Memes, *Biaoqing*, and *Guichu*

From a micro perspective, the popular culture that brands are engaged with is made up of miscellaneous things such as films, music, events, images, and even punchlines. Due to brands' quest for popularity, memes are particularly important for promotional activities. Since the inception of the Internet and social media, memes have grown exponentially and become an indispensable part of the popular culture. Typically speaking, memes are multimodal artefacts that mix verbal text, visuals, hyperlinks, and hashtags through an endless process of reappropriation, imitation, and readaptation (Milner, 2013). The key feature of memes, as argued by Marino (2015), is spreadability. From a semiotic perspective, Marino explains how the 'syntactic hook' and 'semantic hook' of memes lead to their widespread and rapid circulation. At the syntactic level, memes usually provide Internet users with a basic structure or template based on which they can modify and recreate the text. Semantically, on the other hand, memes feature a striking and usually playful element that can stimulate the engagement of Internet users (Marino, 2015).

As a global cultural format and genre (Shifman, 2013), memes are localised in the context of Chinese social media. For example, Ying and Blommaert (2020) provide a detailed analysis of

biaoqing, a vernacularisation of memes popular in China which usually takes the form GIFs and image macros. According to the authors, biaoqing draws on a variety of resources (celebrities, cartoons, animals), revolves around a few characteristics (cute, mischievous, decadent, dirty, violent), and is ludic in nature (Ying & Blommaert, 2020). Besides, Bilibili users are particularly known for their creativity and have developed their unique way of creating viral content. On this platform, certain short audio-visual clips might become trendy memes within a short period of time. These memes can come from all sorts of sources, including clips from television series, music and dancing works, daily vlogs, and videos related to public figures (Zgiat, 2020). While it is hard to propose very concreate and specific commonalities among these trendy video clips, they do contain playful elements and are simple in structure, which fits the criteria for the spreadability of memes (Marino, 2015). Based on these popular cultural resources, Bilibili users then engage in adaptation in very diverse ways. *Guichu*, or auto-tuned remix, is a special form of video-editing that features a background music, auto-tuned melody based on human voices in the original material, and fast switching of images. One widely circulated line, 'there are only two subcategories on Bilibili: *guichu* and material for *guichu*', indicates the popularity of this adaptation format and the wide range of resources it draws on (Darcy, 2018). *Guichu*, together with other forms of adaptation such as different language versions, different settings, and creative re-shooting, constitute a very important part of the videos uploaded on Bilibili.

Co-creation of Brand Meaning and Culture

One important corollary to the interaction between brands and culture is that brand meanings become co-created by businesses and the public. Branding on social media has now moved away from brand-centred to multiple stakeholders as co-creators of brand meaning (Rosenthal & Brito, 2017). In the words of Carah and Brodmerkel (2020), the participation of consumers and the wider public is indispensable to the creation of brand meaning and value. Consequently, more and more brands are trying to harness the creative self-expressions of the public through 'regimes of engagement' and appealing to their attitudes and beliefs (Zwick *et al.*, 2008).

The brands' practice of harnessing public participation for their own benefits have drawn the attention of many scholars and received considerable criticism. For example, the activities that the consumers and wider public are engaged in are regarded by some as a form of 'immaterial labour' (Arvidsson, 2005). Marketers and brand owners adopt a series of techniques to manage the free labour in a way the public either consciously or unconsciously promote the goods and services and participate in brand-building (Arvidsson, 2005). In other words, while in the eyes of media users the participation in creating brand-related content is voluntary and satisfies their emotional or practical needs, their activities are also exploited by brands to serve marketing purposes.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Conceptual Framework

In this dissertation project, a cultural approach towards brands mainly based on Schroeder's brand culture perspective (2009) is adopted to understand this emerging form of brand communications on Bilibili generally referred to as *zhenghuo*. To be more specific, this dissertation is a qualitative, in-depth investigation into the various ways in which brands interact with the cultural environment of Bilibili. As outlined earlier, the interaction between brand and culture should be understood at two levels: the first includes specific expressions, trends, thoughts, and phenomena that are circulating in the cultural space; the second, on the other hand, refers to the ideological implications of such branding practices for society.

Although in the actual analysis and discussion the concrete aspects of brand-culture interaction precede the critical evaluation of its implications on society, conceptually it is necessary to first understand the communication practices in a larger context. Market society, I would argue, constitutes the fundamental and defining context in which brands operate. From the persuasion tactics, the promotion of myths around consumption to the creation of branded content, businesses are using a variety of strategies to sell their products or services,

legitimatise and solidify their presence in society, and ultimately seek profit from their operation (Chmielewska, 2016). *Zhenghuo*, as a specific manifestation of branded content on Bilibili, can be understood as an attempt for businesses to reach out and enhance their appeal to the young generation in China. Originated from a community of AGC subculture, some traces of the resistant youth subculture can still be found on Bilibili today even though it has gradually entered the mainstream (Yin & Fung, 2017). To better increase their presence on this platform, brands are unavoidably faced with its cultural expressions, practices, and atmosphere. In other words, this new form of brand communications can be regarded as an encounter between the ideological forces of the market society and the carnivalesque and entertaining spirit prevalent on this platform.

The last three sections of the literature review, on the other hand, help us better understand brand-culture interaction in detail and practice. First, brand anthropomorphism is a very useful way of thinking about how brands behave in the social media environment. The concept does not only refer to a specific image or mascot representing the brand, but much broader scope of practices which make brands look, act, and feel like human being (Maclnnis & Folkes, 2017). Second, while the cultural resources from which brands draw inspiration are literally unlimited, it is sensible for brands to seek the popular content and format to achieve the desirable result (Hsu, 2018). Therefore, studies on memes and their Chinese varieties (Shifman, 2013; Ying & Blommaert, 2020; Darcy, 2018) provide important knowledge to better understand why and how brands choose and adapt these existing resources. Finally, the concept of interaction between brands and culture entails that brand meanings are no longer exclusively created by brand managers and marketers but instead a result of the joint efforts between brands and other participants. This knowledge can help clarify the complex processes of brand communications on this interactive video platform.

Research Questions

The literature review suggests that the brand culture perspective, regarding brands as a holistic entity made up of stories, values, and symbols, is very promising for investigating the emerging and diverse branding practices. Although the academic value of this approach is

recognised, more applications are needed for further development. In response to this research gap, I will try to apply this approach to a new and unique form of brand communications called *zhenghuo* on Bilibili, a Chinese video platform with unique cultural atmosphere and expressions. While this cultural approach provides me with important analytical perspectives to better understand this phenomenon, in return this dissertation project can offer important insight about the value and potential of the brand culture perspective. Besides, based on existing critique on market-oriented promotional activities, I will try to take a step further and conduct an ideological critique of branded content marketing which hasn't been given due attention in the academic circle to this point. Therefore, the research questions of this dissertation project are:

1) How do the selected brands interact with the cultural environment of Bilibili through this new form of brand communication known as *zhenghuo*, drawing on specific cultural and semiotic resources available on the platform?

2) How do these brands legitimatise and naturalise their presence and operation in society in this process, and what are the implications?

METHODOLOGY

Introduction to Social Semiotics

The objective of this dissertation research, as outlined chapters, is to explore how brands interact with the wider cultural environment through their communication activities on Bilibili, and critique how it might impact the society as a manifestation of market forces in the cultural space. The rise of social media platforms has led to the flourishing of multimodal communications, as the design and technological affordances enable people to draw on a wider range of multimodal resources in their mean-making processes. Social semiotics, as one of the major and widely used approaches to multimodality (Jewitt *et al.*, 2016), is chosen for this dissertation project.

Social semiotics is heavily influenced by Functional Linguistics of which Michael Halliday is the representative figure (Jewitt & Henriksen, 2016). In the late 1970s, Michael Halliday first used the term 'language as social semiotic' (1978) to stress the relationship between a language system and the social context, which stands in contrast with traditional structuralist semiotics (Jewitt *et al.*, 2016: 59). Based on Halliday's thinking, later scholars began to move beyond the realm of language to reach the 'whole domain of meaning' (Jewitt *et al.*, 2016, p. 59). One of the cornerstones of the social semiotic approach to multimodality is the much-cited *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006). Their work mainly focused on written and visual texts, drawing a wide range of samples for analysis from children's drawings, advertisements, and textbook illustrations. In the following two decades, the social semiotic approach to multimodality has been further developed to include a wider range of phenomena, from multimodal interaction in a classroom setting (Kress *et al.*, 2014), music in audio city tour guides (Fina, 2017) to multimodal dialogue on social media (Jovanovic & van Leeuwen, 2018) and the design of social media platforms themselves (Poulsen *et al.*, 2018).

In multimodal communication, different modes combine to constitute a 'multimodal ensemble', in which different aspects of meaning are realised by both the meaning potential of individual modes and the orchestration between different modes (Jewitt, 2016). One the one hand, the establishment of certain semiotic resources as modes is a result of social and cultural process (Jewitt, 2016). On the other hand, the design and production of the multimodal ensemble are also a contextual and situated process in which a sign maker deciding the semiotic resources and their arrangement to achieve certain social functions (Jewitt *et al.*, 2016). In other words, the key to the social semiotic approach to multimodality is that both the semiotic resources used for meaning making and the people involved in the production of signs are shaped by the specific social, cultural, and historical context. Therefore, this approach is appropriate for the cultural analysis of brand communications in this dissertation project.

Analytical Framework and Procedure

The theoretical introduction of social semiotics shows that social semiotics provides a very useful framework for analysing multimodality on social media platforms, as it has the potential to investigate various and newly emerging phenomenon and practices in a coherent manner focusing on the meaning-making and the social context. This dissertation, as outlined in the literature, is aimed at investigating brand communications on a Chinese video platform Bilibili. To provide a more comprehensive investigation, the multimodal ensembles that will be analysed are mainly made up of three aspects: first, the audio-visual content brands produce, which is the foundation and starting point; second, the interaction between brands and Bilibili users or among individual users, in the form of *danmu* and regular comments; third, the design and functional features of the platform itself, and how brands make use of it.

To operationalise the social semiotic approach, the analytical framework will be mainly based on two models. The first is the Kress and van Leeuwen's model proposed in their *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996, 2006). Based on the framework of metafunctions by Halliday, this model divides the meaning potential of a multimodal ensemble into representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. Considering that this framework is mainly focused on visual content, some features of the audio aspect of the multimodal ensemble from Speech, Music, Sound by van Leeuwen (1999) will be used as a supplement to the three-dimensional framework mentioned above. The analysis will start with representative and interactive meaning conveyed by the video content created by these brands. Representational meaning mainly refers to the identification of participants, process, and circumstances portrayed in the multimodal ensemble (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001), while the interactive dimension of multimodal analysis involves the relationship between the multimodal artefact, the producer, and the audience (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). In this study, my analysis will mainly focus on the represented participants, their action, the narrative they are engaged in, and the relationship established between them and the viewers. In terms of the audio aspect, at this stage I will look at the utterances, lyrics, melody, tone, and verbal addresses, as they play a role in the formation of the participants, the narrative, and the social

distance (van Leeuwen, 1999). Then I will move on to the compositional analysis, which mainly concerns the orchestration and interaction of different elements and how they mediate the meaning potential (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In this part, modality and salience are particularly relevant in the analysis. The former concept refers to the 'truth value' of the representation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), and can be exhibited by the design and presentation of the visual image as well as audio features such as pitch, dynamic range, and fluctuation (van Leeuwen, 1999). Salience, on the other hand, indicates the degree of eye-catchingness of certain elements (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001). This construct can help me understand both the video content itself and additional information enabled by this platform.

Second, in the MC4M1 summative essay which is the pilot study for this dissertation, I find that Kress and van Leeuwen's framework (2006) is largely descriptive and therefore a wider range of social theories need to be incorporated to achieve greater analytical depth. Therefore, following Machin's step to 'being critical at the multimodal level' (2013), the concept of 'recontextualisation' will be introduced. In another work by van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice* (2008), the author argues that discursive representation is never a faithful reproduction of social practices. Instead, it is a recontextualisation or transformation of the reality through the process of substitution, deletion, rearrangement, and addition (which further includes repetition, reaction, purpose, legitimation, and evaluation). By investigating the reasons and contexts behind these recontextualisation decisions, a wider range of sociological and cultural knowledge can be incorporated into this multimodal study, thus achieving greater analytical depth. For this dissertation, this involves examining how people managing these Bilibili brand accounts use the strategies mentioned above to transform different elements of the social practices being represented, such as the relationship between brands and the viewers, the actions and measures taken by the brands, and the narrative of certain issues relevant to these brands.

Sampling and Data Collection

Considering the purpose and the scope of this dissertation, I intend to collect a limited amount of data which can provide rich information regarding brand communication practices on

Bilibili. To fulfil this objective, purposive sampling is chosen as the sampling strategy. This non-random method requires the researchers to use their own judgement to decide and sets out to find research subjects that can provide relevant and valuable insight for the research topic, and is well suited for this qualitative, and in-depth investigation of a chosen research topic (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). To find suitable and valuable research subjects, a number of criteria are set based on some commonly used thresholds for this platform (TK, 2021; Xiaoyu, 2021): first and foremost, the chosen content should belong to the new form of brand communications, namely *zhenghuo*, which is the research topic; second, the selected brand accounts must have a relatively large fan base on Bilibili, with over 100 thousand followers; last, the brands should have influential and representative works in the past, which have acquired at least 5 million views and received attention from the marketing industry such as analysis and reports.

Based on the criteria, three brands are chosen as cases for the analysis: DingTalk, a communication and collaboration platform developed by Alibaba Group; Tencent, a giant technology and entertainment conglomerate headquartered in Shenzhen; and Mixue Ice Cream & Tea, a well-known Chinese chain of ice cream and drink stores. After the brands are chosen, the most viewed and liked video for each brand will be selected as the core data, and the three multimodal ensembles based on these videos will be viewed and studied. A detailed description and interpretation based on the Kress and van Leeuwen model (2006) will be conducted first, with each multimodal ensemble used to elaborate on one key aspect of the brand-culture interaction. A critical discussion of the results centred around the concept of 'recontextualisation' (van Leeuwen, 2008) will follow, in which brand communications on Bilibili will be understood against the background of market society and the carnivalesque cultural atmosphere of Bilibili. To illustrate the arguments and findings, selected samples from the data will be included in this dissertation in the form of figures, and annotations will be included either in the footnote or the appendices if needed. Besides, when presenting figures to better illustrate my arguments in the analysis, I will decide whether or not to turn on this *danmu* function according to the point under discussion. If it is turned on, I will set the *danmu*

as 'half-screen' so that both the video content and *danmu* are visible. The original language of the data in this study is Chinese, therefore all content included in this analysis will be translated into English by myself.

Limitations and Reflexivity

Social semiotics is a promising and powerful tool for analysing the increasingly diverse world of multimodality. However, it needs to be pointed out that this method has some intrinsic limitations which should be recognised and attended to. First, similar to other qualitative approaches, social semiotics only focuses on a small collection of data, which means that the research is susceptible to the influence of the researcher's subjectivity (Iedema, 2001). This limitation requires the researcher to beware of and acknowledge his or her own personal backgrounds and social contexts which might influence the interpretation (which will be discussed below). More importantly, the research should adhere to its nature as an individual, in-depth inquiry into the chosen subject, and avoid claiming to reach some objective or universal conclusions.

The second limitation, frequently brought up by scholars, is the descriptive nature of social semiotics itself. For example, Jewitt and Henriksen (2016) argue that the validity and concreteness of the researcher's interpretation are sometimes in question. Social semiotics on its own cannot offer all that is needed for fully-fledged sociological interpretations. To solve this problem, it is necessary to introduce relevant social theories into the analysis. Specifically for this dissertation project, to fully understand and interpret the meanings of the selected multimodal ensembles, it is necessary to rely on literature in the field of market society and the cultural atmosphere of Bilibili.

Finally, as a qualitative research it is necessary to consider the issue of reflexivity, or my own position in relation to the research topic (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Personally, I am a heavy user of Bilibili and like many others I have a particular interest in and a favourable attitude towards *zhenghuo* because it to some extent shows brands' willingness to take the cultural atmosphere of Bilibili seriously. Therefore, it should be noted that this study only focuses on

a very specific kind of branding practices and is far from representative of brand communications on this platform in general. Second, to counterbalance my own inclination, I need to situate this phenomenon in a larger socio-cultural context and investigate it through a more critical lens.

Ethical Considerations

In terms of research ethics, the research topic of this dissertation is not considered as sensitive according to the research ethics committee of LSE. The text-based nature of this study, the research focus on public social media accounts owned by brands, and the non-sensitive topic mean that no human participants will be involved, thus no issues of informed consent or harm reduction need to be considered (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Occasionally, the comments of individual social media users may be needed as illustration. If the comments are in the form of *danmu*, there wouldn't be any issue of anonymity because it is anonymous by design (Li, 2017). In other cases, these individual users will be anonymised to protect their privacy.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Tapping into Popular Forms of Expression on Bilibili

The first case study comes from DingTalk, a leading communication and collaboration platform launched in 2014 by Alibaba. In 2020, when the first wave of Covid-19 broke out in China, students were required to study at home and this platform was chosen by many schools as the tool for online teaching. Although the download and use of DingTalk soared, many students were not very enthusiastic about studying online and decided to show their discontent through giving one-star review (out of five) in app stores. One widely circulated way of jokingly explaining their behaviour is that they will give five stars 'in five instalments' (Jao, 2020). In response to this, DingTalk uploaded a 1-minute-45-second video titled 'The Very DingTalk, Begging for Mercy Online' on February 16, 2020. Soon after its release, this video has become a sensation and received over 30 million views by July 2022.

The representational and interactive meanings of this video, to begin with, is centred around the message of 'begging for more stars'. In this video, DingTalk uses a cartoon swallow named Dingsanduo to represent itself, and throughout this video the swallow is portrayed as doing three things repetitively: looking at the viewers with tears in eyes, bowing, and kowtowing to the audience. To strengthen the submissive position of the brand, design features which usually entail interactive meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) such as eye contact and verbal address are also employed. The constant gaze from Dingsanduo's eyes filled with tears, as well as the address of the viewers as 'papa' which is a very common joke among young people on China's Internet, combines to create an imaginary relationship in which the viewers are given a superior position (Figure 1). As some industry practitioners have argued, the use of animation and the self-depreciating position help make the message more acceptable for the youth-dominated platform (SocialBeta, 2021). In this sense, the representational and interactive meanings conveyed by the brand mascot Dingsanduo can be regarded as an intentional attempt to rely on existing norms and conventions on Bilibili to better serve the purpose of this promotional campaign.

Figure 1

我还是个五岁的
孩子

大家都是我
爸爸

少侠们
请你们饶命吧

却加班到

Another noticeable aspect of this video, on the other hand, is the use of biaoqing and the *guichu* format. Biaoqing is a popular genre of memes in China which is mainly premised on the desire for fun and plays an important role in online communication among Chinese social media users (Ying & Blommaert, 2020). The position of biaoqing in this video, always by the sides of the mascot Dingsanduo (Figure 2), indicates that it is not regarded as the most salient element in the presentation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) but instead serves the function of substantiating the plea of Dingsanduo. In other words, biaoqing is used to make the appeal of Dingsanduo more real, relatable, and sincere. Particularly, among all the biaoqing, the frequent use of crying faces (panda-man, game character, stick man) and animals (cat, dog, panda) collaborates well with the brand mascot in creating a vividly pitiful image. *Guichu*, or auto-tuned remix, is a typical format of content making that represents the carnivalesque spirit of Bilibili. This format usually involves funny BGM, fast repetition and alternation of trendy audio-visual clips, and auto-tuned melody based on existing human voices (Darcy, 2018). Although in this video the melody is sung by a real person, the fast-paced BGM, auto-tuned effect and frequent shift of images are very common elements in *guichu* videos. On Bilibili, this format of video-making has attracted a considerable number of audience and is usually associated with earworm effect which serves business' goal of leaving long-lasting impressions (Darcy, 2018).

Figure 2

Nevertheless, what the video conveys is not a faithful account but a fictional and biased representation of reality. The most striking impression that this video has left on the audience is how DingTalk has portrayed itself as young, humble, pitiful, and submissive by using the image of the sobbing swallow, constantly bowing to and addressing the viewers as 'papa'. Many of the *danmu* responses, including the 'disobedient son' in response to Dingsanduo's address 'papa' and all kinds of laughter, seem to indicate that the brand's self-portrayal and evaluation has received positive responses and many users are happy to engage in the fictional relationship (Figure 3). However, many other reports and studies have pointed out that the reality is quite different. First, one thing that DingTalk is trying to cover up with the humble and harmless brand image is the extensive surveillance and control it conducts over the employees and students, a typical example of the problematic phenomenon called 'dataveillance' (van Dijk, 2014). Second, commonsensically, as a service provider in the marketplace DingTalk is supposed to be satisfy the needs of users to survive in the competition. However, there exist numerous complaints about the service DingTalk provides, such as slow and unstable connection as well as complicated redundant functions (Chen, 2022). Mainly through the discursive narrative of 'a five-year child losing hair due to working overtime', DingTalk attempts to justify the unsatisfactory situation by stressing the unexpectedness of the pandemic and lack of preparation. But the fact is that the company took active measures to grasp the opportunity of the pandemic and succeeded in leading the online working and education market (Yuan, 2020). In other words, the legitimation of the poor performance is not plausible, because DingTalk is undoubtedly capable of addressing these

unsatisfactory issues. This video just gives a cunning excuse to cover up the real management and development considerations that businesses might not want to share with the public.

Figure 3
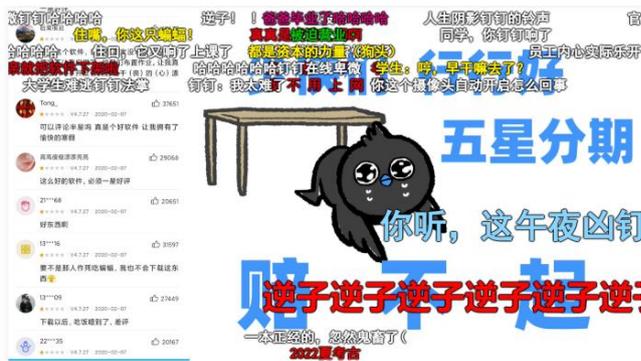
Creating Anthropomorphic Mascots and Narratives

The second case comes from Tencent, one of the best-known companies in China whose business spans across technology and entertainment. This video lasting 2 minutes and 27 seconds, released on July 1, 2020, was a response to a public relations crisis that the company was experiencing at that time. Earlier in 2020, Tencent sued a well-known Chinese chili paste producer Lao Gan Ma for its failure to pay the advertising fees and the court froze 16 million yuan in Lao Gan Ma's account because of the complaint. However, it soon turned out it was three fraudsters who pretended as the marketing team of Lao Gan Ma and signed the contract with Tencent. This incident, commonly regarded as an instance of the abuse of judicial power of Tencent, soon led to wide-spread public ridicule and discontent over the company (James, 2020).

The title of this video, 'I am the Silly Penguin Who Ate the Fake Chili Paste', sets the tone for the brand's attempt to anthropomorphise its image. The animal penguin (Figure 4), originally the logo of Tencent's first successful software QQ, is the most iconic symbol of the company (OpenSesame, n.d.). Choosing this long-established logo on the Chinese Internet to represent

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[1] See detailed annotations in the Appendices.

the company in this video, therefore, is totally natural and can be more easily accepted by the viewers, and even more so considering the ACG origin of Bilibili (SocialBeta, 2021). A representational analysis of multimodal ensemble, according to Jewitt and Oyama (2001), involves both the participants and the narrative. After establishing the cartoon penguin as the participant in this video, the producer then moves on to create a narrative around the penguin, which constitutes another layer of brand anthropomorphism (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). The whole video is adapted from a widely circulated video clip of the farewell ceremony of the Tencent-produced girl group reality show Produce 101, featuring the Chinese idol, actress and singer Yang Chaoyue. Though not as good in singing and dancing as other participants, Yang Chaoyue became a household name overnight, attracted many people for her authenticity, sincerity, humour and even became a symbol of good luck on the Chinese Internet (Wei, n.d.). In this farewell ceremony, Yang Chaoyue lost control of her emotions and wept throughout the speech, which further strengthened this impression on the public. Clearly, by comparing itself to the girl idol, Tencent is trying to leverage the pitiful and sincere associations to reframe its legal controversy with Lao Gan Ma. In a figurative way, the producer of this video describes the fraud that Tencent experienced as 'a penguin eating fake chili paste'. To better incorporate the brand mascot into the narrative structure, Tencent adapts a lot of expressions in the original video, such as 'I am good at nothing but always the best in eating chili paste (originally: quarreling with the boss)', and 'I think I have set a good example for you, there is not a penguin who will always be lucky (originally: God does not always favour those intelligent people)'. As a result, in a trembling and sobbing voice, the 'penguin' tells the audience a story of the company deceived to provide advertising service to the client, suffering from a huge loss, and in the end even becoming a target of ridicule.

Figure 4

Second, through a series of specific adaptation design and techniques, the producer of this video attempts to achieve an amusing effect. Tencent made two major changes to the original clip, substituting the face of Yang Chaoyue with the penguin head and adding a dubbing to replace the original speech. The head of the penguin, as shown in the screenshot, covers the original face of Yang Chaoyue (Figure 5). This video-editing technique, according to the understanding of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), can be understood as an instance of low naturalistic modality. In other words, the video producer is intended to use the unnaturalness to highlight the act of remaking itself. Just as the analysis of the mascot of Expo Milan by Canestrari and Cori (2018) shows, the key element of humour is incongruity. In this case, the incongruity is exhibited through the apparently casual way of replacing the face with that of a penguin, thus creating an amusing effect. Similar to the visual communication, Kress also applies the concept of 'modality' to sound, but with a different set of parameters such as pitch, duration variation, dynamics, and fluctuation (van Leeuwen, 1999). The voiceover in this video, like the original speech by Yang Chaoyue, sounds very natural, spontaneous, and emotional. In other words, the presentation is high in naturalistic modality, making the viewer feel that this is the authentic expression of Tencent in response to the incident. The amusing effect of the original video, therefore, is well preserved in the process of remaking. Besides, when the 'penguin' speaks of some punchlines such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph, the video-maker tries to strengthen the effect with compositional arrangements such as using a more excited and wry tone and the laughing scenes from the original video clip (Figure 6).

Figure 5

Figure 6

From a more critical perspective, all the cultural associations drawn upon, the remaking of the narrative, and final presentation of the video combine to achieve the process of 'recontextualisation' (van Leeuwen, 2008) of the legal dispute between Tencent and Lao Gan Ma. Starting from the iconic, cute-looking brand mascot, the brand is basically trying to frame the whole issue as a child story of an innocent penguin who unfortunately ate fake chili paste. Under the veil of an anthropomorphic story, Tencent is actually manipulating the story-telling through processes of deletion and addition (Machin, 2013). While stressing that it is the victim of a fraud, the brand intentionally ignores about the other side of the story, namely the abuse of judicial and administrative power. Nevertheless, this is exactly why Tencent had been attacked for. Besides, the first-person narrative from time to time involves implicit evaluative

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[2] See detailed annotations in the Appendices.

depiction of the brand itself as 'innocent', 'unlucky', 'silly', and 'gullible'. This narrative, the amusing dubbing, the funny ways of editing, and the self-depreciating expressions all contribute to an amusing story in which Tencent is a well-intended company which unfortunately becomes a victim of deception. Thus, the whole thing is transformed into a 'joke' for the sake of people's amusement, which exhibits the entertaining spirit of the brand and assimilates well into the carnivalesque culture of Bilibili. Nevertheless, the severity of the issue is glossed over, and serious discussion over the company's unethical operations (McGuire, 2021) gives way to laughter and emotions.

Exploiting User Participation in the Creation of Brand-related Content and Culture

Mixue Ice Cream & Tea (Mixue hereafter), a Zhengzhou-based chain of ice cream and tea stores, is another brand that has received phenomenal attention on Bilibili as well as other social media platforms. The Internet sensation started with a video released by the brand on June 5, 2021, titled 'Mixue Ice Cream & Tea Theme Song MV: Chinese / English Versions'. The theme song is adapted from a classical American minstrel song first published by Stephen Foster as early as 1848 (Oh! Susanna, 2022). Presumably, this song is chosen to arouse public memories about the melody, because several versions have already existed in China long before this theme song was released, performed either by well-known singers like Jay Chou and Sam Hui or in traditional Cantonese operas (KuGou Music, 2021).

As suggests by the title, this 1-minute-and-43-seconds video is comprised of two parts, one Chinese version and one English version. Based on the joyful and simple-structured melody (Weiboyi, 2021), Mixue created similarly simple lyrics: 'You love me and I love you, Mixue Ice Cream & Tea / I love you and you love me, Mixue Ice Cream & Tea (different melody in the second bar)' which are repeated four times (Chinese-English-Chinese-English). Similar to the two cases analysed above, this music video also features the brand mascots as the participants, this time three lovely-looking Snow Kings in different costumes dancing joyfully to the theme song (Figure 7). These characters are set in an animation background including two noticeable elements: a variety of fruits and Mixue stores (Figure 7). The lyrics 'I love you and you love me' is apparently an address from the Snow Kings to the audience. From an interactive

perspective, the verbal address, the close-ups of the smiling face of the brand mascot (Figure 8), and the soft female voice to create a sense of intimacy between the brands and viewers (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; van Leeuwen, 1999). These representational and interactive elements, in combination, establish the brand's approachable image and strengthens its identity as a specialist in making fruit juices.

Figure 7

Figure 8

This video is a very good illustration of the contribution of *danmu* comments to the overall meaning of the multimodal ensemble on Bilibili. Just as argued earlier, the temporality of *danmu* give users' watching experience a sense of pseudo-simultaneity (Li, 2017). From a compositional perspective (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), the fact that *danmu* is superimposed on the original content makes it sometimes even more salient than the video itself, and its temporality provides *danmu* additional sense of context and relevance because it is usually a direct response to a specific scene in the video (Figure 9). In other words, *danmu* enriches the

meaning and contributes to the appeal of the original video, at the same time enabling mutual influence among viewers. Through the repetition of four times, the brand is presumably trying to create an earworm effect, but its success is a result of the participation of other social media users. For example, at the beginning of each repetition, there are a wave of *danmu* stressing this repetitive process (Plum blooming twice; Hat trick). The other cluster of *danmu* running throughout the video, in a more direct manner, exhibits how people stress their obsession with the song (Watching a hundred million times a day; Addicted to this video). These *danmu* comments, given their repetition and the large space they occupy, provide conscious and subconscious cues that might influence how viewers interpret and experience the video content.

Figure 9

The co-creation of brand-related content and culture doesn't just end here. What really makes this case stand out is the unprecedented enthusiasm of Bilibili users in creating relevant content. Just as a person working for the marketing department of Mixue says in an interview, the company puts special emphasis on encouraging the creation of user-generated content (Guojun & Kamen, 2021). The simple and easy-to-adapt template and the joyful & playful content, which constitute both the semantic and syntactic hooks (Shifman, 2013), pave the way for this video to become a widespread meme across the Internet and give rise to abundant user-generated content surrounding this brand. This strategy is particularly effective on

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[3] See detailed annotations in the Appendices.

Bilibili, as there exist a large group individual content creators (uploaders) who have always been regarded as a key asset of this platform and certain incentive schemes are in place to encourage their creation (Wang *et al*. 2020). Soon after the original video became a hit, Bilibili uploaders began to post different kinds of remakes on the platform. As the search of 'Mixue Ice Cream & Tea Theme Song' indicates (Figure 10), the scope and creativity of the remaking is extraordinary. The bilingual version provides an early inspiration and direction for Bilibili users' remaking, as there exist numerous language versions from common languages such as Russian, French, German to quite unexpected ones such as local dialects and even ancient Egyptian. Moreover, some creators work on quite unexpected adaptations, from changing the music genre (Soviet Union style, Japanese style), the atmosphere (Mixue in ghostly style), to combining it with other cultural or social issues (Mixue and vaccination). Through creating their own new versions of the theme song or engaging in conversation with these uploaders and the wider public, Mixue also plays an active role in driving forward Bilibili users' enthusiasm for recreation (Figure 11). These miscellaneous versions of creative adaptations are linked together by the 'hashtag' and 'recommend' functions, which occupies considerable space on the right and includes a lot of these adaptations (Figure 12). By clicking on these videos, users will be directed to their home page accompanied by a new set of recommended videos with similar hashtags, creating an iterative process and strengthening viewers' impression on Mixue. In the end, through the co-creation and participation from Bilibili users, the promotional campaign of Mixue becomes a cultural phenomenon itself, providing material for endless user participation and recreation, and paves the foundation for further promotional activities of the brand itself including a series of videos titled 'Mixue's theme song is upgraded!' (Mixue Ice Cream & Tea Official Site, n.d.).

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Xinyu Yang

In the process of the co-creation between Mixue and other Bilibili users, the relationship between the brand and their consumers is transformed in several ways. Mixue intends to present itself as an intimate friend of the audience, mainly relying on the cute cartoon characters and repetitive lyrics of 'I love you and you love me'. According to a later explanatory video, the three different Snow Kings represent the brand itself, its staff, and customers respectively (Mixue Ice Cream & Tea Official Site, 2021). Thus, an evaluative undertone is added to the picture presented by the brand, the business, the production side, and the consumption side seem to coexist in a harmonious and 'sweet' manner. Nevertheless, while it is never totally clear whether the real conditions of production are as harmonious as portrayed, at least Mixue's nature as a corporation seeking profit from its customers is missing from the representation. Second, the participation of Bilibili users constitutes a form of 'immaterial labour' (Arvidsson, 2005). In other words, while it seems that Bilibili users are creating Mixue-related content for their own entertainment and relying on its popularity to attract more attention, from the brand's perspective these Bilibili users are actively promoting Mixue's image and influence. By commenting on and giving credit to user-generated adaptations and engaging in conversations with other people, the brand itself is also trying to strengthen the impression that it is an active participant who both seek and contribute entertainment, joy, and carnival in the Bilibili community. However, in the eyes of the marketers all these campaigns are aimed at promoting the brand to a wider audience and create long-lasting emotional bonds (Guojun & Kamen, 2021), and absence from the representation does not mean that the ultimate objective of selling more products and making profit is changed.

Summary and Discussion

The detailed analysis and interpretation of the three cases identify three complex and intriguing ways in which brands interact with the wider culture through their *zhenghuo* communications on Bilibili, and present a critique of these practices against the background of the market society and the cultural atmosphere of Bilibili.

For the first research question, namely how brands draw on existing resources on Bilibili to engage in the interaction with the wider culture, three themes are identified and elaborated. First, some brands choose to draw on trendy content, format or expressions and incorporate these elements into their own content to make it more appealing to the audience. Second, brands may establish anthropomorphic images and narratives, usually with cultural associations, and promote certain messages in a more covert and acceptable manner. Third, brands are increasingly aware of the importance of public participation in the co-creation of brand meaning and culture, and actively encourage and guide the process. While I use three cases to explain these themes respectively, it must be noted that overlaps and combinations of these three are very common. For example, the narrative used in the Tencent video is originally a widely circulated video clip which also belongs to what I consider as 'popular forms of expression' in this dissertation, while in all three cases there exists a central brand mascot around which the video content is produced. Besides, after gaining considerable attention, all these three videos have entered the cultural space of Bilibili and given rise to miscellaneous remakes and other relevant content, which constitute the other side of the 'interaction' between brands and culture.

Although different in emphasis, commonalities can be found among the three identified ways of brand-culture interaction. Most importantly, these themes all exhibit the mutual-influencing, interactive relationship between brands and culture. In other words, brands act as active mediators of cultural meanings (Schroeder, 2009, p. 124). Second, the process of brand communications exemplified by the three cases is always fluid and dynamic. Although brands are active in creating and initiating promotional campaigns, the complexity and diversity of the cultural atmosphere on Bilibili mean that they can never exert absolute control over the

resources, the process, as well as the outcome. Third, the strategies and practices of the selected brands are rooted in Bilibili's unique cultural environment and conventions, such as its entertaining and carnivalesque spirit, the expressions and conventions originating from its ACG culture, and the atmosphere in which grassroot participation and creation are highly encouraged. To some extent, the cultural relevance of these promotional campaigns helps explain their success on the platform.

For the second research question, all three cases exhibit brands' efforts to naturalise and justify the presence and operation of businesses in a market-oriented society, particularly following the logic of content marketing explained in the literature review (Chmielewska, 2016). Instead of trying to present to the audience the quality or advantages of their products or services, these brands mainly focus on establishing themselves as recognised and even outstanding participants in the cultural environment of Bilibili. It is of particular importance to note how the relationship between brands and the other Bilibili users (their potential consumers) is represented. In van Leeuwen's conceptualisation (2008), DingTalk, Tencent, and Mixue all make substantial transformations in the representational process involved in their *zhenghuo* campaigns, particularly through the addition of evaluative elements and the deletion of certain negative aspects. On the one hand, with the help of certain design features, verbal cues, or ways of interaction, these brands are portrayed as approachable, well-intentioned, innocent, and sometimes even a little subservient or ridiculous. The impression that these brands have left on the viewers, on the other hand, stand in contrast to the reality of their operation as revealed by more journalistic or critical accounts (van Dijk, 2014; Chen, 2022; Yuan, 2020; McGuire, 2021). It is exactly the dark side of these businesses that is intentionally glossed over or simply ignored in the recontextualisation process. What these videos intend to convey is that brands are no longer profit-seeking and exploitative organisations whose only goal is to make money from consumers, but instead real friends and sources of entertainment from whom Bilibili users can gain some emotional, symbolic, or cultural value (Chmielewska, 2016). To some extent, the position taken by these brands reflects how they absorb and exhibit the carnivalesque spirit and atmosphere of Bilibili in order to avoid being resisted or ridiculed as

outright imposition of capitalist, hierarchical ideologies (Yin & Fung, 2017). In the process of repositioning, these brands manage to become accepted members and attract considerable attention on Bilibili. In the end, the approachable position and high visibility naturalise and legitimatise their presence and operation.

However, the seemingly harmless participation of brands in Bilibili's cultural space does not mean that any real changes take place in the nature of businesses and their ultimate goal of making profits, perpetuating economic growth, and maintaining the operation of the market economy. The creation of brand-related entertainment content on Bilibili should not be regarded as brands' abandonment of the market logic, but instead a response of businesses to the changing situations in the marketplace to further consolidate their position in society. Ironically, while Bilibili has been a base of subcultural resistance to the mainstream, market-oriented ideologies, this platform is facing the invasion of market forces as its unique cultural expressions are being co-opted and reappropriated by businesses (Yin & Fung, 2017; Slater & Tonkiss, 2013). In the end, this new form of brand communications might even strengthen the influence of market forces on different aspects of society because it helps brands to redefine and consolidate their roles in society, making it harder and harder for them to be evaluated and challenged simply as organisations competing to provide goods and services to meet the needs of consumers in a marketplace. In other words, the cultural and symbolic value and meanings created by these brands around the entertaining content help them 'be buoyant enough to float above and beyond (its) actual practices' (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010: 6).

CONCLUSION

Adopting a social semiotic approach and a conceptual framework inspired by Schroeder's 'brand culture perspective' (2009), this dissertation project investigates how brands interact with the cultural environment of Bilibili through a new form of branded-content communication activities usually described as *zhenghuo*, and how these practices constitute

part of the more general efforts of brands to legitimatise and naturalise their presence and operation in a market society. Based on three typical cases, the findings present three different yet closely related strategies employed by brand managers to achieve the dynamic interaction between brands and culture. These strategies include the adoption of trendy content and format, the use of anthropomorphic mascot and narrative, and the invitation of user participation in creating brand meaning. For all these practices, brands are trying to exploit existing cultural resources, traditions, or associations to increase the appeal and relevance of their content, and the success of these campaigns makes them become part of the popular culture themselves providing resources for further creation and expression of other members within the cultural community. On the other hand, from an ideological and critical perspective, the multimodal ensembles created through interaction between brands and culture have contributed to the establishment of approachable and funny brand images and the portrayal of them as a source of joy and entertainment well assimilated into the cultural community of Bilibili. Nevertheless, their nature as powerful, profit-seeking organisations and the real social relations embedded between businesses and other market actors are intentionally glossed over or ignored in the 'recontextualisation' that takes place in the process of representation (Chmielewska, 2016; van Leeuwen, 2008). Therefore, this new form of brand communications on Bilibili can be regarded as a reappropriation of the unique cultural expressions on this platform by market forces (Slater & Tonkiss, 2013). Ultimately, the cultural and symbolic value created by these brands provide additional legitimacy and defence for their presence and operation in society (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010).

The theoretical value of this dissertation lies in the fact that, based on a brand culture perspective (Schroeder, 2009), it formulates and implements a conceptual framework which incorporates the more concrete processes of brand interacting with the wider culture and the ideological critique of branding's implicit influence on society. Besides, the choice of *zhenghuo* on Bilibili in this study also contributes to filling the gap in academic literature on this emerging and complex Chinese video platform, especially the study of promotional activities. Methodologically speaking, this study attests to the suitability and potential of the social

semiotic approach in analysing the increasingly diverse and multimodal digital landscape, while exhibiting how a descriptive multimodal framework can be made more critical when combined with knowledge from other social sciences (Machin, 2013). Finally, although this dissertation is intended to go beyond the traditional managerial approach to brand communications, the results do provide some useful insight which may be valuable to branding practitioners.

As mentioned in the methodological chapter, this study is a qualitative investigation based on a very limited number of cases. Therefore, I do not intend to present any general or objective conclusions about this topic. Instead, by looking closely at three popular and representative brands, I am trying to examine the details of how the dynamics between brands and culture play out in these specific cases and hope the results can inform or inspire future researchers interested in this topic. For future studies, considering the brand-oriented and text-based nature of this study, the response to and reception of these brand communication campaigns are far from fully explored. Undoubtedly, a research project in that direction, such as using interview or survey to evaluate Bilibili users' reaction to these campaigns, will also yield meaningful and thought-provoking findings. Besides, a project of larger scale which includes dozens or even hundreds of cases might be conducted, so that a more general picture of brand communications on Bilibili can be presented.

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APPENDICES

1. URL for Audio-visual Material

DingTalk. (2020) 【钉钉本钉，在线求饶】 [The Very DingTalk, Begging for Mercy Online] [Video], *Bilibili*,

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https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1K7411E7Zm?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=bbaf285924cd846a

35b2c2092b1355d8 [14 August 2022].

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5b2c2092b1355d8 [14 August 2022]

Mixue Ice Cream & Tea Official Site. (2021) 蜜雪冰城主题曲 MV 中英双语版[Mixue Ice Cream & Tea Theme

Song MV: Chinese / English Versions] [Video], *Bilibili*, June 5, URL:

https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1wv41157Rr?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=bbaf285924cd846a3

5b2c2092b1355d8 [14 August 2022].

2. Image Stills with Annotations

Figure 3

This screenshot comes from DingTalk's video 'The Very DingTalk, Begging for Mercy Online'. This multimodal ensemble can be divided into three parts: the screenshot of user comments in the app store on the left, the animation around Dingsanduo on the right side, and danmu comments floating above the video. All of the users in the screenshot on the left side, as introduced in the main text, only give one star out of five to add ironic comments to show their discontent with this platform. For example, the comment underlined in purple says: 'Can I just give half a star? It is such a good software that I have a pleasant winter holiday'. On the right side is the brand mascot Dingsanduo kneeling on the ground and looking at the viewers in tears. The blue Chinese characters around the brand mascot, read clockwise, mean 'Young heroes, please show your kindness. Can't afford the loss of receiving five stars in instalments'. The portrayal of the cartoon character and the verbal address, from an interactive perspective, position the brand as humble and submissive. The damnu comments, in the end, provide very rich information about people's reception of this video. One kind of danmu that appears frequently is 'disobedient son' (underlined in red), which shows some users' acceptance of the imaginary relationship between them and the brand. Besides, interestingly, some people are more sceptical and mention issues such as dataveillance: 'Why is the camera switched on automatically' (underlined in blue).

Figure 5

This picture comes from Tencent's 'I am the Silly Penguin Who Ate the Fake Chili Paste'. In line with the title, the video producer uses the penguin head to replace the original face of Yang Chaoyue. The penguin, which is the most iconic character of this company, is winking at the audience to look more approachable. The casualty and unnaturalness of the video-editing as shown in this picture creates a sense of incongruity which adds to the overall amusing effect. Around the time of this screenshot, the character is speaking of the most well-known

punchline coming from the original video clip of the farewell ceremony: 'I am good at nothing but always the best in quarreling with the boss'. In this remake 'quarreling with the boss' is changed to 'eating chili paste', echoing the theme of this adaptation video. Interestingly, the logo pixelated on the top right corner belongs to Tencent Video, a subsidiary of Tencent's immense business, which to some extent reveals the huge influence of Tencent and stands in contrast to the innocent image it is intended to present in this video.

Figure 9

This screenshot is taken when the video 'Mixue Ice Cream & Tea Theme Song MV, Chinese / English Versions' enters its third round of repetition. The background is filled with oranges, and with other fruits that appear at different times throughout the video, strengthens the brand's identity as a provider of fruit juices. In the middle of this picture is a close-up of the 'Snow King' making a hand heart at the audience, which from an interactive perspective strengthens the intimacy between the Snow King and the viewers. Appearing on the screen are a variety of damnu comments centring around the message of 'three', including some football terminologies such as 'plum blooming three times' and 'hat trick' (some selected and underlined in blue by me). Besides, some users leave danmu which stresses how strong the earworm effect is, such as 'I are going to watch a hundred million times' and 'help, I am obsessed' (underlined in purple). These danmu comments, scrolling across the screen at a noticeable position, provide additional meanings to the video itself and might strengthen viewers' impression on its repetitiveness.

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