

The Research on the Popularity of Ding Zhen, a Young Chinese Ethnic Minority Man, and Reasons and Effects of His Negative Online Memes Fascination

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Abstract. In 2020, Ding Zhen, a Tibetan youth in China, became popular on the Internet for a short video, and after he became popular and received strong support from the official media, his popularity declined due to the exposure of his earlier smoking video, and there were even many memes made based on his shortcomings that contained flirtatious and ironic meanings. This paper adopts the method of questionnaire survey and study of past literature to come up with the reasons for the popularity of Ding Zhen and its memes appearing and being spread and the influence of these memes being spread. Reasons are: First, the rebellion against the mainstream narrative to create a perfect public image for Ding Zhen; Second, the role of the pan-entertainment deconstruction and the Internet carnival phenomenon. In terms of impact, the paper argues that these online obsessions can intensify gender antagonism in cyberspace, contribute to the trend of pan-entertainment on social platforms, and adversely affect the outreach of China's minority policies.

Keywords: Ding Zhen, Carnival Theory, Memes, communication.

1. Introduction

On November 11, 2020, Ding Zhen, a young Tibetan villager from Litang County, became popular on online platforms with a short video of him standing in front of a horse, walking from afar and smiling. Without the support of any team or capital operation, Ding Zhen and his smile went viral on Chinese social online platforms, and the phrase "Sweet Wildness" was coined to describe Ding Zhen's wild Tibetan handsomeness.

The number of followers on Ding Zhen's personal social media accounts also grew qualitatively almost overnight. After Ding Zhen became popular on the internet, Litang City Enterprise Cultural Tourism Investment Development Company quickly stepped in and signed a contract with Ding Zhen on November 17. With the local team leading the subsequent promotion, on November 25, the short video "Ding Zhen's World" was launched, which was about Ding Zhen's daily life. Two days after the video was released, through transmitting the video, the CCTV and many mainstream media pushed Ding Zhen to the center of public opinion. Later on, Ding Zhen's popularity has been further boosted by the fact that he was invited to deliver a speech to the United Nations, highlighting the Chinese government's active ethnic policy and the good life of the minority people in the nation.

However, Ding Zhen's popularity did not lead himself to a absolute brighter future. The Internet's acceleration of media communication caused problems for Ding Zhen's public impression shaped by the mainstream media. As a video of Ding Zhen smoking and making indecent gestures in his early years spread on the Internet, negative comments about Ding Zhen gradually appeared in the view of the audience: low education level, bad smoking habits and rude behaviors. The public opinion was gradually divided from the initial positive view of Ding Zhen. Some argue that whether Ding Zhen smokes or not does not affect the economic growth and tourism dividends he brings to his hometown of Litang, of course, there are also many opinions that question Ding Zhen's popularity on the internet and his status as an employee of a state-owned enterprise based on his appearance alone, for becoming an employee of a state-owned enterprise needs to pass severe competition and tests in China. An even larger group of people (mostly men) started a cyberspace carnival around Ding Zhen's substandard mandarin, smoking, and low literacy level, as a result of this carnival, various Ding Zhen-related

internet memes went viral in specific online communities. Most of the participants involved in this carnival are predominantly male, and most of them disagree with the accidental popularity of Ding Zhen and the joint efforts of multiple parties to build Ding Zhen into an IP. This group continues to create online obsessions related to Ding Zhen and is in opposition to the group that supports Ding Zhen's popularity (mostly women). It is worth mentioning that after Ding Zhen's smoking video went viral online, the official media that promoted Ding Zhen's IP started to become ambiguous in their attitude toward Ding Zhen after stating their position that they would guide Ding Zhen to receive a good education and continue to contribute to the cause of tourism and the dissemination of ethnic culture, and it was rare to see the official media follow up on it.

2. Literature Review

In a 2021 study, Wang and Lu analyzed the conditions for Ding Zhen's popularity [1]. The article argues that Ding Zhen's audience mostly finds a "satisfaction" with him and the specific cultural characteristics he carries, and that this satisfaction is an important reason why content related to Ding Zhen has spread so quickly in cyberspace. This connection is an important reason why content related to Ding Zhen has spread so quickly in cyberspace. Since Ding Zhen comes from Litang County, a high-altitude county in western China, the content contains many natural beauties that are not found in urban life, satisfying people's symbolic imagination for the pursuit of a simple and pure spiritual world, and carrying the symbolic desire to escape from the busy urban life. In addition, with the mainstream aesthetic pursuit of fair skin and lean body, the traditional sense of "handsome" is becoming more and more homogeneous, so urban people will seek a different kind of handsome, and Ding Zhen's dark and rough skin, natural and innocent smile just meet the needs of urban audiences. A sense of caring is another important connection, as the audience gave Ding Zhen a large number of books after learning that his Chinese language and culture are relatively weak. This reflects that netizens' symbolic imagination of local culture is "simple" and "beautiful". Sixth, Ding Zhen himself carries the symbolic imagination of a "paradise". It takes half a day to drive from the county town to the Gaiye Snow Mountain site, which is a challenge to age and physical condition, and this almost pilgrim-like trip reinforces the sense of a paradise. To sum up, Ding Zhen's own qualities have successfully created a connection with the audience, and through this connection, a beautiful IP image has been built around the content related to Ding Zhen, and this is the reason why the content related to Ding Zhen has spread rapidly.

In addition to Ding Zhen's own conditions, the popularity of Ding Zhen is also attributed to the official media and the public. In a 2021 study, researchers suggest that Ding Zhen's ethnic minority status and her location in a poor county that had just escaped poverty were captured by the official media and used as a model to promote the Chinese government's open ethnic policy and poverty eradication achievements. Ding Zhen's infectious smile can be imbued with happiness and contentment, reflecting the satisfaction and support of the government's policies by the ethnic minority groups and people who have escaped poverty [2].

As Ding Zhen continues to become popular and obtains the status of an employee of a state-owned enterprise, opposition to Ding Zhen's access to countless resources based on his appearance never ceases, until it intensifies, and some netizens seize on Ding Zhen's non-standard Mandarin and his early smoking habit to create a series of online memes and emoji, sarcastically trolling Ding Zhen and even becoming a community culture. It has even become a community culture. A 2021 communication paper analyzes Ding Zhen's popularity in the context of carnival theory, and this analysis is also applicable to Ding Zhen's reputation crisis. The article points out that carnival theory was proposed by Soviet thinker Mikhail Bakhtin as a general term for the concepts of "carnival style" and "carnivalization" derived from "carnival" [3].

The term carnival theory was originally used in literary and artistic criticism but is also applicable to the interpretation of many social propositions, especially the study of communication phenomena in the Internet age. The term carnival theory has not been used for a long time in the field of

communication, but in the virtual world created by the Internet, carnival theory has become an applicable theoretical tool for interpreting many contemporary communication phenomena. As Bakhtin says, "Laughter at a carnival is also dual in nature: it is joyful and exciting, but also ridiculing and cynical, it is both negative and affirmative, buried and regenerated" [4].

Carnival theory can still explain other details of the Ding Zhen incident. According to one paper, when carnival sentiment has become the dominant discourse in various online and even offline spaces, those outside the circle who continue to decode the event in an adversarial manner become "minority opinion holders. In Ding Zhen's case, the group supporting Ding Zhen will cite "jealousy," "male hatred," "inferiority of ugly men," or even "inciting ethnic antagonism. In Ding Zhen's case, the pro-Ding Zhen group attacked netizens who held opposing views on the phenomenon of Ding Zhen's popularity based on his facial features with gender-oppositional and nationalistic phrases such as "inciting ethnic rivalry", causing that group to fall into a "spiral of silence". At the same time, the group that disagrees with Ding Zhen's popularity may also consider the group that has a favorable opinion of Ding Zhen to be superficial, worldly, and even male pandering. This is the result of the intense revelry of youth groups releasing their long-accumulated gender emotions [5].

It is worth noting that men make up the majority of those who attack Ding Zhen. A study on gender also suggests a new entry point for this phenomenon. Ding Zhen is positively praised and affirmed by the media and most women but has also become the public enemy of a new generation of men. Behind this is a judgment of appearance: in the eyes of some men, Ding Zhen's "face" is the only way to get ahead, and it makes no sense.

From the online voting to the teasing and negative insults about Ding Zhen through words and pictures, it shows that Ding Zhen has finally caused some men's anxiety about their appearance. The company's newest product, Ding Zhen, is a new product that will be available in the marketplace. Ding Zhen broke the male group's perception of the female "dream girl". Netizens all but ignore the characteristics of Tibetans living on the plateau and move out of the stereotypical color discrimination. Ding Zhen's appearance made some men feel the "female gaze" like never before, which made them feel extremely uncomfortable as they were used to being in a top-down perspective. This made them feel extremely uncomfortable [3].

The "no-footing" order during the outbreak significantly increased the length of social media use, and the "information anxiety" caused by the uncertainty of the Newcastle pneumonia epidemic, the "always-on" status is continuing. The "always-on" status is continuing and becoming the norm for social media users. At the same time, new media platforms are also experiencing significant growth, but they are generally adopting a "big-screen viewing, small-screen searching and sharing news" media usage model, with traffic on the Internet and social platforms increasing in tandem. Home isolation policies have made global social media the primary information channel for Internet users to connect with the outside world, and the Newcastle pneumonia outbreak was the first global pandemic in the social media era. During the outbreak, the average American spent more than nine hours a day online. While 58% of Americans still followed national and local news media coverage of the outbreak, social media platforms were the primary source of information for 48% of 18–29 years old and 40% of 30–49 years old, meaning that social media platforms became the new mainstream media that middle-aged Americans relied on during the "fight against the epidemic. This means that social media platforms have become the new mainstream media that middle-aged Americans rely on during the "fight against the epidemic. Specifically, according to an online survey conducted by Statista, a global data portal, among Internet users aged 16 to 64, nearly half of them have increased their use of social media such as Facebook, Photo Wall and Twitter since the outbreak began in Europe and the United States, and these social media platforms have increasingly become a major growth area for the advertising market. Dingzhen exploded in popularity in the second year of the epidemic, and based on the above literature analysis, the viral spread of Dingzhen may also be related to the fact that the epidemic pandemic led people to spend more time in cyberspace [3, 6].

Although there are many scholars working in this field, few scholars/articles have studied the Internet obsessions related to Ding Zhen. In some forums and social groups, such as "Cheese snow

leopard", "mom's e-cigar", "snow leopard shut The Internet memes related to Ding Zhen's flirtatious insults is quietly gaining popularity and is even becoming a subculture. This area and the related fandoms are worth studying. This paper will explore the reasons for Ding Zhen's popularity and criticism, as well as the reasons for the creation and popularity of related Internet memes through questionnaires and analysis of previous studies.

3. Methodology

This paper will conduct a communication analysis of Ding Zhen's popularity and the online frenzy that some groups launched at a later stage using his negative image. A questionnaire based on private communities and social media platforms is given out, discuss the reasons behind the polarization between Ding Zhen's popularity at the early stage and the public opinion of certain groups at the later stage, and suggest possible approaches to the public's perception of him, also suggests possible methodologies and recommendations for maintaining personal IP. The questionnaire consisted of 13 questions and was created and released on Tencent's questionnaire platform under the title of "Communication Survey on Ding Zhen's Popularity and its Current Situation". The questionnaire was distributed for one week, and 74 questionnaires were collected, all of which were valid.

4. Results

Regarding the basic information of the subjects, out of the 74 people who filled out the questionnaire, 53.42% were female and 46.58% were male. 98.63% of the subjects were aged 18-25 years old, and only 1.37% were under 18 years old. All subjects had university (enrolled) and higher (master's and doctoral) levels of education.

The first part of the questionnaire focused on the public's impression of Ding Zhen's popularity. In response to the question "Do you know Ding Zhen, a young man from Litang," the largest number of people (54.79%) chose "Yes, but only passively", 8.22% chose "Very much", and 31.51% chose "Very much". "2.74% of the respondents chose "only know basic background information", which is similar to the number of respondents who chose "not very much". This is the same as the number of subjects who chose "don't know much". This indicates that Ding Zhen is well known among the subjects.

When asked about Ding Zhen's popularity through a video because of his unique charm as a member of a minority group, 36.99% of the respondents supported Ding Zhen's popularity through his handsomeness. 15.7% of the respondents opposed this idea, while the rest were neutral.

In response to the question, "What do you think about Ding Zhen's becoming popular and signing a contract with a state-owned enterprise and giving a speech at the United Nations on behalf of his country," 32.68% of the respondents chose to support the idea, saying that Ding Zhen's popularity has objectively boosted local economic development, which he deserves. 12.87% of the respondents thought that Ding Zhen's popularity is a good reason for him to become popular. 3.96% of the respondents thought that Ding Zhen was nothing but handsome and 19.8% thought that Ding Zhen's move was a desecration of the hard work of hardworking people.

In response to the question, "After becoming popular, Ding Zhen was thrown into the limelight because of his smoking video and indecent gesture video, what is your opinion of Ding Zhen as a public figure?" 30.11% of the respondents think that this is not a matter of principle and can be forgiven. 25.81% of the respondents do not think that the accusation of smoking and indecent gestures is unwarranted because they do not think they can cause any bad influence. 13.98% of the respondents think that Ding Zhen's media exposure should be reduced to avoid negative influence. 5.37% of the respondents think that Ding Zhen should be banned immediately.

When it comes to Ding Zhen's current situation, 12.33% of the respondents continue to pay attention to him, 41.1% say they do not know much about him but will collect information, 45.2% say they no longer pay attention, and 1.37% will actively avoid information.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on the flirtatious and offensive Internet obsessions related to Ding Zhen.

Nearly 60 percent of the respondents answered, "don't know much" and "don't know at all" about these obsessions, and among those who chose to know about them, the majority (20.55%) chose "know about them and use them only in certain communities" and 15.07% chose "know about them but rarely use them". Only 5.48% of the subjects indicated that they were aware of and happy to use these junkies. The majority of those who were happy to use them did so in a "community of people who understand the meaning of these junkies and have similar attitudes toward Ding Zhen," with a small number using them on male-dominated mass media platforms.

When attributing the production of these memes, 6.8% candidates believes that this phenomenon is "Revenge and attack of those who are dissatisfied with Ding Zhen's popularity". 28.7% candidate chose "Group unconscious behavior under the effect of Internet carnival: just for entertainment, regardless of correctness and seriousness". 12.2% candidates believe that "These memes themselves evoke empathy in certain groups, so they spread within their own cliques". 45.9% believe that this situation is the inevitable result of the deconstruction of entertainment.

Based on these statistics, a cross-sectional analysis of the results led to the following three conclusions.

Nearly 85% of the female subjects selected at least one option related to supporting Ding Zhen's popularity/don't think Ding Zhen should be attacked and flirted with. Males who completed the questionnaire showed a more pronounced split in their attitudes toward Ding Zhen than female subjects, with nearly 24% of male subjects selecting at least one option related to supporting Ding Zhen's popularity/don't think Ding Zhen should be attacked or flirted with. In addition, the majority of women (74.17%) were not aware of the online obsessions associated with Ding Zhen, while nearly 75% of male subjects chose to be aware of these obsessions.

Those who had a favorable impression of Ding Zhen avoided using his related Internet obsessions and did not even actively learn about them. In contrast, the vast majority of subjects who were aware of and happy to use/use Ding Zhen's memes in a particular community chose at least one option related to not supporting Ding Zhen's popularity/thinking Ding Zhen's media exposure should be limited/having a negative attitude toward Ding Zhen's popularity.

In terms of attributing the cause of the fandom, most of the participants (75.6%) chose the inevitable result of Ding Zhen's popularity being deconstructed by entertainment and the unconscious behavior of the group under the effect of the Internet carnival: just for entertainment, not caring about correctness and seriousness.

5. Discussion: The causes and effects of the emergence of internet memes related to Ding Zhen

Based on Ding Zhen's non-standard Mandarin, some netizens who are dissatisfied with Ding Zhen's popularity have created a series of online memes related to him. These include "Cheese snow leopard", "Nicotine Ding Zhen", "glimpse Ding Zhen", and so on. Most of these memes involve flirtations and attacks on Ding Zhen's personal characteristics. This is mainly due to Ding Zhen's speech at the United Nations, where he introduced the animals of his hometown and pronounced "this is a snow leopard" like "Cheese snow leopard" because of his poor Mandarin. The phrase "this is a snow leopard" sounded like "Cheese snow leopard". Later, it was secondly spread by people and became a relatively widespread myth related to Ding Zhen.

Through the questionnaire survey and the study of related academic materials, this paper summarizes two reasons for the formation of the mythology in the perspective of communication.

First, Resistance to the mainstream narrative of creating a perfect public image for Ding Zhen. Ding Zhen's popularity is not only due to his handsome face, but also due to the promotion of the official media, which is a key reason. It is the best model for foreign propaganda as it can be used to promote the happy life of the people in China's minority regions, highlight the enlightenment and success of China's minority policy, and counter the Western media that discredit China's minority policy. Ding Zhen's subsequent signings with state-owned enterprises and speeches at the United Nations were also a result of official will and effort. This reflects a rebellion by some people against the mainstream narrative of Ding Zhen's propaganda - the real face of an officially glorified public figure (often in contrast to his public image). This reflects the rebellion of some people against the mainstream narrative's strong propaganda against Ding Zhen - to show the real face of a public figure who has been glorified by the government (often in contrast to his negative public image), and to entertain him vigorously in order to tease and degrade the public image processed by the mainstream narrative.

Second, it is about pan-entertainment deconstruction and online carnival. Nowadays, with the maturity of 5G network and integrated media technology, any social event that attracts enough attention may face the situation of pan-entertainment deconstruction. The concept of "pan-entertainment" can be understood in its literal sense as the proliferation of entertainment, or as excessive entertainment. In other words, it means that entertainment has become a phenomenon that can be seen everywhere in this world. In terms of the characterization of pan-entertainment, Yan Zhibin scholar believes that pan-entertainment is the over-entertainment of the content and form of performance with music as the benchmark [7]. In other words, pan-entertainment is a phenomenon that helps people achieve mental pleasure by some means such as vulgarity and spoofing. In the characterization of pan-entertainment, it depends on whether its content is in line with morality and law and whether it is in line with correct social values, so as to measure whether it is pan-entertainment. The causes of the phenomenon of pan-entertainment deconstruction can be attributed to the gradual transfer of the main right of communication from the media or opinion leaders to the public, the growing desire of the audience for self-expression, and the profit-seeking nature of the media and the pursuit of capital [8].

The fact that the memes related to Ding Zhen has become popular in certain communities is also clearly due to the deconstruction of pan-entertainment. The cost and threshold for producing memes are relatively low, and the audience of Ding Zhen and its related content has the desire to interpret and disseminate the received content twice within a specific community. In today's society, the pace is gradually accelerating, and people's pressure is gradually increasing. After work and study, audiences want to be exposed to relaxing things to relieve themselves and their stress. In addition, audience curiosity, prying and curiosity can lead them to be curious about pan-entertainment information, and a study shows that audiences have the psychology of seeking new and different things and the psychology of entertainment and relaxation when facing the online media [9], which makes them pay more attention to the content of pan-entertainment information.

On another level, the "inside joke" characteristic of Ding Zhen-related online memes has gradually emerged after it has triggered a specific community's online frenzy. In addition to curiosity and entertainment purposes, the content of Ding Zhen is more socially relevant to some young people today. The questionnaire indicated that a significant proportion of the subjects tended to use these online junkies within a specific group of people who were familiar with the junkies. For this group, Ding Zhen-related memes represents resistance to mainstream narratives, negative attitudes toward Ding Zhen, and even a generalized spirit of entertainment, and the use of unique memes such as "Cheese snow leopard" can, to a certain extent, quickly pinpoint whether the other person by using "Cheese snow leopard", people can quickly locate whether the other party has similar ideas and interests and achieve identity and community recognition on the social platform.

While Ding Zhen-related memes has become popular in cyberspace, it has also brought about some negative effects, specifically three.

Firstly, intensifying the gender dichotomy on this issue: Through the previous questionnaire analysis and research literature review, it is clear that men and women have relatively conflicting opinions on this issue, and the gender composition of the group that is willing to use these memes is mostly composed of people who self-perceive their gender as male. On social media, women who support and like Ding Zhen are angered by the negative attitudes of men and the online memes that attacks Ding Zhen, and they insult and abuse the men who attack Ding Zhen while defending Ding Zhen's public image. In turn, the male group attacking Ding Zhen will counterattack by spreading and producing online memes that makes fun of and insults Ding Zhen. As a result, the confrontation between the two genders on the issue of Ding Zhen continues to be planned, which eventually leads to the further intensification of gender confrontation separate from the issue itself.

Secondly, Ding Zhen, as a public figure used as a sample for outreach by the official media, has experienced such a high intensity of pan-entertainment deconstruction, which shows the seriousness of the current pan-entertainment culture on the Internet. Under the status quo of social media pan-entertainment, the shallow content of pan-entertainment continues to corrode the audience's ability to think rationally, so that users lack the patience to think rationally about social media information, and there are also extremes of emotions and irrational judgments of emotions before facts. When a certain social hotspot event occurs, netizens are often reduced in their ability to think rationally by the entire social media environment and engage in either/or dichotomous thinking [10].

Lastly, Negative impact on the foreign propaganda of China's ethnic minority policy: Ding Zhen's public image is quite extremely cut off from its pan-entertainment fan-factor on domestic social media platforms, and the public figure who is officially further promoted as the result of ethnic exchange and enlightened ethnic policy is at the same time suffering from a lot of flirtation, denigration and even insult, which has a great impact on the This has a great negative effect on the credibility of the foreign ethnic policy propaganda work.

6. Conclusion

This paper explores the reasons for Ding Zhen's popularity and criticism, as well as the reasons for the creation and popularity of his related Internet fandom, by distributing questionnaires and analyzing past research. After analyzing the questionnaire data, three results were obtained: First, gender influences the public's perception of Ding Zhen; Second, the group that has a favorable impression of Ding Zhen avoids using the Internet memes associated with him and does not even actively learn about it. In contrast, the vast majority of subjects who were aware of and happy to use/use Ding Zhen's memes in a particular community chose at least one option related to not supporting Ding Zhen's popularity/believing that Ding Zhen's media exposure should be limited/having a negative attitude toward Ding Zhen's popularity. Lastly, when attributing the creation of memes, the majority of subjects (75.6%) chose Ding Zhen's popularity.) chose the option of the inevitable result of Ding Zhen's popularity being deconstructed by entertainment and the unconscious behavior of the group under the effect of the Internet carnival: just for entertainment, not caring about correctness and seriousness. Additionally, in exploring the causes and effects of the emergence of Ding Zhen-related Internet fanfic, this paper concluded that there are two reasons: First, the rebellion against the mainstream narrative to create a perfect public image for Ding Zhen; Second, the role of the pan-entertainment deconstruction and the Internet carnival phenomenon. In terms of impact, the paper argues that these online obsessions can intensify gender antagonism in cyberspace, contribute to the trend of pan-entertainment on social platforms, and adversely affect the outreach of China's minority policies.

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