

Constructing Cultural Identity on Douyin: A Thematic Analysis of 1249 Short Videos from Nujiang, China

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Abstract

Social media platforms serve as structures for constructing cultural identity in various countries, including China. Douyin is the Chinese version of the TikTok platform, where the TikTok platform is a tactic for ethnic minority representation in China. Cultural identity is represented differently in offline and online contexts, particularly within social media environments, as Douyin allows for unique expressions and interactions that reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds of its users. This study aims to explain how cultural identity is constructed on Douyin of ethnic minorities in the Nujiang Region of Yunnan, China, by thematic analysis. The amount of 1249 short videos were collected to examine the strategies used to establish cultural identity. The findings show that the most prominent categories are presented on the Douyin platform are lifestyles and local practices (36.60%), ethnic traditions and customs (29.80%) and natural environment and geography (17.90%). These results suggest that cultural identity on Douyin is primarily constructed through representations of everyday lifestyles, ethnic traditions, and the natural environment. The uneven distribution of themes indicates that cultural identity on the platform does not fully reflect social reality, but rather highlights particular aspects of ethnic minority culture. Overall, the findings demonstrate that cultural identity on Douyin is not merely expressed, but actively constructed through selective representational practices.

Keywords: cultural identity, Douyin, ethnic minority, social media, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Greater internet access in rural China has made it easier for people to communicate. Rural minority residents now use both online platforms and face-to-face interactions, which in turn, influences cultural communication and identity (Peng, 2023; Miller & Slater, 2020; Zhang, 2019; Zhu & Gao, 2019). However, opportunities to express and share cultural identity remain limited. Consequently, ethnic minorities often have less independence in representing their cultures, which can lead to a sense of marginalisation and hinder the preservation of their cultural heritage (Zhu, 2023; Liang, 2021). Multicultural countries, including China, face challenges due to limited understanding of minority cultures, languages, and communication styles (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2019; Jenkins, 2018). With fewer spaces for expression, some ethnic minorities risk losing aspects of their culture, language, and history and may struggle to develop and adapt (Shnirelman, 2022; Andrew, 2017). Limited opportunities for communication can also lead to a loss of uniqueness among these groups, as they may become more homogenised and less able to preserve their distinct cultural identities (Mathews, 2023; Guo & Zhang, 2017). Therefore, social media, the internet, modern technology, and a globalised lifestyle may help address these issues.

1.2 Explore Importance of the Problem

Social media and other online platforms have become important spaces for sharing, communicating, and disseminating information (Baym, 2015; Lindgren, 2021; McStay, 2017). Social media can overcome misunderstandings among ethnic minorities, expand communication channels, maintain their uniqueness, and strengthen their presence in the country by providing a platform for cultural expression and facilitating dialogue among diverse groups (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Zhu, 2021). Scholars have stated that digital and social media platforms have a stronger influence on representing cultural identity than mass or traditional media (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Zhu, 2021; Jenkins, 2018). Social media can also convey information that represents cultural identity and enhance understanding of ethnic minorities, such as by providing platforms for their voices and stories, which are often under-represented in traditional media (Dhoest, 2015; Liang, 2021). To

address these challenges, this study aims to apply thematic analysis to explain the opportunity to construct cultural identity in the case study of cultural identity representation on Douyin among ethnic minority social media content in Nujiang, China. The study aims to answer the following research question (a): What theme categories do ethnic minorities in Nujiang, China, use to share on the Douyin platform? (b) How do the theme categories create cultural identity for ethnic minorities in Nujiang, China?

1.3 Literature Review

Cultural identity representation is the use of language to express ideas and emotions in a cultural context (Hall 2013). Language, signs, and images express the meaning of culture, and representation is essential in the exchange among people in culture (Hall, 1997; Saussure, 2011). Furthermore, as it allows individuals to share their cultural experiences and perspectives, fostering understanding and connection within diverse communities. Culture has traditionally been associated with what Arnold (1869/2006, p. 5) describes as “the best that has been thought and said,” referring to literature, art, and philosophy as expressions of high culture. However, later cultural theorists have expanded this definition to include everyday practices and meanings embedded in social life (Yates, 2022; Williams, 1976). Thus, the combination of art, elite knowledge, and everyday life can be referred to as culture (Anamik, 2021; Berry & Triandis, 2006). Cultural identity relates to ethnicity, language, religion, and social context and is a complex, flexible concept (Wang, 2023; Katan & Taibi, 2021). Cultural identity representation appears across multicultural contexts and digital spaces; cultural identity includes both (Papacharissi, 2002). Social media links between public and private users offer an opportunity to express identity (Turkle, 2017), allowing individuals to showcase their cultural backgrounds and connect with others who share similar experiences. The rise of social media has created opportunities for individuals from marginalized or dispersed groups to maintain and share the uniqueness and cultural identity of their groups (Gilroy, 2022; Sun, 2016; Hao, 2023).

In addition, three main determinants of cultural change and identity among ethnic minorities are diversity, complexity, and media power (Sun & Qian 2020). Social media technology has a strong impact on national culture and cultural identity, and it raises issues related to the promotion of traditional cultures, such as the potential for both preserving and diluting these cultures in the face of globalization (Huang & Ye, 2024; Wu, 2023; Wang, 2017). Several studies confirmed that a critical perspective on the relationship between ethnicity and cultural identity is presented through social media (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014; Sun & Duan, 2024). Social media contribute to the development of cultural traditions, highlight local cultural identity, and maintain ethnic and community identity among minorities. Meanwhile, this research highlights that social media impacts ethnic cultural identity (Huang, 2024; Wu, 2023; Zhu, 2018). Miao (2022) and Qu et al. (2021) found that content about ethnic minorities in online media can explain and promote the expression, emotion, and motivational intent of ethnic minorities in Yunnan, China, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their cultural identity in the context of social media's broader impact on ethnic cultural identity. Therefore, online media is a new technology that creates multidimensional cultural identity for ethnic minorities and provides more space to showcase their cultural identity.

Short-video platforms such as Douyin do not simply host cultural content; they also shape what becomes visible and circulable in digital environments (Seifullina et al., 2024; Yao, 2008; Lo, 2016). Existing research shows that platform affordances structure content production through visibility, engagement, and algorithmic distribution, encouraging creators to present material in brief, recognisable, and visually compelling forms (Abidin, 2016, 2021). Research on ethnicity-related content further suggests that Douyin actively shapes how minzu identity is presented and perceived online (Hao, 2025; McKenzie, 2025), influencing the narratives and representations that emerge, which can either reinforce stereotypes or promote diverse cultural expressions (Battista, 2023). From this perspective, digital visibility on Douyin is not neutral but part of the process through which cultural identity is framed and made legible in platformed environments.

However, it is worth noting that TikTok, as the international version of Douyin, has received widespread attention from researchers. Existing research shows that while Douyin and TikTok use similar technologies—especially algorithms that control what content is shown, short-form videos, and user participation—their social and cultural roles differ significantly depending on context. TikTok is mainly seen as a platform for entertainment and emotional connection. However, it also mixes popular culture with political messages. Personalization, emotional appeal, and “pop politics” change how audiences take part (Battista, 2023). In contrast, studies on Douyin highlight how it fits into China’s social and political environment (Li et al., 2026; Liu, 2024). Algorithms and monitoring control what content is visible and influence how cultural and ethnic identities are created and discussed (Hao, 2025).

Building on this distinction, Douyin is not just a place for entertainment or copying performances (Kennedy, 2020). It is also a platform where cultural expression is intertwined with business goals and broader social and political narratives, including how national and ethnic identity is portrayed (Schouten et al., 2021; Liu, 2024). In contrast, TikTok’s global environment favors content that is less tied to specific contexts, more diverse, and focused on entertainment. On TikTok, identity is more flexible but less clearly tied to formal institutions or political ideas (Cervi, 2021; Battista, 2023).

Existing studies have highlighted TikTok as a key platform for youth engagement, particularly among Generation Z, where participation is shaped by visual, mobile, and algorithm-driven communication environments (McCashin &

Murphy, 2023). Burns-Stanning (2020), Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023), and Gitomer et al. (2026) further argue that TikTok provides a “third space” for youth to negotiate identity and engage in civic or political participation, where social interaction, identity performance, and networked visibility collectively shape forms of engagement. Researchers demonstrate that youth engagement on TikTok is structured by platform affordances such as remix and lip-syncing, through which users simultaneously negotiate personal expression and collective participation in the circulation of networked content (Zulli and Zulli, 2022; Cervi, 2021).

While existing studies emphasize youth engagement on TikTok as a form of personalized expression and identity performance shaped by platform affordances, this study suggests that such engagement takes on a different configuration in the Chinese context. Rather than being primarily oriented toward individualized or decontextualized self-expression, participation on Douyin is often embedded within broader socio-economic and developmental frameworks (Zhang, 2020; Yu, 2024). Moreover, as observed among rural content creators and returning youth, social media engagement is closely tied to practices such as promoting local products, representing hometown culture, and contributing to regional visibility and tourism development (Yang, 2023). In this respect, previous studies on rural content creators in China have shown that social media practices are frequently linked to the representation of local culture, economic activities, and regional development (Chen & Liu, 2021; Zeng, 2019). This suggests that identity construction in such contexts is not only expressed through performance but also shaped by broader socio-economic and cultural conditions. This perspective not only complements existing TikTok-centered research, but also challenges the tendency to generalize platform practices across different socio-political and ethnic contexts.

In this context, although studies have compared Douyin and TikTok based on what the platforms offer and their social and cultural roles, little attention has been given to the specific content themes that express cultural identity within each platform’s context. While Douyin controls ethnic representation through algorithms and social-political systems (Hao, 2025), identity on Chinese social media is seen as a process in flux. It involves balancing ethnic differences and shared cultural traits (Liu, 2024). Still, research has not yet examined the types of themes ethnic minority users create and how these themes help build cultural identity in their content. To address this gap, this study analyzes 1,249 Douyin videos from Nujiang, China, to identify the main thematic categories used by ethnic minority users and to examine how these themes shape cultural identity within the platform’s socio-political context.

2. Method

Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical approach concerned with identifying and interpreting patterned meanings within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Importantly, rather than treating themes as simply reflecting an underlying reality, this study adopts a constructionist orientation, understanding themes as patterns of meaning that are produced through representational practices. As Hall (2013) suggests, cultural identity is constituted through representation, which operates within discourse and symbolic systems. In this sense, shared meanings emerge within what Hall (2013, 2020) conceptualizes as a cultural space shaped by communicative practices. Cultural producers therefore do not merely describe identity; they actively construct it through mediated forms of expression. Accordingly, a constructionist thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring patterns through which cultural belonging and ethnic identity are discursively produced in short-video content. The analysis does not seek to uncover fixed or pre-existing identity categories. Instead, it examines how identity meanings are assembled, framed, and circulated within digital media environments.

2.1 Data Collection Procedure

This study adopts a qualitative research design. A data collection procedure was employed, followed by thematic analysis of the short videos collected from the Douyin platform. The data collection procedure of videos is illustrated in Figure 1.

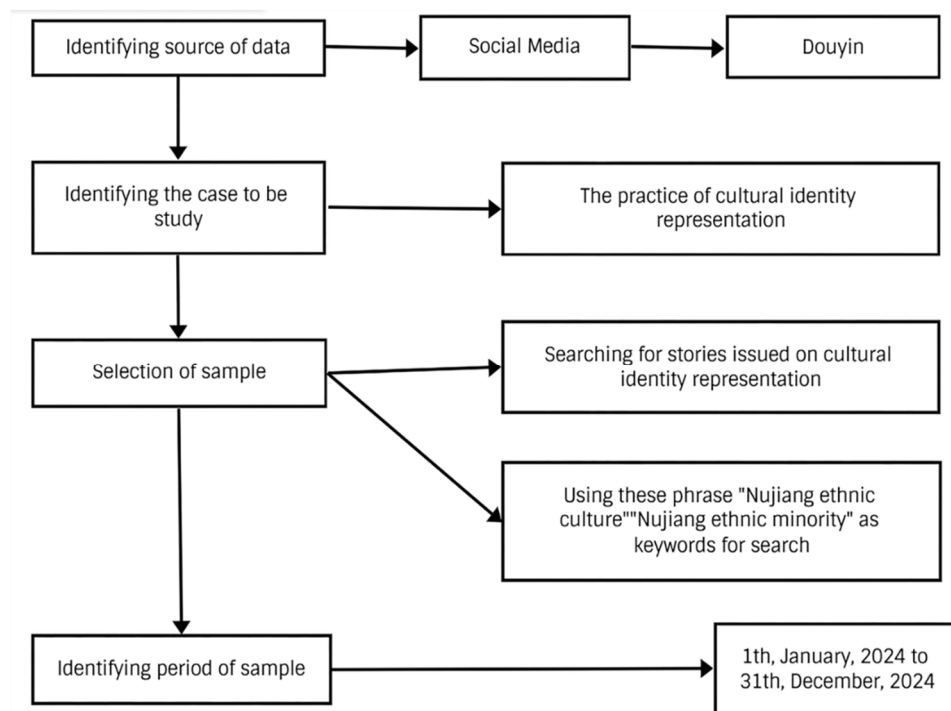


Figure 1. Data Collection Procedure

As shown in Figure 1, the video data were collected from Douyin between 1 January and 31 December 2024. The period from 1 January to 31 December 2024 was selected to capture a complete annual cycle of content production and to reflect recent patterns of cultural identity representation on Douyin. A set of keywords related to Nujiang cultural identity, including ethnic group names, regional identifiers, and culturally specific terms, was used to retrieve relevant videos. Douyin's search algorithm prioritizes content with higher engagement metrics; the initial search results reflect publicly visible and widely circulated content (Cotter, 2019; Abidin, 2016). Two rounds of screening were conducted in this procedure. In the first round, videos were excluded if they were unrelated to Nujiang, duplicated, purely commercial advertisements, or lacking cultural content. In the second round, the remaining videos were assessed for explicit relevance to cultural identity representation. Only videos that directly depicted, discussed, or symbolically referenced Nujiang ethnic identity were included in the final dataset.

2.2 Theme Development Process for Video Data

The 1249 Douyin videos were collected and analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach. Initial coding was conducted in Microsoft Excel to identify recurring representational elements related to cultural identity. Codes were generated based on visual content, video titles, and main content without applying pre-existing identity categories. Through iterative comparison, conceptually related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories (Braun & Clarke, 2021). These higher-order themes were refined to ensure internal coherence and clear distinction across themes. The final thematic structure reflects dominant patterns in how cultural identity was represented on Douyin during the selected time period.

3. Results

3.1 Thematic Patterns of Cultural Identity Representation

The researchers reviewed 1,249 video samples and grouped them into 7 themes relevant to this study. These themes are Ethnic Traditions and Customs, Religion and Belief Systems, Language and Dialect Usage, Natural Environment and Geography, Lifestyles and Local Practices, Regional Identity and Borderland Narratives, and New Rural Construction and Rural Revitalization. Moreover, Table 1 provides descriptions of each theme, while Table 2 shows the number and proportion of videos for each theme.

Table 1. Content categories and description of seven themes in cultural identity representation of Douyin

Themes categories	Description
Ethnic Traditions and Customs	This describes the traditional cultural practices of ethnic minorities in the Nujiang region, covering daily life and festivals, such as wedding and funeral customs, clothing, food habits, and handicrafts. It mainly looks at how these cultures are shown and shared on social media.
Religion and Belief Systems	The text explores the religious beliefs, rituals, sacred sites, shamanistic practices, and folk traditions of ethnic minorities. It also looks at stories about religious practices, how minorities express their religious identity, and the role of religion in shaping cultural identity.
Language and Dialect Usage	This includes using one's native language or dialect on social media, such as folk song lyrics, oral traditions, and expressions of language preservation awareness. It emphasizes the role of language as a cultural marker and a medium for identity recognition.
Natural Environment and Geography	This refers to the unique natural landscape, mountains, valleys, ecological environment, traditional production methods, and the region's spatial sense. It also focuses on how social media content utilizes the natural environment to construct cultural identity.
Lifestyles and Local Practices	This covers the daily lives of local residents: agriculture, hunting, gathering, handicrafts, housing, and diet. It also examines how these practices appear on social media as expressions of everyday identity tied to ethnic culture.
Regional Identity and Borderland Narratives	This includes narratives of frontier identity, cultural connections, historical memory, and ethnic interactions. It emphasizes how social media constructs the "frontier" as a symbol of a unique cultural and social identity.
New Rural Construction and Rural Revitalization	This covers rural development, infrastructure, ecotourism, and cultural revitalization in policy contexts. It emphasizes how ethnic minority communities' express views on modern development and cultural preservation via social media.

Description: The table displays the emerging topics and their definitions.

The thematic analysis of 1249 Douyin videos revealed seven recurring categories of cultural identity representation. Table 3 highlights distinct patterns in theme distribution, with some categories drawing much more attention than others. For instance, the analysis shows that the largest proportion of videos falls under Lifestyles and Local Practices (457 videos, 36.6%) and Ethnic Traditions and Customs (372 videos, 29.8%), representing a striking 66.4% of the dataset.

Table 2. Theme categories, video amounts and proportion

Themes categories	Video amount	Proportion
Theme 1: Ethnic Traditions and Customs	372	29.8%
Theme 2: Religion and Belief Systems	5	0.40%
Theme 3: Language and Dialect Usage	124	9.90%
Theme 4: Natural Environment and Geography	224	17.9%
Theme 5: Lifestyles and Local Practices	457	36.60%
Theme 6: Regional Identity and Borderland Narratives	15	1.20%
Theme 7: New Rural Construction and Rural Revitalization	52	4.20%
Total videos amount	1249	100%

As shown in Table 2, the themes such as Natural Environment and Geography (224 videos, 17.9%) and Language and Dialect Usage (124 videos, 9.9%) attract less focus, while New Rural Construction and Rural Revitalization (52 videos, 4.2%), Regional Identity and Borderland Narratives (15 videos, 1.2%), and Religion and Belief Systems (5 videos, 0.4%) are rarely highlighted. These patterns suggest clear viewer interests and reveal which aspects of cultural identity capture the most attention on Douyin.

4. Findings

The findings reveal seven themes that represent the cultural identity of ethnic minorities in Nujiang. The findings support Hall (2013)'s view that cultural identity is constructed through representation rather than expressed as a fixed essence. However, these themes are deeply influenced by local context and socio-political background, forming a visible cultural practice (Gossett et al., 2017). First, the theme of Lifestyles and Local Practices illustrates agricultural work, food preparation, handicrafts, housing structures, and daily routines rooted in local communities. Instead of separating culture from daily experience, these videos immerse viewers in ordinary actions and familiar rural or domestic settings. Cultural belonging arises through repetition, routine, and visible practical life. Consider the video entitled, "There is a place called #Dulong river; #Life must have a cliff trip." In this video, Dulong ethnic people, carrying backpacks, carefully cross a bamboo bridge—just 20 centimeters wide—that they built themselves. Below, an emerald-green river winds between

steep cliffs. By sharing their routines on these precarious bridges, the Dulong people invite viewers into their world, allowing these visuals to speak to their lived experiences. Their unique architecture and daily practices together underscore a vibrant ethnic identity, reflecting their deep connection to the landscape and traditions that shape their community.

Similarly, the theme of Ethnic Traditions and Customs highlights festival celebrations, wedding and funeral rituals, traditional dress, dietary habits, and cultural crafts. These videos present the practices as more explicitly traditional or ceremonial, thereby foregrounding identity. For example, in “Today, I went with my sisters to eat Xiala (Note 1) #Yamano Haruko” and “#There's a yearning to go to Nujiang #National Dance Pumi Guozhuang (Note 2),” the Bai or Pumi people in Nujiang wear ethnic costumes and headdresses. While gathering with friends and dancing, they actively represent their ethnic identity. Unlike the everyday-life theme, this category instead emphasizes symbolic forms of continuity—especially through dress, ritual action, and collective participation. These cultural symbols serve as clear, shareable signs of ethnic identity and often appear repeatedly on digital platforms.

The theme of Natural Environment and Geography makes up 17.9% of the sample, highlighting the landscape's role in shaping cultural identity. Videos in this category showcase features such as mountains, valleys, rivers, forests, village settings, and traditional production areas in Nujiang. For example, videos like “Nujiang Dimaluo Small Secret Journey ... it is the most promising place in the entire Nujiang River...” and “Biluo Snow Mountain-Peacock Mountain One-Day Tour #Travel Recommendation Officer” focus on local landscapes, village life, and ecological spaces, all of which inform identity. The natural landscape is not just a backdrop but a core element of local culture, linking ethnic identity to Nujiang's unique geography. By repeatedly showing terrain, ecology, and rural places, these videos root cultural identity in a distinctive regional context.

The theme of Language and Dialect Usage, which accounts for 9.9% of the videos, foregrounds another important dimension of identity representation. Videos in this category feature ethnic languages, local dialects, folk song lyrics, and forms of linguistic self-expression that mark cultural difference. In the video, the practitioner recorded “kuqingdiao (Note 3)” and “jiangbian handiao (Note 4)” in ethnic languages to express their feelings to parents and lovers. Compared with the visual emphasis of environment-focused videos, language-centred content highlights identity through sound and verbal performances. In these videos, language functions as a visible and audible marker of belonging, particularly when local speech forms signal authenticity, intimacy, or group recognition.

In addition, beyond everyday life and customary practice, two additional thematic resources—Natural Environment and Geography and Language and Dialect Usage—emerge as important avenues through which cultural identity is represented on Douyin. However, these additional themes also play a critical role in framing belonging and cultural distinctiveness. Together, they account for 27.8% of the dataset, suggesting that identity is likewise constructed through place-based and linguistic markers. Similar to previous studies, this part finds that cultural identity is also constructed through markers of place and language (Buccitelli & Schmitt, 2016; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Inglis, 2004).

However, in contrast to the dominant and intermediate themes discussed above, three categories occupy a relatively marginal position in the dataset: religion and belief systems (0.4%), regional identity and border narratives (1.2%), and new rural construction and rural revitalization (4.2%). Their limited frequency suggests that not all dimensions of cultural identity are equally visible on Douyin. Instead, the platformed representation of identity appears to privilege content related to the more frequently observed themes, such as those that align with popular culture, mainstream narratives, or widely shared expressions of identity, over less prominent topics, which may include niche cultural practices, minority identities, or alternative expressions that are under-represented in mainstream media.

Among the least represented themes, Religion and Belief Systems are particularly striking, accounting for only five videos in the entire dataset. Although religion may be deeply embedded in local cultural life (Arrington, 2018; Fei, 2022; Harrell, 2012; Liu, 2019), it appears only minimally in the sampled Douyin content. When it does appear, it is shown indirectly, such as in videotapes of folk songs or in symbolic local business activities, instead of through ongoing religious stories. It is worth noting that these five video samples were disseminated in the local Lisu ethnic language, which the platform was unable to recognise. Of these five video samples, four were songs in ethnic minority dialects, all about giving thanks to God and expressing Christian joy, while the fifth was commercial content. Based on the comments section, it appears that local ethnic minority users of Nujiang primarily interacted with and shared these five videos. Therefore, this limited visibility suggests that explicitly religious forms of identity are not a central mode of representation within the Douyin platform.

Similarly, Regional Identity and Borderland Narratives account for only 1.2% of the dataset. This theme remains marginal in comparison to representations of everyday life, customs, and local scenery. This indicates that the “borderland” is not a dominant frame through which cultural identity is presented on Douyin, even though it may carry broader historical or geopolitical significance in other contexts (Guo & Yang, 2022). In addition, the theme of New Rural Construction and

Rural Revitalization is somewhat more visible, accounting for 4.2% of the videos. This category includes representations of infrastructure development, ecotourism, modern village transformation, and policy-related narratives of progress. Compared with the dominant themes of lifestyle and custom, however, these videos occupy a secondary position. While they introduce a developmental frame into the representation of ethnic communities, they do not replace the stronger emphasis on everyday cultural practice and local custom.

5. Discussions

Overall, the findings demonstrate that uneven thematic patterns on Douyin represent cultural identity. Some dimensions are more visible than others. First, Lifestyles and Local Practices and Ethnic Traditions and Customs differ in emphasis. Nevertheless, they work together to construct a broader pattern where culture appears through action, embodiment, and repetition. The boundary between "everyday practice" and "tradition" is often fluid. Many videos mix routine life with culturally marked expressions, such as ethnic costumes, dances, and unique lifestyles. As a result, cultural identity is not presented as a fixed label. Instead, it is enacted through ordinary and ceremonial practices that are observable, recordable, and shareable at Douyin. The dominance of daily and customary themes shows that Douyin-based identity representation highlights visually immediate and socially recognisable content. Short-video culture seems to favour identity forms that fit in concrete, repeatable scenes. Examples include cooking, farming, ethnic dress, ethnic dances and music, and taking part in cultural activities. Thus, everyday life and custom are the main and enduring resources for representing ethnic identity on the platform.

Second, the theme of Natural Environment and Geography suggests that place is a key representational resource in Douyin videos about cultural identity. The geographical landscape visually dominates these videos. This allows identity to be framed spatially. It ties ethnic belonging to the physical and ecological character of Nujiang. Thus, the landscape becomes part of the cultural narrative, not just decoration. Third, natural environment and geography, along with language and dialect usage, indicate that Douyin's cultural identity is evident in both social practices and place- and language-based symbols. However, these elements have a lower share compared to daily life and customs, suggesting that while they contribute to Douyin's cultural identity, they are not the primary focus of its social practices and symbols. This means they support rather than dominate the main themes. As a result, identity is shown less through abstract claims of ethnic belonging and more through visual settings, daily routines, and familiar language on the Douyin platform.

However, additionally, the relatively low frequency of these three themes—Religion and Belief Systems, Regional Identity and Borderland Narratives, and New Rural Construction and Rural Revitalization—highlights the uneven visibility of cultural identity on Douyin. These themes were identified based on their recurring appearance and relevance in the dataset. However, their limited presence suggests that potentially important dimensions of identity, such as religion, borderland consciousness, or development-orientated narratives, appear only selectively. Religious and belief systems are embedded in the dialogue of commercial cultural activities or ethnic music videos, allowing them to evade censorship on the Douyin platform and reflect the ideology of ethnic minorities. These minorities know they cannot publish religious content on social media. This is because official Chinese propaganda and Douyin guidelines ban content that promotes "cults and feudal superstitions" or is politically sensitive (Douyin, 2024). This political ban leads most users to avoid creating or posting such videos, even if they have religious beliefs. They want to avoid political risks on Douyin in real life (DeButts & Pan, 2024). Moreover, the themes on Borderland Narratives, New Rural Construction, and Rural Revitalization are discursive frameworks primarily promoted by local governments, official institutions, and other national bodies, rather than organically generated by individual ethnic minority creators. Consequently, for many ethnic minority creators, such political or policy-oriented slogans (discourses) may not be easily understood. Therefore, these discourses are less likely to be actively incorporated into their Douyin videos. Instead, these kinds of political discourse hashtags that appear in their content are often algorithmically recommended by the platform, rather than intentionally typed by the creators themselves. In such cases, the use of these hashtags is largely strategic, serving to enhance the visibility and reach of their videos.

Moreover, these themes are less easily condensed into brief, visually engaging forms, making them less appealing to platforms focused on quick content consumption. Douyin does not simply host cultural representation; it also shapes which aspects of identity become more visible and shareable, influencing trends in social media and public perception of various identities. However, traffic on the Douyin platform still shows a clear preference for entertainment and so-called "positive energy" content (Chen & Wang, 2019; Mohamed et al., 2023). These types of content remain popular. It shows that cultural identity is not mainly constructed through explicit declarations of ethnicity or abstract narratives of belonging. Instead, identity is most often made meaningful through ordinary actions and familiar scenes. In this representational pattern, culture is defined by performance, routine, and shared visual cues on social media. The platform uses everyday life as a medium to make ethnicity visualization understandable and socially recognizable.

This trend can also be explained by Douyin's platform logic, which, as Battista (2023) points out, is mainly focused on entertainment, quick audiovisual experiences, and emotional engagement. The platform's focus on short videos, music,

and algorithm-driven visibility encourages content that is visually attractive, emotionally appealing, and easy to watch (McLoughlin et al., 2026; Amado, 2016). Therefore, content such as ethnic costumes, dance, landscapes, and hospitality fit well with the platform's approach. At the same time, Douyin operates in a tightly regulated digital space shaped by national governance (Creemers, 2017), which also affects what can be shown. As a result, cultural identity on Douyin is often expressed in ways that are rich in culture yet politically moderated, favoring what can be seen, performed, and shared rather than what is debated or challenged ideologically.

Looking at these findings in a global context shows how Douyin stands out as a platform for building cultural identity. While TikTok, its global version, is often known for content that is mixed, decontextualized, and focused on entertainment (Yang, 2022; Cervi, 2021), this study finds that Douyin is more closely tied to local cultural stories and social frameworks. Unlike TikTok's focus on remixing, political identity, and content from ethnic minority creators, Nujiang minorities focuses on local practices, landscapes, and traditions, which are repeatedly used to build a strong sense of cultural belonging. In addition, the lack of openly political or oppositional content, along with the focus on positive cultural themes, suggests that identity is built through subtle, emotional, and visual means rather than through clear-cut boundaries. This sets Douyin apart from TikTok's more mixed and expressive culture, highlighting the need to examine each platform's unique social and political context when studying digital cultural identity. In this way, the research connects studies of social media, cultural identity, and platform governance, especially in non-Western settings.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study support Hall (1990, 2013)'s understanding of cultural identity as a process of representation rather than a fixed or essential category. Across the 1249 Douyin videos, cultural identity is contrasted with a stable inner essence that simply exists prior to media expression as something constructed through recurring representational patterns: everyday practices, customary activities, dialect markers, and place-based imagery. Thus, Douyin contrasts two roles: not only as a platform that displays pre-existing ethnic identity, but also as a mediated space that assembles identity through visible, repeatable signs. This contrast is evident in the dominance of themes related to lifestyles, local practices, and ethnic traditions. These themes do not define identity through abstract statements of who ethnic minorities are; rather, they construct identity through what people do, wear, sing, eat, make, and perform.

The findings also show that cultural identity is selectively organized during the representational process. Not all dimensions of identity are equally foregrounded. Religion, borderland narratives, and development-orientated themes remain relatively marginal. This uneven distribution supports the idea that identity does not fully reflect social reality. Instead, identity is a partial and mediated construction. It is shaped by what becomes visible in digital representation. Taken together, these findings suggest that cultural identity on Douyin is not simply expressed. Rather, it is actively produced through clear representational choices.

This study contributes to scholarship on digital media and cultural identity in three main ways. First, it provides an empirically grounded account of how ethnic cultural identity is represented on Douyin, drawing on a large corpus of short-video content. Second, the study enhances research on ethnic minority media practices by redirecting focus from institutional representation to self-representation by minority practitioners. Rather than examining how ethnic minorities are portrayed by external actors, this article focuses on how practitioners construct and communicate cultural identity through their own digital content. This offers a more practice-based understanding of minority representation in contemporary platform environments. These findings have broader implications for the study of social media and ethnic identity in contemporary China. The study points to the need for future research to consider not only what identities are represented online, but also how platform structures shape the forms through which such identities become visible.

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Author contributions

Dr. Jiaqi Pan was responsible for study design and revising. Dr. Jiaqi Pan was responsible for data collection. Dr. Jiaqi Pan drafted the manuscript and Dr. Rohana Mijan revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. In this paragraph, also explain any special agreements concerning authorship, such as if authors contributed equally to the study.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Notes

Note 1. Xiala: This liquor is made by an ethnic minority group living in the Nujiang canyon. In the Nu language, "xiā" means meat and "lā" means liquor. So, "xiālā liquor" can be translated as "meat stewed in liquor," "meat stir-fried in liquor," or simply "meat liquor."

Note 2. Pumi Guozhuang: Pumi dance, also known as Guozhuang dance, is a traditional dance form of the Pumi ethnic group, often performed during festivals, gatherings, or religious ceremonies. Pumi Guozhuang primarily involves group circle dancing, with vigorous, lively steps full of enthusiasm and exuberance. The movements vary in size, are accompanied by singing, and are played on bamboo flutes or gourd pipes. Common dance types include "Cuo Cuo" and "Da Tiao." The dance movements depict scenes of farming, hunting, weaving, and hemp washing.

Note 3. Kuqing Diao: It is a folk song form with specific emotional expression and narrative structure, expressing the tragic feelings of ethnic minorities towards love and fate.

Note 4. Jiangbian Handiao: One of the traditional tunes of the Pumi ethnic group, the lyrics of which express the longing and separation between lovers.

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