User-generated aesthetic narratives: Vernacular Cultural paradigms of daoming bamboo weaving artisans on Xiaohongshu

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ABSTRACT

This article emphasizes the importance of social media as a key domain for the identity construction of artisans, particularly in the narrative of their unique "vernacular" aesthetic styles in user-generated content. By conducting an empirical study of three Daoming bamboo weaving artisans' accounts on Xiaohongshu (RED), we identified several common styles in their promotion of craftwork: vernacular local expression, photos of people with their products, and emphasized background information. These stylistic preferences effectively define local culture and tangible self-identity, telling the story of traditional crafts. The qualitative visual analysis depicts the representation style of local culture. User-generated content typically covers both personal life and professional activities, showcasing broader social and cultural contexts. These findings indicate that despite attempts at professional expression, amateur-style expression remains dominant and carries unique cultural significance.

Keywords: Daoming Bamboo Weaving; Artisans; Vernacular Culture; Xiaohongshu RED; User-Generated Content UGC

PURPOSE

Since 2020, the physical tourism economy of Daoming Bamboo Weaving Village has faced challenges due to COVID-19 control measures. However, social media has bypassed these physical restrictions, enabling extensive communication with a broad audience and showcasing local creative products to potential consumers. From this period, Daoming bamboo weaving artisans have registered accounts on multiple social media platforms, including Xiaohongshu. They have invested significant time and effort in managing these accounts as teams, extensively showcasing their products and the lifestyles surrounding these products, attracting considerable attention.

Xiaohongshu, also known as RED, is a Chinese social media application similar to Instagram. Since its launch in 2013 until 2024, its user base has exceeded hundreds of millions. Initially a platform for sharing shopping experiences and product reviews, it has now evolved into a mainstream social media with a diverse and active user base, significantly influential in China. As a product of the mobile photography era, it offers fundamental advantages for studying contemporary image culture. Visual media provides a community space for comprehensive lifestyle expression, and the community-driven approach enhances authenticity and trust among users (Liu and Li 2024).
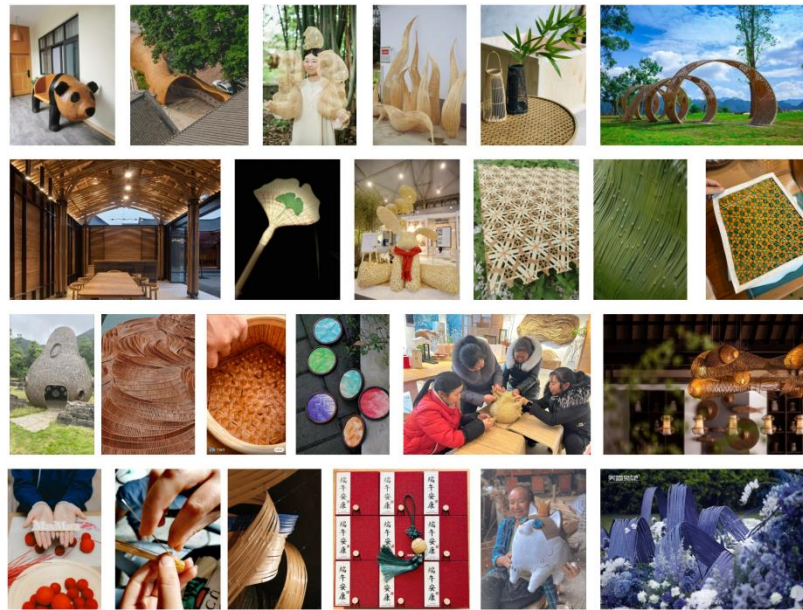
Figure 1. Random sample of image data from Daoming bamboo artisans' accounts
(January 2020 - June 2024).

Through browsing numerous posts from Daoming bamboo weaving artisans on RED, we discovered commonalities in these visual data. The informal creativity generated by users is being converted into value attractive to commercial fields like branding, which is a direction actively explored by the creative industry (Duffy and Hund 2015) (Driel and Dumitrica 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how these artisans utilize the Xiaohongshu platform to express their emotions and attitudes in unique ways. Given the close connection between social media and consumer culture, branding strategies undoubtedly aim to leverage the platform for communication (Iglesias-Sánchez et al. 2020). Our research found that young artisans are engaging in varying degrees of self-branding on social media, but they still leave considerable space for so-called "vernacular" expressions, a phenomenon that merits attention.

In this context, we advocate for using social media as a vital data source for researching artisans, their work, and their culture. While many Daoming bamboo artisans are middle-aged or elderly, it is the younger generation, particularly young female artisans, who hold sway on social media. The visual data and narratives presented on these accounts, along with audience interactions, provide a comprehensive expression of the artisans' aesthetics, emotions, and identities. The abundant data in each account allows for consistent patterns to be filtered and summarized, resulting in more persuasive common paradigms. These findings demonstrate that social media content from artisans' accounts is a significant supplement to field research in Daoming Bamboo Art Village. For effective triangulation of research data, this study represents a deeper exploration of local artisans and their crafts through case studies. We found that achieving depth in case studies requires thorough research across various channels to corroborate findings.

PROBLEM

This study explores the expression paradigms of artisan communities using user-generated content (UGC) from social media as a corpus. We draw on several research fields for our theoretical background: qualitative analysis of visual content on social media, the divide between professional and amateur cultural production, and self-branding in UGC. Using our theoretical and methodological framework, we conducted a qualitative visual analysis of posts from three artisans on RED. We identified common cultural narrative paradigms, including vernacular styles, self-objectified photo styles, and documentary narratives. To conceptualize and analyze these consistent cultural paradigms, we examined the visual content expressions of individual or team artisans on RED.

Qualitative Analysis of Visual Content on Social Media

When focusing on social media visual data studies, a substantial body of literature emphasizes computational approaches like big data algorithms. Quantitative analyses of extensive content samples on media platforms can quantify user strategies and patterns in photography, design, and narrative. Popular social networks, including Weibo, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Tumblr, have been analyzed for their sharing services' characteristics and uses, as well as various aspects of their numerous users (Souza et al. 2015) (Driel and Dumitrica 2021).

However, many scholars highlight the irreplaceable value of humanistic methods for such research. They suggest initial exploratory visual analysis of images before adopting quantitative methods (Indaco and Manovich 2016) (Katz and Crocker 2015). Manovich emphasized that analyzing Instagram images without considering their aesthetics can be misleading. Simply categorizing visual content like portraits, selfies, food, landscapes, and cityscapes overlooks the cultural distinctions between amateur texts, represented by domestic modes, and other forms of expression (Manovich 2017). Thus, cultural analysis of the visual texts in user-generated aesthetics from the perspective of amateur texts represented by domestic modes is essential.

The Divide Between Professional and Amateur

In early photography, professional and amateur were two distinct categories. Amateurism in photography mainly involved practices within private and family environments (Simatzkin-Ohana and Frosh 2022). However, in the digital age, this clear boundary has blurred. Platforms centered on visual content interaction allow maximum sharing between professionals and amateurs (Hjorth and Hinton 2020). This shared possibility highlights cultural production conflicts between professional and amateur creators. Loes van Driel and D. Dumitrica note that influencers must strategically engage with their followers to maintain advertiser appeal while retaining authenticity. This conflict ultimately leads to the standardization of cultural production content (Driel and Dumitrica 2021).

Manovich describes the rules of professional photography and "good photography" displayed on social media, which stand in contrast to the home-style casual photography. These rules include proper composition, focus, grayscale, balanced colors, and interesting subjects. For example, using the "rule of thirds" in composition; proper exposure that shows details in shadows, mid-tones, and highlights; using lines to direct the viewer's gaze into the distance or, conversely, to make the subject appear flatter; balanced colors with no dominant tones (Manovich 2017). According to Simatzkin-Ohana and Frosh, amateur visual forms include expressions of intimate scenes of personal life, poor lighting, editing, and the use of non-professional graphic software (Simatzkin-Ohana and Frosh 2022).

The professionalization of UGC has been a major research focus. The process of transforming user-generated vernacular creativity into attractive talent and content for brands, advertisers, and studios promotes the institutionalization of UGC (Kim 2012). This trend aligns with the commercial nature of profit-driven enterprises (Abidin 2016) (Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017). Both brands uploading professional content and amateurs creating increasingly professionalized content aim to maximize and commercialize their audiences (Fuchs, 2013, 2017). Achieving standards and discourse power is crucial for commercial profitability. The visual presentation style and standards of brands ensure consistency and recognizability.

Conversely, there is a "symbolic amateurism" phenomenon on social media, where professional commercialization pursues intentional amateurism (Hamilton 2013). This trend is not new; it was observed in the fashion industry in the 1950s as "realism aesthetics" (Simatzkin-Ohana and Frosh 2022). Highly professionalized brands use amateurism as a unique style, depicting assumed everyday scenes and ordinary people settings. Abidin refers to the visual aesthetics created by family influencers on social media as semi-professional standards, distinguishing intentional content from every day or family life "filler" content, which provides an authentic and intimate feel (Abidin 2016).

Self-Branding in User-Generated Content: Identity and Image Construction

Online media platforms offer an ideal environment for sharing content in social interactions, where users construct self-images. Visual content sharing is extensively used in self-image construction,

aiming to fulfill social needs for intuitive self-expression. Clearly, UGC on social media aligns with the self-presentation and expression demands of the digital age (Boursier, Gioia, and Griffiths 2020). Social media users are expected to present an identity, increasingly showcasing unique style paradigms on specific sites, constructing digital self-brands in the process (Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy 2018). Carefully curating social media self-images is crucial for creative workers relying on digital self-presentation, making this behavior a primary entrepreneurial strategy (Cohen, Newton-John, and Slater 2018). For creative workers, using social media to gain influence is important. Benkler argues that UGC shifts power dynamics, allowing the broader public to become producers and guide consumption through social media (Benkler 2006). The increasing agency, commercial acumen, and skills of everyday users are redistributing cultural power traditionally held by the media industry (Driel and Dumitrica 2021).

With the widespread use of social media, self-branding practices have become a prevalent feature of social and cultural life. Digital self-brands are continuously replicated and optimized within the extensive social media environment. However, there are concerns that self-expression on social media may differ from face-to-face interactions (Driel and Dumitrica 2021). Some literature critically examines the self-promotion activities of creative workers on social networks, suggesting that UGC is no longer just a joyful expression but requires significant unpaid effort (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010).

METHODOLOGY

We designated Xiaohongshu (RED) as the corpus for our study, aiming to identify consistent visual text expression styles recognizable by young artisans and their teams. The qualitative visual text analysis was based on a multi-stage corpus construction process.

In the first stage, we created an account list. Initially, we identified all known Daoming bamboo weaving artisans' accounts on Xiaohongshu and collected all their visual text posts from 2020 to June 2024. Although we use qualitative methods to organize and classify visual data, we set quantitative screening thresholds (e.g., number of posts, activity level, and number of followers) in the initial stage to quickly identify common points in the vast data. This ensures the diversity and representativeness of the data. Finally, we selected three accounts: Yang Longmei Studio, Ding Zhizhu Studio, and Hongmei Studio. The corpus consists of three accounts and 702 visual data posts.

Table 1. RED accounts and information for their selected artisans

Username	Person (Team)	Followers	Likes & Saves no.	Posts no.
Non-heritage Inheritor Yang Longmei Studio	Yang Longmei	1980	3708	242
Ding Zhizhu's 'Daoming Bamboo Weaving'	Ding Chunmei	5912	11K	205
Daoming Hongmei Bamboo Weaving Workshop	Xiao Yao	19 K	83 K	255

The second stage is content theme coding. In this stage, we conducted an initial empirical analysis of the image texts and coded the content themes of all posts from the three accounts. We categorized the posts into seven themes: bamboo products, production process records, learning activities, studio and surrounding environment, official events and promotions, collaborations with other brands, and other life records. Since some posts contain multiple themes, we used a "multiple classification" method, where one post can be classified into multiple themes. Through this method, we found that artisans are more inclined to promote products, while lifestyle expressions also hold significant value.

Table 2. Number of posts for various content themes and percentage of all posts of the three accounts

Username	Products	Production Process	Learning Activity	Studio Environment	Official Events	Collaborations	Others
Non-heritage Inheritor Yang Longmei Studio	165 (68.2%)	19 (7.9%)	20 (8.3%)	13 (5.4%)	29 (12%)	10 (4.1%)	5 (2.1%)
Ding Zhizhu's 'Daoming Bamboo Weaving'	131 (63.9%)	78 (38%)	7 (3.4%)	4 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (2%)
Daoming Hongmei Bamboo Weaving Workshop	211 (82.7%)	30 (11.8%)	5 (2%)	4 (1.6%)	8 (3.1%)	2 (1%)	8 (3.1%)

The third stage involves narrowing down the corpus for in-depth analysis. During this process, we further refined the corpus, focusing on posts themed around bamboo products, and analyzed the emotions and attitudes expressed by the artisans on social media. Referring to Manovich's standards for distinguishing professional and amateur styles, we divided 507 posts themed around bamboo products into two sets: professional and amateur. The results show that amateur-style posts dominate. These amateur-style posts typically exhibit characteristics such as low pixel quality, poor composition, cluttered backgrounds, and insufficient lighting. Some relatively professional images are processed by non-professional software, adding watermarks or filters. Given the artisans' limited knowledge and skills in professional aesthetics, and their inclination to approach professional standards, we included posts that are similar to but do not fully meet professional standards in the professional posts set.

Table 3. Number of vernacular-style posts from the three accounts and percentage of product-themed posts

Username	Products	Vernacular-style	Professional-style
Non-heritage Inheritor Yang Longmei Studio	165	156(94.5%)	9(5.5%)
Ding Zhizhu's 'Daoming Bamboo Weaving'	131	114(87%)	17(13%)
Daoming Hongmei Bamboo Weaving Workshop	211	95(45%)	116(55%)
Total	507	365(72%)	142(28%)

FINDING

An in-depth analysis of the social media posts of Daoming bamboo weaving artisans on Xiaohongshu reveals their modes of expression and cultural narratives on social media. The consistency in their expression styles guides us towards understanding their identity and image construction. By coding and analyzing the themes, we identified three main paradigms of expression: vernacular local expression, photos of people with their products, and emphasized background information. This section will provide a detailed explanation of these three paradigms.

Vernacular Local Expression

Further analysis reveals that amateur-style posts constitute a larger proportion. These amateur-shot visual images typically exhibit low pixel quality, poor composition, cluttered backgrounds, and insufficient lighting. Many relatively professional photos are filtered and edited by users using non-professional image processing software, adding watermarks or filters to create secondary compositions. Clearly, this is not an aesthetic pursuit but rather a means to indicate product ownership and prevent

intellectual property theft. Additionally, screenshots, casually cropped, or filter-added images, often deemed as low-quality by professionals (Steyerl, 2009), are commonly included in the posts. From the number of favorites and viewer interaction frequency, it appears that a greater extent of professional aesthetic expression helps attract certain audience groups. However, whether other factors influence the broader audience's engagement remains to be further investigated.

Figure 2. Sample Display of Vernacular Style Visual Data from the Three Accounts

Photos of People and Products

In our analysis, we found that the artisans' posts often feature numerous photos of people with their products. These photos have distinct characteristics: the artisans' personal images are captured alongside the products they create, with the proportions of people and objects in the composition being almost equal. From these photos, it can be seen that the artisans consider themselves and their products to be of equal importance, and sometimes, the person is even more important than the product. These photos are usually deliberately posed, with the artisans using their postures and expressions to convey their pride in the products and their love for the craft.

Figure 3. Sample Display of Photos of People with Their Products from the Three Accounts

Emphasizing Background Information

Our research also found that the artisans' visual content in their posts emphasizes conveying background information. This background information provides viewers with more context, showcasing the artisans' real working environment and the production process. The account holders tend to convey more complex information through a single image. Although these intricate images may deviate from professional aesthetic standards, they emphasize narrative function more strongly. Therefore, composition and subject are considered less important.

For instance, many posts depict artisans busily working in their studios or factories, or showcase finished products against natural backgrounds. This background information enhances the narrative and authenticity of the images. The presence of busy artisans in the background reveals the relationship

between people and objects. From the visual images, location information such as factory buildings, studios, or installation sites can be easily identified, despite the messy processing environment. The primary purpose of these expressions is to record events instantaneously, demonstrating the process of the artisan team completing a specific production task at a particular location. Some products are deliberately photographed against natural backgrounds with consistent choices. These backgrounds not only highlight the product themes but also show the audience the location and environment, such as rocks, trees, grasslands, farmlands, and the sky. This background information enhances the narrative and authenticity of the images.

Figure 4. Sample Display of Emphasized Background Information from the Three Accounts

CONCLUSION

Our study reveals significant insights into the visual user-generated content of local bamboo weaving artisans on Xiaohongshu. The findings are closely related to three paradigms observed in the posts: vernacular aesthetics, the relationship between people and objects, and the emphasis on background information. Despite attempts at professionalization in visual expression, amateur-style representation remains dominant. This narrative style of user-generated content holds unique cultural value. Through these modes of expression, the artisans achieve dual purposes: on the one hand, they embrace self-branding to promote their products, craft, and culture, thereby generating creative commercial value; on the other hand, by conveying their working environment and lifestyle, they find emotional and cultural resonance, fostering deeper understanding and appreciation with their audience. This narrative style not only enhances the authenticity and relatability of the content but also strengthens the interaction between artisans and viewers, highlighting the vitality and influence of traditional crafts on modern social media platforms. These users need to find a balance between self-expression and product promotion to maintain alignment with the audience's attraction and authenticity.

Firstly, the predominance of vernacular aesthetics in the artisans' posts. Most of the analyzed posts belong to the vernacular category, characterized by low resolution, poor composition, and messy backgrounds. This is primarily due to the artisans' limited professional aesthetic knowledge and reliance on non-professional editing tools. Despite these imperfections, the vernacular style enhances the authenticity and relatability of the content, resonating with the audience. This finding aligns with the trend of brand amateurism discussed in previous literature, where brands adopt user-generated aesthetics to appear more authentic and engaging.

Secondly, the relationship between people and objects is a crucial aspect of local artisans' visual narratives. Many posts feature artisans alongside their creations, highlighting the important relationship between individuals and their products. This approach reflects the effort to convey the artisans' personal stories and the cultural significance of their craft. By presenting artisans or their family members as central figures alongside their products, the posts create more intimate and relatable narratives, which are essential for building connections with the audience. This emphasis on personal storytelling aligns with the concept of creating intimate and authentic brands. Such photos of people and objects enhance

the narrative and emotional value of the products, allowing the audience to see not just an inanimate object, but a story and emotion behind it.

Lastly, the emphasis on background information in the posts provides rich contextual details that enhance the narrative capacity of the images. Artisans often showcase their busy working environments or the natural settings where products are displayed. These backgrounds not only add authenticity but also guide the audience to a deeper understanding of the artisans' work and cultural context. Despite the chaotic nature of these images, which might deviate from professional visual aesthetic standards, they emphasize the importance of narrative over mere visual appeal. The artisans use background information to add layers of meaning to the images, making the content more engaging and informative. The alignment of the visual text's aesthetics with cultural significance indicates that background information plays an important role in expressing the artisans' culture and craft.

In conclusion, the study of bamboo weaving artisans on Xiaohongshu demonstrates how vernacular aesthetics, personal storytelling, and detailed background information collectively form the rich narrative trends observed in their posts. These findings further elucidate how these artisans utilize visual content to connect with their audience and promote their craft. Future research could further explore the impact of these narrative techniques on audience engagement and their broader implications for cultural preservation and promotion in the digital age.

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