

A Comparative Study on Communication Strategies of Idol Groups Between China and the US from the Perspective of Scenario Communication: A Case Study of K-pop Boy Band NCT

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Abstract. This paper employs the theory of scenario communication as its core analytical framework, focusing on NCT's communication strategies in China and the United States against the backdrop of cultural globalization and the booming development of digital media. Regarding communication content, NCT focuses on building virtual intimate relationships with Chinese fans via fan community applications and offline album signing events, etc. In the US, it relies on Hip-Hop elements and mainstream television programs to create a pseudo-environment of American popular culture. In terms of communication forms, NCT implements interpersonal communication and mass communication strategies in China and the US. Despite differing paths, both strategies aim to establish deep audience identification and achieve commercial value through disseminating cultural content—leveraging the Cultural Economy to drive the Financial Economy. This adaption model of NCT represents a typical pathway for the K-pop industry in implementing the 1998 cultural strategy of South Korea of promoting cultural exports.

Keywords: Scenario communication, NCT, Communication strategies in China and the US, Virtual intimate relationships, Pseudo-Environment

1. Introduction

Driven by cultural globalization and the development of digital media, idol groups characterized by localization have become important carriers for the export of popular culture. The South Korean government formally established a cultural strategy in 1998, positioning the cultural industry as a strategic pillar of the national economy to enhance comprehensive national strength. In this context, the K-pop industry became a crucial practical path for this national strategy. As a branch of the cultural industry, South Korea's music industry, particularly its popular music, has emerged as a significant contributor to the nation's cultural exports, with K-pop's global influence extending beyond music to encompass a wide range of consumer products and services. K-pop music is characterized by its remarkable stylistic fusion and continuous innovation, placing a strong emphasis on both captivating visual elements and dynamic stage performances.

Idol groups, which were initially produced in an assembly-line way, have gradually evolved to embrace individuality and distinctiveness. This trend facilitates the cross-cultural communication of idol groups and their musical images. Among them, SM Entertainment Co. launched the K-pop boy band NCT (N for Neo, C for Culture, T for Technology) in 2016. NCT's musical characteristics are reflected in rich, multi-layered composition, strong impact of mashup songs, and the freshness from abundant details in arrangements. NCT, with its avant-garde and experimental music, has become a typical representative of K-pop innovation. NCT currently consists of four fixed subunits: NCT 127, NCT DREAM, WayV, and NCT WISH, along with the rotational subunit NCT U. The group operates on the core concepts of "openness" and "expandability", meaning "limitless expansion", aiming for global communication through differentiated music [1].

Scenario communication is a mode of communication in the internet era. It refers to a precise communication method that, under internet conditions, based on audience demand and comprehensively uses various means to effectively connect scenario elements to achieve personalized information and service. The basic elements for constructing scenario include space and environment, users' real-time status, users' daily habits, and social atmosphere [2]. For China and the United States, the differences in NCT's communication content and form are deeply connected to the scenario characteristics of the two countries (such as cultural context, media usage habits, etc.), making NCT a typical sample of cross-cultural communication within the globalization process of K-pop industry. Therefore, taking NCT as a case study to comparatively analyze the communication strategies of K-pop idol groups in China and the US holds enlightening significance for the cross-cultural communication of popular culture.

2. Communication content: construction of virtual intimate relationships and expression of pseudo-environment

NCT uses "Dream" as its core creative concept, depicting cognitive interaction between idols and fans through "resonance of dream," promoting the transition of "dream" from symbolic levels to practical levels. Fundamentally, this process involves idols and fans achieving emotional resonance through music as a medium, which in turn drives community practices of pursuing ideals together. Therefore, musical works and the personal images of the idols have become the main content of NCT's brand image communication.

NCT's music combines auditory impact with avant-garde experimentalism, requiring relatively high music literacy and openness to new things from audiences. Regarding fan demographics, the Chinese fan base consists mostly of young females aged 15 to 25, concentrated in economically developed areas, positively correlating with the permeation degree of Hallyu (Korean Wave) cultural. They exhibit strong consumption intention and purchasing power. The US fan base consists mostly of females aged 18 to 35, with a relatively balanced gender ratio compared to China, but it generally shows weaker consumption intention than that in China. The differences in aesthetic preferences between the Chinese and American popular music markets are rooted in traditional music aesthetics. Traditional Chinese music values horizontal melodic development and is influenced by the pentatonic scale, leading Chinese audiences to prefer music with beautiful, epic melodies and subtle emotions. Western classical music emphasizes vertical harmony and instrumentation. American popular music is further influenced by Black music, and this encourages audiences to pursue vertical auditory layers and rhythmic groove. Based on the different preferences, NCT has strategically diversified its music portfolio to effectively engage with two distinct markets.

2.1. Constructing virtual intimate relationships with Chinese fans using music as a medium

Based on the Chinese fan profile, NCT's communication content uses music as a medium to construct virtual intimate relationships between idols and fans, highly relying on the construction of tailored scenarios. Intimate relationships, in a broader context, encompass not only romantic bonds but also familial and platonic connections, all of which are characterized by emotional closeness and mutual support. Virtual intimate relationships lie in the mediated presentation of intimate relationships, because "The role of each person is realized within specific time, space, situation, occasion, and need, and everything surrounding the individual constitutes the scenario [3]." Since NCT WISH's debut on February 21, 2024, their official Douyin account has gained over 830,000 followers, far surpassing NCT 127 (debuted in 2016, 350,000 followers on their official Douyin account), indicating the representative significance of NCT WISH's scenario construction in communication content [4].

In their musical works, NCT WISH integrates the expression of intimacy found in various youth relationships into specific scenarios. Taking their album's title track *Steady* as an example, the song established a lively tone with a upbeat melody at 130 BPM; the arrangement incorporated game sound effects and whistling to enhance the youthful atmosphere; the lyrics revolved around the desire for a stable romantic relationship; the MV shaped the members' images as youthful male students by presenting campus spaces like classrooms, corridors, and basketball courts etc. The first-person perspective shooting techniques and blur filters created a dreamlike scenario experience, satisfying Chinese fans' desires for intimate relationships during their student years.

The communication of virtual intimate relationships through music extends into fans' daily lives. Lysn Bubble is an application based on user's real-time status and habits. (Lysn Bubble is an official fan community APP developed by dear u Company and owned by SM Entertainment Co..Its main functions include allowing fans to pay to subscribe to idols' information, receive text, image, voice, and video messages shared by idols, and enabling fans to send messages to idols for real-time social interaction with them.) Fans can subscribe to receive daily life updates shared by the members, and idols can also view fans' replies in real-time for personalized interaction. This design precisely caters to fans' desires to access idols' updates anytime and establish exclusive connections. It aligns with the internet era's habit of "dialog box communication" in daily life, allowing fans to experience a "one-on-one chat". Lysn Bubble has become a core carrier for constructing virtual intimate relationships between NCT members and their fans, providing a model for fan community apps of other Korean entertainment companies like JYP Bubble and STAR's Bubble.

2.2. Constructing a pseudo-environment of popular culture for US fans

NCT 127 has successfully targeted the US market, creating a pseudo-environment that resonates with American popular culture, as evidenced by their top positions on Billboard charts and their widespread popularity. The pseudo-environment is a concept proposed by American scholar Walter Lippmann, referring to the "symbolic reality" constructed by mass media through selective processing of information, rather than a direct reproduction of the objective environment [5]. NCT 127 primarily utilizes a Hip-Hop style, an artistic style of popular culture originating in the Bronx, New York City, USA, in the early 1970s. Visually, they engage in cross-cultural reinterpretation of popular culture symbols from Hip-Hop, such as graffiti, dreadlocks, and gold chains. For example, the fire truck theme in *Fire Truck* alludes to the continuous fires in the Bronx, the background of Hip-Hop's origin; *Cherry Bomb* employs the diss back form from Hip-Hop culture to showcase the resistance against oppression.

However, as an idol group targeting global adolescents, NCT's expressions of Hip-hop in its songs filtered out the edgy and niche aspects of youth subculture in American popular culture, retaining the more easily accepted "symbolic shell". "A pure scenario is static. Only with events or stories can the scenario truly come alive. Also, only in the narration of events or stories can the scenario transform from the category of place to social relations" [6]. NCT 127 constructs a symbolic reality of youth subculture in American popular culture through specific social events, conveying dreams and of freedom and peace, prompting emotional resonance between the US fans and NCT's music.

"The research on scenarios and scenario communication naturally includes two logics: application and reflection. The application level covers the arrival of content, the resonance of emotions, and the change of attitudes." [7]. In terms of communication content, the focus in China is on utilizing the four scenario elements to adapt to the emotional needs of Chinese fans and establish virtual intimate relationships. In the US, emotional resonance among the US fan base is sought through pseudo-environments of reinterpreted cross-cultural.

3. Communication form: achieving common goals through differentiated paths

The period from 2019 to 2022 marked the peak prosperity of the K-pop industry, with its export value growing from \$74.6 million to \$231.4 million [8]. From the perspective of John Fiske's "two economies" theory, the Financial Economy focuses on the exchange of value, and the Cultural Economy circulates "meaning, pleasure, and social identity". NCT's communication forms in China and the US show differences but ultimately reveal a common purpose.

3.1. Localization of albums and merchandise: Chinese everyday scenarios and american pop culture

Given the large and young Chinese fan base with strong willingness to consume, the Chinese market has become a main front for K-pop album exports. NCT has made adaptive adjustments to album and merchandise. Album sales cooperate with Chinese music streaming platforms (NetEase Cloud Music, QQ Music, etc.) and offer exclusive photo-cards incorporating Chinese language and homophone elements, such as NCT WISH member Jaehee writing Gong Hee Fa Cai on a photo-card. (This is a common blessing meaning Congratulations and Prosperity, which is originally written as Gong Xi Fa Cai —here, "Hee" is a homophone of "Xi.") QQ Music also offers exclusive Chinese voice messages on the condition of purchasing digital albums. Merchandise sales focus on everyday items like water bottles and hats to cater to the basic scenario element of "space and environment" where idols accompany fans in their daily lives, infiltrating "users' daily habits".

In the US, NCT attempts to evoke emotional resonance among the US fan base by constructing a pseudo-environment of American popular culture. In terms of album formats, they release a series of English version songs, such as the re-recorded single Beatbox (English Ver.) by NCT DREAM especially for their Europe and America tour, and the digital single So Am I (feat. NCT 127) by NCT 127 and US native singer Ava Max, to adapt to the US fans' linguistic cognitive context and facilitate value communication. The album merchandise of NCT 127 centers on Hip-Hop cultural elements. For example, in the merchandise for NCT 127's album WALK-The 6th Album, they released baseball caps and bandanas (which belong to Hip-Hop apparel culture) printed with the American colloquial slogan "DON'T CARE BOUT A THANG", conveying the self-affirming attitude of Hip-Hop. This aligns with the dressing habit of "users' daily habits", transforming the pseudo-environment into perceptible scenario symbols.

3.2. Differentiation between interpersonal and mass communication

The Chinese market focuses on interpersonal communication to build emotional connections, while the US market utilizes mass communication to enhance exposure. Both align with the respective cultural contexts and communication needs of the two regions.

In China, the recent evolution of offline album signing events into the "one-day shop manager" model has become a trend targeting the Chinese market which are often implemented in China [9]. Idols play the role as managers to interact with fans and sign autographs at venues like coffee shops or flower shops (e.g., NCT DREAM member Park Jisung personally handing cookies to fans). Participants publish "album signing events repo" (the experience shares of album signing events) on social media to create a shared participatory social atmosphere. This format concretizes the offline signing scenario, allowing face-to-face real-time interaction between idols and fans, while also better corresponding with fans' daily consumption habits. It has become a popular communication form for many K-pop groups to strengthen virtual intimate relationships with Chinese fans.

In addition to interpersonal communication between idols and fans, interpersonal communication also exists within the fan community itself. Leveraging its large number of members, Chinese NCTzens (NCT fans) have held an annual internal CP popularity election since 2018, using Weibo as the medium to set up a voting scenario. Fans can highly participate in imagining, discussing, and constructing the emotional relationships between idols that satisfies their desire to establish virtual intimate relationships with idols.

NCT focuses on mass communication in the US, participating in activities embedded in the localized scenario of American popular culture. For instance, NCT 127 participated in US national television programs like *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, deeply embedding themselves into the evening entertainment scenario of American audiences for faster permeation into mainstream cognition. Furthermore, NCT 127's 2019 North American tour constituted a typical example of scenario communication under ritualized communication. "Ritualized communication, metaphorically speaking in reference to rituals, does not refer to communication in the original sense of ritual, but rather to communication that resembles ritual performance in terms of theme, content, type, method, time, and scenario" [10]. NCT 127's North American tour followed the ritualized process of "Opening VCR—Performance—Interaction—Encore/Farewell". Through ritualized communication, disparate individuals are cohered into a community with shared cognition. This ritualized communication embodies the basic elements of scenario communication, including stage design that constructs an infectious environment and an interactive social atmosphere derived from fans' chanting, cheers, and interactions with idols—all of which strengthen fans' emotional identification with the "popular culture pseudo-environment" constructed by NCT 127.

Against the backdrop of mobile internet, K-pop idol groups exhibit common cross-market communication forms like "challenge" interactions within mass communication. This involves idols performing the memorable point choreography of popular songs, releasing it on short video platforms, and attracting the public to imitate, recreate, and interact. Its core logic lies in leveraging the explosive impact of scenario communication to achieve viral spread. "As long as there are sufficiently valuable connections, popularity can be ignited" [11]. NCT WISH promptly updates various popular challenges online and has become a short video benchmark among K-pop idol groups. Their most popular challenge on Douyin received over 470,000 likes. This cross-market challenge format fully utilizes scenario explosive impact to achieve low-cost but high-coverage communication.

China, as the main market for purchasing power, is where NCT deeply utilizes the four scenario elements to cater to the emotional needs of Chinese fans. NCT builds strong emotional bonds and virtual intimate relationships, realizing the commercial transformation from emotional value to album repurchase. NCT holds 14 spots among the top 20 physical album sales records of all groups under SM Entertainment Co., with cumulative sales of NCT DREAM's ISTJ-The 3rd Album reaching 4,279,203 copies. The US, as the "opinion leader" of global popular music culture, constituting an important source of information and influence the attitudes of the majority [12]. (An opinion leader refers to a person who is active in interpersonal communication networks, often providing information, viewpoints and suggestions to others, and exerting personal influence on them.) The recognition from American market has powerful radiating effects that drives fans in pro-US countries and regions to follow suit. In conclusion, although the two strategies present differentiated communication paths, both ultimately use the Cultural Economy as a bridge to enhance South Korea's soft power and pursue the central objective of the Financial Economy to drive the economic development of South Korea.

4. Conclusion

Under the theory of scenario communication, NCT's communication strategies in China and the US present differentiated practices. In China, the focus is on interpersonal communication that builds virtual intimate relationship, while in the US, it is on creating a pseudo-environment of popular culture and utilizing mass communication to expand cultural influence, both ultimately achieving transformation to commercial value. NCT's communication practices hold multiple representative significances: its "limitless expansion" subunit model provides a flexible carrier for cross-cultural communication; its precise adaptation strategy based on scenario elements validates the feasibility of scenario communication theory in the field of popular culture, providing a typical case for understanding the logic of popular culture's cross-cultural communication against the backdrop of cultural globalization.

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