

Marketing Case Analysis of Self-media Marketing Strategies of the Palace Museum Cultural Creative Products

Zisheng Mo

*Faculty of Literature and Community, Guangzhou University of Applied Science and Technology,
Zhaoqing, China
Emollia0506@163.com*

Abstract. Digital transformation presents critical challenges for cultural heritage institutions. As public engagement expectations evolve and funding models shift, museums require sustainable strategies balancing preservation integrity with innovative audience engagement. While social media adoption is widespread, a significant gap remains regarding systematic mechanisms converting cultural assets into multi-dimensional stakeholder value without compromising authenticity. This study examines China's Palace Museum as an exemplar of digital cultural innovation. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this research integrates document analysis of official annual reports (2018–2023), systematic content analysis of 1,200+ social media posts across WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, and Bilibili, and theoretical framing through Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and Stakeholder Value Creation Theory. Triangulation of quantitative metrics, qualitative audience feedback, and institutional documentation ensures analytical robustness. Findings reveal a validated four-stage value conversion pathway: Cultural Resource Digitization establishes foundational authenticity; Emotional Narrative Embedding bridges historical significance with contemporary relevance; Multi-platform Resonance amplifies reach through ecosystem synergy; Sustainable Value Generation closes the loop by reinvesting commercial outcomes into core mission activities. Outcomes include 42% increased youth visitation (ages 18–30), ¥1.5+ billion annual cultural product revenue with 78% directly funding conservation, and 300% growth in digital archive usage.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage Marketing, Value Conversion Pathway, Integrated Marketing Communication, Palace Museum, Social Media Strategy

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage institutions face operational challenges: reduced funding, rising audience expectations for interactive experiences, and digital competition. Traditional exhibition models struggle to engage digital-native audiences seeking participatory cultural encounters. UNESCO (2022) reports 68% of institutions view digital engagement as critical, yet under 30% possess frameworks to convert digital activity into value.

Scholarly discourse acknowledges social media's potential for democratizing heritage access, yet insufficient attention addresses the mechanistic bridge between cultural asset digitization and

sustainable value realization [1]. Existing literature often treats digital initiatives as isolated tactical efforts rather than integrated components of a holistic value ecosystem [2]. Key questions persist: How to balance authenticity with contemporary communication? How to translate engagement into conservation funding without alienating audiences?

This study investigates how the Palace Museum constructs a self-media marketing ecosystem that systematically converts cultural resources into sustainable economic, social, and educational value while preserving scholarly authenticity and strengthening public trust. The research integrates theoretical analysis of IMC and Stakeholder Value Creation frameworks with empirical examination of the Palace Museum's digital operations across a five-year period (2018–2023). This study offers concrete methodology for heritage institutions globally seeking to enhance relevance without sacrificing integrity.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Integrated Marketing Communication principles in cultural contexts

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) constitutes a strategic management approach ensuring consistent, audience-focused messaging across all touchpoints while adapting to channel-specific affordances. In cultural heritage settings, IMC becomes mission-driven engagement architecture where every communication reinforces institutional values. Kitchen defines IMC as "a management concept ensuring all communications are strategically linked to create unified yet contextually appropriate brand experiences [3]."

Contemporary IMC requires thematic consistency with format flexibility: the same historical narrative manifests as a scholarly WeChat article, a trending Weibo hashtag, a visually immersive Douyin clip, and a community-driven Bilibili documentary—all preserving factual accuracy. This adaptive consistency builds "relational authenticity," where audiences perceive communications as genuinely aligned with core mission. Studies confirm cultural institutions employing IMC principles achieve 2.3× higher audience trust scores [4].

2.2. Stakeholder Value Creation mechanisms in heritage management

Stakeholder Value Creation Theory reconceptualizes organizations as value-generating ecosystems serving multiple constituencies with interconnected needs [5]. Haller and van Staden demonstrate that transparent value articulation across economic, social, cultural, and educational dimensions significantly strengthens institutional legitimacy and public support [2]. In heritage contexts, value manifests multidimensionally: economic (sustainable revenue streams), cultural (knowledge preservation and dissemination), social (community cohesion and identity reinforcement), and educational (accessible, engaging learning opportunities).

Adams emphasizes shifting focus from transactional metrics to holistic societal contribution. When audiences understand that purchasing a "Palace Cat" notebook funds roof restoration, commercial activity transforms into participatory stewardship. This transparency creates "value resonance" where stakeholder interests align with institutional mission [5]. Institutions explicitly communicating value allocation achieve 34% higher donor retention.

3. Case analysis: value conversion pathway

3.1. Multi-platform communication ecosystem

The Palace Museum operates a strategically differentiated ecosystem across four core platforms, each meticulously calibrated to audience expectations and platform affordances. As detailed in Table 1, this architecture exemplifies advanced IMC implementation where narrative coherence coexists with format-specific optimization—a critical distinction from fragmented multi-channel approaches [3,6]. WeChat functions as the content depth and commerce hub, publishing scholarly yet accessible long-form articles (e.g., "The Symbolism of Dragon Motifs in Ming Dynasty Ceramics") alongside seamless e-commerce integration through mini-programs. Weibo enables real-time public dialogue and trend participation, with curators responding directly to audience questions during live-streamed conservation sessions. Douyin delivers visually immersive cultural snippets optimized for mobile consumption—such as 45-second videos revealing the intricate process of restoring a Qing Dynasty silk robe—leveraging AR filters that allow users to "try on" historical court attire. Bilibili targets digitally native youth through documentary-style content like the acclaimed series "Restoring Time," which follows young conservators through multi-year restoration projects, fostering community through comment-driven discussions and user-generated derivative works.

Critically, cross-platform synergy generates multiplicative effects far exceeding isolated channel performance. A WeChat article introducing the Daily of the Forbidden City calendar drives direct e-commerce traffic while seeding discussion threads on Weibo. A Douyin video showcasing the craftsmanship behind "Palace Cat" merchandise sparks viral challenges (#MyPalaceCatStyle) that migrate to Weibo for broader discourse. Bilibili documentaries inspire physical visits, with viewers sharing pilgrimage photos tagged #PalaceMuseumVisit across all platforms. Zhang and Wang document a 67% increase in cross-platform user migration (2019-2022), with 41% of new WeChat followers originating from Douyin referrals—a metric confirming the ecosystem's integrated value circulation rather than channel siloing [7]. This strategic interdependence transforms individual platform activities into a cohesive value-generation network where each touchpoint reinforces institutional credibility and deepens audience investment.

Table 1. Platform-specific strategy and performance metrics of the Palace Museum's self-media ecosystem [6,7]

Platform	Primary Function	Content Format	Followers (2023)	Avg. Engagement Rate	Strategic Role
WeChat	Storytelling & E-commerce	Long articles, H5 pages, mini-programs	12.8M	8.7%	Content depth & revenue conversion
Weibo	Public Dialogue & Trending	Short posts, live streams, polls	18.5M	6.3%	Real-time engagement & crisis management
Douyin	Visual Immersion	15-60s videos, AR filters	25.3M	12.1%	Youth attraction & viral potential
Bilibili	Youth Education	Documentaries, vlogs, collaborations	9.7M	15.8%	Cultural literacy building & community cultivation

3.2. Cultural resource digitization and value conversion pathway

Systematic digitization forms the non-negotiable foundation of authentic value creation. Since 2018, the Palace Museum has invested significantly in high-resolution scanning of artifacts, photogrammetric 3D modeling of architectural spaces, and construction of a narrative database linking objects to historical contexts, scholarly research, and conservation records [8]. With exceeding 1.2 million cataloged items, this digital asset library serves dual purposes: it allows for creative reinterpretation while protecting delicate originals. Crucially, digitization precedes commercialization. No product enters development without verified historical documentation, ensuring scholarly integrity remains the bedrock of all public-facing initiatives.

Li identifies a rigorous three-stage creative transformation process governing this transition from archive to audience: cultural decoding by subject-matter scholars who verify historical accuracy and contextual significance; contemporary translation by designers who adapt visual elements while respecting cultural symbolism (e.g., simplifying intricate dragon motifs for modern aesthetics without distorting meaning); emotional embedding by marketing specialists who craft narratives connecting historical significance to contemporary life experiences. This collaborative workflow prevents superficial appropriation and ensures every product carries authentic cultural DNA. The process culminates in the comprehensive four-stage value conversion pathway synthesized in Table 2. Products like the "Daily of the Forbidden City" calendar transform archival documents into daily inspiration—each date featuring a different artifact with historical context—while "Palace Cat" merchandise anthropomorphizes the museum's resident feline guardians, creating emotional entry points for audiences unfamiliar with imperial history. Critically, these innovations preserve authenticity through transparent sourcing: product descriptions explicitly reference original artifacts and conservation records, allowing audiences to trace creative interpretations back to scholarly foundations [8].

Table 2. Four-stage value conversion pathway [6,7,9]

Stage	Core Activities	Key Outputs	Value Dimensions	Evidence
1.Cultural Resource Digitization	High-res scanning, 3D modeling, database construction	Digital asset library (1.2M+ items)	Cultural preservation, accessibility	300%↑ digital archive usage (2019–2023)
2.Emotional Narrative Embedding	Cultural decoding, contemporary translation, identity storytelling	Engaging content (articles, videos, IP)	Emotional connection, cultural literacy	3.2× engagement in collaborative content
3.Multi-platform Resonance	Platform-native distribution, cross-promotion	67%↑ cross-platform migration; viral campaigns	Social cohesion, brand awareness	Douyin videos avg. 5M views; Weibo topics 2B+ reads
4,Sustainable Value Generation	Revenue reinvestment, conservation funding, education	¥1.5B+ annual revenue; 42%↑ youth visits	Economic sustainability, mission fulfillment	78% revenue directly funds heritage conservation

3.3. Strategic implementation and impact validation

The empirical data in Table 2 provides robust validation of the pathway's efficacy and interdependence. Commercial success directly reinforces cultural mission in a transparent, accountable cycle: ¥1.5+ billion annual cultural product revenue (with 78% directly attributable to social media acquisition channels) is fully reinvested into conservation efforts, educational

programs, and digital infrastructure [6]. This financial transparency transforms audience perception—purchase decisions become acts of participatory stewardship rather than mere consumption. Youth visitation (ages 18–30) increased by 42% between 2019 and 2023, while digital archive usage grew 300%, demonstrating tangible improvements in public cultural literacy and engagement depth [7]. Sentiment analysis of 10,000+ user comments across platforms reveals 89% positive association between product purchases and perceived contribution to heritage preservation ("Knowing my purchase helps restore the Hall of Clocks makes me proud to own this item" – WeChat comment, 2022).

Critically, the Palace Museum resolves the perceived tension between authenticity and innovation through institutional discipline. All digital initiatives undergo mandatory review by the Academic Committee, ensuring scholarly accuracy precedes public release. When a proposed Douyin filter initially misrepresented Qing Dynasty court attire colors, the project was paused for historical verification—a decision publicly communicated to audiences, which paradoxically strengthened trust through demonstrated commitment to accuracy. This integrity-centered approach ensures audiences perceive commercial activities as mission-aligned extensions rather than exploitative ventures. The pathway's true innovation lies not in isolated tactics but in the causal linkage between stages: digitization enables authentic narrative embedding (Stage 2), which fuels multi-platform resonance (Stage 3), culminating in sustainable value generation (Stage 4) where economic outcomes directly fund the digitization efforts of Stage 1—creating a self-reinforcing virtuous cycle.

4. Implications for cultural institutions

4.1. Digital role redefinition and organizational capacity

Cultural institutions must evolve from passive repositories to active cultural conversation facilitators. This requires structural investment: dedicated digital teams with editorial autonomy, content calendars aligned with cultural cycles (e.g., lunar calendar festivals), and metrics prioritizing engagement depth over superficial reach. Authenticity remains non-negotiable—audiences rapidly detect inauthentic commercialization, making scholarly integrity foundational to all digital initiatives. For resource-constrained institutions, phased implementation is viable: begin with one platform matching core audience demographics (e.g., Instagram for visual collections), establish rigorous content review protocols, and transparently communicate value allocation ("Every purchase funds artifact preservation"). The Palace Museum's experience confirms that audiences reward transparency with loyalty—73% of surveyed purchasers cited "knowing revenue supports conservation" as primary purchase motivation [6].

4.2. Sustainable value creation framework for diverse contexts

A replicable framework emerges with adaptable components: First, it is essential to establish robust digital asset libraries pre-commercialization, prioritizing high-significance collections. Then, translating thoughtfully is crucial, such as implementing cross-functional review (scholars + designers + community representatives) to ensure respectful cultural element adaptation. Furthermore, strategic collaboration is a must. Specifically, cultural institutions can partner with organizations sharing core values (e.g., educational institutions for curriculum-aligned content). Finally, economic metrics can be tracked, alongside cultural impact indicators (e.g., knowledge retention surveys, visitation diversity indices) [8].

This framework transforms preservation-innovation tensions into synergistic relationships. For smaller institutions, scalability is achievable: a regional museum might digitize 50 key artifacts rather than 1.2 million, develop one signature product line, and focus on two platforms—but the principles of authenticity, transparency, and value closure remain universally applicable.

4.3. Platform-native communication competence development

Success requires specialized teams possessing both subject-matter expertise and platform literacy, a dual competency increasingly critical for digital relevance. WeChat demands literary depth and historical nuance; Douyin requires visual storytelling immediacy and trend awareness; Bilibili values co-creation and community responsiveness. Institutions should invest in cross-training programs where curators learn platform basics and digital specialists receive cultural competency training. The Palace Museum's "Digital Ambassador" program—pairing junior conservators with social media managers for content co-creation—reduced content production time by 35% while increasing audience trust scores by 28% [7]. This competence building represents essential strategic investment, not peripheral activity.

5. Conclusion

This study confirms the Palace Museum's self-media strategy functions as a sophisticated, self-reinforcing value conversion system rather than a collection of isolated marketing tactics. Through integrated platform deployment, rigorous authenticity protocols, and transparent value communication, the institution achieves the rare outcome where commercial success directly strengthens cultural mission capacity. The documented four-stage pathway—digitization, narrative embedding, multi-platform resonance, and sustainable value generation—provides a validated, adaptable model for heritage institutions globally seeking to enhance relevance without sacrificing integrity.

However, there still exist some imitations in this study. First, the single-institution focus, while enabling deep contextual analysis, limits immediate generalizability. Future research should conduct comparative cross-cultural studies (e.g., Louvre, British Museum) to identify universal versus context-specific pathway elements. Second, audience metrics partially rely on institutional reporting. Thus, incorporating independent survey data and longitudinal tracking would strengthen validity.

Looking ahead, three promising avenues emerge: investigating generational value perception differences; developing standardized metrics for "cultural literacy improvement"; exploring ethical AI applications in heritage communication with safeguards against algorithmic bias. As global institutions navigate digital transformation, the Palace Museum's experience offers concrete methodology for authentic heritage revitalization where digital interactions strengthen cultural continuity.

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