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New Media Environment and the Emotional Communication of AI-Generated Short Dramas

Wenjin Zhang

School of Journalism and Communication, Wuhan Sports University, Wuhan, China
2023332607@whsu.edu.cn

Abstract. In 2024, the global short drama market exceeded 50 billion RMB, surpassing box office revenue for the first time. Notably, AI-generated short dramas have emerged as a transformative factor, signaling a significant shift in content production and consumption patterns. This study explores the emotional communication mechanisms of AI short dramas in the new media environment via a multi-case analysis of three globally viral works: Paper Phone, Fruit Love Island, and Huo Qubing. Informed by McLuhan's media theory and emotional contagion theory, it identifies three central features of emotional communication: broad resonance, algorithmic arousal, and immersive spectacle. The results reveal that new media platforms have transformed emotional communication, fostering a "global emotional village," while AI technology amplifies human creativity, thus enabling the production of unprecedented cinematic visuals. However, persistent issues include emotional uniformity, cultural misreadings, algorithmic bias, and the uncanny valley. This study offers theoretical insights on AI-driven emotional communication and practical guidance for cross-cultural content.

Keywords: AI-Generated Short Dramas, Emotional Communication, New Media, McLuhan's Media Theory, Cross-Cultural Communication

1. Introduction

The past two years have witnessed an explosive growth of AI-generated short dramas on global new media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and ReelShort. With their fast-paced plots, high emotional density, and AI-powered visual effects, these works have attracted billions of views worldwide, becoming a new form of emotional sustenance for Generation Z [1]. The integration of generative AI has revolutionized the entire content production chain, from scriptwriting and virtual shooting to intelligent editing, greatly reducing production costs and cycles [2]. Despite commercial success, research on AI short dramas is limited, especially on their emotional communication in new media. Existing studies have focused primarily on technical aspects or market trends, with insufficient exploration of how AI reshapes emotional production and transmission, and how new media platforms facilitate cross-cultural emotional spread [3]. This study addresses the research gap by examining the distinctive emotional communication features of AI-generated short dramas, the impact of the new media environment on emotional transmission, the challenges in their emotional communication, and the relevance of McLuhan's media theory. To achieve this, it uses a multi-case

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study and theoretical analysis, focusing on three globally viral AI short dramas. Consequently, the findings advance understanding of AI-mediated communication and provide practical guidance for creators, platforms, and policymakers.

2. Theoretical foundation and related work

2.1. Reshaping of emotional communication paths by platform algorithms

In the new media ecosystem, emotional value has replaced pure information value as the core driver of user engagement and secondary dissemination. Accordingly, users' browsing, liking, and sharing behaviors are primarily motivated by emotional resonance and social identity construction rather than effective information acquisition [4]. At the same time, algorithm recommendation technology further reconstructs the entire emotional content dissemination process, replacing traditional manual communication with a computable, adjustable, and scalable intelligent mechanism that significantly shapes the cross-cultural circulation of AI short dramas. New media algorithms enable precise user matching and incremental dissemination through big data analytics and user profiling. Unlike the spontaneous and relatively random diffusion of traditional emotional content, algorithmic systems prioritize high-arousal emotional content by utilizing viewing duration, interaction frequency, and sharing intention as core evaluation metrics. Thus, this mechanism intensifies emotional stimulation, potentially creating information cocoons, emotional polarization, and entertainment dependence, a phenomenon referred to as the "dopamine trap" [5]. Based on existing multi-dimensional models of physiological arousal, algorithmic regulation, and cultural accumulation, this study investigates how platform algorithms convert emotional expressions in AI short dramas into scalable communicative resources, reconfigure dissemination pathways for distinct emotional narratives such as family affection, entertainment, and heroism, and ultimately affect emotional communication efficiency and cross-cultural adaptability [6].

2.2. Theoretical interpretation framework for AI emotional communication

Through the integration of Emotional Contagion Theory and McLuhan's media theory, a dual-dimensional analytical framework is constructed to explain the mechanisms of cross-cultural emotional communication in AI short dramas.

From the emotional transmission perspective, traditional interpersonal emotional contagion operates through two paths: unconscious transmission via mirror neuron mechanisms and conscious resonance based on cognitive empathy [7]. In contrast, AI- and algorithm-driven dissemination fundamentally restructures this process, where technological mediation replaces real interpersonal biological feedback, converting authentic emotions into digital visual symbols while algorithms regulate content exposure and dissemination speed [8]. Through autonomous identification, filtering, and generation of high-arousal content, AI in short drama communication transforms spontaneous emotional interaction into directed technological induction for cross-cultural communication.

From the perspective of media theory, McLuhan's concept of "the medium is the message" explains how the vertical-screen format, fast-scrolling logic, and algorithmic push mechanisms of short-video platforms shape the lightweight, highly entertaining, and viral characteristics of AI short dramas [9]. Generative AI extends human creative capabilities, enabling low-cost, high-efficiency production of cinematic visual scenes that enhance emotional presentation [10]. McLuhan's "global village" concept further clarifies AI short dramas' cross-cultural foundation: new media eliminates geographical barriers, thus allowing universal emotional themes to transcend cultural and linguistic

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restrictions and build a global public emotional community. This ntegrated framework overcomes the limitations of single-perspective approaches and explains the full logic chain linking media technologies shaping content forms, algorithmic mechanisms driving dissemination, and emotional contagion enabling cross-cultural resonance.

3. Case studies and emotional communication features

3.1. Case selection and data sources

This study selects three globally viral AI short dramas, namely Paper Phone, Fruit Love Island, and Huo Qubing, as case studies. As a result, all three works have achieved large-scale cross-platform dissemination, accumulating hundreds of millions of views across TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, thereby reflecting the international communicative characteristics of AI short dramas. Moreover, the selected cases represent distinct emotional and narrative types, including familial affection and nostalgia, light entertainment with romantic conflict, and heroic patriotism, providing a diversified analytical sample. Besides, all selected works are fully AI-generated, including plot creation, image production, and content iteration, ensuring consistency with the focus of this study. Regarding data, public information on global view counts, platform trends, topic influence, and audience growth was collected from official platforms and verified studies. On the basis of these data, a cross-case comparative analysis of narrative strategies, emotional construction, and dissemination pathways is conducted to identify general patterns of emotional communication and cross-cultural circulation in AI short dramas.

3.2. Emotion-driven narrative mechanism of AI short dramas

Through differentiated universal emotional narratives, AI short dramas have developed a mature high-emotion-density content construction mechanism, which serves as the core internal driver of their global popularity. This mechanism relies on three distinct emotional archetypes, each with a tailored cross-cultural resonance strategy. In this regard, Paper Phone adopts the family affection and nostalgic archetype, centering on universal longing and filial piety. It builds soft cross-cultural resonance via unadorned daily stories, accumulating over 40 million worldwide views. By contrast, Fruit Love Island represents the light entertainment and dramatic conflict archetype, combining anthropomorphic design with iterative conflicts to create low-cognitive-load emotional stimulation. It gained 300 million views and 3 million followers in 9 days via its fast-paced rhythm. Meanwhile, Huo Qubing embodies the heroic grand narrative archetype, translating culturally situated historical narratives into universal motifs of heroism, courage, and righteousness. It achieved 500 million global views and realized reverse cross-cultural communication of Chinese traditional culture [11]. By embedding AI short dramas in universal human emotions, these archetypes facilitate the construction of multi-dimensional, high-emotion-density narratives that resonate with diverse global audiences and constitute a foundational mechanism for cross-cultural emotional communication.

3.3. Platform algorithm and content diffusion mechanism

Building on the algorithmic reshaping of emotional communication paths analyzed earlier, AI short dramas leverage platform algorithms to form a mature high-emotion-density content construction and dissemination system, which is the core internal driver of their global popularity. In operational terms, platform algorithms quantify the cross-cultural transmission potential of different emotional

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types through big data analysis of user interaction behaviors. On this basis, they design personalized dissemination strategies tailored to each emotional narrative. Finally, they amplify global influence through incremental push mechanisms. In this process, the algorithm-empowered mechanism aligns differentiated universal emotional narratives with targeted global audiences, thereby significantly enhancing cross-cultural communication efficiency.

For family-affection and nostalgia narratives represented by Paper Phone, algorithms employ a "universal emotion prioritization and cultural specificity filtering" strategy. By identifying emotions like longing for family members and filial piety as having minimal cross-cultural comprehension barriers, the system promotes simple, everyday life stories to cross-generational and cross-cultural user groups with high sensitivity to family-oriented themes. Leveraging the strong cross-cultural compatibility of family-related emotions, which is further amplified by algorithmic distribution, the work has accumulated over 40 million global views. For light-entertainment and dramatic-conflict narratives exemplified by Fruit Love Island, algorithms implement a "real-time interaction feedback and viral amplification" mechanism. And the system, by detecting that high-frequency dramatic conflicts and fast-paced emotional rhythms generate peak viewing duration and sharing intention, applies waterfall-feed intensive distribution alongside real-time popularity weighting mechanisms to enhance content diffusion. For heroic and patriotic grand narratives like Huo Qubing, algorithms utilize a "spiritual core extraction + global interest circle matching" path. Algorithms transform culturally specific historical stories into universally recognizable emotional labels of heroism, courage and righteousness, and push the content to global user groups interested in history, action and heroic themes. This strategy effectively reduces cultural understanding barriers, and the work achieved over 500 million global views, realizing reverse cross-cultural communication of Chinese traditional cultural content [7].

3.4. Cross-cultural communication outcomes and visual enhancement

The synergistic empowerment of AI visual generation technology and universal cultural expression constitutes the dual core of AI short dramas' effective cross-cultural emotional transmission, jointly reducing cultural discount in cross-border communication and strengthening emotional immersion.

From the perspective of cross-cultural communication outcomes and universal principles, all three cases validate a fundamental law of cross-cultural emotional communication, namely that success depends not on culturally specific symbols, but on the precise capture of universal human emotions. By abandoning obscure localized cultural references and focusing on shared emotions such as family affection, romantic joy, and heroism, AI short dramas greatly reduce cross-cultural emotional comprehension thresholds and mitigate cultural discount. Notably, Huo Qubing shows that even culturally specific historical themes can achieve global resonance: its universal spiritual connotation of heroism successfully offsets the cultural distance of Chinese historical narratives, realizing reverse cross-cultural output and international recognition of traditional Chinese cultural content [9]. Regarding the AI visual enhancement mechanism and its causal impact, AI generation technology establishes a clear causal chain n which customized visual presentation boosts emotional immersion and thereby improving cross-cultural communication effectiveness. By breaking through the cost and technical limitations of traditional filmmaking, AI enables the production of tailored high-quality visual content aligned with different emotional narratives at relatively low cost. In particular, the delicate warm-toned scene rendering in Paper Phone intensifies the subtle emotional atmosphere of family nostalgia, the vivid anthropomorphic animation characters in Fruit Love Island enhance the perceptual appeal of entertainment-driven emotions, and the grand cinematic war scenes in Huo Qubing amplify the emotional impact of heroic narratives [12]. This AI-driven visual

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spectacle markedly enhances the intensity of emotional perception and immersive experience, reduces cognitive load in cross-cultural comprehension, and enables universal emotions to reach global audiences in a more direct and powerful manner.This mechanism further confirms McLuhan's theory that media technology extends human sensory and emotional perception.

4. Existing challenges in emotional communication

Despite their global success, AI short dramas are confronted with three fundamental challenges in emotional communication that hinder their sustainable development and long-term cross-cultural influence. These challenges arise from the inherent limitations of generative AI technology and the profit-driven logic of platform algorithmic systems.

4.1. Emotional homogenization and simplified expression

With increasing frequency, AI short dramas depend on stereotyped emotional templates centered on revenge, romance, and tear-jerking tropes, producing formulaic plot structures and one-dimensional emotional expression. As a result, this over-reliance on proven emotional formulas prioritizes immediate audience response over narrative innovation and depth. Even commercially successful works like Fruit Love Island and Huo Qubing depend heavily on repetitive high-intensity emotional stimulation to maintain viewer attention, which gradually erodes narrative complexity and reduces long-term audience engagement [10]. Meanwhile, the standardization of emotional content further limits the diversity of emotional experiences that AI short dramas can offer to global audiences.

4.2. Algorithm-driven emotional amplification and cultural bias

Through systematic amplification of high-arousal emotional content, platform algorithms maximize user engagement metrics, creating a feedback loop that prioritizes sensationalism over balanced emotional expression. In cross-cultural contexts, this algorithmic amplification exacerbates cultural misinterpretation and discount risks. Culturally specific emotional nuances, such as filial piety and ancestor worship depicted in Paper Phone, are often oversimplified or distorted during algorithmic dissemination. Moreover, AI-generated localization tools further fail to capture subtle cultural connotations, thereby leading to emotional dissonance between the intended message and global audience perceptions [13].

4.3. Lack of emotional authenticity and audience fatigue

In emotional communication, AI-generated performances lack the authentic emotional texture and subtlety of human acting, thereby creating a persistent authenticity gap. Even in emotionally warm works like Paper Phone, artificial visual rendering and synthetic voice acting produce an "uncanny valley" effect that disrupts audience immersion and erodes trust in the emotional narrative. This authenticity deficit is reflected in industry data showing that only 26.5% of viewers rate AI short dramas as "exceeding expectations" [14]. Compounded by prolonged exposure to algorithmically optimized high-intensity emotional stimulation, this leads to widespread audience emotional fatigue, particularly among younger demographic groups.

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5. Conclusion

This study explores the emotional communication of AI-generated short dramas in the new media environment through a theoretical and case-based analysis. The results reveal that AI short dramas have developed distinctive emotional communication features centered on universal emotional resonance, algorithmic arousal, and visual spectacle. At a broader level, new media platforms have profoundly reshaped emotional transmission by creating a global emotional village, where emotions can spread instantaneously across cultural boundaries. From a theoretical perspective, McLuhan's media theory provides a powerful framework for understanding this phenomenon, explaining how the medium itself shapes content, how AI extends human creativity, and how new media create a global community. Despite their potential, AI short dramas are faced with several critical challenges, including emotional homogenization, cultural misinterpretation, algorithmic manipulation, and authenticity deficits. However, it focuses on three successful cases and may not represent the entire spectrum of AI short dramas. Moreover it does not include quantitative data on audience emotional responses. Future research could employ large-scale surveys and physiological experiments to more precisely measure emotional engagement. Besides, longitudinal studies are required to examine the long-term social and psychological impacts of AI-generated emotional content. As AI technology continues to evolve, the future of AI short dramas relies on balancing technological innovation with emotional authenticity. By addressing the current challenges, AI short dramas have the potential to become a powerful medium for cross-cultural communication and global emotional connection.

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