Proceedings of ICADSS 2026 Symposium: Interpreting Culture: Context in Art, Literature, and Mass Media
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT35499

The Online Virality Logic and Cultural Characteristics of Changle Youshen Folklore in the New Media Context: A Case Study of Douyin During the 2024-2026 Spring Festivals

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Abstract. The short-video platform is becoming an important carrier for disseminating traditional folk customs. Fujian's Changle Youshen, a folk-belief custom with distinct regional characteristics, achieved phenomenal popularity on the Douyin platform across three consecutive Spring Festivals from 2024 to 2026. Grounded in the new media context, this study takes the communication practice of Changle Youshen on Douyin during this period as a case, adopts an interpretivist paradigm, and integrates text analysis, case study and semi-structured interviews (13 interviewees covering five groups: performers, villagers, creators, and online and offline audiences) to build an integrated analytical framework of "folk origin-media characteristics-virality logic". It analyzes the intrinsic motives of the sustained popularity, distills the cultural characteristics derived in the new media context, and evaluates the two-way impact of communication on folk inheritance. The study finds that, first, the communication content, form and audience feedback evolve iteratively year by year; second, the platform algorithm, scarce visual symbols and the audience's nostalgic and leisure needs work together to form a closed loop of popularity; and third, short videos drive Youshen toward symbolic entertainmentization, commercialization and audience popularization. While broadening dissemination and supporting living inheritance and local cultural tourism, they also bring hidden concerns such as the erosion of ritual authenticity and content homogenization. The study provides a theoretical reference and a practical path for regional niche folklore to achieve long-term inheritance and effective breakout by relying on short videos.

Keywords: Changle Youshen, Douyin, new media communication, folk culture, virality logic

1. Introduction

With the rapid iteration of digital media and short videos, the new media represented by Douyin continues to reconstruct the folk communication ecology. With the advantages of intuitive audio-visual presentation, high interactivity and cross-regional reach, short videos have broken the shackles that geography and clan circles impose on the dissemination of traditional folklore,

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enabling many local niche folk customs to break free from geographical restrictions and enter the public's view by relying on online traffic. New media empowering the living inheritance of folklore has become an important topic at the intersection of folklore studies and communication studies.

Fuzhou's Changle Youshen in Fujian is a landmark local folk-belief custom, carrying clan culture, local memory and traditional ritual skills. It was long confined to local and surrounding offline occasions, with a closed dissemination circle and low national visibility. Since the 2024 Spring Festival, short videos related to Changle Youshen have continued to climb in popularity on Douyin, reaching the platform's Spring Festival folk hot list for three consecutive years and transforming from a local folk activity into a phenomenal folk IP across the whole network. This case not only verifies the feasibility of short videos in promoting the modernized dissemination of traditional folklore, but also exposes real problems such as folk alienation and uneven content quality in the process of networking.

Existing studies mostly explore folk digital communication and cultural-tourism IP creation at a macro level, whereas refined empirical research on a single folk case across multiple years and on one platform remains scarce. Based on this, this study selects content related to Changle Youshen on the Douyin platform during the 2024-2026 Spring Festivals, focusing on three core questions: first, what evolutionary characteristics the communication content, form and audience interaction present over the three years; second, how the platform, creators and audiences jointly drive the sustained popularity; and third, what new cultural characteristics Youshen derives and what inspiration this provides for the living inheritance of local folklore.

2. Literature review

2.1. New media and short-video folklore communication

At the level of new media and short-video folk communication, the academic community has formed a relatively mature research system. Shi et al. used Douyin as the field to explore the value reconstruction and dissemination empowerment of short videos for intangible cultural heritage (ICH) folklore, pointing out that their visualization and fragmented expression lower the acceptance threshold of traditional culture [1, 2]. Meng, from a visual-culture angle, and Chang et al., from a meme-theory perspective, provide theoretical support for the symbolic presentation and fission-style dissemination of short-video folklore [3, 4]. Jin et al. and Yang et al. provide empirical references for studying the drivers of content popularity from the dimensions of platform algorithms and user participation [5, 6]. International frontier research further expands this horizon, addressing the narrative strategies, digital communication mechanisms, critical-heritage perspectives and musical-ICH promotion of Douyin and TikTok ICH short videos [7-10].

2.2. Studies on the Changle Youshen cultural ontology

At the ontological level of Youshen culture, the existing literature mainly revolves around historical origin, folk connotation and regional inheritance. Zhang, Yin and Yuan interpret the ritual connotation and cultural symbols of Youshen from the perspectives of cultural characteristics, living dissemination and soundscape construction respectively [11-13]; Liu and Su define its local value and development path based on regional culture and the current state of inheritance [14, 15]; Wang and Deng pay attention to its revival in Spring Festival culture and its online popularity [16, 17]. Such research mostly leans toward offline fieldwork, clarifying the original attributes and local character of Youshen [18].

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2.3. Research gap and the present study

At the case level of Youshen short videos, the relevant results are relatively scarce; only Lin and Gao used the 5W model to make a preliminary analysis of how Youshen short videos broke out of their circle [19]. Overall, three shortcomings exist in the current research: first, the content is fragmented, lacking an integrated perspective that organically combines the distillation of cultural characteristics with the attribution of sustained popularity; second, static descriptions predominate, lacking diachronic tracking of the evolution of communication over multiple years; and third, studies remain at the level of phenomenon description and do not systematically distill the cultural characteristics in the new media context. This study builds an integrated framework of "folk origin-media characteristics-virality logic" to bridge the above gaps.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research paradigm and analytical framework

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm with qualitative research at its core. Different from inducing general patterns from quantitative data, this study focuses on exploring the meaning construction, communication logic and cultural change of Youshen folklore in the short-video field, and on the new connotations that creators, platforms and audiences give to the folklore through interaction. Grounded in specific communication contexts, interpretivism can retain the uniqueness and complexity of local folklore, which aligns with this study's aim of probing the mechanism of popularity, the new cultural characteristics and the inheritance implications. Accordingly, this study builds an integrated analytical framework of "folk origin-media characteristics-virality logic" (see Figure 1), incorporating Youshen's scarce visual symbols, the Douyin platform mechanism and the audience's aesthetic psychology into a unified perspective, and connecting the distillation of cultural characteristics with the attribution of communication logic.

3.2. Data collection

This study integrates three types of methods to collect data. First, text analysis takes the 2024-2026 Spring Festival period on the Douyin platform as the bounded cycle, collecting short-video captions, footage, topic tags and user comments related to Changle Youshen, and completing the archiving of raw materials. Second, the case study relies on fieldwork, visiting the villages and towns in Changle that hold Youshen and collecting local clan historical materials, folk records and offline activity records over the years, in order to clarify Youshen's traditional original appearance and the trajectory of its online evolution. Third, semi-structured interviews divide subjects into five categories according to the research framework, with 13 informants in total: 2 Youshen performers, 2 offline audience members (one local and one non-local), 2 local villagers, 2 Douyin shooting bloggers, and 5 Douyin online viewers. Questions concern folk inheritance, creative logic, viewing experience and the pros and cons of going viral, with the whole process recorded and transcribed.

3.3. Data analysis

After data collection, this study uniformly conducts cleaning, regularization and coding. The short-video captions, topics and comments are preprocessed to remove spam and irrelevant text, and the interview transcripts are anonymized. On this basis, open coding is carried out around five themes—communication content characteristics, drivers of popularity, new folk-cultural manifestations,

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positive value of communication and negative drawbacks—and a dedicated database is established by module. Then, through content-coding analysis, case-context analysis and interview-theme analysis, the roles of the three-party subjects in the process of going viral are cross-validated.

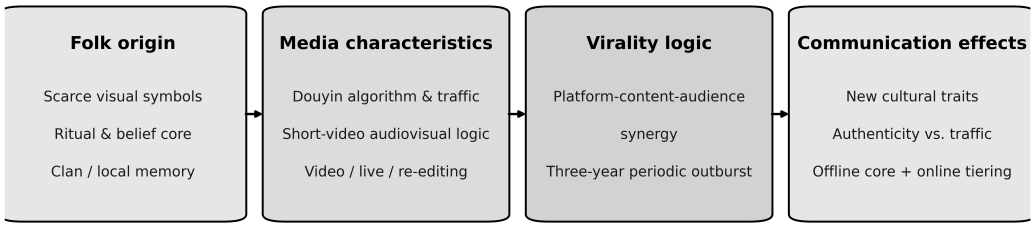

Figure 1. The analytical framework of folk origin, media characteristics, and virality logic

4. Results

Combining short-video samples, case data and interviews, this study tests the three propositions and reports findings on communication evolution, the virality mechanism and cultural transformation.

4.1. Year-on-year evolution of content, form, and audience response

As shown in Table 1 and Figure 2, the content structure changed significantly over the three years: in 2024 it was dominated by original documentary footage of on-site rituals; in 2025 entertainment-style editing grew rapidly; and in 2026 entertainment adaptation and cultural-tourism promotion became the main body, while the proportion of documentary content continued to decline, and the creative orientation shifted from "folklore recording" toward traffic and cultural tourism. The communication form developed from scattered users' casual on-site shooting into a composite mode combining short videos, live streaming and secondary editing, with normalized on-site live streaming by leading bloggers becoming mainstream. The audience expanded from local and surrounding residents to a nationwide pan-entertainment group, and comments differentiated from local sentiment into three categories: curious praise, travel consultation and questioning of excessive entertainment.

4.2. Tripartite synergy of platform, content, and audience as the virality mechanism

Youshen's popularity over consecutive years is driven by the synergy of three parties. At the platform level, Douyin's Spring Festival traffic support, interest tags and same-city recommendation achieve precise cross-circle distribution of content, forming external traffic support. At the content level, scarce visual symbols such as the guard of honor, parade troupes and distinctive costumes fit the audio-visual logic of short videos, forming the core attraction. At the audience level, the public's nostalgic and leisure needs for the traditional New Year flavor and rural culture build a stable market of likes, shares and views. The three form a closed-loop linkage, contributing to the cyclical outburst of popularity across three consecutive Spring Festivals.

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4.3. New cultural characteristics and the coexistence of benefits and drawbacks

Short videos give rise to three new cultural characteristics. First, symbolic entertainmentization: fragments capture highlight scenes while the connotation of the complete sacrificial and blessing ritual is weakened. Second, commercialization of the sector: internet-celebrity check-ins drive local catering and homestays, and some performances are re-arranged to fit the camera. Third, audience popularization: Youshen has transformed from a regional belief custom into a national-level mass IP. The interviews further confirm the coexistence of benefits and drawbacks: on the positive side, communication broadens the boundaries of folklore, attracts young people to learn the craft, and activates rural cultural tourism; on the downside, fragmented adaptation dispels original authenticity, and homogeneous imitation leads to the loss of original ritual details—views expressed by performers, villagers, bloggers and audiences all corroborate this.

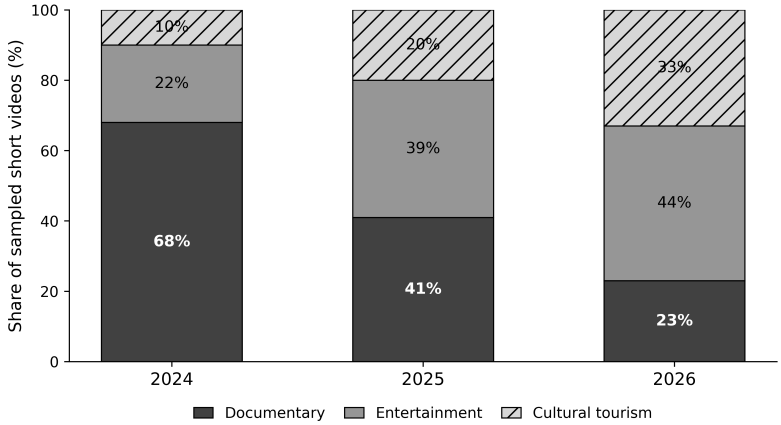

Figure 2. Year-on-year change in the content composition of Changle Youshen short videos, 2024-2026

Table 1: Year-on-year evolution of Changle Youshen short-video communication, 2024-2026

Dimension	2024	2025	2026
Content focus	Ritual documentary	Rise of entertainment edits	Entertainment & cultural tourism led
Communication form	Casual individual clips	Video plus live streaming	Video, live, and re-editing combined
Audience scope	Local and nearby residents	Expanding outward	Nationwide pan-entertainment
Dominant response	Local emotional resonance	Curiosity and praise	Travel inquiry and over-entertainment critique

5. Discussion

From the perspective of media-folklore theory, short videos break the geographical boundaries of folklore; the media deeply participate in the reconstruction of folk forms, realizing the mediatized re-creation of local folklore. The differentiated interpretations of Youshen by subjects of different identities also reflect the characteristic of culture being pluralistically constructed in media interaction. From a practical perspective, short videos are an effective low-cost path for niche

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folklore to break out of its circle; however, platforms favor entertainment content, squeezing the space for folk popular-science content and continually dissolving the traditional core through fragmented editing. Accordingly, folklore inheritance should adopt an "offline adherence and online tiering" strategy: strictly observing ritual regulations offline while zoning popular-science documentary and entertainment content online, and balancing traffic with folk authenticity. This study is limited by its single case, qualitative method and small interview sample; future work could add audience discourse analysis and questionnaire surveys to extend to cultural identity and cultural-tourism integration.

6. Conclusion

Taking the communication of Changle Youshen on Douyin from 2024 to 2026 as a case, and combining content analysis with multi-group interviews, this study verifies its three propositions. The content of Youshen short videos shifted from original documentary toward entertainment adaptation and cultural-tourism promotion, the form upgraded to a video-plus-live-streaming combination, and the audience spread from local to nationwide; the synergy of platform traffic support, scarce visual resources and nostalgic, curiosity-driven demand sustained popularity across three Spring Festivals; and short videos drove Youshen toward entertainmentization, commercialization and popularization, expanding folk communication yet eroding ritual authenticity. The "folk origin-media characteristics-virality logic" framework and the "offline adherence and online tiering" path can offer a reference for similar niche local folklore seeking long-term inheritance and effective breakout through short videos.

Authorship contributions

Shuyuan Zhang: Conceptualization, Investigation, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing.

Declaration of interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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