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A Study on the External Communication Mechanisms and Emotional Chains of Intangible Culture Heritage Short Video under Interaction Ritual Chain Theory: A Case Study of TikTok

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Abstract. With the globalization of short video platforms such as TikTok, the cross-cultural dissemination of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has acquired new media infrastructures and practical challenges. Existing studies from the perspectives of communication strategies or cross-cultural obstacles at the macro level, the complete pathway from mutual focus to emotional energy and ultimately to collective symbols, revealed by the theory of Interaction Ritual Chains (IRC), have not been empirically tested in the context of cross-cultural short videos. This study uses IRC as the analytical framework, selects 300 ICH short-video samples from the TikTok platform, and adopts a method that combines content analysis with quantitative analysis of platform interaction data to investigate the interactive ritual triggering characteristics, emotional energy generation mechanisms, and cultural identity effects of ICH short videos. The study found that there were significant differences in the common focus construction, virtual presence maintenance, and emotional expression strategies of the three types of videos: skill display, cultural story, and fusion innovation. Among them, the skill display category forms the strongest emotional energy through visual focus, driving deep sharing behavior, and the integration innovation category has the widest dissemination but the weakest emotional transformation depth. The research verifies the applicability of IRC theory in cross-cultural short video dissemination and provides empirical evidence for the content production and dissemination strategies of ICH on the TikTok platform.

Keywords: Interaction ritual chains, intangible cultural heritage, TikTok, external communication mechanisms, emotional chains

1. Introduction

In recent years, short video platforms like TikTok have played an increasingly important role in the cross-cultural exchange of ICH. Public data from the platform shows that the view count for videos related to intangible cultural heritage has reached billions, covering various categories such as traditional crafts, folk performances, festival customs, and culinary skills. Short videos have a low

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threshold, strong visual expressiveness, and high interactivity, which have indeed opened channels for the international dissemination of intangible cultural heritage information that was previously unavailable. However, the increase in viewership does not equate to the effective transmission of cultural connotations.

Intangible cultural heritage is essentially a knowledge system embedded in local contexts, relying on bodily practices and intergenerational transmission. When it is removed from its original cultural context and presented to a global audience in a fragmented manner, cultural discount and understanding bias are almost inevitable. Therefore, a key question arises: why do intangible cultural heritage short videos achieve widespread dissemination in cross-cultural communication, yet often struggle to evoke deep cultural resonance? This is both a theoretical and a practical issue.

Three comparatively distinct paths have emerged from the study of ICH short-video transmission from an academic standpoint. Communication landscapes and strategy optimization are the main topics of the first line. Scholars did macro-level scans of platforms like Douyin and TikTok, exposing the processes of algorithmic recommendations, the involvement features of various dissemination players, and the homogenization tendencies of short videos on ICH [1]. These investigations offer an empirical basis for comprehending the ecology of dissemination. The topic of how the impacts of dissemination are produced through micro-level interaction processes is not addressed by the analytical frameworks, which continue to be independent of one another. Beginning with cross-cultural communication studies, the second line focuses on the deep causes of the comprehension challenges faced by intangible cultural heritage abroad, such as the distortion of meaning in the transition between high and low contexts and the network deconstruction of local knowledge [2]. This kind of research keenly points out the phenomenon of "cultural discount," but the methodology is mainly qualitative description, and lacks systematic examination of the process of generating, amplifying, and internalizing emotional resonance. The third line introduces the perspectives of interactive rituals and emotional communication, using Collins' theory of IRH to analyze how ICH short videos construct emotional energy and group unity through "virtual co-presence" [3]. This type of research has explored the analysis unit from macro-level communication effects to micro-level interaction, but there are two progressive limitations. In the application of theory, the use of a single theoretical segment or emphasis on ritual construction, or emphasis on emotional strategies, or emphasis on user psychology, fails to place the complete path of "common concern for emotional energy group symbols" in the same empirical framework. In terms of research context, almost all focus is on domestic platforms and domestic audiences, and this framework has not been expanded to include cross-cultural platforms and overseas audiences represented by TikTok.

The three lines mentioned above indicate that there are three progressive gaps in current research. Firstly, there is a lack of thematic mechanism research that takes the IRC as a comprehensive theoretical framework, TikTok as the platform, and ICH short videos as the subject. Secondly, it was unable to create a tested causal chain that included the content text's ritual-triggering qualities, the platform interaction energy amplification process, and the emotional internalization results of cross-cultural audiences. Thirdly, most studies do not use mixed method designs that link textual aspects, interaction data, and audience feedback. Instead, they rely on single qualitative descriptions. In other words, there is a missing mechanical bridge that explains how emotion is conveyed between the problem of "cultural discount" and the objective of "cultural resonance."

This study focuses on ICH short movies that are making the rounds on Douyin and uses the IRC theory as its analytical framework. This topic was chosen in response to the very little amount of work that addresses this specific junction. The study makes use of both text analysis and the

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quantitative data from the platform rather than just textual interpretation. The investigation is guided by three questions: what factors allow ICH short videos on Douyin to start interaction rituals? How do the platform's interaction mechanisms translate these components into observable emotional expressions? How does the participation of overseas users in rituals affect their cultural cognition and sharing behavior? Thus, this study investigates the applicability and limitations of the IRC theory in cross cultural digital contexts and unifies the three previously dispersed research lines into a comprehensive causal chain. Practically speaking, the study's findings offer data-driven guidance for the creation and marketing plans of ICH content on the TikTok platform.

2. Literature review

Short-video websites like TikTok have become important venues for the intercultural sharing of intangible cultural assets in recent years. Concentrating on the fundamental question of how to successfully distribute brief films about intangible cultural property, current research has produced a multitude of findings in several domains, such as communication tactics, cross-cultural difficulties, and emotional mechanisms. The basis for this study was established by these research findings. A changing trajectory is revealed by a retrospective analysis of the body of extant literature. It progressively moves from describing the communication environment at the macro level to analyzing cross-cultural barriers before going into great depth to examine the dynamics of interaction and emotional processes at the micro level. Even with these developments, there is still a big gap between different lines of inquiry. The entire trajectory of emotional energy, as envisioned by the concept of IRC, from content development to cross-cultural audience reception, has received very little consistent empirical investigation.

2.1. Landscape communication and strategic approaches

The general communication ecology and strategic models of short movies of intangible cultural resources were the main topics of early research. Existing research has examined the dissemination effects of intangible cultural heritage short videos from different platforms. Analysis of Douyin indicates that content homogenization and fragmentation significantly limit the complete transmission of cultural information [1]. In order to perform a thorough assessment of the global spread of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, several academics have also broadened the scope of their research to include TikTok. They discovered that cultural perception disparities and a lack of creative expression continue to be major problems despite the platform's benefits, such as a large audience, a variety of artists, and rich forms of expression [2]. Further research on TikTok communication patterns confirmed the algorithmic suggestion mechanism's crucial importance, but it also highlighted the fact that more complex issues like cross-cultural decoding continue to be major roadblocks [4]. Another study noted that, from the standpoint of emotional connection, short movies transform static cultural symbols into dynamic and beautiful objects through narrative reconstruction, symbolic change, and richer experiences. In this approach, cultural DNA may be creatively transformed throughout the process of creating emotional resonance [5]. This study's analytical framework functions independently even though it reveals several facets of heritage transmission. Platform ecosystems are the subject of some research, while operational strategy, strategic optimization, or esthetic transformation are the focus of others. One common drawback is the absence of a cohesive theoretical framework, which makes it difficult for various studies to share viewpoints. Significantly, prior studies have not addressed a basic question: which micro-interaction mechanisms result in successful or poor communication outcomes? IRC theory can function as a

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thorough analytical framework in this investigation because of this theoretical gap. This paradigm can link several study outcomes.

2.2. Challenges in cross-cultural communication

Some scholars have approached this issue from the perspective of intercultural communication theory, attempting to trace the roots of the misinterpretation of ICH abroad and proposing possible paths to overcome these obstacles. One study outlined three core issues faced by the dissemination of ICH on TikTok: firstly, local knowledge is deconstructed online, and the content of the heritage gradually detaches from its original context. Secondly, high-context cultural information is significantly compressed in the low-context-dominated platform environment, leading to fragmented audience understanding. Thirdly, the misalignment between high-context and low-context modes of expression further leads to the distortion of meaning. To address these issues, the study offers three improvement suggestions: reconstructing the context, establishing multi-level intellectual property rights for intangible cultural assets, and enhancing the implicit information within the culture. At the same time, the authors advocate for promoting the shift from "showcasing culture" to "cultural resonance" through collaborative meaning construction [6]. Another study employed a mixed-methods approach, conducting in-depth interviews with regular viewers and analyzing over 100,000 comments on TikTok. The study identified two main strategies that help viewers emotionally resonate with intangible cultural heritage content. One is self-expansion, where the audience gains a broader perspective and cognitive tranquility through aesthetic immersion. Another is self-transcendence, where cultural exemplars of perseverance and skill provide a moral reference, prompting the audience to re-evaluate themselves with resilience at the core. Based on this, Wang views the digital heritage space as a unique "environment of well-being" [7]. These studies provide some valuable references on the phenomenon of cultural discount and how to minimize its impact in cross-cultural environments. However, methodologically speaking, most studies remain at the level of qualitative case studies or macro-level interpretations. Currently, there is still very little systematic empirical research on how emotional resonance is generated, strengthened, and internalized. Cultural resonance or self-transcendence is often treated as the outcome, but how this outcome develops, spreads, and sustains, the entire causal chain has not yet been fully revealed. It is also unclear whether this chain remains effective in cross-cultural contexts. The reason this study chooses IRC theory as the analytical framework is precisely to fill this explanatory gap. The core of this theory lies in explaining how emotional energy is generated and spread across cultural differences.

2.3. Studies of interaction rituals and emotional communication

The "affective turn" in communication studies continues to advance, with researchers beginning to focus on the motivations behind user engagement and the effects it produces. Some studies have drawn on Collins' IRC theory to analyze how intangible cultural heritage short videos use "virtual co-presence" to stimulate emotional energy and group cohesion [8]. There are also studies that summarize three pathways through which embroidery short videos evoke emotional identification, namely the construction of cultural memory, response to trending topics, and vivid storytelling [9]. Other studies have shown that emotional expression influences users' willingness to share along the chain of "emotional resonance to emotional intensity to emotional memory" [10]. The research indicates that interaction rituals and emotional factors have become key explanatory variables. However, the existing work still has two limitations. Firstly, in terms of theoretical application, most

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studies only focus on individual aspects of the IRC theory. Some emphasize ritual initiation, some focus on emotional strategies, and others on audience psychology. None has yet placed the complete path of "shared attention, emotional energy, and collective symbols" within a unified empirical framework. Secondly, in terms of research subjects, almost all cases are focused on domestic platforms like Douyin and domestic audiences, and this framework has not yet been extended to TikTok and its overseas users as a cross-cultural context. Therefore, there is still no clear answer as to whether the emotional energy generation mechanism described by IRC theory remains effective in a cross-cultural context.

2.4. Research gaps and research questions

Synthesizing the dialogues and limitations across the three lines of inquiry above, three progressive research gaps can be identified. First, there is a lack of dedicated mechanism studies that adopt the IRC theory as the framework, take TikTok as the platform, and target ICH short videos as the object. A mechanistic bridge is missing that explains emotional transmission between the predicament of "cultural discount" and the goal of "cultural resonance." Second, existing work fails to integrate the ritual-triggering features of content texts, the energy amplification process of platform interaction, and the emotional internalization outcomes of cross-cultural audiences into a single causal chain. Third, most studies rely on singular qualitative descriptions. Mixed method designs that connect textual features, interaction data, and audience cognition remain scarce.

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes three research questions: First, what content characteristics of intangible cultural heritage short videos on the TikTok platform can trigger interactive rituals? Second, how are these features transformed into observable emotional energy through the platform's interaction mechanisms? Third, how do overseas users' cultural identity and re-dissemination behavior change after participating in interactive rituals?

To address the above questions, this study takes short videos of intangible cultural heritage on TikTok as the analysis object, employing content analysis to systematically code the elements of interactive rituals within the videos. Additionally, it combines platform-generated interaction data with audience survey results to assess the degree of emotional arousal and level of identification. Through this approach, this study aims to provide empirical evidence for the cross-cultural communication process of intangible cultural heritage short videos and to integrate the previously scattered research clues from three directions into a complete causal chain.

3. Method

3.1. Sample selection and platform interaction data collection

This study focuses on short videos published on the TikTok platform from January 2024 to June 2025, selecting content tagged with #ChineseCulture, #ChineseCalligraphy, #IntangibleCulturalHeritage, and other similar tags as samples. Using a stratified sampling method, based on interaction metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, a total of 300 videos were selected for analysis.

For each sample video, this study recorded the number of views, likes, comments, shares, and saves, while also collecting comment texts for sentiment analysis, categorizing the comments into positive, negative, and neutral. The usage of emojis is also included in the evaluation scope.

Among the 300 samples, there are 114 skill demonstration videos, accounting for 38%; 87 cultural narrative videos, accounting for 29%; and 99 creative integration videos, accounting for

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33%. The total view count for all sample videos exceeded 230 million, with an average view count of approximately 770,000 per video.

3.2. Content Analysis Coding Framework

Based on the IRC theory, video content was coded along three dimensions: (1) mutual focus features: video topic type, including skill demonstration, cultural storytelling, and fusion innovation. Visual focus clarity, indicating whether a clear core object is present. Title and hashtag specificity, showing whether they point to a specific cultural item. (2) virtual co-presence construction: creator's on-screen presence mode, including full presence, partial presence, or absence. Camera language, such as close-up, medium shot, or wide shot. Whether guiding language is used to invite viewers to watch "immersion." (3) emotional expression strategies: music, emotional tone, categorized as stirring, soothing, or neutral. Subtitle tone, including exclamatory, declarative, or interrogative. Narrative rhythm, ranging from fast-paced editing to slow long takes.

Before formal coding, two coders conducted a pilot coding session on 50 videos. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa coefficient. A Kappa value above 0.80 was required before proceeding to formal coding.

4. Results

4.1. Differences in the characteristics of interaction rituals among three types of videos

In skill demonstration videos, close-up shots account for 72% of the footage, and the background music often features instrumental or soothing styles, emphasizing hand gestures and material details. Cultural storytelling videos use picture-in-picture combined with narration 65% of the time, with a relatively smooth narrative pace, alternating between the narrator and visual elements. Creative integration videos, on the other hand, are edited faster, extensively using popular background music and special effects transitions, with an average shot duration of less than 2.1 seconds.

4.2. Differences in interaction metrics among several types

The three types of videos show different trends in interaction data. In terms of likes, skill demonstration videos averaged 82,000 likes, cultural narrative videos received 56,000 likes, and fusion innovation videos had the highest, reaching 123,000 likes. In terms of comments, the skill demonstration category averaged 2,100 comments, the cultural narrative category 3,400 comments, and the fusion innovation category 1,800 comments. In terms of shares, the skill demonstration category averaged 5,800 shares, the cultural narrative category 3,200 shares, and the fusion innovation category 4,100 shares. The proportion of positive comments is 78%, 65%, and 52%, respectively. Calculated by dividing the total number of shares by the total number of views, skill demonstration videos have the highest share rate. In the comments, words expressing admiration or curiosity, such as "awesome," "talent," and "how," are commonly seen. Cultural narrative videos receive the most comments, and the discussions are more in-depth. Comparisons between cultures, like "having something similar in their culture," are rather prevalent. The most popular videos were those that showcased innovation and fusion. Nonetheless, these videos had the most intensely divided comments. Emoji-only comments made up 41% of all comments in this category.

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4.3. Initial demonstration of the conduction of emotional energy

The favorable sentiment rate of comments and the features of the video material were compared using a cross-tabulation technique. The findings show that videos with slower narrative speeds and more close-up shots are more likely to elicit favorable feelings and be shared. On the other hand, videos with more special effects and quicker editing speed got more likes. These videos, however, have lower sharing rates and comment depth. This trend implies that the depth of dissemination and emotional intensity can be positively correlated.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation analysis

video type	percentage	visual features	interaction data percentage
skill demonstration	38%	close-up shots72%, focus on hand details, picture in picture and commentary	highest share rate, positive sentiment 78%
cultural storytelling	29%	slow-paced narration	highest comments volume (average 3400), active cross-cultural engagement
integrated innovation	33%	fast-paced (average shot length 2.1seconds), special-effects transitions	highest like count (123000), but positive sentiment only 52%

4.4. Summary of findings

The triggering interaction routines in these three categories of international Chinese short videos differ significantly. Through a visual focus on "visual spectacle," skill demonstration videos provide intense emotional energy that encourages deep sharing behaviors. Through "narrative immersion," cultural story videos promote cross-cultural comparisons and conversations.

Although fusion-innovation videos had the widest audience, they had the lowest emotional conversion depth. The degree of visual concentration and the narrative rhythm of the video content were strongly associated with the production of emotional energy.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

The results confirm the use of IRC theory in cross-cultural short-video communication. Different paths are used by the three video genres to start rituals.

The strongest emotional energy is produced through visual emphasis in skill-demonstration films. Close-ups draw the viewer's attention for a long time. High sharing rates are caused by this "mediated co-presence." By recognizing visual focalization as a crucial ritual trigger in visual media, the discovery expands the hypothesis. Narrative immersion is how cultural storytelling videos operate. They encourage viewers to make cultural comparisons. Self-transcendence and self-expansion are triggered by this [7]. Instead of instantaneous sharing, the outcome is more in-depth remarks. The largest audience is reached by fusion-innovation videos, but their emotional impact is the lowest. While it draws attention, fast pacing fails to maintain mutual concentration. This implies that successful ritual outcomes are not always ensured by high viewership. Short-term involvement

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might not result in long-term cultural affiliation. These findings show that emotional energy varies by genre. It is not a single outcome but takes different forms with different behavioral effects.

5.2. Practical implications

The skill-demonstration strategy is the most effective way for content providers to promote sharing. Slow rhythm and close-ups inspire admiration. Viewers are inspired to share with this admiration.

For generating conversation, the cultural narrative model works well. Storytelling creates emotional connections. It promotes deeper communication and cross-cultural comparison. New audiences can be drawn in using fusion-innovation. It should not be the primary medium for deep cultural transmission, though. Reach and emotional depth could be combined in a hybrid approach. Content that highlights abilities and cultural narratives should be supported by platforms and cultural institutions. More meaningful cross-cultural communication may be made possible by these formats.

5.3. Research limitations and future research

There are four restrictions on this study. Firstly, the results might not apply to other platforms because the sample is limited to TikTok. Furthermore, subgroup comparisons are not feasible due to the lack of reviewers' demographic information. Thirdly, irony and sarcasm cannot be reliably identified by sentiment analysis. Finally, the long-term consequences of video exposure were not monitored in this study.

Different platforms can be compared in future studies. They can measure emotions more accurately by using computational techniques. Ethnographic techniques can be used to investigate how ICH content is interpreted over time by audiences abroad.

6. Conclusion

This study uses the IRC theory as an analytical framework to examine intangible cultural heritage short videos on TikTok. After analyzing 300 samples using a mixed research method, three main findings were obtained.

Firstly, there are three different ritual modes in intangible cultural heritage short videos, namely skill demonstration, cultural narrative, and creative integration. Different techniques are used by each type to foster an environment of shared attention and virtual co-presence. Cultural narrative types employ a calming and immersive storytelling technique, skill demonstration types rely on powerful visual focus points, and creative integration types keep users' attention through abrupt transitions. Second, the kind of video greatly influences how much emotional energy is produced. Videos that demonstrate skills have the highest share rates and produce powerful emotional energy due to their visual impact. Users are more likely to leave lengthy comments and draw cross-cultural parallels when watching cultural narrative films, which can stimulate deeper cognitive engagement. Despite receiving a lot of views, creative integration videos have comparatively little emotional impact. Thirdly, there are two basic strategies to convert emotional energy into cultural identity. First, user sharing behavior is encouraged by the admiration produced by skill demonstrations; second, conversation and in-depth discussions are driven by the empathy suggested by cultural narratives. Stronger resonance and wider diffusion effects are produced when the two are combined, giving content producers useful references for intercultural communication. In the context of cultural globalization, this study shows how emotional mechanisms direct cultural displays toward

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cultural resonance. The study offers a comprehensive analytical viewpoint for digital cultural diffusion by exposing the effects of visual attention, narrative rhythm, and technical methods on audience reactions. Future studies can monitor these mechanisms' long-term effects on the formation of cultural identity as well as their application to other audience demographics, media platforms, and cultural contexts. References for the distribution of cultural content in different short video ecosystems can also be found in the research findings.

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