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A Study on Transmedia Storytelling and Communication Effects of Cultural Variety Shows: A Case Study of China in Classics

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Abstract. With the diversification of communication platforms, cultural variety shows have begun to leverage transmedia storytelling to expand the ways in which traditional culture is disseminated. This paper analyzes the transmedia narrative practices of the cultural program China in Classics, examining its narrative strategies from three aspects: textual expression, media technology, and dissemination methods, based on transmedia storytelling theory. It further evaluates the program's communication effectiveness by analyzing viewership data, online engagement metrics, and audience feedback. The study finds that the show integrates drama, film, interviews, and other formats to transform classical texts into vivid narratives, while leveraging television, video websites, and social media platforms to broaden its reach and deepen audiences' understanding and emotional connection with traditional culture. However, the program still faces challenges such as a relatively slow narrative pace, insufficient audience interaction, potential oversimplification of cultural content that may diminish depth, and inadequate content coordination across different platforms. To address these issues, this paper offers optimization suggestions regarding content presentation, user engagement, cultural interpretation, and platform collaboration, arguing that while transmedia storytelling can effectively expand channels for classical text dissemination, further improvements are needed in content integration and interactive mechanisms.

Keywords: Transmedia storytelling, Cultural variety shows, China in Classics, Communication effects

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of media technologies, information dissemination has shifted from a single-channel model to a diversified, multidimensional ecosystem. Against this backdrop, Henry Jenkins argues that content can be extended across different media platforms, while new forms of communication emerge via audience participation [1]. In recent years, cultural variety shows like *Chinese Poetry Conference*, *National Treasure*, and Readers have expanded the reach of traditional culture by integrating television with online platforms. However, the rise of short videos and social media has changed the way audience consume information, posing new challenges to traditional TV programming models. Existing research has largely focused on textual analysis of cultural variety

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programs and audience studies within single-media environment, and there is insufficient attention paid to the operational mechanism, communication effect, and the effect on audience participation and cultural identity of transmedia narratives in specific programs. Thus, it is necessary to examine specific cases to further explore the role of cross-media narratives in the dissemination of cultural variety programs. Based on prior research and case analysis, this study investigates the transmedia narrative practices of *China in Classics* across television, online platforms, and short video channels. At the content level, it examines how the program is presented across different platforms; at the effect level, it evaluate its impact on audience participation and cultural identity based on audience surveys. By doing so, the operational characteristics of the program in multi-platform dissemination are summarized, and the basic rules of cross-media narrative for cultural variety shows are refined. This provides a basis for the dissemination practice of cultural variety shows in the environment of media convergence, and also offers a reference for the application of transmedia narrative theory in the Chinese cultural context.

2. Theoretical foundations and core concepts

2.1. The theoretical framework of transmedia storytelling

In transmedia storytelling, different media forms do not simply replicate the same content; instead, each assumes relatively independent narrative functions and collaborates to collectively construct a unified story world [2]. Existing research has mainly focused on two directions: one analyzing text structure and meaning production from a narratology perspective, and the other examining audience participation and content reproduction from a cultural studies standpoint [1]. The former focuses on the internal narrative logic of texts, while the latter emphasizes interactive mechanisms and cultural practices within the communication process. Based on this distinction, this paper examines both the narrative presentation of *China in Classics* across different media platforms and the audience's interactive behaviors and communication effects during cross-platform engagement.

2.2. The structural characteristics of cultural variety shows

Based on mainstream cultural values, cultural variety shows combine entertainment with traditional and elite culture for a broad audience. More specifically, their defining feature is the integration of cultural content into variety-show formats, creating a distinctive form of expression that combines entertainment with cultural communication. Functionally, these programs serve as key vehicles for the creative transformation and innovative development of China's fine traditional culture, and have are also the top priority in current Chinese audio-visual content production. In recent years, cultural variety shows have demonstrated distinct value characteristics across three dimensions: ritualistic experience, cultural depth, and emotional resonance. These developments have also provided new reference points for their future development through innovations in program formats, content, and positioning. Within the context of media convergence, the discursive construction of cultural variety shows extends beyond single-media information dissemination, integrating traditional culture into contemporary life through information spread, field-building, and spatial shaping, thereby forging cultural memory [1-3].

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3. China in Classics and its transmedia storytelling practices

3.1. Program structure and narrative design

With Chinese classic works as the core content, each episode of *China in Classics* focuses on one classic and tells the story. And it also selects historical figures related to the formation, circulation or dissemination of the classic as the main narrative thread. Specifically, the program uses a hybrid structure combining "cultural interviews," "dramatic performances," and "cinematic presentation." Experts first introduce the historical context, compilation process, and key content of each text. The narrative then unfolds via cross-temporal dialogues between a contemporary readers and historical figures [4]. In addition, vivid reenactments bring to life pivotal events and personal experiences behind the classics. By organizing content around the framework of "documents-figures-stories," the show embeds abstract textual material into concrete historical contexts, linking them to individual fates and broader historical settings, thus forming a coherent and compelling narrative chain.

3.2. Manifestations of transmedia storytelling

The transmedia narrative practice of *China in Classics* is primarily reflected in three aspects: textual expression, technological application, and platform dissemination. At the textual level, the program integrates drama, film, and interviews to transform classical content originally presented mainly via written texts into audiovisual narratives [4]. Different media languages work synergistically within the same program to explain knowledge, tell stories, and convey emotions, thus expanding the ways in which classical texts can be presented.

At a technical level, the program comprehensively employs technologies like panoramic screens, real-time tracking, and augmented reality (AR) to construct narrative settings, while also enriching content presentation through diverse media formats including audio, video, and animation [5]. For instance, the program employs large-scale stage scenes to recreate the historical setting of Fu Sheng protecting *The Book of History*, while it adopts craft restoration and prop models to present the technological achievements in Tiangong Kaiwu (The Exploitation of the Works of Nature). In these presentations, technological techniques become an important part of the narrative, shaping both the visual presentation and the storytelling [6].

At the communication level, the program uses a model centered on television broadcasting and supported by multiple platforms. The TV platform delivers complete content, while platforms like Weibo, WeChat official accounts, Bilibili, and Douyin are used to spread topics, divide content into shorter pieces, and support secondary distribution. After the program is aired, related clips, stories about the figures, and knowledge-based content are turned into short videos, images, and text posts and continue to spread on online platforms. This allows audiences to access and engage with the program through different media. Through the combined use of television and online platforms, the program has expanded from single-channel broadcasting to multi-platform communication.

4. The communication effects of the transmedia storytelling of China in Classics

4.1. Communication reach and audience feedback

The evaluation of the dissemination impact of *China in Classics* mainly relies on two types of data [7]. First, publicly available data, including viewership ratings, number of trending topics, video

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views, and topic page views, can reflect the breadth of the program's reach. Second, audience feedback data, like Douban ratings, online reviews, and word-of-mouth, indicate the program's acceptance and social recognition [8]. The integration of these two types of data provides a basis for examining the communication practices and social impact of *China in Classics* from two aspects: communication reach and audience response [9].

The data shows that the program achieved a simultaneous rise in both audience engagement and public acclaim after its broadcast. Notably, the first season received widespread attention from the very beginning of its broadcast. Within the first two episodes, it generated 60 online hot searches across the entire network, and the related topics received over 1.1 billion views. The rating on Douban reached 9.4 points. After the second season was aired, the program continued to maintain a high level of dissemination influence. The cumulative number of online hot searches reached 260 times, and the related topic views exceeded 1.5 billion, showcasing a strong ability for continuous dissemination. Meanwhile, audience feedback indicated that the program achieved a good balance between historical culture interpretation and artistic expression. This enhanced the perceptibility of classic cultural content, and promoted audience interaction and word-of-mouth dissemination. For example, traditional classics like *Book of History* entered the public discussion via the program's presentation, indicating that the program not only effectively disseminated cultural content but also played a positive role in activating classic resources and strengthening cultural identity.

4.2. Transmedia storytelling and cultural identity

Through transmedia storytelling, *China in Classics* enhances the effectiveness of traditional culture dissemination, mainly in three aspects: expanding the audience base, constructing cultural identity, and breaking through the boundaries of traditional media dissemination [3].

Specifically, transmedia narrative has changed the dissemination methods of traditional classics, expanding their audience base [8]. Traditionally, classical texts mainly relied on textual reading, which required readers to possess a certain level of prior knowledge and reading/writing skills. *China in Classics* uses dramatized expressions to convert classical content into character dialogues, historical scenes, and narrative plots, making abstract texts more intuitive and accessible, thereby lowering the barrier for audiences to understand these classics. Meanwhile, by distributing content through multiple channels, including television, video platforms, and social media, the program attracts younger audiences to engage in discussions, enabling classical culture to transcend the limitations of conventional reading environments [8].

Moreover, transmedia storytelling has reshaped the relationship between audiences and classical texts. Rather than merely presenting textual content, the program situates classics within specific historical contexts, using the format of "dialogue across time and space" to present the experiences and perspectives of historical figures, thus allowing viewers to develop emotional connections with the content. As a result, classical texts evolve from static written forms into dynamic, experiential cultural offerings, bringing audiences closer to traditional culture. Besides, transmedia storytelling amplifies the program's cross-cultural outreach. Through coordinated promotion across television, online platforms, and social media, the program has transcended the usual audience limitations of cultural programs, bringing classical culture out of a relatively niche field of knowledge and into public discourse. Meanwhile, multi-platform theme planning and content distribution continuously push related topics to mainstream conversation, triggering continuous heated debates and secondary dissemination. In this process, the program not only expands the reach of traditional culture but also establishes strong social influence and brand recognition.

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5. Issues and improvements in media storytelling practices

5.1. Practical limitations of transmedia storytelling

Although *China in Classics* has achieved significant communication success, from the perspective of cross-media storytelling, several practical limitations remain. Specifically, the program still falls short in terms of dissemination rhythm and interactive mechanisms. For example, its 95-minute episodic format follows the traditional television program model and differs from current habits of fragmented information consumption. While the online platforms provide fragmented dissemination channels, the connection between the fragmented content and the complete narrative still needs to be optimized [7]. According to Jenkins' active consumer participation theory, the current programs mainly rely on viewers' viewing, commenting and sharing for dissemination [1]. The extent of user participation in content production and cultural re-creation is limited, and the interactive potential of cross-media narratives has not been fully exploited.

At the same time, the program faces the challenge of balancing cultural interpretation with mass communication. To lower the comprehension barrier, the program has simplified the content of the classics for easier understanding. However, some complex ideological connotations might have been simplified as a result. How to enhance the entertainment value while maintaining the depth of cultural content is a problem that cultural programs need to solve. Furthermore, the cross-platform dissemination of the program is still mainly limited to the level of content distribution. Different media have not yet achieved effective narrative synergy [10]. Currently, television, video websites and social platforms mainly undertake the functions of content display and dissemination, rather than conducting differentiated narratives around the same story framework. In the future, cross-media narrative needs to further leverage the characteristics of each platform, making different media become different entry points within the content system, and enhancing the overall integrity of the narrative [11].

5.2. Optimization pathways for transmedia storytelling

In response to these limitations, the cross-media narrative strategy can be optimized in four aspects to enhance the program's communication effectiveness and cultural influence. In terms of content supply, the narrative should be designed with a layered structure to meet the information needs of different audiences [12]. While keeping the main narrative intact, the program can provide full content and further explanations for audiences seeking deeper understanding, and short, visual content for those who prefer quick and accessible material.

In terms of the dissemination mechanism, the degree of audience participation should be further enhanced [13]. Currently, the audience mainly engages in watching and providing feedback. To address this, the program can utilize interactive functions and user participation mechanisms to encourage audiences to participate in discussions, content sharing, and cultural re-creation. In this way, the dissemination process can shift from one-way output to two-way interaction.

In terms of content production and cross-media collaboration, it is necessary to strengthen knowledge interpretation and platform linkage. While maintaining a simple expression, the program should incorporate background supplements, academic interpretations, etc., to improve the accuracy of cultural explanations. At the same time, content should be divided based on the characteristics of different media: television should undertake the core narrative, the network platform should provide extended content, and social media should promote interactive dissemination, forming a mutually

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complementary cross-platform narrative system, avoiding simple repetitive dissemination, and enhancing the overall dissemination effect [14].

6. Conclusion

This study employs China in Classics as an example to explore the ways cultural TV programs use transmedia storytelling and its communication effects. The findings show that this program, through the integrated narrative of "theatre+film+interview," combined with audio-visual technology and multi-platform dissemination, transforms traditional classics into more intuitive and understandable audio-visual content. It has achieved relatively positive communication effects in expanding the audience base, enhancing cultural identity, and enhancing the program's influence. However, there remains room for improvement in balancing narrative pacing, audience engagement, cultural depth, and popular expression, as well as in coordinating cross-platform storytelling.

Overall, the value of cross-media storytelling lies not only in the fusion of media formats but also in offering new contemporary expressions for traditional culture, transforming static texts into perceptible and shareable cultural resources. This enables broader public access, especially among younger audiences, to traditional culture through mass media, thereby revitalizing heritage such as Chinese classics in modern communication contexts. This analysis is mainly based on a single case, which limits the wider use of its findings. Future studies could deepen understanding of transmedia storytelling in cultural programming through comparative studies across multiple cases and further explore its practical value within broader communication settings.

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