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Mass Communication Mechanisms, Expression Shifts, and Public Perception of Dong Culture in the New Media Era: An Exploratory Study Based on Rednote

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Abstract. Dong culture is an important part of China's traditional ethnic minority culture. It has been passed down from community to community, and its dissemination has been constrained by geography and available media. Short video platforms, social media and live streaming have changed the way Dong culture enters mass communication. From the perspective of new media communication and the problems that follow, the paper analyzes the joint efforts of platforms, algorithmic recommendation and user participation in bringing Dong culture to wider audiences. To examine the Effectiveness of Communication in Fostering Understanding, the paper further builds on an empirical study of a popular-science account on Rednote to classify users' spontaneous comments by the accuracy of the understanding they express. The results show that digital transformation and visual presentation enable Dong culture to transcend geographical boundaries. Still, wider reach does not mean understanding: A small number of user comments show a basic understanding of Dong cultural elements, as well as a vague understanding of the ethnic and regional context, and some users request more in-depth historical and anthropological content. The logic of platform traffic and short-video formats tends to simplify and symbolize the expression of culture.

Keywords: Dong culture, New media communication, Mass communication, Cultural symbolisation, Cultural dissemination

1. Introduction

Dong culture is one of China's traditional ethnic minority cultures, including song and dance, traditional dress, festivals, architecture, and folk crafts. These cultural aspects have been passed down over time in specific geographic areas and communities. The general public outside these communities has limited access, mainly through tourism, traditional media coverage, or specific cultural events, where dissemination is limited by geographical boundaries and the nature of the media. Social media platforms, live streaming, and short videos have made it easier for cultural content to reach the public. The Dong Grand Song, traditional costumes, drum towers, and wind-and-rain bridges have been turned into short-video and live-streaming content, transcending community boundaries through platform recommendations and user interaction. Research on the

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distribution of intangible cultural heritage on Douyin shows that although government agencies and heritage-bearing communities are the primary content providers, viewers prefer videos created by outside groups and ordinary people [1]; the dissemination terrain is no longer a one-way official narrative. But the logic of platform traffic has also transformed the presentation of culture: complex cultural practices are easily reduced to intuitive visual symbols and linked to tourism consumption. A case study on Tujia culture reveals that ethnic minority cultures are homogenized by algorithms and audience preferences, and they are increasingly estranged from their historical contexts [2].

Taking Dong culture as the research object, this paper explores the mechanisms of Dong culture entering the public sphere of communication from three dimensions: platform dissemination, algorithm recommendation and user participation, from the perspective of new media communication. It also discusses issues such as cultural simplification and symbolization. This paper uses science popularization accounts on the Rednote platform as a case study to examine the effectiveness of this mechanism in real-world communication scenarios. It aims to collect user comments and feedback related to Dong culture in natural interactive contexts, then classify and analyze the accuracy of users' understanding to provide empirical support for the theoretical analysis.

2. The reconstruction of Dong cultural communication by new media

The dissemination of traditional Dong culture has been closely related to specific geographical areas and social life, mainly relying on offline contexts such as festivals, folk rituals, daily interactions, and the practice of traditional crafts. New media has changed this landscape. Short videos, images, and live streaming have turned cultural activities once experienced in person into digital content that can be viewed, saved, and shared online. Short videos can be used to showcase songs and dances; the production processes of traditional costumes and handicrafts can be filmed; and festivals can be broadcast live. Research shows that Douyin has become the largest channel for the dissemination of China's intangible cultural heritage. Billions of views have been garnered by this channel for a great deal of traditional skills only transmitted in local communities [3]. Digital content – it remains after an event is over, it is available, shareable and discussable over and over again. Dissemination no longer depends on the event itself; instead, online and offline channels run in parallel.

Besides the medium of dissemination, new media has also changed the mode of presentation of Dong culture. Traditional culture takes a long time and a complete cultural background to understand, while short videos and social media emphasize immediacy, conciseness and speed. The colors and patterns of Dong costumes, the venues for the "Grand Songs" and the architectural features of drum towers and wind-and-rain bridges all have striking audiovisual characteristics, and they are easy to be made into short videos and images. An empirical analysis of content featuring traditional Yi ethnic costumes on Douyin shows that posting time, visual style and the number of hashtags all have a significant impact on dissemination effectiveness [4]. It can be seen that the visual presentation and the rules of the platform have penetrated deeply into the dissemination process of ethnic cultures, and the Dong people are no exception.

3. The mechanisms through which new media drives the mass communication of Dong culture

3.1. Platform-based dissemination and the transcendence of geographical boundaries

Songs, drum towers and wind-and-rain bridges were traditionally associated with particular locations. These cultural elements were usually only experienced by audiences when they went to

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Dong villages, and participation was limited in traditional media. This pattern has been changed by short-video platforms. The research by Lu et al. on the livestreaming of intangible cultural heritage indicates that livestreams allow for real-time interaction, while edited videos can reach a wider audience and help preserve knowledge, showing different functions of interaction and reach [5].

Removing the cultural content from the place of origin takes away its geographically limited audience. Jenkins et al. call this "spreadability", where content is transmitted through formal and informal networks, and not concentrated at central locations [6]. Festival videos can reach audiences far beyond Dong communities within the framework of the Dong culture, and the platforms are an important gateway for previously unfamiliar audiences to encounter Dong culture.

But platforms are not inherently fair. Wang et al. found that many ethnic minority intangible cultural heritage practitioners on Douyin lack official platform certification and need to highlight their identities in the video titles [1]. So platforms supersede geography, but platform recognition and certification erect new barriers. Therefore, the authentic expertise of village-based Dong inheritors may be less visible than professional content organizations with stronger operational resources.

3.2. Algorithmic recommendations and the dissemination of cultural content

Platforms have answered the question of whether cultural content can be seen, but algorithmic recommendations have altered the way it is reaching audiences. Qin and Tang say that on Douyin, users do not search for content on the long-form platforms. Instead, videos are pushed to users via personalized feeds based on their viewing histories and interests. Thus, users do not need to actively seek out the Dong culture to find it [7]. Videos of Dong villages may show up in algorithmic recommendations for people interested in tourism in Guizhou or ethnic architecture. These mechanisms can help to break down regional barriers, connecting local cultural expressions to national audiences.

Sustained exposure can also come from algorithmic recommendations. When users like or save a video, more similar content is constantly recommended, turning a chance encounter into ongoing exposure to festivals, music, traditional dress and tourism. A viewer might first be attracted by the architecture of a drum tower and later learn the Dong Grand Song and local customs, and the viewer gradually shifts from fragmented impressions to a broader understanding of Dong culture. This interest-based diffusion also helps Dong culture to enter contexts like tourism, gastronomy and photography. However, the diffusion is conditional. Qin and Tang's notion of "struggling representation" highlights the tension between authentic cultural representation and the production of visually appealing content that conforms to algorithmic preferences [7]. Paquienseguy and Guo also find that the production of intangible cultural heritage on Douyin is becoming more and more professionalized, with multi-channel networks playing a growing role [3]. As a consequence, the more visually striking elements such as traditional dress, song and dance are more likely to gain visibility, while context-dependent cultural content may be marginalized.

3.3. User participation and cultural re-dissemination

The platforms are the channels, the algorithms are the reach, but it is user engagement that dictates whether it keeps circulating. With likes, comments, shares and derivative works, ordinary users become participants rather than just recipients, transforming a one-way "publisher–audience" relation into diffusion over many nodes, according to the spreadability described above [6]. Such diffusion capacity is augmented by user-created content: original material is recombined through

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editing, soundtrack selection, commentary and personal narratives, which exceeds the form of mere information replication and enters the expressive frameworks of different users. The internet has facilitated the "decentralization" of narrative production, where content created by users coexists with expert and official narratives [8]. But higher engagement does not equal a deeper understanding, and how much the discussions in comment sections and reinterpretations in content created by users actually convey cultural connotations is a question that needs to be answered with concrete data. This is the point of departure for the empirical research in the next section.

4. Empirical research: an exploratory study on public perceptions of science popularization accounts on rednote

4.1. Research design and data collection

In this paper, the online naturalistic research method was adopted, and a science popularization account was established on the platform of "Rednote", and separate science popularization posts were published based on four dimensions: Dong Culture, Dong Food, Dong Costume and Dong Ethnic Tourism. Other than the voting-guide note, the study did not provide pre-set options or lead users toward certain responses. But the notes themselves were created by the researchers and are the stimulus that users responded to. The method is applied on the basis of the core concepts of online ethnography, which include observing users' natural behavior in real digital contexts, in an effort to collect data that is closer to real cognitive states than structured questionnaires [9]. This method captures the audience's real, unprompted, spontaneous understanding and misunderstandings. Besides the four popular-science notes, the account published one voting-guide note, asking users to specify what they wanted to know more about in Dong culture. Comments under this note were not coded for cognitive accuracy. They were analyzed thematically as a signal of audience expectations.

The data collection was divided into four steps: First, all comments between 10 and 20 days after each post was published were collected; screenshots were taken and exported for each comment to ensure that nothing was missed. Second, the comments were filtered for validity, removing emojis, meaningless approvals (such as "hahaha"), and purely aesthetic evaluations (such as simply praising something as "beautiful"), while retaining questions, opinions, and expressions of cognition directly related to Dong culture. Third, valid comments were coded into three mutually exclusive categories: accurate cognition, vague cognition and erroneous or blank cognition based on the accuracy and clarity of their understanding of Dong culture. Each comment was coded into one category according to the level of knowledge expressed. Fourth, the coded comments were counted by dimension to determine the numbers of total, valid, invalid and categorized comments (Table 1). Due to the small sample, raw counts are reported descriptively rather than being used for statistical inference. Voting-guide comments are analyzed separately.

4.2. Results

Table 1. Statistics on public cognition of various aspects of Dong culture

Dimension	Total comments	Valid comments	Invalid samples	Accurate cognition	Vague cognition	Erroneous/blank cognition
Culture	3	3	0	2	1 (ethnicity & region)	—
Food	1	1	0	1	—	—
Costume	1	1	0	—	1 (IP correctly identified)	—

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Table 1. (continued)

Tourism	0	0	0	—	—	—

A total of 10 comments were collected, including 5 from the "Science Popularization Notes" and 5 from the "Voting Guide Notes." All five comments received in the "Science Popularization Notes" were valid (Table 1). Three indicated accurate understanding (2 under the "Culture" category and 1 under the "Diet" category) and 2 indicated vague understanding (1 under the "Culture" category conflating ethnicity with region and 1 under the "Clothing" category). None of the comments were wrong or left unanswered. Due to the very small sample size these statistics are simply descriptive and do not imply any percentages or differences between dimensions. In this small sample, commentors were generally able to identify elements of Dong culture, but ambiguous understanding suggests that distinguishing between ethnic and regional identities may be more difficult than recognizing cultural symbols. Most of the users can recognize the colors and patterns of traditional clothing or the outline features of architecture, but they cannot accurately express the cultural value and social functions behind them. Simultaneously, there is confusion between Dong culture and other ethnic minority cultures in the southwest, ethnic stereotypes (such as ethnic minorities being "skilled in song and dance" or "wearing brightly colored clothing"), or the application of cognitive templates that are directly related to the traditional dress of other ethnic groups. There are also significant differences in the level of engagement and accuracy across different dimensions. For example, dimensions with a high degree of interaction, such as content related to cuisine and regional symbols (e.g., topics with strong local recognition such as "Guizhou chili peppers"), have been more discussed and relatively more accepted, whereas comment sections for some dimensions have little interaction, indicating that there are large gaps in public understanding of this type of cultural content. It is not rejection but lack of exposure and lack of basic familiarity.

There were five comments under the voting-guide note. One had nothing to do with the research topic (a comment on taxation) and was discarded as invalid. The other four exceeded the four fixed dimensions of Dong Culture, Dong Food, Dong Costume and Dong Ethnic Tourism. Commenters wanted to learn about the historical origin of the Dong people, folk anecdotes, and the anthropological perspective on Dong culture. It implies that the four preset categories do not completely cover what the public wants to know about ethnic minority cultures. Some users look beyond the visual and symbolic content that is dominant on short-form platforms and are looking for more historical and anthropological explanation. This finding qualifies the argument of Section 2: fragmented, visually oriented communication lowers the threshold of contact, but part of the audience is asking for the context that such communication tends to omit.

5. Cultural expression in the mass communication of Dong culture

The geographical boundary of Dong culture has been wiped out by new media, but a wider reach does not mean the total transmission of cultural value. Social media platforms are not neutral channels; the distribution of content is based on a specific logic of popularity and data [10]. consumers to understand the core subject of the content in seconds. The "Grand Song" has been reduced to ethnic music, traditional clothes to colorful patterns, and drum towers and wind-and-rain bridges to architectural landmarks. These symbols strike the unaccustomed audience with a sense of immediate impact, but also confine the Dong culture to a narrow and immediately recognizable series of audiovisual visuals. Mass media representations of ethnic minorities generally emphasize exotic features like song and dance, therefore establishing an ethnic image that is different from that of the Han Chinese [11]. The exploratory observations presented in Section 4 are broadly consistent

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with this concern, although the sample is too small to confirm it. Some commentors recognized cultural elements but conflated ethnic and regional identity. Commentors under the voting-guide note asked for historical and anthropological context that short-form content rarely provides. Ingram's research also implies that the Dong Grand Songs have two different forms – village performances and staged performances, but short films tend to show only one of them, which encourages the listeners to enjoy their musicianship and ignore their social purposes [12].

6. Conclusion

The rapid development of new media has brought new opportunities for the dissemination of Dong culture. Short-video platforms, algorithmic recommendations and user engagement allow cultural expressions like the Dong Grand Song, traditional attire, drum towers and wind-and-rain bridges to cross geographical boundaries and connect with larger audiences. But wider distribution does not necessarily mean more cultural understanding. The exploratory Rednote study, based on a very small number of comments, also points in a similar direction: commentors recognized basic cultural elements, but some conflated ethnic and regional identity, and others asked for historical and anthropological explanation beyond visual symbols. But the exploratory study is based on the platform's organic interaction data, not a random sample, and some commentators may have already been interested in Dong culture. Therefore, its findings should be taken as indicative rather than statistically representative. Future studies can focus on the differences between heritage carriers, content organizations and ordinary users.

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