



Political Economy

Letters

# The Influence of Young Audiences on the Communication Effects of China's Cultural and Museum Industry in the Social Media Environment

Jing Tang  
Linmiao Zeng

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- The advent of the digital age has reshaped the ecological landscape of cultural communication.
  - This paper focuses on young audiences (aged 18-35), who are digital natives, within the social media environment, exploring how they profoundly influence and reshape the communication effects of China's cultural and museum industry.
  - Young audiences are not passive information recipients but rather key nodes and agents of meaning reproduction within the communication network of cultural and museum content.
  - Based on these findings, this paper proposes a systematic set of strategies for enhancing communication effects from four dimensions: content strategy, interaction mechanisms, brand building, and cross-sector integration, aiming to provide theoretical reference and practical guidance for cultural institutions in the digital era.
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We are currently situated within a deeply mediatized society driven by digital technology. According to the 53rd Statistical Report on China's Internet Development by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of December 2023, the number of internet users in China reached 1.092 billion, with the 20-39 age group accounting for a significant 38.1%, constituting the most active and influential core user group on social media platforms. Simultaneously, guided by the national strategy of cultural confidence and the call to "bring cultural relics to life," China's cultural and museum sector is experiencing an unprecedented boom. From the "Forbidden City run" phenomenon to the "Dunhuang fever," from archaeological blind boxes to digital collectibles, cultural institutions are gradually transforming from traditional "repositories and display spaces for artifacts" into "modern hubs of cultural communication" integrating cultural education, social interaction, and leisure entertainment.

In this transformation, social media plays an indispensable role. It is not merely a channel for releasing information but a super-field for constructing dialogue between the public especially the younger generation and millennia-old civilization. However, a core question emerges: To what extent do the communication practices of cultural institutions align with the media usage habits and cultural consumption psychology of young audiences? How do the participatory behaviors of young audiences, in turn, react upon the communication effects and even the development models of the entire cultural and museum industry?

The significance of this study lies in: At the theoretical level, it examines and expands classical communication theories Diffusion of Innovations Theory within the new context of communication specific to China's cultural and museum sector, exploring their explanatory power and applicability

boundaries in the new media environment. At the practical level, by deeply interpreting the behavioral logic of young audiences, it aims to provide targeted and systematic communication strategy recommendations for cultural institutions. This will promote the evolution of cultural content from "one-way indoctrination" to "two-way interaction," from being "excessively highbrow" to "appealing to both popular and refined tastes," ultimately achieving the triple goals of effective communication, industry growth, and cultural heritage preservation.

## **Theoretical Foundation and Analytical Framework**

To systematically analyze the communication mechanism of cultural and museum information on social media, this study primarily relies on the Diffusion of Innovations Theory proposed by Everett M. Rogers. This theory defines "innovation" as "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption," and its diffusion process involves four main elements: the innovation itself, communication channels, time, and a social system.

In the context of this research, the new content formats introduced by cultural institutions e.g., short videos about artifacts, VR tours, interactive experiences e.g., online archaeological games, AR photo opportunities and cultural concepts e.g., new interpretive perspectives on artifacts, aesthetic ideas can all be regarded as the "innovations" to be diffused. Social media platforms constitute the key communication channels. Young audiences, as early adopters and the early majority, directly determine the diffusion rate and breadth of these innovations through their adoption and promotion behaviors.

The diffusion process typically follows an S-shaped curve, involving five stages: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. Young audiences encounter cultural content on social media knowledge, become interested and like or save it persuasion, decide to visit the museum or participate in an online activity decision share their experience implementation, and through continued interaction, confirm their choice and become loyal followers confirmation. This complete chain clearly depicts how cultural information achieves effective penetration and diffusion through the social behaviors of young audiences.

Furthermore, this study supplements the framework with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, aiming to explore the intrinsic motivations behind young users' active use of social media to acquire, consume, and share cultural content—whether for cognitive needs acquiring knowledge, affective needs gaining aesthetic and emotional resonance, personal integrative needs enhancing social image and cultural capital, or social integrative needs integrating into communities, participating in discussions. These two theories together form the analytical framework of this study, providing a solid theoretical foundation for the in-depth exploration of young audiences' behavioral characteristics and their impacts.

## **Deconstructing the Behavioral Characteristics of Young Audiences on Social Media**

Young audiences, as digital natives, exhibit distinct group characteristics in their media usage behaviors. In the realm of cultural communication, their behavioral patterns can be deconstructed into the

following four dimensions:

*(1) Information Acquisition: Fragmented, Visual, and Algorithm-Driven*

Young audiences' information acquisition is highly "anytime, anywhere." They are accustomed to "scrolling" through cultural content on information flow platforms like Douyin, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu during fragmented time such as commuting or breaks. Consequently, visual priority becomes paramount—stunning images of artifacts, creative and interesting animated short videos, and vlog-style exhibition tours are far more attractive than long blocks of text. Additionally, algorithmic recommendation mechanisms profoundly influence their information diet. Platforms precisely push cultural content likely to interest users based on their historical behavior likes, comments, viewing duration, such as the newly excavated gold mask from Sanxingdui or the first snow scene in the Forbidden City. This "tailored" push mode greatly improves information reach efficiency but can also contribute to "filter bubbles."

*(2) Information Sharing: Social Currency, Emotional Drive, and Identity Construction*

Sharing is a core behavior for young audiences participating in cultural communication. Their motivations are complex and diverse: Firstly, cultural content serves as a form of Social Currency; sharing scarce, novel, or in-depth knowledge about culture can demonstrate the sharer's cultural taste and knowledge reserve, thereby enhancing their image within social networks. Secondly, sharing is often driven by strong emotions, such as awe towards exquisite artifacts, reverence for profound history, or pride in the renewal of traditional culture. Finally, sharing is also a tool for identity construction; by publicly expressing preferences for certain types of culture (e.g., Guofeng - national style, archaeology), young people seek and reinforce their cultural circles and identity. The format of sharing is often "image + personalized caption" or short video, striving for high "shareability" (Instagrammability) both visually and textually.

*(3) Interactive Discussion: Co-creative Participation and Community-Specific Exchange*

Young audiences are not satisfied with passive reception; they crave deep participation and co-creation. They will research historical details and debate artistic styles in the comments section of a cultural relic video, spontaneously create guides and memes for exhibitions on Weibo (super topics), or edit "shipping" or "role-playing" videos for artifacts on Bilibili. This interaction is not just feedback but a form of textual poaching and meaning reproduction, endowing ancient artifacts with new contemporary vitality and fun. Simultaneously, these discussions are also community-specific; within particular interest groups (e.g., Hanfu community, archaeology enthusiasts, ACG - Anime, Comics, Games groups), exchanges around cultural topics are more in-depth and frequent, forming unique cultural discourse systems.

*(4) Brand Perception: Experiential, Personified, and Word-of-Mouth Dependent*

The younger generation's perception of cultural institutions' brands no longer stems solely from official one-way (propaganda/publicity) but is based on holistic experiences. They form impressions of a museum through authentic visit vlogs by "ordinary" users, unboxing videos of cultural (creative products -), and feedback on interactive activities shared on social media. Consequently, the image of cultural institutions on social media is increasingly personified—an official account that can use internet memes, interact, and has warmth (e.g., Henan Museum's "Zheng Zai Bo") is far more popular than a rigid and

serious institution. User word-of-mouth (UGC) replaces traditional advertising as the decisive factor in brand reputation. A negative review or a share of a poor experience can significantly damage an institution's reputation.

## **The Mechanism of Influence of Young Audiences' Behavior on the Communication Effects of the Cultural and Museum Industry**

The aforementioned behavioral characteristics of young audiences profoundly influence the communication effects of the cultural and museum industry through the following mechanisms:

### *(1) Expanding Communication Reach: Social Fission and Cross-Community Diffusion*

The sharing behavior of young audiences is the core engine for the viral spread of cultural information. Take the 2022 "What Makes China" major archaeological exhibition at the Shanghai Museum as an example. It did not rely on traditional advertising but exploded on social media due to a picture of a "cutified" treasure—the Shang Dynasty Bronze Zoomorphic Zun (Pig-shaped). Attracted by its contrasting cuteness, young people forwarded it and created memes, pushing related topic readings past 100 million within days. This ultimately led to a powerful "social fission" effect, driving massive offline visitor flow and successfully turning a niche academic exhibition into a cultural phenomenon. This diffusion model, from point to surface and from community to mass audience, greatly breaks the geographical and demographic limitations of traditional cultural promotion.

### *(2) Enhancing Participation Depth: From "Spectating" to "Co-creating"*

The interactive behaviors of young audiences elevate the cultural experience from passive "viewing" to active "participation" and "co-creation." The "Cloud Tour Dunhuang" mini-program cooperation between Tencent and the Dunhuang Academy is a prime example. Users can not only view the caves in VR but also participate in H5 games like "coloring the murals" and share their creations as posters. This Gamification design gives users a strong sense of participation and achievement, transforming them from cultural consumers into participants in cultural production. In 2023, the Sanxingdui Museum collaborated with the mobile game "Let's Hunt Demons," designing artifacts like the Bronze Standing Figure and Gold Mask as "spirits" in the game. Players "capture" them in the real world using AR technology and learn about the artifacts' backgrounds through the game's storyline. This deep cross-border integration allows young people to naturally absorb cultural knowledge through entertainment, achieving ultra-high participation through edutainment.

### *(3) Reshaping Brand Image: Building Youthful and Approachable Cultural IPs*

Young audiences actively participate in reshaping the brand image of cultural institutions through their own interpretations and dissemination. The most typical case is the "Flying Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow" doll from the Gansu Provincial Museum. The museum developed a "ugly-cute" style plush toy based on its national treasure, the Bronze Galloping Horse. The product went viral quickly on social media due to its funny appearance, nicknamed Lù Mǎ, Green Horse, homophone for "Green Code" - aligning with the social psyche at the time, and triggered a buying frenzy. Using this, the Gansu Museum successfully built the "Shenma Is Here" (Shenma sounds like "What" but means "Divine Horse") IP,

which is highly approachable and memorable, changing the stereotypical image of museums as ancient and serious. It established a new brand image that is innovative, playful, and close to young people. The youthful transformation of the brand image is a prerequisite for attracting sustained attention and consumption from young audiences.

#### *(4) Empowering Cultural Heritage: Enabling the Modern Translation of Traditional Culture*

Ultimately, the footing of all communication effects lies in the transmission of cultural value. Young audiences do not simply receive traditional culture; they "translate" it using contemporary expression methods familiar to them. They use danmu (bullet comments) on Bilibili to dub "National Treasure," create personified animations of artifacts, and combine classical patterns with modern outfits on Xiaohongshu... These behaviors essentially integrate traditional cultural symbols into contemporary life contexts, making them "useful," "fun," and "stylish" again. This process significantly lowers the cognitive barrier to traditional culture, eliminates the psychological distance felt by the younger generation, enhances cultural identity and confidence, and endows traditional culture with new vitality, truly achieving "living inheritance."

### **Strategies for Enhancing the Communication Effects of the Cultural and Museum Industry**

Based on the aforementioned mechanisms of influence, cultural institutions should optimize their communication strategies from the following four levels:

#### *(1) Content Strategy: From Knowledge Impartation to Emotional Storytelling*

1. Narrative Transformation: Abandon textbook-style preaching and shift towards story-driven, contextualized, and emotional narratives. Dig deep into the people, stories, and emotions behind the artifacts, produce micro-documentaries, and storyline short videos to evoke audience empathy.
2. Format Innovation: Fully embrace new media formats such as short videos, live streams, and VR/AR. For example, conduct Live Cultural Relic Restoration Day, "Curator's Night Museum Tour" live streams, and create immersive online exhibitions.
3. Visual Revolution: Invest resources in improving the visual quality of content. Utilize technologies like 4K/8K, 3D modeling, and digital animation to present the beauty of artifacts to the extreme, meeting the aesthetic demands of the younger generation.

#### *(2) Interaction Mechanisms: From One-Way Communication to Two-Way Co-creation*

1. Design Interaction Points: Preset interactive links within content, such as initiating topic challenges (e.g., #MyArtifactMakeupLook), soliciting creative interpretations, and developing online interactive games (e.g., artifact puzzles, archaeological treasure hunts) to incentivize UGC production.
2. Build Online Communities: Utilize platforms like Weibo super topics, fan groups, and dedicated mini-programs to cultivate exclusive communities for cultural enthusiasts, encourage in-depth discussions and community-specific cultural exchange, and enhance user belonging.
3. Respond and Empower: Official accounts should actively engage with trends, respond to netizens' creativity, and even incorporate outstanding UGC achievements into the official promotional system,

giving creators a sense of honor and forming a virtuous cycle of interaction.

*(3) Brand Building: From Authoritative Institution to Knowledgeable Partner*

1. Personified Operation: Endow official social media accounts with distinct personalities, use netizen-like and affable language to communicate with users, and create a "museum friend" persona to shorten the psychological distance with young people.
2. IP-Oriented Development: Systematically plan and develop museum collection IPs, extending beyond cultural creative products into areas like animation, games, and film and television, building a grand "cultural and museum universe" to continuously release IP value.
3. Reputation Management: Attach great importance to user feedback, especially evaluations on social media, respond promptly and improve services, treating every user complaint as an opportunity to enhance brand reputation.

*(4) Cross-Sector Integration: From Going It Alone to Ecological Collaboration*

1. Platform Cooperation: Establish strategic partnerships with leading internet platforms (e.g., Douyin, Tencent, Bilibili), leverage their technological, traffic, and data advantages, and jointly develop high-quality projects for precise reach.
2. Crossover Collaborations: Conduct co-branding collaborations with well-known brands in different sectors such as fashion, beauty, F&B, and games. Through the "cultural relic +" model, embed cultural elements into various scenes of young people's lives for breakout communication.
3. Talent Introduction: Actively collaborate with excellent cultural and creative agencies, independent artists, and internet influencers (KOLs/KOCs), leveraging external expertise to enhance the professionalism and appeal of content creation.

## **Conclusion and Outlook**

This study has deeply explored the dynamic relationship between young audiences and the communication effects of China's cultural and museum industry within the new communication ecology constructed by social media. The research indicates that young audiences, with their unique behavioral patterns—fragmented acquisition, emotional sharing, co-creative interaction, and experiential perception—deeply involve themselves in the communication process of cultural information. They are no longer the endpoint of information but key nodes in the communication network and agents of meaning reproduction. Their participatory behaviors expand the breadth of communication through social fission effects, enhance the depth of participation through co-creative interactions, and reshape the brand image of cultural institutions through emotional connections and IP building, ultimately injecting strong momentum into the modern translation and living inheritance of traditional culture.

Facing this transformation, cultural institutions must shift their mindset from being traditional "cultural authorities" to becoming "cultural partners" growing together with their users. The future of cultural communication will inevitably be a comprehensive innovation centered on users, with social media as the main arena, creative content as the link, and emotional resonance as the core.



This study also has certain limitations, primarily employing qualitative analysis and case studies. Future research could further utilize methods such as large-sample surveys, controlled experiments, or big data analysis to quantitatively measure the behaviors of young audiences and more precisely verify the actual effects of different communication strategies. Furthermore, how social media algorithmic recommendation mechanisms subtly shape the cultural information environment and cultural perceptions of young audiences is also a highly valuable research direction. Only through continuous tracking and in-depth research can the cultural treasures precipitated in the long river of history truly radiate bright and lasting brilliance in the hearts of the younger generation amidst the rapidly changing digital age.

**Jing Tang** is a research assistant at Department of Fashion Communication, School of Network Communication of Zhejiang Yuexiu University.

**Linmiao Zeng** is a post-doctoral fellow in Political Communication, affiliated with the Post-doctoral Station in Journalism and Communication and the School of Government, Shenzhen University.