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Narrative transformation and expression mechanisms of cultural communication for generation Z in the digital-intelligent media environment

Yuexing WU¹ and Zihong WU^{2,*}

¹ School of Management, Hunan City University, Yiyang, Hunan 413000, China.

² International Education College, Hunan City University, Yiyang Hunan 413000, China.

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Abstract

Objective: The accelerated evolution of the digital-intelligent media environment is profoundly reshaping the underlying logic of cultural communication. As “digital natives” who have grown up in the internet era, Generation Z has become not only a key audience for cultural communication but also an active participant in content production, meaning negotiation, and dissemination. This study aims to examine the narrative transformation of cultural communication oriented toward Generation Z and to clarify the expression mechanisms underlying such transformation in the digital-intelligent media environment.

Methods: Based on a review and synthesis of existing studies on Generation Z, digital media, international communication, visual narrative, and AIGC-enabled communication, this paper adopts a qualitative theoretical analysis approach. Starting from the group characteristics and media preferences of Generation Z, it analyzes the major shifts in narrative logic and expression forms in contemporary cultural communication.

Results: The study finds that cultural communication in the digital-intelligent media environment is undergoing several major narrative transformations: from grand narratives to micro- and everyday narratives; from text-centered expression to image-based and multimodal narration; from one-way transmission to interactive co-creation; and from generalized communication to segmented and precision-oriented communication. On this basis, the paper further identifies five major expression mechanisms for Generation Z-oriented cultural communication, namely scenario-embedding, symbolic translation, emotional resonance, platform coordination, and human-machine co-creation.

Conclusion: In the future, cultural communication should maintain cultural subjectivity while strengthening youth-oriented expression, cross-cultural adaptation, and technological empowerment. Only by innovating narrative strategies and communication pathways can cultural communication move from “effective reach” to “deep identification” among Generation Z.

Keywords: Digital-intelligent media; Generation Z; Cultural communication; Narrative transformation; Expression mechanisms

1. Introduction

With the continuous embedding of platformized communication, algorithmic distribution, short-video expansion, and AIGC technologies, cultural communication has shifted from a traditional linear model dominated by mass media to a digital-intelligent stage characterized by multi-actor participation, multimodal presentation, and multi-platform coordination. In this process, Generation Z has gradually become an important variable influencing the communication

* Corresponding author: Zihong WU

landscape. On the one hand, as a large generational group on a global scale, the communication practices of Generation Z are profoundly reshaping the forms of international and cultural communication [1]. On the other hand, the rise of younger generations worldwide in the digital-intelligent era has made cultural communication no longer merely a matter of “communicating to youth,” but increasingly one of “communicating with youth” and “disseminating through youth” [2].

Existing studies have shown that Generation Z possesses distinct generational characteristics. Growing up in a context marked by smaller family structures, relatively abundant material conditions, high internet penetration, and increasingly individualized social relations, this generation has developed value orientations and media-use patterns that differ significantly from those of previous generations [3]. At the same time, as a cohort fully embedded in digital society, Generation Z demonstrates stronger tendencies toward individualization, autonomy, and self-centeredness in family, school, and broader social spaces [4]. This means that if cultural communication continues to rely on traditional grand discourse, one-way transmission, and unified messaging, it will be difficult to genuinely enter the everyday lifeworld of Generation Z.

Therefore, reexamining Generation Z-oriented cultural communication in the digital-intelligent media environment is not simply a matter of adjusting communication forms. More fundamentally, it involves the reconstruction of narrative logic, expressive forms, and mechanisms of meaning production. Based on existing research, this paper discusses why the narrative transformation of cultural communication has emerged in the digital-intelligent media environment and how the expression mechanisms behind this transformation are formed.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research design

This study is a theoretical and interpretive inquiry rather than an empirical investigation based on questionnaire surveys or experiments. It mainly adopts literature review, conceptual analysis, and theoretical synthesis as its basic research methods. By integrating representative studies on Generation Z, digital-intelligent media, international communication, image narrative, short-video communication, and AIGC-enabled multimodal communication, the paper seeks to identify the changing trends and internal logic of contemporary cultural communication.

2.2. Analytical framework

The analysis is carried out along two interrelated dimensions. The first concerns the group characteristics of Generation Z and their corresponding requirements for cultural communication adaptation. The second focuses on the narrative transformation of cultural communication in the digital-intelligent media environment and the expression mechanisms generated through this transformation. Through this framework, the study aims to move from “who Generation Z is” to “how cultural communication should be narrated and expressed for Generation Z.”

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Characteristics of Generation Z and the adaptation requirements of cultural communication

Existing research suggests that Generation Z must first be accurately defined as a communication target. Regarding the concept of “Generation Z” itself, scholars have warned against its overgeneralization and misuse in the Chinese context. Although Chinese youth may share certain similarities with their Western counterparts in media exposure and lifestyle, their cultural values remain strongly localized and cannot simply be interpreted through Western generational narratives [5]. Therefore, cultural communication aimed at Generation Z must grasp both the common traits of “digital natives” and the differences arising from specific socio-cultural environments.

From an international perspective, overseas youth—especially Millennials and Generation Z—display significant cross-national differences in their impressions of China, which are shaped by stereotypes, China-related memories, social psychology, and real-life interactions [6]. This suggests that cultural communication for Generation Z cannot presuppose a homogeneous audience; rather, it must be based on sufficient recognition of generational, regional, and cognitive differences. Meanwhile, relevant studies have shown that global Generation Z shares several salient common features, such as strong subjectivity, a preference for authenticity and everydayness, and concern for global issues [7]. These characteristics imply that effective cultural communication must shift from “what we want to say” to “how they are willing to understand.”

At the level of cross-cultural communication, digital-intelligent technologies have turned younger generations into “prosumers” who are both consumers and producers of content. Communication activities have thus moved beyond simple “cross-cultural” exchange toward more fluid, negotiated, and hybrid forms of “transcultural” practice [8]. This means that Generation Z-oriented cultural communication is no longer merely a matter of content supply. Rather, it is a dynamic process involving youth participation in content reconstruction, platform-driven re-diffusion, and algorithm-mediated redistribution.

3.2. Narrative transformation of cultural communication in the digital-intelligent media environment

3.2.1. From grand narratives to micro- and everyday narratives

In the digital-intelligent media environment, Generation Z tends to accept cultural content in ways that are lighter, more emotional, and more closely connected to everyday life. Research has pointed out that the international communication of Chinese culture is undergoing a structural shift from grand narratives to micro-narrative-driven communication [9]. Through light expression, multimodal presentation, and everyday language, micro-narratives make cultural content more accessible to the cognitive and emotional world of Generation Z.

At the same time, communication paradigms aimed at overseas youth are also changing—from an emphasis on “discursive competition” to a stronger emphasis on civilizational co-creation and value coordination [2]. In this mode, cultural communication is no longer simply one-way expression, but rather a process of generating cultural identification through co-creation of subjects, content, and values.

3.2.2. From text-centered communication to image-based and multimodal narration

Against the rapid development of visual culture, images and audiovisual media have gradually become important expressive forms in cultural communication. Relevant studies have shown that image narrative can realize the coordination of value dissemination and meaning production through symbolic encoding, circle-based adaptation, and emotional activation mechanisms [10]. Meanwhile, documentary communication practices have demonstrated that everyday narrative, immersive experience, and technological innovation can significantly enhance cross-cultural understanding of cultural content [11].

In the context of short-video platforms, the “secondary creation” editing of Chinese films has also become a new form of cultural communication. Through topic slicing, hashtag aggregation, and semantic recombination, audiovisual content can be disseminated more efficiently across different cultural communities [12]. This indicates that cultural communication is shifting from a text-centered expressive model toward a system centered on visual symbols and multimodal narration.

3.2.3. From one-way transmission to interactive co-creative narration

In the digital-intelligent communication environment, Generation Z is not only a receiver of information but also a participant in content production and meaning negotiation. Studies show that global younger generations are gradually forming new pathways of people-to-people exchange and cultural communication characterized by content adaptation, cognitive negotiation, and discursive innovation [13]. In this process, communication effectiveness increasingly depends on audience participation and depth of interaction.

At the same time, research on digital influence indicates that authenticity, participation, and intimacy are crucial conditions for building communication influence [14]. Studies on overseas influencers also suggest that the formation of cross-cultural affective communities is an important basis for successful content dissemination [15]. This means that cultural communication is no longer merely information delivery, but an interactive process through which meaning and identification are continuously constructed.

3.2.4. From generalized communication to segmented and precision-oriented communication

In international communication practice, Generation Z has increasingly been viewed as a strategic communication target. Relevant studies have argued that improving international communication effectiveness requires building segmented communication systems for youth and exploring video-based expression and intelligent communication models [16]. Meanwhile, promoting rational perceptions among youth also requires story-based expression and emotional resonance to achieve value communication [17].

Therefore, one of the key tasks of cultural communication in the digital-intelligent media environment is to realize more precise and innovative expression based on a deep understanding of youth media preferences and discursive styles [18].

3.3. Expression mechanisms of cultural communication for Generation Z

Based on the above narrative transformations, five major expression mechanisms of Generation Z-oriented cultural communication in the digital-intelligent media environment can be identified.

3.3.1. Scenario-embedding mechanism

Communication competition in the short-video era is essentially competition over scenarios. Research suggests that through scenario rituals, everyday contexts, and interactive expression, cultural content can be embedded into the daily life experiences of young people, thereby enhancing communicative closeness and participation [19].

3.3.2. Symbolic translation mechanism

In the context of visual culture, cultural communication needs symbolic translation to lower the threshold of understanding. The combination of image narrative and micro-narrative can transform abstract cultural values into symbol systems that are easier to comprehend, thereby enabling meaning transformation in cross-cultural communication [10].

3.3.3. Emotional resonance mechanism

In the communicative world of Generation Z, emotional connection often carries stronger communicative power than information itself. By constructing affective communities, identification and value resonance can be generated in cross-cultural interaction [15].

3.3.4. Platform coordination mechanism

The effectiveness of communication in the digital-intelligent media environment depends to a large extent on platform ecology. Tag systems, community structures, and algorithmic recommendation mechanisms all influence the diffusion paths of cultural content [12].

3.3.5. Human-machine co-creation mechanism

With the development of AIGC, human-machine co-creation has gradually become an important mode of innovation in cultural communication. Through multimodal narration and digital design, cultural content can be transformed into creative, cross-boundary forms of expression [20].

Overall, the above mechanisms are not isolated from one another. Instead, they jointly constitute an interconnected expressive system for Generation Z-oriented cultural communication. Scenario embedding provides an entry point into everyday life, symbolic translation lowers cognitive barriers, emotional resonance strengthens affective identification, platform coordination improves dissemination efficiency, and human-machine co-creation expands expressive possibilities. Together, these mechanisms reveal the structural logic through which cultural communication is being reconfigured in the digital-intelligent media environment.

4. Conclusion

Overall, cultural communication for Generation Z in the digital-intelligent media environment is undergoing a profound narrative transformation. From grand narratives to micro-narratives, from text-centered communication to multimodal expression, and from one-way transmission to interactive co-creation, these changes together constitute the major characteristics of cultural communication in the new era. In this process, scenario embedding, symbolic translation, emotional resonance, platform coordination, and human-machine co-creation have gradually formed a new set of expression mechanisms.

Future cultural communication should, on the premise of maintaining cultural subjectivity, attach greater importance to youth-oriented expression and technological empowerment. By innovating narrative strategies and communication pathways, it can move from mere "information reach" to deeper "value identification."

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

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