Research on Strategies for Disseminating a Vivid Chinese Image from the Perspective of Para-Social Interaction Theory: A Case Study of Zhu Zitong, Host of Phoenix TV's Talk with World Leaders

Yao Liu

Jishou University, Hunan, China

1774573480@qq.com

Abstract. In recent years, the construction and dissemination of national images have become key topics in international relations and cultural exchanges, playing a crucial role in enhancing citizens' sense of national identity and pride. Against the backdrop of the ever-changing international economic and political landscape, the dissemination of China's image faces practical challenges, such as audience resistance and an overly propagandistic tone. The report from the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized the need to accelerate the construction of a Chinese discourse and narrative system, tell China's story well, disseminate China's voice effectively, and present a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China. With the continuous development of new media technologies, strengthening the relationship between communicators and audiences has become a key factor in spreading a vivid image of China. From the perspective of para-social interaction theory, this paper examines para-social interaction and the dissemination of China's image on social media, using Zhu Zitong, host of Phoenix TV's *Talk with World Leaders*, as a case study. It analyzes how Zhu connects with audiences through television programs and social media platforms, establishes emotional resonance, and deepens emotional identification, thus contributing to the dissemination of a vivid image of China. The paper further explores strategies to optimize the dissemination of this image.

Keywords: Para-social Interaction Theory, Chinese Image, Social Media, Emotional Identification

1. Para-Social Interaction and the Dissemination of China's Image on Social Media

As new media technologies disrupt and transform the way information is disseminated, an increasing number of researchers focused on media communication effects have realized that the relationship between the media and its audience plays an increasingly important role in predicting the effectiveness of communication [1]. In the field of media studies, para-social interaction theory often receives the most concentrated attention. Also known as "quasi-social interaction" or "pseudo-social interaction," this theory was proposed by Horton and Wohl in 1956. Its core concept is that when audiences continuously watch television content, they establish a special emotional connection with the characters portrayed by the media in their imagination. This connection, although similar to real social interactions in essence, differs due to its unique formation mechanism and expression. Therefore, the term "para-social interaction" emphasizes its distinctive nature, which lies between fiction and reality. Rubin et al. describe para-social interaction as "a goal-directed behavior in which individuals, to fulfill their interpersonal communication needs, interact with media characters and content." Over time, individuals may form a strong bond with media figures [2]. Para-social interaction theory provides a new perspective for understanding the complex relationships between audiences and media figures, revealing the important role media plays in modern society.

With the rapid development of new media technologies, social media has seamlessly integrated into all aspects of people's lives, becoming an indispensable platform for communication and interaction in modern life. These platforms not only provide users with highly convenient spaces for communication but also play a crucial role in shaping and transmitting national images. Especially on popular social media platforms like Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, users engage in dynamic interactions through posting updates, expressing opinions, liking, and sharing, thus forming a unique, internet-based mode of para-social interaction. This new mode of interaction not only enriches people's life experiences but also offers new avenues and platforms for shaping and disseminating national images. Through the interaction between content creators and audiences, such as those who share

Chinese stories or cultural products, the image of China can be presented in a more vivid and authentic manner, allowing audiences to further deepen their identification with the image of China through this interaction.

Humans are "social beings," and when viewed as a node in a social network, an individual's behavior is shaped by the influences exerted by surrounding connections, determined by the expectations of others and the constraints of social roles. People with different temperaments possess different psychological characteristics [3]. Empathy plays a crucial role in strengthening para-social interactions, and fostering communicators like Zhu Zitong, who have a "Chinese perspective" and a "Chinese heart," acts as a powerful driving force in this process. On social media platforms, actively interacting with audiences and deepening para-social relationships will become an important breakthrough in effectively disseminating a vivid image of China.

2. The Mechanism of Disseminating China's Image from the Perspective of Para-Social Interaction

The core of the mechanism for disseminating China's image from the perspective of para-social interaction theory lies in emotional resonance with the audience. The emotional expression and narrative style of media figures directly influence the emotional responses of the audience. Zhu Zitong, who was honored with the "Top Brand 2024 Chinese Media Industry Brand Woman" award, is a prominent media figure. Not only has she demonstrated exceptional hosting skills on Phoenix TV's *Talk with World Leaders*, but she has also garnered a significant following and influence on social media. Zhu Zitong has amassed more than 14 million followers across various social media platforms, creating a large audience base. With her unique charm, she has built a deep emotional bond with her fans. By actively engaging with her followers on social media and gradually building and deepening emotional identification, she has made a significant contribution to the vivid presentation and dynamic dissemination of China's image, injecting new vitality into the shaping and promotion of the country's image.

2.1. Establishing Emotional Identification: Authentic Representation of China's Image

When examining the dissemination of China's image, there is no doubt that media figures play an indispensable role. As bridges and connectors, they use diverse media platforms such as television, radio, and the internet to accurately and vividly convey the essence of Chinese culture, its historical heritage, and the country's current developmental trajectory to a wide audience. These media figures are not merely information transmitters; they are also concrete embodiments and profound interpreters of China's image. Every word and action they take carries the deep cultural heritage of China, continuously conveying the unique charm of the Chinese spirit to the world.

One of the greatest challenges in introducing one culture into the symbolic world of another lies in overcoming cultural bias and establishing intercultural understanding. This requires reflecting on one's own culture through the lens of the other [4]. The program *Talk with World Leaders* takes a unique perspective, focusing on international hot topics and influential global figures. By interviewing key figures on the global political stage, the program presents China's position and viewpoints to the world. Host Zhu Zitong, with her exceptional professional skills, has earned the love and admiration of a broad audience. She not only engages in in-depth conversations with prominent figures from around the world but also skillfully communicates China's unique way of thinking and value systems, building a bridge for international dialogue.

In the program, Zhu Zitong adopts a deeply engaging and objective attitude in her analysis of international hot topics. Through direct dialogues, she accurately captures and presents the thoughts and perspectives of each guest in a genuine manner. She is committed not only to showcasing the diverse viewpoints of her guests but also to seeking common ground in these discussions, aiming to foster a more harmonious understanding and mutual recognition within the international community. In doing so, Zhu Zitong not only shapes a positive image of China on the global stage but also builds emotional identification with her audience.

2.2. Deepening Emotional Identification: Vivid Dissemination of China's Image

Weibo has both prominent users who act as "opinion leaders" and a broad public who use the platform for entertainment and information exchange. These users exchange viewpoints on Weibo, thereby establishing para-social interactions [5]. On Weibo, Zhu Zitong has more than 9.33 million followers. She frequently shares snippets of her personal life and work reflections, presenting a genuine and multi-faceted self. Additionally, she actively responds to fans' comments and private messages and regularly hosts discussions and polls, encouraging her fans to participate and share their views. This open and inclusive interaction further strengthens her connection with her audience.

Zhu is equally active on short video platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu. She not only posts short video clips and behind-the-scenes moments from *Talk with World Leaders* but also shares exciting moments from her personal life, allowing fans to gain a more comprehensive understanding of her. Furthermore, she interacts with fans in real-time through live broadcasts, promoting her books and sharing knowledge and wisdom. This multi-channel approach, along with frequent interactions with her followers on social media, not only enhances her public image but also deepens the emotional identification her fans have with her.

Research indicates that many audiences feel that a positive relationship with video creators stems from a fundamental alignment with the content they produce. This identification manifests in agreement with opinions, empathy with the stories, and interest in

the creativity of the videos [6]. In her interactions with fans, Zhu Zitong often shares her thoughts and emotions, allowing fans to feel her authenticity and naturalness. These para-social interactions not only give her a unique sense of relatability but also make the Chinese image she conveys more vivid and lively. Through sincere expression, she breaks traditional stereotypes, presenting a more diverse and humanized version of China, making it easier for a broad audience to understand and accept.

3. Optimizing Strategies for the Dissemination of a Vivid Chinese Image

Since entering the new era and with China's comprehensive national strength significantly increasing, the question of how to optimize strategies for disseminating a vivid Chinese image, presented in a more diverse, dynamic, and personalized manner, has become a pressing issue. Based on para-social interaction theory and emphasizing the "audience-centered" principle, optimizing the strategy for disseminating a vivid Chinese image from the perspectives of upholding authenticity, enhancing appeal, and increasing engagement has become a major breakthrough.

3.1. Upholding Authenticity: Building a Trust Ecosystem

Trust mechanisms form the social foundation on which communication systems operate [7]. In the process of disseminating an authentic image of China, it is crucial to emphasize the creation of media figures that are both representative and genuine. These figures not only carry the unique charm of Chinese culture but also reveal and convey the true emotions and inner world of the Chinese people. To more comprehensively present the richness and depth of Chinese culture, it is necessary to delve deeply into and accurately portray the daily life stories, core values, and spiritual ethos of the Chinese people. Such interactions not only allow the audience to more vividly experience China's customs and culture but also foster greater understanding and identification with Chinese culture, thereby providing a fuller understanding and knowledge of the real China.

In their para-social interactions with audiences, communicators must uphold authenticity and transmit accurate information. The famous American sociologist Erving Goffman, in his theory, depicted society as a grand stage where each individual plays a specific role, becoming a performer on this stage. These performances are not random but are deeply influenced by the performers' existing social image and broad social expectations. When communicators on social media platforms create content based on their own image, if they can genuinely and wholeheartedly engage in their performance, this emotionally resonant "performance" will greatly enhance the credibility of the information source, thereby establishing greater authority and trust in the minds of the audience. This accumulation of trust will further promote interaction and communication between the audience and the communicator, forming a positive social media ecosystem. The formation of such an ecosystem is crucial to enhancing the effectiveness of the dissemination of a vivid Chinese narrative.

3.2. Enhancing Appeal: Building a Diverse Image

The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China highlighted the importance of "deeply exploring and showcasing the spiritual core and cultural essence of Chinese civilization, thereby accelerating the construction of a discourse system and narrative framework with Chinese characteristics." This directive aims to communicate China's voice to the world through carefully crafted storytelling, presenting a truthful, multidimensional, and comprehensive image of China. This image has been summarized as "credible, lovable, and respectable." It is clear that the core objective of telling China's story is to shape the nation's image, and the descriptors "credible, lovable, and respectable" not only reflect a progressive evaluation standard but also deeply clarify the values and guidelines that should be followed when telling China's story, ensuring that the conveyed information is both authentic and attractive.

Traditionally, communicators primarily appeared on television screens. However, the advent of the all-media era has broken down the barriers of communication channels, resulting in unprecedented diversification in forms of dissemination, thereby further enhancing audience appeal. Technological innovations have provided communicators with a broader creative space, and personalized expressions have added to the appeal. Audiences' affection for communicators is no longer limited to their professional personas but is increasingly shaped by an inner image constructed through para-social interactions. This inner image is built upon the communicators' unique personalities, emotional expressions, and deep interactions with their audiences. On this foundation, the vivid image of China gains deeper recognition.

3.3. Increasing Engagement: Strengthening Emotional Connections

To effectively tell China's story, it is essential to ground the process in practice and subject it to audience scrutiny. This means paying close attention to collecting audience opinions and feedback, using their evaluations as an important benchmark to measure and optimize external communication efforts [8]. Strengthening interactions with the audience, enhancing social media account activity, and analyzing data such as comments and likes to identify the audience's preferred forms of communication and content can further refine communication strategies and foster a positive communication ecosystem. Social presence is defined as "the extent to which individuals perceive others as being authentically present during online interactions" [9]. When the activity level

of a communicator reaches a significant level, the intimacy between the audience and the communicator increases. This growing intimacy enhances the audience's sustained attention and interest in the communicator's content, fostering virtual friendships and creating a solid emotional foundation for the communicator to shape and convey a vivid image of China.

Technology itself carries inherent values [10]. The development of internet technology has made real-time interaction between content creators and audiences possible. Through platforms such as social media and live streaming, content creators can communicate with their audiences in real time, respond to their questions, and gather feedback. This real-time interaction not only enhances the audience's sense of participation and satisfaction but also strengthens the emotional bond between communicators and their audience, thereby increasing engagement. Additionally, with technological support, content production has become more efficient, and the high-quality, high-frequency output not only strengthens the connection between communicators and their audience but also embeds the construction of China's image more deeply in the audience's minds.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of para-social interaction theory, exploring strategies for more effectively disseminating a vivid image of China requires carefully selecting media figures who can truly represent the image of China. These individuals must not only have significant influence in their respective fields but also possess qualities that resonate broadly with audiences. By deeply exploring and delicately presenting their unique stories, rich life experiences, and firm values, a profound and lasting emotional bond can be established with the audience. This emotional connection will not only enhance the audience's identification with Chinese culture but will also further improve their perception and understanding of Chinese society.

References

[1]   Cho, H., & Boster, F. J. (2005). Development and Validation of Value, Outcome, and Impression-relevant Involvement Scales. *Communication Research*, 32(2).

[2]   Rubin, A. M., Perse, E. M., & Powell, R. A. (1985). Loneline Interaction and Local Television News Viewing. *Human Communication Research*, 12(2), 155–180.

[3]   Dong, J. H., & Ma, P. R. (1986). The theory of traditional Chinese medicine temperament. *Journal of Shandong College of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, (04), 6–8+12.

[4]   Chen, X. H., & Qin, D. X. (2020). Global public relations: Theoretical methods for enhancing China's international communication capacity. *Modern Communication*, (06), 44–49.

[5]   Yue, Z. Y. (2015). A brief analysis of quasi-social interaction phenomena in the context of new media. *Journalism & Communication*, (02), 22–23.

[6]   Su, K. (2021). Research on the influencing factors of video blog (Vlog) users' quasi-social interaction based on grounded theory. Chongqing: Chongqing University.

[7]   Chen, J. F., & Wang, C. D. (2023). Social functions, value rules and practical logic of the construction of an all-media communication system. *Journal of Anhui Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, (01), 75–81.

[8]   Zhou, J., & Wang, Z. Y. (2024). How to tell Chinese stories well in the context of international communication. Media, (08), 60–62.

[9]   Short, J., Williams, E., & Christie, B. (1976). The Social Psychology of Telecommunications. Toronto; London.

[10]   Duan, W. W. (2000). The value load and ethical reflection of technology. *Studies in Dialectics of Nature*, (08), 30–33+54.