

Guardianship and Curiosity: A Study on Differences in Cultural Stance among Audiences of Intangible Cultural Heritage Short Videos

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Abstract. The rapid growth of short video platforms has drawn significant public attention to the dissemination and preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). This study examines the divergence in cultural stances among ICH short video audiences, with a particular focus on “cultural guardians” and “cultural tourist”. By analyzing their preferences in video content, discursive interactions, and underlying value orientations, this paper explores the cultural roots and formative mechanisms of such stance differentiation. Findings reveal that the cultural logic of tourists aligns more closely with mainstream consumerism, whereas guardians adhere to a “minority” stance that emphasizes authenticity and historical continuity. This distinction reflects a micro-level tension between tradition and modernity within the digital cultural environment. Although the two groups exhibit clear differences, they are not entirely oppositional. Their ongoing interaction, communication, and negotiation illustrate the coexistence of multiple cultural stances in the digital public sphere. However, Over- spectacle may disengage ICH skills from their original context, reducing them to mere “performative displays.” Ultimately, the enhancement of cultural belonging and the stimulation of “cultural resonance” depend on users’ sustained participation in ICH communication.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, ICH short videos, cultural stance, cultural differences, audience research

1. Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage constitutes a vital component of China’s outstanding traditional culture and serves as a vivid reflection of the continuous evolution of human civilization. It carries the collective wisdom and memory of all ethnic groups in China. However, the traditional mode of oral transmission has constrained the effective perpetuation of ICH, leading to a gradual erosion of its cultural connotations. Challenges such as a shortage of inheritors, limited public awareness, difficulties in market-oriented development, and the evolving nature of contemporary audiences have further impeded its dissemination and sustainability [1]. According to the "Report on the Development of China's Online Audio-Visual Industry (2025)", as of December last year, the number of short video users in China reached 1.04 billion, with a penetration rate of 93.8%, making

it the most widely used and time-consuming digital format. The dissemination of short videos has to some extent effectively addressed the predicament of intangible cultural heritage dissemination and has become the main battlefield for its promotion. Short videos conform to the information reception habits of the audience in the era of pan-entertainment and fast food, breaking the traditional official dissemination model, lowering the threshold for information dissemination and content creation, and making it possible for users to create content independently [1]. The audience is no longer merely passive participants but gradually become creators and expressers of cultural positions.

However, this dissemination model driven by visual spectacles and consumption logic has shown a clear trend of spectacle, and has sparked discussions about the "authenticity" of culture. The audience of intangible cultural heritage short videos can be divided into two categories: cultural guardians who adhere to the authenticity of intangible cultural heritage and strive to preserve it in its original living context; and cultural tourists who view intangible cultural heritage as "consumable image symbols", pursuing strong visual impact and downplaying the production context and cultural connotations. Therefore, how to attract audiences with different cultural positions through different content? What are the differences in viewing, interaction, and value orientation between cultural guardians and cultural tourists? How do these differences affect the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage? These questions have become key issues in the current research on the audience of intangible cultural heritage short videos.

This study adopts a method combining text analysis and online ethnography, conducting a three-month observation. The data covers short video content, comment sections, bullet comments, live interaction, and secondary creation videos on platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu from August 1, 2025 to October 1, 2025. Through the analysis of the characteristics of the audience's cultural positions, this study aims to fill the theoretical gap in the research on the audience differentiation of intangible cultural heritage short videos and provide new perspectives for platform promotion, creator content production, and user viewing experience, guiding the public to return to the focus on the authenticity of intangible cultural heritage and enhancing the cultural taste and literacy of the nation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Current research status on the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage and audience

Fiske pointed out in his study of television culture that for a television text to become popular, it must be interpreted and appreciated by different social groups, so that its meaning can change in various ways [2]. This communication logic also applies to short videos of intangible cultural heritage. Existing academic research mainly focuses on the innovation of digital dissemination paths of intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing how to use media technology to lower the threshold for cultural contact and expand the audience coverage. For instance, Yuan Kan pointed out that the "Digital Palace Museum" launched by the Palace Museum not only lowers the learning threshold of Chinese excellent traditional culture but also successfully attracts a large number of young audiences to actively participate, allowing traditional culture to be inherited and promoted in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere [3]. Su Chang believes that immersive communication will drive the innovation of content expression methods in short videos, more diverse interaction methods will be applied, and the audience's choice rights will be enhanced, and the interaction forms of online and offline will be overturned. This will inevitably prompt short videos to play a key role in more mainstream social events, and the immersive scene sharing under multiple connections will better enhance the effect of intangible cultural heritage dissemination [4]. However, although existing

research has revealed the communication value of new media, it still remains at the level of technological innovation as a whole, and the exploration of internal differences among audiences is still insufficient, providing a clear entry point for this study.

2.2. Research on cultural position theory

Jan Assmann pointed out in his theory of cultural memory that the "cohesive structure" formed by cultural memory generates hope and memory by internalizing past scenes and history into the framework of current reality [5]. The differentiation of cultural positions stems from the joint effect of the inheritance of cultural memory, the evolution of social landscapes, and the cognitive differences of audiences. Its essence is the differentiated value judgments and behavioral tendencies presented by audiences when facing intangible cultural heritage. Zhang Yuequn and Zhong Lei further pointed out that the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage as an important manifestation of cultural memory integrates past cultural resources through diachronic and synchronic mechanisms, making historical information concrete in the "generational sequence", and then generating local cultural collective identity, helping specific groups to achieve self-identity and image positioning in history [6]. In the process of dynamic inheritance and reconstruction, cultural memory is constantly transformed into current cultural positions and group cohesion. It can be seen that cultural positions not only represent the self-positioning methods of different groups when facing landscape and entertainment-oriented cultures but also reflect differences in value orientations. Currently, in the dissemination process of short videos of intangible cultural heritage, two typical groups mainly emerge, reflecting different consumption positions under the logic of the landscape society.

In summary, existing research mainly focuses on the technical and communication levels, lacking in-depth exploration of the differentiation of cultural positions among the audiences of short videos of intangible cultural heritage. This study will combine cultural memory theory, landscape society theory, and cultural position theory, taking the contrast between cultural guardians and cultural adventurers as the entry point to respond to this research gap.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Audience analysis of the "guardians" in intangible cultural heritage short videos

3.1.1. Content preferences

These videos focus more on endangered and niche intangible cultural heritage content. What they present is not only the reproduction of intangible cultural heritage skills but also the continuation of cultural memory. The core demand of the audience lies in cultural authenticity. They pay attention to the details of the skills, historical origins, and cultural symbols in the videos. Such videos often adopt a slow narrative pace and long shots to fully display the process of the skills. Although the videos are relatively long, it is precisely this panoramic presentation that effectively enhances audience stickiness.

For instance, when the blogger "Nanxiang" recorded the last performance of the endangered intangible cultural heritage "Huohu", long shots were used to show the entire process, including making fire twigs, preparing fire clothes, and learning dance steps, allowing the audience to realize the arduous efforts and life risks behind this skill. Such images shift the audience's acceptance logic from the superficial "excitement" of the performance to a deeper appreciation centered on aesthetic

reflection and symbol interpretation, emphasizing the craftsmanship and spiritual value of intangible cultural heritage, and making the audience feel awe and a sense of protection when watching the performance. Similarly, the blogger "Shanbai" recorded the process of making "Ai Tiao", from mulberry paper to moxa wool preparation. Every detail was captured faithfully, and the quiet texture and composed interest behind the lens were also perceived by the audience, creating an atmosphere of returning to simplicity and allowing the audience to experience the tranquility and permanence behind the intangible cultural heritage skills. Such images not only strengthen the craftsmanship of the skills themselves but also highlight the spiritual value they carry, preventing the audience from remaining at the surface level of "watching for fun".

3.1.2. Interactive discourse

The interaction in the comment sections is characterized by personal experience sharing and emotional resonance. For example, in the comments of the blogger "Nanxiang"'s "Huohu" video, one viewer wrote: "I watched the Huohu performance in Pingyang Temple in my hometown in February 2021. It was truly breathtaking. I hope this intangible cultural heritage can be seen by more people through Nanxiang's video." Another commented: "The fire dragon in my hometown is also very dangerous. The dragon dancers must go shirtless and wear shorts. They are soaked in sweat after the performance." Some even exclaimed: "Since Nanxiang promoted the fire flower and fire pot, now there are performances in various scenic spots. It really saved a traditional skill." Even a viewer from Zoucheng said: "A person who has lived in Zoucheng for many years, here I learned about the Zoucheng Huohu. This should be the meaning of Nanxiang." These comments indicate that although some intangible cultural heritages are difficult to inherit due to safety or technical difficulties, their cultural connotations and national spirit can still be passed on in the public space through short videos.

Under the video of "Shanbai" making "Ai Tiao", the audience's interactions mainly revolve around the process details, such as "This is how mulberry bark paper is made" and "Why can so many pieces of paper be separated after being stacked together? Won't they stick together?" Such discussions reflect the audience's interest in the process, and also include experience sharing, regret, and calls for protection, further highlighting the "guardians"' attention to the details of the skills and their awareness of inheritance.

3.1.3. Value orientation

For the "guardians", intangible cultural heritage short videos are not only windows for showcasing skills but also important carriers for continuing cultural memory and strengthening historical context. They uphold the stance of "cultural guardianship", emphasizing the authenticity and purity of intangible cultural heritage, and focusing on the deep cultural symbols and national spirit core it contains. In the current era where digital technology is rapidly reshaping the form of communication, they always maintain the posture of "guardians", attempting to maintain the thickness and authenticity of intangible cultural heritage in a fast-paced and fragmented environment, and prevent it from becoming a "symbolic commodity" that loses its cultural roots under the logic of traffic.

3.2. Audience analysis of the "tourists" in intangible cultural heritage short videos

3.2.1. Content preferences

Cultural tourists prefer highly visually impactful performance-based content. Their videos often focus on well-known intangible cultural heritage projects such as fire breathing, face changing, and Peking Opera. Their core demand lies in "sensory stimulation," hoping to obtain visual spectacles, emotional release, and momentary entertainment experiences through short videos. Their attention mainly focuses on special effects, rhythm, and conflict points, while the cultural connotations are often weakened.

For instance, the blogger "Zhu Tiexiong" creates fast-paced costume changes using elements such as special police, Peking Opera, Yingge dance, and lion dance, providing a strong visual impact for the audience. His video content is detached from the original production and living context, creating dramatic tension through new plot compilations. The blogger "Duoduo Hualin" shoots costume changes with intangible cultural heritage elements, such as "Five Elements: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, Earth," "Chinese Version of MBTI," and "Chinese Millennium Wedding Fashion," completing the transformation in a few seconds, leaning more towards showcasing the national style rather than strict intangible cultural heritage inheritance. Such short videos mainly serve visual spectacles rather than the continuation of cultural memory.

3.2.2. Interactive discourse

Comments in the comment sections are mostly filled with amazement and entertainment-oriented expressions. For example, a viewer left a comment under the blogger "Duoduo Hualin's" national style costume change video: "I declare I'm the last one to watch this," expressing the regret of missing the visual spectacle and the amazement at the splendid effect. Some viewers post their own ethnic costumes or look forward to the blogger showcasing ethnic groups not yet covered. Under the blogger "Su Jiucheng's" fire stick performance video, viewers associate the splendid fire sticks with the plot in "Black Myth: Wukong," and the comments are mostly entertainment-oriented interpretations, rarely touching upon the fire stick technique itself. From this, it can be seen that these interactions mostly remain at the level of visual amazement.

3.2.3. Value orientation

These intangible cultural heritage short videos reflect the audience's pursuit and recognition of fast-food entertainment, emphasizing immediate sensory satisfaction. As John Fiske said, "They are the mediators that circulate meaning and pleasure in society. As objects themselves, they are impoverished." [7] The videos of the blogger "Zhu Tiexiong" often build up the plot and release emotions in a few seconds of national style costume changes, but do not delve into the cultural connotations of intangible cultural heritage. Their value lies more in immediate sensory stimulation rather than deep cultural understanding. Although they occasionally link visual spectacles with national pride, such as "This is Chinese romance" and "Let the world feel Chinese culture," this recognition mostly stays on the surface and lacks a deep grasp of the core values of the culture.

4. Discussion

4.1. Analysis of the cultural roots of positional differentiation

In the context of digital communication, the differentiation of cultural positions essentially manifests as two distinct cultural logics. The "guardians" audience emphasizes the authenticity of memory and the presentation of historical context. They maintain collective cultural memory and national cultural and identity recognition through viewing and interaction. This position aligns with Assmann's theory of cultural memory. Through interactive narratives, re-narratives, and experience sharing, this audience gives intangible cultural heritage a new lease of life in the digital space. Short videos offer the possibility of recreating scenes and forming an emotional resonance with the audience, thus narrowing the distance between intangible cultural heritage and the audience from both emotional and relational perspectives [8].

The "tourists" audience, on the other hand, is more in line with Debord's theory of the society of the spectacle. The spectacle is "a performance for a few, watched in silence by the many" [9]. Their viewing motivation mainly stems from sensory stimulation and immediate entertainment. In this process, intangible cultural heritage is transformed into a spectacle object for consumption and entertainment, with its deep cultural connotations taking a secondary position.

4.2. Analysis of the generation mechanism of positional differentiation

Platform algorithms do not merely respond passively to user demands but actively capture likes, comments, and viewing durations. Each like and reply is a small emotional bond, and the algorithm continuously reinforces this bond by pushing content that can evoke similar emotions. What users feel is not only the attractiveness of the content itself but also the sense of identity and cultural position derived from being part of a certain group. Thus, to some extent, platform algorithms and creators' content strategies have exacerbated the differentiation between cultural guardians and cultural tourists ones. Collins' "interaction ritual chain" theory posits that "the core mechanism of interaction ritual theory is that intense mutual attention combined with intense emotional connection leads to a sense of membership associated with cognitive symbols; it also brings emotional energy to each participant, making them feel confident, passionate, and willing to engage in activities they consider morally permissible" [10]. This theory provides strong support for explaining the generation of audience cultural positions.

In a restless social and cultural environment, people tend to favor content that can immediately capture their attention and evoke strong emotions. For online platforms, their survival "nutrient" is web traffic [11]. Therefore, deep cultural connotations, complex production techniques, and long learning processes are often difficult to present within a few seconds. As a result, the focus of intangible cultural heritage short videos has gradually shifted from cultural value and the transmission process to dazzling visual effects.

At the same time, local governments and relevant departments have also actively entered short video platforms, using works to promote local traditional culture and creating topics based on local conditions to attract attention. For example, on the Douyin platform, there are interactive topics such as "Cloud Tour of Intangible Cultural Heritage", "Intangible Cultural Heritage Tour of Shanxi", and "All are Cultural Guardians of Shanghai" [12]. This form of promotion attracts a wide audience with spectacular content and then provides in-depth interpretations to explain the history and cultural connotations of intangible cultural heritage. This process serves the dual function of attracting

guardians concerned with substantive meaning and satisfying tourists in pursuit of visual novelty, thus illustrating a marked divergence in their cultural positions.

4.3. The dual effects of positional differentiation

4.3.1. Positive effects

Although there are differences between the guardians and the tourists, they are not completely opposed to each other. There is still a certain degree of interaction between them. The tourists may realize through the interactive narratives of the guardians that intangible cultural heritage is not merely a "visual spectacle", but also carries a profound historical context, folk traditions, and national spirit. This enhances their cultural sensitivity and the depth of their cultural demands. The guardians also admit that the curiosity-driven dissemination helps intangible cultural heritage attract more young people and increase its exposure, bringing originally niche and endangered intangible cultural heritage projects into the public eye and laying the foundation for subsequent in-depth dissemination. The interaction, communication, and even negotiation between the two sides, such as the guardians voluntarily supplementing the details of intangible cultural heritage in the comment sections of the tourists, demonstrate the tension of multiple cultural positions in the digital public space and build a progressive path for intangible cultural heritage dissemination from "attracting attention to deepening understanding".

In the dissemination ecosystem of intangible cultural heritage short videos, the audience is no longer merely a viewer but becomes a disseminator and co-creator of intangible cultural heritage through sharing and creative behaviors, injecting new vitality into its inheritance. Through forwarding, commenting, and secondary creation, the audience conveys their own viewpoints and cultural positions to more people and even directly participates in the production of intangible cultural heritage content, such as shooting cultural experience vlogs, intangible cultural heritage documentaries, creating cultural works and sharing techniques, and interpreting intangible cultural heritage programs or works, forming a secondary dissemination of culture. This participation and sharing behavior helps expand the dissemination scope and depth of intangible cultural heritage [8]. In the process of sharing and creation, the audience strengthens their sense of cultural belonging and expresses their recognition and love for excellent traditional Chinese culture, gradually forming a "cultural resonance" in social dissemination.

4.3.2. Negative effects

When some audiences tend to pursue shallow entertainment and visual stimulation rather than in-depth understanding of the cultural connotations and technical essence of intangible cultural heritage, this demand is keenly captured by the market, thereby influencing the creative choices of creators at different levels. Some high-level creators can promote the dissemination of high-quality culture, but more grassroots creators can only imitate and follow the trend, unable to create original products with novelty, leading to content homogenization and simplification [11].

The core of intangible cultural heritage lies in its "immateriality". To fully preserve the philosophical thoughts and folk beliefs it carries, it is necessary to strengthen the authenticity of the culture and the in-depth presentation of the techniques. All parties, including platforms, creators, and audiences, should work together to build a comprehensive dissemination network based on short video platforms and media, produce and disseminate high-quality short video content, tell Chinese stories, and promote excellent traditional Chinese culture [12]. However, in reality, some creators, to

cater to the audience's pursuit of "novelty", deviate from the traditional presentation of intangible cultural heritage techniques and turn to performance-oriented displays. Processes that originally take days or even months are compressed into "fast-paced performances" of a few minutes; complex procedures are simplified, key techniques are avoided, and only the most visually striking segments are retained. Such overly spectacularized intangible cultural heritage short videos for the sake of traffic gradually cover the cultural attributes of intangible cultural heritage with entertainment attributes, and the folk beliefs and philosophical thoughts behind them are also dissolved. It is necessary to be vigilant that if the curiosity-seeking stance continues to dominate, it may lead to intangible cultural heritage being gradually simplified into "spectacle performances", weakening its cultural depth and social value.

5. Conclusion

In the fast-paced social context, the cultural logic of "tourists" is more likely to align with the mainstream consumer mentality, while "guardians" maintain authenticity and memory continuity in a "minority" stance. This difference in value orientation is a microcosm of the tension between tradition and modernity in the digital cultural environment. However, it is worth noting that despite their different positions, both have positive values for the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage (ICH): guardians adhere to the authenticity of ICH and promote in-depth cognitive dissemination; tourists attract new audience groups and help ICH achieve "breaking out of the circle" dissemination. It should be noted that excessive landscape-oriented dissemination may lead to the dissolution of the authenticity of ICH.

This study, through the analysis of the differences in the positions of guardians and tourists of novelty, responds to the existing research gap of insufficient attention to internal differences among audiences. Of course, this study still has certain limitations in case selection and research methods. Future research can further combine the audience characteristics of guardians and tourists of novelty, expand cross-cultural comparisons, especially explore how ICH short videos can attract more overseas users, and in the context of audience differentiation, explore new paths for the protection and dissemination of ICH in a multicultural environment.

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