

From "Communicator" to "Empathizer": A Study on the Emotional Labor and Value Transmission of Cultural Interview Program Hosts

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ABSTRACT

This study is based on Hochschild's theory of emotional labor and analyzes the mechanism and value transmission of the transformation of cultural interview program hosts from "communicators" to "empathizers." Research has found that hosts transcend superficial performances through "deep emotional role-playing" and employ innovative practices such as ritualized symbol construction, intergenerational translation, and "clumsy empathy" to embody and convey abstract cultural values, effectively triggering a three-stage transformation in the audience's cognition, emotions, and behavior. The study also reveals that emotional labor drives the emotional attachment to cultural IP and its industrial transformation, but it also comes with the risks of professional burnout and professional erosion. In response to this, the paper proposes the development of an emotional energy conservation mechanism, the design of a three-dimensional emotional intelligence training model (integrating cognition, emotion, and behavior), and AI-enabled empathy training. Ultimately, it points out that the emotional labor of hosts has become a key hub connecting the core of cultural spirit with public acceptance and reshaping the paradigm of cultural communication.

KEYWORDS

Hochschild's theory of emotional labor, Host; Cultural interview program

1 Introduction

In the face of the current bottleneck in the effectiveness of knowledge transmission in cultural communication, hosts of cultural interview programs are undergoing a critical transformation from "communicators" to "empathizers." This study is based on Hochschild's theory of emotional labor and focuses on how hosts can effectively bridge the gap between abstract cultural spirit and public acceptance through deep emotional labor. It also explores the mechanisms that trigger deep cultural identity and behavioral transformation in audiences. The study also critically examines the risks of professional burnout and professional erosion that accompany this transformation. The aim is to reveal the unique value transmission logic of the host as an "emotional hub."

2 Theoretical anchors for the transformation of the host role: emotional labor and the creation of the empathizer role

2.1 The shift from communicator to empathizer: the transfer of hochschild's theory and core dimensions

Hochschild's theory of emotional labor first answers the questions "What is emotion and how can we manage it?" The answer lies in finding the important connections between "social structure, rules of feeling, emotional grooming, and emotional experience," revealing the underlying mechanisms behind the transformation of hosts from "information disseminators" to "emotional empathizers."^[1] The traditional hosting model relies on superficial acting—using professional emotional training (such as standardized smiles and formulaic exclamations) to convey information. Cultural interview programs require in-depth role-playing, that is, the genuine fusion of the host's inner emotional structure and cultural values. A classic scene from CCTV's "The Reader" where Dong Qing interviews translator Xu Yuanzhong: When the centenarian tremblingly recites, "Life is not about how many days you have lived, but how many days you have remembered," the host abandons her professional comforting rhetoric and instead conveys her thoughts through a meaningful expression. This reaction has been interpreted as an example of the internalization of emotional norms—cultural programs have transcended performance norms and become the cornerstone of value transmission through their expectation of sincere empathy. The more fundamental transformation lies in the reshaping of role identity: hosts have evolved from information relay stations to spiritual resonators. For example, in the program "China in the Classics," Sa Beining, in his role as a "contemporary scholar," engaged in dialogue with Sima Qian. His respectful posture and choked-up plea, "Please accept this bow from future generations," transformed historical reverence into a tangible collective emotional memory. This transformation marks a paradigm shift in communication effectiveness evaluation systems from "information reach" to "emotional penetration."

2.2 The unique context of cultural interview hosts: the dual efficacy of knowledge dissemination and emotional value

The uniqueness of cultural interviews lies in their need to integrate the dual tensions of cognitive rationality and emotional sensibility. Wang Luxiang, host of Phoenix Satellite Television's "Cultural Panorama," visited the Zhongshan Ancient City Archaeological Site Park and the Hebei Provincial Museum, facing a double challenge: he needed to accurately convey the historical heritage of the ancient Zhongshan Kingdom (the objective requirement of knowledge dissemination), while also entering the Hebei Provincial Museum and expressing his admiration for "exploring the culture of Shijiazhuang, with the ancient Zhongshan Kingdom being just the beginning" (the subjective awakening of emotional value). This kind of effectiveness coupling requires the host to become a "cultural translator" —converting abstract knowledge into emotional symbols. In CCTV's "Stories of China," host Dong Qing deliberately replaced class narrative analysis with the image of "Shao Ping reading by kerosene lamp at night" when interpreting "Ordinary World." By adjusting the brightness of a prop lamp, she triggered the audience's emotional resonance with the spirit of struggle, confirming the regulatory value of emotional reduction in knowledge transmission. This approach, which combines emotion and reason, is precisely what makes cultural interviews so appealing. Not only does it disseminate knowledge, but it also plants seeds of resonance in the hearts of viewers, deepening their sense of identification with and understanding of history and culture. And this emotional evocation often transcends the boundaries of time and space, vividly bringing to life a piece of history, a memory, or even the spirit of a culture. As Wang Luxiang said, the weight of history and the inheritance of culture are often revealed and sublimated in the smallest emotional fluctuations.

2.3 Practical breakthroughs in empathetic hosting: the emotional contagion paradigm and the reshaping of "clumsy empathy"

The traditional model of emotional contagion faces a crisis of authenticity due to its one-way output, while emerging practices reconstruct the logic of empathy through two-way mechanisms. Dou Wentao, host of Youku's "Round Table Talk," has developed dynamic emotional regulation. As a talk show, the program has attracted a large television audience largely due to its authenticity and relatability. Because he liberated the audience from old-fashioned, rigid programs, bringing the programs closer to the audience and making it easier for viewers to feel an emotional connection while watching. This resonant design allows emotional flow to transcend the framework of performance. Even more revolutionary is the rise of anti-technique empathy strategies. In the program "Thirteen Invitations," when Xu Zhiyuan interviewed anthropologist Xiang Biao, he repeatedly responded with unconventional remarks such as "I didn't think of that." This "clumsy empathy" that deliberately exposes cognitive gaps deconstructs the host's omniscient authority and constructs a "sense of coexistence" in the exploration of knowledge. In the "Host Competition," host Sa Beining rushed onto the stage to say thank you when the contestants had only 30 seconds left, thinking that time was up. However, Sa Beining handled the situation well. Afterward, he asked the contestants how they felt about him suddenly rushing onto the stage and jokingly said that they weren't nervous but angry. He naturally and gracefully admitted his mistake, not only successfully defusing the awkwardness caused by the mistake but also adding a touch of humor to the serious and tense competition scene. Such practices demonstrate a paradigm shift in cultural dialogue from "perfect performance" to "authentic exploration."

3 The practical reshaping of hosts' emotional labor: value transmission mechanisms and technological empowerment

3.1 The dual paths of emotional adjustment: cultural pre-reading and dialogue-based emotional guidance

The emotional adjustment of cultural interview hosts relies on the deep coupling of systematic cultural cognition and dynamic emotional guidance. In the CCTV program "National Treasures," host Zhang Guoli once said, "I have seen every national treasure in the museum, watched dozens of celebrities perform the past lives of national treasures, and welcomed every guardian of the present life of national treasures." Before presenting the "Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains" scroll from the Palace Museum, he visited the Palace Museum's Cultural Relics Hospital to observe the artifacts in person, forming a concrete understanding of the historical context of the artifacts. This cultural immersion process enables the narrator to transform the "chemical composition of azurite and malachite" into an imagery narrative of "an 18-year-old boy painting green mountains and clear waters with gemstone ink," achieving an emotional leap from scientific knowledge to aesthetic experience. In Lu Yu You Yue, Lu Yu often uses emotional guidance in her conversations. For example, when interviewing Xu Jinglei, she heard that Xu Jinglei was both mischievous and timid as a child. Her parents were very busy with work and did not have time to take care of her, so she spent her childhood with her grandmother. Lu

Yu expressed sympathy in the conversation, saying that her closest relative was also her grandmother, and began the conversation in a peaceful and warm atmosphere. Such practices demonstrate that in-depth cultural research builds the cognitive foundation for value transmission, while emotional regulation in dialogue shapes the emotional trajectory of identity.

3.2 Symbolic construction of value transmission: emotional ritualization and intergenerational translation functions

The host reconstructs cultural inheritance pathways through ritualized behavioral design and intergenerational symbol translation. In Zhejiang TV's "Wonderful Ink, Chinese Heart," each episode begins with host Shen Tao slowly explaining the theme of the episode while holding up an animated calligraphy scroll. This process uses animated language to reinforce a physical expression of cultural reverence. In the modern adaptation of classical texts, in CCTV's "Classics of China: The Book of Changes," Sa Beining is no longer the host, but takes on a new identity as a "contemporary scholar," engaging in dialogue with ancient figures to help viewers better understand the cultural essence of The Book of Changes. In particular, when Sa Beining heard the story of Fu Sheng and his family risking their lives to protect the book during the turmoil at the end of the Qin Dynasty, he was so moved that he shed tears. Giving empirical commentary to abstract philosophical concepts. Even more groundbreaking is Tencent Video's cross-media symbolism in "Neighborhood Poetry Talk": when Wang Jinsong recites "There is a fish in the North Sea" from "The Free and Easy Wanderer," the background screen shows an animated image of Kun, and digital artists create an animated version of Kun's image. Such symbol translation strategies are recognized by communication scholars as a key mechanism for bridging the generational cognitive gap, and their effectiveness has been confirmed by qualitative research on young audiences' acceptance of traditional culture.

4 The dialectic of the effectiveness of emotional labor by hosts: cultural communication gains and occupational alienation

4.1 The impact of empathy on the audience: a three-stage transformation from cognition to emotion to behavior

The host's deep empathy is theorized as the core mediating mechanism that triggers the audience's gradual internalization of values. This process manifests itself in the audience's gradual evolution toward deeper understanding, emotional identification, and behavioral transformation in relation to specific cultural values and concepts. Sharing emotions is the first step in forming empathy among the audience, so the host should do their best to stir up the audience's emotions and make it easy for them to share the experience^[2]. The host's empathetic guidance can concretize abstract cultural values, effectively lowering the audience's threshold for understanding and deepening their cognitive understanding. For example, in "China in the Classics," host Sa Beining cleverly transforms the abstract philosophical concept of "benevolence" in The Analects into a concrete scene of a father and son embracing in the present day through a cross-temporal dialogue with ancient sages, allowing viewers to intuitively grasp its profound ethical core. The host's sincere emotional investment becomes the key catalyst for inspiring emotional resonance among the audience. In the program "The Reader," host Dong Qing listened intently as "Dunhuang's Daughter" Fan Jinshi recounted her six decades of dedication to the desert. Dong's heartfelt gaze, timely silences, and gentle inquiry, "Have you ever regretted it?" collectively created an emotionally charged atmosphere. Audience feedback research shows that such scenes can effectively stimulate emotional resonance among viewers regarding the spirit of dedication, such as spontaneous emotional reactions like teary eyes. Ultimately, the deep integration of cognitive understanding and emotional resonance often leads to practical intentions or specific behaviors. Related research indicates that the narrative in The Reader about cultural guardians such as Fan Jinshi has prompted some young viewers to develop an intention to apply for archaeology or cultural relics and museum studies programs after gaining a deep understanding of the importance of cultural relics protection and being deeply moved by the spirit of the guardians. This complete chain of transformation from understanding value to practicing value marks a high level of effectiveness in the emotional labor of the host in guiding the audience to internalize cultural values.

4.2 Extension of value creation: emotional attachment and cultural IP proliferation

The emotional labor of hosts not only affects the audience within the communication field, but more importantly, it injects vibrant emotional energy into cultural symbols, driving them to break through the limitations of the screen and achieve value extension and industrial transformation. The host's emotionally charged narration can imbue cultural

symbols with new emotional connotations and communicative power, thereby enhancing the value of emotional symbols. In the program "National Treasures," host Zhang Guoli's emotional interpretation of the "Sword of King Goujian of Yue" not only successfully evoked strong empathy from the audience at the scene, but also sparked a wave of spontaneous "anthropomorphization of cultural relics" secondary creations among netizens, such as the creation of related traditional Chinese-style comic works. This process has transformed cold ancient weapons into cultural totems that embody the spiritual pursuits and emotional identification of contemporary youth. This added emotional effect directly promotes the derivative development and value enhancement of cultural IP at the industrial level. The Palace Museum capitalized on the popularity of the TV program "National Treasures" and host Zhang Guoli's emotional interpretation of the Song Dynasty painting aesthetics embodied in the "Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains" scroll to launch a series of tea sets bearing the same name. This successful endeavor transformed the unique blue-green aesthetics of the mineral pigments (lapis lazuli and malachite) used in the painting into a form of consumer aesthetics for everyday life. Similarly, the host's emotional interpretation of Qu Yuan's prose in Henan Satellite TV's program "The Wonderful Journey of the Dragon Boat Festival" effectively increased market attention and actual booking growth for the Xiangchu cultural tourism route. As an emotional hub connecting the core of cultural spirit with public acceptance, the host has achieved the deep penetration and effective transformation of cultural values from spiritual resonance on screen to material consumption, lifestyle, and other areas off screen.

4.3 Symptoms of alienation in emotional labor: occupational burnout and professional erosion risks

High-intensity, deeply immersive emotional labor, while producing significant effectiveness, also brings with it unignorable challenges of alienation, confirming the warnings in Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labor regarding "emotional exhaustion" and "self-alienation." Long-term deep emotional investment can easily lead to physical and mental exhaustion for hosts, resulting in emotional burnout, and professional burnout is an important factor that limits the development of hosts^[3]. Host Dong Qing candidly shared during an exclusive interview with China Arts and Culture News while preparing for the third season of *The Reader*: "I still feel anxious when the show airs, because after over 20 years in this field, not every profession allows you to meet different people every day and requires you to constantly reflect and examine. Through my efforts, I realized that we can also create cultural products that bring light into people's spiritual worlds." This statement deeply reveals the sustained, high-intensity consumption of an individual's psychological resources and the potential psychological pressure associated with deep emotional roles. An excessive pursuit of emotional impact or external interference from production companies may weaken the professionalism of hosts and even lead to blurred professional boundaries and the erosion of authority. For example, Xu Zhiyuan, host of *Thirteen Invitations*, insists on using a "clumsy empathy" strategy, with the original intention of deconstructing the omniscient authority of the host in order to establish a more equal dialogue for the exploration of knowledge. However, this strategy has been misinterpreted by some viewers as "lack of preparation," and its intellectual and speculative characteristics have been undermined by entertainment-oriented interpretations. When program producers requested that traditional opera excerpts be mixed with popular online hits to boost viewership, the host found himself caught between upholding artistic values and compromising to appeal to the market. If such situations are not handled properly, it will blur the professional role of the host as a "cultural translator" and may also lead to a subtle loss of professional authority. In addition, playing the specific professional role of "empathizer" for a long time may cause a sense of alienation between the host's true emotional experiences and the requirements of their professional role, affecting the sincerity and sustainability of their emotional expression. This is also a deep manifestation of the alienation of emotional labor.

5 The development path of empathetic hosts: institutional guarantees and capability evolution

5.1 Emotional support system: Building a systematic waste reduction mechanism

To address the alienation of emotional labor, it is necessary to establish a multidimensional support network, with the core focus on incorporating emotional exhaustion into the institutionalized framework of occupational health management. It is essential to establish a scientifically sound emotional buffer period to prevent hosts from continuously participating in high-emotional-intensity program recordings. By reasonably scheduling schedules to allocate time for emotional recovery, we can alleviate the sustained psychological strain described by Dong Qing in *"The Reader"*. Additionally, a professional psychological support team should be established to provide regular psychological counseling for self-alienation tendencies following deep emotional performances, thereby interrupting the cumulative effects of occupational burnout. Furthermore, production workflow collaboration mechanisms should be optimized to reduce external traffic pressure's interference with professional judgment. The collaborative responsibilities of the production team in content control and emotional protection should be clarified to avoid the risk of entertainment-oriented misinterpretation faced by *"The Thirteen Invitations"*, thereby safeguarding the integrity of the host's artistic

expression and professional authority.

5.2 Empathy training: designing a three-dimensional model of emotional intelligence

Professional empathy training requires the development of a three-dimensional capability framework that integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Through three layers of empathy, "China in the Classics" breaks with traditional linear narratives, creates specific scenes of empathy, maintains the subject's emotional connection, and elicits empathy from the audience. By utilizing both rational and emotional communication channels to outline a complete narrative structure for the host, blending reason and emotion, reality and fiction, a new contemporary audio-visual text based on classical literature has been successfully created^[4]. Enhance cultural translation capabilities through cognitive dimensions, deepen systematic understanding of cultural symbols through preliminary reading, such as Zhang Guoli's embodied learning of the historical context of cultural relics in "National Treasures"; The emotional dimension focuses on emotional perception and control accuracy, training hosts to identify implicit emotional cues in conversations and drawing on the emotional guidance strategies based on interviewees' experiences in the TV show "Lu Yu You Yue". Innovate empathetic expression paradigms in behavioral dimensions, incorporate counterintuitive strategies such as "clumsy empathy" into scenario simulation training, and balance the sincerity and professionalism exposed by cognitive gaps in programs such as "Thirteen Invitations." Achieve deep integration of cultural cognition, emotional resonance, and behavioral expression.

5.3 Technology-enabled scenarios: AI-driven empathy training optimization

Artificial intelligence technology is reshaping the precision and contextualization of empathy training. The "virtual cultural interview system" developed by Shanghai Media Group has a composite emotional response training function. It uses a micro-expression capture engine to identify the mixed emotional states of virtual guests and generates real-time optimization suggestions for parameters such as the length of eye contact and speech pauses. The system deeply integrates the dialogue pattern database of excellent cultural interview programs, intelligently identifies key nodes of emotional resonance, and provides intervention strategies. The database of bidirectional emotional flow patterns deeply integrated into the program intelligently identifies key points of emotional resonance and recommends intervention strategies (such as choosing the right moment to remain silent or introducing metaphorical symbols) when simulating difficult scenarios such as intergenerational cultural conflicts and clashes of values. This creates a low-risk trial-and-error and high-frequency iteration training environment for hosts, empowering the contextual evolution of their empathy skills.

6 Conclusion

Cultural program hosts act as emotional hubs, performing deep emotional labor. Through symbolic ritual arrangements and clumsy empathy that defies technique, they break through the framework of performance and translate the core of culture into perceptible collective emotional memories. This communication strategy, which replaces knowledge density with emotional intensity, successfully activates the three-stage conversion chain of "cognitive recognition-emotional resonance-behavioral participation" among the audience, thereby empowering the emotional premium of cultural IP. Research has found that the reshaping of the host's professionalism is reflected in the precise control of the tension between "rational interpretation" and "emotional triggering." Their deep emotional involvement is both a key path to breaking through communication barriers and a professional barrier against the entertainmentization of the media. This mechanism provides a methodological reference for knowledge-based programs to break through the "aloof dilemma" and has paradigmatic significance for the construction of in-depth communication.

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