

A Study on Empathetic Communication Strategies in Cultural Programs Amidst the "National Trend" Phenomenon and Youth Identity Construction

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ABSTRACT

This study examines cultural programs within the "national trend" phenomenon, using innovative cultural productions such as "Silk Road Season: Splendor Across the World" and "Twelve Gatherings in Jiangnan" as representative case studies. It explores how these programs achieve deep emotional connections with young audiences through empathy-driven communication strategies, and analyzes how such communication contributes to the construction of cultural identity and national belonging among contemporary youth. Research indicates that these programs employ empathy-building strategies such as immersive scenarios and narrative innovation to break down barriers in traditional cultural dissemination. By fostering emotional resonance, they encourage young audiences to actively embrace and identify with the culture, thereby reshaping individual identity perceptions and collective belonging. This paper also reflects on the challenges facing current communication strategies and proposes optimization pathways, offering theoretical references and practical insights for the innovative dissemination of traditional cultural programs and the cultivation of youth cultural identity.

KEYWORDS

National trend; Cultural programs; Empathetic communication; Identity construction; Youth culture; National identity

1 The Theoretical Framework of Empathic Communication and the Rise of "National Trend" Programs

Empathic communication theory originates from the intersection of psychology and communication studies. Specifically, it refers to the process whereby communicators utilize emotional transmission, sharing, and interaction to evoke emotional resonance and psychological identification in audiences. Within the scope of communication studies, empathy transcends mere emotional response; it embodies the integration of cognitive and emotional capacities—enabling individuals to comprehend others' emotional states and generate corresponding emotional responses.

This theory provides a crucial perspective for analyzing how cultural programs forge emotional bonds with audiences, particularly younger viewers. In recent years, cultural programs such as Silk Road Season of Splendor and "Twelve Gatherings in Jiangnan," have continuously innovated their expression methods. By employing emotional storytelling, immersive experiences, and interactive participation, these programs have successfully sparked young people's interest in traditional culture, giving rise to the highly notable "national trend" phenomenon^[1].

At its core, the "national trend" phenomenon represents a cultural consumption trend and serves as an outward expression of identity. It signifies the deep integration of traditional Chinese cultural elements with contemporary design aesthetics, reflecting a shift among young people from idolizing Western culture toward rediscovering and embracing their own cultural heritage. From a cultural dissemination perspective, these programs have achieved a transition from "cultural admiration" to "cultural parity." Early cultural programs often placed traditional culture on a pedestal, emphasizing its profound mystery and lofty value. Yet this approach inadvertently created distance between the content and its audience. In contrast, new-generation cultural programs like Silk Road Season of Splendor deliberately shatter this "sense of distance," bringing Silk Road aesthetics down from the 'pedestal' and back to "earth." Rather than discussing grand civilizational narratives, the program focuses on subtle details—from "natural landscapes" and "traditional patterns" "exquisite fabrics," and "regional cuisine." By weaving these elements together through the lens of clothing, it makes culture tangible, perceptible, and resonant. These programs have advanced the identity construction process among young people through empathetic communication. Identity construction is the process by which individuals gradually shape and adjust their self-identity through social interactions^[2]. Cultural identity is a key dimension in this process. Through viewing, participation, and interaction, young people acquire cultural knowledge, forge emotional connections with traditional culture, integrate cultural elements into their self-concept, and develop cultural identity and national belonging.

2 Empathetic Communication Strategies for "National Trend" Cultural Programs

The success of "national trend" cultural programs in attracting young audiences hinges on a series of innovative empathy-driven communication strategies. These approaches break away from the traditional one-way dissemination model of cultural programming, instead leveraging scenario-based construction, narrative innovation, and other methods to spark emotional resonance and cultural identification among youth^[3].

2.1 Immersive Scenario-Based Communication: From Symbolic Transmission to Experiential Transmission

The new generation of cultural programs places great emphasis on creating immersive scenarios. By integrating

traditional cultural elements into tangible, relatable life situations, they enable young audiences to experience cultural charm through firsthand immersion. This approach dismantles the abstract nature and sense of distance associated with traditional cultural symbols, transforming them into tangible experiences that more readily evoke emotional resonance.

Silk Road Journey: A Tapestry of Beauty employs a “travel-as-shell, aesthetics-as-core” approach, featuring host Nigemati and his travel companions as the Silk Road Travelers. Driving along the Silk Road, they showcase the enduring vitality of Silk Road aesthetics through diverse landscapes and everyday street life. In Kazakh yurts, the ubiquitous ram's horn motifs are not obscure terms from art reports, but foundational aesthetic tones shaping everyday scenes. In Xinjiang-style restaurants, melon and fruit patterns cease to be specialized jargon, becoming relatable details remembered through playful quizzes. This contextualized approach transforms traditional culture from distant symbols into tangible, experiential elements of life, significantly enhancing the program's emotional resonance ^[4].

Jiangnan: Twelve Gatherings innovatively introduces an “immersive character development” model, placing 24 young contestants within the authentic landscapes of Jiangnan's water towns. Through a closed-loop path of “learning - practice - performance” to refine their skills. Participants explore cultural landmarks like Zhenze Ancient Town, Tui Si Garden, and the Temple of the First Silkworm, immersing themselves in the rhythmic clatter of looms to grasp the artisan spirit, experiencing the connection between body and environment within garden spaces, and understanding the fusion of labor and spirit through ancient rituals. This immersive cultural experience transcends visual and auditory boundaries, creating a deeply engaging cultural space through multisensory participation. It fosters powerful emotional resonance among both participants and viewers ^[5].

2.2 Narrative Innovation: From Grand Narratives to Micro Perspectives

Empathic communication and a key strategy involve narrative innovation—shifting from traditional grand narratives to micro perspectives, using personalized stories to resonate with audiences. “*Silk Road Season*” employs a “cultural decryption” narrative model. Through a process of seeking, discovering, and understanding—a journey of cultural exploration—it builds sustained emotional tension. The program no longer merely showcases cultural elements; instead, it relies on the hosts and guests' cultural exploration to guide viewers in unraveling cultural codes together. For instance, at Jinquan Mall, Xiao Ni, Wu Xin, and Chui Nalisa selected Edles fabric based on skin tone analysis. In Pingxiliang Village, Yijin Group collaborated with Tang Bao, a post-00s young man from Ili, who Tursunhalil from Ili used games to explore natural patterns. This exploratory narrative fosters sustained curiosity and the joy of discovery, creating a deeper emotional connection and engagement for the audience ^[6].

Another key narrative innovation lies in emotional expression—using heartfelt stories and emotional portrayals to resonate with audiences. As He Saifei emphasized in “*Twelve Gatherings in Jiangnan*,” the primary goal of actor training is to achieve authenticity. Only authenticity can trigger deep empathy in the audience, making technical skill truly valuable. Numerous programs deliberately highlight participants' emotional shifts and poignant moments within cultural experiences—such as confusion, surprise, moving moments, and pride—using these emotional touchpoints to resonate with viewers. This emotional storytelling transforms communication from cold knowledge transfer into warm emotional exchange, making it far more resonant and relatable for younger audiences ^[7].

2.3 From One-Way Communication to Interactive Participation in Co-Creation and Sharing

The key to empathetic communication lies in interactivity and a sense of participation. New-generation cultural programs employ multiple avenues to enhance audience engagement, transforming viewers from passive recipients into active participants and co-creators. This sense of involvement not only heightens viewing enjoyment but also deepens emotional connections and cultural identification.

“*Silk Road Season*” employs lightweight interactive design to make cultural knowledge engaging and accessible. Through everyday interactions, the show cleverly weaves cultural insights into game outcomes and integrates aesthetic awareness into fashion choices. This approach to cultural immersion resonates deeply with young audiences. The production team collaborated with Hongguo to co-create the vertical-screen micro-variety show “*Journey with Ni*.” From the perspective of Xiao Ni, it invites friends to immerse themselves in a Silk Road adventure. Employing high-energy new media storytelling, it captivates audiences, creates memorable moments, and achieves widespread dissemination among young demographics. This multi-platform interactive strategy adapts content to diverse media formats and audience segments, expanding the reach of empathetic communication ^[8].

3 The Mechanism of Empathic Communication's Influence on Youth Identity Construction

“*National Trend*” cultural programs have successfully achieved cultural dissemination through empathy-driven communication strategies, while also deeply engaging in the identity-building process of contemporary youth. Together, they shape the cultural identity and national recognition of the younger generation.

3.1 Building Cultural Confidence from Cultural Self-Awareness to Cultural Identity

Cultural programs leverage empathy-driven communication to help young audiences achieve a transformative journey from cultural awareness to cultural identity and ultimately cultural confidence. Through showcasing cultural

integration and innovative vitality along the Silk Road, Silk Road Season of Splendor enables young audiences to appreciate the openness and inclusivity of Chinese culture, thereby enhancing their cultural confidence. The program not only highlights the beauty of traditional Chinese attire but also, through cultural exchanges with nations along the Silk Road, reveals the unique value of Chinese culture within the global dialogue of civilizations. Through immersive experiences and cultural dialogues, it naturally immerses viewers in cultural diversity while highlighting the distinctive allure of Chinese culture, thereby fostering genuine cultural confidence.

“Twelve Gatherings in Jiangnan” immerses participants and audiences in profound cultural experiences, allowing them to appreciate the ingenuity and wisdom of Jiangnan culture while fostering a sense of cultural pride. Rather than performing in a studio before cameras, the program’s participants journeyed to historic sites: century-old residences in Zhenze Ancient Town, Tui Si Garden in Tongli Ancient Town, and the Xiancan Temple—a testament to the silk industry’s prosperity. Amidst the rhythmic clatter of looms, they learned silk reeling; within the gardens, they contemplated the philosophy embedded in every step’s shifting vistas; and upon the field ridges, they witnessed the transformative cycles of the seasons. Such immersive cultural experiences enable participants not only to master performance techniques but also to genuinely comprehend and internalize cultural essence, fostering profound cultural identity and confidence. As Executive Director Wang Keran states: “Living life requires more than words—it demands experience and feeling. Through every moment in this drama-variety show, participants gradually achieve a dual experience: embodying the persona of their theatrical role while simultaneously connecting with its humanity.”

3.2 Activating Collective Memory: From Individual Emotions to Shared Identity

Another key function of empathy-driven communication lies in activating collective memory, transforming individual emotional experiences into communal identity. Cultural programs leverage empathy-driven communication to activate the collective memory of younger generations, linking these memories to contemporary life and creating entirely new spaces for shared identity.

“Twelve Gatherings in Jiangnan” successfully revived regional and historical cultural memories through historical figure role-playing and local cultural experiences. Twenty-four young participants received character cards representing twelve renowned historical figures associated with Jiangnan. Through role-playing, reciting ancient poetry in modern contexts, and navigating daily life challenges, they immersed themselves in Jiangnan culture. This experiential approach enabled participants to transcend time and space, forging emotional connections with historical figures and awakening deep cultural memories. For audiences, witnessing these events similarly activated memories and evoked emotional resonance, enhancing their identification with Jiangnan culture and broader Chinese heritage.

3.3 Strengthening Ethnic Identity: From Cultural Identity to National Identity

The highest level of identity construction lies in strengthening national identity—elevating cultural identity to a national one. Cultural programs leverage empathy-driven communication to skillfully blend cultural and national identities, enabling young audiences to naturally develop national identity through cultural experiences.

“Silk Road Season” of “Clothes Make the Man” leverages cross-cultural dialogue and mutual learning among civilizations to showcase the unique charm of Chinese culture while highlighting China’s friendly exchanges and deep historical ties with nations worldwide. The program ventures beyond China’s borders to Kazakhstan, opening a new chapter in this extraordinary journey. Using clothing as a universal language, the program fosters the vision of “each beauty in its own way, all beauties together” in the exchange between Chinese culture and the world. At the Khorgos Port, Xiao Ni and Tang Jiuzhou interacted with border inspection officers through the ritual of “stamping passports,” illustrating the evolution of six generations of border gates. Each narrative of gate upgrades vividly unfolded China’s high-quality opening-up and the shared development opportunities for the world. This culturally rich display with an international perspective fosters cultural pride among young audiences while deepening their recognition of China’s open, inclusive, and peaceful development philosophy, thereby strengthening national identity.

Cultural programs, through emotional storytelling and immersive experiences, have ignited collective and national sentiments among young audiences. These emotional experiences have transformed into a sense of national belonging, rendering ethnic identity no longer an abstract concept but a tangible emotional reality.

4 Challenges and Optimization Pathways for “National Trend” Cultural Programs

Although “national trend” cultural programs have achieved certain successes in fostering empathy and shaping youth identity, they still face a series of challenges. It is necessary to objectively analyze these challenges and propose targeted optimization strategies to achieve more sustainable and effective cultural dissemination outcomes.

4.1 The primary challenges currently faced

The primary challenge facing cultural programs is the risk of content homogenization. As the concept of “national trend” gains popularity, an increasing number of shows chase similar cultural elements and expression styles. This leads to insufficient content innovation and causes audience fatigue. Whether focusing on clothing, poetry, cultural relics, or traditional etiquette, many programs compete around identical themes. While this creates short-term cultural buzz, long-

term, this trend risks diminishing the uniqueness and appeal of these programs.

Generational differences also present a significant challenge in cultural transmission. While younger audiences demonstrate relatively high receptivity to domestic trend culture, distinct interpretations and expectations exist across age groups. The key to effective cross-generational communication lies in balancing cultural authenticity and integrity with the aesthetic demands of younger audiences. Some programs may overly pander to young preferences, leading to excessive adaptation and deconstruction of traditional culture that strips it of its original value and meaning.

4.2 The Optimal Path for Empathetic Communication

Facing numerous challenges, cultural programs must optimize their empathy-driven communication strategies to achieve more effective and sustainable cultural dissemination and identity construction. First, they should deepen content innovation to avoid homogenized competition. Program producers need to explore more diverse cultural themes and regionally distinctive cultural resources, seeking unique content angles. For instance, "Jiangnan: Twelve Gatherings" focuses on showcasing Jiangnan culture, while Silk Road Season of Splendor focuses on the Silk Road—both exemplifying content innovation through niche cultural exploration. Future programs should delve into underrepresented cultural domains like ethnic minority traditions, local intangible cultural heritage projects, and traditional crafts to cultivate a more diverse content ecosystem. Secondly, it is essential to strike a balance between entertainment value and cultural depth, achieving a fusion of "interesting" and "meaningful." Programs can employ a layered communication strategy to cater to the needs of different audiences. For casual viewers, ample entertainment and visual appeal should be provided, while for deeper audiences, more cultural context and in-depth analysis should be offered. Third, we must broaden our international perspective and propel Chinese culture onto the global stage. Cultural programming should not only cater to domestic audiences but also leverage the potential for international dissemination. During production, adopting international forms of expression can minimize cultural discounting. Strengthening collaborations with overseas platforms will amplify global influence, while emphasizing universal human values will enhance cross-cultural resonance.

5 Conclusions and Outlook

Cultural programs within the "national trend" phenomenon employ empathy-driven communication strategies to forge emotional connections and cultural identify with with young audiences, participating in the identity-building process of contemporary youth. These programs break through barriers in traditional cultural dissemination, prompting young people to actively embrace cultural content through emotional resonance. This fosters cultural confidence, collective memory, and national identify with. Through empathy-driven communication, cultural programming has facilitated a transformative journey for young people—from cultural self-awareness to cultural identity and ultimately cultural confidence. It has activated collective memory, transformed individual emotions into communal recognition, and ultimately strengthened national identity. This identity construction is not externally imposed but internally generated, making it more robust and enduring. Cultural programs must optimize content innovation, in-depth exploration, interactive experiences, and international dissemination to address challenges such as content homogenization, excessive entertainment focus, generational gaps, and commercial pressures. Through continuous innovation and refinement, cultural programming can harness the power of empathetic communication to achieve more effective and sustainable cultural transmission and identity formation. "National trend" is not merely a cultural phenomenon; it is an external manifestation of identity recognition. Through empathetic communication, cultural programs disseminate cultural knowledge while participating in the identity construction and national identity of young people, offering new possibilities for cultural inheritance and national recognition. This emotional model of cultural communication and identity construction warrants analysis and promotion.

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