

From "Viewing" to "Experiencing": A Study on the Embodied Communication Practices of Museum Cultural and Creative Products

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the paradigm shift in museum cultural and creative products from "viewing" to "experiencing" based on embodied communication theory. Research has found that cultural and creative products achieve an embodied transformation in cultural dissemination through three dimensions: tactile design, digital technology integration, and scenario construction. This effectively breaks through the limitations of traditional visual communication. This shift has profound implications for deepening understanding, fostering identity formation, and driving cultural innovation. It not only addresses the theoretical gap of "the absence of the body" in traditional cultural dissemination studies but also offers new practical pathways for the development of museum cultural and creative products.

KEYWORDS

Embodied communication; Museum cultural and creative products; Immersive experiences; Cultural identity; Communication paradigms

1 Introduction

Against the backdrop of the current experience economy and the cultural strategy of "bringing cultural relics to life," museums are undergoing a significant transformation in their functions—shifting from collection and preservation to cultural experiences. This transformation has propelled museum cultural and creative products beyond their role as mere souvenirs, elevating them into cultural conduits that bridge history and the present. However, traditional cultural and creative development often remains confined to the two-dimensional replication of cultural relic symbols. Its detached visual communication model struggles to meet the public's demand for immersive cultural experiences.

Embodied communication theory offers a fresh perspective for understanding this transformation. This theory transcends the limitations of mind-body dualism, emphasizing that cognition and meaning are achieved through the interaction between the body and the environment. Within this framework, the body becomes central to communicative practices, providing an appropriate theoretical tool for analyzing the experiential shift in museum cultural and creative products.

This paper systematically analyzes the embodied communication practices of museum cultural and creative products within this theoretical framework, examining three dimensions: the tactile shift in product design, the virtual integration of digital technology, and the ritualized participation in scenario construction. By exploring the intrinsic logic and value significance of this paradigm shift in communication, this study aims to provide theoretical reference for the innovative development of museum cultural and creative products and to open new avenues for research in cultural communication.

2 Research Background and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Experience-Driven Shift in Museum Cultural and Creative Development

Amidst the global wave of the experience economy and guided by China's strategy to "bring cultural relics to life", museums are undergoing a profound paradigm shift in their function: transitioning from custodians centred on artefact collection, research and static display to interactive spaces focused on cultural dissemination, public education and dynamic experiences. This transformation has propelled museum cultural and creative products beyond their initial function as souvenirs, evolving them into pivotal conduits linking history with the present, and the public with culture. Early cultural and creative development was largely confined to the two-dimensional, souvenir-style replication of cultural relic symbols. Its dissemination model was fundamentally one of detached visual observation, creating an inherent aesthetic and psychological distance from the audience.

However, with the advancement of consumption upgrades and media technology, mere visual consumption has become insufficient to satisfy the public's growing demand for cultural immersion and emotional connection. The cultural and creative industries are undergoing a leap towards an 'experience-oriented' approach, centred on guiding audiences from passive 'spectators' to active 'participants' and 'experiencers' through meticulously designed products, technologies and settings. This shift is strikingly evident in recent phenomenon-level cases: the Palace Museum has transformed

weighty history into accessible, interactive narratives through developing adorable IPs like the 'Forbidden City Cats' and puzzle books such as *The Mysterious Palace: The Ruyi Linglong Atlas*; Meanwhile, the Sanxingdui Museum's "Archaeology Blind Boxes" allow users to simulate the process of archaeological discovery through the physical actions of "excavating" and "cleaning", greatly stimulating the public's sense of exploration and participation. These practices signify that the core value of museum cultural and creative products has shifted from the visual transmission of 'the beauty of artefacts' to the creation of experiences that foster 'mind-body immersion', providing rich fertile ground for in-depth interpretation through embodied communication theory.

2.2 The Theoretical Implications and Applicability of Embodied Communication

Cognitive science posits that cognition and the body are separate entities, with cognition being an isolated symbolic computational process occurring within the brain, while the body serves merely as a provider of external stimuli. However, this computational metaphor of cognition fails to explain how the objective world is transformed into symbolic form. As the limitations of the computational metaphor became increasingly apparent, cognitive science began to place greater emphasis on embodied cognition. Heidegger posited that human cognition of the world originates from the process of bodily interaction with it. Merleau-Ponty emphasised that the body and the world form a unified system, with the body constituting humanity's sole connection to the world. The aforementioned perspective inspired and gave rise to embodied cognition theory. Embodied communication theory posits that cognition and meaning-making are fundamentally achieved through the interaction between the body and the environment. This theory posits that the body is not merely a passive receiver of information, but rather the core of both the cognitive subject and communicative practice. During the transmission process, the synergistic interaction of multiple sensory channels—such as tactile and kinesthetic perception—holds irreplaceable value in constructing immersive experiences and fostering deep cognitive understanding^[1].

This theory provides an appropriate theoretical framework for analysing the experiential shift in museum cultural and creative products. When visitors personally 'unearth' archaeological mystery boxes, the tactile and proprioceptive feedback fosters a far deeper cultural understanding than mere visual observation. When audiences 'step into' historical scenes through VR equipment, the virtual presence of their bodies enables a cultural comprehension that transcends textual and pictorial explanations. These practices demonstrate that cultural and creative products transform abstract cultural symbols into tangible, interactive physical experiences by activating users' bodily engagement.

Examining museum cultural and creative products from an embodied perspective reveals how they guide users through a transition from physical 'contact' to spiritual 'touch' via carefully designed multisensory interactions. This theoretical perspective not only offers a fresh approach to understanding the dissemination mechanisms of cultural and creative products, but also charts a course for developing more immersive cultural and creative experiences in the future.

2.3 Research Framework Construction

This study systematically introduces embodied communication theory into the field of museum cultural and creative research, demonstrating significant theoretical innovation and practical guidance. At the theoretical level, existing research predominantly approaches the subject from perspectives such as design studies, marketing, or cultural heritage management, focusing on the aesthetic value, market performance, or cultural symbol transformation of cultural and creative products. Yet it has generally overlooked the pivotal role of bodily experience in cultural transmission. This study employs an embodied theory framework to reveal that the essence of cultural and creative experiences lies in the dialogue between the body and culture. It offers a novel theoretical perspective for understanding how cultural transmission achieves a 'mind-body unity' effect through multisensory channels, effectively addressing the 'absence of the body' in traditional research.

At the practical level, this theoretical research provides innovative methodological guidance for cultural and creative development. It encourages creators to shift from a singular visual design mindset towards designing multi-dimensional sensory experiences, incorporating physical user engagement into the creative process. Through systematic analysis across three dimensions—tactile interaction, technological integration, and scenario construction—this study provides concrete pathways for museums to develop more immersive cultural and creative products and design more engaging educational activities. This contributes to advancing the cultural and creative industry's profound transformation from "object production" to "experience creation".

This study not only establishes a novel criterion for evaluating the communicative efficacy of cultural and creative products—namely, their capacity to stimulate physical engagement and foster cultural identification—but also offers an instructive practical framework for effectively conveying China's narrative and revitalising traditional culture through embodied experiences within a global context.

3 The embodied communication practice dimension of museum cultural and creative products

3.1 The Tactile Shift in Product Design

The embodied communication practices of museum cultural and creative products are first manifested in the tactile shift within product design. This transformation breaks away from the traditional, visually-centric dissemination model of cultural and creative goods, expanding cultural experiences from unidirectional visual perception to multi-sensory, embodied participation. Specifically, this shift achieves the embodied construction of cultural meaning through three levels: at the operational interaction level, novel cultural and creative products such as archaeological blind boxes employ meticulously designed "excavate-clear-discover" procedures to guide users through the entire archaeological process. This transforms audiences from passive cultural observers into active cultural explorers, forging deep connections with history through embodied practice; At the material narrative level, products such as antique-style stationery and the Four Treasures of the Study employ materials selected for their specific texture, warmth, and weight to construct a tactile historical context. Through sustained interaction between fingertips and materials, users form unique bodily memories, achieving the intangible transmission of material cultural heritage; At the structural cognition level, products requiring hands-on assembly—such as mortise-and-tenon models and artefact jigsaw puzzles—transform abstract cultural knowledge into tangible constructive practice through coordinated manual dexterity and spatial imagination. This deepens cultural understanding from superficial form recognition to intrinsic structural comprehension. This comprehensive shift towards tactile engagement not only redefines the relationship between audiences and culture, but more significantly, through the accumulation and transformation of bodily experience, elevates cultural transmission from abstract symbol reception to embodied life experience. This pioneers a promising new pathway for the revitalisation and inheritance of traditional culture within contemporary society.

3.2 Virtualisation through digital technology integration

Building upon the tactile shift, the virtual integration of digital technology has further expanded the boundaries of physical experience in museum cultural and creative products, creating a new dimension of "physical presence" that transcends physical limitations. This practice achieves deep immersion primarily through three pathways: Firstly, VR/AR technology enables audiences to gain a first-person embodied experience by constructing explorable virtual spaces. The VR immersive project launched by the Palace Museum enables visitors to 'walk' through the digitally reconstructed Hall of Mental Cultivation. Through body movement and perspective shifts within the headset, they experience a sense of temporal and spatial traversal, as if present at the historical site. This motion-based interaction evokes far greater emotional resonance than static viewing^[2].

Secondly, augmented reality technology creates an immersive experience that merges the virtual and physical worlds. Users can interact with virtual artefacts through their mobile devices—placing bronze vessels upon their own desks for close examination, or gesturing to 'don' ancient garments. This ability to manipulate virtual objects within real-world settings effectively bridges the physical distance between audiences and cultural relics. Moreover, the introduction of motion-sensing technology elevates cultural engagement into a full-body 'co-performance'. In certain digital exhibition spaces, for instance, visitors can trigger corresponding cultural content responses by mimicking ancient ceremonial gestures or the posture of wielding a brush and ink. Thus, the body itself becomes an interface for cultural narration. These technological practices collectively construct a communication space centred upon the user's physical body. Not only do they extend the depth and breadth of sensory experiences, but more significantly, through bodily engagement within virtual environments, they transform historical and cultural heritage from an observed 'other' into a perceptible, interactive 'lived world'. This achieves the embodied transmission and innovative expression of cultural memory within the digital dimension.

3.3 Ritualised Participation in Scenario Construction

Beyond tactile and digital practices, museum cultural and creative products further deepen the socio-cultural dimensions of embodied communication through ritualised participation enabled by scenario construction. This dimension situates individual bodily practices within specific socio-cultural contexts, fostering collective memory and cultural identity through the cultivation of ritualistic experience. Specifically, within cultural heritage contexts, thematic workshops such as ancient text restoration and traditional craft production guide participants into an 'apprentice' role through standardised operational procedures and tool usage. This embodied learning process not only transmits technical knowledge but also internalises cultural memory into individual experience through the repetitive practice of the body. Secondly, in social settings such as cultural and creative markets, meticulously designed spatial layouts and atmospheric ambience construct a multi-dimensional cultural space. Through the integrated experience of movement, touch and interaction, the body becomes a conduit linking individuals to cultural communities, thereby reinforcing a sense of

belonging to cultural identity. Moreover, in the social media era, the act of 'checking in' has itself evolved into a ritualised bodily practice. Audiences capturing, geotagging and sharing photographs before specific exhibits not only embody their personal cultural experiences through tangible documentation, but also transform individual encounters into collectively shared cultural narratives through dissemination and interaction within digital communities^[3]. The interplay of these three layers of scene construction transforms the audience's bodies from passive recipients into active producers of cultural meaning. Through ritualised participation, they undergo an elevation from individual perception to collective identification, ultimately achieving the transmission and reproduction of cultural values at the societal level.

4 The Effects and Value of Embodied Communication

4.1 From Knowledge to Belief: Deepening Cultural Understanding

Embodied communication practices fundamentally alter the pathways through which cultural cognition is formed, propelling the cognitive process from superficial knowledge acquisition towards deep-seated belief internalisation. Traditional museum education has primarily relied on symbolic communication methods such as text and image captions, with knowledge often remaining at the level of abstract concepts. In contrast, tactile, digital and immersive physical experiences transform abstract culture into perceptible bodily experiences through the synergistic engagement of multiple sensory pathways. When visitors personally excavate archaeological mystery boxes, the tactile sensations conveyed through their fingertips and the exertion of muscular effort collectively form an embodied cognition of the 'archaeological excavation' process. When exploring ancient structures freely within VR environments, bodily movement and shifting perspectives foster an intuitive grasp of spatial configurations. During participation in traditional craft workshops, repetitive physical practice transforms operational techniques into muscle memory. This form of knowledge construction grounded in physical engagement not only enhances the durability of information retention but, more significantly, forges an emotional connection between personal experience and cultural significance through the fusion of bodily sensation and intuitive understanding.^[3] Through immersive experiences, audiences gain not merely factual knowledge of 'what it is', but also process-based comprehension of 'how it came to be' and value-based recognition of 'why it matters'. This facilitates a progressive deepening of cultural cognition—from mere awareness to understanding, and from understanding to identification—thus laying a solid psychological foundation for cultural transmission

4.2 From the Individual to the Community: The Construction of Cultural Identity

The practice of embodied communication not only deepens individuals' cultural understanding but also advances the construction of cultural identity from the personal to the communal level through shared experiential patterns. When individuals gain profound sensory impressions and emotional resonance through museum cultural and creative experiences, these personalised encounters gradually coalesce into a shared communal identity with collective cultural memory through social interaction and ritual participation.

This construction process is primarily realised through three pathways: Firstly, within physical settings such as creative markets and cultural workshops, participants forge emotional bonds based on shared spatial and temporal experiences through synchronised physical practices—such as jointly crafting traditional handicrafts or collectively completing cultural challenge tasks. This embodied shared experience fosters an understanding and recognition that transcends words, elevating individual cultural experiences into a collective memory. Secondly, digital platforms have extended the boundaries of this identity construction. Through check-in sharing and experience displays on social media, individuals' embodied experiences are transformed into visual cultural symbols, triggering chain reactions within virtual communities and forming a cultural resonance circle that transcends geographical boundaries. Immersive videos shared by visitors after experiencing the Forbidden City in VR, or the moments of delight captured during archaeological blind box unboxing, have become cultural touchpoints connecting like-minded individuals. Ultimately, these embodied community interactions foster a contemporary reconfiguration of collective memory. Traditional culture is reinterpreted and imbued with fresh contemporary significance through collective physical engagement, elevating cultural identity from individual perception to communal consensus. This process infuses cultural transmission with enduring social vitality^[4].

4.3 The Creative Fusion of Tradition and Modernity

The practice of embodied communication offers a distinctive pathway for the creative integration of traditional culture with modern life, enabling ancient traditions to flourish with renewed vitality within contemporary contexts. This process of integration is achieved through three operational pathways: Firstly, in terms of expression, traditional cultural elements undergo creative transformation through contemporary design language and technological means. Much like the Palace Museum's cultural and creative products, which blend ancient motifs with contemporary daily necessities, augmented

reality technology transforms static artefacts into dynamic narratives. This transformation not only preserves cultural heritage but also aligns it with modern aesthetic sensibilities. Secondly, in terms of experiential engagement, traditional cultural practices are revitalised through contemporary interactive methods. Archaeological blind boxes transform rigorous archaeological knowledge into participatory exploration games, while ancient text restoration workshops convert the transmission of traditional craftsmanship into experiential educational activities. This transformation shifts traditional culture from being an 'esoteric discipline' requiring professional expertise to an accessible 'lifestyle experience' for the general public. Ultimately, at the level of meaning, embodied communication facilitates the reconfiguration of cultural symbols' value. Through profound experiential engagement involving the body, traditional culture ceases to be merely an exhibit in museums, instead becoming a living cultural phenomenon that resonates with the emotions and values of contemporary life^[5]. This creative fusion neither constitutes a mere replication of tradition nor a blind pandering to modernity. Instead, through the bridging role of physical practice, it facilitates a dialogue and symbiosis between the essence of tradition and the spirit of modernity, thereby charting a sustainable developmental trajectory for the innovative evolution and creative transformation of traditional culture.

5 Conclusions

This paper systematically examines the paradigm shift in museum cultural and creative products from 'viewing' to 'experience' through the theoretical lens of embodied communication. Research indicates that cultural and creative products successfully transform traditional culture into tangible, interactive experiences through three dimensions: tactile design, embedded digital technology, and contextualised scenarios. This approach effectively transcends the limitations of conventional visual communication. This transformation has not only reshaped the relationship between audiences and culture, but has also exerted profound influence across three dimensions: cognition, identity, and innovation.

At the theoretical level, this study introduces embodied communication theory into the field of museum cultural and creative research, overcoming the 'absence of the body' in traditional approaches and providing a new analytical framework for understanding cultural transmission. At the practical level, research reveals how embodied communication facilitates the internalisation of cultural cognition through multisensory experiences, fosters the construction of cultural identity through shared practices, and achieves the contemporary transformation of traditional culture through creative fusion.

Despite the notable achievements of current practices, embodied communication in museum cultural and creative products still faces numerous challenges. How to maintain a balance between technological innovation and cultural substance, how to avoid superficial and entertainment-oriented experiences, and how to extend embodied communication to reach a broader audience are all subjects requiring in-depth exploration in the future. With the continuous advancement of new technologies such as the metaverse and artificial intelligence, embodied communication in museum cultural and creative products will unlock greater possibilities, promising to create richer and more profound cultural experiences within environments that blend the virtual and the real. This not only facilitates the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional culture, but also offers new pathways and methodologies for effectively conveying China's narrative within a global context.

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