

PROGRAMMING STYLES AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN HISTORICAL MUSEUM SHORT VIDEOS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CHINA'S DIGITAL HERITAGE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This study examines how programming styles in short-form museum videos contribute to cultural identity construction in China. Employing a qualitative research design, the study integrates textual analysis of 20 museum-related short videos with semi-structured interviews ($n = 30$) and focus group discussions ($n = 16$). The sample consisted of audiences aged 18–35 who actively engage with digital heritage content on short-video platforms. Data were analyzed through structured coding procedures and thematic analysis to identify recurring stylistic patterns and identity-related responses. The findings reveal three analytically distinct dimensions of identity construction. First, didactic narration supports cognitive recognition by reinforcing institutional authority and historical credibility. Second, immersive dramatization facilitates emotional resonance, fostering affective connection to cultural heritage. Third, participatory affordances such as danmu and remix practices enable symbolic participation, allowing audiences to negotiate cultural meaning within digital environments. The study demonstrates that programming style functions not merely as an aesthetic feature but as a mediating mechanism shaping how heritage is interpreted and internalized in platform-based communication contexts.

Keywords: Programming styles, Cultural identity, Museum short videos, Digital heritage, China

Introduction

In recent years, China's media landscape has been profoundly reshaped by the rapid expansion of short video platforms. Services such as Douyin, Bilibili, and Kuaishou have become embedded in everyday life, transforming not only patterns of entertainment consumption but also the circulation of cultural knowledge. Through algorithmic distribution systems and visually driven storytelling formats, these platforms reorganize how attention, memory, and meaning are structured in digital environments (Kaye et al., 2021; Bucher, 2018). By 2023, short video had become the dominant media form among young Chinese audiences, significantly influencing cultural consumption patterns (Russo et al., 2008).

For historical museums, this transformation extends beyond communication strategy. Traditionally, museums have operated as custodians of collective memory and institutional authority, authenticating artifacts and stabilizing historical meaning (Bourdieu, 1984). In the digital era, however, this authority is reconfigured. When museums adopt short video formats, they enter algorithmically

mediated environments in which visibility depends on affective appeal, speed, and audience participation (Paquienseguy & Guo, 2025).

This shift raises critical questions about cultural authority and meaning-making. Short videos condense complex historical narratives into brief and emotionally compelling formats, enhancing accessibility while potentially simplifying historical depth (Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007). At the same time, participatory affordances such as danmu, remixing, and interactive commenting enable audiences to actively negotiate cultural meaning, transforming heritage communication into a dynamic and dialogic process (Jenkins, 2006; Deuze, 2006).

Drawing on Cultural Identity Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Constructivist Learning Theory, this study examines how programming styles in historical museum short videos shape cultural identity among Chinese audiences. By situating museum short videos within debates on algorithmic mediation, participatory culture, and identity construction, the research seeks to illuminate the cultural implications of heritage communication in the platform age.

Research Objectives

1. Examine the development and evolution of short-form video adoption in Chinese historical museums.
2. Investigate the role of short videos in the preservation and communication of cultural heritage, particularly in relation to audience engagement and identity formation.
3. Propose practical design strategies to assist museums and cultural institutions in producing effective and culturally meaningful short-form video content.

Methodology

The methodology comprised research design, sampling, instruments, data collection, and data analysis.

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how programming styles in short video heritage media shape cultural identity among Chinese audiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three complementary methods were integrated: textual analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. The use of multiple methods ensured both depth and breadth in understanding the study topic.

2. Population and Sample

The population in this study consisted of audiences actively engaged with short video platforms in China, including university students, young professionals, and museum visitors aged 18-35. This demographic was chosen because younger generations are the primary consumers of digital heritage media, and their interpretations play a central role in understanding contemporary cultural identity (Zhang & Negus, 2020). A total of 30 individuals participated in in-depth interviews, representing diverse educational backgrounds, occupations, and media habits. Additionally, two focus groups were organized, each with 8 participants ($n = 16$), for a total of 46 participants across

both methods. Participants were purposively sampled, ensuring they had prior exposure to museum-related short videos.

3. Research Instrument

Three research instruments were used in accordance with the study's multi-method design. The first instrument was textual analysis, based on a corpus of 20 representative short videos from official museum accounts (e.g., Palace Museum, Sanxingdui Museum, Dunhuang Academy) and grassroots creators on platforms such as Douyin and Bilibili. The selection criteria included popularity (measured by views and likes), diversity of style (didactic, immersive, participatory, performative), and thematic relevance to Chinese cultural heritage. The second instrument was semi-structured interview guides, consisting of questions targeting three key areas: perceptions of authenticity and authority in heritage videos, reactions to different stylistic approaches, and reflections on how these videos shaped participants' sense of cultural belonging. The third instrument was focus group protocols designed to stimulate collective discussion on topics such as participants' favorite heritage short videos, how style influenced emotional engagement, and debates on the value of entertainment-oriented formats (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Morgan, 1997).

4. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period from March to May 2025. Textual materials from short videos were downloaded and archived for systematic analysis. Interview and focus group participants were recruited through university networks, museum visitor groups, and social media outreach. All participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms in transcripts and reports. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, while focus groups lasted between 90-120 minutes.

5. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a structured qualitative procedure integrating textual analysis and thematic analysis. The analytical process consisted of four stages.

5.1 Coding Procedure

For textual analysis, the 20 selected short videos were coded using a deductive-inductive framework. Initial deductive categories were derived from the theoretical framework (narrative voice, emotional design, participatory affordances). These were then refined inductively through repeated viewing to identify emergent stylistic patterns. Each video was coded for duration, narrative structure, visual techniques, tone, and audience interaction features.

5.2 Thematic Analysis

Interview and focus group transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were first open-coded to identify recurring concepts related to authenticity, engagement, emotional response, and identity perception. Codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories corresponding to cognitive recognition, emotional resonance, and symbolic participation.

5.3 Inter-coder Reliability

To enhance reliability, a second independent coder reviewed a subset (30%) of the coded video and transcript data. Coding discrepancies were discussed and reconciled to ensure consistency in category interpretation.

5.4 Trustworthiness

Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation, integrating textual analysis, interviews, and focus groups. Member checking was conducted by summarizing key interpretations to selected participants for validation. Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, anonymity protection, and voluntary participation.

6. Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample focused on audiences aged 18–35, which may limit the generalizability of findings to older demographic groups with different media consumption patterns. Second, the selection of 20 short videos, while purposively sampled for stylistic diversity, cannot fully represent the breadth of museum-related short video production in China’s rapidly evolving digital ecosystem. Third, the qualitative design emphasizes interpretive depth rather than statistical generalization, which may constrain broader extrapolation. Future research may address these limitations through expanded sampling, cross-generational comparison, and mixed-method approaches.

Results

1. To Analyze the Development and Evolution of Short Video Usage in Chinese Historical Museums

Textual analysis of the 20 selected short videos revealed clear stylistic differences between institutional and grassroots accounts. Of the 20 videos, 12 institutional museum videos predominantly employed authoritative voice-over narration, formal language, and close-up visualization of artifacts, typically structured within 30–60 seconds and focused on explanatory content. In contrast, 8 grassroots-produced videos incorporated informal speech, animated overlays, popular culture references, and humorous framing devices.

Interview responses further supported this pattern. Twenty-two of the 30 participants associated institutional formats with credibility and informational reliability. As one interviewee noted, “When the museum account explains the artifact, I feel the information is more trustworthy” (Interviewee 07). However, focus group discussions indicated a different evaluative emphasis. Thirteen of the 16 focus group participants reported that hybrid and participatory styles were more engaging and emotionally resonant. One participant commented, “Videos that mix explanation with entertainment keep me watching longer” (FG2-P4).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate a measurable shift in programming strategies across different production contexts, reflecting a growing tension between institutional authority and platform-oriented engagement logics.



Figure 1: Improving audience awareness through explanation. The picture is from the Douyin account of the Palace Museum.

The coding results indicate that the content style of these videos increasingly integrates factual explanation with narrative and entertainment elements. For example, the Palace Museum’s Douyin account employed a 45-second animated video of an imperial vase, which was positively received by several participants during the interviews and focus groups. Participants noted that the combination of historical context, engaging visuals, and concise explanation enhanced comprehensibility while preserving institutional credibility.

In contrast, grassroots creators on platforms such as Bilibili more frequently adopted hybrid popular-culture strategies. These videos commonly blended humor with informal academic references, making heritage content more accessible and relatable. In particular, the use of anime-inspired tropes to explain historical material was perceived by participants as aligning more closely with youth subcultural preferences. Together, these patterns suggest a gradual convergence toward hybrid narrative forms across different production contexts.

2. To Explore the Role of Short Videos in the Preservation and Communication of Cultural Heritage

Interview data (n = 30) revealed that 18 participants explicitly identified short videos as the primary channel through which they first encountered specific artifacts or historical narratives. During the coding process, these responses were categorized under the theme “initial heritage exposure through digital platforms.”

Focus group discussions (n = 16) further indicated recurring patterns of continued engagement. Participants reported that they frequently revisited museum-related short videos before or after physical museum visits, describing these videos as supplementary interpretive resources that enhanced their understanding of exhibition content.

Taken together, these coded patterns suggest that short videos function as an important mediating layer between archival heritage knowledge and everyday digital consumption practices, extending their role beyond that of merely promotional media.

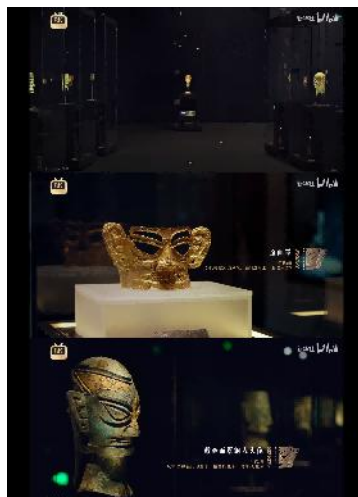


Figure 2: Multimodal narrative resonates with the audience. Image from Xinhua News Agency's bilibili account.

However, concerns regarding excessive dramatization also emerged from the data. Several participants noted that some videos occasionally leaned too heavily toward entertainment-oriented presentation, which they felt could dilute the perceived authenticity of the heritage content. At the same time, many participants emphasized that the emotional resonance generated by immersive video design was important for sustaining interest and engagement with cultural heritage.

These findings indicate an ongoing tension between maintaining historical credibility and enhancing affective appeal, suggesting that the effectiveness of short videos in digital heritage communication depends on how producers balance informational authority with emotionally engaging storytelling.

3. To Propose Practical Strategies for Museums and Cultural Institutions in Designing Short-Form Video Content

The proposed strategies are derived directly from the empirical findings presented above. First, textual analysis revealed a clear distinction between authoritative didactic narration and emotionally immersive formats, while interview data indicated that participants simultaneously valued informational credibility and audience engagement. This dual preference suggests that museums should balance factual narration with stylistic elements that enhance emotional resonance.

Second, focus group discussions identified participatory features—such as commenting, duets, and meme adaptation—as key mechanisms through which audiences expressed cultural connection. The recurrence of this pattern across participant responses supports the integration of interactive affordances into short-form heritage content.

Finally, the comparative analysis between institutional and grassroots productions demonstrated complementary strengths in credibility and relatability. This finding provides empirical support for collaborative content strategies between museums and digital creators in order to maximize both authority and audience engagement.



Figure 3: Participatory interaction strengthens identity recognition. Image from CCTV.com's bilibili account.

Discussion

Objective 1: Development and Evolution of Short Video Usage in Chinese Historical Museums

The findings of this study reveal a clear stylistic differentiation between institutional and grassroots museum short videos. Institutional productions tend to emphasize authoritative narration and explanatory structures that reinforce informational credibility, whereas grassroots creators more frequently employ hybrid entertainment-oriented formats to enhance viewer engagement. This pattern reflects an ongoing shift in digital heritage communication toward platform-sensitive programming strategies.

From the perspective of Cultural Identity Theory, identity is constructed through representational practices rather than passively received cultural messages (Hall, 1996). The observed divergence between authoritative and hybrid styles suggests that museums are increasingly operating within a negotiated representational environment where institutional authority must coexist with platform-driven audience expectations. Programming style therefore functions as a mediating structure through which cultural meaning is organized and circulated.

These findings are consistent with prior museum communication research that identifies the growing hybridity of digital heritage formats. However, the present study extends existing scholarship by providing empirical qualitative evidence of how stylistic differentiation operates specifically within short-form video ecosystems in the Chinese context.

Objective 2: Role of Short Videos in the Preservation and Communication of Cultural Heritage

The study found that short videos function as both cognitive entry points and affective engagement mechanisms for heritage learning. Many participants reported first encountering specific artifacts through short video platforms and described revisiting these videos to support museum visits. In addition, participatory affordances such as commenting and meme practices were perceived as enhancing personal involvement with cultural heritage.

These patterns can be interpreted through Uses and Gratifications Theory, which posits that audiences actively select media to satisfy cognitive and emotional needs (Katz et al., 1974). At the same time, the participatory behaviors observed in danmu interaction and remix practices align with Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture, where users move beyond passive consumption toward active meaning-making. Together, these frameworks help explain why emotionally immersive and interactive short videos are particularly effective in fostering identity engagement.

The findings generally support previous research emphasizing the role of digital media in expanding heritage accessibility. However, this study contributes new insight by demonstrating how specific programming styles mediate the relationship between exposure, emotional resonance, and symbolic participation within short-video environments.

Objective 3: Practical Strategies for Museums and Cultural Institutions

The empirical results indicate that effective short-form heritage communication requires balancing epistemic authority with affective and participatory engagement. Participants consistently valued informational credibility while also responding positively to emotionally immersive and interactive formats. This suggests that purely didactic approaches may be insufficient for sustaining attention in platform-based environments.

Constructivist Learning Theory provides a useful lens for interpreting this pattern, as it emphasizes that knowledge construction emerges through active and emotionally meaningful engagement (Vygotsky, 1978). Hybrid programming styles combining clear explanation with narrative immersion and interactive affordances therefore appear particularly well suited to contemporary digital heritage communication.

Compared with earlier museum digitalization studies, the present findings highlight the strategic importance of collaboration between institutional producers and digital-native creators. Such partnerships may enable museums to maintain curatorial authority while simultaneously enhancing cultural relevance and audience engagement within rapidly evolving short-video ecosystems.

Body of Knowledge

This study synthesizes the findings into a conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between programming style and cultural identity construction:

Programming Style functions as the mediating variable in digital heritage communication.

It generates three analytically distinct dimensions:

1. Cognitive Recognition reinforced through didactic narration and authoritative presentation.

2. Emotional Resonance facilitated by immersive dramatization and affective design.

3. Symbolic Participation enabled through interactive and remix-based affordances.

These three dimensions collectively contribute to Cultural Identity Construction within platform-based digital environments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study found that programming styles in museum short videos play a significant role in shaping cultural identity among Chinese audiences. Three main dimensions of identity construction were identified: cognitive recognition, emotional resonance, and symbolic participation. Didactic narration supports cognitive recognition by presenting authoritative knowledge, but without engaging techniques, it can feel rigid. Immersive and dramatized formats stimulate emotional resonance and create emotional connections, although there is a risk of over-sensationalizing the narrative. Symbolic participation, such as through features like danmu or remixes, allows audiences to engage in the negotiation of cultural identity in digital spaces, reflecting the idea of making cultural expression participatory.

Policy Implications

The findings emphasize the importance of establishing guidelines that protect the authenticity of cultural heritage while not stifling creative innovation in its presentation. Current policy frameworks prioritize accuracy and moral responsibility, which sometimes may limit stylistic creativity. Policymakers should encourage collaborations between cultural institutions and digital content creators by offering funding or incentives for joint projects that align heritage communication with the dynamics of digital platforms while preserving the integrity of heritage.

Practical Implications

Museums should consider adopting hybrid programming styles that balance authoritative narration with engaging techniques. Presenting accurate information alongside humorous narration or cinematic design can preserve authenticity while increasing audience engagement. For example, incorporating close-ups of artifacts while explaining their historical significance can help viewers remember details and connect with the content on a deeper level.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. Methodological Development: Future studies may incorporate mixed-method or quantitative approaches to examine the scalability of stylistic effects on identity formation.
2. Cross-Platform Comparison: Comparative analysis between algorithm-driven platforms (e.g., Douyin) and community-driven platforms (e.g., Bilibili) may reveal structural differences in identity mediation.
3. Longitudinal Research: Long-term studies may explore how sustained exposure to digital heritage content influences identity construction over time.

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