

Original Research Article

Cross-cultural strategies for adapting Chinese culture on overseas social media platforms

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Abstract: With the increasing intensity of global digital communication, the representation of Chinese culture on overseas social media platforms has emerged as a pivotal area for fostering intercultural exchange. This particular study delves into the cross-cultural strategies that are utilized to modify and adapt Chinese cultural content to resonate with international audiences on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. The research is grounded in Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's high-context/low-context theory, which provide a framework for understanding how content creators, institutions, and influencers adeptly tailor Chinese cultural narratives—spanning traditional arts, festive celebrations, and core values—to enhance their reception and engagement within a multitude of cultural contexts. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study conducts a content analysis of 120 culturally themed social media posts and conducts in-depth interviews with 15 bilingual content strategists. This comprehensive methodology uncovers three dominant strategies: cultural reframing, semiotic bridging, and narrative localization. The results indicate that effective adaptation hinges not on the dilution of content, but on the art of creative intercultural translation that harmoniously balances authenticity with audience appeal. This study not only contributes to the field of digital intercultural communication literature but also provides valuable practical insights for public diplomacy initiatives, cultural export endeavors, and strategies for global branding.

Keywords: Chinese culture; Cross-cultural communication; Social media adaptation; Intercultural strategy; Cultural export; Digital diplomacy

1. Introduction

With the growing prominence of digital diplomacy and soft power, Chinese culture has increasingly become visible on international social media platforms. Whether in the form of traditional tea ceremonies, calligraphy, or contemporary adaptations like Chinese rap and vlogs, these representations are mediated by the expectations and preferences of international audiences. While linguistic translation has been widely explored, the question of cultural adaptation—how content is modified or reframed for overseas viewers—Remains under-researched in global communication studies. This paper aims to fill that gap by analyzing the strategies employed in adapting Chinese culture on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework

Cross-cultural adaptation, which is frequently examined through the lens of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, particularly focusing on the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism, as well as the concept of long-term orientation, plays a pivotal role in understanding the nuances of global communication. Hofstede's framework, initially proposed in the year 2001, has become a cornerstone in the field of intercultural studies, offering insights into how different societies prioritize individual freedom and autonomy versus the importance of group

cohesion and collective goals. Furthermore, it sheds light on the value systems that emphasize perseverance and future-oriented planning, which are often reflected in the strategic approaches of various cultures.

On the other hand, Edward T. Hall's communication theory, introduced in 1976, differentiates between high-context and low-context communication styles, providing another layer of understanding in the realm of cross-cultural interactions. According to Hall, high-context cultures, which are prevalent in East Asian societies, tend to rely heavily on implicit communication, where much of the meaning is derived from the context rather than explicit verbal or written messages. This implies that content originating from such cultures might not be immediately comprehensible to Western audiences, who are accustomed to low-context communication that is more direct and explicit.

These theoretical frameworks, Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's high-context/low-context communication theory, are instrumental in guiding our comprehension of how cultural values are encoded, modified, or even omitted when content is adapted into digital formats. As we delve into the intricacies of global digital communication, it becomes increasingly important to recognize and respect these cultural differences to ensure effective and respectful cross-cultural adaptation in the digital age.

2.2. Cultural translation in the digital age

Digital media has revolutionized the way content is delivered, allowing for micro-targeted and highly personalized dissemination. Scholars such as Marwan M. Kraidy in his work from 2005 and Tarleton Gillespie in his 2018 publication have observed that online cultural translation is a complex process that encompasses both semiotic elements (which include symbols, colors, and sound) and discursive aspects (such as narratives and idioms). Therefore, to truly grasp and appreciate Chinese culture as it is presented on digital platforms, it is essential to pay close attention not only to the content itself, the "what" that is being said, but also to the manner in which it is communicated, the "how" of its delivery.

2.3. Chinese cultural representation abroad

While the global circulation of Chinese dramas and films has been studied, few works explore social media creators who serve as "informal diplomats" in cultural transmission. Studies (Feng & Wu, 2021) show that TikTok creators often act as cultural translators rather than direct transmitters.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and sampling

We have employed a convergent mixed-methods approach in our study, which involved a comprehensive quantitative content analysis of 120 social media posts that were tagged with #ChineseCulture and its various derivatives. This analysis was complemented by an in-depth qualitative examination, which included conducting 15 interviews with bilingual content creators who actively engage in the creation and dissemination of content related to Chinese culture. The aim of this dual approach was to gain a more nuanced understanding of the representation and perception of Chinese culture on social media platforms.

3.2. Coding schema

Three adaptation strategies emerged from preliminary review: Cultural Reframing (replacing or comparing concepts with familiar foreign analogues), Semiotic Bridging (using visual cues or hybrid symbols), and Narrative Localization (changing tone, idioms, or platform conventions).

3.3. Data tools

NVivo is utilized for the thematic coding of interviews, providing a robust platform for qualitative data analysis. It allows researchers to systematically organize and analyze interview transcripts, identifying recurring themes and patterns within the data. On the other hand, SPSS is employed for the generation of descriptive and comparative statistics, offering a suite of tools to summarize and contrast data sets effectively. This statistical software is widely used for hypothesis testing, variance analysis, and regression analysis, among other quantitative methods. Additionally, the inter-coder reliability for content analysis has been established at a commendable level, with a Cohen’s kappa coefficient of 0.87. This high value indicates a strong agreement between coders when analyzing the content, ensuring the consistency and reliability of the coding process.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Frequency of adaptation strategies

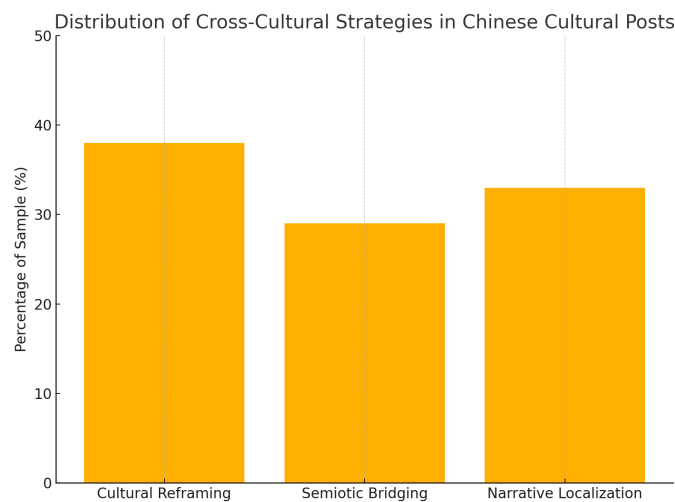


Figure 1. Distribution of cross-cultural strategies in Chinese cultural posts.

4.2. Audience engagement by platform

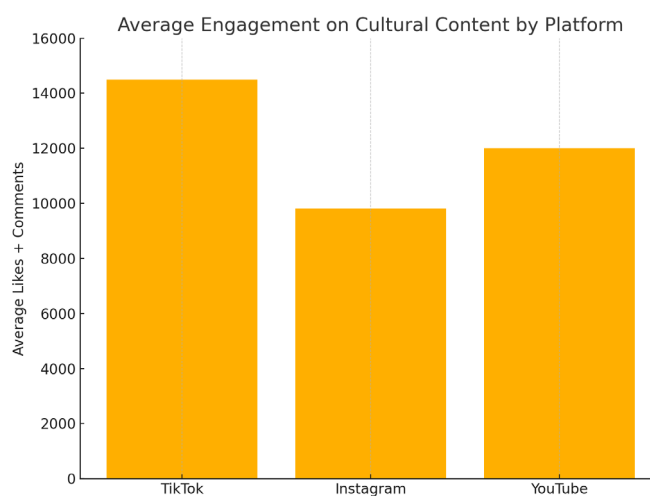


Figure 2. Average engagement on cultural content by platform.

4.3. Perceived effectiveness and creator reflections

Interviewees noted that adaptation is not dilution: ‘It’s about finding entry points into Chinese culture, not simplifying it. I might say tea culture is about “mindfulness,” a term Westerners relate to, but I still brew it the Chinese way.’

4.4. Challenges and tensions

Challenges that content creators often face include: Cultural essentialism, a phenomenon where audiences have preconceived notions and expect “exotic” portrayals that may not accurately represent the diversity and complexity of a culture. This can lead to a skewed perception and a demand for stereotypical content. Another significant challenge is algorithmic limitations, where the platforms themselves prioritize content that is catchy and easily digestible over more nuanced and thoughtful content. This can result in a homogenization of content and a lack of diversity in the topics covered. Additionally, identity pressure poses a challenge for creators, who often feel caught between the need to accurately represent their cultural background and the pressure to perform for a digital audience. This can create a tension between authenticity and the desire to attract viewers, leading to a struggle to balance these two aspects in their work.

5. Conclusion

This research study brings to light the fascinating phenomenon of how Chinese culture is being digitally disseminated across social media platforms, revealing a dynamic and proactive approach to intercultural exchange rather than a mere passive broadcasting of content. The study identifies and delves into three distinct strategies that are pivotal in this process: Reframing, bridging, and localization. These strategies are instrumental in showcasing how content creators and cultural mediators skillfully navigate the delicate balance between preserving cultural authenticity and ensuring global accessibility. By reframing cultural elements, they present them in a new light that resonates with a broader audience; through bridging, they connect disparate cultural concepts, fostering understanding and appreciation; and with localization, they tailor content to fit the cultural nuances of specific regions, thereby enhancing its relevance and appeal. As social media continues to evolve into a crucial arena where global perceptions are shaped, the implications of this intercultural work are far-reaching. It has significant ramifications for public diplomacy, as it can influence international relations and mutual understanding; for branding, as it can enhance the global image and appeal of cultural products; and for education, as it can provide a rich tapestry of diverse cultural insights that enrich learning experiences. This study not only sheds light on the strategies employed but also underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing the role of social media in facilitating intercultural dialogue and exchange in our increasingly interconnected world.

6. References

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