A Grounded Theory Study of Audience Emotional Experience in Chinese Web-based Craftsmanship Documentaries

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Abstract

Amid globalization and modernization, maintaining national identity and folk culture has become a pressing issue. While web-based craftsmanship documentaries are rapidly emerging in the digital media environment, their role in shaping cultural identity remains underexplored. Using a procedural grounded theory approach, this study investigates nine viewers through semi-structured interviews, adopting theoretical sampling and constant comparison. Findings reveal five main emotional responses—empathy, enjoyment, pride, concern, and dissatisfaction—forming a progressive mechanism of emotion–cognition and reflection–cultural identity. These emotions not only reflect viewers' complex perceptions of craftsmen and their skills but also resonate with personal memories and cultural experiences, fostering re-identification with tradition and reconstruction of cultural belonging. The study highlights documentaries as cultural learning devices that trigger emotions and activate memory to promote cultural identity reconstruction, enriching debates on media, culture, and identity. This framework extends cinematic emotion research by integrating cultural identity into the process of emotional generation and cognitive processing, offering a renewed perspective on digital documentary audiences.

Keywords: web-based craftsmanship documentaries, grounded theory, emotional experience, cultural identity

1. Introduction

Driven by digital technologies such as cloud computing, big data, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic systems, all aspects of human society—including daily life, social interactions, economic activities, government governance, and information production and dissemination—have been profoundly affected (Dobrinskaya, 2021). Entering the era of new media, all forms of cinema have changed or been compelled to adapt; consequently, documentaries, as a genre, have also exhibited new styles, dimensions, and creative approaches (Arda, 2020). Web-based documentaries have emerged as an important form of contemporary documentary media. These documentaries typically distribute content using multiple formats (e.g., video, text, images, animation) or across multiple platforms (e.g., the Internet, mobile applications, books, interactive installations, video games) (Vázquez-Herrero & Gifreu-Castells, 2019).Its production characteristics of "narrativization and micro-formatting" (Ni, 2017) significantly lower the audience's comprehension threshold, enhance content accessibility and shareability, and broaden the audience base of documentaries. Consequently, Nash (2014) refers to viewers who engage interactively as members of a new type of community.

As globalization and modernization increasingly influence local cultures, younger generations often adopt global pop culture and digital media trends at the expense of indigenous traditions, prompting governments and communities to emphasize national identity and cultural heritage to preserve their distinctiveness (Sanmee, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the significance of cultural heritage in sustaining human evolution and social cohesion has become increasingly salient (Podara et al., 2021). As Galloway, McAlpine, and Harris (2007) assert, every documentary is a cultural document. Documentaries possess the potential to serve as a form of serious discourse, with the capacity to exert tangible influence on individuals and communities (Nichols, 1991). Purkis (2017) further argues that by creating narratives that reflect the lived histories of communities and individuals, documentaries can foster a sense of place and identity, thereby enhancing public engagement with and participation in cultural heritage. Today, web documentaries offer an intriguing alternative to traditional television or online video platform releases. Their interactive and non-linear features provide audiences with greater potential for participation (Ducasse, Kljun, & Čopič Pucihar, 2020). Among various types of web-based documentaries, those centered on themes such as "craftsmen," "craftsmanship spirit," and "intangible cultural heritage" have gradually formed a distinct cultural subgenre. These documentaries not only record the intricate details and procedures of manual skills but also evoke a nostalgic emotional return to "primitive craftsmanship" in the context of industrial and postmodern societies (Yin, 2018).

The year 2016 is widely regarded as the inaugural year of web-based documentaries in China (Liang, 2019), witnessing the emergence of several widely acclaimed works such as *Masters in Forbidden City* (2016), *Human World* (2016), *Birth Gate* (2016). These popular documentaries refer to those that did not receive much attention when aired on television but gained acclaim and went viral online, accumulating millions of views during their secondary playback on internet video platforms. This phenomenon highlights the critical role played by audiences in the popularization and diffusion of documentaries through their evaluations, sharing, and creative engagement. Therefore, it is of both theoretical and practical significance to explore the mechanisms by which audiences experience emotional responses, memory activation, and cultural resonance when engaging with web-based craftsmanship documentaries.

With the increasing number of web documentaries, scholarly research on their audiences has also grown. Some studies adopt quantitative approaches, focusing primarily on the macro-level impacts of web documentaries. For instance, Ducasse, Kljun, and Čopič Pucihar (2020) examined interactivity by observing user behaviors within web documentaries—such as the number of visits per user, videos viewed, and time spent on the website—yet did not address users' comprehension of the narrative content. Similarly, Zamith (2018) employed methodologies originally developed for web analytics and marketing, utilizing data collection and processing systems to generate aggregated indicators of audience preferences and behaviors in order to investigate the behavioral characteristics of specific audience groups. Nash (2014), from the perspective of interactivity in web documentaries, analyzed audience experiences and discussed both the strengths and limitations of interactive documentary forms. In contrast, the present study capitalizes on the strengths of qualitative research by employing semi-structured, in-depth interviews to capture audiences' emotional responses and cultural resonances toward web-based documentaries. Situated within the context of China's unique social transformation, this allows for an in-depth exploration of the interrelationship between emotional experience, cultural memory, and identity within a specific cultural context.

Based on the above background, this study adopted Straussian grounded theory approach for qualitative research. Drawing on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine Chinese viewers of web-based craftsmanship documentaries, this study seeks to address the following core questions: What emotional experiences are evoked during the viewing process? How are these emotions connected to individual memory and cultural experience? And in what ways do documentaries foster cultural identification and resonance among audiences?

At the theoretical level, this study extends existing research on audience experiences of web-based documentaries by deepening the understanding of the relationship between emotions and cultural identity, while also offering a new analytical perspective for subsequent inquiries into cultural identity construction within digital media contexts. At the practical level, the study enhances creators' awareness of audience emotional mechanisms and cultural resonance in this genre of documentaries, thereby providing both theoretical guidance and practical reference for the production and dissemination of folklore-oriented documentaries in new media environments.

The structure of this paper is organized as follows. First, it provides a systematic literature review on the development of Chinese web-based craftsmanship documentaries and the emotional experiences of their audiences during viewing. Next, the study details the research methodology, sampling procedures, and the three-level coding analysis process employed. Finally, based on the data analysis, the paper identifies and synthesizes key dimensions of audience emotional and cognitive experiences during viewing, including empathy, enjoyment, pride, concern, and dissatisfaction.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Development of Web-based Craftsmanship Documentaries

With the development of new media, documentaries have emerged in various new forms, such as i-docs (Dowling, 2022), web documentaries (Nash, 2012), and living documentaries (Gaudenzi, 2013). Research on these emerging documentary forms generally emphasizes their interactivity, transmedia storytelling, and innovative database structures.

In contrast, the concept of "web-based documentaries" in China is situated within a distinctly local context. It represents not only an adaptation to new technologies but also the "third pole" in the documentary industry following television and theatrical documentaries (Liang, 2019). Scholars generally define web-based documentaries as "documentaries produced and disseminated for online audiences, driven by Internet platforms" (Liang, 2019; Ma & Leng, 2020), emphasizing the leading role of video-sharing websites in promoting the development of this genre. Zhang and Zhang (2020) further note that web-based documentaries are both a product of technological advancement and an outcome of the documentary form actively breaking through traditional dissemination circles. These studies primarily focus on industrial driving forces and production logics, illustrating the gradual formation of web-based documentaries from platform self-production to an emerging aesthetic paradigm.

Meanwhile, scholars have begun to examine the influence of audience media habits on aesthetic structures. Han (2020) points out that "youth" and "innovation" have become core elements of content strategies in web-based documentaries, driving continuous breakthroughs in audience expansion and genre boundaries. Given that younger audiences tend to consume information in a fragmented manner and exhibit low tolerance for long-form videos, researchers suggest employing alternative structures and interactive mechanisms to engage them, allowing viewers to autonomously select their depth of engagement (Rizvic et al., 2019). Overall, existing literature has accumulated substantial insights regarding definitional clarification, industrial configuration, and aesthetic innovation, yet it largely focuses on the production side and formal characteristics.

In contrast, the expansion of documentaries into specific thematic domains, particularly the rise of folklore-themed content, has shown new developmental trends. In recent years, Chinese folklore documentaries have experienced rapid growth, exhibiting increasing thematic diversity and gradual genre differentiation. From a macro-level perspective, Gu and Peng (2023) systematically reviewed the current state of the documentary industry and related research, noting that in China, niche topics such as traditional Chinese medicine, martial arts, cultural heritage, ethnography, and anthropology have received increasing attention. Historical and cultural documentaries have been further subdivided, giving rise to case studies on historical figures, archaeology, and historical literature, thereby enriching the system of genre research.

As a subgenre of folk culture, documentaries focused on Chinese craftsmen have formed a diverse communication matrix. Works like *Great Craftsmen* (2015) and *A Hundred Craftsmen* (2017) take a macro perspective, integrating ideology and a sense of grandeur into the narrative discourse, elevating craftsmen to a symbolic group that represents the national image. These works review the history of Chinese craftsmanship, moving from biographical accounts to historical narratives, and reflecting the changing status and evolving perceptions of craftsmen over a century of transformation. On the other hand, works like *Papa's Carpentry House* (2015) and *The Great Shokunin* (2016) adopt a small yet beautiful strategy, aiming to bring the topic of craftsmen into the market for younger audiences (Zhu, 2022). The success of Masters in Forbidden City (2016) reflects the attention and recognition that the craftsman culture and spirit have received in Chinese documentaries (Li, 2021).

The consummate skills and ingenious craftsmanship of artisans become universal topics with global humanistic and aesthetic value (Zhu& Zhang, 2022). Notable productions such as the BBC's *The Repair Shop* (2017) and Japan's NHK channel's *Master Craftsmen* (2010) underscore the acclaim and reverence for highly refined craftsmanship and transcendent artisan spirit across various cultures.

These works not only advance the visual representation of craftsmanship and traditional folk culture in the era of new media, but also bring the cultural symbol of the craftsman to the forefront of public discourse, thereby creating possibilities for further examining the interaction between documentaries, cultural heritage, and social identity.

However, scholarly discussions of these works have largely focused on their genre development and the exploration of cultural value, paying comparatively less attention to audience reception and experiential dimensions. In other words, although the abundance of documentary samples provides a solid empirical foundation, existing studies have yet to fully reveal how viewers generate emotional experiences, evoke personal memories, and further transform these into cultural identification and resonance during the viewing process. This study is situated within this context, drawing on a rich body of works to focus on the emotion–cognition and reflection–cultural identity chain, thereby addressing gaps in the current research.

2.2 The Emotional Dimension in Documentary Reception

Existing theoretical research on cinematic emotions provides an important reference for understanding the emotional dimensions of documentary reception.

According to the Cognitive-Perceptual theoretical model proposed by American cognitive film scholar Plantinga (2009), film cognition initially occurs as an automatic and unconscious perceptual process triggered by external stimuli, which then progresses into a more complex cognitive stage involving conscious selection and judgment. Artaud (1976) argued that film connects directly to our brains, establishing a neural order of emotional sensation, where at the base of every

emotional chain lies the film's awakening of emotions. Although this may remain at a primary level, film still produces cognitive vibrations through its unique artistic form. Both converge on the view that the process of watching films is essentially a chain from emotional arousal to cognitive processing.

On this basis, Zhou (2023) categorizes cinematic emotions into two levels based on the degree of audience engagement and the underlying causes. The first level is cinematic emotion, which represents the preliminary stage of emotional response to film. It is typically an unconscious psychological state—short-lived, explosive, and easily triggered. Cinematic emotions are primarily instinctive reactions arising from physiological mechanisms in response to external tension or pressure, and each emotional episode results from a multi-level neurophysiological integration. Common cinematic emotions include pleasure, excitement, disgust, surprise, and fear. Plantinga (2009) argues that emotional experience is one of the main motivations for film viewing. Viewers may derive intrinsic emotional pleasure from cinematic experiences, but they also experience meta-emotions, as well as social or utilitarian emotional responses.

The second level is cinematic affect, a more advanced stage that emerges from the development and elevation of cinematic emotion. At this stage, cognition begins to participate in the generation of affective responses, resulting in more complex emotional experiences and meanings. Compared with cinematic emotion, cinematic affect is a more stable psychological state (Zhou, 2023). This classification highlights the hierarchical and complex nature of audience emotional experiences.

Table 1. Comparative Table of Cinematic Emotion and Cinematic Affect (Zhou, 2023)

Category	Positioning	Characteristics	Level of Conscious Participation	Examples
Cinematic Emotion	The primary stage of cinematic affect	Short-lived, explosive, easily triggered	Predominantly unconscious psychological state	Pleasure, excitement, disgust, surprise, fear
Cinematic Affect	The advanced stage resulting from the elevation of cinematic emotion	Long-lasting, stable, difficult to trigger	Psychological state primarily involving conscious participation	Love for the motherland, aversion to war, admiration for maternal love, yearning for freedom

Existing research has largely focused on the psychological mechanisms of film reception, emphasizing the interaction between emotion and cognition. However, the reception context of documentaries differs significantly. In documentary viewing, audiences are not merely passive recipients of emotional arousal; their responses are also shaped by memory, cultural resonance, and identity recognition. In other words, while existing theories provide a foundational framework for understanding audience emotional responses, they are insufficient to explain how documentaries elicit deeper resonance through the interplay of real-life imagery and cultural narratives. Accordingly, this study seeks to extend the "emotion–cognition" model by incorporating a cultural identity perspective, aiming to investigate the audience's experiential process along theemotion–cognition and reflection–cultural identity continuum.

Within this conceptual framework, Plantinga's "Cognitive-Perceptual" model and Zhou's dichotomy of "Film emotion–Film affect" provide theoretical support for understanding the hierarchical and complex nature of audience emotional experiences. The five types of emotions proposed in this study can be further situated within this framework: empathy and enjoyment align more closely with the initial stage of viewing, corresponding to "film emotions," as they are primarily triggered directly by on-screen characters, scenes, and narrative tension, reflecting audiences' immediate responses and sensory pleasure. In contrast, pride, concern, and dissatisfaction rely more heavily on cognitive processing and cultural interpretation; they are elicited and elevated within the documentary's authenticity and narrative context, representing a more stable level of "film affect." Accordingly, the emotional experience of documentary audiences exhibits a progressive trajectory from "basic emotions" (empathy, enjoyment) to "advanced affective responses" (pride, concern, dissatisfaction), ultimately culminating in cultural resonance and identity construction. This mapping not only addresses the limitations of existing theories but also provides conceptual grounding and theoretical expectations for the subsequent empirical analysis

3. Methodology

3.1 Samples

Given that this study focuses on the impact of web-based craftsmanship documentaries on the understanding of Chinese folk culture, the research scope was not limited to specific groups (e.g., college students or young adults). A combination of sampling strategies was employed to ensure both diversity and richness of information. First, maximum variation sampling was used to broadly capture diversity within the larger population, establishing the study's outer frame. Next, criterion sampling was applied on the basis of this large-sample variation to set the necessary condition, ensuring high relevance of the sample to the research topic. Finally, snowball sampling was employed to supplement

key groups that were difficult to reach through the previous two methods, building upon the networks of the initially selected relevant participants.

First, maximum variation sampling was employed. This approach consists of determining in advance some criteria that differentiate the sites or participants and then selecting sites or participants that are quite different on the criteria. This approach is often selected because when a researcher maximizes differences at the beginning of the study, it increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives—an ideal in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In order to more comprehensively cover the broader Chinese population, basic demographic indicators such as age, educational background, occupation, and gender were taken into consideration.

Second, criterion sampling is involved, aiming to ensure that the selected interviewees have a close relationship with the research texts. In the context of this research, the first screening criterion when determining interviewees is whether the person has watched web-based craftsmanship documentaries, as this directly determines whether they can provide valuable information for the core issues of the study. Additionally, considering that the creators of web-based craftsmanship documentaries, driven by the pursuit of communication effectiveness, may define their target audience during the early stages of production, the audience for such documentaries is not the entire Chinese population but rather a segmented audience. This aligns with the purpose of using criterion sampling in this research.

Furthermore, in the specific process of implementing the sampling, the Snowball or chain sampling method will also be used. The purpose is to Identify cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In order to facilitate the statistical analysis of the research sample data and to organize it categorically, while also protecting the respondents' real information, it is first necessary to encode the samples. For instance, the number in the first position represents the interview sequence number of the respondent, the letter "M" in the second position denotes male (Male), "F" denotes female (Female), the number in the third position represents the age of the respondent, and the letter in the fourth position represents the first letter of the respondent's surname. For example, "02-M-24-L" indicates that the "02" represents the second interviewee, followed by a 24-year-old male with the surname starting with "L." The main information about the interview subjects is listed in the table according to the chronological order of the interviews.

Table 2. Information of the Informants

No	Job	Duration	Interview Format	Province of Work and Study
01-M-29-F	Government Administrator	43m	By mobile video	GuangDong
02-M-33-Y	Documentary Director	34m	Face to face	Beijing
03-M-20-L	Undergraduate Student	46m	Face to face	ShanXi
04-M-42-W	University President	45m	By phone	HeNan
05-F-35-Z	Television Journalist	31m	Face to face	HeBei
06-F-25-H	Engineer	40m	By phone	Shanghai
07-M-37-D	Elementary School English Teacher	37m	By wechat	HuBei
08-M-52-L	University Professor	59m	By phone	SiChuan
09-F-25-Z	Graduate Student	42m	Face to face	ZheJiang

The actual sample characteristics of this study indicate that the respondents were predominantly individuals with relatively high educational attainment and a specific interest in folk culture and craftsmanship topics. This reflects the core audience profile that web-based craftsmanship documentaries tend to reach in practice, which also constitutes a limitation of the current study. Nevertheless, this limitation offers valuable insight. Future research should incorporate more diverse samples, including audiences from different social strata, educational backgrounds, and geographic regions, in order to further assess the applicability of the findings across varied populations and to explore how dissemination strategies might expand the documentaries' audience reach.

3.2 The Three-Stage Coding Process

Grounded Theory is a research methodology primarily associated with qualitative research, first introduced by Glaser & Strauss in 1967. It aims to "discover theory from data" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 1). The theoretical foundation of Grounded Theory is rooted in pragmatism (Dewey, 1925; Mead, 1934) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). This qualitative research method constructs theory from the ground up, without any predetermined theoretical assumptions. It involves inductively summarizing concepts and categories from the collected raw data and identifying relationships among them, ultimately building theory based on these connections (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Hall et al., 2013).

To date, mainstream grounded theory has been primarily divided into three types: the first is the classic grounded theory proposed by Glaser & Strauss (1967); the second is the systematic grounded theory, introduced by (Corbin & Strauss, 1990); the third is the constructivist grounded theory proposed by developed by Charmaz (2006). These approaches illustrate how the methodology has diversified over time (Maz, 2013).

Grounded Theory is a method for constructing theory through repeated processes of coding and analysis based on collected empirical data (Susanto et al., 2024). It requires strong analytical skills as well as the ability to manage and integrate large, complex datasets (Ramdhan, 2021). Data coding is a critical step in Grounded Theory. The coding process in Grounded Theory is iterative, involving open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This aligns with the inductive approach of qualitative methods, wherein concepts and categories emerge directly from the data itself (Susanto et al., 2024).

This study is based on Straussian grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and follows the three-phase coding steps of open, axial, and selective coding. Utilizing qualitative analysis software Maxqda, the original text data collected from interviews is subjected to grounded analysis. First, the text data undergoes conceptualization, followed by categorical induction. Second, based on the completed categorical coding, a paradigmatic model is used to systematically organize the established categories. Finally, causal logical relationships are employed to connect the various categories.

3.2.1 Open Coding

Open coding is the process of gradually conceptualizing and categorizing all collected data. According to specific principles, the data are systematically condensed and then replaced by concepts and categories that accurately reflect their content. At this stage, raw data—such as interview transcripts—are preliminarily examined, organized, and grouped into categories based on similar phenomena. Through open coding, this study initially generated 55 concepts. After further consolidation, these were grouped into seven major categories: (1) inheritance of traditional Chinese culture, (2) web-based environment, (3) cinematic techniques, (4) emotional resonance, (5) cultural identity, (6) modern society, and (7) government intervention.

3.2.2 Axial Coding

This study adopts the coding paradigm developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). It is through this paradigm—comprising conditions, context, strategies (action/interaction), and consequences—that subcategories are systematically related to a central category.

Table 3. Coding of Subcategories

category	subcategories
conditions	**Inheritance of Traditional Chinese Culture:** China's long history and its multi-ethnic composition have contributed to the formation of a profound and diverse traditional culture, including folk traditions and craftsmanship culture. These cultural elements have been passed down through generations, enduring the tests of history and remaining an integral part of contemporary Chinese identity.
context	**Context – Modern Society:** Modern society has brought about significant economic and social transformations, which in turn have influenced and reshaped individuals' sense of cultural identity. **Web-based Environment:** Changes in the media environment have altered the way people receive and process information, leading to a transformation in the expressive forms of documentary filmmaking.
strategies (action/interaction)	**Cinematic Techniques:** On the technical level, cinematic techniques—including audiovisual language and narrative strategies—serve to enhance the appeal of cultural content, making it more engaging and accessible to audiences. **Government Intervention:** Government intervention, through policy support and resource allocation, plays a crucial role in promoting the inheritance and dissemination of folk culture.
consequences	**Emotional Resonance:** By narrating the personal emotional stories of craftsmen or showcasing the aesthetic beauty of folk traditions, web-based craftsmanship documentaries evoke emotional resonance among viewers. This resonance serves as an emotional pathway to fostering cultural identity. **Cultural Identity:** Web-based craftsmanship documentaries help cultivate a sense of identification and emotional connection with traditional Chinese culture among audiences.

Based on the interrelationships and logical sequence among different categories, this study reclassified and integrated them to arrive at a core category: cultural identity. The strength of "cultural identity" as the core category lies in its capacity to encompass the other six categories—the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture, cinematic techniques, emotional resonance, modern society, and government intervention—and to explain the logical connections among them. Centered on cultural identity, the other categories form a causal chain, as illustrated in Figure 1.
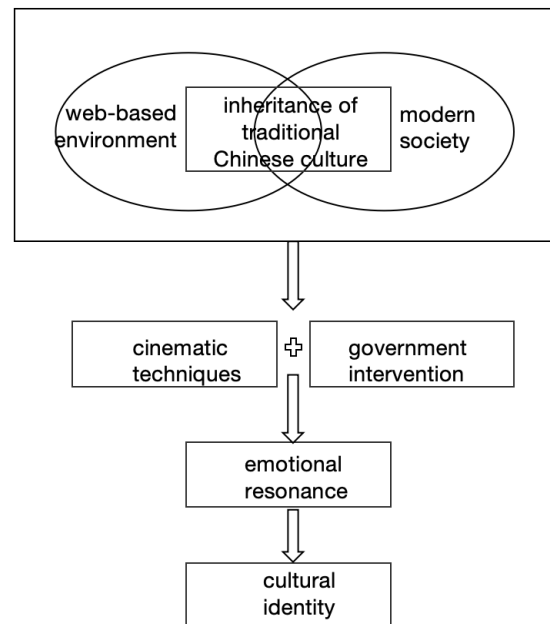
Figure 1. Causal Chain Centered on Cultural Identity

Cause: Social transformation, globalization, and other modernization processes have triggered a growing need for individuals to seek and affirm their cultural roots and identity.

Pathway: Through the medium of web-based documentaries, cinematic techniques are employed to enhance the emotional appeal of the content, thereby eliciting emotional resonance among viewers.

Outcome: Cultural identity is thus established and reinforced. Viewers deepen their understanding of traditional culture and develop an emotional identification through the documentary-watching experience.

By adopting the coding paradigm model, complex data can be systematically organized into a coherent logical chain, making the phenomenon and its influencing factors more comprehensible and interpretable within a theoretical framework.

3.2.3 Selective Coding

By examining all the data related to cultural identity, a more abstract concept—identity construction—can be further derived.

Cultural identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a specific cultural group. From a social-psychological perspective, Hogg (2006) explains that the self-concept is constructed through group membership, group processes, and intergroup relations. In other words, individuals are not born with a cultural identity; rather, they continuously re-examine and reconstruct it based on others' recognition of their group affiliation until a stable sense of identity is achieved. Chen (2017) further argues that by inheriting a group's core values and norms, individuals attain a cultural identity that transcends time and space (Bhandari, 2021).

In the context of globalization and modernization, traditional culture is increasingly challenged by external cultural influences, placing many ancient crafts and cultural customs at risk of being lost. Against this backdrop of cultural transformation, audiences experience uncertainty regarding their sense of cultural belonging and identity.

Craftsmanship documentaries not only serve as tools for documenting traditional skills but also act as windows through which audiences can re-explore and re-understand their personal and cultural identities. By presenting traditional crafts and folk culture, and portraying craftsmen in a delicate and humanized manner, these documentaries evoke emotional resonance in viewers toward traditional culture. This resonance strengthens their sense of cultural belonging and guides them to reconstruct their cultural identity through the viewing experience.

The narrative thread surrounding this core category can be summarized as follows: craftsmanship documentaries, functioning as a form of media ritual, re-enact the symbolic meanings of traditional culture by telling the stories of craftsmen. During the viewing process, audiences become participants in this "ritual," experiencing a form of cultural regeneration within a modern context. Through this mediated ritual, viewers form emotional bonds with traditional culture and gradually develop a sense of cultural belonging.

3.3 Constant Comparison and Theoretical Saturation

In grounded theory research, the focus of qualitative sampling lies not in a fixed number of participants but in the pursuit of theoretical saturation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Theoretical saturation refers to the stage at which, through continuous data collection and analysis, no new concepts or categories emerge from the data, and all concepts are sufficiently defined and integrated into existing categories, thereby achieving a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this study, it was initially unclear how many participants would be required to reach theoretical saturation. After the ninth interview was completed, the researcher determined that no new substantive information emerged and that the new data could be smoothly integrated into existing categories or subcategories; therefore, data collection was concluded. Throughout the entire data analysis process, the researcher adopted the constant comparison strategy, comparing each incident in the data with others to identify similarities and differences. Subsequently, incidents were categorized into the same or different codes. In later interviews, within-code comparison was conducted on incidents assigned to the same code in order to reveal different properties and dimensions of that code (2015).

During the open coding stage, the researcher analyzed the interview transcripts line by line and segment by segment. Newly generated concepts were constantly compared with existing ones to avoid redundancy and ensure conceptual precision. The concepts identified and coded in the first interview required further exploration; therefore, the researcher conducted a second interview to elaborate on these initial concepts. The second interview could provide additional insights into the existing concepts while also generating new ones. The researcher continued coding and examining these emerging concepts in subsequent interviews, eventually identifying 55 initial concepts, which were later consolidated into seven categories.

In the axial coding stage, the researcher applied the paradigm of conditions, context, strategies and consequences to connect subcategories with main categories. Each new piece of data was compared with existing data to confirm whether the logical relationships remained stable or whether category boundaries needed adjustment.

During the selective coding stage, the researcher theoretically integrated the core category of "cultural identity." The process involved continuously comparing new and existing data to test its explanatory power. Each new datum was examined to determine whether it could be incorporated into the theoretical chain of "cultural identity–identity construction." When inconsistencies or novel insights emerged, further refinement was undertaken.

4. Results and Discussion

Through the analysis of interview data, we found that viewers of web-based craftsmanship documentaries undergo a cinematic experiential process moving from emotion to affect and then to cognition and judgment. This process can be summarized into five psychological experiences: empathy, pride, enjoyment, concern, and dissatisfaction. The interrelationships among the five dimensions of audience emotional experience are illustrated in Figure 2.
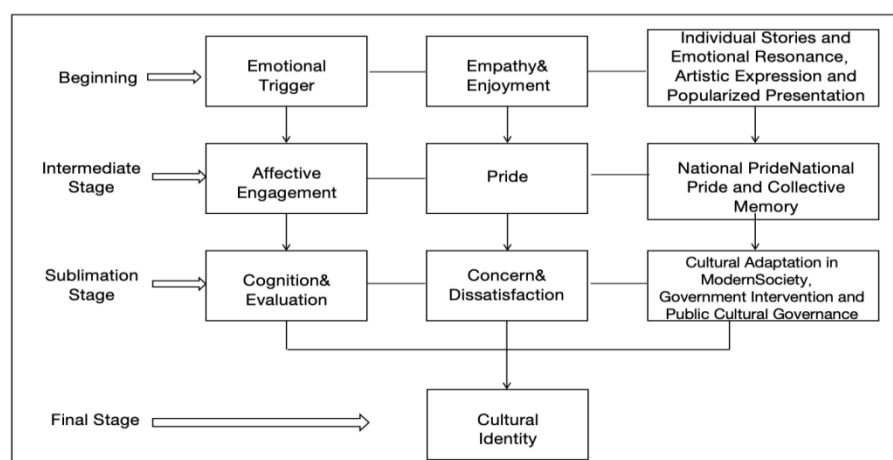

Figure 2. A Conceptual Diagram of the Interrelationships among Five Audience Emotional Experience

4.1 Empathy — Individual Stories and Emotional Resonance

The empathetic experience generated by audiences when watching web-based craftsmanship documentaries belongs to the stage of basic emotions, which are immediate affective responses directly triggered by the characters' stories, settings, and narrative tension in the films.

The repeated use of the term "shock" in the interviews—especially across statements from different interviewees—warrants in-depth exploration. The frequent mention of this word may indicate that respondents experienced strong emotions triggered by certain situations or events, resulting in a significant emotional resonance.

Participant 02-M-33-Y said: "There were many moments in the documentary that shocked me. I never realized how much effort these craftsmen put into their handmade work. Their dedication and pursuit of perfection were truly striking."

Participant 07-M-37-D expressed: "Watching these documentaries made me very excited and shocked. I could feel the profoundness of Chinese culture, which gave me a sense of pride. It also made me reflect on how our fast-paced work and life have caused many to lose unique Chinese cultural traits. Some crafts have even become extinct, which is really regrettable."

A notable distinction between web-based craftsmanship documentaries and traditional television documentaries lies in their shift in creative perspective and narrative approach. Traditional television documentaries tend to favor grand narratives, often addressing macro-level themes such as politics, history, and society, with a focus on major events and social transformations. In contrast, web-based craftsmanship documentaries emphasize the micro-perspectives of individual artisans, portraying the growth and struggles of ordinary people through their daily lives and personal experiences. In the semi-structured interviews, the concept of "storytelling" was frequently mentioned, highlighting the importance of narrative in shaping viewers' emotional engagement and cultural resonance.

Participants 01-M-29-F, 02-M-33-Y, 05-F-35-Z, 06-F-25-H, and 09-F-25-Z all mentioned that web-based craftsmanship documentaries convey their themes through storytelling.

Participant 02-M-33-Y noted: "Watching a web-based craftsmanship documentary feels like following the story of an ordinary person. It's easier to enter their world and connect with their journey."

This empathetic reaction involves viewing the world from another's perspective and feeling events as if from another's standpoint. The reason people seek empathy lies in the emotional refinement and purification it brings—an invaluable experience that transcends the mundane aspects of everyday life (Neill, 1996). Many interviewees reported experiencing empathetic reactions. They stated that the personal experiences of the craftsmen portrayed in the documentaries prompted them to reflect on their own lives and work.

03-M-20-L noted that certain emotions expressed by the craftsmen in the documentaries reminded him of his own experiences. He stated: "The family bonds and the relationships between masters and apprentices in the stories really resonated with me. They made me think about the relationship between my father and me. I used to feel misunderstood by him, but now I realize that his strictness came from high expectations."

07-M-37-D mentioned that the professional dedication of the craftsmen prompted her to reflect on her own work attitude: "The craftsmen's pursuit of perfection has greatly inspired me in terms of how I approach my job. Their profession is very different from ours, but the way they devote themselves so fully makes me wonder—if I could put that same level of commitment into one aspect of my work or life, I might also see a big change. There's a lot we can learn from them."

Web-based craftsmanship documentaries typically adopt a character-driven narrative, emphasizing the personal growth, struggles, and emotional experiences of individual craftsmen rather than a grand, overarching storyline. This structure, centered on individual stories, enables audiences to empathize with the characters, thereby eliciting strong emotional resonance. This arousal of basic emotions lays the foundation for cognitive processing and cultural resonance, enabling audiences to not only understand the individual stories of craftsmen but also to further appreciate the underlying cultural values and sense of identity, thereby fostering a more advanced cinematic emotional experience.

4.2 Enjoyment — Artistic Expression and Popularized Presentation

Audiences' sense of enjoyment in watching web-based craftsmanship documentaries primarily derives from visual aesthetics and immersive storytelling experiences, triggered directly by the films' visual presentation, narrative tension, and character stories. Interviewees generally noted that the documentaries' exquisite production, the rich details of craftsmanship, and the use of close-up shots and macro photography generated a strong sense of visual pleasure during viewing. This emotional state of "enjoyment" reflects Holl's (2017) emphasis on the active shaping of audience emotions by media texts. According to Hall, audiovisual techniques such as camera work, sound effects, music, and

editing can serve as stimulus conditions that engage the senses and guide audiences into particular emotional states.

When discussing their viewing experience of Web-based craftsmanship documentaries, interviewees unanimously noted that these documentaries are "aesthetically well-produced" (03-M-20-L, 05-F-35-Z, 06-F-25-H, 07-M-37-D, 09-F-25-Z).

According to 09-F-25-Z, "the crafts themselves are inherently beautiful, and the documentaries enhance this aesthetic through extensive use of close-up shots, further idealizing traditional craftsmanship and evoking a sense of awe."

Interviewee 01-M-29-F observed that the production quality of contemporary documentaries has significantly improved compared to earlier television documentaries, which often lacked visual refinement. She noted that "Web-based documentaries, especially those featuring craftsmen, now demonstrate enhanced cinematographic techniques—not only employing close-up shots but also using macro photography to reveal intricate internal structures of objects such as porcelain."

Similarly, 07-M-37-D pointed out that tools such as narration and voice-over helped him better comprehend the origins and evolution of traditional craftsmanship.

In web-based craftsmanship documentaries, the interplay between artistic cinematography and popularized narrative techniques provides audiences with immediate sensory pleasure and immersion in the characters' stories, thereby preparing them psychologically for subsequent cultural resonance and cognitive processing. In other words, enjoyment is not merely a response to visual aesthetics but also a prerequisite for entering higher-level emotional experiences.

4.3 Pride — National Pride and Collective Memory

In addition to individual emotional resonance, another frequently discussed theme among interviewees was the sense of national pride and cultural confidence derived from root culture. The participants' reflections on the personal stories of craftsmen often extended beyond the individual level, prompting a deeper contemplation of the cultural origins of the nation as a whole. This goes beyond the earlier stage of enjoyment, reaching a more advanced phase of emotional myth.

Participant 05-F-35-Z expressed a strong sense of national pride rooted in China's longstanding cultural heritage. He remarked that: China is an ancient civilization with over 5,000 years of accumulated culture. It is vast in territory and rich in resources, with diverse folk customs across different regions and ethnic groups. I believe only China possesses such cultural advantages. Among the four ancient civilizations in history, only Chinese civilization has survived continuously. I think this is because traditional cultures, including craftsmanship and folk customs, have never ceased to be passed down. So, after watching these documentaries, I felt proud—this kind of national pride and cultural confidence is something only China has, something that only 5,000 years of history could produce.

Participant 09-F-25-Z also addressed the emotional and cognitive impact of these documentaries, linking them to the development of cultural confidence: What is cultural confidence? I used to think it was just an abstract concept. But after watching these craftsmanship documentaries—seeing the vivid stories of craftsmen, the beauty of handmade arts, and some of the folk customs—I suddenly felt a sense of national pride. I think that's what it means to have cultural confidence.

In web-based craftsmanship documentaries, audiences first experience empathetic responses to individual craftsmen's stories, which evoke basic emotions. Through subsequent cognitive processing, cultural interpretation, and connections to broader social contexts, these individual experiences are elevated into a sense of identification with the roots of national culture. Personal emotional resonance and collective pride intertwine, giving rise to stable cinematic emotions. Through this process of emotional sublimation, audiences not only undergo personal-level affective experiences but also achieve a deeper sense of cultural identity and the construction of self-identity.

4.4 Concern — Cultural Adaptation in Modern Society

During the viewing process, the "concern" experienced by audiences belongs to a higher stage of cinematic emotions. That is, after the arousal of basic emotions, audiences form a stable emotional state through cognitive processing and cultural interpretation. This concern primarily arises from their cognitive and emotional responses to the challenges faced by traditional folk culture in contemporary society, serving as both a psychological adjustment to the real cultural environment and a reflection on social values.

Interviewee 07-M-37-D commented: "Nowadays, the fast-paced work and life make people feel lost. Most people rarely have the time or energy to care about cultural issues beyond the economy. We've lost many unique elements of Chinese culture and identity—some crafts have even disappeared—which I find regrettable."

Interviewee 02-M-33-Y remarked: "Our era is developing too rapidly. Everyone is in a rush to move forward, and life feels extremely tense. Especially when I work in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, I feel enormous pressure and have no energy left to engage with folk culture."

Interviewee 09-F-25-Z remarked: "I think our traditional crafts and old folk cultures are still incredibly beautiful. However, in today's self-media era, people are exposed to an overwhelming amount of information. The public is becoming increasingly entertainment-oriented, while traditional culture remains relatively serious. As a result, many are unwilling to engage in deep thinking. Some people don't even enjoy watching documentaries—scrolling through short videos is much easier and more relaxing."

While the development of the online environment has in some ways facilitated the dissemination of culture, it has also posed challenges to the transmission of folk traditions. In cyberspace, popular and consumer cultures spread rapidly, often leading to the marginalization of traditional folk culture. Although web-based media—such as craftsmanship documentaries—have opened up new channels for the dissemination of folk traditions, their visibility remains limited within the vast landscape of digital entertainment. A narrow audience reach is a commonly acknowledged issue. Interviewees 02-M-33-Y, 04-M-42-W, and 06-F-25-H all pointed out the limited viewership of craftsmanship documentaries.

This concern reflects the integration of audiences' cognitive and emotional responses to the real cultural environment during the viewing process. It leads audiences not only to feel regret over the potential disappearance of cultural traditions but also to develop a psychological concern for their preservation and continuity. This highlights the potential of documentaries to evoke social awareness and cultural reflection.

4.5 Dissatisfaction — Government Intervention and Public Cultural Governance

When discussing how to improve the current state of folk culture transmission and dissemination, the majority of interviewees agreed that the issue extends beyond documentary production itself, involving a broader scope of public cultural governance. Although some respondents proposed specific production techniques, directorial strategies, and promotional approaches—believing that enhancing the artistic expression, emotional resonance, and content innovation of documentaries could better attract audiences and convey folk culture—these methods alone remain insufficient to address the deeper challenges faced by folk cultural heritage.

More than half of the interviewees emphasized that the fundamental resolution of folk culture preservation requires intervention by governments at various levels. This is reflected in systematic measures such as policy support, resource allocation, and the promotion of public culture.

Interviewee 07-M-37-D suggested: "Cultural and tourism departments at all levels could do more to increase publicity for local folk culture. This would be beneficial for both cultural promotion and city image building."

Interviewee 02-M-33-Y stated: "I think documentary creators have already worked very hard; they are actively adapting to the demands of the times and the online environment. I believe today's documentaries are already very refined in terms of viewing experience. The next step, I think, requires government-level support."

This sense of dissatisfaction reflects the emotional progression from immediate affective responses to institutional reflection. While watching the documentaries, audiences first experience direct attention and affective arousal regarding the craftsmen's skills and the current state of folk culture transmission. They then contextualize these feelings within the broader frameworks of public policy and social governance, critically examining the inadequacies in resource allocation, government support, and public cultural promotion, thereby forming a stable sense of dissatisfaction.

5. Conclusion

The study found that audiences experienced a range of intense emotional responses—empathy, enjoyment, pride, concern, and dissatisfaction—while engaging with craftsmen's stories. These affective experiences collectively form a progressive framework: emotion–cognition and reflection–cultural identity. Through the interplay and entanglement of these complex emotions, audiences ultimately construct their self-identity, demonstrating the role of web-based craftsmanship documentaries in fostering both affective engagement and identity formation.

This framework provides theoretical support for understanding the systematic functions of documentaries in cultural learning, value transmission, and identity construction. It extends existing research on cinematic emotions by incorporating audiences' cultural identity into the chain of emotion generation and cognitive processing, thereby enriching the theoretical perspective on digital documentary audiences. From a practical standpoint, the study suggests that creators of web-based documentaries should integrate emotional arousal with cognitive guidance in narrative design and visual presentation to enhance audiences' cultural experience and identity formation. Meanwhile, policymakers and cultural institutions can utilize this framework to optimize the dissemination of traditional culture on digital platforms, using web-based documentaries to increase public awareness and engagement with cultural heritage, social values, and national identity, thus achieving both educational and societal objectives.

Although internet technologies have enhanced the interactivity and multi-platform dissemination of documentaries,

increased interactivity may reduce producers' control over narrative pacing and emotional guidance, raising the risk that audiences may not achieve deep engagement (Forceville, 2017). Therefore, systematic research on documentary content, narrative strategies, and their cultural significance remains necessary, particularly regarding cross-cultural, cross-age, and diverse social groups' emotional responses, to provide targeted insights for production and public cultural policy. Methodologically, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches is recommended. For instance, network analysis (Zamith, 2018) can examine how audiences discover, select, consume, and interact with online documentary content, revealing causal pathways between emotional arousal and cultural identity formation. Further investigation into platform algorithms, recommendation systems, and social interaction design can clarify how different digital environments modulate audience emotions, memory, and cultural identity.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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