

Communication of Garden Aesthetic Symbols in A Dream of Red Mansions

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Abstract: As a literary masterpiece of the Qing Dynasty, *A Dream of Red Mansions* incorporates numerous aesthetic symbols epitomizing the essence of classic Chinese garden design. This study is an interdisciplinary study that employs Mixed-methods research to examine the communication effects of garden aesthetic symbols in *A Dream of Red Mansions* in contemporary communication campaigns. The research design integrates quantitative research and qualitative content analysis. Likert scale questionnaires were designed using stratified sampling and distributed. The questionnaires were distributed through an online platform and 433 valid questionnaires were returned. The questionnaires were subjected to content analysis, data analysis and age-stratified cross-tabulation analysis. The empirical study shows that the symbols of garden aesthetics have the advantage of popular cognition, and young people aged 18-24 years old demonstrate exceptional semiotic decoding competence and heightened media engagement frequency, and they constituting the core target audience of garden aesthetics symbol communication. The cognitive-emotional-behavioral measurements of the audience reveal that in the new media context, the willingness to accept the symbols and the loyalty of communication can be marked improvement by enhancing emotional resonance and cognitive matching. The analysis of intergenerational communication behaviors reveals that the youth group presents the characteristics of network media dependence, and their information acquisition mode and content co-creation behaviors are significantly different from those of the middle-aged and elderly groups in terms of their single reception mode. **Keywords:** Communication, Garden Aesthetics Symbols, *A Dream of Red Mansions*

INTRODUCTION

Novels, films and TV dramas all belong to the art of narrative. According to the media narrative theory, the story runs through the narrative clues of typical characters in a specific environment, and the environment carries the occurrence of the story and ensures the coherence of the plot. In the process of narrative, the environment can fully stimulate the audience's aesthetic perception ability, and different aesthetic experience determines the readers to form a unique aesthetic value in reading. *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Cao, 1981) uses a lot of text to describe the beautiful garden called "The Prospect Garden", and it is the specific setting in which the story takes place. Gardens are a manifestation of the Chinese people's love for nature. Designers imitate natural landscapes and use China's unique garden design aesthetics to build Chinese gardens. Various aesthetic symbols are cleverly set in the gardens, such as properly arranging buildings, shaping terrain, planting flowers and trees, building rockery, designing water systems, etc., with the purpose of building a poetic living space. The garden aesthetic symbols in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are in line with the aesthetic tastes of the Chinese people. With widespread dissemination, they eventually became one of the typical paradigms of China's natural landscape gardens. The symbolic communication of garden aesthetics relies on the theories of aesthetics, semiotics and communication, the core of which is to convey aesthetic value and cultural connotation through visual, spatial and cultural symbols. The rocks, water features, plants, buildings and other elements in classical Chinese gardens are not only reproductions of natural landscape, but also carry philosophical ideas such as "Harmony between Heaven and Humanity", "Reclusive Culture" and so on. For example, the rockery symbolizes "firmness, sublimity, Benevolence", the water means "life, wisdom, tolerance and purification", and the plants embody the cycle of seasons and the philosophy of life. The dissemination of aesthetic

symbols in gardens not only helps to pass on classical culture, but also enhances the public's knowledge and recognition of traditional aesthetics, and promotes cultural self-confidence and the popularization of aesthetic education. The dissemination of the garden aesthetic symbols in *A Dream of Red Mansions* has lasted for more than two hundred years, and the meaning of the symbols has been continuously expanded and deepened. The recipients, media and methods of dissemination have changed greatly compared with the past, and these changes follow the requirements of the development of the times. In the new dissemination context, the garden aesthetic symbols in *A Dream of Red Mansions* will inevitably present different dissemination characteristics than before, but these situations have not received enough attention at present. In order to study the dissemination of garden aesthetic symbols in modern times, more than 400 people participated in the questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was designed with stratified sampling of different ages. Respondents answered their views on the garden aesthetic symbols in *A Dream of Red Mansions* in three dimensions. The questionnaire data have been collected and used for related research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study mainly collects and analyzes literature from two aspects: cross-media communication theory and semiotic research on the aesthetics in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. In the new era of communication, the communication media of the garden aesthetics in *A Dream of Red Mansions* presents the characteristics of diversified communication media. The book *Understanding the Media* makes the point that “the medium is the message” and that the medium of communication itself should be an important part of the study (McLuhan, 1964). The change of media not only significantly affects human's cognition and use of time and space, but also affects the accessibility and control of media (Shan & Liu, 2015). The continuous development of electronic technology has promoted the gradual convergence of seemingly unrelated media, and the convergence of media is an inevitable trend in the development of the market.

(Zhao, 2011). Ferdinand de Saussure, a structuralism semiotician, considered semiotics to be the science of the role of signs as part of social life, he proposed that signs contain two mutually distinguishable systems of psychical signs, the signifier and the referent (De Saussure, 1980). In contrast to Saussure's dualistic tradition, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics is triadic. He divides logic into three main parts, discursive grammar, logical criticism, and discursive rhetoric, which are used to explore the meaning, conditions, and methodology of symbols (Peirce, 2014). On this basis, the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer established aesthetic symbolism. Aesthetic symbolism is an important school of contemporary Western aesthetic theory, whose basic characteristic lies in the reduction of aesthetic and artistic phenomena to cultural symbols. (Cassirer, 2022) The following conceptual framework is established through a theoretical study of cross-media communication of aesthetic symbols.

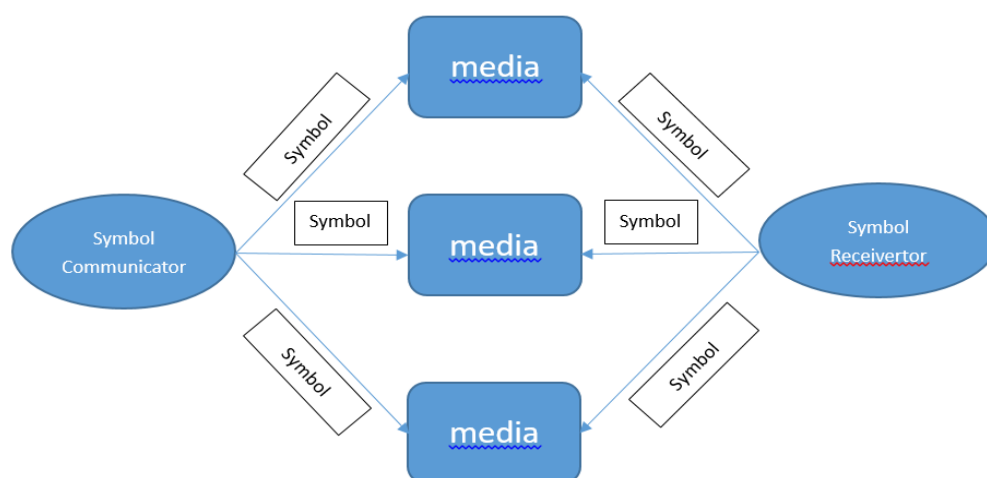


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework of the study

METHODOLOGY

This study used mixed methods research, which contains quantitative research and qualitative content analysis. A questionnaire was used in the study and the results were analyzed textually and statistically. The questionnaire was administered using the age-stratified sampling method, and the audience was categorized into three age levels: 18-24 years old, 25-60 years old, and over 60 years old. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the dissemination of garden aesthetic symbols from three dimensions: cognition, attitude and behavior. For the age-stratified sample survey of China-wide cases, the population sample is calculated according to the formula $N = [Z^2 * P (1-P)] / D^2$, where N is the required sample size, the confidence level $Z=1.96$, (corresponding to the 95 per cent confidence level), the expected overall proportion $P=0.5$, and the margin of error D is set at 5 per cent,, which results in a minimum sample size of 385 persons. The researcher distributed and collected standardized questionnaires through the online platform (www.wjx.cn) for a period of two months and a total of 433 valid questionnaires were collected (this number is higher than 385). Quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS statistical analysis tool to analyze the reliability of the questionnaire data. Firstly, reliability analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The sample size was 433 and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.848, indicating a high level of confidence. Secondly, in order to verify the validity, KMO and Bartlett's test were used to evaluate the applicability of the data to the factor analysis, and the KMO value in the validity analysis was 0.899, which has good validity and can accurately reflect the research variables. Meanwhile, the method of cross-tabulation analysis was used in the analysis of data results to quantitatively describe and explain the specific dissemination of garden aesthetic symbols in the intergenerational dissemination of A Dream of Red Mansions.

FINDINGS

A questionnaire was drawn up based on the research objectives, and 433 valid questionnaires were returned. The total sample consists of three age stages, respectively between 18-24 years old, between 25-60 years old and over 61 years old. The questionnaire provides an empirical basis and data support for an in-depth understanding of the dissemination information of garden aesthetic symbols in A Dream of Red Mansions, such as dissemination recipients, dissemination media, dissemination quality and dissemination effect. Subsequently, the thesis proposes communication paths and strategies for the good development of garden aesthetics symbols with regard to the problems identified in the questionnaire.

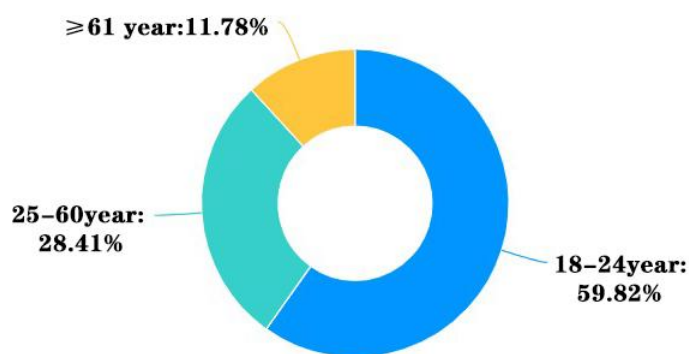


Fig. 2 Distribution of Respondents by Age Level and Number

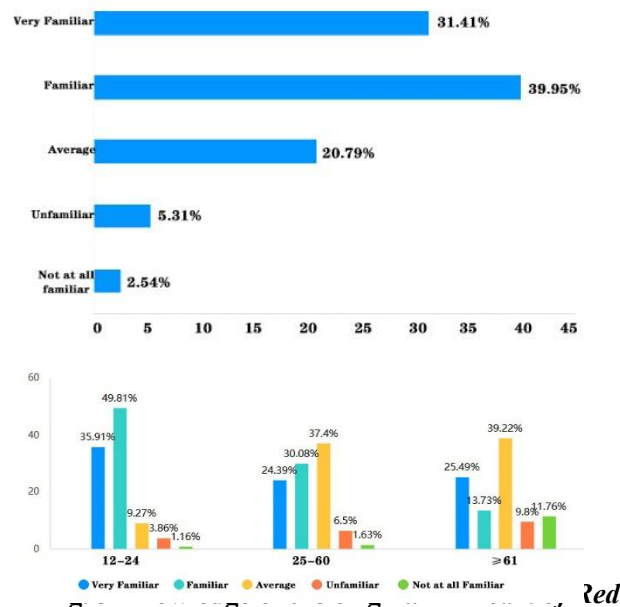
As shown in Figure 2, among all 433 respondents, 259 were aged 18-24, accounting for 59.82% of the total sample; 123 were aged 25-60, accounting for 28.41% of the total sample; and 51 were aged 61 and above, accounting for 11.78% of the total sample. It can be seen that the 18-24 age group has the largest number of young respondents, more than half of the entire sample. Young people are active on

Internet platforms and have become major participants in online communication activities.

The questionnaire was designed and data was collected from three dimensions: perception, attitude and behavior, and the following is an analysis of the data obtained. It is important to note that in the group of graphs shown below, each data graph is divided into two. One of them shows the study data for the total sample size of 433, and the other graphic shows the study data for the sample group divided by age strata.

1. Cognitive dimension

1.1 Have you read the original *A Dream of Red Mansions* or related adaptations (e.g., TV series, movies, plays)



Based on the analysis of the data shown in Figure 3, it can be seen that the majority of respondents have some familiarity with *A Dream of Red Mansions* and its related works, especially among the younger group (18-24 years old). The 18-24 age group was significantly more familiar with *A Dream of Red Mansions* than other age groups, showing strong interest and cognition, among which familiar and very familiar answers accounted for 71.36%. However, in the older group (over 61 years of age), the proportion of people who are less familiar and completely unaware is relatively high.

1.2 Do you think there are many people who understand the garden aesthetics in *A Dream of Red Mansions*?

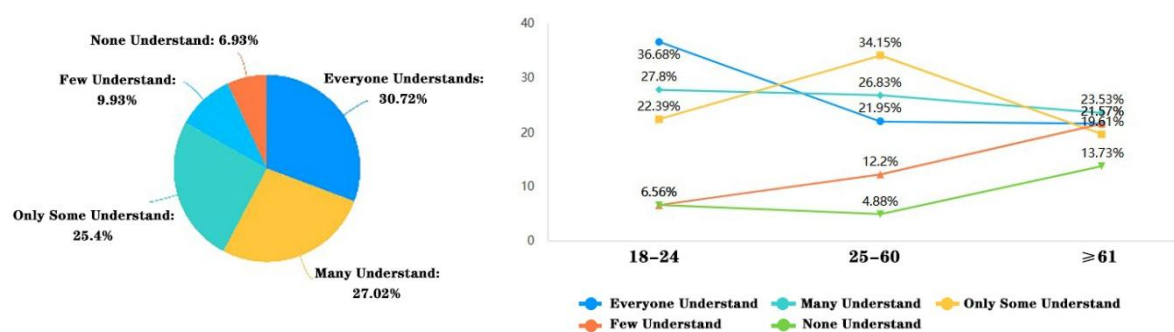


Fig. 4 Perceptions of the garden aesthetics of *A Dream of Red Mansions*

According to Figure 4, more than half of the population believes that *A Dream of Red Mansions* garden aesthetics is highly popular, and people should know about it. According to the cross-analysis of the data

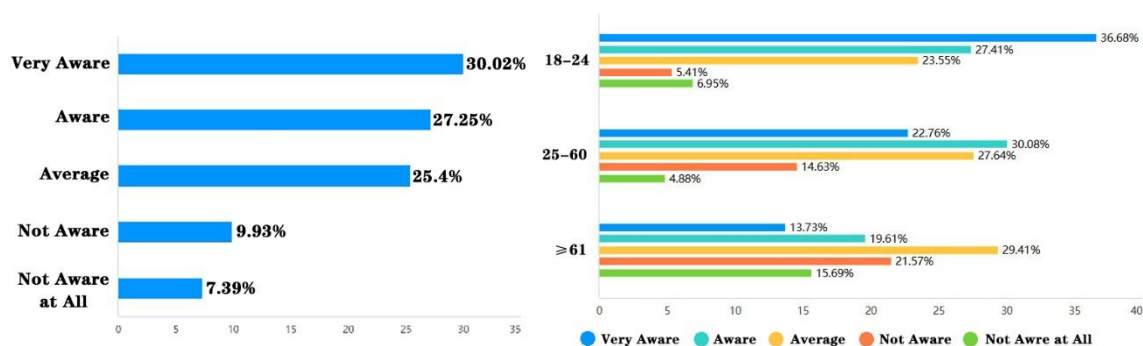


Fig. 5 Cognition of the metaphorical meaning of aesthetic symbols in classical Chinese gardens

according to the age stratification, 36.68% of the young group aged 18-24 believe that everyone knows the garden aesthetics of *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

1.3 Do you have an understanding of the basic metaphorical meanings represented by the aesthetic symbols of classical Chinese garden plants such as bamboo, vanilla, peony, sycamore and plum blossom?

In Chinese garden aesthetics, plants such as bamboo, vanilla, peony, sycamore and plum blossom not only carry the physical characteristics of natural objects, but are also endowed with profound cultural allegories and personality symbols. These meanings are closely related to the character, destiny and spiritual pursuit of the characters in the story of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, forming a unique aesthetic world. Celebrated in Eastern philosophy, bamboo epitomizes integrity and resilience. Its flexibility during storms reflects humility and adaptability, while its evergreen vitality symbolizes enduring strength. Admired for their delicate fragrance and understated elegance, Vanilla signify refined virtue. Growing in secluded, shaded areas, they evoke the quiet dignity of solitude, mirroring the introspective wisdom revered in both Eastern and Western traditions. The peony is known as the 'Queen of Flowers' and represent opulence and prosperity. Yet their brief, lavish blooms also underscore life's fleeting beauty—a duality reminiscent of poetic themes celebrating joy tinged with impermanence. The sycamore, also known as the phoenix tree, is steeped in mythology and is believed to attract the phoenix (a legendary bird that symbolizes rebirth and is the king of all birds), which symbolizes strength and lofty ambitions. The plum blossom, which blooms provocatively in the snowy depths of winter, epitomizes perseverance and hope in the midst of suffering, and represents the spirit of determination in the face of adversity. As can be seen from the data shown in Figure 5, the respondents are well aware of the basic symbolism embedded in classical Chinese garden plants. This performance is most obvious among respondents aged 18-24, which indicates that young people are more willing to recognize the elements of classical Chinese

aesthetics than the other two groups, and their knowledge reserves are richer, so young people are the most powerful communication force for the inheritance and development of the elements of classical Chinese aesthetics. Young people are the most powerful communication force for inheriting and developing the elements of classical Chinese aesthetics. Analysis of the cognitive dimension data from the questionnaire reveals that *A Dream of Red Mansions* enjoys widespread popularity and significant influence among the public, solidifying its status as a renowned literary classic. The high research value and scholarly enthusiasm surrounding this work underscore the importance of this study. With China's socio-economic advancement and the ongoing development of its educational system, younger generations are increasingly exposed to high-quality educational resources, which enrich their cognitive frameworks. Moreover, as digital natives, young people access information at an unprecedented speed and volume, fostering a higher level of cognitive development compared to other age groups. Their strong recognition of and interest in *A Dream of Red Mansions* provide a critical foundation for the preservation and evolution of Chinese classical garden aesthetics.

2. Attitude Dimension

2.1 Do you think it is important to disseminate the aesthetic symbols of classical gardens (such as the Prospect Garden in *A Dream of Red Mansions*) for the preservation and inheritance of traditional culture in modern society?

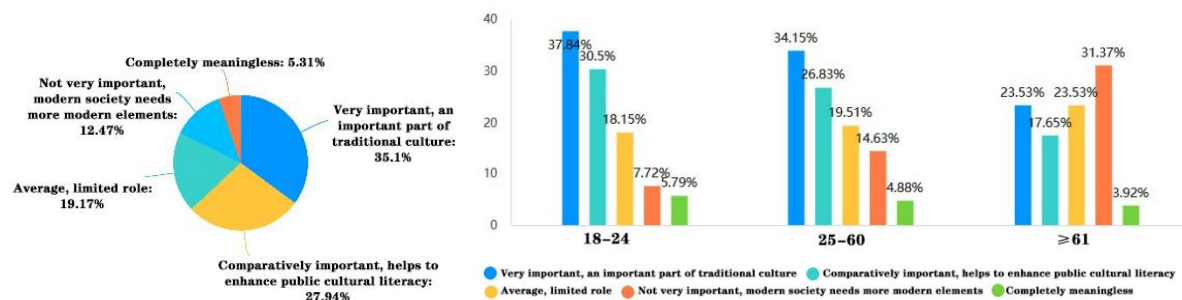


Fig. 6 Attitudes towards the dissemination of aesthetic symbols in classical gardens

The data analysis in Figure 6 shows that overall 63.04% of people believe that dissemination of aesthetic symbols of classical gardens is important for the protection and inheritance of traditional culture (Very important and Comparatively important). Young people aged 18-24 years old have the highest level of agreement with this, with 68.34% giving it a high score, while people aged 60 years old and above have the lowest level of agreement with it, with only 40% giving it a high score. Young people have a higher level of agreement with the aesthetic symbols of classical Chinese gardens than older people.

2.2 What is your feeling about the aesthetic symbols of classical Chinese garden architecture such as pavilions, platforms, towers and pavilions?

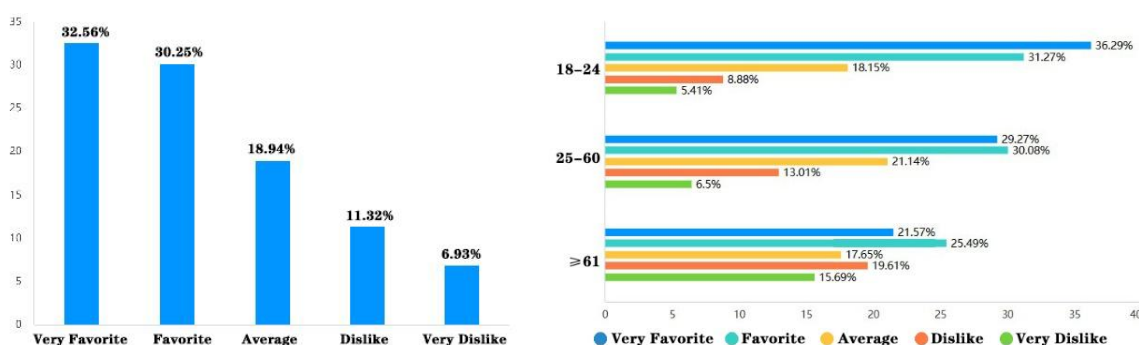
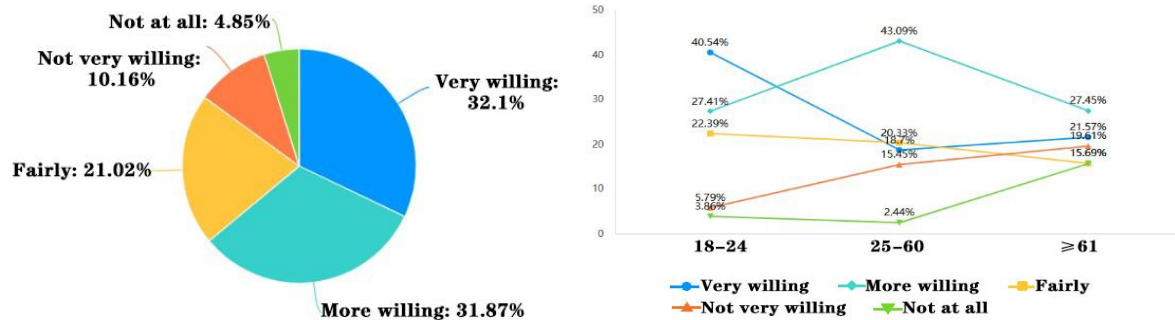


Fig. 7 Attitudes towards the aesthetic symbols of classical Chinese garden architecture?

In Chinese garden aesthetics, pavilions, platforms, towers, and pavilion are architectural symbols rich in meaning. Pavilion is an open-air structure for contemplation, symbolizing harmony with nature ~ like a place of retreat in a landscape painting. Platform is an elevated platform used for rituals or moon viewing, embodying reverence for the cosmic order. Tower is a large building of more than two floors, used for study or lookout, on behalf of academic pursuits and social prestige, often as the highest building in the garden exists. Pavilion is a small volume of multi-story buildings, the interior decoration is gorgeous, used to store treasures or books, reflecting the elegant culture. The data in Figure 7 tell us that the proportion of people whose attitudes show “Favorite” and “Very Favorite” aesthetic symbols in classical Chinese garden architecture reaches 62.81%, and the proportions of people choosing these two responses in all three sample groups of different ages are more than half. The percentage of the 18-24 year olds is more significant than the other two groups.

2.3 Are you willing to pay attention to and learn from the garden aesthetic symbols in A Dream of Red



Man Fig. 8 Willingness to pay attention to garden aesthetic symbols through social media

The data in Figure 8 shows that overall 63.97% are willing to pay attention to and learn the garden aesthetic symbols of A Dream of Red Mansions through social media (very willing and willing). The willingness of 18-24 and 25-60 year olds is higher, 67.41% and 61.79%, respectively, while the willingness of those over 61 years old is lower, only 48%. Younger people are more receptive to social media learning methods and older people are relatively conservative.

2.4 What is your opinion about spreading the Garden Aesthetic Symbols in A Dream of Red Mansions through short videos, live broadcasts and other new media forms?

As can be seen from the data in Figure 9, 65.12% of the participants supported the use of new media forms to disseminate the aesthetic symbols of gardens in A Dream of Red Mansions. Among them, 35.1% said they were very supportive. This attitude indicates that the garden aesthetic symbols of A Dream of

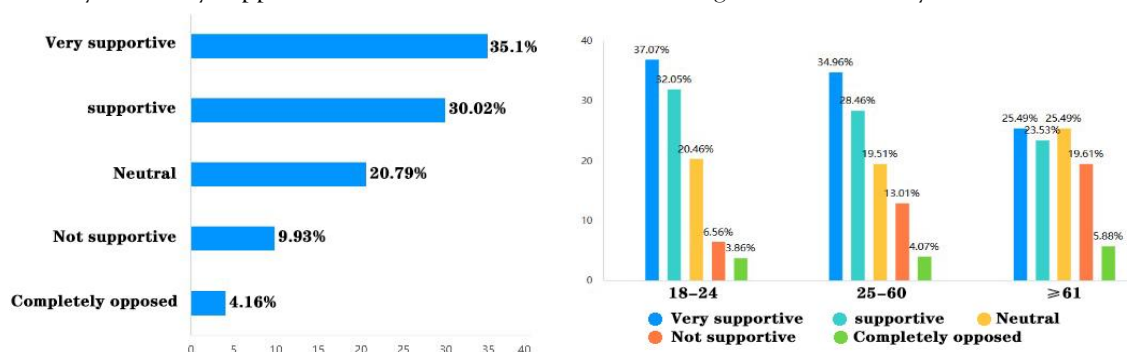


Fig. 9 Attitudes towards using new media to disseminate garden aesthetic symbols

Red Mansions still have vigorous vitality and research value in the new media era, and that it is still the young people who embody a more positive attitude in terms of age structure. Figures 6-9 reveal that the

public widely believes disseminating garden aesthetic symbols from A Dream of Red Mansions aids in preserving traditional culture and inspires modern garden design, enhancing aesthetic appreciation. Most respondents, especially those fond of these symbols, expressed a strong willingness to continue engaging with them. These symbols, rooted in Chinese natural landscape gardens, embody unique aesthetic values shaped by historical development, ensuring the continuity of Chinese aesthetic traditions. Data indicates their popularity and communication value, affirming their relevance in communication studies. Cross-tabulation by age shows younger audiences respond most positively, likely influenced by the revival of Chinese traditional culture since 2018, bolstered by national "cultural confidence" policies and new media. This has made traditional aesthetics a cultural trend, with the younger generation emerging as primary consumers of such content, predominantly through digital platforms.

3. Behavioral Dimension

3.1 Do you often use social media (e.g. Micro-blogging, We Chat, Shake, etc.) to get information?

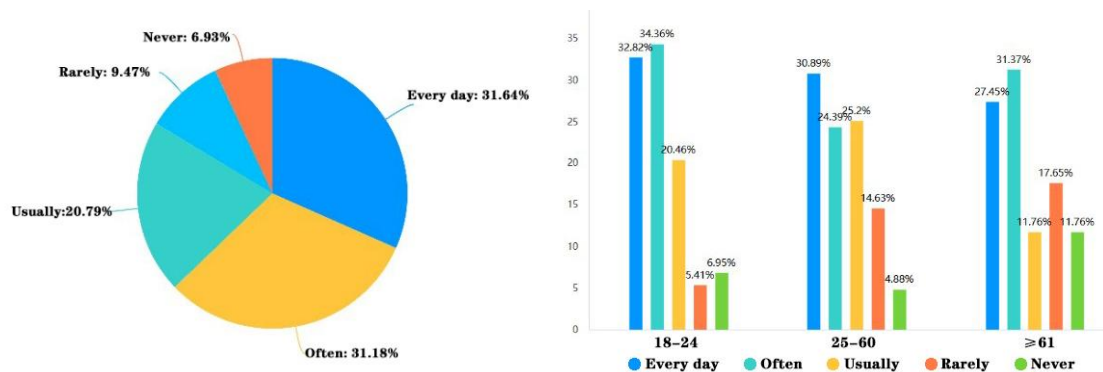
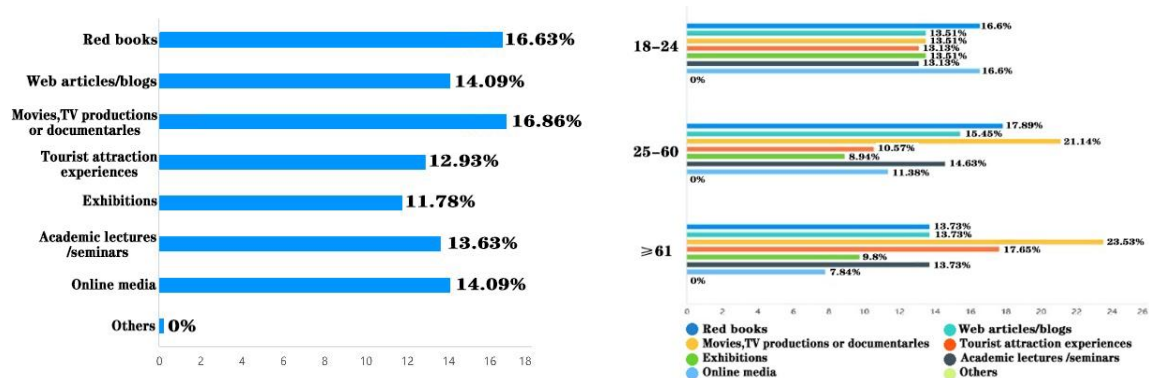


Fig. 10 Behavioral manifestations of frequency of social media

Social media belongs to the new media. Data show that Social media has now become an indispensable part of the daily life of the general public and is one of the main means by which people participate in interactions and obtain information. Among them, users in the age group of 18-24 years old showed a higher frequency of use than the other two age groups, and the number of young users who use social media every day reached 32.82%, which is the highest percentage among the three age groups. And the number of users who use social media frequently is the highest at 34.36%.

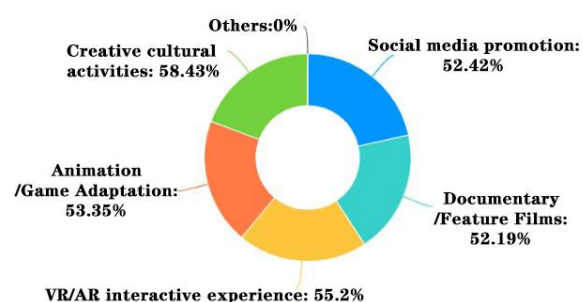
3.2 Through what means of communication did you learn about A Dream of Red Mansions?



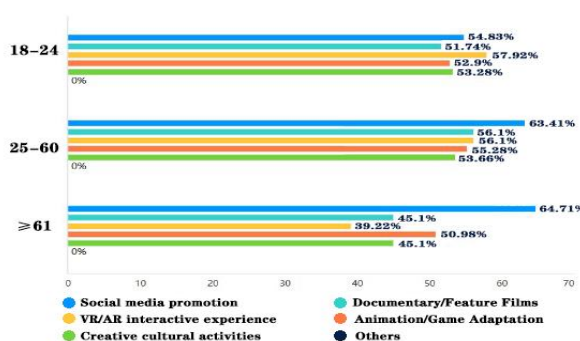
As the main users of the Internet, young people aged 18-24 are more receptive to new forms and means of communication. Their access to information is diverse and evenly distributed. The survey shows that the two most popular means of communication are books and online media, but young people are less interested in seminars and lectures of a more academic nature. A Dream of Red Mansions is compulsory reading in China at the compulsory education level. As a result of the intervention of educational pathways, book reading had a strong influence on the dissemination of the novel. The Online media, as a major means of communication, is one of the most important ways for young people to obtain information. However, among the two groups of users over 25 years of age, the communication of traditional audiovisual media shows a stronger influence, such as films, TV productions and documentaries.

3.3 What means of communication do you think can help the garden aesthetic symbols in A Dream

Fig. 11 Behavioral choices of communication media



of Red Mansions gain wider dissemination?



The data analysis reveals that respondents generally recognize the value of diversified communication media. The results show a stronger preference for social media as the most effective communication platform, with this tendency becoming more pronounced with increasing age. In contrast, VR/AR technologies and cultural creative communications, due to their innovative nature and technology-driven characteristics, have gained greater popularity among younger demographics.

Fig. 12 Preferred behavior of means of communication

and above show a stronger preference for social media as the most effective communication platform, with this tendency becoming more pronounced with increasing age. In contrast, VR/AR technologies and cultural creative communications, due to their innovative nature and technology-driven characteristics, have gained greater popularity among younger demographics.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

A total of 433 questionnaires from different regions of China and different age stages were collected in this study. After the data were collated and analyzed, the overall situation and problems in the dissemination of garden aesthetic symbols in A Dream of Red Mansions were revealed in terms of perceptions, attitudes and behaviors, and the following main conclusions were drawn:

1. The public has a high awareness of the garden aesthetic symbols in A Dream of Red Mansions. It is shown that the scope of communication is wide, the degree of reach is high, and the effect is good. More than half of the respondents are familiar with the garden aesthetic symbols in A Dream of Red Mansions and its metaphorical meaning. Among them, especially prominent is the young people's group, which not only participates in a large number, but also has a higher level of awareness than other age stages. It can be seen that the young people group is the main participant and media information receiver in the communication activities, and the young people should be given enough attention in the communication strategy.

2. The results of the survey shown that most people love the gardens of A Dream of Red Mansions, express a strong interest in traditional culture, and are prone to emotional resonance with the aesthetic symbols of the gardens. Respondents had a high willingness to accept communication and showed strong support for new forms of media communication, and the extent of awareness and attitude towards communication at the psychological level influences the audience's behavior in the communication

process. The communication activity of garden aesthetics symbols has a wide range of awareness, sufficient knowledge and preference. And this positive mental attitude will lead to high loyalty. Innovative communication activities based on the above-mentioned communication will have a positive impact on and promote communication behavior. The audience will be more receptive and the effectiveness of communication will be significantly improved, whether it is an innovation in content, means or form of communication.

3. In communication behavior, young people are the most active element of the three age groups. They are more likely to use online media, actively participate in various communication activities and obtain information mainly through reading books and online media. Young and middle-aged people, on the other hand, mainly use traditional media to obtain information. Based on the survey results, the researcher believes that suggestions can be made in the following three aspects to facilitate the future dissemination of the aesthetic elements of classical gardens in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. First, focus on the youth group to create diversified communication content. Youth groups are the main participants and information receivers of the dissemination of garden aesthetic symbols of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and they have a higher level of cognition of garden aesthetics and a strong willingness to participate. Therefore, the communication strategy should be centered on the youth group, combining their interests and media habits, and designing diversified communication content. For example, the garden aesthetics elements in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are combined with modern aesthetics through short videos, animation, games and other forms. Utilizing social media platforms (such as Microbolg, TikTok, Bilibili, etc.) to launch topic discussions, online exhibitions or interactive activities, enhance the fun and interactivity of communication.

Secondly, innovate the form of communication to enhance audience loyalty. The garden aesthetic elements in *A Dream of Red Mansions* can be integrated into immersive experiential activities, such as the use of VR/AR technology to restore the landscape of the Prospect Garden, so as to let the audience immerse themselves in the charm of classical gardens. At the same time, the development of cultural and creative products (such as garden-themed stationery, clothing, home decorations, etc.) integrates garden aesthetic symbols into daily life and enhances the emotional connection of the audience. Innovation makes communication activities more attractive, thus increasing audience loyalty. Thirdly, the dissemination is segmented, taking into account the media preferences of different age groups. Design differentiated communication channels and contents for different age groups. For young people, the focus is on using social media, short video platforms and online literature platforms for dissemination; for middle-aged and old-aged groups, the cultural connotations of the garden aesthetics of *A Dream of Red Mansions* can be interpreted in-depth through TV special programs, newspaper columns, offline lectures and other forms. In addition, cross-generational interactive activities on garden themes (cultural salons or parent-child activities) can be organized to promote communication and empathy among different age groups. In short, by focusing on youth groups, innovative forms of communication and strategies such as diversified communication, not only can it enhance the sense of participation and identity of youth groups, but also take into account the cultural needs of middle-aged and old-aged groups, which can effectively promote the dissemination and inheritance of classical garden aesthetics.

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