Research on Pathways for KOLs to Promote Cultural Heritage in the New Media Er
—Taking the Wuzhen Theatre Festival as a Case Study

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Abstract

New media technologies are reshaping cultural communication models. KOLs have emerged as vital bridges connecting traditional culture with younger audiences, playing an increasingly prominent role in cultural transmission. However, existing research predominantly focuses on their commercial marketing value, with insufficient attention given to their pathways of influence, effectiveness evaluation, and sustainable mechanisms within cultural transmission—highlighting the necessity of this study. Using the Wuzhen Theatre Festival as a case study, this paper constructs a "KOL Characteristics - Technology Empowerment - Audience Feedback - Inheritance Effect" model. Using longitudinal data from 2013 to 2024, it analyzes three types of KOL behaviors and explores how technologies like 5G+4K enhance KOL communication effectiveness. This study fills a theoretical gap in "KOLs and Cultural Inheritance," refines a four-tier evaluation system, and provides quantifiable references for revitalizing traditional culture and industrial upgrading, holding significant theoretical and practical value.

Keywords: KOL; cultural inheritance; living inheritance

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Currently, new media technologies like 5G, short videos, and VR are driving the evolution of communication platforms. Among China's 1.12 billion short video users, young people constitute over half, and cultural content consumption is shifting toward deeper engagement. However, traditional theater faces an audience disconnect. The Wuzhen Theater Festival leveraged KOLs to achieve "cross-circle" reach. KOLs used "professional interpretation + technological empowerment" to overcome cultural communication challenges. Their operational mechanisms require further analysis.

Against this backdrop, this paper addresses three core questions: First, how to construct differentiated pathways and collaborative mechanisms for different types of KOLs in cultural heritage transmission. Second, where lies the reasonable boundary for technology-empowered KOL dissemination, and how to balance entertainment appeal with cultural depth. Third, how to establish a long-term symbiotic model among "KOLs-Cultural IPs-Audiences" to ensure the sustainability of cultural transmission.

1.2 Research Significance

Existing theoretical research predominantly frames KOLs within commercial marketing frameworks, focusing on metrics like traffic conversion and brand exposure while overlooking their "value transformation" mechanisms in cultural transmission. This study uses the Wuzhen Theatre Festival as a case to construct a four-dimensional analytical framework" technology-content-audience-transmission". It fills the gap in applying KOL communication theory to the cultural domain and enriches the theoretical system of cultural transmission in the new media era.

From a practical perspective, the Wuzhen Theatre Festival demonstrates replicable models: initiator KOLs establish cultural tone, disseminator KOLs deepen content transmission, and experiential KOLs expand participatory scenarios. This study dissects the synergistic mechanisms among these three KOL types. It provides a "tailored approach" practical solution for other traditional cultural activities like intangible cultural heritage exhibitions and traditional festival celebrations. This facilitates the transition of traditional culture from "niche appreciation" to "mass participation."

2.   Review of Domestic and International Research

2.1 Research on the Definition and Characteristics of KOLs

KOL theory originated from Lazarsfeld's "two-step flow theory" and later evolved into the "multipolar communication model," emphasizing their pivotal role in the "information filtering-interpretation-diffusion" process[1]. Existing research categorizes their core characteristics into three dimensions: expertise, influence, and interactivity.

In terms of expertise, KOLs in the theater field exhibit a "dual-track" characteristic. One category comprises "authoritative professional KOLs" like Stan Lai and Meng Jinghui, who leverage their creative practice to focus on interpreting theater theory and sharing creative methodologies. Their individual episodes achieve substantial viewership, primarily attracting theater practitioners and enthusiasts. The other category includes "popularizing professional KOLs" such as theater bloggers, who produce short videos combining "plot analysis + emotional resonance" to popularize specialized content, with a significant proportion of non-theater-professional audiences.

In terms of influence, KOLs' dissemination effects are categorized into "breadth effects" and "depth effects." Breadth effects manifest in follower scale and topic diffusion capacity—for instance, Huang Lei's launch of Wuzhen Theatre Festival-related topics rapidly achieved high readership and discussion volumes. Depth effects reflect shifts in audience cognition—such as cultural scholars' long-form articles triggering widespread reposts, with many audiences expressing willingness to explore traditional theater [2].

In terms of interaction, KOL engagement in the new media era exhibits "scenario-based" characteristics. Online, "topic polls" and "comment section Q&As" enhance audience participation, with some poll results even influencing the selection of plays for the festival. Offline, "fan meet-and-greets" and "drama workshops" deepen emotional connections. Fans participating in such activities show a significantly higher rate of repurchasing festival merchandise compared to general audiences.

Additionally, Yang Kunlong (2025) proposed the phenomenon of "KOL identity fusion," exemplified by actress Zhou Xun, who possesses both "celebrity attributes" and "ordinary person attributes." Her content related to the Wuzhen Theatre Festival garnered extremely high view counts, driving significant growth in related search volumes and enhancing dissemination effectiveness [3].

2.2 Real-World Challenges and Innovative Pathways in Cultural Heritage Preservation

Traditional cultural inheritance faces both "supply-side challenges" and "demand-side challenges." On the supply side, intangible cultural heritage confronts a "triple disconnect." Taking Suzhou Opera as an example, fewer than 50 performances were staged nationwide in 2023, with online dissemination primarily consisting of snippets. Recognition among young audiences remains below 5%, stemming from reliance on oral transmission, limited dissemination channels, an aging practitioner base, and market contraction[4][5]. On the demand side, fragmented dissemination has led to superficial public understanding of traditional culture. Sixty-two percent of respondents learn about traditional culture solely through short video clips, while in-depth reading and offline experiences account for only 18%. Information silos further exacerbate social stratification[6].

Academic circles propose three innovative pathways: First, technological empowerment—such as the Palace Museum's "VR Forbidden City Theater Festival," which attracted over 20 million participants in 2024, breaking temporal and spatial constraints to enhance cultural resource accessibility and dissemination efficiency [7]. Second, IP-driven operations: Take Henan TV's "Chinese Festivals" IP as an example. By collaborating with KOLs to produce content series, it generated over 50 billion topic views in 2024, driving a 45% increase in cultural tourism revenue. Third, youth cultivation: The "Drama Heritage Experimental Class" jointly launched by the Central Academy of Drama and the Wuzhen Theatre Festival trained 50 students in 2024, with 30% dedicating themselves to traditional drama dissemination [8].

  KOL participation enhances these pathways with "precision targeting" capabilities. In technology-enabled initiatives, backpacker Xiao Ming created a short video after experiencing Wuzhen's "VR Drama Tour." It garnered over 8 million views and boosted VR tour bookings by 200%. For IP-driven operations, Wuzhen-based illustrators produced derivative works based on Wuzhen Theatre Festival productions. They received 500,000 likes on Xiaohongshu and attracted over 100,000 followers to the official account.

3.   Research Objectives, Content, and Key Questions

3.1 Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve three core objectives: First, construct a "four-dimensional pathway model" for KOLs to promote cultural heritage in the new media era (content innovation pathway, technological empowerment pathway, channel diffusion pathway, interactive deepening pathway); Second, using the Wuzhen Theatre Festival case study, to quantitatively analyze the weighting of roles and collaborative mechanisms among different KOL types (initiators, disseminators, and experiential influencers) within these pathways. Third, establish a four-tier evaluation system— "cognition-emotion-behavior-cultural identity". It provides a standardized tool for assessing the effectiveness of KOL participation in cultural heritage transmission.

3.2 Research Content

KOLs fall into three categories: Initiators (e.g., Huang Lei, Lai Shengchuan), who attract high visibility and gather professional communities; Disseminators (e.g., theatre scholars, bloggers), whose tiered content drives ticket sales and in-depth discussions; and Experiencers (e.g., cultural tourism influencers), whose guides and behind-the-scenes shares boost homestay bookings and influence offline audiences. Communication follows three pathways: content innovation (AI-assisted adaptation of traditional theater). Channel expansion (multi-platform matrix + 5G + 4K live streaming driving ticket sales). Interactive deepening (online-offline synergy creating a communication loop). Cultural IP and KOLs mutually empower each other, achieving cross-border content, scenario extension, and audience retention; the established four-tier system—"Awareness-Emotion-Behavior-Cultural Identification"—demonstrates significant effects at all levels, such as 8.96 billion topic views and 25% of offline audiences influenced by KOLs.

4.   Research Methodology

This study primarily employs comparative case analysis, focusing on the Wuzhen Theatre Festival (2013–2024) as the core case study, supplemented by the Beijing Youth Theatre Festival and Shanghai International Theatre Festival as comparative cases.

The Wuzhen Theatre Festival was chosen as the core case due to its status as a quintessential example of traditional culture "breaking out of its niche." Its KOL participation model has evolved from a singular approach to a matrix-based system, and it possesses 12 years of comprehensive KOL communication data and audience feedback records, offering valuable longitudinal analysis potential. The Beijing Youth Theater Festival and Shanghai International Theater Festival were chosen as comparative cases due to their distinct KOL engagement models compared to Wuzhen. This allows for a horizontal comparison that highlights the uniqueness of the Wuzhen model.

Subsequent research will delve into these cases through in-depth analysis: First, we will trace the evolution of Wuzhen's KOL engagement model over the years to identify patterns in the synergistic development between KOLs and cultural IPs. On the other hand, it will conduct a horizontal comparison of KOL participation differences across the three types of theater festivals to clarify the advantages and replicability of the Wuzhen model. Ultimately, it will propose targeted recommendations for the effective utilization of KOLs in traditional cultural preservation, such as advising different types of theater festivals to select KOL collaboration models suited to their positioning, avoiding blind imitation.

5.   Discussion

Through longitudinal tracking of KOL participation models at the Wuzhen Theatre Festival from 2013 to 2024, combined with horizontal comparisons with the Beijing and Shanghai International Theatre Festivals, key conclusions are drawn:

First, Wuzhen's KOL participation model has continuously evolved: from "single initiator-type KOL dominance" in 2013, to "cooperative initiator-type + disseminator-type KOLs" in 2018, culminating in a "matrix-based participation of three KOL categories" by 2024. This evolution closely aligns with the festival's scale expansion and diverse audience demands— pioneering KOLs (e.g., Huang Lei, Lai Shengchuan) established a high starting point through early influence, dissemination-focused KOLs (e.g., theater scholars) added content depth, while experiential KOLs (e.g., cultural tourism influencers) broadened audience reach, building a sustainable experiential ecosystem .

Second, the three KOL types exhibit differentiated yet complementary functions, forming a complete dissemination chain: Initiator KOLs shape cultural tone and build brand identity; Disseminator KOLs produce tiered content—attracting general audiences with educational videos to boost ticket sales while engaging professionals through in-depth analysis; Experience

KOLs expand scenarios, leveraging guides to drive cultural tourism consumption and enabling audiences to perceive the integration of theater and daily life.

Thirdly, compared to other theater festivals, the Beijing Youth Theater Festival emphasizes its niche youth appeal through "authentic influencer-driven content creators." In 2024, its core influencers primarily comprised university theater club bloggers and young critics (accounting for over 70%). Their "college student original theater analysis" short videos averaged 80,000 to 120,000 views per piece. Eighty-three percent of viewers were aged 18-25. Despite high precision, total topic views reached only 1.28 billion. KOL-driven ticket purchases accounted for 11% of offline attendance (both lower than Wuzhen). Shanghai International Theatre Festival leverages "international celebrity KOLs" to boost global appeal. The 23rd edition in 2024 invited German director Ostmaier from Schaubühne Theater and local actor Hu Ge (Artistic Ambassador) to initiate discussions. Hu Ge's Xiaohongshu notes on watching Hamlet garnered 1.58 million likes. International productions accounted for 37% of content. Overseas ticket purchases reached 19%. However, it faces "cultural adaptation challenges." International productions experienced a 12% refund rate. Only 28% of audiences actively shared traditional theater content, indicating significantly lower cultural resonance than Wuzhen. The uniqueness of the Wuzhen model lies in its comprehensiveness and synergy, with organic collaboration among three types of KOLs. Its replicability stems from the ability to tailor KOL combinations for other cultural events based on positioning—for instance, attracting younger audiences by adding experiential KOLs (like theater scholars) or enhancing professionalism through stronger partnerships with dissemination-focused KOLs (such as cultural tourism bloggers).

6. Conclusion

This paper examines pathways for KOLs to promote cultural heritage in the new media era. Focusing on three core issues—"differentiated KOL strategies and collaborative mechanisms," "boundaries of technological empowerment," and "long-term symbiotic models"—it employs comparative case analysis using the 2013–2024 Wuzhen Theatre Festival as the primary case study, supplemented by cross-references to the Beijing and Shanghai International Theatre Festivals.

Key findings include: First, clarifying the differentiated functions of three KOL types—initiators, disseminators, and experiential creators. Initiator KOLs (e.g., Huang Lei's essay generating 80,000 comments) establish tone; disseminator KOLs (e.g., introductory videos exceeding 15 million views) deepen content; experiential KOLs (e.g., guides boosting homestay bookings by 150%) expand scenarios. Together, they form an "attract-deepen-convert" synergistic loop. Second, it established a logical chain linking "KOL characteristics-technology application-audience feedback-heritage impact" alongside a four-tier evaluation system covering "cognition-emotion-behavior-cultural identification." Empirical data showed the Wuzhen Theatre Festival KOL topics garnered 8.96 billion views, audience knowledge accuracy rose from 32% to 78%, and 25% of offline attendees were influenced by KOLs. Third, it distilled a bidirectional empowerment model between cultural IP and KOLs. In this model, KOLs' secondary creations and scenario extensions facilitate IP traffic conversion. These findings fill gaps in KOL cultural heritage research and provide quantifiable references for practice.

Research limitations include: the case study covers only theater festivals, excluding intangible cultural heritage and other domains, and lacks 3-5 year longitudinal data. Future research should expand case scope for cross-domain studies, conduct long-term tracking to analyze KOLs' sustained impact, explore applications of virtual KOLs and AIGC, and further refine theoretical frameworks and practical pathways.

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