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Weakening of the Effect: A Study on the Reverse Third-Person Effect of Spring Festival Gala Digital Humans

Tong Zhao*
School of Cultural Industry Managemen, 8Zhejiang University of Media and Communications, China
***Corresponding author E-mail: 1967994687@qq.com**

Abstract:
As technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual digital humans increasingly enter the cultural communication domain, the integration of digital and physical elements has become a significant approach to innovating traditional culture. However, technological innovation does not necessarily translate into the expected communication outcomes. This study takes Weibo discussions sparked by the digital-physical integrated programs of the 2026 Spring Festival Gala as its research subject, introducing the third-person effect and counter-third-person effect theories, and employs content analysis and in-depth interviews to examine audiences' cognition, emotions, and interactive behaviors toward culturally integrated digital-physical content. The findings reveal that audiences exhibit high self-involvement with the programs and feel an urge to persuade others; however, persuasive actions do not lead to attitude change but may instead reinforce pre-existing judgments through debate. Consequently, the counter-third-person effect manifests as a "variant effect" in the social media era, shifting communication outcomes from attitude change to attitude entrenchment and public opinion polarization, thereby weakening the intended cultural communication goals.

Keywords:
Attitude entrenchment, Cultural communication, Counter-third-person effect, Digital- physical integration, Social media

1 Introduction

Against this backdrop, leveraging emerging media technologies to innovate traditional cultural expression has become a key practical direction for mainstream media in cultural dissemination. In recent years, the Spring Festival Gala has extensively adopted integrated digital-physical technologies. In 2026, Unitree Robotics' humanoid robots performed the world's first fully autonomous group martial

arts show titled "Wu BOT". In 2024, the AI digital avatar of Li Bai from the poem "Shan He Shi Chang'an" appeared across time and space at Xi'an's Yongning Gate, interacting with live actors and audiences to recite poetry, merging historical figures with real-world settings and further expanding the boundaries of digital cultural expression. However, we observe that although these digitally integrated programs have gained wide-

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spread attention through technological innovation, public reactions on social media are clearly divided: some audiences believe digital technology enhances the appeal and emotional impact of traditional culture, bringing history and heritage to life; others argue that the programs overemphasize technical spectacle, weakening the expression of cultural content itself, even claiming that "the more dazzling the technology, the less festive the atmosphere." More notably, amid

ongoing online discussions, many viewers can recall the digital avatars and robots vividly but struggle to accurately remember the cultural messages conveyed by the programs-indicating a certain weakening trend in the cultural communication effectiveness of digital-physical integration. This raises an intriguing question: why do identical digitally integrated cultural contents provoke such starkly divergent opinions? How does the transmission effect of virtual digital humans and robots gradually diminish?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Literature Review on Virtual Digital Humans

The phenomenon of virtual digital humans has attracted multidisciplinary research from academia. Foreign scholars Bae, Jung, Cho, and Kwon (2025) conducted a comprehensive analysis of user acceptance mechanisms of virtual digital humans from the perspective of the uncanny valley theory, indicating that users are influenced by the uncanny valley effect in both appearance and functionality when interacting with digital humans. Meanwhile, foreign researchers Tsekouras, Gutt, and Heimbach (2024) carried out an in-depth study from the perspective of media anthropomorphism, finding that moderate levels of anthropomorphism enhance interaction enjoyment, while high levels increase social presence, thereby reducing the perceived usefulness of audience evaluations.Domestic scholars Qu Ru and Chen Zhengyang (2025) conducted a more detailed study on the integration of virtual digital humans with traditional Chinese cultural communication from the perspective of cultural dissemination paradigms. Their research indicates that virtual digital humans possess dual attributes—both technological form and cultural carrier—and are driving the evolution of traditional cultural communication from unidirectional "cultural representation" toward interactive "co-creation of culture." Qin Hong (2025) analyzed the significant differences between machine performers and human actors, pointing out that characteristics such as pseudo-autonomy, mechanical movement, one-way output, and superficial emotional expression in embodied robots are reshaping traditional performance paradigms and audience-performer relationships. Cui Yidan (2026) provided an overall analysis from the perspective of human-machine collaborative performance, demonstrating that the introduction of AI performers challenges conventional notions of agency, intentionality, and stage embodiment, while also raising fundamental questions about the essence of authentic performance and artistic interpretation. However, although these studies have examined the marketing effectiveness, cultural dissemination, and technical characteristics of virtual digital humans, they have paid relatively little attention to the weakening of communication effects in scenarios integrating the digital and physical worlds.

2.2 Literature Review on the Third-Person Effect

The third-person effect theory, proposed by Davison (1983), has received extensive attention from scholars both domestically and internationally, resulting in numerous research achievements.Foreign scholars Perloff

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and Shen (2023) conducted a critical synthesis of 40 years of research on this theory, analyzing the historical and sociological context in which Davison originally proposed it, and systematically integrating studies on self-other perception differences and their behavioral consequences. Foreign researchers Byoungkwan and Tamborini (2005) were the first to demonstrate the third-person effect of the internet in Western cultures, indicating that culture is a crucial prerequisite, and that collectivist cultures weaken both third-person perceptions and subsequent support for internet pornography regulation. Zhi-Jin Zhong (2009) further advanced this research by introducing the concept of self-construal-categorizing individuals as either independent or interdependent—and found that even within the same culture, the third-person effect does not occur uniformly across all individuals. Interdependent individuals perceive themselves as similar to others, making their perceived differences less pronounced.Domestic scholar Yu Weihua (2009) conducted the first experimental study on the “third-person effect” in the Chinese mainland, exploring the relationship between localized research methods and findings on the third-person effect. Domestic scholar Wu Nan (2017) integrated actual phenomena of audience factors from China's communication practices with the third-person effect theory, pointing out that the third-person effect involves not only how information receivers perceive media influence but also social psychological factors such as social distance, message salience, and audience personality traits. Domestic scholar Luo Shuhuan (2023) combined CNKI journal articles related to the third-person effect theory from 2002 to 2022 in China, using visualization techniques to analyze the current status and developmental trajectory of Chinese-language research in this field. However, although these studies have examined the third-person effect from perspectives such as theoretical integration, internet effects, and receiver factors, they have not explored this phenomenon from the standpoint of cultural digital-physical integration scenarios.

2.3 Research Questions

Therefore, this paper will, based on the counter-third-person effect theory, attempt to answer the following question:In the context of cultural communication integrating digital and physical realms, how does the technological representation of virtual digital humans-such as anthropomorphic appearance and human-like behavior-lead to weakened communication effectiveness through cognitive-emotional pathways? How does the reverse third-person effect-where audiences believe that cultural content disseminated by virtual digital humans affects others less than themselves, or deny its impact on others-affect audiences' cognition, acceptance, and memory of virtual digital humans and their presented cultural content?How do audience familiarity (degree of familiarity with traditional cultural content), presence (sense of realism in virtual digital humans), and perceived novelty (cognitive recognition of technological innovation) strengthen or weaken the impact of the reverse third-person effect on cultural communication outcomes?

3 Research Methodology

This study employed content analysis and interview methods to address the above research questions.

3.1 Content analysis method

3.1.1 Assumption establishment

Based on the issues raised above, the following hypothesis was proposed:

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Compared with the period before the integration of digital and physical realms, after the emergence of cultural communication scenarios involving such integration, online discussions about virtual digital humans became more focused on technological presentation, showing declining interest in cultural content and weakened dissemination effects.

To test the hypothesis, this study employed content analysis, selected a sample from the research population, and designed a coding scheme to systematically code and statistically analyze the sample.

3.1.2 Sampling method

The research subject corresponding to this hypothesis was social media.

First, a representative sample of this type of media was selected, with the Weibo platform chosen as the research medium. The rationale for this choice is that Weibo, one of China's most influential social media platforms, boasts a massive user base and significant social impact, serving as a key online space for public discussion and expression on trending topics. Moreover, Weibo features rapid information dissemination, high topic concentration, open comment sections, and strong interactivity, enabling it to comprehensively reflect audiences' genuine attitudes and opinions toward cultural content integrating digital and physical realms, thus making it highly representative.

Second, a constructed week sampling method was adopted for sample selection. Taking the cultural communication event of "WuBOT" in the 2026 Lunar New Year Gala on February 16, 2026, as the pivotal point, relevant content on the Weibo platform before and after the event was sampled separately. For the period prior to the event, the research timeframe was set from February 2 to February 15, 2026, primarily because this phase coincided with the preheating stage of the Spring

Festival Gala, during which audiences had not yet been exposed to the full program content. Discussions during this period could thus better reflect public understanding and attitudes toward virtual digital humans, artificial intelligence, and robotics before the emergence of the digital-integration event. During this phase, core keywords such as "virtual digital human", "AI digital human", and "digital human" were used to retrieve and filter relevant Weibo posts and their first-level comments within the specified period. For the post-event period, the timeframe was set from February 16 to March 16, 2026.This period covered the entire evolution of public opinion following the gala broadcast and thereby enabled a more comprehensive reflection of audience online discussion patterns. Core keywords including Spring Festival Gala robot, "WuBOT", and "digital-integrated Spring Festival Gala" were used to search and screen related Weibo posts and first-level comments. Given that Weibo content exhibited clear weekly periodicity, a constructed week sampling approach was employed to better represent overall trends.The two time periods-before and after the event-were each divided into natural weeks of seven days, and one random day per week was selected as a sample date. These randomly selected dates across the different weeks formed a "constructed week," which aimed to balance periodic differences in information release and user engagement levels across weekdays, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the sample and the reliability of the research findings.

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3.1.3 Encoding Table

This study divided the variable of dissemination stage into two periods: before and after the event. The period before the event spanned from February 2 to February 15, 2026, while the period after the event covered February 16 to March 16, 2026. The content of online discussions was further divided into the following variables: discussion themes (technical presentation, cultural content, equal emphasis on technology and culture, and others), sentiment orientation (positive, neutral, and negative), evaluative tendency (affirmative, negative, and neutral), persuasive intent (no persuasive intent, suggestive statements, and absolute assertions), and pronoun reference tendency (first-person, third-person, and impersonal references). The coding scheme is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Content Analysis Coding Sheet

Serial Number	Encoding variables	Assignment
1	Dissemination Phase	1 Before the event occurred, 2 After the event occurred
2	Discussion topic	Technical presentation, 2.Cultural content, 3. Equal emphasis on technology and culture, 4. Other
3	The relationship between technology and culture	1 promote, 2 coordinate, 3 overshadow, 4 not mentioned
4	Sentiment orientation	1 Positive, 2 Neutral, 3 Negative
5	Evaluation orientation	1 Positive, 2 Negative, 3 Neutral
6	Persuasion intent	1 No persuasive intent, 2 advisory statement, 3 absolute assertion
7	Pronominal reference tendency	1 first person, 2 third person, 3 impersonal reference

3 impersonal reference

3.2 In-depth Interview Method

3.2.1 Interview outline preparation

The interview questions were mainly divided into three parts.

The first part mainly covered the respondents' basic information, including their gender, age, educational background, media usage habits, as well as their experiences with and familiarity with virtual digital humans and traditional culture.

The second part translated the research questions into specific interview inquiries, including respondents' overall viewing experiences and evaluations of the digitally integrated programs in the Spring Festival Gala, their perceptions of the relationship between virtual digital human technology and cultural content delivery,

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perceived differences between how they and others were influenced by digitally integrated cultural communication (the reverse third-person effect), as well as the impact of familiarity, presence, and perceived novelty on their viewing experiences and perceptions of cultural dissemination effectiveness.

The third section primarily addressed potential follow-up questions, including respondents' further understanding of the relationship between "technological demonstration" and "cultural expression," the reasons behind their views, the key factors influencing their judgments, as well as new insights, emerging phenomena, and typical cases that arose during the interviews.

During the interviews and research process, the researcher made every effort to avoid the four ethical issues and misconduct emphasized by scholar Alan Bryman:

(1) causing harm to research participants;

(2) failing to obtain informed consent;

(3) violating the privacy of research participants; and

(4) deceiving research participants.

If interviewees encountered questions they were unwilling to answer or expressed dissatisfaction during the interview, they were allowed to remain silent or withdraw at any time.Interview materials that the interviewee has requested as not to be made public were not included or cited in this study.

3.2.2 Selection of Interviewees

This study conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes with 15 participants who had watched the Spring Festival Gala in both 2024 and 2026 and had been exposed to content related to integrated digital-physical cultural communication. The interview duration varied depending on the depth of participants' responses. The interviews were carried out from August 2 to August 8, 2026, spanning approximately one week. Initially, participants were selected from individuals around the researcher who met the study criteria; subsequently, snowball sampling was employed, whereby previously interviewed participants recommended new candidates who met the criteria and possessed diverse characteristics, thereby expanding the sample pool. In line with the qualitative research principle of maximum variation sampling, efforts were made during recruitment to ensure diversity among participants in terms of age, gender, occupation, education level, geographic region, familiarity with traditional culture, and experience with emerging technologies, aiming to capture varied experiences and perceptions across different demographic backgrounds. When the 15th participant was recruited, the interview data had reached theoretical saturation-new respondents no longer provided insights or descriptions beyond those already covered-suggesting that the sample was sufficient to address the research questions, thus concluding the sample collection process.

Respondents varied significantly in terms of age, gender, occupation, education level, region, familiarity with traditional culture, and exposure to cutting-edge technologies such as virtual digital humans, AI, and robotics, resulting in a relatively low degree of homogeneity. This diversity enabled a more comprehensive reflection of different audiences' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding the cultural communication of digital-physical integration in the Spring Festival Gala.

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The interviews were conducted in a one-on-one, semi-structured format, using either face-to-face meetings or online platforms such as Tencent Meeting and WeChat voice calls, depending on the respondents' actual circumstances. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent. After each interview, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings into verbatim transcripts, resulting in a total of approximately 34 941 words. The organization, coding, and analysis of the interview data were carried out by the researcher personally to ensure a thorough understanding and accurate interpretation of the interview context. Basic information about the participants is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Respondent Information Form

Number	Gender	Age	Occupation/Field of Study
S1	Woman	21	Student: Journalism major
S2	Woman	21	Automotive Sales
S3	Man	16	Student: High school
S4	Woman	22	Student: Major in Financial Management
S5	Woman	21	Student: International Trade Major
S6	Man	69	Unemployed
S7	Man	15	Student: High school
S8	Woman	21	Student: Film and Television Photography and Production major
S9	Woman	20	Student: Advertising major
S10	Woman	36	Housewife
S11	Man	36	Medical Device After-Sales Service
S12	Man	49	Teacher
S13	Man	22	Student: Control Engineering major
S14	Woman	20	Student: Geography Education Major
S15	Woman	21	Student: Major in Cultural Industry Management

4 Counter-third-person effect: Cognitive biases and attitude entrenchment on social media

4.1 Theoretical Origins: From the Third-Person Effect to the Counter-Third-Person Effect

In 1983, American scholar Davison proposed the third-person effect, suggesting that individuals tend to believe that mass media messages have a greater impact on “others” than on themselves. In other words, people perceive themselves as having stronger abilities to discern and resist media influence, while others are seen as more susceptible to media effects. Conversely, when media content carries strong social identification attributes, aligns with social norms, or is perceived as positive, audiences may make judgments opposite to the traditional third-person effect-believing that the message affects them more than others. This phenomenon is commonly known as the counter-third-person effect.

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The Spring Festival Gala's fusion programs indeed possess distinct social-cultural characteristics. On one hand, technological elements such as robots and AI digital avatars reflect innovation and the progress of the times; on the other hand, performances like “Wu BOT” convey the significance of cultural heritage through traditional Chinese martial arts. As a result, such content simultaneously embodies “positive cultural value” and “positive technological innovation,” making it highly likely to elicit favorable social responses. In this context, audiences tend to believe they can understand, accept, and be influenced by the programs, while others-especially those “unfamiliar with traditional culture” or “more drawn to technology”-may focus solely on visual effects without grasping the underlying cultural meanings. This leads to a cognitive bias in which individuals perceive themselves as more influenced or better able to appreciate the program's value than others.

However, in the social media environment, this cognitive bias does not necessarily manifest as a change in an individual's own attitude. Audiences are both recipients of information and active participants in commenting and interaction. When individuals believe their judgments are more accurate than those of others, they may further attempt to influence others' attitudes through comments, debates, and similar means. Thus, the reverse third-person effect evolves from a simple “self versus other influence discrepancy” cognitive mechanism into an interactive mechanism characterized by “perceiving one's judgment as correct-actively persuading others,” offering a new theoretical perspective for understanding public opinion polarization and weakened communication effects in the context of digital-integrated cultural dissemination.

4.2 Research Design and Findings: Verification of the Reverse Third-Person Effect in Comment Interactions

To examine the reverse third-person effect in the context of digital-physical integration and media communication, this study employs content analysis to code and analyze discussions on Weibo related to the integration of digital and physical elements in the Spring Festival Gala. Taking programs such as “Wu BOT” from the 2026 Spring Festival Gala as key events, the study divides relevant Weibo discussions into two phases: before and after the event. Discussions are coded across multiple dimensions, including thematic content, the relationship between technology and culture, emotional tone, evaluative stance, persuasive intent, and pronoun usage, resulting in a total of 106 valid comments. The study focuses particularly on whether audiences exhibit a clear self-other difference when evaluating media content, and whether this difference further translates into commenting, expressing opinions, and engaging in debates.

From the perspective of content dissemination, the Spring Festival Gala's fusion programs are not merely technical displays, but also carry dual significance in innovation and cultural heritage. This study conducted a coding analysis of 106 Weibo-related comments, with specific results shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Frequency Distribution Table of Main Variables

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage %
Dissemination Phase	Before the incident	42	39.62%
	After the incident	64	60.38%

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Discussion topic	Technical Presentation	46	43.40%
	Cultural Content	0	0.00%
	Technology and culture go hand in hand	37	34.91%
	Other	23	21.70%
The relationship between technology and culture	Promote	12	11.32%
	Coordination	21	19.81%
	Stealing the spotlight	16	15.09%
	Not mentioned	57	53.77%
Sentiment orientation	positive	59	55.66%
	Neutral	13	12.26%
	Negative	34	32.08%
Evaluation orientation	Certainly	59	55.66%
	Negation	39	36.79%
	Neutral	8	7.55%
Persuasion intent	No persuasive intent	97	91.51%
	Suggestive statement	7	6.60%
	Absolute statements	2	1.89%
Pronominal reference tendency	First person	25	23.58%
	Third person	3	2.83%
	Impersonal reference	78	73.58%

Table 3 shows that 46 comments (43.40%) discussed technical presentation, while 37 comments (34.91%) emphasized both design technology and culture. Regarding the dimension of “the relationship between technology and culture”, 20 comments indicated that the two could be harmonized, 12 believed technology promoted cultural dissemination, and 16 noted that technology tended to overshadow cultural content. This suggests that audiences do perceive the cultural value in the program, yet their overall discussion remains more focused on technical aspects and the interplay between technology and culture. This provides a suitable communication context for the emergence of the reverse third-person effect: when audiences perceive a program as having positive cultural value, they are more likely to assume that "I can understand its meaning, whereas others may only focus on the technological form."

Further examination of the persuasive intent in comments before and after the incident reveals that audience expression does not always remain limited to evaluations of the program itself, but gradually exhibits more distinct characteristics of opinion expression and attempts to persuade others following the event. To further investigate this shift, this study conducts a cross-analysis of communication stages and persuasive intent, with results shown in Table 4 below.

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Table 4 Communication Stage × Persuasion Intent

Dissemination Phase	No persuasive intent	Suggestive statement	Absolute statements	Total
Before the incident occurred	41	1	0	42
After the incident occurred	56	6	2	64
Total	97	7	2	106

Meanwhile, the interactive nature of social media further transforms this cognitive gap into expressions of opinion. Content analysis reveals that while most comments do not clearly intend to persuade, they still contain advisory statements and absolute claims. For instance, one comment directly states, “Don't have so many robots next time!” and further explains that excessive use of robots makes the show feel"lacking in human warmth." Another comment argues, “The Spring Festival Gala doesn't need to overemphasize technological displays... Audiences watch the gala not to witness national strength, but to seek emotional comfort.” Such expressions go beyond mere personal viewing experiences and clearly convey persuasive and argumentative intentions.

Thus, the reverse third-person effect identified in this study is not simply “I am influenced, but others are not,” but rather manifests more as a cognitive difference in social media environments where “I understand things more correctly, while others fail to grasp them properly,” further expressed through interactions such as comments, evaluations, and persuasion. In other words, online audiences do not passively accept positive messages merely because they receive them; instead, they may use their own judgments as a reference point to evaluate others' understanding or even attempt to change it. This indicates that the reverse third-person effect evolves in social media contexts from “self-judgment” to “superior self-judgment,” laying the foundation for later discussions on why it fails to achieve its intended cultural communication outcomes.

4.3 Discussion: Why did the effect go “counter” to expectations and fail to achieve the communication goal?

The above analysis reveals that the “reverse third-person effect” in the digital-integrated communication of the Spring Festival Gala did not unfold along the path anticipated by traditional communication theories-that is, audiences do not necessarily accept the cultural values conveyed simply because they perceive the content as having a significant impact on them. Instead, within social media spaces, audiences primarily engage through comments, suggestions, and debates, extending their cognitive judgments from “I am being influenced” to “my judgment is more accurate.” As a result, the reverse third-person effect manifests as a cognitive gap between “my judgment is correct” and “others’ judgments are biased.”

First, this phenomenon is related to the interactive structure of social media. In traditional mass communication, audiences primarily exist as information recipients, and communication effects are typically reflected in changes in cognition, attitudes, or behavior. However, Weibo connects information reception with opinion expression, enabling audiences not only to share their viewing experiences but also to instantly evaluate content and respond to others' viewpoints. As a result, when audiences believe they can grasp the cultural significance of a program while perceiving others as focusing merely on technical spectacle, their communication behavior may shift from "receiving information" to “attempting to correct or persuade others.” For instance,

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some comments argue that “the essence of the Spring Festival Gala lies in emotional connections among people, not in technical or commercial displays,” suggesting that viewers watch the gala to “seek emotional comfort, human warmth, and reflections on the passage of time.” Such comments go beyond personal viewing experiences and instead make judgments about “what constitutes the proper way to watch the Spring Festival Gala.”

As shown in Table 5, which presents the intersection of pronoun usage and emotional orientation, comments referring to others also exhibit certain evaluative characteristics. This suggests that when audiences shift their focus from the program itself to “others,” their attention may move from “what I think” to “what others think.” It should be noted that the sample size for third-person references in this study is limited; therefore, this finding cannot stand alone as sufficient evidence supporting the reverse third-person effect. However, it can serve as supplementary material for understanding audience interpersonal differences and behaviors. Combined with an analysis of persuasive intent, it becomes evident that some audiences have begun intervening in future program presentations through suggestions and advice—for example, “Don't have so many robots next time... a moderate number would be fine.” Such comments indicate that audiences are not merely expressing personal preferences but are actively attempting to guide the content toward directions they approve of.

Table 5 Person reference × emotional tendency

Pronoun reference	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
First person	9	4	12	25
Third person	2	1	0	3
Impersonal reference	48	8	22	78
Total	59	13	34	106

Thus, when expressing opinions becomes a key form of participation in communication, debate itself may replace the acceptance of certain content. This study finds that after the event, discussions surrounding technological presentation, the relationship between technology and culture, and the program's value orientation became more prominent. Some audiences appreciated the integration of technology with traditional culture, viewing “WuBOT” as an embodiment of “Chinese technology + Chinese martial arts.” Others, however, felt that the excessive use of robots created a sense of "ack of human presence, even calling for “returning art to humanity.” As a result, a program originally intended to convey cultural values has become a platform for audiences with differing perspectives to express their views and affirm their identities. Although audiences continue discussing the same content, this does not necessarily lead to shared understanding; instead, persistent expression may reinforce their pre-existing stances.

Therefore, the weakened effectiveness in the integrated digital-physical communication of the Spring Festival Gala does not mean that the program has failed to produce cultural dissemination effects altogether, but rather indicates a shift in how these effects are achieved: from “receiving content-forming identification” to “evaluating content-judging others-expressing one's stance- strengthening personal views.” In this process, the communication effect shifts from “attitude change” to “attitude reinforcement and public opinion po-

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larization.” This precisely reflects a distinctive manifestation of the reverse third-person effect entering the social media arena: cognitive bias no longer merely involves “believing one is more influenced,” but further evolves into “believing one's judgment is more accurate,” which is then reinforced through interactive behaviors such as evaluation, persuasion, and debate. Ultimately, disputes between technology and culture may thus become a potential mechanism for weakening cultural communication effects.

5 Psychological Analysis: Empathy, Cognitive Dissonance, and Public Opinion Conflict

5.1 Empathy: From Emotional Resonance to Persuasive Impulse

This study finds that netizens' evaluations of the Spring Festival Gala's fusion programs are not simply supportive or opposing, but rather characterized by empathy and persuasion. Although audiences with different stances vary in their understanding of the relationship between technology and culture, their comments all reflect an underlying empathy toward certain values, which in turn triggers a desire to persuade others to understand their own positions.

For audiences who recognize the communication impact of integrating digital and real-world elements, their empathy primarily lies in narratives that combine “traditional culture” with “technological innovation.” These audiences are not merely drawn to technological forms such as robots or digital avatars; rather, they view technology as a crucial means for traditional culture to achieve innovative expression and expand its reach. For instance, some commentaries describe “Wu BOT” as a fusion of “Chinese technology and Chinese martial arts,” highlighting how technology can endow traditional culture with new modes of expression. Under this empathetic mindset, what audiences ultimately uphold is the value judgment that “traditional culture must also evolve alongside the times.” Thus,when confronted with criticism that technology is merely showing off, they often feel compelled to further explain—or even persuade others—demonstrating that technology is not an adversary to traditional culture, but rather a new pathway for cultural preservation.

For audiences who believe that “special effects outweigh content,” their emotional connection is more closely tied to the original quality, emotional value, and humanistic atmosphere of the Spring Festival Gala. What they oppose is not necessarily technology itself, but rather the perception that technological presentation has crowded out genuine emotional expression and the authentic “warmth and liveliness” traditionally associated with festivals. Comments such as “The heart of the Spring Festival Gala lies in human emotional connections, not in technical or commercial spectacle” reflect viewers' deep emotional attachment to the traditional essence of the show. When this space for meaningful expression is encroached upon by technology, audiences feel a strong urge to speak out and persuade others that “technology should not become the very purpose of the Spring Festival Gala.”

This shows that persuasive impulses are not confined to a single stance, but are driven by various forms of empathetic psychology. Whether supporting the cultural empowerment of technology or defending traditional content values, audiences are essentially upholding the value systems they identify with.When this emotional identification enters the interactive space of Weibo, empathy extends beyond individual feelings and further

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transforms into opinion expression, commentary, and even persuasion. This also indicates that communication conflicts on social media do not stem solely from differing viewpoints; beneath them lies an underlying emotional resonance and competition among different value systems.

5.2 The Mechanism of Attitude Rigidity from the Perspective of Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Persuasive behavior driven by empathic psychology can essentially be understood as a psychological response serving as a "defense mechanism against cognitive dissonance." According to cognitive dissonance theory, when individuals encounter information that contradicts their existing beliefs, their original cognitions are challenged, leading to psychological discomfort. In line with this study's findings, once audiences have formed clear value judgments about programs on digital-physical integration, exposure to opposing viewpoints activates cognitive dissonance-not by reflecting on and adjusting their own views to restore cognitive balance, but by refuting the opposing side to strengthen their self-justification.

For instance, audiences who believe technology empowers traditional culture tend to emphasize how the integration of digital and physical elements can offer new forms of expression for cultural heritage. In contrast, those who feel technology undermines the depth of cultural programs are more likely to highlight emotional values such as "human warmth" and "everyday authenticity." When these two groups encounter opposing viewpoints, the other side's opinion is not merely a difference in information but may also challenge their existing value judgments. As a result, seeking new evidence to support one's own perspective becomes a way to restore cognitive consistency. At this point,persuading others serves not only to change minds but also functions as a psychological process confirming the correctness of one's own beliefs.

This psychological mechanism also explains why debates on social media often become increasingly polarized. What began as a personal opinion about a show may, through the process of responding and refuting, lead individuals to continuously add arguments and reinforce their original stance, thereby further solidifying their initial attitudes. As a result, rather than facilitating attitude adjustment, the exchange of opinions creates a cycle of "expression-refutation-re-argumentation-reinforcement." Consequently, cognitive dissonance is not resolved by changing one's original attitude, but instead by strengthening existing positions, ultimately resulting in attitude reinforcement rather than change.

5.3 Interview reveals how holding onto differing opinions leads to weakened communication effectiveness

Further interviews revealed that after watching the integrated digital-physical programs of the Spring Festival Gala, audiences do form relatively clear judgments based on their emotional identification and develop a tendency to want others to understand their viewpoints. However, in actual communication, audiences with differing perspectives do not achieve mutual understanding as a result; instead, they are more likely to remain entrenched in their own opinions. In other words, while empathetic psychology can encourage audience participation in dissemination, it does not necessarily lead to the expected persuasive outcomes and may instead make conflicts between opposing views even more apparent.

This phenomenon can be further explained by the "echo chamber effect" and "confirmation bias." Social

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media algorithms tend to promote content aligned with users' preferences, causing groups with differing viewpoints to become immersed in self-reinforcing information environments. The reason why exchanges between opposing perspectives fail to persuade one another lies precisely in these two factors: when members of different "echo chambers" happen to encounter each other, their arguments not only fail to convince but instead intensify conflict due to fundamental differences in cognitive frameworks-resulting not only in failed communication but also in a further weakening of persuasive effects amid escalating discord.

The interview results also indicate that such communication does not necessarily lead to "persuading the other party." When faced with differing opinions, respondents tend to stick to their own understanding rather than altering their original judgment due to others' viewpoints. As a result, the communication process forms a cycle of “expressing opinions-encountering disagreement-offering rebuttals-reinforcing existing attitudes,” ultimately transforming opinion exchange into a defense of one's position.

Thus, empathy plays a dual role in this process: on one hand, it enables audiences to emotionally engage with digital human performances, serving as the starting point for communication effects; on the other hand, when combined with the “urge to persuade others,” empathy drives the emergence of public opinion conflicts. The weakening of communication effects does not stem from audience indifference, but rather may result from excessive emotional involvement-under the reverse third-person effect, high self-involvement strengthens individuals' own judgments, and under the influence of social media interaction mechanisms, attitudes become further entrenched. Ultimately, what was originally intended to promote cultural understanding and identification may transform into ongoing disputes among differing value positions, shifting communication effects from attitude change toward attitude reinforcement and public opinion polarization.

6 Summary and Outlook

This study takes the Weibo discussions sparked by the 2026 Spring Festival Gala's digital-physical integration programs as its subject, examining audience perceptions, emotions, and interactive behaviors toward content blending technology with traditional culture through content analysis and in-depth interviews. From a reverse third-person effect perspective, it analyzes the reasons behind the weakened communication impact. The findings reveal that the integration of digital and physical elements in the Spring Festival Gala did not produce a uniform cultural dissemination effect, but instead generated divergent value judgments on social media-ranging from "technology empowering culture" to "technology weakening content."

6.1 Summary of Research Findings

Research has found that audiences exhibit high levels of self-involvement with content integrating digital and physical elements. Some audience members believe technology can offer new forms of expression for traditional culture, while others place greater emphasis on the warmth, cultural depth, and emotional value that the Spring Festival Gala should embody. Although these differing perspectives focus on distinct values, they all foster strong emotional identification and further generate a persuasive impulse to seek validation from others for their own judgments.

Thus, the reverse third-person effect manifests in social media environments as a “variant effect” distinct

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from traditional communication-audiences do not change their original attitudes simply because they believe they are more susceptible to media influence. Instead, they develop the perception that "my judgment is more accurate while others' understanding is biased," and attempt to persuade others through comments, suggestions, and rebuttals. When such persuasion fails to alter others' views,it further strengthens their own stance, transforming the communication process from "receiving content-forming identification" to “evaluating content-judging others-expressing positions-reinforcing attitudes.” Consequently, communication effects are not weakened by audience indifference; rather, precisely due to high levels of self-involvement, audiences may solidify their attitudes and foster opinion polarization, ultimately undermining the intended cultural communication outcomes at the micro level.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions and Limitations

This study examines the reverse third-person effect within the context of social media, expanding the applicability boundaries of traditional third-person and first-person effect theories. The research shows that individuals' differing perceptions of how much they and others are influenced can further translate into "correct self-judgment versus biased other-judgment," which manifests through persuasion and argumentation, offering a new theoretical perspective for understanding changes in communication effects in the internet era.

However, this study still has certain limitations. First, the content analysis primarily uses Weibo comments as samples, with relatively limited platforms and sample sizes. Second, the number of interviewees is small, and further validation with larger samples is needed to better explain audience psychological mechanisms. Additionally, this study mainly identifies relationships among variables through content analysis and in-depth interviews, which does not fully establish causal relationships among the psychological mechanisms involved.

6.3 Future Research Directions and Practical Implications

Future research could expand samples across different social media platforms and audience groups, and further validate the relationships among self-involvement, empathy, cognitive dissonance, and attitude entrenchment through experimental methods. Meanwhile, mainstream media should avoid equating technological innovation itself with communication effectiveness when promoting integrated digital-physical cultural dissemination. Instead, greater emphasis should be placed on the harmonious interplay between technology, cultural content, and emotional expression. Only by ensuring that technology genuinely serves cultural expression and emotional resonance can value conflicts among audiences be reduced, enabling the “attention” generated by technology to be transformed into cultural identification—thus achieving a true shift from technological attraction to effective communication in the integration of digital and physical realms.

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