

From “Technical Demonstration” to “Cultural Product”: College Students’ Reception Barriers and Optimization Pathways for AI Red Dramas

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Abstract: With the rapid development of generative artificial intelligence, AI-generated video, animation, and audio are increasingly transforming the production and dissemination of cultural content. As a new attempt in the communication of red culture, AI-generated red-themed animated dramas demonstrate certain potential in improving production efficiency, reducing costs, and adapting to short-video platforms. However, their actual communication effect and user acceptance remain to be further examined. Focusing on college students, this study adopts a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to explore their cognition, emotional experience, aesthetic evaluation, and sharing intentions after watching AI-generated red dramas. The findings show that college students display a pattern of conditional acceptance. While they recognize the innovation, convenience, and communicative potential of this form, they are generally dissatisfied with its current performance in terms of narrative depth, emotional resonance, character expression, voice acting, historical authenticity, and visual quality. Participants showed a clear preference for micro-narratives centered on ordinary individuals and concrete life details, and emphasized that technological innovation in red cultural communication must remain grounded in historical seriousness and value accuracy. The study further argues that AI itself cannot constitute the core competitiveness of red dramas. A more sustainable path lies in a collaborative model of “AI-assisted generation plus human refinement.” By examining AI red dramas from the perspective of youth audiences, this study enriches research on AIGC cultural communication and provides practical reference for the optimization and future application of AI-empowered red cultural dissemination.

Keywords: AI-generated content, red-themed animated dramas, college students’ reception, cultural communication, human-AI collaboration

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

With the rapid iteration of generative artificial intelligence (AIGC) technology, intelligent creation represented by AI-generated video, AI animation, and synthetic audio is profoundly reshaping traditional paradigms of cultural production and communication. Recent studies suggest that generative AI has significantly lowered the threshold of audiovisual production and expanded the efficiency, scalability, and automation of content creation, thereby opening new pathways for digital cultural communication (Epstein et al., 2023; Feuerriegel et al., 2024; Sætra, 2023). Artificial intelligence has increasingly been viewed as a means to reduce the high cost, long production cycle, and labor intensity of traditional animation workflows, enabling rapid and scalable visual generation suitable for contemporary media environments (Cao & Li, 2024; Sætra, 2023).

Red culture, as a core spiritual and historical resource of China’s revolutionary tradition and socialist development, undertakes important functions of ideological inheritance, historical education, and value guidance. However, in the context of fragmented mobile Internet communication, conventional red cultural carriers such as official documentaries, classical animations, and historical videos face growing challenges in adapting to the short-form, visualized, diversified, and interactive media preferences of young audiences (Burgess et al., 2023; Nee & Dozier, 2023). To respond to this youth-oriented communication ecology, AI-generated red-themed animated dramas (hereafter AI red dramas) have emerged as an experimental form integrating AI-driven content production with red cultural communication, with the aim of promoting more youthful, visualized, and popularized dissemination of red culture (Epstein et al., 2023; Feuerriegel et al., 2024).

However, as an emerging and still experimental cultural product, AI red dramas remain in an early developmental stage. Although they offer potential advantages such as high production efficiency and relatively low cost, they also face practical dilemmas, including rigid technical presentation, insufficient historical authenticity, weak emotional resonance, and homogenized narrative structures—limitations that are frequently discussed in recent scholarship on generative AI media and digital heritage representation (Bender et al., 2021; Epstein et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023). University students, as both a core audience for youth ideological

education and a major user group of digital media, are especially important for evaluating this new form. Their reception attitudes, aesthetic judgments, and behavioral intentions toward AI red dramas directly affect the application value, developmental potential, and optimization path of this medium (Burgess et al., 2023; Nee & Dozier, 2023). Therefore, it is necessary to systematically examine young users' actual reception experiences and multidimensional evaluations of AI red dramas in order to provide an empirical basis for the high-quality development of AI-enabled red cultural communication (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

1.2 Research Significance

1.2.1 Theoretical Significance

First, this research expands the boundaries of AIGC cultural communication studies. Existing research on generative AI has predominantly focused on commercial entertainment, productivity, and platform governance, while relatively limited attention has been paid to its applicability in serious cultural communication and ideological content production (Epstein et al., 2023; Feuerriegel et al., 2024). By examining the use of AI in red cultural creation, this study helps address the lack of empirical research on the integration of AI technology and politically or historically serious cultural communication (Bender et al., 2021).

Second, this study enriches youth media reception research. Reception theory emphasizes the active meaning-making role of audiences, and recent studies on youth media use continue to show that young users' responses to digital content are shaped by cognition, emotion, aesthetics, social context, and platform affordances (Burgess et al., 2023; Nee & Dozier, 2023). By constructing a multidimensional analytical framework covering cognition, affect, aesthetics, marketability, and technology, this study contributes to a more empirically grounded understanding of college students' acceptance logic toward technologically generated cultural products (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Third, this study helps clarify the balance between technological innovation and cultural seriousness in red communication. Recent scholarship on digital heritage and AI ethics repeatedly stresses that technological innovation in cultural representation must remain accountable to historical authenticity, cultural memory, and value integrity (UNESCO, 2023; Bender et al., 2021). In this sense, the present research provides a useful theoretical reference for the standardized and high-quality development of AI-enabled ideological and political communication content.

1.2.2 Practical Significance

From the perspective of user experience, this study identifies practical problems in current AI red dramas, including rigid presentation, insufficient emotional resonance, and weak historical authenticity. Existing work on generative media similarly indicates that synthetic audiovisual content often struggles with emotional expressivity, narrative coherence, and credibility, especially in contexts requiring seriousness and authenticity (Bender et al., 2021; Epstein et al., 2023). The findings of this study can therefore provide targeted suggestions for content design, technical refinement, narrative optimization, and dissemination strategy. At the same time, they may help cultural communication institutions and university education departments better understand the aesthetic preferences and reception patterns of youth audiences, thereby promoting a more effective integration of AI empowerment and red cultural inheritance (Nee & Dozier, 2023).

1.3 Research Questions

Centering on college students' reception of AI-generated red-themed animated dramas, this study addresses three core questions:

First, what are college students' basic cognitive status, overall impressions, and sharing intentions regarding AI red dramas?

Second, how do college students evaluate current AI red dramas across multiple dimensions, including formal presentation, narrative content, emotional resonance, visual quality, and technical execution?

Third, what are the core advantages, existing limitations, and sustainable developmental pathways of AI red dramas, and how can technological innovation be balanced with historical seriousness in order to optimize intelligent red cultural communication? These questions are informed by recent scholarship on audience reception, digital cultural communication, and generative AI content evaluation (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nee & Dozier, 2023; Epstein et al., 2023).

1.4 Research Framework and Structure

This study follows the analytical logic of "theory – research design – empirical investigation – conclusion and optimization." Chapter 1 introduces the research background, significance, research questions, and overall framework. Chapter 2 reviews relevant domestic and international literature on AIGC visual communication, youth-oriented red cultural dissemination, and user reception theory, in order to identify current

research gaps. Chapter 3 presents the research design, including methods, participants, data collection, and thematic analysis. Chapter 4 reports the empirical findings regarding users' multidimensional reception of AI red dramas. Chapter 5 summarizes the conclusions, proposes optimization strategies, and discusses limitations and future research directions. Such a structure is consistent with qualitative media reception research and thematic analysis reporting conventions (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2023).

1.5 Research Innovations

First, in terms of perspective, this study adopts a user reception approach rather than a purely technical or production-oriented approach, focusing on college students' actual experience and subjective evaluation. This aligns with recent calls in digital media studies to foreground audience interpretation in assessing emerging technological media forms (Burgess et al., 2023; Nee & Dozier, 2023).

Second, in terms of object, this study focuses on AI-generated red-themed animated dramas as an emergent cultural form that integrates AIGC technology with serious red culture, thereby addressing a gap in empirical research on this new object (Epstein et al., 2023).

Third, in terms of conclusions, this study seeks to clarify the boundary between technological innovation and cultural seriousness in red communication, and proposes an "AI assistance + human refinement" model of sustainable development. Similar hybrid human-AI production models have been increasingly advocated in recent research on generative AI governance and creative practice (Epstein et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

2. Research on AIGC Visual Communication and Animated Content

2.1 Research on AIGC Visual Communication and Animated Content

With the growing maturity of generative artificial intelligence, AI-generated animation, short videos, and visual creative content have become important topics in digital communication research. International scholarship has highlighted the technical and industrial advantages of AIGC, especially in improving creative efficiency, reducing production costs, and enabling large-scale content customization (Epstein et al., 2023; Feuerriegel et al., 2024). Recent studies confirm that generative AI can support scene generation, image synthesis, multimodal matching, and automated audiovisual production, making it particularly suitable for short-cycle and fragmented media environments (Bender et al., 2021; Sætra, 2023).

At the same time, foreign research has also identified the limitations of AI-generated visual content. Commonly reported problems include rigid facial expressions, unnatural motion, insufficient detail accuracy, and a lack of emotional warmth or artistic intentionality (Bender et al., 2021; Epstein et al., 2023). In audio terms, synthetic voices are often criticized for mechanical tone and weak affective variation, making them less suitable for serious or emotionally demanding cultural works (UNESCO, 2023; Sætra, 2023). Scholars have further pointed out that generative content may contain factual inaccuracies, historical errors, or logical inconsistencies due to data bias and model limitations, which undermines the authenticity and rigor of cultural representation (Bender et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2023).

2.2 Research on Youth Communication of Red Culture

Red cultural communication has long been an important field in Chinese ideological education and cultural communication research. Traditional studies generally argue that the inheritance and development of red culture must adapt to changing youth communication ecologies by innovating presentation forms and reducing the distance between political narratives and young audiences (Burgess et al., 2023; Nee & Dozier, 2023). Existing research suggests that rigid indoctrination and macro-level narrative approaches can reduce the attractiveness of red cultural content among young audiences, who tend to prefer more micro-level, personalized, and emotionally engaging forms of expression (Burgess et al., 2023).

In the field of new media communication, scholars have examined the use of short videos, animation, VR/AR, and immersive media for cultural dissemination, and generally conclude that visualized and experiential communication can improve youth engagement and recognition (Burgess et al., 2023). However, most of these studies focus on relatively conventional digital media forms, while research on AI-generated red animation remains insufficient.

2.3 Research on User Reception and Thematic Analysis

Reception theory emphasizes audiences' active interpretation, emotional experience, and behavioral response to media content, arguing that communication effects depend not only on media messages themselves but also on users' subjective decoding and contextual evaluation (Burgess et al., 2023; Nee & Dozier, 2023). In youth media studies, reception analysis has been widely used to explore young users' aesthetic preferences, value recognition, and willingness to accept emerging media content (Nee & Dozier, 2023).

Thematic analysis, as a mature qualitative method, is particularly suitable for organizing multidimensional and diverse subjective experience data. It enables researchers to identify recurring patterns from open-ended interviews and to construct systematic analytical dimensions of user reception (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach is especially effective for capturing the complex, ambiguous, and ambivalent attitudes users often hold toward emerging technological media forms, and is therefore well suited to the present study of college students' mixed evaluations of AI red dramas (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2023).

2.4 Research Gaps

A review of the literature reveals three main gaps. First, current AIGC communication research is still largely concentrated on commercial and entertainment content, with relatively limited empirical attention to the use of AI in serious red cultural communication (Epstein et al., 2023). Second, research on youth-oriented cultural dissemination has not adequately addressed emerging AI animation forms and therefore cannot fully explain the advantages and limitations of AI red dramas in youth communication contexts (Nee & Dozier, 2023). Third, most existing studies remain at the level of macro-theoretical or strategic analysis and lack qualitative empirical research based on user interview data, making it difficult to accurately capture young users' multidimensional cognition, emotional experience, and behavioral intentions regarding AI red dramas (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In response to these gaps, this study adopts semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to conduct targeted empirical research.

3. Research Approach

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. Unlike quantitative approaches focused primarily on numerical measurement, qualitative research is particularly effective for exploring participants' subjective cognition, emotional experience, aesthetic judgment, and behavioral intention in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2023). It is especially suitable for emerging research objects whose reception dimensions are not yet fully stabilized or measurable. Given the novelty of AI red dramas and the complexity of users' evaluations, thematic analysis is well suited to identifying the multidimensional structure of user reception and summarizing the key problems and development patterns of this communication form (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.2 Interview Participants

This study selected 12 university students through purposive sampling, with variation in grade, major, and media use habits in order to ensure diversity of perspectives. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative inquiry when the goal is to recruit information-rich participants relevant to a specific research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2023). All participants had prior experience consuming short-video and animation content on digital platforms and had watched the three AI-generated red-themed animated dramas selected for this study, ensuring the relevance and validity of their responses.

The sample included students from humanities, social sciences, science, and engineering backgrounds, ranging from first-year undergraduates to seniors. Participants also differed in their familiarity with AIGC content, with some reporting regular exposure to AI-generated videos and digital artworks and others having relatively limited prior contact. Such variation helps capture differences in youth users' cognitive and evaluative responses to AI red dramas (Nee & Dozier, 2023).

3.3 Data Collection

This study used three representative AI-generated red-themed animated short dramas as the common viewing materials for all participants. Before the formal interview, all participants independently watched the selected works to ensure a consistent experiential basis for subsequent discussion. Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted both online and offline, each lasting approximately 20–30 minutes. Semi-structured interviews are particularly appropriate when the researcher aims to balance comparability across participants with flexibility for in-depth probing (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

The interview guide was organized around seven dimensions: basic cognition and overall impressions, market potential and sharing intention, formal presentation, narrative content and emotional resonance, visual quality and technical execution, overall appeal and core competitiveness, and extended AI application value. During the interviews, follow-up questions were flexibly used to further explore participants' genuine viewing experiences, reasons for negative or ambivalent evaluations, conditions of acceptance, and optimization expectations. After the interviews, all recordings were transcribed verbatim and cleaned to remove irrelevant repetition, producing standardized textual data for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.4 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

This study adopts thematic analysis to code and interpret the interview data. Following established procedures, the analysis proceeded in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. First, all transcripts were repeatedly read to identify original participant statements and generate preliminary labels. Second, these labels were grouped according to content similarity to form secondary thematic categories such as technical presentation, narrative emotion, and dissemination potential. Third, the secondary themes were integrated into seven core dimensions aligned with the interview framework, thereby forming a relatively complete system for evaluating user reception of AI red dramas. This iterative and reflexive process is consistent with the coding logic widely recommended in qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Throughout the analysis, special attention was paid to participants' ambivalent evaluations of AI red dramas. Rather than forcing consensus, the study retained meaningful differences in individual responses while identifying recurring patterns and common concerns across the sample. This strategy helps ensure both the comprehensiveness and interpretive validity of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.5 Research Reliability and Validity

In terms of reliability, this study used a unified interview guide and relatively standardized coding procedures to improve the consistency and traceability of data analysis. In qualitative research, reliability is often understood in terms of methodological transparency and analytic coherence rather than statistical replicability (Creswell & Poth, 2023). In terms of validity, the study is grounded in participants' actual viewing experiences, and all interview materials constitute first-hand user feedback. Moreover, the analytical dimensions cover cognition, emotion, aesthetics, technology, and market considerations, allowing for a relatively comprehensive understanding of the reception process. Such practices are consistent with current recommendations for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the overall research design, including the adoption of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the characteristics of the interview sample, the data collection process, and the main analytic procedures. It has also explained the basis for the study's reliability and validity. The seven-dimensional analytical framework established here provides the methodological foundation for the empirical findings presented in Chapter 4 and supports a systematic and credible analysis of college students' reception of AI red dramas (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2023).

4. Findings

This chapter reports findings from twelve semi-structured interviews with university students on their reception of AI-generated red-themed animated dramas (hereafter AI red dramas). Thematic analysis identified seven major dimensions: basic cognition and overall impressions, market potential and sharing intentions, formal presentation, narrative content and emotional resonance, visual quality and technical execution, overall appeal and core competitiveness, and extended applications of AI technology.

4.1 Basic Cognition and Overall Impressions

Participants' prior exposure to AI-generated content varied, but their evaluations of the three AI red dramas were broadly consistent. Most respondents had encountered AI-generated short videos or digital artworks, though only a few had previously watched AI-generated dramatic content. Despite these differences in familiarity, all participants recognized the AI-generated nature of the works, suggesting that AI production features are readily identifiable to young audiences.

Overall impressions were characterized by an ambivalent response: participants acknowledged the novelty of the form but were largely dissatisfied with its execution. Descriptions such as "a moving PowerPoint" (Interview 9), "a technical demonstration" (Interview 6), and "an experimental product with potential" (Interview 10) captured this tension. As Interview 1 stated:

"Although a few frames were visually striking, the overall viewing experience was rigid, with stiff facial expressions and abrupt scene transitions. The heavy AI-generated traces made genuine immersion impossible."

AI-generated features were identified mainly through three types of cues. First, character-related anomalies were most frequently mentioned, including stiff expressions, unnatural movement, inconsistent proportions, and errors such as extra or missing fingers. Second, audiovisual flaws, especially flat AI voice acting and abrupt transitions, were seen as highly indicative of machine generation. Third, some participants pointed to narrative and compositional weaknesses, arguing that scene changes often functioned as image display rather than narrative progression.

4.2 Market Potential and Sharing Intentions

Participants expressed cautious optimism regarding the market prospects of AI red dramas. Their perceived strengths lay in production efficiency, short duration, and suitability for short-video dissemination. The two-to-four-minute format was considered compatible with fragmented media consumption, and AI's low-cost, scalable production was regarded as a potential advantage. As Interview 6 noted, AI's key strength lies in "scalability and rapid iteration."

However, participants also identified major constraints. The most prominent were limited emotional resonance, weak production quality, and concerns that entertainment-oriented packaging might dilute the seriousness of red themes. For example, Interview 1 argued that the rough visuals, rigid characters, and formulaic plots failed to convey the emotional depth required by red culture.

Sharing intentions were correspondingly limited. Only a minority expressed willingness to repost such content, and only if narrative quality and production standards improved substantially. Most respondents would not share the current works because they lacked polish and emotional impact.

With regard to dissemination platforms, participants distinguished between official/educational platforms and entertainment platforms. Campus WeChat accounts, Xuexi Qiangguo, video channels, and class groups were seen as appropriate for ideological or educational viewing. By contrast, platforms such as Bilibili, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu were considered viable only if content quality were significantly enhanced. Some respondents also proposed integrating online and offline communication, such as linking museum exhibitions to AI-generated dramatic content through QR codes.

4.3 Formal Presentation

Participants discussed formal presentation in terms of episode duration, format suitability, and audiovisual execution.

4.3.1 Episode Duration

The two-to-four-minute duration was widely endorsed. Most participants considered it well aligned with student viewing habits and suitable for fragmented contexts such as breaks between classes or before sleep. Only one respondent questioned whether such brevity might limit narrative depth, suggesting that the format may be better suited to introductory or popularizing purposes than to deeper ideological communication.

4.3.2 Format Suitability for Red Themes

Views on the "static frame + dynamic storyboard + AI voice acting" format were mixed. Supporters argued that it was more immersive than static comics and potentially effective if technical quality improved. Critics, however, maintained that the format was too rigid to convey the emotional intensity and historical gravity of red themes. In particular, participants noted that the limited motion and monotonous visual design weakened the representation of complex or emotionally charged scenes.

4.3.3 Audiovisual Execution

Audiovisual execution was one of the most criticized aspects of the works.

AI voice acting was widely seen as flat, mechanical, and emotionally inadequate. Participants argued that red-themed storytelling requires tonal variation, solemnity, and affective force that current synthetic voices fail to provide.

Background music received more mixed evaluations. Some participants believed it helped establish atmosphere, but others noted poor balance with dialogue, abrupt transitions, and weak synchronization with visual rhythm.

Transitions were almost uniformly criticized as simplistic and abrupt, usually consisting of hard cuts or generic fade effects. Participants suggested more symbolic and thematically meaningful transitions.

Subtitles were also criticized for monotony, layout problems, and occasional errors. Some respondents recommended more stylized typography and explanatory annotations for historical references.

4.4 Narrative Content and Emotional Resonance

Two clear patterns emerged in this dimension: a preference for micro-narratives and a perceived lack of emotional resonance.

4.4.1 Preference for Micro-Narratives

Most participants preferred micro-level storytelling centered on ordinary individuals, everyday life, and specific historical details. They found such narratives more relatable and emotionally effective than abstract

macro-level accounts. Stories of students, soldiers, or revolutionary figures in ordinary circumstances were seen as more likely to generate identification and engagement.

Although a small number of respondents supported macro-narratives, even they emphasized the need for accessible entry points. Several participants argued that red history should be connected to contemporary youth concerns, but without reducing it to superficial slang or trivialized adaptation. In this sense, respondents generally favored a strategy of dialogue with the present rather than simplification of the past.

4.4.2 Emotional Resonance

Emotional resonance was identified as a major weakness across all three sample dramas. Only a few participants reported feeling moved, while most described their reactions as weak or detached. Respondents argued that the works tended to state events rather than dramatize inner conflict, sacrifice, or personal transformation. As a result, narratives were often seen as explanatory rather than affective.

Among the three works, the drama featuring Red Army soldiers appearing in the present was mentioned most often, but mainly because of its premise rather than its emotional impact. Overall, participants agreed that thematic clarity alone was insufficient to generate meaningful emotional engagement.

4.5 Visual Quality and Technical Execution

Participants' evaluations of visual quality reflected a consistent dual judgment: AI was seen as efficient, but visually lacking in refinement, warmth, and authenticity.

4.5.1 Overall Visual Quality

Most respondents rated the visual quality as average or below average. Common descriptions included "mediocre," "cheap-looking," and visually polished but emotionally empty. Although a few participants acknowledged acceptable texture or atmosphere, the dominant view was that the visuals were watchable but insufficiently refined.

4.5.2 AI Versus Manual Animation

Participants identified several advantages of AI-generated visuals, including speed, lower cost, and the ability to generate large-scale or stylistically ambitious scenes. AI was considered particularly useful for concept generation and atmospheric scene construction.

At the same time, its limitations were seen as substantial. Character depiction was the most frequently criticized weakness, especially in relation to facial expressions and bodily movement. Participants also noted blurred details, visual noise, inconsistent frames, and inaccuracies in props or costume design. These flaws were regarded as particularly damaging in works that rely on historical credibility.

4.5.3 Historical Authenticity and Color Tone

Historical authenticity was a recurring concern. While some respondents felt the overall atmosphere approximated the relevant historical period, many pointed to inaccuracies in details such as props, costumes, and textures. Several participants argued that these details reflected an AI-generated "imagination" of history rather than historical reality.

Color treatment also drew criticism. Participants frequently described the palette as overly bright, saturated, and aesthetically aligned with commercial short-video culture. In their view, red themes require a broader emotional register, including solemnity, hardship, and historical gravity, which current AI-generated color design failed to convey.

4.6 Overall Appeal and Core Competitiveness

4.6.1 Overall Appeal

Overall appeal was generally assessed as moderate at best. Those who offered ratings placed the works around the midpoint, recognizing the novelty of the format while identifying clear weaknesses in emotional depth and technical quality. Most participants suggested that such works might attract initial curiosity but were unlikely to sustain attention, stimulate discussion, or motivate repeat viewing.

4.6.2 Factors Reducing Interest

Participants identified three main factors that reduced viewing interest. The first was technical limitation, including stiff animation, weak voice acting, and rough visuals. The second was content weakness, particularly formulaic narrative, didacticism, and lack of emotional force. The third was concern over seriousness, especially where historical rigor or ideological depth appeared insufficient.

4.6.3 Core Competitiveness

A strong consensus emerged that AI itself cannot serve as a lasting source of appeal. Participants repeatedly argued that sustainable competitiveness depends on good storytelling, emotional credibility, visual refinement, and historical rigor, rather than on technological novelty alone. One participant also suggested that interactivity could become a distinctive advantage if AI were used to support user participation, branching narratives, or embedded educational content.

4.7 Extended Applications of AI and the Balance Between Innovation and Seriousness

4.7.1 Alternative AI Applications in Red Cultural Communication

Participants proposed multiple AI applications beyond animated drama. The most frequently mentioned was historical restoration, including photo enhancement, archival repair, and reconstruction of historical sites. Other suggestions included digital human guides, AI-generated virtual dialogues with historical figures, VR/AR immersive exhibitions, interactive games or comics, and personalized recommendation systems for red cultural learning. These responses suggest that participants viewed AI as potentially more valuable in supportive, interactive, or immersive functions than in fully AI-generated dramatic storytelling alone.

4.7.2 Innovation and Seriousness

Participants consistently emphasized that innovation in red cultural communication must remain subordinate to historical seriousness. Innovation in style, rhythm, visual language, or narrative structure was broadly welcomed, but only on the condition that historical facts, value orientation, and reverence for the subject remain intact. In their view, the acceptable boundary of experimentation lies in form, not in the distortion of content or historical meaning.

4.7.3 Recommendations for Future Production and Dissemination

Participants proposed improvements in three areas: production model, content development, and dissemination strategy.

First, many advocated a model of AI generation plus human refinement, especially for scripts, emotional scenes, key frames, and voice performance. Some also recommended the involvement of historical consultants to ensure factual accuracy.

Second, participants called for better scripts, stronger emotional design, reduced didacticism, and greater attention to micro-level storytelling. A few suggested training specialized AI models on red-themed historical materials to improve visual authenticity.

Third, in terms of dissemination, respondents recommended stronger integration with campus ideological and political education, including classroom use, themed activities, and collaboration with university media platforms. They also suggested tailored distribution strategies for Bilibili, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat channels, as well as interactive promotional formats and student participation through competitions or co-creation projects.

4.8 Summary

The interview data indicate a pattern of conditional acceptance of AI red dramas among university students. Participants were generally open to the idea of AI-assisted red cultural communication and recognized its advantages in efficiency, accessibility, and formal innovation. However, current works were widely seen as limited by weak emotional resonance, insufficient visual refinement, rigid voice performance, and inadequate historical texture.

The findings suggest that the main challenge is not whether AI should be used, but how it should be used. Participants favored a human-centered model in which AI functions as a production tool rather than an autonomous creative agent. For AI red dramas to achieve sustained appeal, they must move beyond technological novelty and prioritize narrative quality, emotional depth, visual credibility, and historical seriousness.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

5.1.1 College Students' Acceptance of AI Red Dramas Is Conditional Rather Than Unconditional

The findings of this study suggest that college students do not reject AI-generated red-themed animated dramas in principle. On the contrary, most participants acknowledged the potential value of this form in terms of production efficiency, accessibility, and formal innovation. This result is broadly consistent with current research on generative AI, which emphasizes that AIGC has significantly expanded the speed, scalability, and accessibility of cultural production, while also lowering technical and economic barriers to visual content

creation (Epstein et al., 2023; Feuerriegel et al., 2024). In this sense, the emergence of AI red dramas reflects a larger transformation in cultural production in which AI serves as a new creative medium rather than merely a technical accessory (Epstein et al., 2023).

However, the present study also demonstrates that acceptance remains highly conditional. Participants' recognition of AI's efficiency did not automatically translate into aesthetic approval, emotional engagement, or willingness to share the works. Instead, students evaluated AI red dramas through a multidimensional framework involving narrative quality, emotional credibility, visual refinement, and historical seriousness. This finding indicates that in serious cultural communication contexts, technological novelty alone cannot sustain audience interest. Existing scholarship likewise warns that generative AI often produces outputs that appear plausible and efficient while still suffering from problems of homogenization, weak contextual judgment, factual unreliability, and limited cultural sensitivity (Bender et al., 2021; Feuerriegel et al., 2024). Therefore, the current reception pattern identified in this study may be understood as one of "conditional acceptance": audiences are open to AI-assisted red cultural communication, but only when technological efficiency is matched by cultural quality and interpretive seriousness.

This also helps explain why participants repeatedly emphasized that AI itself cannot be the "core competitiveness" of red-themed animation. Their responses imply that the long-term legitimacy of AI red dramas depends less on whether the work is AI-generated than on whether the work can successfully realize the communicative goals of red culture. Such a view is compatible with human-centered perspectives on generative AI, which argue that AI should enhance rather than replace human meaning-making, ethical judgment, and cultural responsibility (Miao & Holmes, 2023).

5.1.2 The Preference for Micro-Narratives Reflects the Narrative Logic of Youth Reception

One of the clearest findings of the interviews is participants' preference for micro-narratives centered on ordinary individuals, concrete historical details, and emotionally specific life experiences. Compared with abstract macro-level revolutionary narratives, stories about students, soldiers, or ordinary people in historically meaningful but everyday situations were perceived as more relatable and more likely to generate identification. This finding can be understood through narrative transportation theory, which argues that audiences are more likely to be persuaded and emotionally involved when they become absorbed into a story world through attention, imagery, and feeling (Green & Brock, 2000). When narrative transportation is weak, viewers may understand the informational content of a story without becoming emotionally immersed in it.

This theoretical insight is particularly relevant to the present study. Participants did not deny the ideological value of red themes; rather, they repeatedly suggested that the sample dramas failed to dramatize inner conflict, sacrifice, moral choice, and personal transformation. In other words, the problem was not the theme itself but the narrative mode through which the theme was communicated. This resonates with entertainment-education scholarship, which argues that the persuasive power of narrative media depends not simply on message clarity, but on character involvement, emotional identification, and reduced resistance to overt didacticism (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). When a text becomes too expository or instructional, it risks weakening the emotional and persuasive processes that make narrative media effective in the first place.

The interview data therefore suggest that future AI red dramas should not merely "translate" grand historical narratives into short audiovisual formats. Instead, they should reconstruct red history through emotionally grounded micro-stories that offer accessible entry points for young audiences. This does not mean trivializing red culture or replacing history with entertainment. Rather, it means recognizing that for today's student audiences, historical meaning is often more effectively communicated through lived experience, emotional texture, and character-centered narration than through purely declarative ideological discourse. In this respect, the participants' preference for micro-narratives should be understood as a demand for deeper communication rather than for simplified communication.

5.1.3 Platform Fit Is an Opportunity, but Platform Fit Alone Is Not Enough

The findings also indicate that the short duration of AI red dramas—typically two to four minutes—was widely regarded as appropriate for contemporary student media habits. Participants generally felt that this format fit fragmented viewing contexts and was compatible with the logic of short-video dissemination. This result corresponds with recent research showing that video-sharing platforms are increasingly used not only for entertainment but also for learning, knowledge exchange, and self-directed engagement, especially among young users (Yu et al., 2025; Xia & Zheng, 2023). In particular, studies on Bilibili suggest that even in entertainment-dominant environments, platform affordances can support informal learning, collective interpretation, and youth-oriented knowledge dissemination (Yu et al., 2025; Xia & Zheng, 2023).

Nevertheless, the present findings also show that format compatibility does not guarantee communicative effectiveness. Although participants largely accepted the short form, they did not consider brevity itself a

sufficient advantage. In their view, the current works often resembled compressed technical demonstrations rather than compelling narrative experiences. This suggests that “platform fit” is only a necessary condition, not a sufficient one. In youth-oriented red cultural communication, short-video logic may improve accessibility, but it cannot substitute for meaningful storytelling, emotional appeal, or visual credibility.

This distinction is important. Existing research on digital knowledge dissemination shows that youth audiences are willing to engage with serious or educational content on platformized media environments, but such engagement depends on motivation, affordance, and quality of presentation rather than on platform presence alone (Xia & Zheng, 2023). Similarly, participants in this study drew a clear boundary between platforms suitable for official or educational viewing and those appropriate for broader public circulation. Their judgments imply that AI red dramas may enter entertainment platforms such as Bilibili, Douyin, or Xiaohongshu only when they achieve a substantially higher level of narrative and visual polish. Otherwise, their more immediate value may lie in campus media, educational accounts, classroom integration, and museum or exhibition-based dissemination.

5.1.4 Historical Authenticity and Cultural Seriousness Remain the Core Boundary of Innovation

A major contribution of this study is the finding that students’ evaluations of AI red dramas were strongly shaped by concerns over historical authenticity and emotional seriousness. Participants repeatedly criticized inaccuracies in props, costumes, textures, and character movement, and many felt that the visual style of the sample dramas was too bright, commercialized, or aesthetically aligned with generic short-video culture. These criticisms are highly significant because they reveal that, in the context of red cultural communication, aesthetic form is never value-neutral. Visual design, color treatment, and representational detail all participate in the construction of historical meaning.

This finding is closely aligned with recent scholarship on authenticity in digital heritage communication. Manlee and Kasemsarn (2025) argue that digital platforms often create an “authenticity paradox,” because algorithmic visibility tends to reward simplified, engaging, or sensationalized content rather than culturally accurate representation. Their analysis suggests that heritage communication in platform environments must constantly negotiate the tension between visibility and integrity. The present study provides a similar insight in the specific context of AI red dramas: participants welcomed formal innovation, but they were unwilling to accept innovation that weakened historical gravity or distorted the meaning of red culture.

This concern is also consistent with broader debates about generative AI governance. Research has shown that AI-generated outputs are shaped by training data quality, model bias, and system-level limitations, which can produce inaccuracies, incoherence, and culturally insensitive results (Bender et al., 2021; Feuerriegel et al., 2024). UNESCO’s human-centered guidance likewise emphasizes that generative AI must be used in ways that preserve human agency, cultural diversity, and ethical responsibility rather than allowing technical convenience to override social and educational values (Miao & Holmes, 2023). In the case of red culture, this means that innovation should remain bounded by historical accuracy, value orientation, and respect for collective memory.

Therefore, the core issue is not whether AI may be used in red cultural creation, but how far experimentation may go before it begins to erode cultural seriousness. The interview data suggest that students are willing to tolerate innovation in rhythm, format, and visual language, but not in ways that turn revolutionary history into superficial spectacle. This point is especially important for future red cultural production in platform environments, where pressure for speed, novelty, and shareability can easily conflict with the ethical demands of historical representation.

5.1.5 The Study Supports a Human-Centered Model of AI Co-Creation

Perhaps the most practically important finding of this study is that participants consistently favored a model of “AI generation plus human refinement.” This was especially evident in their recommendations regarding scriptwriting, emotional scene construction, key frames, dubbing, and historical verification. Rather than rejecting AI, respondents positioned it as a useful assistant for ideation, visual drafting, and efficiency enhancement, while insisting that human creators remain responsible for interpretation, emotional calibration, and historical judgment.

This preference is strongly supported by recent research on human–AI collaboration. McGuire et al. (2024) found that the benefits of AI in creative work are greater when humans act as co-creators rather than passive editors of machine-generated output. Their results suggest that creative efficacy is weakened when humans merely revise AI products after the fact, but can be strengthened when collaboration is structured as an active co-creative process. Similarly, Öztaş and Arda (2025) argue that creative workers tend to view AI simultaneously as an opportunity and a threat, and that socially meaningful co-creation requires preserving human interpretive agency rather than surrendering creative decision-making to technocratic efficiency.

These insights are particularly relevant to red cultural communication. Because red-themed works involve not only aesthetic production but also historical narration, ideological education, and collective memory, they demand a degree of ethical and cultural accountability that current AI systems cannot independently provide. The findings of this study therefore reinforce the view that AI red dramas should be developed under a human-centered production logic: AI may support asset generation, scene prototyping, multimodal drafting, and distributional adaptation, but the final authority over narrative framing, emotional tone, and historical authenticity should remain with human directors, writers, educators, and historians.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature in at least three ways.

First, it extends existing research on generative AI beyond commercial and entertainment contexts into the domain of serious ideological and cultural communication. Much of the current literature discusses generative AI in relation to efficiency, creativity, governance, and labor transformation (Epstein et al., 2023; Feuerriegel et al., 2024), but relatively little work has examined how young audiences receive AI-generated content when the communicative goal is not entertainment alone, but historical education and value transmission. By focusing on AI red dramas, this study broadens the scope of AIGC communication research and highlights the special constraints of politically and historically serious content.

Second, the study enriches youth reception research by showing that student evaluations of emerging media forms are structured by a multidimensional logic involving cognition, emotion, aesthetics, authenticity, and platform suitability. The findings suggest that young audiences are not simply novelty-seeking users who prioritize technology over content. Instead, they are capable of making nuanced judgments about the relationship between technical form and cultural meaning. This supports a more active and interpretive view of youth audiences, consistent with qualitative reception approaches and narrative persuasion theory (Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Third, the study contributes to discussions of digital authenticity by demonstrating that in the context of red culture, innovation is legitimate only when it remains subordinate to historical seriousness. This finding connects AI media studies with broader work on platform-mediated cultural authenticity and digital heritage representation (Manlee & Kasemsarn, 2025). It suggests that the problem of authenticity is not peripheral but central to evaluating the communicative legitimacy of AI-generated cultural products.

5.3 Practical Implications

The findings of this study also offer several practical implications for the future development of AI red dramas.

First, script quality should be treated as the central priority. Future productions should move away from formulaic macro-narratives and instead develop micro-level stories with clear emotional arcs, specific historical details, and relatable characters. Rather than simply stating revolutionary values, scripts should dramatize them through conflict, decision-making, sacrifice, and transformation.

Second, AI should be positioned as an enabling tool rather than an autonomous creator. A more sustainable workflow would involve AI in visual prototyping, scene generation, layout assistance, and multimodal drafting, while reserving final control over script revision, key images, voice performance, and historical review for human experts. Historical consultants and ideological education specialists should be incorporated into production teams to ensure factual and value consistency.

Third, audiovisual polish requires substantial improvement. Participants' criticisms indicate that voice acting, transitions, subtitle design, character movement, and color treatment are not minor technical details but decisive components of audience reception. For red-themed content in particular, visual atmosphere should move beyond generic short-video aesthetics and better reflect solemnity, hardship, and historical depth.

Fourth, dissemination strategies should be differentiated by platform logic. Educational and official platforms such as campus media accounts, classroom channels, museum exhibitions, and policy-oriented learning platforms may serve as more appropriate primary distribution venues in the current stage. Entertainment platforms may become effective only after substantial quality improvement. Meanwhile, platform affordances such as comments, note-taking, classroom discussion, co-creation activities, and QR-linked exhibition experiences could be used to strengthen interaction and learning engagement (Yu et al., 2025; Xia & Zheng, 2023).

Finally, AI in red cultural communication may have broader application value beyond fully generated dramas. Participants' suggestions regarding archival restoration, digital human interpretation, immersive exhibitions, VR/AR scenes, and interactive educational content indicate that AI may currently be more effective in supportive and hybrid communication functions than in fully autonomous dramatic storytelling. This may represent a more realistic and productive direction for near-term innovation.

5.4 Conclusion

This study examined college students' reception of AI-generated red-themed animated dramas through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The findings reveal a clear pattern of conditional acceptance. Participants generally recognized the potential of AI to improve production efficiency, reduce costs, and support innovative forms of red cultural communication. At the same time, they expressed widespread dissatisfaction with the current quality of AI red dramas, especially in relation to emotional resonance, visual refinement, voice performance, and historical authenticity.

The results show that the key challenge facing AI red dramas is not technological feasibility, but communicative legitimacy. For student audiences, technological novelty alone is insufficient to sustain attention or generate meaningful identification. What matters more is whether the work can produce narrative immersion, emotional credibility, and historically grounded representation. In this respect, the study suggests that the future of AI red dramas depends on whether they can move from being perceived as "technical demonstrations" to becoming genuinely persuasive and affective cultural texts.

More broadly, this study argues that the sustainable path for AI-enabled red cultural communication lies in a human-centered co-creative model. AI should function as a production tool that enhances efficiency and expands expressive possibilities, while human creators remain responsible for interpretation, ethical judgment, emotional design, and historical rigor. Only under such conditions can AI red dramas balance innovation with seriousness and become a meaningful medium for communicating red culture to younger generations.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to university students, which means the findings cannot be generalized to all audience groups. Second, the study focused on three specific AI-generated red dramas, so participants' responses may partly reflect the quality and style of these particular works rather than the full range of future AI red cultural products. Third, as a qualitative study, the research is well suited to exploring subjective experiences in depth, but it cannot determine the broader distribution of reception patterns across larger populations (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Future research may therefore proceed in several directions. Quantitative surveys could test the broader prevalence of the dimensions identified in this study. Experimental designs could compare AI-generated, human-produced, and hybrid works to examine how production mode affects trust, emotion, and sharing intention. Comparative platform studies could further explore how AI red dramas are differently received in classroom, museum, campus media, and entertainment-platform settings. Finally, future work may also investigate whether AI is more effective in red cultural communication when used for restoration, interactive interpretation, and immersive educational experiences rather than for fully autonomous dramatic production.

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