

A Study on the Formation Path of Cultural Identity among Elderly Sojourners in Yunnan

Chengbin Yang*

Yunnan Open University, Kunming, 650000, China

*Corresponding author: yangchengbin9802@163.com

Abstract: *With the rise of the sojourn-based elderly care model, Yunnan, leveraging its ethnic cultural resources and highland geographical environment, has become a significant gathering place for elderly sojourners. However, the participation of elderly sojourners in ethnic culture largely remains at the level of sightseeing and experiential engagement, making it difficult to achieve a profound transformation from external symbolic exposure to internal cultural identification. The root cause lies in the absence of an effective adaptation mechanism between the meaning transmission of cultural symbols and the cognitive characteristics and need structures of elderly learners. Grounded in the theories of cultural gerontology and semiotics, this study proposes, at the symbolic foundation level, a three-layered analytical framework for ethnic cultural symbols-comprising the material layer, the meaning layer, and the regeneration layer-along with a transformation pathway of "decoding-reconstruction." At the need-adaptation level, it constructs a three-dimensional need framework encompassing "health tolerance, cultural cognitive preference, and digital skill level," thereby elucidating the dynamic generation mechanism of personalized learning pathways. At the carrier design level, it puts forward a triadic collaborative design paradigm of "authenticity, multimodality, and emotionalization" for age-friendly micro-learning products. The theoretical framework constructed in this study provides a new perspective for understanding the formation mechanism of cultural identity among elderly sojourners and lays a theoretical foundation for the educational transformation of ethnic cultural resources.*

Keywords: *elderly sojourners; cultural identity; ethnic cultural symbols; three-dimensional need adaptation; micro-learning products; age-friendly design*

Introduction

Against the backdrop of population aging and the integration of culture and tourism, sojourn-based elderly care has emerged as a novel lifestyle that combines health maintenance with cultural experience. Yunnan, with its highland climate and ethnic cultural resources, has become a significant destination for elderly sojourners. However, within the existing service systems, cultural presentation largely remains confined to the level of landscape display, and the cultural participation of elderly sojourners exhibits characteristics of superficiality and fragmentation, making it difficult to achieve a leap from sightseeing experience to cultural internalization. This phenomenon reflects two core theoretical issues: first, how ethnic cultural symbols, once detached from their original contexts, can effectively transmit profound meanings and foster identification; second, how the physiological characteristics, cultural preferences, and technological competencies of heterogeneous elderly sojourners can dynamically adapt to learning resources. By integrating semiotics, cognitive psychology of aging, and educational design theories, this study systematically constructs a theoretical pathway for the formation of cultural identity among elderly sojourners across three levels-symbolic foundation, need adaptation, and carrier construction-thereby providing an analytical framework for understanding the identity formation mechanism of elderly populations in cross-cultural contexts.

1. The Symbolic Foundation for Constructing Cultural Identity among Elderly Sojourners: From "Decoding" to "Reconstruction"

1.1 The "High-Context" Characteristics and Meaning Stratification of Ethnic Cultural Symbols

The essential feature of the ethnic minority cultural symbols in Yunnan lies in their "high-context"

attribute, meaning that the significance of the symbols is not fully manifested on the surface but is deeply embedded in specific ethnic histories, cosmological concepts, and social structures. Such symbolic systems employ material carriers as their external manifestation while housing collective memory, value norms, and ecological wisdom as their internal core, thereby forming a complex mapping relationship between the "signifier" and the "signified." For elderly sojourners, initial encounters often only allow them to capture the visual representations at the material level, making it difficult for them to access the profound cultural logic behind the symbols. The rupture between superficial perception and deep meaning constitutes the primary obstacle to the leap from "sightseeing experience" to "cultural internalization" in cultural identity formation. Understanding the multiple layers of meaning within ethnic cultural symbols thus becomes the logical starting point for constructing a pathway to cultural identity^[1].

Based on semiotic theory, ethnic cultural symbols can be analyzed into a three-layered structure comprising "the material layer, the meaning layer, and the regeneration layer." The material layer refers to the physical carriers of symbols, such as ritual implements, clothing patterns, and architectural forms, which are forms that can be directly perceived. The meaning layer encompasses the ethnic beliefs, historical memories, ethical norms, and ecological cognitions carried by the symbols, meanings that are predominantly conveyed through non-explicit means such as metaphor, symbolism, and narrative. The regeneration layer points to the potential for symbols to be reactivated and transformed within specific contexts, that is, the inherent potential of a symbol to shift from being an "object of observation" to a "medium for participation." These three layers constitute a continuum of meaning transmission. Research on the formation mechanism of cultural identity among elderly sojourners must be grounded in this stratified understanding in order to transcend superficial consumption of symbols and access the deep pathway toward cultural internalization.

1.2 The "Decoding-Reconstruction" Pathway for the Educational Transformation of Cultural Symbols

The transformation of cultural symbols from "objects of observation" to "learning media" is essentially a dual process of "decoding-reconstruction." "Decoding" entails the systematic extraction and analysis of the three layers of meaning within a symbol, identifying the perceptual form elements at the material layer, distilling the comprehensible core concepts at the meaning layer, and anticipating the micro-tasks that can be embedded into educational scenarios at the regeneration layer. The crux of this process lies in restoring symbols to their dynamic structures of meaning generation rather than treating them as isolated "knowledge points." The depth of decoding directly determines the cultural substance of the subsequent reconstruction. If the process remains confined to the extraction of forms at the material layer, the educational transformation of symbols will degenerate into superficial mimicry of techniques and fail to reach the core mechanism of cultural identity formation.

"Reconstruction," on the other hand, refers to the reorganization and repackaging of symbolic elements in accordance with educational objectives on the basis of decoding. This process comprises three progressive stages: extraction of symbolic elements, mapping of educational objectives, and multimodal packaging. The extraction of symbolic elements involves selecting core elements from the three layers of meaning that can be transformed into learning tasks. The mapping of educational objectives involves structurally aligning these elements with learning goals such as cognitive understanding, skill acquisition, and affective experience. Multimodal packaging involves presenting the reconstructed learning content as age-friendly, interactive micro-task modules through diverse forms of carriers. Through this pathway, ethnic cultural symbols are transformed from static cultural heritage into dynamic learning resources, and the participation mode of elderly sojourners shifts from "watching performances" to "participating in creation," thereby providing an operable cognitive channel for the formation of cultural identity^[2].

1.3 The Preservation of Authenticity and the Risk of Dissipation in the Transformation of Cultural Symbols

During the migration of cultural symbols from their original contexts to educational scenarios, the dissipation of their profound meaning constitutes a theoretical challenge that cannot be overlooked. Dissipation refers to the phenomenon whereby the core meaning of a symbol is lost or distorted during the transformation process due to contextual detachment, formal simplification, or objective deviation. The "high-context" attribute of Yunnan's ethnic minority cultural symbols renders them highly dependent on their original settings. Once separated from the complete meaning network constituted by

ethnic rituals, natural rhythms, and community interactions, symbols are prone to being compressed into fragmented elements devoid of profound connections. If such dissipation is not effectively curbed, educational transformation will degenerate into the recreational appropriation of symbolic forms, and the pathway toward cultural identity formation will be ruptured due to the erosion of its foundational meaning.

The preservation of authenticity lies in the identification and retention of the core meaning of symbols during the transformation process. Within the meaning layers of a symbol, not all elements must be presented in their entirety; rather, the crucial task is to identify which meanings constitute the "cultural gene" that distinguishes the symbol from others and to ensure that this gene is neither diluted nor distorted during the reconstruction process. This requires that the transformation mechanism be capable of differentiating between the "core meaning" and the "peripheral form" of a symbol. The former must be preserved with fidelity in the educational modules, while the latter may be adjusted in accordance with learning objectives and age-appropriate requirements. The preservation of authenticity does not entail the mechanical replication of the original form; instead, it involves seeking, while acknowledging contextual differences, effective transmission of the meaning core within the new context after transformation. The tension between authenticity and innovation in the transformation of cultural symbols constitutes a central theoretical issue in the construction of the cultural identity pathway for elderly sojourners, as it directly determines whether the reconstructed symbols can genuinely fulfill the function of cultural internalization.

2. The Differentiated Generation of Cultural Identity among Elderly Sojourners: The Three-Dimensional Dynamic Need Adaptation Mechanism

2.1 The Three-Dimensional Composition and Interactive Effects of the Learning Needs of Elderly Sojourners

The generation pathway of cultural identity among elderly sojourners exhibits a trend of diverse differentiation under the influence of individual differentiating characteristics. The identification of this internal logic requires transcending traditional static analytical paradigms and constructing a three-dimensional need framework encompassing "health tolerance, cultural cognitive preference, and digital skill level." Health tolerance reflects an individual's physiological adaptability within a specific geographical environment and directly determines the intensity threshold and duration boundary of learning activities. Cultural cognitive preference embodies an individual's receptive inclination toward cultural content, forming a continuous spectrum ranging from superficial sensory experience to profound meaning exploration. Digital skill level represents an individual's capability hierarchy in acquiring and processing information through technological media, thereby determining the selectable range of learning carriers and the depth of interaction. These three dimensions of need collectively constitute the analytical foundation for the differentiated generation of cultural identity^[3].

Complex interactive effects emerge among the three dimensions of need, collectively shaping the learning behavior patterns of elderly sojourners. Health tolerance exerts a constraining influence on the realization of cultural cognitive preferences; within hypoxic environments, the limited availability of cognitive resources causes needs oriented toward in-depth study to yield to those centered on relaxed experience. A matching relationship exists between cultural cognitive preferences and digital skill levels; for individuals with a preference for in-depth study, insufficient digital skills will subject the fulfillment of their needs to constraints imposed by technological barriers. The digital skill level, in turn, inversely affects health management capacity, as technologically proficient individuals are more effectively able to utilize digital tools to monitor their own physiological states. Alterations in any single dimension may precipitate a reconfiguration of the overall need structure, and it is precisely on the basis of the interplay among the three dimensions of need that the formation pathways of cultural identity among elderly sojourners unfold in a differentiated manner.

2.2 The Path Evolution Logic Based on the Dynamic Drift of Needs

The need structure of elderly sojourners exhibits characteristics of dynamic drift^[3] under the dual influence of the sojourn duration and physiological states. From a temporal perspective, during the initial stage of sojourn, individuals tend to focus on health adaptation and the acquisition of basic information, and cultural needs largely remain at the level of superficial experience. As the sojourn duration increases and physiological adaptation stabilizes, individuals begin to seek deeper cultural

interaction and meaning exploration. By the later stage of sojourn, some individuals may develop needs for skill acquisition or creative expression, thereby forming higher-order manifestations of cultural identity. This temporal drift of needs reflects the phased characteristics of cultural participation evolving from the "adaptation phase" through the "immersion phase" and toward the "creation phase," with the focus of needs varying across each stage.

From the perspective of state dimensions, the health tolerance and cultural interest of elderly sojourners exhibit significant volatility, further compounding the dynamic complexity of the need structure. For short-term recuperators, whose sojourn objectives center on physical adjustment, cultural needs often yield precedence to health management needs. In contrast, long-term sojourners, endowed with ample time and thorough adaptation, are more inclined toward deep cultural immersion. Even within the same cohort, the focus of needs may shift across different seasons and under varying physical and psychological conditions. This characteristic of dynamic drift imposes higher demands on the adaptability of cultural identity formation pathways. Only through the establishment of a responsive mechanism capable of tracking the drift of needs can a dynamic alignment be achieved between resource provision and genuine needs, thereby providing support for the sustained generation of cultural identity^[4].

2.3 The Generation Mechanism and Adaptation Logic of Personalized Learning Pathways

The core of generating personalized learning pathways lies in establishing a dynamic adaptive relationship between need structures and learning resources. Based on individual profiles generated from the interplay of the three dimensions of need, this process achieves multidimensional matching among learning content, presentation formats, and participation rhythms. Health tolerance defines the upper limit of learning activity intensity, indicating the duration and cognitive load range within which an individual can effectively participate. Cultural cognitive preference determines the depth positioning of learning content, guiding the individual to select an appropriate position along the spectrum between "superficial experience" and "in-depth study." Digital skill level delineates the technological threshold of the carriers, ensuring that the interaction modes of learning products align with individual competencies. The intersection of these three dimensions constitutes an individual's "feasible learning domain" under specific spatiotemporal conditions, and it is within this domain that personalized pathways are generated.

The adaptation logic of personalized learning pathways is essentially a strategy of dynamically mapping the needs of elderly sojourners onto combinations of learning resources, adhering to a closed-loop mechanism of "dynamic tracking, real-time feedback, and resource reconfiguration." By continuously capturing signals of change across the dimensions of health, culture, and skills, this mechanism identifies the migration trajectory of an individual's need focus and dynamically adjusts the combination scheme of learning products accordingly, thereby ensuring that resource provision remains consistently within the individual's "feasible learning domain." Under this mechanism, the personalized learning pathway is no longer a predetermined fixed track but rather an adaptive trajectory that is continuously generated in tandem with the evolving needs of elderly sojourners. It is precisely within this process of dynamic adaptation that the formation of cultural identity progressively achieves the transformation of meaning from external symbols to internal identification.

3. The Carrier Construction of Cultural Identity among Elderly Sojourners: The Theory of Age-Friendly Design for Micro-Learning Products

3.1 The Cognitive Load in Highland Environments and the Spatiotemporal Adaptation of Micro-Learning Products

The inhibitory effect of the highland geographical environment on the cognitive functions of elderly sojourners constitutes a core constraint in the design of micro-learning products. Under hypoxic conditions, the attention maintenance capacity, working memory capacity, and information processing speed of elderly populations all exhibit significant decline, and the increase in cognitive load directly impairs the sustainability and effectiveness of learning activities. From the perspective of cognitive resource allocation, the highland environment causes a portion of an individual's limited cognitive resources to be occupied for physiological regulation, thereby correspondingly reducing the reserve of resources available for learning engagement. This physiological-cognitive interaction mechanism implies that if micro-learning products adhere to the duration standards and rhythm arrangements

suitable for lowland areas, a structural misalignment will occur between learning load and individual tolerance capacity, thereby hindering the effective transmission and internalization of cultural content^[5].

The theoretical core of the spatiotemporal adaptation strategy lies in aligning the granularity of learning units with the cognitive rhythms inherent to the highland environment. In the temporal dimension, the duration of learning modules must be compressed within the threshold that enables individuals to maintain effective attention under hypoxic conditions, thereby reducing the cognitive burden of a single learning activity through micro-segmentation. In the spatial dimension, the distribution of learning scenarios must be coordinated with the individual's rest rhythms so as to avert the accumulation of cognitive fatigue induced by continuous learning. This spatiotemporal adaptation is predicated upon an understanding of the patterns of cognitive resource consumption in highland environments. By deconstructing cultural content into micro-units that conform to cognitive rhythms and embedding intervals for cognitive recovery between learning sessions, micro-learning products are able to sustain the continuity of learning activities amidst environmental constraints, thereby providing a stable cognitive foundation for the gradual formation of cultural identity.

3.2 The Design Paradigm of "Authenticity-Multimodality-Emotionalization" Triadic Collaboration

As the material carrier for the formation of cultural identity, micro-learning products necessitate a design paradigm that strikes a balance among multiple value propositions. The authenticity dimension pertains to the degree to which the core meaning of cultural symbols is preserved during the transformation process and constitutes a prerequisite for the formation of cultural identity. When the meaning layers of symbols are converted into educational modules, it is imperative to identify and maintain the "cultural gene" that distinguishes them from other symbols, thereby averting the dissipation of meaning caused by formal simplification or contextual detachment. The realization of authenticity relies on the capacity to differentiate between the core meaning and peripheral forms of symbols, as well as on the continuous verification of the effectiveness of meaning transmission after transformation, thereby ensuring that the cultural content encountered by elderly sojourners possesses genuine cultural affiliation.

The multimodal dimension pertains to the diversity of carriers in the presentation modes of learning products and constitutes a key mechanism for adapting to different cognitive preferences and digital skill levels. Presentation through a single modality struggles to accommodate the differentiated needs of elderly sojourners. Multimodal packaging, by integrating multiple perceptual channels such as visual, auditory, and tactile senses, lowers the participation threshold for individuals who may encounter barriers with a specific modality. The selection of low-technological-threshold carriers can enhance information accessibility and interaction depth while circumventing technological exclusion. The emotionalization dimension pertains to the function of learning products in stimulating intrinsic motivation and affective experience. By constructing a closed-loop structure of "learning-creating-displaying," the product not only transmits cultural knowledge but also provides individuals with space for expression and sharing, thereby reinforcing self-efficacy and group belonging. Authenticity safeguards the depth of content, multimodality expands the breadth of participation, and emotionalization elevates the warmth of the experience. The triadic collaboration of these three dimensions constitutes a complete paradigm for the age-friendly design of micro-learning products^[6].

3.3 The Mutually Constitutive Relationship between Learning Products and the Internalization of Cultural Identity

A bidirectional and mutually constitutive cyclical process exists between micro-learning products and the internalization of cultural identity. From the perspective of the product's impact on identity, age-friendly micro-learning modules, as materialized carriers of cultural symbols, provide elderly sojourners with a cognitive channel through which to access, comprehend, and engage with cultural meanings. By transforming abstract cultural concepts into micro-tasks that are perceivable, operable, and amenable to reflection, learning products lower the cognitive threshold for cultural internalization, thereby enabling individuals to progressively complete the transformation from external symbols to internal meaning within the scope of their own capabilities. This transformation emerges incrementally through the cumulative effect of multiple learning activities, wherein the completion of each micro-task serves to reinforce and consolidate cultural identity.

From the perspective of identity's feedback upon the product, the understanding and affect generated by elderly sojourners in the process of cultural internalization in turn shape the usage patterns and meaning generation of the learning products. Individuals do not passively receive the content preset by the product; rather, based on their own cognitive frameworks, affective inclinations, and cultural backgrounds, they actively interpret and re-create the learning tasks, thereby enabling the learning product to acquire multiple meanings in actual use that transcend its original design intent. The mutually constitutive relationship between learning products and the internalization of cultural identity reveals an essential characteristic of the formation pathway of cultural identity: identity is not the outcome of unidirectional input from the product, but a dynamic process that emerges through sustained interaction between the individual and the product. As the material intermediary in this process, the design of micro-learning products must reserve space for the active interpretation and creative participation of individuals, so that the deep objective of cultural internalization can be realized within the mutual constitution of product and identity.

Conclusion

This study has systematically constructed a theoretical pathway for the formation of cultural identity among elderly sojourners in Yunnan across three levels: symbolic foundation, need adaptation, and carrier construction. At the symbolic foundation level, it proposes a three-layered analytical framework for ethnic cultural symbols comprising "the material layer, the meaning layer, and the regeneration layer," thereby revealing the inherent tension between the preservation of authenticity and the dissipation of meaning within the "decoding-reconstruction" transformation pathway. At the need adaptation level, it constructs a three-dimensional need framework encompassing "health tolerance, cultural cognitive preference, and digital skill level," thereby elucidating the generation mechanism of personalized learning pathways under the closed-loop mechanism of "dynamic tracking, real-time feedback, and resource reconfiguration." At the carrier construction level, it puts forward a triadic collaborative design paradigm of "authenticity, multimodality, and emotionalization" for age-friendly micro-learning products, thereby revealing the bidirectional and mutually constitutive relationship between learning products and the internalization of cultural identity. Future research may further explore the differences in the educational transformation modes of various types of cultural symbols, deepen the quantitative characterization of the dynamic evolution patterns of the three-dimensional needs, and conduct more refined theoretical modeling of the learning pathways for elderly individuals at different stages of sojourn.

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