

Research on influencing factors of audience emotional resonance in warm realistic films: taking *Dear You* as an example

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of the overall downturn in the film market, realistic films such as *Dear You* have been well received by audiences. Taking the film *Dear You* as a case study and based on the narrative transportation theory, this study constructs an integrated analytical framework for the impact of film attribute characteristics (including story verisimilitude, story innovation, and character depth) on audience emotional resonance. Data analysis of 292 valid questionnaires shows that both story innovation and character depth exert significant positive effects on audience emotional resonance, with character depth having a stronger effect. However, the impact of story verisimilitude on emotional resonance is not supported by the data. Focusing on the specific genre of warm realistic films, this study enriches the research on audience emotional resonance with this type of film, and aims to provide practical references for the creation, promotion and distribution of similar films.

Keywords: story verisimilitude, story innovation, character depth, emotional resonance, *Dear You*

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the commercial film market has long been dominated by the Hollywood-style film industry featuring grand spectacles, strong special effects and standardized production processes. However, as audiences develop aesthetic fatigue towards similar narrative structures, character settings and visual wonders, coupled with changes in the viewing preferences of the new generation of filmgoers, a number of films focusing on the daily lives, real situations and delicate emotions of ordinary people have gradually gained attention in the recent film market. From *Dying to Survive* to *Big World* and then to *Dear You*, realistic films have continuously broken through the boundaries of traditional genres, presenting the living conditions and emotional experiences of ordinary people in a more delicate and warm narrative way and conveying positive energy [1]. This trend has been summarized by academia as "warm realism". Adapted from the true story of Qiaopi (overseas Chinese remittance letters), *Dear You* has maintained high popularity since its release during the May Day holiday this year. As a low-budget film with minimal promotion and distribution, its word-of-mouth and box office reversal mainly stemmed from the audience's emotional resonance and the resulting spontaneous recommendations from "word-of-mouth promoters", making it a representative case of warm

realistic films. It cannot help but ask: why do audiences develop such strong emotional resonance with this type of film?

Existing studies generally agree that film content characteristics are important antecedents affecting audiences' emotional experience, and scholars at home and abroad have carried out extensive discussions around narrative, characters, audio-visual and other attribute dimensions [2]. However, most existing studies focus on the overall viewing experience or consumption behavior, and there is still a lack of systematic empirical testing on which specific content attributes can directly trigger the audience's emotional resonance. Especially for films based on real life, the question of "what factors jointly affect the audience's emotions?" remains to be further explored.

Against this background, drawing on the narrative transportation theory and taking *Dear You* as the research case, this study identifies three elements that trigger the audience's emotional resonance in the film from the perspective of audience perception, namely story verisimilitude, story innovation and character depth. It further examines the specific impacts of these three factors on audience emotional resonance, aiming to reveal the emotional generation mechanism of warm realistic films and provide references for the creation and optimization of similar films and even various types of films.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1. Theoretical foundation

The Narrative Transportation Theory was proposed by Green and Brock. The theory holds that when individuals are attracted by a story narrative, they will develop a sense of immersion of being "transported" into the story situation, which in turn affects their cognition, emotion and behavioral attitudes [3]. A study of film audiences by Wang and Tang found that narrative transportation dimensions such as empathy and immersion can significantly enhance audiences' positive emotions such as pleasure and arousal [4]. Emotional resonance is a psychological experience in which audiences form emotional connections and emotional synchronization with the story and characters during the viewing process, and is closely related to the emotions formed in the process of narrative transportation. Therefore, the narrative transportation theory can provide a theoretical basis for explaining how film content characteristics trigger audience emotional resonance.

On this basis, this study identifies three specific influencing factors, namely story verisimilitude, story innovation and character depth, from the perspective of film content characteristics, and establishes a theoretical model of the effects of these three factors on audience emotional resonance. It focuses on examining whether different film content characteristics will trigger the audience's emotional reactions and the differences in the effects among the three factors.

2.2. Story verisimilitude and emotional resonance

Story verisimilitude refers to the degree to which the story told by the film is perceived by the audience as credible and consistent with life logic. Hall's research points out that audiences' judgment of media reality includes multiple dimensions such as credibility, typicality, factuality, narrative consistency and emotional involvement [5]. This study argues that the higher the story verisimilitude of a film, the more it can trigger the audience's emotional resonance, for three main reasons. First, the sense of reality can reduce the psychological distance of the audience from the story and enhance their sense of credibility of the story world. Based on the true story of Chaoshan Qiaopi, *Dear You* restores the life scenes of Minnan overseas Chinese hometowns, intergenerational family relationships and cross-sea separation experiences, which can weaken the audience's

sense of alienation from fictional content, thereby reducing psychological barriers, allowing them to smoothly enter the narrative and further develop corresponding emotional experiences. Second, verisimilitude can help audiences connect the story with their own life experiences, making it easier for them to understand the emotional meaning expressed by the story. When the family relationships, family affection, separation and life choices in the film resonate with the audience's existing experiences, the story is no longer just a fictional event in the film, but can be understood as a life experience with practical significance, and the emotions it expresses can be more easily transformed into emotional experiences that the audience can understand and feel. Finally, verisimilitude can also enhance the credibility of the narrative, making audiences more willing to stay engaged in the story. Narrative transportation is a state that needs to be maintained; once the plot is unrealistic, it is easy to interrupt the audience and pull them out of narrative transportation. With the true Qiaopi story as the foundation, *Dear You* allows the audience to more fully understand and experience the emotional content of the story in the process of continuous engagement, which may enhance emotional resonance. Based on this, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Story verisimilitude has a significant positive effect on audience emotional resonance.

2.3. Story innovation and emotional resonance

Story innovation refers to the degree to which a film presents novelty in terms of story content and breaks through the audience's existing expectations. Schneider regards story innovation as one of the important dimensions of film evaluation, arguing that novelty reflects the audience's evaluation of the film's novel narrative methods and unusual plot content [6]. This study holds that the higher the story novelty of a film, the more it can trigger the audience's emotional resonance, for three main reasons. First, story innovation can break through the audience's familiar cognition of existing story patterns and attract their attention to novel information. Novel plot settings and narrative expressions make it impossible for the audience to fully predict the development of the story, requiring them to pay more attention to the character relationships, event changes and subsequent developments in the story. Weierich et al. found that compared with familiar stimuli, novel stimuli can trigger stronger emotion-related neural responses [7]. In the context of film viewing, unlike common commercial films that rely on strong conflicts and grand scenes to advance the story, *Dear You* takes Qiaopi as a unique narrative clue and combines ordinary people's family experiences with cross-time and space stories. This novelty enables the audience to maintain a higher level of attention to the story and provides motivation for further understanding of the story content. Second, story innovation breaks the audience's original expectations and prompts them to develop a deeper understanding of character behaviors and event development. The film adopts a narrative expression that spans time and interweaves character relationships, linking the fates of Musheng, Shurou and Nanzhi layer by layer. This unexpected plot arrangement will break the audience's preconceived stereotypes, drive them to follow the plot development, actively sort out character relationships, and further understand the reasons and emotional meanings behind character behaviors. Third, innovation based on familiar life experiences allows the audience to gain fresh experiences while maintaining an understanding of the emotional meaning of the plot. Story expressions that are too unfamiliar or difficult to understand may increase the barriers to entering the story world. Innovating on the basis of the audience's familiar life experiences and emotional foundations can not only break through traditional narrative routines, but also allow the audience to obtain new story experiences from expressions different from their existing experiences, and further grasp the emotional meaning conveyed by the film, thereby forming a stronger emotional experience. Based on this, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Story innovation has a significant positive effect on audience emotional resonance.

2.4. Character depth and emotional resonance

Character depth refers to the degree to which character portrayal evokes the audience's detailed and multi-dimensional psychological cognition of the characters' psychology, behaviors and experiences [8]. Characters are an important component of a film, and the audience's understanding of the story comes not only from the plot and events themselves, but also from the understanding of the characters' behaviors, psychological states and life experiences. This study argues that the deeper the character portrayal of a film, the more it can trigger the audience's emotional resonance, for three main reasons. First, three-dimensional and full-bodied characters have richer psychological and behavioral information, enabling the audience to form a more complete understanding of the characters. The characters in the film are not simply good or bad people, but roles with different life experiences, emotional choices and inner contradictions. As the story unfolds and the characters' life experiences are gradually presented, the audience can form a more complete perception of the characters and further feel the emotions carried by the characters. Second, character depth can deepen the audience's understanding of characters' behaviors and their emotional situations. Existing film studies have found that the audience's emotional engagement in narrative films is closely related to sympathetic and empathetic responses to characters [9]. When the characters' experiences are fully unfolded, the audience can understand their behavioral choices based on their life experiences. When the characters in the film face family responsibilities, cross-sea separation, long-term waiting and life choices, their behaviors are closely related to the characters' past experiences and real situations. As these background information are gradually revealed, the audience can understand the reasons behind the characters' choices, and generate specific emotions on the basis of understanding the characters' situations, thus promoting emotional resonance. Finally, character depth can turn abstract emotional themes into specific life experiences. Emotions such as family affection, separation and waiting can only be fully perceived by the audience when they are supported by specific character experiences and choices. The film carries these emotions through the different life experiences of Musheng, Shurou and Nanzhi, enabling the audience to translate abstract emotional themes into the fates of specific characters, thereby generating more direct and lasting emotional experiences. Based on this, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Character depth has a significant positive effect on audience emotional resonance.

In summary, the conceptual model of this study is shown in Figure 1.

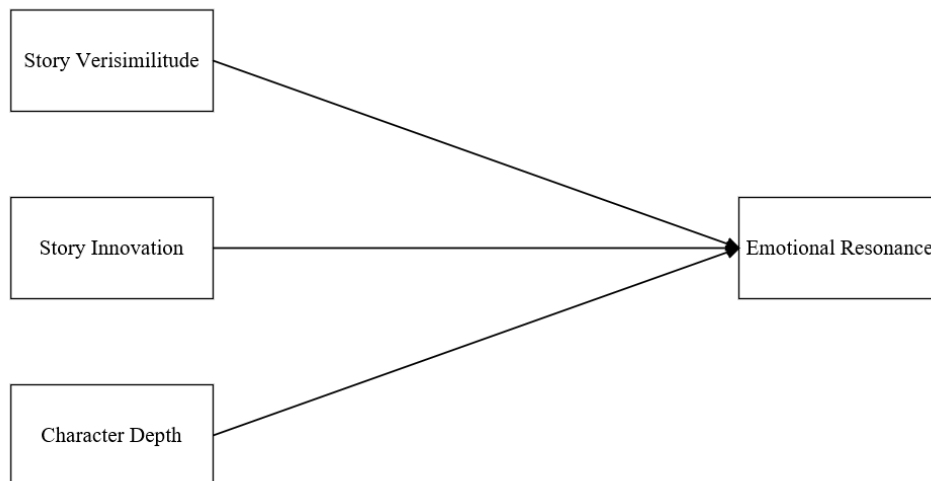


Figure 1. Conceptual model

3. Research design

3.1. Questionnaire design and variable measurement

The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part is the background information of film audiences. The second part is the items measuring the effects of story verisimilitude, story innovation and character depth on emotional resonance, adopting a 7-point Likert scale. Each item is scored from 1 to 7, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Among them, story verisimilitude draws on the research of Schneider [6], with a total of 4 items; story innovation draws on the research of Schneider [6] and Im et al. [10], with a total of 3 items; character depth draws on the research of Frazer et al. [8], with a total of 6 items. The dependent variable, emotional resonance, mainly refers to the mature scale of Xiong et al. [11], with a total of 3 items.

3.2. Data collection

This study distributed questionnaires through the online survey platform "Wenjuanxing", and collected data by distributing questionnaire links via WeChat and Xiaohongshu. The official distribution period of the questionnaire was from August 12 to 22, 2026. A total of 444 questionnaires were collected in this survey, and 152 invalid questionnaires were excluded, finally obtaining 292 valid questionnaires, with an effective rate of 65.8%.

4. Result analysis

4.1. Descriptive statistical analysis

Table 1. Demographic characteristics

Item	Category	Number	Proportion (%)	Item	Category	Number	Proportion (%)
Gender	Male	101	34.6	Education	Junior high school and below	8	2.7
	Female	191	65.4		High school	20	6.8
	Under 18	9	3.1		Junior college	12	4.1
Age group	18-22	116	39.7		Bachelor's degree	177	60.6
	23-25	62	21.2		Postgraduate and above	75	25.7
	26-30	32	11.0	Monthly after-tax income	2,000 yuan and below	110	37.7
	31-35	11	3.8		2,001-4,000 yuan	82	28.1
	36-40	35	12.0		4,001-6,000 yuan	30	10.3
	41-45	18	6.2		6,001-8,000 yuan	34	11.6
	46 and above	9	3.1		8,001-10,000 yuan	17	5.8
Chaoshan area life experience	Never	172	58.9		10,000 yuan and above	19	6.5

Table 1. Continued

Chaoshan area life experience	Short-term travel/business trip	105	36.0	Work/study status	Full-time student	173	59.2
	Long-term residence	8	2.7		Full-time job (enterprise/company staff)	47	16.1
	Local resident	7	2.4		Full-time job (government/public institution)	30	10.3
Preference level	Very preferred	32	11.0	Work/study status	Freelance/independent contractor	20	6.8
	Relatively preferred	140	47.9		Platform employment (ride-hailing/food delivery/live streaming/crowdsourcing)	3	1.0
	Average	89	30.5		Internship/probation period	11	3.8
	Less preferred	26	8.9		Unemployed/job seeking	2	0.7
	Not preferred at all	5	1.7		Full-time homemaker/caregiver	6	2.1
Cinema viewing frequency	Almost never watch movies	7	2.4	Viewing companion	Watching alone	66	22.6
	Once every few years	9	3.1		Partner	54	18.5
	1-2 times a year	89	30.5		Children	17	5.8
	1-2 times every six months	93	31.8		Friends	117	40.1
	3-5 times every six months	58	19.9		Parents and other relatives	20	6.8
	Once a month	20	6.8		Colleagues	2	0.7
	2-3 times a month	14	4.8		Classmates	16	5.5
	Once a week and above	2	0.7		Total	292	100.0

Among the total sample (Table 1), there were 101 males, accounting for 34.6% of the total sample, and 191 females, accounting for 65.4% of the total sample, which is basically consistent with the audience profile of the film. In terms of age structure, the proportion of people aged 18-22 was as high as 39.7%, and the 23-25 age group accounted for 21.2%. In terms of income, the proportion of people with a monthly disposable income of 2,000 yuan and below was the highest, accounting for 37.7% of the total sample, followed by 2,001-4,000 yuan, accounting for 28.1%. In terms of viewing characteristics, 58.9% of respondents "never had" Chaoshan life experience, indicating that the film's emotional narrative has broken through regional and cultural circles. The viewing frequency was mainly "1-2 times a year" (30.5%) and "1-2 times every six months" (31.8%), and all respondents were ordinary audiences with certain viewing habits.

4.2. Measurement model test

4.2.1. Reliability test

Using SPSS 26.0 software, this study conducted an internal consistency test on the four variables of story verisimilitude, story innovation, character depth and emotional resonance. The results are shown in Table 2. The Cronbach's α coefficients are 0.732, 0.704, 0.833 and 0.823 respectively, all above 0.7, indicating that the questionnaire has good reliability.

4.2.2. Validity test

Before testing the scale validity through factor analysis, this study first conducted the KMO test and Bartlett's test of sphericity to judge the data suitability. A KMO value greater than 0.7 indicates suitability, and a p -value < 0.05 in Bartlett's test of sphericity indicates significance, which means the data is suitable for factor analysis.

The results of this study show that the KMO value is 0.917, and Bartlett's test of sphericity is $p < 0.001$. On this basis, this study conducted factor analysis on 16 items of the 4 variables, and extracted 4 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, with a cumulative variance explanation rate of 60.46%. The reliability and validity test results are shown in Table 2. The factor loadings of all items are greater than 0.5, indicating that the scale of this study has good validity.

Table 2. Reliability and validity tests

Measurement items	Cronbach's α coefficient	Factor loading			
Story verisimilitude 1	0.732	0.752	/	/	/
Story verisimilitude 2		0.758	/	/	/
Story verisimilitude 3		0.597	/	/	/
Story verisimilitude 4		0.582	/	/	/
Story innovation 1	0.704	/	0.540	/	/
Story innovation 2		/	0.760	/	/
Story innovation 3		/	0.763	/	/
Character depth 1	0.833	/	/	0.684	/
Character depth 2		/	/	0.702	/
Character depth 3		/	/	0.689	/
Character depth 4		/	/	0.645	/
Character depth 5		/	/	0.617	/
Character depth 6		/	/	0.613	/
Emotional resonance 1	0.823	/	/	/	0.802
Emotional resonance 2		/	/	/	0.763
Emotional resonance 3		/	/	/	0.751

Note: Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

4.2.3. Correlation analysis

To preliminarily clarify the linear correlation among variables, this study conducted Pearson correlation analysis on the core variables. The results are shown in Table 3. All core variables show a significant positive correlation with emotional resonance, which is consistent with the expectations of the research hypotheses.

Table 3. Correlation analysis of core variables

	Correlation					
	Mean	Standard deviation	SV	SI	CD	ER
SV	5.8151	0.69550	1			
SI	5.7865	0.78484	0.516**	1		
CD	5.9344	0.65232	0.546**	0.568**	1	
ER	5.8231	0.76451	0.418**	0.487**	0.634**	1

Note: SV: Story Verisimilitude; SI: Story Innovation; CD: Character Depth; ER: Emotional Resonance; two-tailed test, ***, ** and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels respectively.

4.2.4. Regression analysis

To test the effects of each variable on the emotional resonance of audiences of warm realistic films, this study used SPSS software to conduct hierarchical regression analysis. Specifically, taking emotional resonance as the dependent variable, control variables and independent variables were added in sequence to test each research hypothesis. The regression analysis results of each hypothesis are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Regression analysis results

	M1	M2
(Constant)	6.783***	2.066***
Gender	-0.107	-0.223**
Age group	-0.047	-0.041
Education	-0.038	-0.055
Monthly after-tax income	0.036	0.005
Work/study status	0.007	0.028
Chaoshan area life experience	-0.079	-0.056
Cinema viewing frequency	0.019	0.026
Warm realistic film preference	-0.240***	-0.152***
Viewing companion	0.017	0.008
Story verisimilitude		0.054
Story innovation		0.175**
Character depth		0.576***
R^2	0.089	0.479
Adjusted R^2	0.060	0.457
F value	3.076**	21.408***

Note: The values in the table are unstandardized coefficient Beta; the dependent variable is emotional resonance; ***, ** and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels respectively.

4.2.5. Hypothesis test results

The test results of this study show that: the influence coefficient of story verisimilitude on emotional resonance is 0.054 ($p > 0.05$), so hypothesis H1 is not supported; the influence coefficient of story innovation

on emotional resonance is 0.175 ($p < 0.01$), and the influence coefficient of character depth on emotional resonance is 0.576 ($p < 0.001$), so both hypotheses H2 and H3 are supported by the data.

The study indicates that the emotional resonance of warm realistic films is not simply based on story verisimilitude, but more relies on the emotional experience formed by story innovation and character depth. Audiences develop emotional resonance with the film through three-dimensional characters and novel narratives, and character depth is the most critical driving factor.

5. Discussion and implication

5.1. Discussion

One of the core findings of this study is that character depth is the strongest factor affecting emotional resonance in this study, and story innovation also has a significant positive effect, indicating that "depth" and "novelty" are the two core content driving forces for this type of film to evoke emotional resonance.

The effect of story verisimilitude on emotional resonance does not reach a significant level, which seems unreasonable. However, through literature review, this study argues that a possible explanation is that when audiences judge whether a film is "real", they do not necessarily mainly depend on whether the story is indeed derived from real events. Cho et al.'s research points out that factuality is not the core predictor of perceived realism that affects emotions [12]. Compared with "whether this story actually happened", audiences may pay more attention to whether the plot conforms to life logic, whether the characters' behaviors are reasonable, and whether the emotions expressed by the characters are true and credible. In addition, cultural familiarity may be a key moderating variable for the impact of verisimilitude on emotion. Audiences who understand Chaoshan Qiaopi culture, have Chaoshan life experience, or at least are familiar with Chaoshan regional culture will have more profound and lasting emotional collision and touch when watching *Dear You*. Future research can take cultural familiarity as a moderating variable to test the differentiated effects of verisimilitude among different audience groups.

5.2. Theoretical contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study are mainly reflected in three aspects:

First, this study expands and deepens the research dimension of audiences' film viewing behavior intention from the perspective of emotional response. Most existing film studies focus on consumption behavior outcomes such as box office, word-of-mouth and communication intention, and lack discussion on the audience's deep emotional reactions, psychological activities and their influencing mechanisms. Focusing on the audience's emotional reactions and starting from the perspective of film content attributes, this study reveals its impact on the audience's viewing psychology and emotions, which is a supplement and enrichment to existing research.

Second, this study depicts and tests the action logic and effect differences of three different dimensions of film content attributes on the audience's emotional experience. For the film *Dear You*, this study first depicts three film attribute characteristics at the content level, namely story verisimilitude, story innovation and character depth, verifies their differentiated effects on emotional resonance, and sorts out the specific action mechanisms of these three content attributes on the audience's post-viewing emotions.

Third, this study further expands the research boundary of narrative transportation theory in the specific film genre of warm realistic films. Existing narrative transportation studies mainly emphasize the cognition, emotion and behavioral attitudes generated by audiences after entering the story world. Starting from three specific content attributes, this study discusses the differentiated effects of different content attributes on the

audience's entry into the narrative transportation state and the formation of emotional resonance, further explaining that not all film content attributes can be transformed into the audience's emotional reactions in the same way.

5.3. Practical implications and limitations

Based on the research conclusions, the following practical suggestions are put forward for film creators, film distributors and industry practitioners:

First, creators should place character portrayal in an important position. In this study, character depth has the strongest effect, indicating that three-dimensional and rich characters are more likely to become important carriers for the audience's emotional investment. Therefore, creators should focus on shaping three-dimensional and multi-faceted character images. By enriching character backgrounds, presenting characters' inner contradictions and portraying character growth arcs, the audience can fully understand the characters' behavioral motivations and emotional choices, and then establish deep emotional connections.

Second, the innovation of story expression should be enhanced on the basis of real life. This study finds that story innovation can significantly positively affect audience emotional resonance, indicating that warm realistic films do not mean simple restoration of traditional real life, but need to endow ordinary people's life experiences with new emotional meanings through novel narrative methods and expression techniques. At the same time, the tendency of homogenization and formulization should be guarded against, and innovative narrative carriers and expression techniques should be used to arouse the audience's interest and emotional resonance.

Third, "verisimilitude" should be correctly understood and applied, and the real event itself should not be equated with emotional resonance. In this study, the direct effect of story verisimilitude on emotional resonance does not reach a significant level. When using real events, real characters or real life materials, creators should pay more attention to the internal narrative logic and emotional logic of the story, so that real materials still maintain life credibility and emotional authenticity after artistic expression, and further transform "objective reality" into emotional experiences that the audience can understand, feel and empathize with.

Finally, film promotion and distribution can carry out content communication around emotional resonance points. For realistic films focusing on ordinary people's emotions such as *Dear You*, in the process of promotion and distribution, character relationships, emotional conflicts and story details can be highlighted through short videos, social platforms and other channels, so that the core emotional value of the film can be more intuitively presented to the audience and accurately meet the audience's emotional needs.

This study still has certain limitations. First, the study only takes *Dear You* as a single case, so the generalizability of the research remains to be verified. Future research can compare the differences in the effects of content attributes in different realistic films through multi-case studies. Second, the research content or perspective needs to be further expanded. In the future, antecedent variables such as audio-visual presentation and actor performance can be included in the model, or moderating variables such as cultural familiarity can be introduced to more comprehensively reveal the formation mechanism of emotional resonance.

6. Conclusion

Taking *Dear You*, a representative warm realistic film, as the research object, this study constructs an integrated analytical framework based on the narrative transportation theory, and systematically tests the

influence mechanisms of story verisimilitude, story innovation and character depth on audience emotional resonance through empirical data from 292 valid audience questionnaires. The main core conclusions are as follows.

First, character depth is the most critical factor driving the emotional resonance of audiences of warm realistic films. Three-dimensional and full-bodied character images can effectively eliminate the psychological estrangement between the audience and the narrative, promote the audience to empathize with the characters' situations and understand their choices, and translate abstract emotional themes such as family affection, waiting and separation into perceivable specific life experiences, thereby forming strong and lasting emotional resonance.

Second, story innovation has a significant positive promoting effect on audience emotional resonance. On the premise of conforming to the public's general life experience and emotional logic, novel narrative expression techniques can break the audience's aesthetic inertia and narrative expectations, continuously maintain their attention and engagement with the story, and deepen emotional perception in fresh narrative experiences.

Third, the direct positive effect of story verisimilitude on emotional resonance is not supported by empirical evidence. This result reveals that the audience's emotional investment relies more on the internal emotional logic and life credibility of the story rather than the mere factual source; it also indicates that potential moderating variables such as cultural familiarity may play an important role in the process of transforming verisimilitude into emotional experience.

Overall, the emotional generation of warm realistic films does not rely solely on the verisimilitude of real materials, but is realized through in-depth character portrayal and innovative narrative expression. Future creation should go beyond the superficial restoration of "reality", focus on the exploration of characters' inner worlds and the breakthrough of narrative methods; promotion strategies should also focus on emotional resonance points to accurately convey the core emotional value of the film. Although this study has the limitation of a single case, the conclusions can still provide empirical evidence with reference value for the creation optimization and communication practice of similar films.

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