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An Exploration of the Transition of Chinese Cultural and Creative Brands from "Story-Driven" to "Symbol-Driven"—Taking the Practices of the Duffy Family and Pop Mart as Examples

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Abstract. In the context of the accelerated restructuring of the global cultural and creative industry pattern, more and more cultural brands are gradually shifting from the traditional "story-driven" model to the "symbol-driven" model. This marketing strategy, with visual symbols and emotional markers as the core not only significantly reduces the cost of content production and cultural communication, but also achieves efficient cultural output. Thus, it promotes the spread and recognition of local culture on a global scale. This study takes Bubble Mart and Disney's Duffy family as the main cases to systematically analyze their brand construction and communication paths, deconstructing around three dimensions: the symbolic layer, the emotional layer, and the cultural layer. At the symbolic level, focus on character design, visual systems, and the identification of IP symbols. At the emotional level, analyze the emotional connections, community identity, and consumer resonance generated by users through symbols. At the cultural level, explore the cultural values behind symbols and analyze how local aesthetic elements can be expressed internationally, exploring how Chinese cultural and creative brands achieve cultural dissemination through a "background-free" symbolization strategy, and how to shape a leading Chinese cultural brand and provide theoretical references and practical paths for the international development of Chinese cultural and creative brands.

Keywords: symbol-driven, cultural communication, symbol recognition, emotional recognition, cultural recognition

1. Introduction

In the current global consumer market restructuring, many cultural brands are undergoing a paradigm shift from story-driven to symbol-driven, transforming from brands originally based on film and television works to brands without story IP. The new marketing approach driven by symbols is becoming increasingly common, allowing many brands without stories or film works to quickly become 'top female celebrities'. The practices of the Duffy family and Pop Mart reveal a breakthrough path: The Duffy family is a series of products under Disney. Unlike Disney's

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traditional style, the Duffy family does not have a story-based background, Instead, it reconstructs the logic of the story through symbols, rising as a “blank character” without a film or television background, relying on character interaction, visual symbols and ultra-realistic performances, it has become popular around the world and is enthusiastically sought after by the public. POP MART has also pioneered a purely symbols-driven paradigm. For example, the Labubu serious of dolls, with their ugly-cute design and shape teeth and unusual eyes, blend Nordic elves and Eastern mythical creatures to become a cross-cultural carrier. Though symbol implantation, blind box mechanisms, and celebrity endorsements, they have ignited the global market, the commercial value of Labubu has reached 3.04 billion in 2024, and the serious has accounted for 23.3% of Pop Mart’s total industry revenue, becoming the company’s largest source of income, the two models adopt the same approach and point to a mechanism with symbolization as its core [1].

The public believe that the symbolic value of commodities is considered to be the ultimate value of consumer society. Contemporary society is a consumer society dominated by symbols. Disney uses image symbols and music symbols to create IP without background stories, injecting new vitality into the brand and strengthening brand recognition and dissemination. The development of imaging technology has stimulated consumers' desire to purchase symbolic goods, and young generations define the cute characteristics of doll brands by consuming cute items [2-4].

However, the Short-term cultural brand struggles to deliver long-term value and benefits. How can we truly transition from a “story-driven” approach to a “symbol-driven” one, creating a sustainable “context-independent” brand? How can we become a leading brand in promoting Chinese culture? These questions are highly valuable for exploring the construction of a sustainable symbol-driven brand. This study will unfold the marketing models of Pop Mart and the Duffy family brand from three levels: the symbolic level, the emotional level and the cultural level, providing a strategic paradigm for Chinese cultural and creative brands to communicate Chinese culture and build sustainable symbolic value.

2. Research finding

2.1. Building symbolic layer recognition

2.1.1. Each character in the duffy family has a distinct color identity and image characteristics

The characters in the Duffy family are all designed with soft, warm colors, such as Lina Belle's light pink and Stellalou's lavender purple, and they all have a “cute” appearance, with big eyes and smiling lips, which deeply rooted in people's minds as traditional cute dolls. Although the Duffy family does not have a complete story, their distinct character labels, such as Lina Belle's “explorer” label, Duffy's “travel companion” identity, and Stellalou's “ballerina” image, deeply reveal each character's personality and background. Labeled character settings facilitate fragmented dissemination on the Internet, making the characters quickly recognizable symbols and triggering emotional resonance among the younger generation.

2.1.2. Pop Mart has become popular with its ugly and cute aesthetics, breaking traditional aesthetic norms through "rebellious design"

The Labubu dolls in the Pop Mart series have a unique appearance, with jagged fangs, twisted eyes, and strange limb proportions, which are very different from the traditional "cute and well-behaved" doll image. However, a rebellious image is consistent with the young generation's ideas of opposing

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anxiety and pursuing freedom. The grotesque and rebellious image resonates with consumers and reflects the status of contemporary young people in the workplace and life, allows "imperfection" to exist, this “rebellious” label has gradually become symbolic, and despite the complete absence of stories or films, these dolls have become wildly popular among young people and are selling like hotcakes around the world.

2.2. Building emotional identification

2.2.1. The duffy family satisfies consumers' deep emotional and social needs

In terms of emotional needs, consumers can achieve emotional resonance and generate emotional projection. Some young people today face emotional difficulties due to excessive pressure in their lives and work, leaving them feeling lonely and unwilling to socialize. However, they still yearn for emotional companionship, which has given rise to a strong need for emotional resonance. Therefore, symbolic dolls are no longer simple visual symbols, but have become companions; in other words, for consumers, what they buy is not just an ordinary product, but an emotional companion that can accompany them in various aspects of their daily lives, providing emotional comfort and companionship, relieving and releasing stress. Although they do not speak, every touch can be felt as warmth and healing, like a living friend. Thus, dolls become objects of emotional projection, providing a sense of healing. In addition, these symbolic dolls also provide some consumers with a projection of their ideal selves. These dolls embody young people's unfulfilled childhood dreams. For example, Stellalou is endowed with the characteristics of "daring to pursue dreams and being brave and fearless," and Lina Belle is "knowledgeable and passionate about solving puzzles." These traits become a mirror image of young people's ideal selves, making up for the sense of powerlessness in reality, becoming a projection of an ideal life state, providing spiritual comfort and an emotional outlet, and creating an ideal utopia in the adult world.

In terms of social needs, the Duffy family has created a rich social environment and a sense of community. The herd mentality allows consumers to obtain unique symbols of identity. Most users are influenced by the marketing and promotion of major bloggers and celebrities on social media platforms. For example, key opinion leaders with Duffy dolls being photographed on the street and celebrities uploading product unboxing videos, which helps to attract large fan bases to purchase the same products, thereby obtaining symbols of identity. Besides, brands promote their products through extensive online marketing and traffic diversion methods to increase product awareness and facilitate better product dissemination [5]. In addition, brands also organize large-scale social events and exhibitions. Fans often attend offline events such as the “Duffy Fan Gathering” wearing self-made costumes, quickly identifying each other in person, discussing character details together, and forming specific fan communities. which strengthens the bonds within the fan base, creating an emotional community. This social aspect transforms consumer behavior into a form of “social currency” for entering the fan community. This is not merely a matter of personal preference but also a symbol of community identity. By strengthening community engagement and organizing various offline interactive activities, consumers can develop a sense of belonging to the community, achieve identity recognition, and deepen their emotional connection with the brand. Additionally, the Duffy Family plush toys can serve as a bridge for cross-emotional bonds, acting as a medium and topic for parent-child interaction. This transforms “healing companionship” from mere marketing rhetoric into genuine social connections.

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2.2.2. Pop Mart transforms users from consumers into co-creators, promoting brand marketing and publicity through secondary creation

In an open narrative system without a story background, Pop Mart's consumption structure is undergoing a transformation from “enterprise-led” to “user-co-creation.” As a well-known enterprise in China's contemporary trendy toy industry, Pop Mart has increased user creativity by establishing an ecosystem without a background story, successfully converting a large number of users into active participants in IP creation and dissemination, and forming a balanced co-creation ecosystem. This is not the traditional “company-consumer” dichotomy, but rather emphasizes consumer participation and interaction during the usage process [6].

For example, the Labubu series of dolls under the Pop Mart brand has adopted a diversified communication strategy, leveraging celebrity endorsements and fan-created content to form a powerful co-creation communication matrix. Brands expand their brand awareness through carefully planned marketing campaigns. By collaborating with popular celebrities, which can rapidly increase popularity, fans are flocking to the trendy toy market, encouraging more people to participate in creation and promote the brand. In addition, ordinary fans indirectly participate in product creation and promotion through activities such as doll customization, scene photography, and fan comics, engaging in secondary creation of the dolls. For example, dressing dolls in new clothes and accessories, adding personalized scene elements, drawing pictures on trendy toys, and posting them on social media platforms. This not only strengthens the connection between users and brands, but also provides brands with free indirect publicity. In contrast, IP characters with story backgrounds are restricted by official copyright protection measures, limiting fan creativity and reducing user engagement and interaction, which is detrimental to brand promotion and marketing. Through the co-creation mechanism design, Pop Mart can inspire users to shift from passive purchasing to active co-creation, which sparked a craze among everyone from internet celebrities to ordinary people, it not only reshaped the rules of the trendy toy industry, but also provided a new paradigm for brand-user relationships in the digital age.

2.3. Building cultural identity

2.3.1. The duffy family gains deep recognition through local symbols

The development of cultural and creative brands cannot be separated from the inherent regional characteristics and ethnic culture of the local area, and must have a profound regional cultural connotation. Products must not only satisfy the emotional needs of modern people, but also reflect regional cultural characteristics. For example, the Duff family combines Western cultural elements with Eastern aesthetics. The character Lina Belle is imbued with Chinese emotional memories, wearing a Suzhou embroidered cheongsam and a traditional hairpin, sparking a wave of innovation in Chinese style. The brand even incorporates traditional embroidery techniques from intangible cultural heritage into its production process, offering consumers three versions of “doll clothes”—pure hand-embroidered, hand-pushed embroidery, and machine-embroidered—to choose from. These can be seen as “miniature versions of theatrical costumes,” blending with local traditional culture and imbued with China's unique emotional memories. it not only awakens Chinese consumers' memories of the intangible cultural heritage of embroidery, but it also allows Lina Belle to gain more recognition and popularity among young people. As can be seen, global IP can gain recognition and popularity among Chinese consumers by incorporating local symbols. Therefore, the necessary conditions for the globalization of cultural IP are to integrate local cultural

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characteristics, use traditional cultural symbols to take root in the local community, and modify and adjust the IP image. By better integrating the cultural thinking and habits of consumers in various countries, we can innovate our brand, launch a series of distinctive products, revitalize the IP, enhance its global influence, and achieve global promotion and dissemination of the IP [7].

2.3.2. Pop Mart collaborates with the Dun Huang Research Academy to infuse cultural significance into trendy toys

Cultural and creative brands are the concrete embodiment of traditional culture and connotations. Pop Mart's new product, Royal Molly, has collaborated with the Dun Huang Research Academy to launch the “Flying Heaven” series of products. The design draws inspiration from the honeysuckle patterns found in the Lotus Grottoes of the Sui Dynasty, depicting the veins and shapes of plants climbing up Molly's skirt and crown, Combining the image of the flying celestial maidens of Dun Huang with trendy toy design, elegant clothing, flowing ribbons, and other elements gives trendy toys more cultural depth. This approach of integrating traditional culture into trendy toys not only promotes the beauty of Chinese Dun Huang culture but also presents traditional culture to the world in a new form. It not only carries on and promotes traditional culture, allowing ancient culture to be reborn in modern daily life, but it also infuses trendy dolls with cultural significance. In addition, the dolls' designs also meet cultural requirements. By reconstructing elements from the murals, the patterns are perfectly reproduced on the dolls, innovating the expression of the thousand-year-old Dun Huang aesthetic. The breakthrough in craftsmanship is equally impressive, using the ancient technique of gold inlaying that originated in the Shang dynasty to embed gold lines in the texture of the material, restoring the original effect of the murals and awakening the cultural memories of Chinese consumers. This approach is no longer limited to hype and marketing, but has become a vessel for the inheritance of Chinese culture. It is also a new attempt to blend traditional aesthetic culture with modern pop culture, enabling local consumers to build a cultural identity unique to China and promoting cultural dissemination. This will enable Chinese cultural and creative brands to transition from “story-based cultural and creative products” to modern “symbol-based Chinese brands” [8].

3. Conclusion

This paper explores how Chinese cultural and creative brands can transition from “story-driven” to “symbol-driven,” and combines research on the top-tier Daffy family and Pop Mart to analyze how to achieve this transition to symbolization from three aspects. Firstly, construct the symbolic identity, for example, each character in the Duffy family has a distinctive color scheme and visual characteristics, without a traditional story structure, the IP relies on rich colors and iconic character designs to create memorable elements, which lead to the characters become easily recognizable symbols that can spread quickly in the new media era, generating a large number of clicks and traffic, and resonating emotionally with the younger generation. Pop Mart has gained popularity with its ugly-cute aesthetic. Although it lacks a story background, it has created a rebellious image for its dolls with claws and bared teeth, breaking traditional aesthetic norms and creating a “rebellious” image that allows for “imperfection” and appeals to the current anti-competitive mindset of young people. The second point is to build emotional recognition. For example, the Duffy family satisfies consumers' deep emotional and social needs, and the doll IP is no longer just an ordinary stuffed toy, rather than a companion-type friend, for consumers, what they purchase is not just an ordinary product, but an emotional companion. In the fast-paced rhythm of modern life, it

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serves as a gentle source of comfort and healing, offering young people solace and reassurance. In addition, the Daffy family IP is also a means of social currency, allowing consumers to develop a sense of community belonging, gain identity recognition, promote connections with like-minded groups, and become a new form of communication. The third point is the construction of cultural identity layers. The Daffy family uses local symbols to promote the brand globally. Products are combined with local traditional culture and imbued with unique Chinese emotional memories, fine-tune the IP, design a series of signature products, and promote the globalization of the brand. Pop Mart has integrated traditional culture into its designs, incorporating the distinctive shapes and colors of the Mogao Grottoes, thereby enriching its trendy toys with cultural depth and uniqueness, and promoting the better dissemination and promotion of cultural and creative brands.

This study fills the theoretical gap in "non-narrative IP." Traditional IP images emphasize storytelling as the core of a brand, believing that good narratives are an important factor in cultural communication, while the Duffy family and Pop Mart are famous for having no background. This paper demonstrates through analysis that even a single symbol or character image can promote cultural dissemination. From three dimensions—symbolic, emotional, and cultural—it can resonate strongly with consumers and establish a connection with them, thereby achieving cultural dissemination without a specific context.

The "symbolization" model in this study provides Chinese cultural and creative brands with a path and methods for transformation. Chinese cultural and creative IP brands have long been constrained by limited storytelling capabilities, investing significant human, time, and financial resources without achieving the desired results. Furthermore, character creation and operation cycles are relatively long, which is not conducive to rapid cultural dissemination and brand promotion. The symbol-driven model can reduce content development costs and cycles, enable rapid market entry, generate high dissemination benefits in a relatively short production cycle, and increase user engagement. For example, consumers engage in secondary creation, this will not only strengthen the emotional connection with users, but also promote the brand's dissemination and promotion.

The full text discusses how to achieve cultural transformation, but current research findings have certain limitations. Firstly, IP brands without a background have a short life cycle and lack cultural connotations, making it easy for consumers to be attracted by other similar trendy blind boxes, furthermore, simply relying on marketing hype strategies lacks cultural depth and makes it difficult to establish long-term, effective relationships with consumers. Secondly, brand communication strategies that rely on celebrity hype are unpredictable and unstable, and are easily influenced by well-known figures such as internet celebrities and stars. For example, negative news and behavior involving fan circles are constantly emerging, which is detrimental to establishing the prestige and image of cultural and creative brands, It can even have a negative and misleading impact on brand image, ultimately hindering the healthy development of the brand's culture. In summary, future research should explore how to integrate Eastern and Western cultural designs to enrich the cultural connotations of cultural and creative industries, endow them with enduring vitality, and enable them to possess cross-cultural appeal, thereby laying a solid foundation for globalization.

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