

Why does Disney Place Such Emphasis on Controlling its Image and How does it Use its Image as an Element of its Business Practices?

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Abstract: This article examines why The Walt Disney Company places sustained emphasis on controlling its corporate and brand image and how it incorporates that image into its business practices. Drawing on scholarship in brand management, media industries, cultural studies and transmedia storytelling, together with examples from Disney's intellectual properties, theme parks, streaming services and corporate training, the article argues that image control performs three interrelated functions. It supports IP expansion and consumer loyalty by maintaining recognisable audience expectations; provides a stable symbolic framework through which cultural values are encoded and circulated; and operates as a form of corporate governance that protects reputation, coordinates diversified businesses and reduces commercial risk. The analysis further shows that Disney institutionalises its image through standardised content production, coherent cross-media narratives, licensing oversight and employee management. However, strict image control may also constrain creative autonomy and reinforce American-centred aesthetic and ideological norms in global markets. Disney's image is therefore not merely a promotional asset but a central organising principle of its cultural production and commercial operations.

Keywords: The Walt Disney Company; Brand Image Control; Intellectual Property; Transmedia Storytelling; Corporate Governance.

1. Introduction

Since its establishment in 1923, Walt Disney has grown from an animation studio to one of the most influential media conglomerates worldwide through acquisitions, technological innovation and diversification into theme parks, commodities and digital platforms. Throughout these expansions, Disney has maintained a unified brand image. As Francoeur (2004, p.2) noted, the company is regarded as a model for shaping brand image. The fantasy world built by Disney has brought commercial success and promoted the dissemination of cultural values and shaped the corporate management model (Wasko, 2020). Therefore, analyzing Disney's image control should go beyond the traditional scope of brand management and examine its commercial function and cultural impact. This control lays the foundation for integrating brand image into business practice. Against this background, this article will analyze the importance of Disney's image control and the strategy of integrating its brand image into business operations. The article first evaluates the role of image control in market efficiency, cultural value communication and enterprise management. This article will explain how Disney integrates brand image into business practices through content production, cross-media narrative and internal management. Additionally, the article will also explore the possible limitations of Disney's strict image control in the face of global cultural differences.

2. The Significance of Image Control

2.1. Market Expectations

Walt Disney strictly controls its corporate image, mainly because it is important to meet market demand, including relying on intellectual property (IP) to develop and meet consumer expectations.

The construction of IP is a key factor in Disney's image control, because the company is highly dependent on IP-based operations, which can bring considerable economic benefits. Disney's stable IP image enables it to expand to various cultural products, such as commodities, theme parks, and adaptations of novels, video games, and other multimedia forms. According to Disney's 2023 report, revenue from goods, food, and drinks in the theme park and experience business unit reached \$7.712 billion. Wasko (2020, p.78) noted that the total sales of Frozen authorized goods exceeded \$1 billion. Singh (2023, p.1) believed that the creation of IP is impossible without stable and effective brand communication, while Wasko (2020, p.87) indicated that Disney is characterized by its 'extreme control' of creative assets. These findings show that image control is not an additional strategy for Disney, but a basic condition for its IP growth and popularity. The reason why Disney's animated characters can become recognized IP images is precisely because of their consistent image control. Audiences can quickly identify these characters in various forms of media. Mickey and Donald Duck maintain their innocent and lovely images, and Disney Princess is still a symbol of beauty and dreams. Zi Han (2025, p.2) indicated that IP management requires clear brand image. For Disney, this means protecting its 'Joy and Dreams' brand image and ensuring that each character and story is consistent with this overall impression, to create strong and successful IP and generate commercial profits.

Disney's control over its image is closely related to meeting audience expectations. As a long-established global media conglomerate, Disney has created a unique brand image with the transmission of innocence, happiness and dreams as the core. For audiences familiar with Disney content, the consistent expression of these themes enables them to identify the brand image and connect with their existing cognitions,

thereby generating emotional resonance. Shimul (2022, p.404) indicated that consumers regard brands as cultural elements and use them to establish emotional connections that meet their expectations, while Japutra et al. (2019, p.458) noted that the consistency of brand image and consumer perception can enhance brand loyalty. Therefore, when the brand image is stable and well-recognized, audiences are more likely to develop a long-term attachment to it. Disney's global influence is based on its consistent theme of innocence, happiness and dreams. Therefore, its strict control of brand image helps maintain the expression of these core themes, and any deviation may undermine the emotional coherence that audiences rely on. Meanwhile, a stronger emotional attachment will increase the possibility of repeated purchases, even leading to impulsive or compulsive purchases (Japutra et al., 2019, p.457). Therefore, Disney's strict management of its brand image has enhanced audience loyalty, thereby promoting growth in product consumption and generating greater commercial revenue. For example, Disneyland's 'Duffy and His Friends' IP, despite the lack of original animation works to support, its products are in strong demand, bringing considerable revenue to the Disney Company. The reason is simple: it is compatible with Disney's 'cute and innocent' brand image. Therefore, Disney's strict control of its brand image ensures brand stability, enabling it to meet audience expectations and generate profits.

2.2. Cultural and Ideological Demands

The media is a mixture of economic interests and ideology, driven by capital, and spreads the values of mainstream groups (Al-Azab, 2024, p.3). As one of the largest media conglomerates worldwide, Disney plays the role of cultural communicator. Therefore, the study of its image control must go beyond market considerations and incorporate cultural perspectives. Additionally, the cultural values pursued by Disney are transmitted through its fixed and stable cultural image, because the identification, reproduction and internalisation of cultural meaning depend on consistency.

The construction of Disney's cultural values depends on its own stable image. This consistent image contains recognisable character definitions and thematic expressions, which serve as carriers of symbolism. As Sullivan (2020, pp.172-173) pointed out, cultural producers encode meanings into symbols, and the audience interprets these symbols according to their cultural background and ideology. For Disney, the cultural values it wants to convey are encoded in the stable image and narrative design of its animated characters. Therefore, these character images are an important medium for audiences to perceive Disney's values. If the image is inconsistent or changes frequently, the symbolic connection between design and meaning will weaken. For example, Disney princesses are usually portrayed as beautiful and brave. Although the narrative of the princess story evolves with changes in social and historical contexts, its core reflects shifting gender roles and expectations in American society (Wasko, 2020, p.145). Based on the ever-changing social history, strict control of the character image is crucial to ensure the spread of Disney's expected values. Improper handling of characters will lead to deviation from Disney's established image, out of audiences' perception, and weaken the effect of cultural communication. Therefore, Disney's strict control of its image allows its expected values to be more accurately coded and disseminated.

Furthermore, since Disney's cultural values are integrated

into its image, strict control is significant because in cross-cultural communication, audiences usually identify the content through established symbols. According to Chu's (2003, p.78) research, symbols with cultural continuity are more readily accepted across cultures, and such continuity depends on stable and consistent symbolic images. For Disney, a concept called Disneyfication, which means 'a social order which is controlled by an all-powerful organization' (Bryman, 1999, p.27), is defined by a thematic narrative that relies on a unified image to ensure expressions across cultural contexts remain coherent and reduce cultural barriers. American cultural values like individualism, heroism and self-actualization which Disney wishes to convey are often rooted in its fairy-tale-like storytelling and characterization which are centred around Disney's themes of childlike wonder and innocence and may be easily understood by diverse audiences. Therefore, only by consistently maintaining Disney's theme of innocent childhood image can a stable medium be established for the dissemination of its cultural values, thereby achieving more effective cross-cultural communication.

2.3. Corporate Management Requirements

Disney's strict control of its brand image is not only related to the consistency of aesthetics and narrative, but also a strategy rooted in corporate brand governance and long-term profit stability. Disney's strict control of corporate image is necessary for maintaining brand consistency. Urde (2013, p.750) noted from a management perspective that brand-oriented enterprises must coordinate internal and external factors around the core of their brand in operations. Keller (1993, p.16) added that a strong brand depends on consistent, coherent brand meaning and maintains stability of the brand knowledge structure through tracking research to ensure brand meaning is consistent across stages and audiences. These studies show that maintaining corporate brand consistency is important to the company's market development. As a brand-driven enterprise, Disney's business expansion in various fields has always revolved around its brand significance. Therefore, Disney's brand image must remain stable and recognisable in different media and environments, which can only be achieved by controlling its self-presentation. Through a stable brand image and consistent expression of the brand's essence, Disney can sustain long-term business growth and its customer base.

Disney's control of its brand image is a key measure in the company's risk management framework. Specifically, a company's risk management is usually aimed at protecting its business reputation, which in turn affects stakeholders, including customers, investors and suppliers. These impacts usually affect the company's performance through changes in revenue or costs (Gatzert, 2015, p.486). Houque et al. (2024, p.1107) further pointed out that companies with a good reputation can obtain lower capital costs and more favourable financing conditions to some extent. This logic is especially important for Disney, which relies on reputation and attaches great importance to brand awareness. Disney's long-term and child-friendly brand image not only constitutes the core of its market positioning, but also affects the way investors and partners monitor their risks. Therefore, any deviation from its characterisation, narrative style or brand values can lead to revenue uncertainty and have a negative impact on the company's relationship with stakeholders. Therefore, Disney's strict control of its image should be regarded as a

mechanism to maintain its reputation, reduce market risks, prevent damage to brand value across its diversified media business, and stabilise long-term stakeholder relationships that are crucial to sustainable revenue growth.

3. The Usage of The Image in Business Practice

Disney's strict control of its brand image runs through all its business practices, which is an essential factor. Based on the evolution of Disney's business development, we can divide the analysis of its brand identification into three stages: early content production, medium-term cross-media narrative, and later enterprise management.

3.1. Content Production

In Disney's content creation, the company integrates symbolic images into character shaping, narrative structure, and visual style through an institutionalised production process. According to Sullivan (2020, p.173), the media encodes its thematic images into the content it produces. Caldwell (2008, p.233) argued that 'all scripts are also business plans' from an industrial perspective, emphasising that business needs essentially influence the art texts of the film and television industries. For Disney, its established symbolic images have set specific standards for content creation. Disney's characterisation has always met the requirements of innocence, kindness and moral integrity. Its visual style is full of fairy-tale elements, including exaggerated, expressive character facial expressions and a soft colour palette. Meanwhile, its narrative content always follows the logic of the growth story and runs through an optimistic, hopeful theme. In addition, the Disney+ streaming platform's entrance adopts brand classification, and its visual design aligns with Disney's consistent childish aesthetics. It is worth noting that Wasko (2020, p.44) mentioned that Disney has enhanced its brand influence and expanded its multiverse after acquiring Pixar, Marvel and Lucasfilm. Kumar and Upadhyay (2024, pp.121-122) further added that although Disney gave these companies creative autonomy, it successfully integrated Star Wars IP into its business portfolio through effective management. For example, Star Wars incorporated Disney-style themes such as 'growth stories and family ties' during the Disney period, while Marvel's promotional images adopted brighter tones. This shows that Disney's institutionalised control of brand image extends to the management level of its acquisition content. In a word, these characteristics show that Disney has always integrated its brand concept of 'family, positive and fantastic' into the content production standards.

3.2. Cross-media Narrative

Disney's business operation takes brand image as the structural principle of narrative expansion, realising cross-platform narrative extension and creating economic benefits. Disney's commercialisation has surpassed its main medium of animated films. Based on its long-established brand image, Disney extends characters, stories and themes to games, stage musicals, theme parks and products. Caldwell (2008, p.233) noted that entertainment works can be presented visually, auditorily, interactively or experientially. Jenkins (2006, p.113) holds a similar view, believing that a successful cross-media system depends on the coherence of each work, so that it is seen as part of a unified whole. Audiences build a

narrative world by collecting information from different media, but this process depends on unified thematic expression (Johnson, 2013, pp.30-31). These theories show the basis of Disney's cross-media narrative: the entertainment content itself can be expressed in many forms, and each medium must show recognisable consistency, reflecting the inevitable result of brand recognition becoming a narrative rule.

Disney has strengthened the extension of its brand image through this 'symbolic consistency' and institutionalised its unified identity. This ensures the narratives in various fields, such as movies, games, theme parks, and products, are consistent in visual style and revolve around themes such as optimism and childlike. For example, in Disney theme parks worldwide, although the characters' costumes may be adjusted to suit different cultures or festivals, the appearance and personality of IP characters remain consistent. Besides, cross-media narratives always revolve around the core of Disney's consistent theme. For example, Frozen focuses on growth, love, and self-identification. These themes run through movies, stage musicals, theme park performances and video games, stabilising the structure of cross-media narrative. Therefore, Disney's cross-media narrative is not about expanding the content to different platforms. By continuously monitoring its symbol system, aesthetic style and values, it integrates its brand image into the cross-media narrative structure itself. This method has promoted business development and created economic benefits.

3.3. Corporate Management

When analyzing Disney's business operations, the company's management must be considered in its control of overall business behavior. Through institutional management, Disney integrates the brand image into the organizational structure and operational processes, making it an important corporate principle. Caldwell (2008, p.233) noted that in the later stages of film and television content development, narrative content is closely linked to the company's economic goals, showing that brand image is crucial as a standardized governance standard. Disney's brand management is achieved mainly through franchising. Johnson (2013, p.38) emphasized that franchising depends on media companies' control over brand image and ideology. This control can ensure a more lasting partnership, so a consistent brand image is essential for business cooperation and expansion.

This is reflected in Disney's expansion, including the establishment of monitoring teams and audit departments to manage the brand image. Any new movie, TV series, authorized goods or theme park projects must go through these processes to ensure that they are consistent with Disney's long-standing family, optimistic and magical brand image. Keller (1993, pp.7-8) noted that enterprise management relies on brand consistency to establish a stable, lasting relationship with market demand. Disney practices this principle through employee management. As an animation studio, it unifies the creative style through standardized training to cater to the market's commercial entertainment orientation. Besides, Disney institutionalizes brand behavior through Disney University training, strict dress code, probation monitoring, hidden supervision, and education on company history and values (such as creating happiness and guarding magic) for theme park performers (Wasko, 2020, pp.95-101). These measures show that Disney's brand image has been integrated into its

management standards to ensure steady progress of the company's business development.

4. The Drawbacks of Strict Image Control

Disney's strict management of its brand image has laid a crucial foundation for its great commercial success. However, it may also prevent the company's commercial development. Firstly, strict image management restricts artistic creativity. As Caldwell's (2008, pp.198-200) industrial author theory suggests, media corporations frequently take a commercially driven approach to creative intervention. This diminishes directors' creative autonomy, forcing compromises toward 'low-risk, high-return' outcomes. Consequently, creativity drifts from its artistic nature, leading to superficiality. Disney, relying on its brand image for commercial expansion, is forced to compromise artistic creativity to some extent for commercial gain, thereby affecting the quality of creative content.

Furthermore, given Disney's global reach and the influence of American cultural hegemony, the aesthetic and value systems embedded in its fixed image become internationally internalized standards. Di Giovanni (2003, p.207) notes that 'Disney films are therefore rightly considered an important part of popular culture worldwide, especially in the United States, a country whose cultural standards and beliefs have crossed national boundaries and penetrated local lifestyles as a consequence of the increasing hegemony of American cinematic products. As observed by Wasko (2020, p.142), the shaping of female characters in Disney movies reflects the aesthetic standards of mainstream American culture, in which the heroine is always beautiful and touching, while the villain is described as ugly, extremely fat or thin. This dominant aesthetic has long been rooted in Disney's character design, forming a stable visual symbol. For decades, this aesthetic perspective has profoundly influenced the aesthetic standards of global audiences. Disney's fixed visual image lays the foundation for the dissemination of its values, but when discussing the cultural content of other countries, it essentially presents those countries' values through American narratives. For example, the movie *Coco* celebrates the Mexican Day of the Dead, but its core remains American-style heroism and individualism, just packaged as a universal theme.

5. Conclusion

This article analyzes the importance of Disney's strict image control for business needs, cultural value communication and corporate governance. Strict image management is important to build intellectual property and meet audiences' expectations. In cultural communication, strict image control enables Disney to integrate its values into the narrative and help audiences understand its meaning. This control can also protect brand value and reduce business risks. This article also discusses how Disney integrates these control images into practice through content creation, cross-media narrative and organizational governance. It institutionalizes the creation of the company's products through strict image control, extends the narrative across multiple media platforms, and integrates the corporate image into operational practice and decision-making. Besides, this article notes that strict image management may limit creative freedom and strengthen the value system centered on the United States. In

the future, I will explore the advantages of image control for Disney compared with other media conglomerates such as Netflix.

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