

Study on the Cultural Narratives and Empowerment Mechanisms of Contemporary Visual Symbols in the Creative Industry

Yao Peng

School of Design, Xiamen University, Xiamen, Fujian 361005, China

Abstract: In the digitally driven communication era, visual symbols have become the core vehicle for cultural expression and industrial interaction. The cultural narrative function they carry is not only a key link in cultural inheritance but also a vital engine for the value upgrade of the creative industry. Drawing on theories of semiotics, cultural communication, and industrial economics, this paper systematically explores the cultural attributes and narrative logic of contemporary visual symbols, as well as their empowerment mechanisms for the creative industry, using literature research and case analysis. The study finds that, through the path of "cultural encoding-narrative construction-industrial transformation," contemporary visual symbols can inject cultural value into the creative industry, strengthen brand identity, and activate user emotions. Practical cases such as the "palace symbols" of the Palace Museum's cultural and creative products, the traditional aesthetic symbols of Henan TV's "Chinese Festivals" series, and the visual elements of Dunhuang IP's murals all demonstrate the effectiveness of visual symbols in empowering creative industries such as cultural tourism, design, and digital content through cultural narratives. This paper further proposes a practical path of "symbol mining-narrative design-technical adaptation-industrial integration," providing theoretical reference and practical guidance for the creative industry to achieve a synergistic enhancement of cultural and economic value through the use of visual symbols.

Keywords: Contemporary Visual Symbols, Cultural Narrative, Creative Industries, Enabling Mechanisms, Symbolic Communication.

1. Introduction

With the advancement of media technology and the upgrading of consumer demand, "visualization" has become a key feature of contemporary cultural communication and industrial development. In street signs, brand logos, film and television animation, and digital cultural and creative products, visual symbols, with their intuitiveness, appeal, and cross-cultural communication advantages, are gradually surpassing verbal texts to become the core medium for conveying cultural connotations and connecting industries and consumers. The creative industry, centered on "cultural creativity," is essentially the creative transformation and innovative development of cultural resources. Visual symbols are crucial vehicles for the visualization and industrialization of cultural resources. For example, the Forbidden City's "dragon patterns" and "palace wall red" have been transformed into cultural and creative products through narrative design, while Dunhuang's "flying apsaras" and "caisson ceilings" have been integrated into games and films through digital technology. Visual symbols are no longer isolated aesthetic elements, but rather "core engines" that activate cultural memory and drive industrial value growth. Current academic research on visual symbols often focuses on the aesthetic characteristics or communication patterns of the symbols themselves, but lacks systematic exploration of their "cultural narrative" function. Research on the empowerment of creative industries often focuses on external factors such as policies and technology, overlooking the crucial role of visual symbols as "carriers of cultural core." This research gap leads to frequent problems of "symbol abuse" and "narrative emptiness" in creative industry practice. Some domestic trend products simply pile on traditional

symbols without exploring the cultural connotations behind them, ultimately falling into homogenized competition. Based on this, this article, centered around the logical chain of "visual symbols-cultural narratives-creative industries," uses real-world cases as support to systematically analyze the cultural narrative logic of contemporary visual symbols, deconstruct their empowerment mechanisms for the creative industry, and propose practical and implementable paths. This research will not only enrich the theoretical intersection of semiotics and creative industry research, but also provide reference for practitioners in fields such as cultural tourism, design, and digital content, helping the creative industry achieve its development goals of "cultural depth and industrial vitality."

2. Definition and Cultural Attributes of Contemporary Visual Symbols

2.1. Connotation and Characteristics of Contemporary Visual Symbols

Visual symbols are visually perceptible carriers of information and meaning, encompassing images, colors, graphics, and logos. Compared to traditional visual symbols, digital technology has given contemporary visual symbols three distinct characteristics: First, digitality. The generation, dissemination, and interaction of symbols all rely on digital media. Examples include dynamic graphics in short videos and virtual avatars in the metaverse, which transcend the physical limitations of traditional symbols. Second, interactivity. Leveraging technologies like AR and VR, visual symbols can interact with users in real time. For example, in the Palace Museum's "Digital Cultural Relics Library," users can zoom and rotate visual symbols on cultural relics, gaining

an immersive understanding of their meaning. Third, cross-disciplinary nature. The same visual symbol can be used across different fields and contexts. For example, the Dunhuang "Flying Apsaras" symbol can appear in mural reproductions, as well as in game skins and clothing patterns, becoming a "common language" connecting diverse creative industries.

2.2. Core Cultural Attributes of Contemporary Visual Symbols

The core value of contemporary visual symbols lies in the cultural attributes they carry, which also forms the foundation for their connection to the creative industry. First, cultural encoding. Visual symbols are a concentrated expression of cultural connotations. In Chinese culture, the color red symbolizes joy and auspiciousness. This encoding stems from traditional folklore and historical memory, and the color red resonates naturally without further explanation. For example, the armor patterns of the Shaanxi Terracotta Warriors embody the military culture and craftsmanship of the Qin Dynasty, becoming a visual representation of regional culture. Second, identity. Visual symbols serve as visual markers of a group's cultural identity. For example, the Mongolian cloud patterns and the Miao silver patterns are not only symbols of national culture but also foster a sense of belonging among group members. This identity provides a basis for the creative industry to precisely target its target audience. Finally, contemporary innovation. Contemporary visual symbols are not simply reproductions of traditional cultural symbols, but rather integrate contemporary aesthetics and techniques with traditional elements. For example, the panda symbol of the "Bing Dwen Dwen" (Bing Dwen Dwen) retains the panda's identity as a Chinese symbol while incorporating the modernity of winter sports through its transparent shell and ice crystal texture, creating a symbol that embodies both traditional and contemporary cultural connotations. These cultural attributes demonstrate that contemporary visual symbols are more than simply aesthetic elements; they are also "carriers of meaning" that connect cultural traditions with contemporary life, and bridge the gap between industry and consumers, laying the foundation for their empowerment of the creative industry [1].

3. The Logic of Cultural Narratives in Contemporary Visual Symbols

Cultural narrative is the core pathway for visual symbols to convey meaning. If visual symbols are "cultural fragments," cultural narrative is the process of piecing together a "meaningful whole." This logic is divided into three levels:

3.1. Symbol Selection: Core Extraction Based on Cultural Consensus

Symbol selection is the starting point for narrative, and its core lies in "cultural consensus." Choosing symbols that are familiar to the public can reduce the cost of understanding and resonate. This consensus can stem from tradition, such as the Palace Museum's use of "dragon patterns" and "palace wall red" in its cultural and creative products, which have become core public perceptions of palace culture over centuries. It can also stem from contemporary memories, such as Henan TV's "Chinese Festivals" program, which chose "Dragon Boat Festival" and "Mid-Autumn Festival Moon," evoking emotional associations through the familiarity of the festivals.

The symbolic choice wasn't a literal copy, but rather a focus on its core. The Dunhuang Academy retained the "flying apsaras," "streaming ribbons," and "light gestures," while removing the mural's complex backgrounds for simpler graphics. This approach preserves the cultural essence while also adapting to contextual settings like cultural creativity and apparel [2].

3.2. Structure Construction: From Linear to Scenarios

Traditional visual symbols often employ "linear narratives," conveying a single meaning through text or image. For example, ancient murals used continuous imagery to tell myths. With the advancement of contemporary media technology, this shift has shifted to "scenarios"-creating specific scenes that allow the audience to actively perceive meaning. The Palace Museum's "Immersive Exhibition" doesn't simply display dragon patterns. Instead, it uses lighting and sound effects to create a "royal palace" setting. Visitors can touch the screen to trigger the dragon patterns' movement, allowing them to more intuitively understand their power and auspicious connotations. NetEase's game "Naraka: Bladepoint" collaborated with Dunhuang to integrate "flying apsaras" into the game's setting. Players can see the apsaras fluttering in the "Dunhuang Map," and the symbols become part of the scene, naturally absorbing the cultural significance. This type of narrative breaks the one-way flow, shifting audiences from passive observation to active participation, significantly enhancing its appeal.

3.3. Meaning Conveyance: Building Emotion and Value

Meaning conveyance is the core goal of narrative, and contemporary visual symbols emphasize the dual construction of "emotional resonance" and "value identification." Emotionally, the "China Lunar Exploration Project" uses the "moon rabbit" as its symbol, inspired by the legend of "Chang'e Flying to the Moon." This symbol conveys technological attributes while evoking a connection to traditional mythology, connecting technology and culture. Value-wise, Li Ning's "National Trend" symbol blends Chinese characters, Chinese knots, and the spirit of sports. The advertisement depicts a scene where young people spread culture through sports, showcasing traditional charm while aligning with young people's pursuit of "cultural confidence," earning recognition [3]. From symbol selection to meaning conveyance, this logic is essentially a process of meaning construction based on cultural consensus, using interactive scenarios as a means, and aiming for emotional and value resonance. This provides a "meaningful carrier" for visual symbols to empower the creative industry.

4. Analysis of the Development Needs of the Creative Industry and the Compatibility of Visual Symbols

The core competitiveness of the creative industry lies in "cultural creativity." Development requires addressing three key issues: building cultural uniqueness, enhancing market recognition, and strengthening user emotional connections. Contemporary visual symbols, with their inherent cultural attributes and narrative power, perfectly meet these needs, becoming a crucial tool for the creative industry to break through. In the face of global competition, creative industries

without cultural uniqueness are prone to homogenization. For example, many cities' "internet-famous check-in spots" share similar architectural styles and business formats, lacking regional cultural characteristics and struggling to maintain long-term appeal. However, visual symbols possess "cultural encoding." Symbols from different regions and ethnic groups carry unique cultural imprints and can serve as "cultural labels." Lijiang Tourism, for example, focuses on the Naxi people's "Dongba script," using this unique script in scenic spot signage, cultural and creative products, and homestay decorations, creating a clear distinction from other tourist destinations and instantly enhancing cultural uniqueness. Creative industry products are often "intangible" or "asset-light" products such as design and digital content. They rely on visual elements to be memorable, otherwise they struggle to stand out from their peers. For example, the visual symbol of Huawei's "HarmonyOS," a dynamic graphic inspired by the Tai Chi diagram, not only conveys the technological concept of "Internet of Everything" but is also instantly memorable, significantly enhancing brand recognition. Without this unique visual symbol, cultural and creative products struggle to leave a lasting impression on consumers [4]. As consumption shifts from "functionality" to "experience," the creative industry must rely on emotions to connect consumers. For example, focusing solely on plot is insufficient for film and television animation. Without relatable visual symbols, long-term memories and IP value are unlikely to emerge. The "identity" of visual symbols can awaken users' cultural memories and a sense of belonging. For example, Pop Mart's blind box collaboration with China Aerospace uses "rocket" and "astronaut" as symbols, appealing to young people's "space dreams" while conveying the value of "confidence in science and technology." This creates an emotional resonance and identification when users collect it. Viewed in this way, visual symbols are not simply "add-on elements" of the creative industry, but rather "core resources" that precisely connect with needs and address pain points, laying the foundation for a deep integration between the two.

5. The Core Mechanism of Visual Symbols Empowering Creative Industries through Cultural Narratives

The empowerment of visual symbols for creative industries isn't simply a "symbol + product" superposition; rather, it relies on cultural narratives to achieve the "cultural value to industrial value" transformation. Four core mechanisms exist: Cultural narratives serve as a crucial bridge for transforming cultural value. The Palace Museum, through documentaries like "I Repair Cultural Relics in the Forbidden City," explores the imperial culture and craftsmanship of "dragon patterns" and "palace wall red," incorporating them into cultural and creative design, generating over 1.5 billion yuan in annual revenue from cultural and creative products alone. The Dunhuang Academy, leveraging its "Digital Dunhuang" platform, uses high-definition imagery to explore the Silk Road cultural heritage of the "Flying Apsaras" figurine and authorizes the release of "Flying Apsaras" skins in games, increasing revenue while promoting Dunhuang culture, achieving a two-way transformation. In the construction of brand identity, visual symbols can help industries move from "remembering symbols" to "being loyal to the brand" - Li

Ning uses "Chinese characters" and "ink" as core symbols, and uses the ink sportswear of the Paris Olympics to convey the concept of "China Li Ning going global", and the sales of the national tide series increased by more than 50% year-on-year; Cha Yan Yue Se uses the symbols of "Changsha dialect" and "Yuelu Mountain" to convey the concept of local tea drinking through packaging and stores. Even in long lines, users are still willing to wait, and it has become a representative of regional brands [5]. In terms of user emotional activation, symbols can enable users to change from "passive viewing" to "active participation" - Henan Satellite TV's "Chinese Festivals" series uses the symbols of "Lotus Goddess" and "Dragon Boat Festival" to evoke festive emotions through the play "Prayer", and then invites users to share Dragon Boat Festival symbols. The series has been viewed over 10 billion times; "Genshin Impact" turns the Zhangjiajie mountains into game symbols, and promotes check-in activities for players to share, which not only increases game stickiness but also promotes local tourism. In terms of industrial ecosystem collaboration, visual symbols serve as a cross-disciplinary "universal language." For example, Sanxingdui, with the "Bronze Sacred Tree" as its core, leverages documentaries to develop the "Ancient Shu Civilization" theme, integrating it into cultural tourism, cultural creativity, film, and television, creating a collaborative ecosystem. Similarly, the "Twenty-Four Solar Terms" symbology leverages short videos to develop a farming culture theme, integrating it into agricultural tourism, food, apparel, and other fields, achieving a "1+1>2" effect. These four mechanisms demonstrate that visual symbols can empower the creative industry through value conversion, brand building, emotional activation, and industrial collaboration, contributing to the cultural upgrade and value growth of the industry.

6. Practical Paths and Optimization Strategies for Empowering Creative Industries with Visual Symbols

Empowering the creative industry with visual symbols requires a four-step approach: "symbol discovery - narrative design - technical adaptation - industrial integration." Optimization strategies must also be developed to address key pain points and ensure sustainable results. The first step in symbol discovery isn't just about piling up symbols; it's about uncovering the cultural core. This involves building a library of visual symbol resources, thoroughly understanding the symbols' connotations through literature research and expert interviews, and selecting symbols that align with cultural consensus and are relevant to the industry. For example, when Henan TV was producing a program on "Chinese Festivals," they researched the Book of Songs and Chu Ci, and interviewed folklore experts to uncover profound symbols like the "Lotus Goddess" and the Dragon Boat Festival. The second step is to design narratives that align with the industry context. Cultural tourism emphasizes immersion, such as Dunhuang's use of VR to create "digital caves" that allow visitors to "enter" the stories told through murals. Cultural and creative industries should balance practicality and culture, like the Forbidden City's "imperial beads headphones," which combine imperial culture with headphone functionality. Digital content emphasizes interactivity. "Naraka: Bladepoint" allows players to complete quests to unlock the story of the "Flying Apsaras," enhancing engagement. The

third step involves technological adaptation, leveraging digital technology to bring symbols to life [6]. AR/VR fosters immersive interaction, AI generates personalized symbols, and big data delivers precise communication. Dunhuang's "Digital Dunhuang" project uses 4K and VR to transform the "Flying Apsaras" from static to dynamic, significantly enhancing its appeal. The fourth step in industrial integration should be centered around symbolic narratives: establishing a unified cultural theme, collaborating with companies from various fields to develop products, and establishing a licensing mechanism to prevent abuse. The "China Space" IP, with its symbols of "rocket" and "astronaut," integrates cultural creativity, apparel, and gaming to create products. This approach relies on standardized licensing and application to form a converged ecosystem. Optimization strategies should address three key pain points: To address superficial symbolism, establish a "symbol-culture" database to capture its underlying meaning, promote collaborative research between companies and universities, and establish standards for in-depth cultural evaluation. The National Cultural Heritage Administration's "Cultural Relics IP Licensing Standards" require products to reflect the symbolic connotations of cultural relics to avoid hollowing out. To address narrative homogeneity, encourage companies to develop personalized narratives tailored to their industry characteristics, establish incentive mechanisms to promote innovative cases, and engage in cross-disciplinary exchanges. Henan TV's "Chinese Festivals" broke with the traditional gala format by incorporating dance and underwater filming, ultimately becoming a hit. To protect intellectual property, establish a symbolic property registration system, strengthen law enforcement to combat piracy, and have industry associations establish application standards. The Dunhuang Academy established the "Dunhuang Cultural IP Licensing Center," which effectively registers the property rights of "Flying Apsaras" and "Caijing" (lit. caisson ceilings) and regulates licensing.

7. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the "Cultural Narratives of Contemporary Visual Symbols and the Empowerment Mechanism of the Creative Industry." Combining literature research and case analysis, it systematically examines the cultural attributes and narrative logic of visual symbols, as well as their empowerment mechanisms and practical paths for the creative industry. The study found that contemporary visual symbols possess three major cultural attributes: cultural encoding, identity recognition, and contemporary innovation. Their cultural narratives follow a path of "symbol selection-structure construction-meaning transmission," perfectly suiting the creative industry's needs for "building cultural uniqueness, enhancing market recognition, and

strengthening user emotional connections." Visual symbols can also be used to "transform cultural value and build brand identity." The four major mechanisms of "visual construction, user emotional activation, and industrial ecosystem collaboration" deeply empower the creative industry. The path of "symbol mining-narrative design-technological adaptation-industrial integration," coupled with the optimization strategy of "exploring cultural depth, creating narrative innovation, and protecting intellectual property rights," can effectively promote the deep integration of the two. On a theoretical level, this article establishes an interdisciplinary research framework of "visual symbols-cultural narratives-creative industries," enriching the interdisciplinary theories of semiotics, cultural communication, and industrial economics, and filling the research gap on "how visual symbols and cultural narratives empower the creative industry." On a practical level, these empowerment mechanisms and paths can provide reference for practitioners in fields such as cultural tourism, cultural creativity, and digital content, helping the industry achieve the coordinated growth of cultural and economic value. However, this study has limitations: the case studies focus primarily on traditional cultural visual symbols, with insufficient research on the empowerment of emerging symbols such as virtual idols and environmental protection. Future research could expand the scope to explore the differences in empowerment mechanisms across different types of symbols, as well as empowerment paths in cross-national and cross-cultural contexts, to provide more theoretical support for cultural integration and value upgrading in the global creative industry.

References

- [1] Zhao Hongxun, Zeng Dandan. Interactive ritual construction of Beijing Winter Olympics communication in the digital context [J]. China Media Technology, 2022, (04): 11-14. DOI: 10.19483/j.cnki.11-4653/n.2022.04.002.
- [2] Miettinen SA, Sarantou M, Akimenko D. Narrative-based art as a means of dialogue and empowerment [J]. Mediation: Art and Design Institutions and Public Space Participation, London: Royal College of Art, 2016: 137-149.
- [3] Yang Hui, Dai Haibo. Scene, symbolization, and concretization: innovative expression of visual narrative in ritual cultural programs - taking "Poetry and Painting of China" as an example [J]. Educational Media Research, 2024, (03): 101-105. DOI: 10.19400/j.cnki.cn10-1407/g2.2024.03.013.
- [4] Belfiore E. Whose cultural value? Representation, power and creative industries [J]. International Journal of Cultural Policy, 2020, 26(3): 383-397.
- [5] Mayo M. Culture, community, identity: cultural strategies for participation and empowerment [M]. Springer, 2000.
- [6] Burgess J E. Vernacular creativity and new media [D]. Queensland University of Technology, 2007.