

IP Research That Is Currently Exploding in Popularity

- Taking Chiikawa as an Example

Wenjie Wan^{1,a,*}

¹*Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Macau University of Science and Technology, Macau, 999078, China*

a. 20098533a311005@student.must.edu.mo

**corresponding author*

Abstract: As a cultural asset, animation IP has high commercial value. With the development of streaming media, many influential commercial animation IPs have appeared on online platforms. This paper employs a case analysis methodology to scrutinize Chiikawa, a comic that has garnered popularity across social media platforms in both China and Japan in recent years. By delving into its character symbols, satisfaction of consumer demand, marketing strategies, and providing a succinct overview of its evolution within the Chinese market, the paper elucidates the significance of animation IP communication on emerging media platforms, as well as the underlying factors contributing to its widespread appeal. Through empirical analysis of current social characteristics, it is believed that IP content should conform to public preferences and meet audience needs. It should not only meet aesthetic needs in appearance, but also resonate with people emotionally, help them resist the pressure of fast-paced life, and meet spiritual needs. In terms of marketing, IP should utilize new media platforms and expand multi-channel operations to capitalize on cultural resources and build a complete IP industry chain. This study provides a reference for subsequent related research reports, guides the creation of animation IP, and gives suggestions and inspirations in the context of the current situation of China's animation IP business operation model.

Keywords: Chiikawa, Streaming comics, IP marketing

1. Introduction

Chiikawa is a comic Chiikawa launched by Japanese writer and illustrator Nagano on the online media X (formerly Twitter) in 2020. After being animated in 2022, its popularity has exploded. In the ranking of the best popular products released by "Nikkei Trends December 2022 Issue", Chiikawa peripheral products ranked second [1]. It also ranked second in Line's youth fashion trend survey in the first half of 2023 [2]. In the Japan Research Center (NRC) survey, Chiikawa ranked first among Japanese people's favorite peripheral products in 2023 [3]. As of May 2024, its official account has more than 3 million fans on X. In Japan, these anime characters can be found in McDonald's, Uniqlo, trams and almost everywhere. On March 29, 2024, a joint pop-up store between Miniso and Chiikawa opened in Shanghai. On the first day of the event, sales reached 2.68 million yuan in just 10 hours, and the average customer consumption exceeded 1,000 yuan [4]. On the Chinese website Bilibili, the official account has more than 600,000 fans within four months of its establishment. Its cartoon image

is also active in every corner of China's social media, which shows its current popularity in China and Japan.

In previous studies, studies on Japanese animation were mostly discussions of animated films or traditional long-form serialized animation. With the explosive growth of users of social network platforms, individual creators have become the focus. Due to the development time, there has been a lack of discussion on works on streaming media and social platforms in recent years. Therefore, under the framework of historical event theory, this article uses the case of Chiikawa to analyze from multiple angles the reasons why Chiikawa is so popular in China and Japan using this emerging communication method as a medium. In contemporary society, characterized by a burgeoning demand for spiritual culture and the rise of online social platforms, conducting thorough analysis proves instrumental in comprehending their communication significance and delineating effective business strategies. This analysis also serves as a valuable point of reference for future endeavors in commercial IP creation and development.

2. Chiikawa's Character Symbol Attributes

2.1. Visual Symbols

In Japan, "cute" culture is very popular. Whether it is the elderly or children, Japanese people naturally have a pursuit of "small and cute" and "exquisite and simple" in their aesthetic consciousness. Japanese people regard this as a precious character. In terms of visual image symbols, the comic style of Chiikawa characters is cute and relaxing [5]. Chiikawa's comic characters mostly appear as two-headed animals or food mimics. Wherever food appears in comics, the comic author also uses a lot of cute and vivid onomatopoeia. This style made Chiikawa quickly become known. Many fans who love Chiikawa say that they were attracted to Chiikawa's cute image when they first got to know it. "Cute" is the image of many Japanese animations, such as Sanrio, and Pikachu, which are very popular around the world and have brought huge economic benefits to Japan.

2.2. Emotional Symbols

Contrary to its cute appearance, the core of Chiikawa's story is an anti-Utopia existence, where one can glimpse the dark side of reality from the world constructed by the animation. Anime characters interact and influence each other, creating a series of relationships that reflect cultural and social realities. The characters are products of society [6]. The world of Chiikawa is a world with beautiful natural scenery and food flowing out like spring water. Although there is free food, the "chiikawas" must also work hard to earn wages in exchange for other daily necessities, such as weeding, labeling, or fighting monsters. Their lives are still full of challenges, such as the failure of missions, the monster Kimera that will appear at any time, and not enough salary. They worked hard to obtain certificates, but they still had to live in dilapidated houses and experienced various failures and difficulties. Even so, Chiikawa did not give up his determination to move forward. This spirit of perseverance and mutual dedication moved many viewers. Although the conditions are difficult, the "chiikawas" help each other and save each other. The difficulties encountered by "chiikawas" are common problems faced by contemporary young people in life. "chiikawas" also experience the same survival challenges and social anxiety, but they still face life optimistically and never give up, inspiring people in the current social context. It also brings comfort and encouragement to people, helping them cope with the stress and anxiety in their lives. On the Internet, Chiikawa has been described by many people as the "electronic ibuprofen" for adults.

3. The Communication Significance of Chiikawa and Satisfaction of Consumer Demand

Some scholars believe that anime subculture is a lifestyle culture that arises from the otaku's values, worldview, and other aspects of daily life and interpersonal interactions. The meaning of this culture or lifestyle is mainly divided into two levels. One is the pleasure and happiness that meets the basic needs of human nature, and the other is the satisfaction of self-identity and social identity [7].

3.1. Desire and Pleasure Needs

In the fast-paced contemporary society, while people have sufficient material resources, they also face huge spiritual vacancies. People will pay more attention to the added value brought by-products and have unprecedented interest and desire for products with higher spiritual value [8]. This change in consumption patterns has increased people's spiritual needs and gained satisfaction from them. Otakus can freely imagine and control space in the virtual world described in anime works. They believe that the characters and scenes in the two-dimensional world are more beautiful than the real world [7]. Fans of Chiikawa collect a large number of various peripheral products, queue up in long lines outside peripheral sales stores, and create and publish related secondary content, such as emoticons or fan works. They use this behavior to fill the holes in their spiritual world in order to obtain the desires and pleasures buried deep in their hearts.

3.2. The Need For Self-identity and Group Identification

In the production process of popular culture, it is often accompanied by a sense of "resistance". This does not mean blindly accepting the ideology of the ruling class without judgment, but constantly fighting against it and expressing and adhering to one's own values through various means, such as consumption choices, and cultural creation [9]. The current youth subculture style is no longer like the resistance to class conflicts and competition for voice in the early Birmingham School theory, but the resistance to the life pressure brought about by social changes [10]. Young people use their way to relieve their emotions and relieve stress more gently. Today, whether in Japan or China, studies, work, social interaction, etc. have brought tremendous pressure to young people. When people face reality, they often adapt to society by suppressing their nature according to social conventions. In Chiikawa, Chiikawa, who loves to cry when seeing monsters, will overcome fear and stand up for his friends when they are in trouble. Poor Hachiware will also generously give gifts to friends and care about his friends' emotions. In particular, the free-spirited Usagi does not hide his emotions. His character of doing whatever he wants and having the courage to try attracts fans. The madness he reveals from time to time is also a true portrayal of many people's spiritual world. People project themselves onto characters, use characters to resist dissatisfaction in life, and allow themselves to be flawed and imperfect. Satisfy people's identification with their ideal self.

Comments such as "Baby, I love your face so much" and "Who doesn't have a cute baby" are often seen on online media. The image of Chiikawa has big, round eyes and face, and its appearance is similar to that of an infant. Many comments about the experiences of the "chiikawas" in the story called them "distressed" and "poor". This image of a young child in need of protection can inspire the audience's desire for protection and trigger the audience's maternal emotions, thus forming a "digital upbringing" of the character. This maternal emotion is also closely related to socialization and identity, especially for young women. By paying attention to and sharing these cute images, they can express their sense of social responsibility and gain social recognition and recognition. In real life, people long to find identity and belonging in society. This sense of identity not only satisfies inner needs but also helps people determine their position and role in society. Therefore, group identity plays an important role in daily life, helping people build relationships, filling feelings of emptiness and loneliness, and providing emotional security.

3.3. Social Needs

In the process of information exchange connecting themselves and others, people need to communicate with the outside world and establish social relationships through various symbols [11]. As a symbol, chiikawa has a strong ability to convey information. Characters provide people with a common topic. People communicate and share through characters to express their thoughts and opinions. It is also a medium for people to communicate. It can be seen that when a group of people share common interests, the social circle of the same people will be further expanded online and offline, gaining a sense of group identity and satisfying people's social needs.

4. Chiikawa's Communication and Commercial Marketing and Expansion into the Chinese Market

4.1. The Dissemination of Chiikawa in New Media

With the development of mobile terminals such as mobile phones, new media communication using digital technologies such as Internet technology for real-time information exchange and sharing has become very flexible and convenient [12]. Different from traditional publishing in books and periodicals or on specialized comic platforms, Chiikawa is released on the online social platform X (Twitter) in the form of daily updates. The animation is also released on YouTube, TVer and other platforms. Each episode is only about a minute long. This kind of short content can quickly attract an audience, allowing people to find a moment of relaxation and entertainment in today's fast-paced society. Publishing on social platforms also has the feature of being easy to share, which can spread quickly on the Internet and push the content to a wider audience. At the same time, the characteristics of social media and online communities make it one of the main places for modern people to conduct social activities. People can transcend the limitations of geography, time and identity, express their true selves more freely and anonymously, and share fun and ideas with other like-minded people around the world. The online platform provides a more comfortable, free and equal communication space that is more open and inclusive.

With the expansion of postmodern cultural consciousness, Japan's role economy is developing in a more refined direction. There is a trend of gradually developing from the original "story consumption" to "database consumption" [13]. That is to say, the animation created before the 1980s was based on telling a good and exciting story as the top priority to gain market. It has gradually transformed into one that has little to do with the original animation. Consumers only appropriate the separate fragments of the worldview, story settings, characters, etc. in the animation works, and then consume these information fragments after combining them. New media just provides a platform for the transmission of "popular elements" information derived from these fragments of information [13]. For example, the character Usagi in Chiikawa has won the love of a large number of people because he can express his emotions unabashedly by making various bold "strange screams". On Bilibili, fans have combined Usagi's voice with rap songs, and the song has been played more than two million times.

The dissemination of new media also promotes the development of Chiikawa in China. Due to the rapid transmission of information on the Internet, it provides more channels for its promotion and dissemination, promoting cross-cultural exchanges and integration. Most of the users of social media are teenagers, who are of the same age as animation and subculture enthusiasts. Chiikawa first became popular in China through various emoticons that appeared in the form of characters in Chiikawa. People choose, use and create these emoticons based on their aesthetics and consciousness, and these symbols also reflect their emotions, attitudes and opinions [14]. Social platforms and these emoticons provide a channel for people to vent their stress and express their emotions.

4.2. Chiikawa Business Marketing

In the production of traditional animation cultural products, novels, comics, newspapers and magazines, TV animations, etc., are already manifestations of the integration of multiple industry resources. The industrial integration between early works has initially revealed the strategy of IP operation, which is also the only way for the development of animation culture [15]. Chiikawa first serialized comics on the X (former Twitter) account of its author Nagano. Later, Kodansha acquired the copyright, established an independent account and published physical comic books. It has been animated in 2022 and is broadcast on Fuji Channel every Friday morning.

As the derivatives of ACG IP gradually drive the development of various offline physical industries, such as offline activities, theme restaurants, etc., related industries are also paying more attention to the benefits brought by high-quality ACG IP. The two are mutually beneficial. The “dimension-breaking” construction of ACG IP has driven industries such as catering, construction, and tourism. The various peripherals produced by it also require the support of the manufacturing industry [15]. In Japan, Chiikawa has everything from daily necessities to clothing and food, shopping malls, tourist landmarks and other areas, covering all aspects of life. In particular, it has launched a large number of offline-themed restaurants. For example, in a cafe called “Chiikawa cafe”, tickets were sold out ten minutes after they went on sale. The large-scale cross-border joint activities enable it to break through the information cocoon and expand its audience scope. One netizen said that he was originally a collector of red ink stamp, but he learned about and became a fan of Chiikawa because of the joint red ink stamp event between Chiikawa and Gokokuji Temple in Tokyo.

It can be seen that peripheral development is a very important part of business. In the past, if Chinese fans wanted to obtain Chiikawa-related products, they could only purchase them through overseas purchasing agents with slightly higher prices. However, in March 2024, the joint peripheral sales with Miniso in China became the first time for genuine peripherals to be sold in China. Attracting a large number of fans to consume, fans can obtain it more cheaply and conveniently. In addition, Chiikawa also “invades” people’s real lives. Chiikawa character peripherals can often be seen online, especially the dolls that often appear in people’s daily life pictures posted on social platforms (Plogs). People eat, study, sleep, and travel with “chiikawas” Fans decorate it, let the “chiikawas” accompany them, and create related topics on online platforms to share.

The scale of the animation industry chain is composed of multiple factors. Among them, the value of the product itself and the IP value of the animation image are two important components. When these two values are integrated, the added value generated will promote the growth of the entire industry chain. The realization of the complete IP value chain and its added value is the result of a two-way interaction between content and audience [16]. Content creators continue to create interesting and attractive works to attract audiences, while audiences increase the influence and value of IP by consuming, sharing and interacting with IP content. This two-way interaction promotes the addition of the animation industry chain to continuous growth in value. Commercial benefits can be achieved through effective business operations and marketing promotions such as extensive cross-border collaborative events and pop-up activities. The realization of this commercial value promotes the development of the animation industry chain.

5. Enlightenment

China has a huge consumer market for the animation industry, but among the commercial IPs that have appeared in recent years, there are no representative IP outputs. Old IPs from countries such as the United States, Japan, and Korea still occupy the majority of the market share. With the advent of the pan-entertainment era, the success of IPs like Chiikawa, which rely heavily on streaming media

for dissemination, has brought inspiration to the development of China's animation IP industry in the current era.

First of all, IP developers and operators should pay close attention to the needs of current audience groups. In a modern society with abundant materials and rapid development, it is important to keenly capture the emotional needs of the audience. Pay attention to the proximity of cultures in cross-cultural communication and create animation products that are universally acceptable regardless of national boundaries, race, language, age, etc. At the same time, there should be progress in values, aesthetics, and artistic expression techniques, so that different audience groups can find emotional resonance and identification and obtain aesthetic satisfaction and joyful satisfaction [17]. When companies make business decisions, they cannot only focus on the economic value of IP and accelerate the IP research and development cycle to quickly obtain benefits. On the contrary, companies should pay more attention to the development of social values such as content and value communication in order to achieve sustainable development and profitability [18].

Secondly, IP developers and operators should focus on the realization of animation IP and other cultural products from production to marketing. The core principle of IP is to achieve "capitalization of cultural resources" [15]. Cultural resources need to be processed, formed into creative stories, conceptually packaged, accepted by the market through marketing means, and have incremental value effects through transactions before they can be transformed into cultural capital [17]. IP developers and operators should extend and build a complete animation industry chain, gradually expand outward from the core content of IP, and drive its online and offline peripheral industries, such as cultural industries and derivative products. However, China's current IP derivative products are in a single form and are still defined in the narrow scope of animation ancillary products. Most of them are still low-end and copy-and-paste products, which are "fake products" that lack customer markets and IP content [19]. In the commercial marketing of IP, capital support is needed to achieve resource integration and industry integration in various industries, fully develop IP with high-quality connotations, and improve competitiveness.

6. Conclusion

With the development of society, the development potential of IP operating on social media network platforms cannot be underestimated. Through new media communication, Chiikawa attracts the audience visually and emotionally through character symbols. It also brings emotional comfort to people in today's society and helps them gain a sense of identity in themselves and society. Therefore, in today's social context, IP content should cater to and meet the different needs of the audience, especially to make up for people's spiritual void under the rapid economic development. The development of pan-entertainment and the resulting database-style consumption of people on new media platforms also indicate that operating channels on social platforms should be developed in an all-round way.

Its business operation model also provides new ideas for popular Internet IPs in the future. In terms of IP operations, the first is to carry out publicity and exposure, which can be done through cross-border collaborative events and new media platforms to expand the audience and increase fans. The second is to realize business, drive the development of surrounding industries through IP, and realize the construction of the entire IP industry chain, thereby making profits from it.

This paper conducts a theoretical analysis of the content and marketing of Chiikawa, an IP that is currently popular in both China and Japan, and gives suggestions based on the current dilemma of IP development in China. It aims to provide reference and help for the incubation and commercial marketing of animation IP in the future. However, today's society is changing so fast. IPs are constantly emerging, and some IPs become popular but quickly lose their advantages. Following IPs

such as Lina Bell and Loopy, how long can this "Chiikawa" trend last? How to create an IP that can have long-term popularity and monetization capabilities is still a question that can be explored.

References

- [1] Nikkei Cross Trend. (2022). [Top 30 Hit Products of 2022] Top 30 Hit Products of 2022 Selected by Nikkei Trendy. Retrieved from <https://www.nikkei.com/compass/content/XTRKDB0000B8y5/preview>
- [2] LINE Corporation. (2023). LINE Research, Regular Survey on Trends Among Young People (First Half of 2023). Retrieved from <https://linecorp.com/ja/pr/news/ja/2023/4623>
- [3] Japan Research Center. (2024). NRC Character Web Survey 2023 Part 4: Characters Who Purchased Merchandise. Retrieved from <https://www.nrc.co.jp/report/240415.html>
- [4] Xinhua New Agency. (2024). China's Brand Licensing Market Attracts Attention from Japanese Animation IP. Retrieved from <http://www.news.cn/20240401/b936011ca110442b891c2373b1e16216/c.html>
- [5] Lu, SN. (2015). A Brief Discussion of Japan's "Cute Culture". *Journal of Chinese Language and Literature*, 08, 104-105.
- [6] Han RB. (2021). Cultural Symbolism and Symbolic Expression of Animation Characters. *Shandong Social Sciences*, 08, 161-167.
- [7] Borijihanzhuona. (2014). *I am lost, therefore I am*. University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Graduate School.
- [8] Qi YJ. (2023). Symbolic Consumption and Emotional Support in Cultural and Creative Design. *Cultural Industry*, 35, 121-123.
- [9] Luo X. (2016). Research on "Resistance" Strategies of Popular Culture. *Journal of Xiangnan University*, 37(04), 42-45+52.
- [10] Guo JX. (2020). *Research on The Subcultural Style of Online Virtual Anchors*. Xiangtan University.
- [11] Peng L., Yao XD. (2022). The Continuation of Animation Character IP Value in Communication in The Digital Media Era. *Art View*, 03, 73-75.
- [12] Chen X. (2023). Analysis of The Communication Characteristics Of Japanese Animation Culture Under The Background of New Media - Comment on "New Media and The Communication of Japanese Animation Culture". *Media*, 23, 97-98.
- [13] Han RB. (2015). Postmodern Consumer Culture and The Construction of Japanese Character Consumption Model. *Dongyue Forum*, 36(01), 61-71.
- [14] Gao HY. (2023). Application of Emoticon IP in Brand Design from The Perspective of Youth Subculture. *Shanghai Packaging*, 12, 123-125.
- [15] Lin ZC. (2022). *Research on The IPization of Two-dimensional Works from A Cross-media Perspective*. Jilin University.
- [16] Chen M., Yang HJ. (2023). Thoughts on The Development Path of Domestic Animation and IP Communication - taking "Chinese Ancient Poetry Animation" and "Peking Opera Cat" As Examples. *News Communication*, 17, 22-24.
- [17] Li Y. (2017). Animation Adaptation of Chinese Literary Classics from The Perspective of Cultural Resource Capitalization. *Sichuan Drama*, 12, 51-54.
- [18] Ge LJ., Zhang L. (2021). Research on The Operation Model of Domestic Animation IP - Taking the IP Operation of "Oolong Yuan" as An Example. *Communication and Copyright*, 07, 104-107.
- [19] Zhou C. (2021). Research on Animation IP Incubation and Derivative Product Development and Application. *Animation Research*, 00, 87-90.