

Research on the Consumption of Cultural Symbols in the Digital Media Era: Take the Movie Ne Zha 2 as an Example

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Abstract. In the digital media era, symbolic consumption is essentially a form of cultural consumption. Cultural symbols continuously evolve with the trends of the times, taking on various forms. Among these, the method of reconstructing traditional cultural symbols by integrating them with modern values has effectively achieved innovative transformations of cultural symbols. Ne Zha 2 exemplifies this approach by subverting traditional characterizations and creatively developing a successful cultural symbol, thereby gaining widespread popularity among consumers. This paper adopts the encoding/decoding theory from cultural studies, combined with case analysis, to explore how Ne Zha 2 achieves the innovative construction of cultural symbols. The study finds that the film enhances audience identification with traditional culture by reshaping mythological figures and constructing youth-oriented narratives, while also expanding the market influence of cultural symbols.

Keywords: Digital media era, Cultural symbols, Symbolic consumption, Ne Zha 2

1. Introduction

Consumption refers to the act of purchasing and utilizing goods or services to fulfill human needs. As the core component of economic activity, it bridges production and distribution. With the advent of the digital era, living standards have undergone a qualitative leap. Consequently, consumption is no longer merely about material satisfaction derived from goods, but increasingly centers on the cultural values, spiritual connotations, and symbolic meanings embedded within them.

As Mike Featherstone observes in *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, contemporary consumer culture prioritizes the consumption of aesthetically and culturally significant objects over mere subsistence needs [1]. This shift has prompted producers to deliberately encode cultural symbols aligned with consumer preferences, which are then actively decoded by consumers to achieve dual material and spiritual fulfillment.

Against this backdrop, Ne Zha 2 adeptly caters to the demand for innovative adaptations of Chinese mythological content amid the digital media era's cultural symbol consumption boom. By doing so, it evokes audiences' cultural identification and confidence in Chinese traditions.

Thus, grounded in encoding/decoding theory, this paper analyzes Ne Zha 2 to explore the essence of cultural symbol consumption in the digital age and its evolution within globalized and digitized contexts. The study not only elucidates modern interpretations of symbolic consumption but also

provides theoretical and practical insights for the construction and dissemination of cultural symbols.

2. The modern evolution of cultural symbol consumption

2.1. The contemporary evolution of cultural symbol consumption

The consumption of cultural symbols refers to consumers' attention not only to the material utility of goods or services, but also to their embedded cultural meanings, symbolic values, and social identities [2]. In modern society, cultural symbols serve as emotional bridges that connect individuals across regions and backgrounds. With globalization and digital technology advancing rapidly, cultural symbol consumption has evolved beyond traditional forms, showing greater diversity, personalization, and interactivity.

Under the influence of globalization, cultural symbols increasingly transcend regional and ethnic boundaries. Consumption is no longer just about material satisfaction but also about expressing identity, values, and belonging. Cultural symbols have thus become key tools through which individuals engage with, experience, and communicate culture. Different cultural backgrounds lead to diverse consumer preferences, fostering both cultural integration and the richness of the global marketplace.

Digital technologies further amplify these dynamics. Consumers now actively participate in the creation and circulation of cultural symbols through social media and virtual platforms. This shift from passive reception to active engagement enables deeper immersion in the narratives and meanings behind cultural products, strengthening emotional identification and facilitating both preservation and innovation of cultural heritage.

Taking *Ne Zha 2* as an example, the film embodies a successful case of combining traditional Chinese mythology with modern storytelling and animation technology. On the global stage, the film reinterprets the classic image of Ne Zha to align with modern values such as individuality and rebellion, thereby lowering cultural barriers and enhancing global resonance. Visually, it merges traditional aesthetics with Hollywood-style 3D animation, appealing to both domestic and international audiences.

Digitally, the film utilized advanced production techniques such as AI rendering and virtual workflows, improving visual effects and narrative immersion. These innovations, along with targeted online distribution and audience interaction, allowed *Ne Zha 2* to meet the evolving expectations of younger, tech-savvy viewers and reflect broader trends in cultural symbol consumption.

2.2. Challenges and risks in the modern consumption of cultural symbols

However, while the consumption of cultural symbols brings positive impacts, it also faces several challenges and issues.

Firstly, the commercialization and marketization of cultural symbols may lead producers to prioritize production and sales while neglecting the essential "cultural" nature of cultural products. This can result in superficial or homogenized cultural connotations. Originally rich in traditional significance and regional characteristics, cultural symbols may gradually lose their profound cultural distinctiveness under the influence of consumerism, becoming mere commodities for mass production and replication. This not only weakens cultural diversity and complexity but also significantly diminishes consumers' emotional resonance during cultural experiences.

Secondly, as the consumption of cultural symbols progresses toward globalization, it risks fostering cultural hegemony. Western developed countries, leveraging their strong economic power and media influence, may impose their own cultural symbols and values on other regions. Consequently, affected countries and regions could gradually lose their indigenous cultures amid the overwhelming influx of foreign cultural elements, leading to an imbalance in cultural ecosystems and blurred cultural identities.

Furthermore, although the rapid advancement of digital technology has enabled faster dissemination of cultural symbols, consumers in an environment of overwhelming information overload often struggle to deeply comprehend the underlying meanings of these symbols. This contributes to the fragmentation and "fast-foodization" of culture, where profound cultural elements are reduced to shallow, easily digestible snippets.

3. Encoding and decoding of cultural symbols

3.1. Theoretical interpretation

The encoding and decoding of cultural symbols is an important concept in cultural studies, which is mainly used to analyze the process of generation, transmission and reception of cultural meaning. This theoretical framework was proposed by British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall to reveal how cultural symbols are given meaning in specific social contexts.

Coding refers to the process by which cultural producers embed specific meanings, values, or ideologies into cultural symbols. When a commodity or consumer is consumed as a symbol, its value "does not depend at all on the thing itself, but as a function of the logic of meaning", and at this stage, the producer transforms the cultural connotation into a concrete symbol system through various forms such as language, images, and sounds [3]. The encoding process is influenced by the producer's own position, cultural background, and social power structure, so cultural symbols are often not neutral, but carry specific ideologies or cultural preferences. Three hypothetical positions of coders in the propagation process are proposed: dominant hegemony, Negotiate, and Anti-hegemony [4]. Decoding refers to the process by which the audience interprets cultural symbols and extracts meaning from them. Different from coding, decoding is not a simple passive acceptance, but an active and dynamic process of meaning reconstruction, which produces three interpretation methods: hegemonic interpretation, negotiation interpretation, and confrontational interpretation for the three illusion positions of encoding. Dominant-hegemonic decoding: The audience fully accepts the meaning embedded by the producer, which is highly consistent with the coder's intent. Consultative decoding: The audience partially accepts the meaning of the coder, but at the same time modifies or adjusts the meaning based on their own experience and social context. Adversarial decoding: The audience completely rejects the meaning of the coder and interprets the cultural symbol from the opposite perspective. The model, proposed by Stuart Hall, explains the process of information from production to reception, emphasizing that meaning is not fixed, but is dynamically generated through encoding and decoding. The inequality of class status between the coder and the decoder, the coder chooses the encoding method that suits his class interests, and the decoder will also interpret the information from his own class standpoint, and the decoding process is affected by the cultural background, social status, personal experience, and power relations of the audience, so the same cultural symbol may be interpreted by different audiences with completely different meanings [5].

3.2. Case study

Taking Ne Zha 2 as an example, the filmmakers reinterpreted traditional Chinese mythology by preserving Ne Zha's core traits of bravery and justice, while infusing him with modern teenage characteristics like rebellion, loneliness, and confusion. Classic themes such as "rebellion against patriarchy" and "changing one's fate" are reframed through a modern lens, highlighting values like freedom, equality, and individual consciousness. As Raymond Williams suggests, cultural symbols are inseparable from social practices and power structures.

Visually and narratively, Ne Zha 2 is more creative than many other myth-based films. The traditional "lotus incarnation" is replaced with a punk-inspired image, emphasizing resistance and individuality. The film blends traditional aesthetics—such as ink painting and paper-cutting—with 3D animation, using bold colors and dynamic visual effects. Signature items like the Chaotian Aya and Qiankun Circle are redesigned with mechanical elegance, reflecting both heritage and modernity. These design choices root the film in contemporary culture while reinforcing national cultural confidence.

The new Ne Zha shifts from a divine figure to a more humanized character. While retaining the theme of resisting fate, the story emphasizes self-exploration and personal choice—resonating with younger audiences and conveying traditional values through modern forms.

Audience interpretations vary. Some adopt a dominant reading, embracing the film's message of self-determination and cultural revival. Others negotiate the meaning, admiring the visuals but critiquing possible commercialization. The ideological dimension—embodied in the line "I am the master of my fate"—mirrors modern emphases on self-realization.

For Chinese youth navigating academic and social pressures, Ne Zha symbolizes a fight for autonomy and self-worth. International viewers, drawn by cultural novelty and universal themes like family and growth, may see the film as a window into China's evolving cultural expression. In sum, the decoding of Ne Zha 2 reveals how traditional culture and modern narratives intersect, reflecting the rich potential of cultural symbols in contemporary storytelling.

4. The dilemma and countermeasures of cultural symbol construction

4.1. The construction dilemma caused by cultural barriers in the coding process

Cultural barriers are a common phenomenon in coding cultural symbols, especially in the design phase. Due to the obvious cultural differences between people in different regions, consumers in the global market find it difficult to understand the true meaning of some cultural symbols, which makes developers have to make certain compromises and adjustments in the process of coding cultural symbols, so that the symbols can be accepted by different consumer groups. In response to this phenomenon, cultural symbol creators can adopt "cross-cultural adaptation theory" and "symbolic interaction theory" to solve it. First of all, the constructor should have a deep understanding of the values, customs, and cognitive patterns of the target culture to avoid cultural misinterpretation. In Ne Zha 2, the creator, based on the image of Ne Zha in the original traditional mythological story, endowed Ne Zha 2 with a new connotation of "rebellious against fate and self-identification", which not only retains the core spirit of traditional culture, but also meets the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences. Through modern visual language and emotional expression, cultural barriers are reduced. Secondly, the symbolic interaction theory emphasizes that the meaning of symbols is generated in interaction, and the constructor can jointly construct the meaning of the symbol through continuous communication with the target cultural group, so that it can resonate

with consumers and enhance the acceptance and recognition of cultural symbols. The reconstruction of Ne Zha's image has formed a good emotional resonance with the audience, making it a symbol connecting tradition and modernity, culture and individuality. This innovative change not only made the local audience feel familiar, but also attracted the attention of the international audience, and successfully realized the cross-cultural communication of cultural symbols.

4.2. Cultural misunderstandings and biases in the decoding process

In the process of disseminating cultural symbols, due to the different cultural backgrounds and cognitive forms of consumers, their understanding of foreign cultural symbols will be biased. Cultural misunderstanding refers to the misunderstanding or interpretation of other people's behaviors, languages, symbols, or customs due to differences in cultural background when decoding cultural symbols. Cultural bias refers to the underestimation and depreciation of the cultural value of a symbol due to its incomplete understanding of its meaning and connotation. These two phenomena affect the decoding effect of consumers and greatly limit the depth and breadth of cultural symbols in the global market. In this regard, cultural translation theory points out that in the dissemination of cultural symbols, symbolic information needs to be "re-encoded" in different contexts to adapt to the cognitive framework of local culture. Symbol constructors should deeply understand the historical background and social context of the target culture, make appropriate adjustments to cultural symbols, and avoid misunderstandings caused by direct transplantation. At the same time, reception theory points out that the audience's interpretation of the text is influenced by its cultural context, so the construction of this requires research and other methods to understand the consumer's acceptance response, even if the bias is corrected. For example, in Ne Zha, the threshold for cultural understanding is lowered by using international visual language and humorous elements. Through emotionally-driven narratives, cross-cultural emotional themes such as father-son relationships and self-identity are highlighted, so that audiences from different cultural backgrounds can understand and accept them.

In the process of constructing cultural symbols, there is a complex dialectical relationship between structure and reconstruction, inheritance and innovation, cultural value and commercial value. The successful experience of Ne Zha 2 shows that only by adhering to cultural consciousness and maintaining the spirit of innovation can we build a cultural symbol with vitality in the era of globalization. In the face of the alienation risk brought about by consumerism, we need to establish a more sound production mechanism for cultural symbols, cultivate a rational concept of cultural consumption, and ensure that cultural symbols maintain their vitality in inheritance and innovation.

5. Conclusion

This paper takes the movie Ne Zha 2 as an example to explore the nature of cultural symbol consumption in the digital media era. The consumption of cultural symbols is not only the satisfaction of material needs, but also the pursuit of cultural values and spiritual connotations. With the advancement of globalization and digital technology, the form and connotation of cultural symbol consumption have undergone significant changes, showing the characteristics of diversification, intelligence and sustainability. By combining traditional culture with modern values, Ne Zha 2 has successfully realized the innovative transformation of cultural symbols, which not only retains the core needs of traditional culture, but also meets the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences. Through modern visual language and emotional expression, the film lowers the cultural barrier and becomes a cultural symbol connecting tradition and modernity. This paper also analyzes

the encoding and decoding process of cultural symbols, and points out that the meaning of cultural symbols is dynamically generated in the interaction between producers and consumers, and is affected by cultural background, social context and ideology. Finally, this paper discusses the dilemmas that may be faced in the process of cultural symbol construction, such as cultural barriers and cultural misunderstandings, and proposes strategies to solve these problems through cross-cultural adaptation and symbol interaction. It provides theoretical support and practical enlightenment for the construction and dissemination of cultural symbols.

However, some traditional culture purists might adopt an oppositional reading, criticizing the adaptation for compromising cultural authenticity and sacredness. Changes to Ne Zha's characterization and modernized dialogue could be viewed as disrespectful to the original mythology. Conversely, other traditionalists may appreciate the adaptation as necessary for cultural preservation, recognizing that innovation and integration are essential for traditional culture to maintain relevance in modern society.

This diversity in interpretation precisely reflects Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, demonstrating how the same cultural product can generate varied meanings when received by audiences with different backgrounds and perspectives. The film's commercial success and cultural impact stem from its ability to accommodate multiple readings while maintaining cultural distinctiveness.

In short, consumers' decoding of Ne Zha's *Demon Boy in the Sea* not only reflects the complex state of traditional culture and modern narratives, but also reveals the multiple meanings and powers of cultural symbols in tradition.

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