Strategic Regionalization in Global Animation: A Comparative Study of Disney's Zootopia (2016) and Zootopia 2(2025)

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Abstract. Strategic regionalization, an art of balancing global scale with local relevance, is increasingly important for multinational cultural enterprises, especially in animation. Prior work on globalization, localization, and glocalization has examined universal storytelling, dubbing/casting, and market-specific marketing, but these approaches are often treated in isolation, under-theorize coordination across platforms, and rarely link tactics to outcomes with comparative evidence. This study addresses these limitations by conducting a comparative case analysis of Disney's Zootopia (2016) and the ongoing Zootopia 2 (2025), and by articulating an integrated strategic regionalization framework that links narrative design, release timing, voice localization, social and streaming campaigns, and cross-media coordination with theme parks and consumer products. This study triangulates observations with box-office results and publicly observable engagement metrics, with special attention to China. The results reveal that a universal allegory paired with regionally differentiated tactics drives cross-cultural resonance and deep market penetration, converting into durable IP value via a derivative ecosystem; that the sequel upgrades the model from foundational localization to cross-platform synergy and multi-level coordination; and that strategic regionalization functions as an IP management system rather than a narrow marketing tool. The study also identifies risks in cultural interpretation, regulation, and audience fragmentation, and recommends cultural consultation, transmedia storytelling, and data-driven personalization to balance brand cohesion with local responsiveness.

Keywords: Strategic regionalization, Zootopia franchise, Animated film marketing, IP management, Cross-media synergy

1. Introduction

After the pandemic, the global film market is experiencing a gradual recovery rather than a rapid resurgence, with box office revenues and film productions still failing to reach pre-pandemic peaks [1]. In contrast, the animated movie industry is demonstrating its unprecedented resilience and a strong momentum of development [2]. Within this landscape, the Pareto principle, in which a small number of films, companies, or national markets generate the vast majority of revenue and dominate the global box office share, has become increasingly evident in the era shaped by both economic and cultural globalization [3]. Among the key players, Disney has consolidated its dominance as the world's most influential entertainment empire via sophisticated strategic regionalization, a practical compromise beyond the debate between standardization and "glocalization". This approach emphasizes implementing semi-standardized, semi-differentiated marketing and content strategies in specific strategic regions (such as North America, Europe, and Asia) within the context of globalization [4].

The success of Zootopia has clearly demonstrated this strategy [5]. Leveraging global-level strategy as well as localized translation, dubbing, marketing strategies, release scheduling strategies, and derivative products, this movie distinguished itself and created a global box office miracle of $1.02 billion, winning both the Academy Awards and Golden Globe for Best Animated Feature in 2017 and becoming a milestone in Disney's animation.

The sequel, Zootopia 2 [6], scheduled for North American release on November 26, 2025, continues the franchise's world-building as Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps reunite to tackle new cases, with additions such as a snake named Gary and a short-tailed wallaby doctor drawing attention across global social media. Notably, Disney appears to be reinforcing and upgrading its strategic regionalization playbook, with multi-level coordination that aligns theatrical campaigns with streaming, consumer products, and location-based entertainment, and with heightened attention to key regions such as China.Existing work on globalization, localization, and glocalization highlights tactics like universal storytelling, dubbing/casting, and market-specific marketing but treats them in isolation, under-theorizes cross-platform coordination, and seldom ties regional strategies to comparative outcomes. Here, this study addresses those gaps via a comparative case of Zootopia and the ongoing rollout of Zootopia 2, articulating an integrated strategic regionalization framework that links a universal narrative core to region-specific execution in release timing, voice localization, social/streaming campaigns, and cross-media coordination with theme parks and consumer products, grounded in box-office and publicly observable engagement data with special attention to China. Results show that coupling a universal scaffold with locally differentiated strategies gives rise to cross-cultural resonance and deep market penetration, which translates into long-term IP value through a derivative ecosystem; the sequel reforms this model from rough localization to cross-platform synergy and multi-level coordination, positioning strategic regionalization as an IP management system rather than a finite marketing tool. This study also reveals risks: cultural misinterpretation, regulatory uncertainty, audience fragmentation, and proposes mitigations such as cultural consultation, transmedia storytelling, and data-driven personalization. Overall, this study offers a transferable framework and actionable guidance for international marketing of animated films.

2. Literature review & theoretical framework

2.1. Definition & development of strategic regionalization

Strategic regionalization refers to the way international corporations organize their operations around major world regions, adopting relatively standardized but differentiated strategies within each region, thus providing an alternative to the binary traditional framework between globalization and localization [7].

Initially, the theory of standardization prevailed in the 1980s, as exemplified by Theodore Levitt's proposal of global market standardization [8]. However, some standardized marketing campaigns failed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Subsequently, under the pressure of cultural differences, marketers began to adopt adaptive strategies to fit in various national markets (i.e., Glocalization)

[4]. However, excessive localization is costly and difficult to manage globally. Subsequently, global marketers found an alternative to adapt to the different regions where they do business, not just to the nations within them, attempting to think globally, act locally, and manage regionally (i.e., strategic regionalization). This novel method offers a practical compromise, maximizing organizational and economic advantages while maintaining responsiveness to cultural and other differences within the regional markets, ensuring marketing activities are neither excessively standardized nor excessively localized.

In international business research, scholars have already pointed out that the expansion of multinational enterprises lies not in a unitary globalization process, but in strategic regionalization built around several strategic regions [8]. In the field of cultural industries, Sinclair was the first to systematically apply this theory to international television and media industry research in Latin American television: A global view, putting forward "strategic regionalization" as an intermediate mode. Sinclair emphasized that this theory is neither coherent global standardization nor scattered local adaptation, but rather a business operation formed by international corporations inside strategic areas with semi-standardized, semi-differentiated characteristics.

2.2. Definition & future direction of marketing strategies

Marketing strategies are defined as the holistic framework and action plan enterprises formulate to attain long-term competitiveness [9]. In the cultural industry, marketing strategies often lie in cross-media communication, brand extension, and regional adaptation to meet the cultural needs and consumption habits of different audiences. In recent years, as digital and social media platforms evolve, marketing strategies have placed more emphasis on user engagement, fan co-creation, and data-driven, precise promotion [10]. In the case of the Zootopia franchise, it is noteworthy that cross-media marketing strategies deserve credit for the films' adaptation to the digital era and competitiveness in the global film market.

3. Case study 1: Zootopia (2016)

3.1. Global-level strategy: universal narrative

The success of Zootopia can be primarily attributed to its universal allegorical narrative. Through anthropomorphized animal characters, the film constructs an idealized animal metropolis with a utopian touch. Beneath the surface of peace, it exposes universal social issues such as racial bias and social inclusion through political, value, and consumer culture metaphors, exploring anti-discrimination and multiculturalism [11]. This universal discussion transcends the limitations of specific cultural backgrounds, resonating with global audiences. Simultaneously, conflicts in the fictional world allegorically reflect real-world racial bias and class divisions, enabling viewers from all cultural backgrounds to perceive parallels in their own society. With the metaphorical content, the narrative approach possesses both entertainment and cross-cultural resonance [12].

Moreover, resonance at the level of individual development attains a broader emotional demographic. Judy Hopps, the idealistic and courageous protagonist, alongside the witty partner Nick Wilde, as well as amusing supporting roles and even unremarkable background characters, not only render the animal metropolis more authentic but also allow audiences to resonate with character arcs or social identities. Hence, Zootopia transcends animation for children. It is a movie for people of all ages, genders, and identities, enabling them to escape the real world temporarily and immerse themselves in the symbolic and fantastic universe.

3.2. Regionalized marketing: the case of the Chinese market

In the Chinese market, Disney implemented strategic regionalization for Zootopia. Firstly, by means of employing domestic well-known casts for voice dubbing, the film mitigates language barriers and bridges the gap between itself and Chinese audiences. Localized translation also serves as an intermediate link to connect Zootopia's universal content and metaphors to audiences across different regions speaking different languages, thereby surmounting linguistic barriers [12]. Secondly, marketing materials were tailored to fit in local cultural context. For instance, Disney employs viral materials such as stickers and fan culture to appeal to young generations and promote the competitiveness of the movie in the wave of globalization through a user-generated, cost-saving strategy. In the end, Disney tactically postponed the release in order to avoid the Chinese New Year period when a number of movies are released simultaneously. These measures significantly improved the performance of the movie and vividly exhibited the effectiveness of strategic regionalization in global distribution.

3.3. Outcomes and inspirations

Finally, the film had huge outcomes. According to Box Office Mojo, Zootopia grossed approximately USD 1 billion at the box office [13], with Chinese consumers contributing nearly one-fourth of total revenue [14]. Besides its financial success, the film created long-term intellectual property value that generated substantial business value like Shanghai Disneyland and derivative merchandise goods. These actions complement Disney's global brand power further.

4. Case study 2: Zootopia 2

Recent reception indicates that Zootopia 2 has successfully generated global attention. As of now, since the release of teasers and official trailers, the total visible views on YouTube are approximately 4.9million. The cumulative play volume of TikTok-related topics is estimated to be about 131 million. The topic has about 1.5K short videos on TikTok and about 4.2K posts on the #zootopia2 tag on Instagram.

The official social media (Disney Animation) and related star accounts have also participated in publicity: the number of likes or comments of official X or Instagram posts is in the thousands, and a single retweet or embedded tweet reaches 1.1M video views. Media reports and fan recreations tend to outbreak immediately.

4.1. Global strategy continuity

4.1.1. Universal cultural symbol design

Zootopia 2 continues the successful experience of its predecessor. In interviews, directors Byron Howard and Jared Bush revealed that the sequel will expand the geographical boundaries of Zootopia, showcasing more diverse ecological zones, such as deserts and rainforests [15]. This expansion of the world not only enhances visual diversity but also provides points of identification for audiences from different cultural backgrounds—for instance, viewers from desert regions may feel a sense of familiarity with the desert zone, while those from tropical areas are more likely to resonate with the rainforest environment. At the same time, the sequel maintains globally unified brand values, emphasizing themes of diversity and equality.

4.1.2. Multimedia synergy

Disney has integrated streaming media platforms and IP derivative products to ensure overall revenue stability. While maintaining traditional channels of cultural communication, such as television commercials and theme park buses, Disney has also introduced streaming-based promotion. The company established an official website and operates official accounts on global social media platforms to share theme park–related information, in addition to independently managing the official accounts of Disneyland theme parks on various streaming platforms. This approach leverages major streaming platforms, appeals to potential users, and provides audiences with sharing channels, further expanding the marketing reach [16]. To date, Disney has strategically leveraged both traditional and digital marketing channels to build anticipation for the release of Zootopia 2. On May 20, 2025, Disney released the first teaser trailer, which contained no dialogue, only visuals and background music, featuring a new character, "Gary Snade", to maximize mystery and anticipation. Subsequently, on July 30, the official full-length trailer was released.

4.1.3. Derivative ecosystem

Disney's global promotion extends beyond film production to a sophisticated derivative ecosystem. These products function not only as revenue streams but also as mobile advertisements, continually reinforcing the presence of Disney in consumers' daily lives and strengthening brand recall. Through a globally unified brand management and empowering system, Disney ensures the quality and consistency of its derivative products while simultaneously tailoring products to regional preferences, thereby achieving a balance between global standardization and local adaptation.

4.2. Upgrading of strategic regionalization

4.2.1. Differentiated cross-media synergy

Zootopia 2 enjoys differentiated marketing strategies in various regional markets. Below are a couple of examples for reference. For the United States and Europe region, the campaign employs platforms such as TikTok and Instagram to make interactive conversations and user engagement. At the same time, considering the region's cultural background and history, the campaign also highlights social issues as one of the main themes to provide netizens with rich content.

By contrast, Disney has established the Shanghai Disney Zootopia theme park as a China anchor for the long term, aside from short video promotion and fan-generated content on Douyin, Red Note, and Bilibili. This will be addressed in more detail in the following text. In addition, in Japan and other Asian emerging markets, the promotion strategies still focus on the recruitment of local voiceover talent and carefully selected release dates. In contrast, TikTok is utilized as the central promotion channel with precise algorithm-driven targeting.

4.2.2. Salient regional strategy: the case of the Chinese market

Due to the part that the Chinese market played in its predecessor, Disney's emphasis on the Chinese market is particularly noteworthy this time around in terms of promotional methods for Zootopia 2. In addition to the historical Snake-Year character designs and release of traditional Chinese animation shorts, Disney has introduced remarkable market-centric strategies that show impressive deference to culture. Such an action shrewdly gains popularity among Chinese people, generates interest, and increases anticipation.

Foremost, the campaign strategically adjusts the release date. The release of the prequel Zootopia took place on 8th August, 2025, when its target audiences, the youths, are off school on vacation during summer and the official release of the sequel would also tend to coincide with one of the big domestic holidays to garner the most revenues.

Second, 4K HDR restoration for re-release allows brand positioning. Not only did it enhance the visual quality of Zootopia, enhancing the fine workmanship of the Disney animation team to the limit, but it also cemented Disney's status as a global leader in film quality and innovation, extending propaganda.

Thirdly, cultural integration and respect are essential to Disney's strategies, as evidenced by the collaborative ink-wash and paper-cut animation pieces based on Zootopia. Instead of shallow cultural appropriation or root cultural adaptation such as localized translation, these attempts communicate more essentially with Chinese traditional culture and national sentiment.

Moreover, Disney also enables user engagement through experiential theme park experiences.For instance, Shanghai Disneyland themed parades and activities allowed visitors to form deeper emotional connections with the film by getting to live in a Zootopia world created by Disney themselves, feeling Disney's hospitality, and having beautiful memories that will now for the first time be ingrained in customers' minds associated with Zootopia and Disney Company. The world's first-ever Zootopia-themed land is to debut in Shanghai Disney Resort by the end of 2023. It transcends a destination for tourists, serving as an ever-available marketing platform because of the memory mechanism mentioned above, which substantiates the IP's effect and brand value. The park attracted over 13 million guests last year, as pointed out in the 2024 Shanghai Disney Resort Happy Travel Trends Report. Second, it is hinted by the survey that almost one-third of guests are inspired by the new themed zone for a trip [17]. This offline-online synergy is a lucrative marketing cycle: theme parks make movies more appealing, and movies make theme parks' derivative value larger.

5. Discussion

5.1. Continuity and dynamism

The Zootopia brand shows the continuity and dynamic evolution of Disney's strategic regionalization.

On the continuity side, both the movies employ a global allegorical narration, hence globally adding brand and IP value. On the evolution side, the success of the previous one locally in 2016 is primarily attributed to its indigenous cultural absorption, such as localized dubbing and captioning, but first gaining an emotional bond with their viewers and a fan base. Differently, the 2025 sequel gives greater emphasis to cross-media synergy regionization and multi-level integration of Disneyland resort, streaming media, IP value, and derivative products. This development shows that for Walt Disney Company, strategic regionalization is not merely an expansion tool in marketing, but a more critical IP management tool. Furthermore, this experience is a valuable reference to the world animation industry.

5.2. Challenges and competition

5.2.1. Cultural adaptation & reception challenges

Although universal narrative already made the film more acceptable cross-culturally, various meanings animals have in symbols across cultures can lead to uncertainties. For instance, snakes, as part of China's twelve animals zodiac, are symbolic in that country, but in the majority of Western countries, they are symbolic for danger or untruth. Such cultural divergence can lead to divergence, and that is counter to acceptance elsewhere.

In addition, while the social issues as portrayed by the film such as racial prejudices and trust issues are internationally universal, may be addressed differently by regions that cannot accommodate such views. Thus, it may face the contradiction of retaining universal value-level depth and avoiding the risk of offending some of the cultural taboos.

To mitigate these challenges, Disney can use cultural consultation or pretest market response. This will reduce risks and make the content interesting to various cultural worlds without watering down its thematic texture.

5.2.2. Market competition and audience expectations

On the one hand, the Chinese market is highly uncertain due to regulatory policies, and native animation has emerged as a competitive force. The success of Nezha, which surpassed even the heights of some Pixar movies, indicates not only the potential of Chinese animation but also the willingness of local audiences to patronize local productions. Meanwhile, audience focus globally is increasingly fragmented with greater choices for entertainment. Zootopia 2 therefore faces not just other animated movies but the entirety of the entertainment industry. Specifically, with the speedy growth of streaming services, home entertainment options have increased, rendering going to the cinema no longer the exclusive choice. In addition, the blockbuster box-office reception of the original film has created high hopes among fans for the sequel. Increased expectation is a double-edged sword: unless the sequel surpasses the original in storytelling profundity, technical skill, or emotional resonance, it will fail to meet the expectations of viewers, producing negative word-of-mouth and reduced box-office takings.

To meet these challenges, Disney must put authentic content innovation ahead of technical spectacle or nostalgia. Creating real emotional connections with audiences through authentic storytelling is vital. Meanwhile, embracing transmedia storytelling can disperse risk by taking narratives across several platforms, so that reliance on a single film product decreases.

5.3. Future prospect

From an economic perspective, the Zootopia IP, through its global storytelling commonalities and its constantly evolving marketing strategy, has high cross-cultural applicability. The commonality provides extended opportunities for IP extension—e.g., theme parks, merchandise, and streaming media. Moreover, Disney's established brand capital in China, e.g., Shanghai Disney Resort and derivative products, creates brand capital capable of reducing investment risks and financing challenges. Collectively, while the box office run of the sequel may not be as much as that in 2016, the regionalized marketing strategy should be able to guarantee overall profitability, with IP extension being the primary source of value creation.

From a future development perspective, rapid developments in digital technology are revolutionizing media consumption behavior and marketing strategies. Short-video platforms, virtual reality, and augmented reality not only open up new marketing opportunities for films but also impose the challenges of adaptation. Disney must aggressively embrace these technological shifts and experiment with new marketing solutions, such as immersive VR experiences, interactive storytelling, and AI-driven personalized recommendations, to more precisely and compellingly target their audience. In the meantime, there is a need to balance technological application with content value, not allowing technical grandeur to dominate narrative content.

6. Conclusion

The case of the Zootopia series demonstrates that strategic regionalization has become a crucial mechanism for Hollywood to maintain competitiveness under globalization. A comparative analysis of the 2016 original film and the 2025 sequel reveals that Disney, while sustaining a globally unified brand value, has progressively deepened regional operations into cross-media and multi-layered market strategies. This evolution not only reflects the organic integration of creative content and business models but also marks a transition from "universalist narratives + localized dubbing" toward "cross-media marketing + multi-level coordination."

From an academic perspective, the case highlights a strategic approach to regionalization that is particularly suited to animated films. It moves beyond the conventional globalization–localization dichotomy to propose a "third pathway": maintaining global strategy, IP, and brand cohesion while adopting flexible and fine-grained regional tactics to generate differentiated value across diverse markets. This theoretical perspective contributes to broader discussions of how multinational corporations in cultural industries balance global integration with local responsiveness.

From a practical perspective, the study provides valuable insights for transnational film companies. First, strategic regionalization not only enhances box office performance in individual markets but also fosters long-term fan communities, user-generated content cultures, and digital communication ecosystems. Second, multi-channel and cross-media synergies effectively mitigate the commercial risks of high-budget animation while extending IP value across theme parks, merchandise, and streaming platforms. Finally, in emerging markets, sensitivity to local cultural contexts, policy environments, and media practices is essential for achieving sustainable profitability.

In conclusion, the Zootopia series illustrates that strategic regionalization is not merely a commercial tactic but a systematic strategy that reconciles global brand cohesion with local market diversity. It offers both practical lessons and theoretical grounding for Hollywood and other multinational cultural enterprises seeking a balanced path between globalization and localization in the future.

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