

Cultural and Creative Museum Products: Implications for Cultural Dissemination and Brand Development—A Case Study of the Palace Museum

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Abstract. This paper examines the role of cultural and creative products in museums, using the Palace Museum as a case study, to explore their function in cultural dissemination and brand development. Drawing upon Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory and Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism Model, the research analyses how such products reproduce cultural meaning through the interaction of design and consumption, thereby reinforcing the museum's brand identity across multiple dimensions. Findings reveal that cultural and creative products not only transform and disseminate traditional culture into consumable forms but also foster public cultural identity and brand loyalty through visual symbols, cultural narratives, and emotional connections. However, excessive commercialisation may dilute their cultural depth. The Palace Museum's practice demonstrates that such products achieve cultural innovation through diverse designs and cross-sector collaborations, yet require maintaining equilibrium between cultural values and market logic. This paper contends that museums should centre on cultural essence while integrating digital and cross-sector strategies to broaden dissemination pathways and establish sustainable brand identities. The study's limitations lie in its singular case and lack of empirical investigation; future research may deepen understanding of museum cultural and creative mechanisms through multiple case studies and audience research.

Keywords: The Palace Museum, Museum Cultural and Creative Products, Cultural Dissemination, Encoding/Decoding Theory, Brand Identity Prism Model

1. Introduction

The cultural and creative industries (CCI) are among the world's fastest-growing sectors. Museums, as pivotal institutions within the CCI, now perform multifaceted roles that extend beyond heritage preservation to include cultural dissemination, education, and market participation [1]. The expansion of the internet and digital technologies has further accelerated this transformation [2]. According to UNESCO, the CCI generates over US\$2 trillion annually, reflecting its vital role in cultural diversity and the creative economy [3]. Within this context, museum cultural and creative products are not only revenue sources but also strategic instruments for cultural transmission and brand building. Despite their potential, museum cultural and creative products face critical

challenges: balancing cultural value and commercial appeal, ensuring audiences understand the embedded cultural meanings, and integrating these products into brand identity construction. This study therefore explores: (1) how such products achieve cultural value transformation through symbolic design and multi-channel dissemination? (2) how they enhance museums' social influence and public recognition? (3) What mechanisms underpin their role in cultural dissemination and brand building, offering insights for other museums? This study employs literature analysis and a case study of the Palace Museum, drawing on Encoding/Decoding Theory to examine how cultural meanings are produced and interpreted and Brand Identity Prism to explore brand construction. The Palace Museum, whose cultural and creative revenue surpassed RMB 1.5 billion in 2017, exemplifies the modern transformation of traditional culture [4]. The paper comprises four sections—Introduction, Literature Review, Application, and Conclusion—to analyse the dual role of museum creative products in cultural dissemination and brand development, providing strategic implications for other cultural institutions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition and characteristics of cultural and creative products

Cultural and creative products constitute the core output within the cultural and creative industries system, representing the fusion of creativity and artistic expression. Centred on cultural resources, they objectively articulate the creative processes in the cultural and creative industries, possessing market value [5]. Such products not only embody art and culture but also serve as significant sources of innovation and economic benefit. Xu and Cai identify the principal characteristics: (1) Additional cultural attributes: Cultural and creative products serve as carriers of cultural symbols and historical memory, possessing cultural dissemination functions. (2) Artistic quality: These products convey cultural connotations through design innovation and aesthetic expression. (3) Commercial viability: They achieve the conversion of cultural and economic value through market circulation. (4) Functionality: Whilst emphasising their cultural and artistic attributes, such products retain practical utility to attract consumers. (5) Sustainability: Increasingly mindful of their public benefit role, cultural and creative products utilise eco-friendly materials. Simultaneously, they leverage cultural core values to evoke emotional resonance among consumers, thereby fostering sustainable environmental and emotional development and heritage transmission [6].

Consequently, cultural and creative products serve both as cultural consumer goods and as instruments for cultural dissemination.

2.2. The value and development trends of cultural and creative products

The value of cultural and creative products manifests primarily across cultural, economic, and social dimensions [7]. In terms of cultural value, these products disseminate traditional culture through tangible symbols, enabling audiences to appreciate cultural significance and facilitating the innovation and advancement of historical heritage. Regarding social value, they bridge the gap between museums and audiences, heightening public interest in historical and cultural heritage. This fosters greater cultural identification and participation, fulfilling a vital social educational function. Economically, cultural and creative products provide museums with a stable revenue stream, offering new economic growth points for sustainable development.

Cultural and creative products have undergone a transformation from single-purpose souvenirs to diverse digital offerings. Early museum cultural products primarily replicated artefacts, featuring

limited functionality and lacking innovation or practicality [8]. With the proliferation of internet technology and advancements in digital techniques, museums have initiated cross-industry collaborations to jointly develop cultural and creative products [9]. Museums partnered with fashion labels and technology firms, integrating traditional cultural elements with contemporary design concepts and technological methods. This approach yielded cultural products possessing both cultural significance and alignment with modern aesthetics and consumer demands. This diversification of types and formats enhanced museums' market competitiveness and cultural dissemination effectiveness. Concurrently, digital cultural and creative products have emerged as a new trend, with virtual exhibitions, digital collectibles, and immersive interactive experiences developing rapidly [2]. Examples include the Modigliani art experience exhibition in Milan and the Digital Dunhuang project in China, which have transcended temporal and spatial constraints. This evolution has transformed museum cultural and creative products from mere souvenirs into branded offerings grounded in cultural substance, while simultaneously delivering experiential and technologically advanced qualities.

2.3. Encoding/decoding theory

Hall's encoding/decoding theory emphasises the meaning of cultural products is not unilaterally determined by producers but is reconstituted through the audience's decoding process [10]. Their decoding of cultural products manifests in three patterns: (1) Dominant decoding: Audiences align with the producer's encoded intent, receiving and assimilating its dominant meaning. (2) Negotiated decoding: Audiences partially receive the producer's intent and partially question it based on their own experience and stance, forming interpretations that coexist with both adaptation and opposition. (3) Oppositional decoding: Audiences take a stance contrary to the producer's, reconstructing the information according to their position in opposition to the producer's intent. For museums, cultural and creative products represent the materialised form of cultural encoding. Designers employ cultural encoding methods to extract cultural elements, integrating traditional symbols and historical narratives into products [11]. This constitutes encoding at the production stage. During consumption, audiences provide varied responses reflecting differing decoding pathways. Some audiences recognise the cultural value, purchasing cultural and creative products to disseminate culture. Others may acknowledge only the aesthetic or practical value of the product. Still others might perceive such activities as excessively commercialised.

In the digital environment, audience decoding has become increasingly diverse. Within the new media landscape, audiences are no longer mere consumers of media content; they actively participate in content production and dissemination through commenting, liking, sharing, and other means [12]. This transformation has elevated audiences to the status of 'reproducers.' The popularity of museum cultural and creative products on social media is inseparable from secondary dissemination by audiences. This further enhances audiences' cultural identification and sense of participation, driving the dissemination of museum culture and brand development.

2.4. Brand identity prism theory

Kapferer first proposed the Brand Identity Prism theory in 1986, subsequently refining it over time. This model reveals six dimensions constituting a brand [13]. (1) Physique: The physical attributes of a brand image, encompassing packaging, logos, and design. Distinctive visual recognition aids brands in emphasising their identity and attracting consumers. (2) Personality: The anthropomorphic traits a brand exhibits when communicating with consumers. This element enables brands to forge

emotional connections with their audience. (3) Culture: The values and cultural ethos embodied by the brand. This element fosters cohesion among audiences, aids brand identity formation, and serves cultural dissemination and educational functions. (4) Relationship: The interactive model established between brand and consumer. Strong brand relationships cultivate public loyalty and enhance brand sustainability. (5) Reflection: The archetypal audience segment shaped by the brand, representing its ideal consumer. (6) Self-image: The self-perception and identity constructed by consumers. Brands provide opportunities for self-expression and recognition, exerting a positive influence on consumer psychology. Kapferer posits that these six dimensions interact, encompassing externalisation, internalisation, the brand itself, and audience perceptions, collectively shaping a complete brand identity [13]. For museums, this model explains how brands are constructed through visual, cultural and interactive means. O'Reilly contends that cultural institutions differ from conventional commercial brands, as they not only bear cultural dissemination and educational functions but also face challenges of market competition and audience attraction [14]. Museums require market-oriented approaches to enhance brand recognition and appeal. Cultural and creative products not only embody cultural value but also reinforce museum brand identity through symbolic representation.

2.5. Research status and gaps in museum cultural and creative products

Existing research primarily focuses on the economic and cultural functions of cultural and creative products, yet certain limitations persist. The literature predominantly examines the role of products in boosting revenue, with relatively little in-depth exploration of their dual mechanisms in cultural dissemination and brand building [15]. Concurrently, studies tend to lean towards descriptive accounts of phenomena, lacking systematic analysis of the participatory mechanisms through which cultural and creative products engage in cultural transmission and brand identity construction.

Consequently, this paper adopts a theoretical framework centred on encoding/decoding theory and the brand identity prism model. The former elucidates how museum cultural and creative products achieve cultural meaning transformation during dissemination, while the latter examines how such products influence consumers while simultaneously advancing the construction of museum brand identity. Building upon this theoretical foundation and using the Palace Museum as a representative case study, this paper examines the role of museum cultural and creative products in cultural dissemination and brand development. It aims to address existing research gaps and provide strategic guidance for other museums in the future.

3. Applications

3.1. Research methodology

This study employs a case study approach, integrating theoretical analysis with empirical exploration to elucidate the role of museum cultural and creative products in cultural dissemination and brand development. Widely utilised within the social sciences, the case study method enables in-depth analysis of specific instances, facilitating the identification of novel variables and hypotheses [16]. This proves particularly crucial for comprehending the complex and dynamic field of museum cultural and creative products. Theoretically, the encoding/decoding theory is employed to examine how museum cultural and creative products embody cultural significance during design and consumption, achieving value transformation through diverse audience interpretations. Meanwhile,

the brand prism model effectively reveals how museums shape brand identity across multiple dimensions through such products.

Regarding case selection, the Palace Museum serves as the representative case study. As one of the most influential museums in China and globally, the Palace Museum has pioneered cultural and creative development, market promotion, and cross-sector collaborations [17]. Its experience serves as a prototypical case for museum cultural and creative product practices. Selecting the Palace Museum as the research case facilitates a systematic analysis of the intrinsic connections between museum cultural and creative products, cultural dissemination, and brand building, thereby providing reference points for the overall development of museum cultural and creative initiatives.

3.2. Museum cultural and creative products promoting cultural dissemination

Museums serve as vital institutions for cultural dissemination. Through the commercialisation of cultural resources, their cultural and creative products transform these assets into more accessible commodities for public consumption [18]. This approach enhances the social influence and outreach of museums' historical and cultural offerings. According to Hall's theory, museums assume the role of 'encoders' in the development of cultural and creative products [10]. By transforming the symbols, colours, artistic styles, and historical narratives of their collections into visual or functional elements, museums imbue these products with specific historical and cultural connotations. Numerous museums apply artifact patterns and calligraphic-painting motifs to stationery and accessories, thereby endowing cultural and creative products with both cultural and practical value [19]. However, the 'feedback' provided by audiences during consumption may vary. Lopez contends that regarding cultural consumption and cultural and creative products, some consumers identify with and actively disseminate them, while others engage in partial consumption based on personal aesthetic preferences and practical value [20]. Concurrently, digitalisation and mass production may undermine the authenticity and uniqueness of cultural products [21]. Consequently, some critics contend that cultural and creative products are excessively commercialised. It is evident that different audiences may adopt distinct 'decoding pathways' during consumption. These correspond respectively to dominant decoding, negotiated decoding, and oppositional decoding. This shows that cultural transmission through creative products is not a unidirectional process but rather an interactive, bidirectionally constructed endeavour.

From the perspective of brand identity prisms, cultural and creative products are not merely the materialised form of cultural symbols. They also reinforce the museum's brand identity during dissemination. On the physique dimension, numerous brands enhance brand recognition through visual design [22]. On the culture dimension, products embody not only the brand's core values but also showcase its style and narrative [13]. Museum cultural and creative products effectively highlight their historical heritage and values. Within the Reflection and Self-Image dimensions, these products assist audiences in constructing cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging through their purchase and practical use [23]. Consequently, cultural and creative products facilitate cultural transmission through symbolisation and branding.

The Palace Museum's practices validate this mechanism. For instance, the 'Ruyi keychain' draws inspiration from the traditional Chinese auspicious symbol 'ruyi', retaining its fundamental form while incorporating contemporary accessory design language [24]. By translating this cultural symbol into everyday contexts, consumers naturally absorb traditional values through daily use. The 'Palace Museum Lipstick' combines traditional colours with contemporary fashion trends, attracting greater attention from younger or female consumers. While this product reinforces the Palace Museum's brand image, most consumers purchase it for its aesthetic appeal, trendiness, and social

value [25]. This represents a negotiated decoding process, where audiences possess limited understanding of the cultural connotations during use. Criticism exists that the Palace Museum excessively leverages its cultural capital for commercial gain [26]. This exemplifies the existence of oppositional decoding in the Palace Museum's cultural and creative products. These instances demonstrate the communicative effectiveness of products depends on the depth of their cultural connotations and their suitability within the prevailing market environment.

In summary, the cultural dissemination of museum cultural and creative products involves not only the reproduction of cultural content but also an ongoing process of decoding and reconstruction by the audience. Simultaneously, these products continually reinforce the museum's brand identity during dissemination, offering audiences cultural and identity recognition, thereby fostering a two-way emotional connection with the museum. Consequently, cultural and creative products can effectively advance cultural dissemination, yet it is essential to strike a balance between their social mission of cultural education and their commercialisation.

3.3. Strengthening brand development through museum cultural and creative products

With the advancement of the cultural industry, museums have evolved beyond mere custodians of cultural heritage. Their expanded roles and growing societal influence have progressively transformed them into cultural brands bearing social responsibility and market impact [27]. Cultural and creative products have played a pivotal role in this transformation. The Brand Prism Model elucidates how museums shape their brand identity through such products:

(1) Physicality: Through the design of cultural and creative products, museums extend the cultural symbols of their collections into a visualised system. For instance, the Palace Museum's 'Emperor's Annotated Bookmark Ruler' as stationery and 'Plum Blossom Openwork Incense Sachet' as accessories draw inspiration from its collection of Yongzheng's red-ink annotations and gilded cloud-dragon pattern plum blossom boxes. These integrate historical culture into audiences' learning and daily contexts, reinforcing the Palace Museum's brand identity [24].

(2) Individuality: Museums convey both scholarly authority and approachability through cultural and creative products. For instance, the Palace Museum's cross-industry collaboration with a cosmetics brand to launch lipsticks cultivates a youthful image, replacing its previously staid, antiquated perception. This broadens audience reach while infusing the brand with vitality.

(3) Culture: Cultural and creative products establish a connection between a museum's historical and cultural values and the contemporary cultural context, reinforcing the museum's identity as a cultural institution. Inspired by its collection piece 'Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains', the Palace Museum launched a series of homeware products. These items preserve the essence of classical Chinese aesthetics while integrating artistic culture into the audience's daily lives through design language in a tangible manner. This strengthens the Palace Museum's brand identity as an organisation dedicated to cultural heritage and innovation.

(4) Relationship: The consumption of cultural and creative products serves as a bond between museums and consumers. By emotionally reinforcing brand imagery, museums retain existing audiences while attracting new ones. The Palace Museum's limited-edition releases of traditional-style pyjamas, kitchenware, and other items [28]. It helps strengthen connections with audiences and enhance mutual engagement.

(5) Reflection and Self-Image: Audiences reinforce their recognition of the museum's brand identity through purchasing cultural and creative products, simultaneously constructing their own identity. Bourdieu posits that cultural consumption is not merely the simple acquisition of cultural products but also a process of accumulating and displaying cultural capital [29]. This encompasses

an individual's knowledge, skills, and cultural taste. Many female consumers purchase the Palace Museum lipstick not merely for its utilitarian value, but as a social symbol. They satisfy their display needs and seek social recognition through showcasing and sharing [25]. This demonstrates how numerous audiences achieve cultural identity reconstruction through the consumption of cultural and creative products.

The encoding/decoding theory elucidates the dynamic nature of brand construction. Museums encode brand imagery through cultural and creative products, while audiences' decoding determines their degree of identification [10]. The process of consumers purchasing Palace Museum lipsticks, homewares, and accessories constitutes an act of decoding. When the public receives the cultural value of these products through dominant decoding, the Palace Museum's brand identity is naturally reinforced, thereby enhancing its brand influence.

In summary, museum products play a pivotal role in cultural dissemination and brand development. Through the lens of decoding/encoding theory, this paper elucidates how such products undergo multifaceted public interpretation within the 'consumption-dissemination' process, continually reconstructing cultural significance through interaction. Concurrently, the Brand Identity Prism Model systematically explains how these products evoke audience resonance across multiple dimensions, propagate cultural connotations, and reinforce brand identification. By balancing social mission with market logic, museum cultural and creative products can serve as effective carriers of historical and cultural heritage.

4. Conclusion

This study, using the Palace Museum as a case study and employing the encoding/decoding theory and brand identity prism model as theoretical frameworks, explores the role of museum cultural and creative products in cultural dissemination and brand development. Findings reveal that cultural and creative products not only embody materialised forms of cultural symbols but also facilitate the reproduction and dissemination of cultural meanings during audience decoding. Meanwhile, these products advance brand construction across multiple dimensions, reinforcing the museum's cultural identity and societal influence. By preserving cultural substance while circulating as marketable commodities, such products enhance museum revenue streams while deepening public understanding and appreciation of historical heritage. Based on the above, this study offers the following recommendations: (1) Museums must maintain a cultural foundation in their creative development, avoiding excessive commercialisation to safeguard authenticity and effective dissemination. (2) Strengthen cross-sector collaborations—such as with cosmetics and homewares—while expanding digital exploration. Leverage diverse market channels, media platforms, and digital technologies to broaden cultural outreach pathways, enhancing audience engagement and experiential value. (3) Prioritise long-term brand development by cultivating a stable and distinctive brand identity through multi-category, diverse cultural, and creative products, thereby strengthening public engagement and emotional connections. This study also has certain limitations. It primarily relies on literature review and case analysis, lacking empirical surveys of target audiences. Consequently, it struggles to comprehensively reflect the actual decoding patterns of museum cultural and creative products among diverse consumer groups. Furthermore, the research focuses exclusively on the Palace Museum, excluding smaller museums and institutions in other countries, potentially leading to issues of insufficient representativeness. Future work could validate and expand these conclusions through comparative case studies and questionnaire surveys, thereby ensuring the applicability of the findings.

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