

A Study on the Differences in Color Usage for Emotional Expression Between Western and Japanese Animation

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Abstract. Animation, as a globally recognized art form, assigns color a pivotal role in emotional expression. Western and Japanese animations are two major global paradigms with clear differences in color utilization. It adopts a comparative case study approach, taking Disney's Zootopia and Studio Ghibli's Spirited Away as primary case studies. The research focuses on how color psychology and cultural contexts influence color application. The findings reveal that Western animation, exemplified by Zootopia, uses vivid, high-contrast colors to achieve direct emotional resonance, reflecting an outward cultural style. In contrast, Japanese animation, typified by Spirited Away, prefers soft, delicate tones to convey subtle and intricate feelings, rooted in traditional aesthetics. This study concludes that color in animation is a cultural language, and understanding such differences is of great significance for global animation creation and appreciation.

Keywords: Animation, Color Psychology, Cultural Differences, Emotional Expression, Comparative Study

1. Introduction

Animation, as a global visual art form, relies heavily on color to mediate emotional expression. Western animation and Japanese animation stand as two of the most important and representative traditions in the world, and they show pronounced disparities in their use of color. These differences are not only technical but also embody the aesthetic and psychological characteristics of their respective cultural contexts. Research in animation studies has increasingly focused on the role of visual elements like color in narrative construction and cultural communication [1]. While existing studies have examined color theory in the broader context of film, there remains a research gap in targeted comparisons between major animation traditions.

This paper uses Disney's Zootopia and Studio Ghibli's Spirited Away as examples to analyze the fundamental differences in how these two major animation systems use color for emotional expression. Zootopia employs vibrant, high-contrast color palettes to generate direct and potent emotional effects, thereby epitomizing the Western animation style. Spirited Away utilizes soft and delicate color tones for a subtle and profound emotional expression, reflecting Japanese aesthetics. By comparing these two works, we can clarify how color mediates emotional communication and understand the cultural reasons behind these differences. Such a comparative analysis yields valuable insights into the adaptation of visual language to diverse cultural contexts.

2. Theoretical basis of color application

2.1. Color psychology and emotional association

Color psychology posits that distinct colors elicit divergent emotional responses. These responses exhibit both universal attributes and are influenced by culture [2]. In animation, color is not just decoration; it is an important tool for expressing emotion, shaping characters, and creating atmosphere.

It is worth emphasizing that the emotional connotations of colors are culturally contingent. For example, in the West, white connotes purity and weddings, whereas in Japan, white is often associated with mourning and death [3]. Such cultural divergences exert a direct and tangible influence on color selection strategies in Western and Japanese animation.

Table 1. Cross-cultural comparison of color-emotion associations

Color	Western Cultural Association	Japanese Cultural Association
Red	Passion,danger,love	Vitality,ritual,warding off evil spirits
Blue	Melancholy,calm,technology	Calm,daily life,peace
Green	Nature,jealousy,money	Eternity,nature,rebirth
White	Purity,weddings,peace	Death,mourning,sacredness

2.2. Historical evolution of color function in animation

The utilization of color in animation has undergone continuous evolution in tandem with advancements in technology and artistic practices. Early animation adopted simpler colors, which later became richer and more varied [4].

Western animation leans toward bright, highly saturated colors with pronounced contrast, aiming for clear visual impact and emotional guidance. By contrast, Japanese animation has cultivated a delicate and muted color aesthetic, centering on the conveyance of intricate emotional nuances through subtle chromatic variations. Digital technology has further amplified these characteristics.

3. Western animation: color analysis of Zootopia

3.1. Connection between vivid colors and emotional intensity

Western animation typically employs vivid, highly saturated color palettes to achieve direct and intense emotional expression. Studios like Disney prioritize clear color symbolism—vibrant hues represent positive emotions, while dark tones represent negative situations [5].

Zootopia embodies this characteristic. The color palette of the film is not only visually striking but also fulfills dual functions of emotional guidance and symbolic signification. This stylistic approach aligns with the extroverted, optimistic, and straightforward nature of American culture and well-suited to Hollywood's narrative rhythm, which emphasizes clear conflict and resolution.

3.2. Color design features of Zootopia

In terms of character design, color is strategically deployed to delineate distinct personality traits and character identities. The purple police uniform of the protagonist, Judy Hopps, signifies her professional identity; purple also hints at her combination of rationality and warmth. The contrast

between Nick Wilde's green tie and orange fur mirrors his sly exterior and kind heart. The antagonist, Assistant Mayor Bellwether, is clad in blue and white hues, which correspond to her outwardly gentle yet covertly scheming character image.

In environmental color design, different districts have distinct color schemes: Sahara Square employs warm yellows and oranges, creating a hot and vibrant atmosphere; the small rodent town adopts cool tones and fluorescent colors, giving a modern, technological feel; the Rainforest District is dominated by verdant shades, exuding a sense of robust vitality. These deliberate chromatic distinctions serve to reinforce the film's core thematic message of "diversity and coexistence."

Table 2. Color design and emotional expression of main characters in Zootopia

Character	Main Colors	Emotional Meaning of Colors	Connection to Character Personality
Judy Hopps	Purple,Gray	Purple:Dignity,wisdom;Gray:Practicality	Combination of idealism and practical spirit
Nick Wilde	Orange,Green	Orange:Energy,deceit;Green:Hope,rebirth	Sly appearance,kind heart
Chief Bogo	Black,Dark Blue	Black:Authority,seriousness;Blue:Stability	Stern,authoritative law enforcer
Bellwether	White,Blue	White:Purity (surface);Blue:Calm	Outwardly gentle,secret schemer
Mr. Big	Dark Brown,Black	Darkness,majesty,tradition	Traditional authoritative crime boss figure

The color palette of the film also undergoes dynamic shifts in tandem with the narrative progression. When Judy first arrives in Zootopia, the color scheme is bright and vivid, reflecting her excitement. When she faces setbacks, the colors become dull and gray. When problems are resolved, the colors return to being bright and warm. This synchronized chromatic variation not only amplifies the audience's emotional immersion but also constitutes a hallmark technique in Western animation production.

4. Japanese animation: color analysis of spirited away

4.1. Soft colors and the expression of subtle emotion

Japanese animation typically employs muted, delicate color palettes, focusing on the conveyance of intricate emotions and nuanced moods through subtle chromatic variations. This stylistic tendency is rooted in traditional Japanese aesthetics such as "mono no aware" (sensitivity to impermanence), "yūgen" (profound grace), and "wabi-sabi" (beauty in imperfection and transience) [6].

Spirited Away embodies this stylistic trait. The film rarely employs high-contrast primary color combinations, instead favoring intermediate tones and soft chromatic gradations to craft a warm, ethereal visual ambiance. This mirrors the Japanese cultural emphasis on "harmony"—not just harmony of colors, but also emotional harmony between humans and nature, and between the inner self and the outside world.

The film excels at leveraging color to create immersive narrative atmospheres. For example, the bathhouse's warm golden tones, the boiler room's dark reds, and the Sea Train's blue-gray tones not only delineate the spatial characteristics but also evoke the viewer's subtle feelings about the passage of time and life. This is connected to Japanese culture's sensitivity to natural changes.

4.2. Color metaphor and symbolism in spirited away

The color design in *Spirited Away* is characterized by its delicacy and profound symbolic significance, which plays a pivotal role in character arc development and core theme articulation.

The overall color scheme presents a distinct narrative transition from reality to fantasy. The opening sequences are dominated by verdant tones, and the interior of Chihiro's family car is gray-brown, portraying an ordinary reality. Upon the family's entry into the mysterious otherworld, the colors become rich and surreal, marking the shift from the ordinary to the extraordinary and mirroring the protagonist's evolving psychological state.

Character color design is imbued with rich complexity and symbolic depth. For example, No-Face: initially a translucent black, symbolizing mystery and emptiness; after becoming greedy, he turns into an ominous deep black; after being saved, he appears in a gentle gray tone. Yubaba has both a gorgeous appearance and a dark sorceress image; her colors change with her role.

Color symbolism is replete with profound cultural connotations. The brown sludge on the River Spirit symbolizes the detrimental impacts of industrial pollution; the blue after cleansing represents natural purity. Haku's silver-white color scheme shows his noble mystery and hints at his connection to water. These deliberate color choices subtly encapsulate the film's core environmentalist themes and profound humanistic concerns.

Color contrast and progression also propel the plot forward. Chihiro's plain pink attire contrast with the vibrant colors of the fantasy world, emphasizing her position as an ordinary person. As she grows, the surrounding colors gradually become brighter and warmer. This nuanced color evolution effectively enhances the emotional depth and thematic resonance of the film.

5. Comparative analysis and discussion

This section will compare and discuss the findings from the two case studies. The discussion will focus on two core dimensions: the deep-seated cultural antecedents underpinning these color stylistic divergences and their resulting impact on audience emotional response.

5.1. Cultural roots of color differences

The color stylistic divergences between Western and Japanese animation are deeply anchored in their distinct cultural heritages. Western culture prioritizes individualism, optimism, and direct expression, and fosters the adoption of bright, high-contrast colors and clear emotional signals in animation. Japanese culture, influenced by Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism, values collective harmony, subtlety, and reservedness, engendering a preference for soft, delicate colors and a cultivation of nuanced atmospheric moods in animation.

Historically, the Western animation color tradition can be traced back to early Technicolor technology, which suited the Western cultural predilection for clarity and direct communicative modes [4]. Japanese animation color aesthetics inherit from traditional painting and ukiyo-e, favoring natural tones, subtle gradients, and flat decorative effects.

National cultural dispositions also exert a tangible influence on color selection strategies. American optimism and outwardness incentivize the employment of bright colors to amplify comedic and uplifting narrative effects. Japanese introspection and sensitivity lead to an emphasis on using color details to convey complex psychology.

5.2. Impact on audience emotional response

The differences in color lead to different emotional experiences for the audience. The vivid colors and clear coding in Zootopia make emotional transmission direct and strong, easily eliciting immediate audience resonance. It is suitable for family entertainment across age groups. The soft tones of Japanese animation like Spirited Away tend to evoke more intricate, reflective emotional responses, requiring more interpretation from the audience. The emotional resonance thus generated is typically more enduring and profound, a stylistic attribute that accounts for the broad appeal of Japanese animation among adolescent and adult demographics.

From a cross-cultural reception perspective, the vibrant color schemes of Western animation more easily cross cultural barriers and achieve global resonance. The delicate colors of Japanese animation may demand a higher degree of cultural literacy, but once understood, they often create cross-cultural influence and stronger fan allegiances.

Table 3. Comprehensive comparison of color usage in Western and Japanese animation

Comparison Dimension	Western Animation	Japanese Animation
Color Saturation	High saturation,bright	Medium saturation,soft
Color Contrast	Strong contrast,clear distinction	Weak contrast,gradient transition
Color-Emotion Relationship	Direct,clear	Indirect,subtle,complex
Character Color Coding	Fixed,easy to identify	Flexible,multi-dimensional
Environmental Color Function	Background setting,atmosphere creation	Emotional projection,psychological reflection
Cultural Roots	Individualism,optimistic spirit	Collective harmony,reverence for nature
Representative Works	Zootopia	Spirited Away

6. Conclusion

By comparing Zootopia and Spirited Away, we can see that color is an emotional language deeply rooted in cultural psychology. Zootopia employs bright, high-contrast colors, reflecting the direct and optimistic spirit of the West. Spirited Away uses soft and delicate tones, reflecting the reserved and introverted aesthetic temperament of the East.

In terms of technique, Zootopia employs vibrant, high-contrast color palettes that embody the extroverted, optimistic, and direct emotional expression inherent in Western culture, while Spirited Away adopts subtle gradients and symbolism to create a complex space for emotional interpretation. Both strategies have cultural rationality and artistic value, adapting to different aesthetic needs.

From an audience reception perspective, the bright colors of Western animation facilitate rapid cross-cultural resonance. The delicate tones of Japanese animation tend to evoke profounder cultural identification and introspective emotional responses. This also explains why Western animation often has a broader market, while Japanese animation often has a more lasting fan culture within specific groups.

This study yields valuable implications for future animation creation: creators should recognize the inherent cultural connotations of color, rather than merely treating it as a technical or artistic ornament. In the context of globalization, animation creation upholds respect for local color traditions while also considering cross-cultural reception, striking a balance between cultural specificity and universal emotional appeal. With technological progress, animation's color language

will become more diverse and integrated, thereby delivering more enriched emotional experiences to global audiences.

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