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Visualizing Subculture: Symbolism, Storytelling and Media Behavior in AI Videos — A Case Study of The Era of Smart Guardian?

Yian Lin

University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK
renjieboo@126.com

Abstract. In the era of rapid development in the AI industry, AI can accurately answer the meanings and connotations of many concepts, including subcultures. However, some people question whether AI generated videos can fully reflect its understanding of the subcultures being represented. This study examines how subcultural elements are represented in AI-generated advertising videos, using the case study of a Chinese commercial The Era of Smart Guardian. The investigation analyzes from three dimensions, which are visual symbols, storytelling and media behaviors. The advertisement mainly incorporates three subcultural elements: "cyberpunk", "pop art", and "surrealism". The overall research has found that the synergistic effect of these three dimensions forms a phenomenon, which is "hollowed representation", where subcultures retain high visual recognizability, whereas they lost their contextual meaning and critical potential, becoming mere aesthetic commodities for commercial consumption.

Keywords: symbolism, storytelling, media behavior, subculture

1. Introduction

*The Era of Smart Guardian*is an AIGC concept video and advertisement under the UGREEN brand in China. This advertisement mythologizes UGREEN's five important products as "absolute power" capable of saving the world. Those products are "160W charger", "NAS private cloud", "T6 earphones" and "Energy Pai power bank" [1]. The video mainly tells the story of a cyber wasteland world invaded and eroded by the "Crimson Code Virus". The protagonist, faced with "poor state and data crisis", uses the weapon embodied by the products promoted by the brand to fight against disasters and ultimately save the world. At the end of the story, the protagonist returned to his home happily.

This advertisement mainly presents three subculture elements, which are "cyberpunk", "pop art", and "surrealism". On the visual level, various subcultures are simplified into the most recognizable colors, textures, and scene templates. On the narrative level, the critical core behind these subcultural elements is systematically replaced with product-feature-related "heroic narratives" and binary conflicts of good and evil. In terms of media behavior, AI represents the aesthetics of

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subculture elements by replacing "roughness dynamic from technical constraints" with the smooth motion that is computed precisely.

This paper explores whether AI achieves genuine understanding of subcultures or only reproduces their surface-level stylistic traits. It also investigates subcultural elements in advertisements from the perspectives of symbolism, narrative construction and media behaviors, alongside a comparative analysis of the original connotations and characteristics of the relevant subcultures.

2. Cyberpunk

To begin with, Cyberpunk subculture is visually characterized by high-contrast dark tones, neon colors, machine glitches, and virtual space scenes. *The Era of Smart Guardian* has systematically extracted and reorganized these symbols, whereas it stripped away the original social critical context of these symbols. The core of cyberpunk visual aesthetics lies in the dystopian tension of "High-Tech, Low-Life" [2]. Its iconic neon-dark palette and cybernetic designs aren't just "art for art's sake", aiming to show a future dominated by big corporations and tech monopolies [3, 4]. However, when AI represents these visual symbols, it relies too much on the commonly seen visual templates in its data, like the color formulas and scene prototypes that are easiest to recognize and replicate. For instance, the advertisement opens with a cool blue filter, shifts to green in the middle, which echoes the brand's signature color, and then ends with white light [1]. This presents a cyber world invaded by glitched viruses, containing the elements like digital deserts and futuristic fantasy. Accordingly, these visual elements originate from cyberpunk's typical palettes and scene, but their logic combination has shifted fundamentally. The cool color filter originally used to create a sense of technological oppression has been rearranged into an emotional arc from crisis to redemption. The "glitch aesthetics" once employed to question and doubt the technological monopoly become a backdrop for showcasing the product as an "absolute power". The "signified" of visual symbols is replaced, since cyberpunk's critique of social inequality in AI videos is filtered out, leaving a consumable "apocalyptic spectacle".

The Era of Smart Guardian retains the narrative structure of "technological anxiety" from cyberpunk, but changes the core "resistance conflict" of that subculture into a commercialized tech-savior story. The classic narrative structure of cyberpunk features marginal characters, such as hackers and mercenaries, who rebel against large corporations or technologically alienating systems [5]. Its core conflict is between humans and the system, essentially a political and philosophical resistance, like questioning power structures [4]. However, AI-generated advertisements tend to favor popular heroism story templates when creating narratives. Therefore, it caused many conflicts to a linear logic of "when the hero or protagonist shows up, all crises are instantly resolved". For example, the core conflicts in this advertisement are status disconnection and data crisis, which is a quintessential cyberpunk anxiety [1]. The products of UGREEN are mythologized as the absolute power to save the wasteland, by coordinating with the protagonist's actions or setting up a defense system. Hence, although this storytelling style keeps the cyberpunk fear of "technological alienation", it shifts the root of that fear from systemic and technological oppression to device compatibility issues [4]. Protests originally led by marginalized groups are replaced by redemptive products driven by brands. Consumers are no longer the ones actively using technology to fight back in cyberpunk stories, but rather passive people waiting for products to save them. As a result, the theme of "resisting oppression" in cyberpunk narratives is stripped away, leaving only the superficial "technologies save the world," which aligns with the requirements of advertising.

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In terms of media behavior, the advertisement represents cyberpunk's dynamic aesthetics by replacing roughness movement from physical constraints with the smooth motion that is computed precisely; thereby it substitutes the style's spiritual core with algorithmic visual simulation. An important feature of cyberpunk imagery at the level of media behavior is a kind of "deliberate imperfections", such as blurriness, pixelation, and shaky cameras [6]. This "roughness" isn't the technical problem, whereas it is a conscious aesthetic choice to illustrate the unreliability of memory and the fragmentation of reality in a high-tech circumstance. However, the motion logic of AI-generated videos depends on pixel-level interpolation and frame prediction, so they tend to produce smooth and coherent motion. *The Era of Smart Guardian* is filled with dynamic effects like particle collapses and polygonal fragmentation transitions1; the opening and closing scenes of space travel simulate the break between reality and virtual space through sudden fragmentation [1]. However, through the AI processing, these elements that show "flaws" become overly smooth in every detail, making them look deliberate. This situation contrasts with the roughness in cyberpunk imagery that comes from device limitations or deliberately anti-tech stances. Although AI can accurately replicate the visual elements like "glitch" and "chaos", it cannot reproduce the production context beyond them. Thus, it is replaced by "style parameters" in AI algorithmic probability models, because the original randomness came from human limitations, device constraints, or a deliberate rejection of perfect technology [4]. Accordingly, in this advertisement, the satire of technological perfection and the acknowledgment of fragmented spaces found in cyberpunk media behavior are diminished in AI's imitation.

3. Pop art

Moreover, the representation of "Pop art" visual symbols in *The Era of Smart Guardian* extracts its most recognizable "commodity iconography", while abandoning its critical core to reflect on consumer culture [7]. "Appropriation" is a significant strategy of pop art, which transforms the images from mass culture, like advertisement and comics, into art through repetition and enlargement. The subculture pop art's visual features include the use of bright colors and black hard-edge outlines in flat images, as well as central composition and emphasis on product logos [7]. For example, in this short film, the villain "Crimson Code Virus" and the products of UGREEN are designed with exaggerated looks similar to comic characters and materials, because the image is full of highly saturated flat colors, and the scene also has a sense of segmentation similar to comic landscapes [1]. Therefore, these visual elements create the comic style in pop art. However, AI's extraction function also reveals its restriction, since it neglects pop art's inherent irony and critiques towards consumerism. Visually, the core of pop art's critique of consumerism lies in a stance that is both celebratory and cautious. It doesn't reject outright, but through repetition and alienation strategies, it gets viewers to start questioning the logic of consumer culture [8]. AI generated videos retain the accentuated "comic hero" appearance, whereas ignored pop art's critical stance towards consumer culture and mass media, turns the symbols into common visual stimulation.

In terms of narration, the advertisement continues the pop art themes of "heroism" and "commodity worship", but it swaps out the critique of consumer culture for praise of the product's functionality. Pop art extensively utilizes commodity, but its stance is critical.

Whether it was Andy Warhol's replication of celebrity portraits or Roy Lichtenstein's enlargement of comic panels, the pop art artists often use the technique of repetition and enlargement of images, in order to reveal how does the mass media operates images constructed by desire and ideology [9]. However, *The Era of Smart Guardian*'s narrative logic goes against the values of pop art, because UGREEN products are portrayed almost like godlike "superheroes", since in the video they not only

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become a key factor in saving disasters in the virtual world, but also bring happiness to people in real life. For instance, the private cloud turns into a shield in the virtual world, helping the main character defeat the villains [1]. After using all UGREEN products promoted in the virtual world, the protagonist comes back to real life feeling better and gets redeemed. The "heroes" in pop art, like comic characters, often become the images under scrutiny, whereas in the AI videos, the product is portrayed as a "hero" and given a strong sense of divinity [10]. The storytelling in the ads ignores pop art's satire and critique of consumer culture. In contrast, AI's narrative directly conveys the message that "consumption" equals "salvation", which is the most straightforward expression of consumer culture. Therefore, this advertisement only presents the surface-level narratives of pop art like "commodity worship" and "heroism", which doesn't actually critique consumerism, and even misrepresents the value of pop art.

On the media behavior level, *The Era of Smart Guardian* presents pop art's dynamic aesthetic by mimicking the flat, fragmented motion of "comic books" and "collages" to create visual stimulation, but it doesn't convey any deeper meaning [9]. Pop art often illustrates the immediate impact of advertising and the frozen dynamism of comics [7]. Particularly, it accentuates overwhelming immediacy, showing the images through commercial techniques. Its motion is essentially static, which stressed the impact of frozen frame rather than smooth physical movement. The editing in the advertisement mimics the frozen-impact effect: when the UGREEN products appeared. For instance, in the scene where the power bank appears, the screen suddenly turns static, and then starts to spin unnaturally [1]. Apart from that, the scenes indeed look like a collage, by juxtaposing different lines and elements. Although AI captures the "advertising impact" aspect of pop art accurately, attracting more attention, but this representation simplifies pop art's connotation into a common material visual stimulation. Because the objective and rationality in pop art have been replaced by excitement that caters to algorithmic recommendations [9]. As a result, AI has turned pop art into a visual template of "instant gratification", serving as a template for data, rather than artistic expression.

4. Surrealism

The Era of Smart Guardian adopted the surrealist subculture ideas of "dream logic" and "strange juxtapositions" but overlooked turning the aesthetic that challenges rational order into a "spectacular" appearance for the brand narrative [11]. In advertising photography, surreal visual language is characterized by novelty, dreaminess, and irrationality, often achieved through techniques like exaggerated proportions and post-production collage [12]. Thus, surrealist advertisements' visual symbols carry the symbolism and metaphor rather than mere visual stimulation. For instance, at the beginning of the video, a red text on the computer saying "Insufficient Storage" suddenly transforms into a tunnel made of pixels and code that transports the protagonist into the virtual world [1]. The charging pad turnes into a tall tower shooting out green lasers, standing among buildings made of other computer parts. Indeed, these aspects draw from surrealism's imagery, and the AI does capture its "dreamlike" presentation. However, AI's generation logic shifts fundamentally, because the "strange juxtapositions" in surrealist advertising aim to produce "shock" through irregular images, in order to make viewers question the reality. In contrast, the surrealist elements that are generated by AI are turned into non-critical visual spectacles. The red warning text and gibberish in ads are no longer unconscious symbols of fear, which are symbolic signs, but instead become a direct visual translation of "data anxiety". Their functional design creates a marketing scheme that turns products into spectacles for recommendation. As a result,

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surrealism subculture's deeper intent to awaken the unconscious and question reality has been neglected.

Furthermore, *The Era of Smart Guardian* utilized the the "dream logic" shell of surrealist storytelling, which transformed it from a tool for critique into a tool for showcasing product features. Surrealist storytelling advocates breaking the chains of reason and reality. The surrealist advertisements build transformative narratives about products through symbols, metaphors, and myths: their impact often comes across as "uncoded information", linking the product to aspects like self-fulfillment and desire through metaphor [13]. For example, in the video, every UGREEN product appears and shows its features, and the scene where that product appears seamlessly jumps to the next scene through rotating or shattering transitions to showcase the next product's functions [1]. Besides, the advertisement's narrative has no cause and effect, because it doesn't clearly explain the whole story behind things, like the origin of the virus in the virtual world[1]. Accordingly, this narrative does capture the "dreamlike" quality of surrealism, since it suspended causality, spatiotemporal leaps, and blended realities. However, the surrealism subculture broke narrative logic to question rationality itself. In the AI advertisement the "dream logic" merely serves the marketing pitch and storytelling of "Buying and using products can solve problems and also bring redemption". The subversive attack on rational order in Surrealist narrative is replaced by narrative convenience for the "attention economy", as dream logic is reduced from a critical tool to an efficiency tool.

In terms of the representation of media behavior, *The Era of Smart Guardian* replaces the core spirit of surrealism—rejecting rational narratives and physical coherence, with algorithm generated visual pleasure. A key feature of surrealist imagery at the media behavior level is a kind of "incoherent movement", because of the fragmented jumps between scenes and nonlinear timline [11]. This incoherence is a deliberate rejection of rational storytelling and physical coherence. Therefore, the surrealist advertisements rely on techniques like "post-production collage" and "multiple exposures", and this misuse of technology itself is a critique of reality. For example, in the scene of where the power bank appears, the product turns into a blue meteor falling from the sky, and then one corner of it hits the ground, which creates a round hole and a small explosion, but the power bank itself doesn't even have any signs of wear [1]. The overall situation doesn't conform to physical motion in reality. These dynamic effects visually simulate the "dreamlike" quality of surrealism, but AI's generation logic is fundamentally misaligned. Because the surrealism's "discontinuity" originated from deliberate rejection of coherence, whereas AI's deformations are highly smooth and precise [12]. Accordingly, in this advertisement, the AI algorithm replaces the sense of fracture— originate from provocation against rational order and physical coherence, with "dynamic style parameters", and generates an overly exaggerated dream. The mockery of coherence itself in surrealist subculture media behavior is ignored in AI's polished simulation, since the representation of surrealism subculture remains at the level of stylistic imitation, but is not achieved at the spiritual essence of Surrealist dynamic aesthetics.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Era of Smart Guardian* presents subcultural elements of "cyberpunk", "pop art", and "surrealism". The integration of symbolism, storytelling and media behaviors forms the effect of "hollowed representation", because the subculture elements in this film retain high visual recognizability, whereas it lost its contextual meaning and critical potential, becoming mere aesthetic commodities for commercial consumption. In semiotic perspective, all three subcultures are simplified into the most recognizable colors, textures, and scene templates. In terms of

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storytelling, the critical core behind these subcultural elements is systematically replaced with product-feature-related "heroism" narration and binary conflicts of justice and evil. As for the media behavior, AI represents the dynamic aesthetics of subculture elements by replacing "roughness dynamic from technical constraints" with the smooth motion that is computed precisely. The overall situations show that AI videos can only display the surface meaning of a certain subculture, and it's hard to show any other deeper meanings.

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