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Creating cultural brand equity from the perspective of consumer cognition – a case study of Chinese animation brands

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Abstract

With the rapid development of China's cultural innovation industry, enhancing brand equity and increasing brand value has become the only way for enterprises to achieve leapfrog development. Taking Chinese animation brand equity as an example, this paper constructs a brand equity driven model from the perspective of consumer cognition. Firstly, based on the brand resonance model, the theoretical model of animation brand equity is established. And then from the mass of product reviews, the focus of consumers on the brand is mined to form the latitude of brand equity. Finally, the theoretical model of brand equity is tested based on the Chinese consumer questionnaire data and structural equation model. This study provides a reference for the construction of Chinese animation brand equity, and also provides a new idea for the establishment of cultural brand equity management.

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Keywords: Animation Brand; Brand Equity; Brand Resonance Model; Consumer Cognition

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of media convergence and internet economy in recent years, as an important part of the cultural industry, Chinese animation industry has entered a stage of rapid growth. According to research report on Chinese animation industry in 2020 from *iResearch*, the market size of Chinese animation reached 19.14 billion yuan in 2019 while it's only 3.28 billion yuan in 2015. With the change of consumption demand from quantity to quality, establishing excellent animation brands is the only way for enterprises to release their consumption potential and maintain consumption scale.

As a hot research topic in academia and industry, brand equity management has already achieved rich research results in traditional industries such as automobile, clothing, agricultural products, and gradually formed a "product--meaning--brand" brand building path attached to tangible products. However, cultural

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industry is different from traditional industry in brand carrier and brand generation process, and consumer demand is more reflected in emotional interests and self-expression interests. The brand construction of cultural industry is generally "meaning--brand--product" [1]. That makes the existing brand equity model and mechanism not fully applicable to cultural industry, and of brand equity needs to adjust dimensions according to the characteristic of cultural industry. When it comes to animation brand, most existing researches focus on case study with a lack of relevant theoretical construction and empirical research, and the universal brand equity models still need adjustment before applied to the animation industry. To filling this research gap, this paper aims to explore the dimensions of animation brand equity from the perspective of customer cognition, to enrich and develop brand management theory and provide reference for cultural brand construction.

2. Literature review

Animation brand refers to a kind of virtual reality created from comics and animations, which can meet the desire and demand of the public and animation lovers. Through the interaction between animation lovers and the public and the prototype of animation products or related derivatives, it can produce a complex of value recognition and emotional belonging [2], an animation product and an animation image or animation companies can be used as an animation brand. In this paper, an animation brand corresponds to an animation product. The concept of brand equity first appeared in the American advertising industry in the 1980s and reached its peak in the early 1990s. Scholars have made positive contributions to the rapid development of this field from the aspects of concept connotation, evaluation methods and management methods. Based on the different understanding of the meaning of brand equity, the existing evaluation methods can be mainly summarized into three kinds: the first one is based on the financial accounting, hoping to use the method of intangible assets evaluation to evaluate the financial value of the brand; the second is based on the definition of marketing, which believes that the size of brand equity is reflected in the value brought by brand extension, which can be divided into the growth ability and expansion ability of the brand; the third is based on the perspective of consumers, which believes that the fundamental reason why brands bring excessive profits to enterprises lies in their value to customers, which is the focus of most scholars[2]. Using the financial data to evaluate brand equity only considers the input and output, but ignores the intermediate process of the role of the brand and is difficult to explain the real source of brand equity [3]. In contrast, the brand equity theory based on the perspective of consumers aims to explore the essential factors driving the economic value of brand equity, which has important guiding significance for brand management and also implies the hypothesis of "product brand". Compared with all stakeholders of an enterprise, the construction of "product brand" should mainly focus on consumers [4]. Since this paper focuses on the animation product brand, the theoretical framework of this paper is constructed from the perspective of consumers. Keller proposed the concept of CBBE (Customer-Based Brand Equity), believing that brand equity is the response of consumers to the brand marketing activities under the influence of their brand knowledge [5]. To date, although no consensus has been reached on the composition dimensions, scholars all agree that brand equity is a multi-dimensional concept, and a narrow research perspective may affect the comprehensiveness of the theory. *Aaker* initially divided brand equity into brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other brand proprietary assets (such as patents, trademarks and channel relationships), with the first four dimensions reflected consumers' perceptions of the brand while the last one was based on the perspective of the company[6]. He then proposed a more comprehensive model called *The Brand Equity Ten* [7]. However, *Aaker* regarded the dimensions as a parallel relationship, while they were not in practice. And *Keller* regarded that brand knowledge was the key antecedent of brand equity, which could be divided into brand awareness and brand image [5]. With the maturity of this research field, *Keller* put forward the brand resonance model based on the previous studies, which is composed of four levels: Brand Identity, Brand Meaning, Brand Responses and Brand Relationships[8]. Combining the theory with the process of brand building, this model proposes the hierarchical relationship of all dimensions for the first time. Specifically, the brand can only publicize its brand meaning after brand identification, the spread of brand meaning generates brand response and finally leads to

brand loyalty. It leads to more researches exploring the relationship between different dimensions of brand equity, and also shows the transformation of brand equity research from "evaluating brand value" to "managing brand value".

It is worth noting that the above models are only at the theoretical level, but such classical models have provided a solid theoretical basis for many empirical studies and scale development. *Yoo* and *Donthu* develop the two influential scale, MBE (Multidimensional Brand Equity, Multidimensional Brand assets) and OBE (Overall Brand Equity, and Overall Brand Equity). Through the empirical researches on sports shoes, film and color TV industries by taking the students in the United States and South Korea as samples, they construct a three-dimensional model including perceived quality, brand loyalty and brand association [9]. *Netemeyer et al* divide brand equity into core and non-core dimensions, and the empirical study confirms core dimensions like perceived quality (PQ) / perceived value relative to cost (PVC), brand uniqueness and willingness to pay premium affect brand purchase decisions [10]. Keller's Customer-Based Brand resonance model which has been proved to be applicable in different fields and cultural background. *Moura L R C et al.* disassemble the pyramid into two path (the rational path and the emotional path), using data of hotel guests to prove that the model has good reliability and validity in both two path [11]. Brand resonance model is based on the perspective of consumer perception, and its dimensions are closely related to customers' primary topics of concern. When brand equity theory is applied to a new field, content analysis is often used to explore specific dimensions and logical relationships. Some researchers use qualitative data analysis tools like coding and clustering to mining information from customer interview to propose the dimensions for the CBBE scale for tourism [12]. From those research, we can find that brand equity evaluation models and measurement need to be adjusted according to the different social, economic and cultural environments.

In addition, text analysis of online reviews is increasingly being used to guide brand building. *Xu X et al.* use LSA (latent semantic analysis) to identify the key attributes that drive customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction toward hotel products and services, bridging customer online textual reviews with customers' perceptions [13]. *Ibrahim N F et al.* analyze tweets associated with five leading UK online retailers to identify primary concerns of consumers on brands, transforming social media data into useful knowledge about online retail brands [14].

It can be seen that the existing theoretical framework of CBBE mostly stays in the stage of theoretical analysis, and lacks corresponding operational indicators and empirical studies. Much less studies focus on the relationship between dimensions of brand equity, and there is a lack of in-depth discussion on the formation process of brand equity, which means that brand building of specific industries lacks practical guiding. Therefore, this paper attempts to clearly define the concept of animation brand equity from the perspective of customer cognition. Through text analysis of movie reviews, the composition dimensions of animation brand equity are extracted as comprehensively as possible, and the model of animation brand equity is constructed based on the brand resonance model. Finally, the model is empirically analyzed by using the survey data of Chinese consumers to provide guidance for the construction of domestic animation brands.

3. Dimension exploration and model construction

3.1. Dimension exploration

Identifying the composition dimensions of animation brand equity has become the primary task of this paper. Our work aims to extract the preliminary composition dimensions of animation brand equity from *Douban* animation movie reviews. A large number of review of 20 domestic and foreign animation films, such as *Big Fish and Begonia*, *Monkey King is Back*, *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbor Totoro*, are collected to explore animation movie concerns of consumers. *Jieba* software package is used to segment text and eliminate text noise or meaningless words as much as possible. It mainly includes the following operations: comment clauses segmentation according to punctuation marks, converting traditional Chinese characters to simplified Chinese characters, word tagging, word frequency statistics, etc.

The high frequency words in the preprocessed text data are taken as the candidate attribute set and the higher

the frequency of the word, the higher the user's attention to this attribute. In order to take low-frequency attributes into account as much as possible, phrases with frequency greater than 1000 are selected as candidate word set, and 1012 candidate attribute words are selected. It can be found that consumers' interest focus on "music", "picture" and "story". Based on the candidate attribute word set, the *Word2Vec* model and the *K-means* clustering algorithm are used to train the Chinese word vectors and cluster the attribute words. The parameters of the model are optimized by the contour coefficient and inflection point graph, and then the words are clustered into 16 categories. According to original reviews and interview, we manually screened and merged the algorithm clustering results to eliminate the non-attribute and redundant categories, finally obtaining 11 attribute word sets shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of word clusters

Cluster	Words
Cluster 1	childhood, remember, the first time, recall, primary school, high school, memory, deep impression
Cluster 2	picture, painting style, image, scene, visual effect, tonality, scenery.....
Cluster 3	dub, music, Wang Feng, voice actor, song, melody, Joe Hisaishi, Cantonese.....
Cluster 4	monkey, hero, Tang Monk, Calabash Brothers, figure, character, heroine.....
Cluster 5	plot, story line, scenario, script, content, pace, logic, ending, main plot, point.....
Cluster 6	core, implied meaning, connotation, values, feature, traditional culture, style, thought, meaning, concept.....
Cluster 7	original, mainland, innovation, traditional, breakthrough, contemporary era, national features.....
Cluster 8	director, creator, author, producer, crew, talent, painter, capacity.....
Cluster 9	like, not bad, lovely, funny, moving, brilliant, fancy, fantastic, review.....
Cluster 10	support, sincerity, excellent, milestone, pitch, worth, word of mouth
Cluster 11	never tire of seeing, second time, sequel, again, over and over

By referring to the previous literature and the original complete corpus, this paper aims to identify the composition dimensions of animation brand equity model from the effective attribute word sets. For example, by reviewing the original corpus of cluster 1, it is found that most of these words express the recognition ability and deep memory of the image, story and other elements of a certain animation brand. For example, "This is one of my favorite cartoons when I was a child, the most impressive is the plot of the master", "This is an animation that has a deep impression on every scene". Correspondingly, in the traditional brand equity model, brand awareness, as an important dimension of brand equity, includes two sub-dimensions: brand recognition and brand recall. The former refers to the ability of customers to correctly identify a brand based on previous experience. The latter refers to the ability to recall the brand when given a certain product category [5]. Therefore, cluster 1 is identified as brand awareness dimension in our model.

By observing the word sets, it can be found that category 2-7 are mostly nouns and describe different product attributes of animation works. Empirical researches confirm that customer experience mediates the relationship between product attributes and brand equity, which implies that the influence degree of product attributes on brand equity depends on corresponding customer perceptions [15]. Therefore, the animation brand equity dimension corresponding to these attribute word sets is consumers' perception of the specific attribute.

According to the actual situation and the key words, cluster 2,3,4,5 can be respectively named as visual performance, auditory performance, characters and plot creation. The comprehensive performance of these four categories can be regarded as consumers' perception of the content quality of animation works. Therefore, these four clusters together constitute the dimension of perceived content quality. The primitive corpus of cluster 6, 7 contain some reviews like "this animation still lacks some shocking values", "It doesn't lack technology, it lacks originality and imagination", showing the consumer demands for the improvement of animation brand culture and innovative ability. These two clusters are identified as perceived culture dimension and perceived innovation dimension respectively, which are included in the important dimensions of animation brand equity.

Cluster 8 is mainly related to animation creative team. The traditional brand equity theory, such as *Aaker's* The Brand Equity Ten, usually contains the organizational association dimension which refers to consumers' overall impression about a certain enterprise [7], *Keller* also regards organizational association as a secondary channel for building brand equity [5]. Since the narrow sense of animation production organization is its creative team, the organization association dimension here is extended to the creative team association.

Similarly, words of cluster 9 and its original corpus mostly show consumers' emotional evaluation of animation brands, which is identified as the brand emotion dimension.

One of the most important goals of brand equity construction is the establishment and maintenance of brand loyalty which contains two dimensions, attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty includes trust, price tolerance, word-of-mouth and recommendation, while behavioral loyalty includes repurchase, complaint and conversion [16]. The two dimensions are exactly corresponding to the attribute words such as "recommendation" and "repeated viewing" in cluster 10 and 11. Therefore, the two clusters are combined and identified as the brand loyalty dimension.

In summary, seven main dimensions are identified, which are brand awareness, perceived content quality, perceived culture, perceived innovation, creative team association, brand emotion and brand loyalty, forming the dimensional basis for the construction of animation brand equity model, shown as Table 2.

Table 2. Final dimensions

Dimension		Corresponding Cluster
Brand Awareness		Cluster 1
Perceived Content Quality	Visual Effect	Cluster 2
	Auditory Effect	Cluster 3
	Character Role	Cluster 4
	Story Creation	Cluster 5
Perceived Culture		Cluster 6
Perceived Innovation		Cluster 7
Creative Team Association		Cluster 8
Brand Emotion		Cluster 9
Brand Loyalty	Attitudinal Loyalty	Cluster 10
	Behavioral Loyalty	Cluster 11

3.2. Hypotheses and research model

Based on *Keller's* brand resonance model, the above dimensions are divided into different levels, suggesting that brand awareness is the level of brand identity, perceived content quality, perceived culture, perceived innovation and creative team association constitute the brand meaning level, while brand emotion and brand loyalty are the level of brand responses and brand relationships respectively. With the former level being the foundation of the latter one, all the levels form a pyramid hierarchy.

(1) Influence of brand identity level on brand meaning level

The dimensions of brand meaning level vary with industries, however they show consumers' perception of the brand attributes in essence. After text analysis, it can be seen that as intangible cultural products, the meaning of animation brands is mainly composed of perceived content quality, perceived culture, perceived innovation and creative team association. Keller points out that brand identity is the foundation of brand equity construction, and only on the basis of brand identity can consumers understand the brand meaning [8]. Brand awareness can improve consumer perceptions about brand attributes and this construct is related to the strength of a brand's presence in consumers' minds. *Jin Su's* empirical research in the field of fast fashion proves that brand awareness has a significant positive impact on brand personality and perceived value [17].

A higher level of animation brand awareness usually shows consumers' deeper memories and wider associations of specific animation work. The former promotes consumers to form positive feelings on the quality of brand content, culture, innovation and other aspects by building a sense of belonging, while the latter enhances consumers' recognition of various elements of the work and deepens their understanding and perceptions of the brand meaning. From the concepts described, hypotheses were created:

H1: Brand awareness has a positive effect on perceived content quality.

H2: Brand awareness has a positive effect on perceived culture.

H3: Brand awareness has a positive effect on perceived innovation.

H4: Brand awareness has a positive effect on creative team association.

(2) Influence of brand meaning level on brand responses level

According to the brand resonance model, consumers will not form an overall judgment and evaluation of the brand until they have a certain understanding of the meaning of the brand, that is, brand responses. In this paper, brand emotion is selected as the representative dimension of this level. When it comes to the relationship between brand meaning and brand emotion, some studies based on the self-congruity theory suggest that consumers' perception of brand-related elements will lead to consumers' positive response and positive emotion towards the brand when their perception is compatible with their self-image [18]. On the other hand, the quality of the brand meaning that can be objectively measured also directly affects the brand emotion. For example, in the retail context, consumer's perception of product quality, physical store and other brand meanings significantly affects consumer trust in the retailer [19].

In reality, animation brands with excellent brand meaning are indeed more likely to arouse consumers' positive brand emotion. Taking the creative team association dimension as an example, works of well-known animation companies or authors such as *Disney* are more likely to be recognized by consumers.

H5: Perceived content quality has a positive effect on brand emotion.

H6: Perceived culture has a positive effect on brand emotion.

H7: Perceived innovation has a positive effect on brand emotion.

H8: Creative team association has a positive effect on brand emotion.

(3) Influence of brand responses level on brand relationships level

The brand resonance model suggests that the positive brand responses is the foundation of building solid brand relationships, and the continuous positive emotional connection between consumers and the brand will eventually lead to attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. From the perspective of cognition theory, *Zhang Feng* established a theoretical model based on "cognition-emotion-behavior" logical system, suggesting that brand emotion dimension plays a partial mediating role among brand awareness, brand meaning (including perceived quality and brand association) and brand loyalty [20]. When customers have positive emotions and comments on a certain animation brand, with gradually forming a solid emotional bond, their commitment to the work will be significantly enhanced, which is manifested in repeated viewing, spontaneous recommendation, purchase of derivatives and other behaviors, and they are willing to pay a higher premium for the brand products. Therefore, hypotheses were created:

H9: Brand emotion has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

Based on the above research assumptions, this paper constructs the theoretical model, shown as Fig.1.

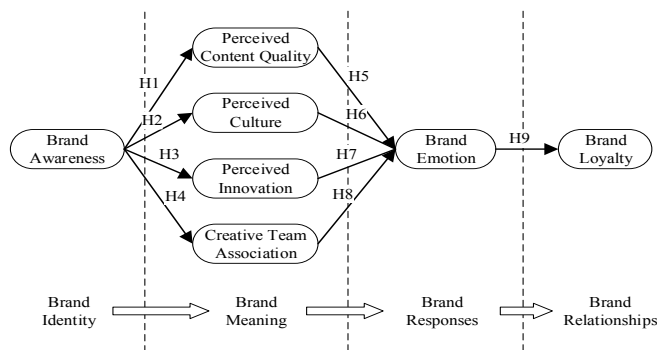


Fig.1. The hypothesized research model

3.3. Structural equation model analysis

Based on the brand equity field maturity scale of consumers, this study has developed a special scale for the field of animation, including 25 items. Compared with confirmatory factor analysis, exploratory factor analysis can spontaneously find out the essential structure of multiple observed variables, which is suitable for verifying

original scales and avoiding subjective design bias. With KMO and sig value of 0.000 and 0.950, the measurement items were proved to have correlation and were suitable for factor analysis, and the rotated factor loadings of all the items were greater than 0.7, ensuring a good structural validity.

For simultaneously testing multiple causal relationships and measuring latent variables, this paper used the SmartPLSV3.2.8 software and the least square structural equation model (PLS-SEM) to conduct path analysis on 977 questionnaire sample data. The test results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path coeff.	t	Results
H1	Brand Awareness → Perceived Content Quality	0.527***	14.551	supported
H2	Brand Awareness → Perceived Culture	0.441***	11.761	supported
H3	Brand Awareness → Perceived Innovation	0.465***	13.746	supported
H4	Brand Awareness → Creative Team Association	0.514***	14.585	supported
H5	Perceived Content Quality → Brand Emotion	0.241***	7.731	supported
H6	Perceived Culture → Brand Emotion	0.068***	2.426	supported
H7	Perceived Innovation → Brand Emotion	0.186**	6.321	supported
H8	Creative Team Association → Brand Emotion	0.449***	15.690	supported
H9	Brand Emotion → Brand Loyalty	0.764***	45.734	supported

Notes: ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$

It can be seen that all the hypotheses proposed in this paper pass the path test. Specifically, among the influences of brand identity on brand meaning, brand awareness has the greatest influence on consumers' perceived content quality and creative team association. These two dimensions of brand meaning also have a greater impact on the brand emotion, which are 0.241 and 0.449, respectively. Consumers tend to subconsciously think that animations with high popularity also have good performance in terms of sound, painting, characters and stories, and the recognition of the creation teams is more likely to stimulate viewers' positive emotions towards specific brands. China's animation industry is still in a breakthrough stage of development, consumers pay more attention to the quality of animation and creative groups while are not sensitive to innovation and cultural elements, the test results well match the development situation of China's animation industry.

4. Discussion

This article constructs an animation brand equity model with seven dimensions and empirically verifies the influence relationship among them through structural equation model, confirming the four-step framework as "identity - meaning - responses - relationships" can be fully applicable in the field of animation. This model reveals the process of building a strong animation brand, of which brand awareness is the most basic element that brands should first make effort to create an impressive awareness in consumers' minds to attract them to further understand the brand. Nowadays, the development of media convergence has expanded the communication space. The marketing campaign of animation brands should make full use of various media to publicize brands' core characteristics and increase brand awareness. It's also effective to carry out industrial operation around animation works, strengthen the production of relevant books, toys and other extension products, and enhance the brand awareness of animation through synergies.

Through text analysis, this paper finds that consumers pay most attention to the content quality, culture, innovation and creative team of animation works in terms of brand meaning, the perception of which directly affects consumers' emotion towards brand, and then affects brand loyalty. Also, the creative team association has the greatest impact on brand emotion. Animation enterprises should take the building of well-known creative teams as an important strategic plan for brand building and improve the talent training mechanism. The works of well-known enterprises and creative teams are much easier to gain the trust and praise of consumers, which is conducive to the development and extension of the brand. The dimension that has the second largest impact on brand emotion is the perceived content quality. With the continuous development of the production

level of digital products, consumers have much more higher requirements for visual and auditory enjoyment. The building of animation brand should focus on quality, making effort to improve the level of picture, dubbing, story and other aspects.

In addition, due to the late start of China's animation industry, consumers pay less attention to advanced demands like culture and innovation of the works, but it does not mean that animation enterprises can reduce their requirements for these two aspects. China has rich cultural resources of animation and many successful foreign animations, such as *Mulan*, are based on traditional Chinese stories. Enterprises should make full use of Chinese culture, integrating brand values with story characters for creating their own brand culture. At the same time, animation brands need to improve their innovative ability, think about their core competencies in story, technology or other areas, jump out of the existing routine, break the homogenization problem and improve brand competitiveness. In the face of the pressure from mature foreign animation brands, the use of rich cultural resources and creativity to building unique Chinese animation brands may become a breakthrough for the leapfrog development of the industry.

This paper still has some limitations, future research can, on the basis of the model in this paper, carry out quantitative measurements of brand equity of representative animation brands and compare measurement results with their market performance, so as to test whether the model is applicable to real business scenarios. Future research can also take foreign consumers as research objects to identify the focus of consumers' attention to animation brands and explore the cultural applicability of this model.

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