

Operation Culture of Independent IP in China in the Past Decade

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Abstract:

In recent years, the development and operation culture of China's independent IP has been widely discussed, but there are still deficiencies in the comparison, analysis, and research of various independent IP cases. This paper analyzes the effective and sustainable operation mode of China's independent IP by comparing the operation culture of "The Legend of Luo Xiaohei" IP and "Wu Huang Wan Shui" IP. This paper analyzes the problems of China's independent IP in recent years, such as the gap between originality and creators, the restriction of originality by platform ecology and capital orientation, the lack of a systematic independent IP training mechanism, premature commercialization and immature content, a single profit structure, and the double-edged sword effect of the fan economy. Based on this, this paper suggests that major platforms and departments related to independent IP in China can establish a long-term original incubation mechanism, optimize platform algorithms, and promote the optimization of commercialization mode, to promote the sustainable improvement of the quality of independent IP creation in China and further strengthen the long-term sustainable development of independent IP in China.

Keywords: Content analysis; China's independent IP operation mode; sustainable development

1. Introduction

In Chinese society in the past decade, the prosperity of the Internet and the trend of consumption upgrading have spawned the rise of the IP trend. At the same time, the development of the fan economy has enabled IP fans to convert their support into purchasing power [1]. In this environment, fan culture, cross-media narration, and IP operation culture are widely concerned and studied by all walks of life.

Cross-media narration has been regarded as an important strategy for IP operation, and fan groups with highly organized characteristics have also become a hot research topic [2].

However, the current research mostly focuses on the detailed research of a single case, and the research results from the perspective of comparative analysis are still insufficient. Therefore, this study will use the content analysis method to code and systematically and comprehensively analyze the coding dimensions

of “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP and “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP, the two major independent Chinese IP, in terms of narrative theme and depth, aesthetic symbols and visual style, fan interaction and communication forms, business path and cash flow rhythm, and summarize their commonness, differences and the general laws and modes of operation, to study the effective mode of sustainable development and operation of independent Chinese IP.

2. Method Design

2.1 Case Introduction

In the past decade, China’s independent IP has shown an upward trend. Among them, “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP and “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP are two successful IP models with different operating cultures. Therefore, this study selected these two IPs for comparison and analysis. “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP is a Chinese independent IP that was formally created in 2011 and has developed and flourished in the past decade. This IP combines traditional Chinese style elements with modern Chinese aesthetic style, and takes growth, friendship, trust, balance, and harmony between humans and nature as the core theme, telling the life and growth of the cat fairy Luo Xiaohei. The storyline and content of this IP are set reasonably and coherently, and are very popular with young Chinese groups. With the support of fans, it has developed from the initial network animation to the big screen, and has made cross-border expansion to the fields of comics and surrounding co-branding, deeply demonstrating the influence of long-term and profound accumulation of cultural capital driven by content.

The “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP is an independent IP in China, which was founded in 2016 and has been thriving in the past decade. This IP takes the proud cat “Wuhuang” and the cute dog “Bazhahei” as the core image, and takes the humorous and relaxed daily style as the keynote, and has successively created a series of works, such as comic books and books. Through large-scale cross-border linkage and co-branding, this IP is linked with many well-known games and has launched peripheral products such as a series of blind boxes and interactive puzzle-solving boxes. It is deeply loved and supported by fans of all ages and is a model of successful fast-paced commercialization.

2.2 Research Methods

This research adopts the content analysis method and selects four research dimensions from “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP and “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP, including

narrative theme and depth, aesthetic symbols and visual style, fan interaction and communication forms, business path and cash flow rhythm, for coding, classification, and counting.

3. Differences

3.1 Narrative Theme and Depth

At present, the narrative content of China’s independent IP focuses on arousing emotional resonance, but there are differences in narrative theme and narrative depth. For example, from the above content analysis and case introduction, it can be concluded that the “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP plot line is long in length and width across time and space, has a grand, innovative, complete, and detailed world view, has a coherent plot, and focuses on large movies with rich plots. Correspondingly, the “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP plot line is short across time and space, and its selling point is a relaxed, humorous, and warm comedy rather than an innovative design with a grand world view. The plot is mainly a unit of short stories. At the same time, the narrative theme of “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP is grand and serious, and there are many themes worth pondering, such as “the balance and harmony between man and nature”, “the harm of war to mankind”, and “post-war trauma”. The content of the text is suitable for in-depth discussion and thinking, while the narrative theme of “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP is more relaxed, covering all age growth, companionship, love, and warmth. The depth is shallow, and it does not focus on the depth of the text, but mainly pursues interest and emotional resonance.

Generally speaking, “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP focuses on the long-term narrative, focusing on the story and cultural connotation, while the “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP prefers interesting and relaxed short emotional light comedy. As the case shows, at present, most of China’s independent IPs prefer shallow and humorous narrative content, but at the same time, China’s independent IPs with deep narrative depth, rich content, and sufficient cultural connotation also show a rising trend.

3.2 Aesthetic Symbols and Visual Style

Nowadays, China’s independent IP pays more and more attention to the integration of Chinese culture and Chinese style aesthetics, but it still focuses on the symbolic style, which is relatively simple and easy to spread. For example, according to the coding classification, it can be concluded that “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP integrates traditional Chinese aesthetics with modern Chinese

aesthetics, and is good at using Chinese style aesthetic symbols, such as Chinese martial arts, Chinese Bonsai, and Chinese mythological images, to form a unique artistic style that combines traditional cultural style with modern trends. At the same time, “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP focuses on the simple, cute, and distinctive personified PET image, supplemented by the traditional Chinese aesthetic symbol ink painting style, and focuses on creating a relaxed, humorous, easy-to-spread, and symbolic visual style. It can be seen that in today’s independent IP in China, the accumulation of cultural capital still needs to be strengthened.

3.3 Fans’ Interaction and Communication Forms

In today’s environment, the form of fan interaction and communication of China’s independent IP is different because of the IP content and the IP’s official operation mode. For example, according to the research and analysis, the fan interaction of “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP mainly focuses on a large number of secondary creations of IP peer paintings and comments and exchanges, as well as active interaction and exchanges on the official microblog account home page of IP Movie 2. This situation stems from the conscious propaganda and the behavior of attracting young fans by the IP official, as well as the efforts made by the IP official to maintain an orderly and healthy secondary creation environment. The form of fan interaction of “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP is mainly to actively purchase IP co-branded products, watch and comment on IP network comics, and short video animations. This situation is also because the large-scale co-branded linkage and unique style of online comics and short video animations of “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP official have penetrated into all aspects of IP fan life.

At the same time, the communication form of “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP focuses on the spontaneous publicity and promotion by a large number of fans through second creation works and social media posts, as well as the in-depth exploration and discussion of the IP content and text widely disseminated by many media bloggers on the online social platform. The communication form of “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP is mainly to launch and promote various commercial IP co-branded products, to realize cross-domain publicity, and improve IP popularity. The different communication forms of these two different IPs reflect the difference between the more academic IP operation ecology caused by the accumulation of cultural capital and the fragmented and interactive IP operation ecology caused by the symbolic light comedy style.

3.4 Business Path and Cash Flow Rhythm

Nowadays, due to the different accumulation of cultural capital, there are obvious differences in the business path and cash flow rhythm of Chinese independent IP. For example, combined with the data and classification obtained from content analysis, it can be clearly concluded from comparative analysis that the business path of “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP is mainly to launch diversified IP co-branding linkage and officially design and sell IP peripherals, with a relatively stable and sustainable cash flow rhythm. The business path of “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP is more extensive and diversified, focusing on the collection of relevant fees for the publication of comic books by IP authors, as well as the joint linkage of IP rapid authorization and large-scale IP peripheral sales. The pace of realization is fast and regular, but the long-term liquidity is insufficient. Therefore, China’s independent IP with a relatively complete accumulation of cultural capital is more capable of long-term and sustainable commercial realization.

4. Overall Development Problems and Deficiencies

It can be seen from the above that China’s independent IP is showing a positive development trend in today’s social environment, but due to the lack of depth and innovation in the overall environment, there are still some deficiencies in the development and operation of China’s independent IP.

4.1 Insufficient Accumulation of Original Content

4.1.1 Originality and creator fault

In the past decade, China’s independent IP has flourished. However, most of the newly created independent IPs are too dependent on a single type of theme, such as adorable, two-dimensional animation images, expression packs, and so on. These themes can often bring short-term pop points and fan craze, but at the same time, they lack the innovation and depth of original content, making IP content simple and superficial, and it is difficult to accumulate effective cultural capital [3]. The lack of cultural capital accumulation is a major reason why independent IP cannot develop and prosper for a long time.

Under the current situation of IP development, most Chinese independent IP creators who are good at creating original and innovative themes and in-depth IP content find it difficult to get public attention and traffic, which leads to these excellent independent IP creators being un-

able to continue or are no longer willing to create original IP content with in-depth and cultural connotation. At the same time, the lack of a stable, independent IP creation support system has further contributed to the current gap between independent IP originality and excellent independent IP creators. For example, “The Legend of Luo Xiaohei” IP was successful as a Chinese independent IP with both cultural capital accumulation and fan traffic. However, during the same period, many similar excellent Chinese independent IPs did not receive enough attention, which led to the transfer or abandonment of the creators of these IPs. As SX Zhang and others said, the development of sustainable innovative design needs to improve imagination and knowledge. The loss of outstanding independent IP creators will lead to the lack of cultural capital accumulation and sustainable development of independent IP in China [4].

4.1.2 Platform ecology and capital orientation restrict originality

At the same time, China’s major social media platforms, as the main venues for IP development, excessively advocate algorithmic streaming, and these algorithms prefer homogeneous themes that can bring short-term pop points and fan traffic rather than innovative themes with cultural accumulation, thus inhibiting the accumulation of China’s independent IP cultural capital and the creation of original innovative content.

The major capitals also prefer to support replicable IP templated content, which is not conducive to the growth and development of original independent IP content.

4.1.3 Lack of a systematic, independent IP training mechanism

China has not yet formed a systematic and stable original IP training system like Japan and the United States. As Wang Weiting said, the reform of China’s cultural system has been further improved in recent years, but the overall situation is not perfect [5].

At present, the development of independent IP in China often depends on traffic, star effect, and so on, but lacks enough attraction of its own content and cultural connotation.

4.2 Imbalance of Commercialization Rhythm

4.2.1 Premature commercialization and immature content

Many independent IPs in China pay too much attention to short-term cash flow, and have carried out a large number of IP commercialization activities, such as co-branding, peripheral sales, film and television, when they have not yet grown and improved, and the IP content base and fan

popularity have not yet stabilized. The unstable foundation of these IPS is not suitable for these premature and large-scale commercial activities, which will lead to the overdraft of the content of these IPS and the poor experience of IP fans, and ultimately lead to the lack of support of IP fans and the decline of IP reputation.

These pressures of expecting too much short-term returns will also inhibit the creativity and innovation enthusiasm of independent IP creators, and will lead to the compression of their creation cycle.

4.2.2 Single profit structure

In the past decade, most of China’s independent IPs have advocated a series of shallow profit models, such as advertising, joint branding, and templated peripheral sales, which have led to the failure of IP content itself to achieve a valuable and perfect story and cultural foundation. As Zhu Qile found when studying the cultural and creative marketing of “The Graver Robbers’ Chronicles” IP, although the IP has a rich cultural and creative product line, there may be a lack of innovation [6].

4.2.3 Double-edged sword effect of fan economy

China’s independent IP, which lacks excellent cultural capital accumulation and original innovative content, will be supported and boosted by fans during the boom period. However, with the rapid pace and premature IP commercialization, the spontaneous support of IP fans will be weakened or transferred, and the traffic and attention of IP will also be greatly reduced with the withdrawal of IP fans. After all, IP fans “desire to obtain a highly satisfying participatory cultural experience”, rather than immature IP cultural capital and excessive consumption of fans [7]. For example, “Wu Huang Wan Shui” IP was widely supported and praised by fans in the early days of its establishment, but the long-term failure to achieve innovation breakthroughs and a large number of consumer fans has led to the loss of a large part of the public’s attention.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Strengthen the Ecological Construction of Original Content

5.1.1 Establish a long-term original incubation mechanism

China’s major social media platforms can establish relevant mechanisms, such as China’s independent IP innovation incentive mechanism, China’s excellent independent IP incubation program, and China’s independent IP cultural capital accumulation support program, in combination with relevant policies to encourage and support China’s

independent IP original content and cultural capital accumulation.

In addition, China's major platforms can also introduce or emulate the independent IP cultivation mechanisms of Japan, the United States, and other countries, such as the large-scale direct payment subscription mechanism of fans to creators, and the effective platform support for creators' crowdfunding for IP development, to achieve the sustainable improvement of the quality of China's independent IP creation.

After all, as Liu Mingyue mentioned, "the spread of food culture leads to economic value"; the cultural value of China's independent IP can also be transformed into economic value. Only with high-quality cultural products can it remain invincible in the market [8,9].

5.1.2 Optimization platform algorithm

The major social media platforms in China can improve the platform algorithm, optimize the flow allocation logic, and give more streaming and exposure to excellent original Chinese independent IP, so as to stimulate and support the in-depth development and innovation of Chinese independent IP content. After all, most of the creative power of excellent Chinese independent IP creators lies in traffic, popularity, and attention.

5.2 Promote the Optimization of Commercialization Mode

First of all, China's major independent IP commercialization-related departments and platforms can establish a China's independent IP creation cycle management mechanism and promote and encourage the "content first" mode to ensure that China's independent IP can develop relevant commercialization activities when the content and fan base are mature.

Secondly, China's major platforms can encourage and support China's independent IP to transform the commercialization mode from a single linkage and joint branding, peripheral sales, etc., to a long-term sustainable, and diversified mode, such as long-term brand operation, offline experience economy, etc.

Moreover, the relevant government departments in China can encourage the long-term investment mechanism of capital, such as the integrated investment of "venture capital+incubation+operation". This will enable capital to take a longer-term view of investment, thus promoting the long-term development and content precipitation of China's independent IP.

Finally, the major social media platforms can also strengthen and improve the relevant mechanisms, such as increasing the punishment for original plagiarism, adding corresponding functions to make the copyright protection

and rights protection actions of Chinese independent IP creators more convenient, just as China is now fighting against online film and television piracy [10].

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the overall development problems and deficiencies of China's independent IP in recent years, and examines the effective and sustainable operation mode of China's independent IP. Through research and analysis, this paper concludes that in the past decade, China's independent IP has had problems such as insufficient accumulation of original content and an imbalance in the pace of commercialization. Relevant platforms and departments can optimize the operation mode of China's independent IP by strengthening the ecological construction of original content and promoting the optimization of the commercialization mode, so as to promote the sustainable development of China's independent IP. This paper will contribute to the theoretical research and Path Exploration of China's independent IP operation mode. Future research can combine the data and content of this study, expand the research sample, or conduct a cross-border sample comparison to verify and develop the conclusion of this study, and study the development mode of China's independent IP internationalization.

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