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Reflections on Consumption Visual Expression and Emotional Consumption in the Creation of Virtual Avatars

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Abstract: The popularity of short videos and live streaming media has expanded the commercial application boundaries of rendering and motion capture technologies. Virtual digital characters gradually break away from the narrative frameworks of animation and games and develop into media forms for service consumption and communication. MCN institutions, brand operation entities, and independent creators use interactive technologies to shape digital characters and rely on designed visual symbols to complete brand promotion and the daily operation of fan communities. The cognitive construction of virtual characters by the audience is rooted in a complex visual information system. The character appearance schemes, shot scheduling strategies, and real-time interactive feedback in live streaming interweave with each other, jointly influencing the audience's perception and judgment. The platform has built a low-barrier channel for consumer participation, allowing users to give virtual gifts in live rooms and purchase IP derivative products to participate in such cultural consumption activities. During continuous media exposure, audiences tend to establish psychological emotional connections with virtual digital characters. The emotional attachment generated by continuous interaction will guide audiences to form regular consumption choices, and the internal path of this emotional transformation into consumption is precisely the core mechanism that this article aims to analyze.

Keywords: Virtual avatars; visual expression; emotional consumption; symbolic consumption; digital fan culture.

1. Introduction

The fragmented leisure time of the new generation of audiences has become the main scenario for virtual hosts and brand-exclusive digital representatives to carry out communication activities [1]. The technical threshold for digital image production has continued to decline, and the implementation difficulty of practical operations such as modeling adjustment and live streaming operation has significantly reduced. Small and medium-sized creative teams thus gained the opportunity to participate in the development, breaking the previous pattern where large institutions monopolized the resources for digital character creation. Market funds have continuously flowed into the virtual IP sector, and the commercial virtual projects implemented by platforms have continued to increase. The industry expansion pace is fast, while the update of regulatory norms is relatively slow. Many projects have encountered the problem of design convergence, and the emotional attention invested by the audience is also prone to being repeatedly consumed.

Existing research on virtual images mainly focuses on three directions: technology implementation, platform content review, and fan community management. There is still not much in-depth discussion centered around visual narrative [2]. Visual symbols can act on the cognitive feelings of the audience. How this perceptual change affects subsequent consumption choices still requires in-depth analysis. Creators continuously collect aesthetic information from the circle and user feedback, and continuously polish the visual effects of virtual images. Adjusting content includes facial styling, color matching, accessory styles, and micro-expressions that occur during live streaming interactions. These visual elements are not just appearance decorations. Audiences are willing to invest time and money in consuming virtual content and often transfer the emotions that cannot be satisfied in reality to digital characters. Visual narrative fulfills such emotional needs and supports continuous consumption behavior. Visual symbols establish the perceptual connection between the audience and the virtual IP, and commercial monetization converts the cultural value inherent in the IP into actual revenue. The two parts work together to form a complete commercial loop. Based on this logic, this study sorts out the different paths through which visual narrative touches the emotions of the audience and identifies the industry governance issues hidden in the process of traffic expansion [3].

2. The Visual Expression of Virtual Image Consumption

2.1. The encoding construction of virtual image visual symbols

For virtual hosts aimed at the general audience, soft facial lines are usually chosen to reduce the sense of detachment of the digital image; for virtual images serving brand communication, a simple and restrained design language is adopted to convey a credible and professional brand temperament [4].

Color itself has the role of guiding emotions. Low saturation tones can weaken the visual impact and are suitable for content with a healing style; high contrast color combinations have stronger visual tension and are more likely to capture users' attention in the vast amount of information flow. Users rarely actively pay attention to such subtle designs, but they unconsciously receive all visual information during content browsing [5]. These easily overlooked details gradually shape the audience's impression of the character and support the complete symbolic system in completing the meaning transmission. During the project preparation stage,

the creative team first determines the commercial goals and then decomposes the preset personality traits, integrating these traits into the appearance design. Virtual images have no physical carriers, and the entire set of visual materials is the medium for presenting the personality externally.

Creators rely on visual symbols to convey the preset personality, but the interpretation process of the audience is clearly subjective [6]. Personal growth experiences, media usage habits, and the interest circle they belong to will change the audience's understanding of the image. The same virtual image will present a differentiated appearance in the cognition of different audiences. This cognitive-level difference also becomes the basis for fans to conduct exchanges and discussions. The operation party relies on backend data feedback to adjust the visual plan, reduce the cognitive deviation among audiences, and ensure the stability of symbolic meaning [7]. Consistent and unified visual impressions continuously deepen the audience's understanding of the IP, and the virtual image also becomes a carrier for implanting brand information, reducing the audience's resistance to commercial promotion. Smooth and comfortable viewing experiences continuously accumulate the audience's favor, and these emotional accumulations further support core operations such as fan maintenance, consumption conversion, and other operations.

2.2. The consumption-oriented nature of visual narrative in media scenarios

The single-frame presentation format limits the narrative effectiveness of static images. Such materials lack continuous scene transitions and do not have interactive entry points for the audience, making it difficult to maintain the audience's attention for a long time. Introducing dynamic images and corresponding interactive response mechanisms in the development of virtual content is a feasible way to enhance the appeal of content dissemination. Live streaming rooms, short video materials, and outdoor large screens are several main deployment scenarios for virtual visual content. The viewing states and stay logic of the audience in different scenarios are not consistent, which also indicates that a well-tuned visual solution is difficult to be directly replicated and put into use in other scenarios [8].

The communication characteristics of the media carrier will influence the choice of narrative methods. The information transmission of short videos aims to trigger emotional resonance in a short period of time. Creators often choose close-up shots to magnify the expressions of digital characters, thereby narrowing the psychological distance between the audience and the virtual image. The sense of companionship created by live streaming is based on full-body motion capture technology. Uninterrupted two-way interaction is the key to maintaining the audience's continuous viewing. The inherent technical limitations of the hardware will also compress the expression forms available for visual narrative. Events such as brand cooperation and anniversary celebrations are usually included in marketing planning in advance. Platforms often launch limited derivatives based on these events, and the content launch schedule will also align with the marketing sequence. During the process of the audience receiving information along the narrative thread, their consumption intentions will gradually be activated [9].

Interactive narrative leaves room for the soft implantation of commercial information. When the audience is immersed in the narrative-constructed scenario, their resistance to embedded marketing information is lower, and their acceptance degree also increases. Marketing content is no longer presented independently of the narrative but integrated into the story line, indirectly influencing the audience's consumption judgment. Resolution, network bandwidth are objective conditions that need to be addressed during content production. Creators should coordinate the visual presentation effect and the brand communication goal within the technical limits. The immersive viewing experience continuously eliminates the psychological distance between the audience and the virtual image. This reduction of the sense of isolation lowers the conversion threshold from browsing content to consumption behavior, and also lays the foundation for long-term consumption behavior driven by emotional connection [10].

3. The Internal Logic of Emotional Consumption Through Virtual Avatars

3.1. Audience emotional projection and simulated intimate relationship

Audiences are aware that the interaction object is merely a digital product, but they still remain willing to invest their real emotions [11]. Real social interactions often come with contradictions and uncertainties. When audiences interact with virtual characters, they can fill some of the emotional gaps that have not been satisfied. Fixed character designs avoid the endless conflicts in real interactions, and stable interaction feedback attracts audiences to continuously participate in interactions. This stable accompanying experience aligns with the large number of audiences' demand for emotional support [12].

When emotional demands are appeased, audiences will choose to express their emotions through consumption behaviors. The depth of their emotional investment directly determines their subsequent consumption choices. Purchasing related products and participating in crowdfunding activities are all ways for audiences to convert their internal emotional preferences into consumption actions. Consumption here serves to maintain the emotional connection, with the original practical value of the goods taking a secondary position, and the commemorative attribute that carries emotional taking the lead in the final consumption decision of audiences [13].

3.2. Consumer practices driven by community identification

During the continuous communication process among the members of the circle, a group consensus gradually forms. Virtual image enthusiasts gather in Bilibili sections, fan communities, and comment sections to exchange ideas and share materials. After long-term interaction and adaptation, an exclusive discourse system, evaluation standards, and aesthetic orientation gradually emerge within the circle. Enthusiasts independently produce secondary creation content such as text and video, sharing their direct feelings when watching the content within the community. The community atmosphere cultivates the sense of belonging among the audience and helps individuals integrate into the circle [14].

The consensus within the circle continuously strengthens the members' identity recognition, consolidates the positive

impression of the IP among the audience, and amplifies the internal emotional tendencies of the audience. The prevailing atmosphere gradually formed within the circle will gradually change the original consumption preferences of individuals, giving rise to unique consumption habits of the circle [15]. Collecting limited editions, unlocking paid live-streaming content, in the circle context, becomes a kind of implicit identity identifier. Many audience members rely on such consumption to confirm their circle affiliation, and the opinions of the like-minded group will subconsciously influence their personal consumption judgment [16].

4. Reflection and Adjustment on the Phenomenon of Emotional Consumption through Virtual Images

4.1. The challenges in creating virtual IPs

Virtual hosts generate revenue by using visual images to evoke emotions in the audience. This business model inherently carries many risks. In 2021, a large amount of capital flooded into this industry, and the number of virtual IPs suddenly increased. The problem of similar images gradually emerged. Many small development teams wanted to save costs and directly used ready-made templates to design the appearance and interaction functions of the characters. The resulting virtual images lacked unique design ideas and were difficult to retain the audience for a long time [17]. Many operation teams placed more emphasis on short-term traffic, and the content changed back and forth following online hotspots, rarely planning a long-term content direction. Template production could reduce upfront costs, but it was difficult to create an impressive and well-contented IP. After a large number of similar virtual images were launched, the initial novelty of the audience would gradually fade, and the emotional consumption became a difficult problem to avoid in the industry.

When I was organizing relevant cases, I found that many operation teams would use the emotions of the audience to promote consumption. This approach easily led young audiences to make impulsive consumption choices. Audiences were willing to spend time and money to support their favorite virtual characters, and gradually established emotional connections with the characters. However, this connection was not very reliable. When the IP stopped updating or the character's appearance and settings changed, the accumulated emotional connections would be broken. Some projects relied on novel stories to attract attention, with relatively narrow aesthetic choices, and also had hidden risks in value guidance. Continuously consuming the audience's true feelings led to the loss of fans for individual IPs, and the overall impression of the industry also deteriorated.

The display of virtual images requires code and artistic materials as support. Projects cannot withstand too many external changes [18]. Platform modifications of management rules or insufficient project funds could cause the IP to completely stop updating. The emotions the audience placed in the virtual characters could not find a stable foothold. Capital trends and platform requirements would limit the operation of this business model. Emotional consumption relying on virtual images has no reliable guarantee. These inherent uncertainties are the characteristics of digital emotional consumption. Researchers and industry practitioners can continue to pay attention to such phenomena.

4.2. Thoughts on the Path for the Healthy Development of Industries

Long-term governance strategies are the key to resolving industry. During the development of virtual image industries, the creative team needs to balance commercial gains and cultural value. Diversified creation is more likely to build distinctive IPs. Projects that solely rely on appearance to attract traffic generally have a shorter lifespan. Visual creation can carry cultural connotations and enhance the aesthetic level of the content. Diverse creative directions can also alleviate the problem of internal competition caused by following trends and copying. Diversified development is the foundation for the healthy development of the industry.

The operating entity should adhere to the bottom line of operation and abandon short-term profit-making methods such as emotional manipulation and inducing excessive consumption [19]. The audience also needs to distinguish between media emotional experiences and the boundaries of real life. Universities and mainstream media should promote media literacy education to guide the audience to rationally view the emotional comfort brought by virtual images and reduce impulsive consumption behaviors among teenagers. The coordinated guidance of multiple forces can reduce the negative effects of emotional consumption. Regulatory authorities should gradually improve relevant regulations to restrain improper visual design and marketing methods and ease the disorderly competition in the industry. Traffic indicators cannot be the sole criterion for evaluating the quality of industry development. The development of the industry needs to take into account revenue, aesthetics, and the rights and interests of the audience, and continuously produce digital content with humanistic connotations [20].

5. Conclusion

The creators rely on a layered visual system to gradually complete the construction of the personality of the virtual characters. Various communication channels continuously output commercial information, and visual narratives evoke the emotional engagement of the audience, fostering close relationships. Circle identity amplifies the emotional demands of individuals, driving continuous emotional consumption. Virtual characters give rise to new cultural consumption forms and expand the boundaries of the digital cultural industry. The development model prioritizing traffic leads to a series of problems such as image homogeneity and emotional depletion. The entire industry is still in a stage of rapid iteration. After the implementation of new technologies, the space for exploring visual narratives will further expand. Practitioners need to clarify the psychological logic behind emotional consumption, abide by ethical boundaries, and coordinate multiple demands in order to ensure the stable operation of virtual IPs. This article discusses the visual expression of virtual characters and the emotional consumption mechanism, providing references for research on youth consumption.

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