

Cartoon Characters and Virtual Idols in the Context of Cross-Cultural Communication

Delong Chen*

North China University of Science and Technology, Tangshan, Hebei, China

**Corresponding author: Delong Chen.*

Abstract

Edward T. Hall's high- and low-context communication theory provides a core framework for analyzing the transmission and adaptation logic of symbols in cross-cultural communication. Taking cartoon characters and modern virtual live streamers as the research subjects, this paper systematically explores the practical logic, influence mechanisms and practical dilemmas of the two types of communication carriers in cross-context scenarios from the dual perspectives of cultural communication and cultural adaptation. The findings indicate that Disney cartoon characters, rooted in low-context cultural traits, achieve adaptation to high-context markets through universal value packaging, localization of cultural symbols and multi-channel IP accumulation. Their adaptation logic has evolved from superficial presentation of cultural symbols in the early stage to in-depth exploration of cultural connotations. Empowered by technology and community co-creation, virtual live streamers realize dynamic adaptation between high and low contexts centering on real-time interaction, and fan communities build cross-cultural communities through three stages: adaptation, identification and consolidation. On this basis, this paper analyzes their cultural adaptation approaches with Disney movie characters and virtual live streamers as research materials, aiming to offer theoretical references for cross-cultural communication practices.

Keywords

high- and low-context, virtual live streamers, cultural communication, cultural adaption

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of globalization and rapid technological advancement, cartoon characters have emerged as a prominent cultural vehicle and gradually become one of the major tools for cultural communication. From Disney's classic cartoon figures to a wide range of modern online virtual streamers, cartoon characters represent an innovative form of cultural communication. The underlying logic of contextual adaptation and community identity mechanisms hold the key to interpreting this phenomenon. Lin Meilin [1] pointed out that rooted in culture, Disney has set a model for classic cross-cultural IPs through full industrial chain operation and the evolution of adaptation strategies. By contrast, modern virtual live streamers leverage digital technologies to demonstrate unique strengths in cultural communication.

The rise of virtual idols, especially the popularity of national-style virtual idols such as Luo Tianyi, has opened up new avenues for Chinese culture to go global. Ni Han [2] stated: "The virtual idol Luo Tianyi has

injected new vitality into the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture and revived the popularity of traditional Chinese styles among young people. Its success is also inseparable from cultural co-creation by fans. Fans devote their expertise and talents to active creative participation. Within the open ecosystem of content consumption and secondary creation, as they interact with Luo Tianyi, fans build close bonds with the idol. This process naturally fosters a strong sense of identity with national culture, and motivates them to learn about and innovate traditional culture on their own initiative.”

As a new channel for cultural communication, virtual idols deliver intended messages in an approachable and engaging manner, subtly influencing audiences’ values and lifestyles and acting as a bridge between the real and virtual worlds. This communication mode abandons the rigid and obscure expression of traditional approaches, and reshapes the subjects and pathways of cultural communication. In contemporary youth culture, virtual idols are far more than mere entertainment products; they serve as a bond connecting diverse cultures.

2. Hall's High- and Low-Context Theory and Cross-Cultural Communication

Edward T. Hall [3] proposed in *The Silent Language* that essential cultural differences determine communication logic. The core distinction between high-context and low-context cultures lies in the varying degrees of reliance on linguistic symbols and contextual cues for information transmission. In low-context cultures, represented by the United States, information is conveyed through explicit expressions, emphasizing rigorous logic, straightforward narration and individual values, with core meanings presented directly. By contrast, high-context cultures, represented by China, rely heavily on contextual cues. Verbal expressions tend to be implicit, laying stress on emotional hints and collective consensus, where cultural symbols often carry profound connotations.

Disney cartoon characters are typical representatives of American low-context culture, and their cross-cultural communication is essentially a process of low-context symbols adapting to high-context markets. Virtual live streamers boast diversified contextual attributes. Some, such as Luo Tianyi, are rooted in high-context cultures and carry subcultural styles, while overseas virtual streamers belong to low-context products. Their communication and adaptation reflect the dynamic balance of contexts empowered by technology.

In contemporary cross-cultural communication, contextual adaptation is no longer the simple appropriation of cultural symbols, but a process of cultural recreation, which reflects whether creators have an in-depth understanding of the core of the target culture. Disney experienced a setback with *Mulan*, which drew fierce criticism from Chinese audiences, and later achieved great success with *Kung Fu Panda*, further boosting global enthusiasm for Chinese martial arts. This transition fully demonstrates the significance of cultural core.

3. A Comparative Analysis of Disney and Virtual Streamers in Cross-Cultural Communication

As important carriers of cross-cultural communication, Disney cartoon characters and virtual live streamers both follow the core rules of Hall’s high- and low-context theory: contextual adaptation is the key to reducing cultural discount and realizing effective communication. Ma Hua [4] stated that the evolution of Disney’s adaptation from superficial symbol application to in-depth connotation exploration, together with the two-way adaptation of virtual streamers, verifies this logic.

When Disney’s early work *Mulan* was first released in China, it immediately met with audience resistance and triggered heated debates among domestic critics. The film attempted to shape a figure with profound traditional Chinese spirits based on Western values. In the original story, *Mulan* joined the army for her father out of obligation, while the film rewrote it as an act of self-awakening. The protagonist was transformed from a filial daughter embodying loyalty and piety in traditional Chinese virtues into a young woman with modern ideas pursuing self-worth. *Kung Fu Panda*, however, made a breakthrough. Its elaborate details reveal Disney’s thorough exploration of martial arts culture, winning wide popularity among Chinese audiences. Some viewers even commented that the film was “more Chinese than domestic animations”.

Compared with Western-originated Disney, domestic virtual live streamers like Luo Tianyi present distinct communication characteristics. As a national-style virtual idol, Luo Tianyi’s cultural communication is not mere copy and paste. Instead, it integrates traditional culture with modern aesthetics through multiple

approaches: elite creators deliver mainstream culture as narrative subjects, storytelling incorporates pingtan (a traditional storytelling and singing art), and traditional Chinese music is interpreted via the ACG style. In the work *South Lake Scenery*, Luo Tianyi adopts pingtan tunes to pay tribute to revolutionary martyrs, turning plain historical narration into elegant vocal performance. This vivid yet solemn approach greatly enhances narrative effectiveness. Notably, virtual streamers break the limitation of traditional cartoon characters with strong interactivity. Taking Luo Tianyi's live streams on Bilibili as an example, fans can send real-time bullet comments to influence the live content. Audiences are no longer passive recipients but participants in cultural communication, which substantially strengthens their cultural identity.

4. Luo Tianyi: Communication Practice and Innovation of National-Style Virtual Idols

As a representative national-style virtual idol, Luo Tianyi has formed a unique path of cultural adaptation and innovation in communication. In terms of narrative subjects, her facial expressions, movements, emotions, lyrics and tunes are all elaborately designed by professional creators. For instance, *South Lake Scenery* was created to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, depicting the prosperity of South Lake in vivid lines. The second part adopts pingtan singing to commemorate revolutionary martyrs, where creators exert full initiative. The artistic effect of the work depends on the consistency between the implied meanings perceived by the audience and the original intentions of the creators.

In terms of narrative content, Luo Tianyi's works skillfully combine traditional cultural elements with modern aesthetics. Though an intangible art, pingtan has witnessed the development of China over the past century. Works ranging from *Wuxi Scenery* and *Qinhuai Scenery* to *South Lake Scenery* share melodious tunes yet convey different sentiments with the passage of time, enriching the narrative layers. Presenting traditional culture in modern ways preserves its core essence while catering to the aesthetic tastes of contemporary young people.

Luo Tianyi also leverages social functions of platforms such as Bilibili to achieve in-depth interaction with audiences. Bullet comments, reviews, reposts and likes are essentially secondary creations by the audience. Such feedback enriches and deepens the narrative content of national-style virtual idols, and gradually turns Bilibili into an important platform for spreading traditional culture and historical stories.

5. The Mechanism of Community Identity Construction among Virtual Idol Fans

The communication of virtual idols relies not only on content itself, but also on the formation and identity construction of fan communities. Song Chenting and Qiu Xiangkui [5] pointed out that the identity construction in virtual idol live streaming follows this logic: emotional projection of ideal images driven by affection, primary identity formed through simulacrum proliferation, boundary crossing of imagined communities, and reinforcement via diversified behavioral strategies including deconstructing traditions, community selection and self-empowerment — all of which further consolidate the effect of cultural adaptation.

The fan community of Luo Tianyi is built upon emotional attachment. Fans regard Luo Tianyi as an emotional sustenance and establish emotional bonds with her by watching live streams and interacting via bullet comments. Such bonds stem from not only fondness for the virtual streamer, but also recognition of traditional culture. The subcultural traits carried by Luo Tianyi have stepped out of niche circles and integrated with mainstream culture, breaking the invisible barrier between subculture and mainstream culture. Audiences thus understand and accept mainstream culture in a familiar and refreshing cultural atmosphere.

Primary identity based on simulacrum proliferation lays the foundation for community formation. As a virtual figure, Luo Tianyi enables fans to project their imagination and treat her as a real individual. Simulacrum proliferation is reflected in both the shaping of her image and fans' secondary creations. Fans remake her image, voice and style to produce abundant simulacrum works, which in turn consolidate their recognition of Luo Tianyi.

Boundary crossing of imagined communities deepens community identity. Luo Tianyi's fan community transcends the divide between traditional subculture and mainstream culture, forming an imagined community that blends traditional culture and modern aesthetics. This community exists not only online but also extends to offline activities. In the 2021 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, Luo Tianyi performed the song *Listen to Me*

together with hostess Wang Hao and singer Wang Yuan. The in-depth interaction between the virtual idol and mainstream culture further strengthened community identity.

Diversified behavioral strategies consolidate community identity. Fans participate in content production by creating live stream clips, derivative works and emoticons. Live stream clips, short videos edited from live content, help attract new followers and serve as mutual assistance among fans. Wang Wenfeng and Jiang Zongde [6] stated that live streaming features strong interactivity but is hard to review, and full recorded videos are usually too long for some fans to watch in time. Additionally, time zone differences and language barriers prevent some audiences from fully engaging in interaction. To address this issue, fans with high media literacy, cross-cultural competence and spare time voluntarily share edited clips and translations free of charge to help other viewers.

A complete cultural production cycle has taken shape within Luo Tianyi's fan community, covering content creation, dissemination and feedback. This closed-loop mechanism boosts fan participation and enhances community cohesion and cultural identity.

6. Two-Way Interaction between Virtual Idols and Mainstream Culture

The communication of virtual idols represented by Luo Tianyi is not merely the infiltration of subculture into mainstream culture, but a two-way interaction between the two. Works co-produced by the Communist Youth League feature virtual singers, representing the practice of mainstream discourse in subcultural forms. Most of these works adopt ancient-style music, for which the genre has unique advantages. A product of the internet era, ancient-style music is widely accepted in online subcultures. It integrates tradition, nationality and fashion with high artistic value, and its distinct Chinese characteristics weaken the foreign attributes of virtual singer subculture. Emotionally, these works often adopt rock arrangements with impassioned melodies to inspire the public. Moreover, ancient-style songs draw extensively on classics and allusions, embedding numerous historical events and cultural stories within lyrics, which helps foster teenagers' collective memory and national consciousness.

Taking *Steadfast as Heaven* as an example, Ye Runze [7] noted that the title derives from *The I Ching*: As heaven maintains vigor through movements, a gentle man should constantly strengthen himself. Its companion song *Generous as Earth* comes from another chapter: As earth's condition is receptive devotion, a gentle man should hold the outer world with great virtue. In less than one hundred lines of lyrics in *Steadfast as Heaven*, allusions to ancient Chinese myths and legends are adopted, including Sui ren drilling wood for fire, Jingwei trying to fill up the sea with pebbles, Xingtian's resistance, Hou Yi shooting the sun, Yu the Great taming floods and Shennong tasting herbs. These stories are sourced from ancient classics such as *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. The abundant literary allusions fully display the profoundness of fine traditional Chinese culture and the national spirit of perseverance, arouse national pride among audiences, and lay a foundation for the expression of patriotic discourse.

Furthermore, Luo Tianyi has actively participated in various cultural events, such as performing at the National Style Music Festival held by the Palace Museum, and established in-depth cooperation with traditional cultural institutions. Such cooperation enriches her cultural connotation and provides new ideas for the innovative communication of traditional culture.

7. Dilemmas and Challenges: Sustainability of Contextual Adaptation and Cultural Depth

While virtual idols show great potential in cross-cultural communication, their developmental challenges cannot be ignored.

Lin Meilin [1] stated that long-term IP accumulation also leads to insufficient innovation, making it hard to adapt to the aesthetics and values of modern audiences. Song Chenting and Qiu Xiangkui [5] stated that for virtual live streamers, over-reliance on technology may cause contextual misinterpretation. Blurred ethical boundaries result in improper value transmission. They generally have a short life cycle and lack long-term IP accumulation, leading to poor sustainability in contextual adaptation. Some virtual streamers are soon eliminated by the market due to weak content innovation.

Second lies in the lack of cultural depth. In a traffic-oriented environment, some creators arbitrarily appropriate and distort cultural symbols for greater influence, altering their original implications and even endangering the inheritance of traditional cultural images. Rigid corporate mechanisms also hinder cultural adaptation, and Disney's inherent IP mindset slows down its strategic adjustment. Many virtual streamers suffer from homogeneous content and shallow expression, lacking personalized contextual communication strategies. Zhao Yiyang [8] pointed out that virtual streamers like Luo Tianyi face the risk of weakened subcultural features in interaction with mainstream culture. Excessive commercialization and mainstreaming may make them lose their original appeal to fan communities.

Virtual idols also confront the dilemma of balancing technology and ethics in cross-cultural communication. With the wide application of AI technology, the authenticity and emotional credibility of virtual idols have sparked debates. How to retain profound cultural connotations while leveraging technological advantages has become a major challenge.

8. Conclusion and Prospect

The success of cartoon characters as emerging carriers of cross-cultural communication relies not only on innovative forms, but also on effective contextual adaptation and community identity construction. A comparison between Disney cartoon characters and virtual live streamers reveals the evolutionary trends of cross-cultural communication: from one-way transmission to two-way interaction, and from superficial symbol application to in-depth exploration of cultural connotations. The popularity of national-style virtual idols such as Luo Tianyi is a typical embodiment of these trends.

Blind pursuit of technological innovation and visual splendor will backfire. Only by integrating cultural core and exploring historical origins and value systems can cultural resonance be achieved and a balance between form and spirit be struck.

Cartoon characters should also strengthen integration with mainstream culture instead of confining themselves to niche subcultural groups. Works co-produced by the Communist Youth League and virtual singers prove that mainstream culture and subculture can promote and integrate with each other. Via media like ancient-style music, mainstream culture can reach subcultural groups in a more approachable way, while subcultures can in turn boost the communication of traditional culture.

Technologically, cutting-edge technologies including Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), real-time motion capture, speech synthesis and natural language processing have transformed virtual idols. Their presentation has expanded from two-dimensional screens to three-dimensional spaces, and from one-sided performance to immersive interaction. Audiences are no longer mere viewers; they can virtually step into the virtual world, make eye contact, have voice conversations and establish emotional bonds with virtual idols. Technological empowerment not only expands the expressive boundaries of virtual idols, but also creates new paths for cross-cultural communication with stronger appeal and audience participation.

The cross-cultural communication of virtual idols is far more than a media experiment based on digital technology; it is an in-depth social practice concerning cultural understanding, contextual adjustment and community co-construction. Against the backdrop of coexisting globalization and localization, all cultural products aiming to cross national boundaries and reach audiences from different cultures must tackle the core challenge of cultural discount — information loss and meaning misreading caused by cultural disparities. Cartoon characters possess unique strengths: through flexible contextual adaptation strategies, they can retain their own cultural genes while actively integrating into the cognitive framework and emotional structure of target markets, thus realizing effective cross-cultural communication.

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Conflicts of Interest

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