

“Weak Narrative, Strong Symbols”: Pop Mart’s Practical Rebellion against and Theoretical Revision of Brand Narrative Theory

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Abstract

Traditional brand narrative theory has long maintained that storytelling is an essential pathway for brands to establish emotional connections with consumers. However, the phenomenon of Pop Mart achieving annual revenues of 10 billion yuan through a “de-storytelling” strategy challenges this hypothesis. Taking Pop Mart as a case study, this research employs a combination of case study and text analysis methods to explore how a “story-less” brand achieves success. Research reveals that Pop Mart employs a “negative space” strategy regarding visual symbols, transforming its IP characters into symbolic spaces that accommodate consumers’ emotional projections and personalized interpretations. The mechanism underlying consumers’ emotional connection to symbols is one of “active projection,” distinct from the “passive transportation” emphasized by traditional narrative theory. The “decontextualized” nature of symbols imbues them with the attributes of social currency capable of cross-cultural circulation. Based on this, the present study proposes a “weak-narrative, strong-symbol” paradigm, revising the brand narrative theory from a framework positing that “storytelling is the sole pathway” to a pluralistic explanatory framework in which “storytelling is one pathway, while strong symbols constitute another.”

Keywords

brand narrative, symbolic consumption, Pop Mart, de-storytelling

1. Introduction

How brands establish emotional connections with consumers is a core issue in marketing research. Brand narrative theory, exemplified by Escalas, answers this by positing that stories are a necessary pathway [1]. Recent developments in narrative transportation theory, as highlighted by Escalas, indicate that its effectiveness depends on the type of consumption. This raises the question of whether Pop Mart’s symbolic consumption represents a scenario where narrative transportation is less effective. Textbooks repeatedly emphasize that brands must tell stories—stories that convey values, evoke emotional resonance, and forge deep connections.

However, Pop Mart's practices challenge this presupposition. For IPs such as Molly and Labubu, the creators deliberately eschewed narrative backstories—there are no animated series, movies, or character biographies; there is only a face and a single expression. According to narrative theory, it should not succeed. Yet in 2025, Pop Mart's revenue reached RMB 37.12 billion, surpassing the RMB 31.336 billion recorded by Disney's global consumer products division during the same period. This contradictory phenomenon calls into question the assumption of universality in brand narrative theory.

This study focuses on the discrepancy between Pop Mart's business practice of “de-storytelling” and the theoretical presuppositions of brand narrative. It holds theoretical significance for expanding the explanatory framework of brand emotional connections and offers practical insights for designing marketing strategies for symbol-driven brands. This study unfolds primarily across three dimensions: an examination of the core logic of brand narrative theory, an analysis of the semiotic mechanisms behind Pop Mart's “de-narrativization” strategy, and an investigation into the pathways of consumers' emotional projection onto “blank symbols.” In terms of research methodology, a combination of case study and text analysis is employed. Regarding the case study, Pop Mart was selected as the subject of a single-case study because, as a prime example of a “de-storytelling” strategy, it offers a critical case for challenging the universal assumptions of narrative theory. Regarding text analysis, the study examines two types of content—official brand descriptions and promotional copy for the IP, alongside user-generated content (such as derivative works and shares) on social media—and employs a comparative analysis to reveal the dynamic interplay between brand strategy and consumer reception. The ultimate objective of this study is to propose an analytical paradigm characterized by “weak narratives and strong symbols,” thereby revising the theory of brand narrative from a framework positing “storytelling as the sole pathway” to a pluralistic explanatory model, where storytelling is one pathway and strong symbols constitute another, to provide a new theoretical perspective for understanding the phenomenon of contemporary symbolic consumption.

2. Literature Review

Research on brand emotional connection has long been based on narrative theory. Escalas's narrative transportation theory proposes that stories foster emotional engagement and attitude change by “transporting” consumers into the narrative world [1]. This process comprises three elements: the consumer's immersion in the story, identification with the characters, and the generation of mental imagery evoked by the story. Narrative transportation is effective because consumers temporarily suspend their real-world cognitive defenses while immersed in the story world, making them more receptive to the brand messages embedded in the narrative. This theory provides a foundational framework for understanding the mechanisms behind the emotional impact of brand stories. Nevertheless, it rests on the implicit premise that a brand must actively tell a complete story for consumers to be “transported” into it.

Building on this foundation, numerous empirical studies have examined the effectiveness of brand stories and their boundary conditions. Liu Tianjiao and Xie Chenxin demonstrated through experiments that brand stories can enhance consumers' attitudes toward a brand, with product stories proving more effective than corporate stories or consumer stories [2]. Xu Lan et al. further discovered that the authenticity of the storyline and self-similarity influence brand attitude through the fluency of self-imagination. The more fluently consumers can imagine themselves within the story, the more positive their brand attitude becomes [3]. Wu Yuanyuan and others approached the study from the perspective of narrative style, finding that “showing-weakness” and “showing-strength” brand stories influence consumers' brand attitudes through the perception of warmth and competence, respectively, with consumers' implicit personality and brand history acting as moderators [4]. The aforementioned research expands brand narrative theory across multiple dimensions, such as story types, plot design, and narrative styles. But their shared premise is that brands influence consumers through the proactive design and telling of stories, while consumers act as the recipients of—and participants who immerse themselves in—those stories.

However, the applicability of narrative transportation theory is not without limits. Research by Gallo, Escalas, and Sood indicates that consumers are more inclined to engage in narrative processing when making decisions regarding experiential purchases than when making decisions regarding material purchases. Consequently, narrative transportation emerges as a key element in persuasion within the context of experiential consumption. Factors that hinder narrative thinking, such as inconsistency in marketing

communications or reduced character identification, attenuate narrative transportation and impair evaluations of experiential consumption, whereas their impact on evaluations of material consumption is limited [5]. This finding suggests that the effectiveness of narrative transportation depends on the type of consumption and the mode of information presentation. When a brand proactively strips away narrative elements and abandons character development, the efficacy of narrative transportation may be suspended. This, in turn, creates space for the emergence of alternative mechanisms for emotional connection.

At the same time, the rise of the consumption of visual symbols poses a challenge to the universality of narrative theory. Drawing on simulacra theory, Song Yuxuan points out that contemporary brand symbols have detached from real-world narratives to become self-referential systems of simulacra. These symbols no longer refer to reality but instead create a state of “hyperreality” [6]. From the perspective of temporal narrative, Hua Yijiao and Zhang Guangli found that Labubu consumption is embedded within a tripartite temporal structure comprising the consumer’s past (emotional compensation), present (immediate interaction), and future (capital transformation), with the symbol serving as a mediator through which individuals reconstruct their temporal experiences [7]. These studies reveal the logic of symbolic consumption from semiotic and sociocultural perspectives, providing a macro-analytical framework for understanding “story-less” brands.

Existing research has analyzed the specific case of Pop Mart from multiple perspectives. Pan Huimin points out that Pop Mart’s “de-storytelling” strategy has resulted in a lack of character-based marketing and insufficient emotional resonance, making it difficult to sustain the vitality of its IPs. Yet she fails to explain “why Pop Mart has nonetheless succeeded despite these numerous drawbacks” [8]. Chen Cheng and Shi Jiaxin analyzed the unique appeal and derivative forms of Pop Mart blind boxes, but their focus was on production and marketing mechanisms, with limited analysis of consumer psychology [9]. Rong Huijin analyzed the marketing strategies of the blind box economy, including precise targeting, contextual marketing, and cross-brand collaborations, from the perspective of consumer culture, yet paid insufficient attention to the underlying mechanisms by which symbols drive emotional connections [10]. Xu Song and Hou Minqian proposed optimization strategies for shaping Pop Mart’s brand image from the perspective of emotional design. However, their work focused on design practice and did not elevate the concept of “de-storytelling” to a theoretical level for examination [11].

In summary, existing research has shortcomings in the following areas: Research on narrative theory has focused on the mechanisms of brand attitude formation in contexts involving a story, failing to explain how brands without a story achieve success. While research on symbolic consumption has revealed the meaning-constructing function of symbols, it has failed to theorize “de-storytelling” as a deliberate brand strategy. Case studies of Pop Mart have largely remained at the level of describing phenomena and summarizing strategies, lacking a systematic dialogue with brand narrative theory. Addressing the aforementioned gap, this paper takes Pop Mart as a case study to propose a “weak-narrative, strong-symbol” paradigm. It aims to revise the absolutist assumptions of narrative theory, explore the mechanism by which symbols autonomously drive emotional connections, and offer a new theoretical perspective for understanding contemporary symbolic consumption.

3. Research Methods

This study employs a combined approach of case study and text analysis.

Regarding the case study, Pop Mart was selected as the subject of the single-case study. Rationale for selection: First, Pop Mart exemplifies a “de-narrativization” strategy. Its intellectual properties (IPs), such as Molly and Labubu, deliberately eschew narrative backstories, relying instead on symbolic communication to generate billions in revenue and establish a unique, closed-loop business model, thereby offering a critical case study that challenges the universal applicability of narrative theory. Second, there is a substantial body of existing data and research regarding Pop Mart. The high accessibility of these materials provides a solid foundation for case analysis. The brand offers a wealth of publicly available information, including annual reports, in-depth interviews with the founder, and third-party industry reports, and the cross-verification of evidence from these diverse sources helps enhance the study’s internal and external validity.

To systematically analyze the operational logic behind Pop Mart’s “de-storytelling” strategy, this study conducts its analysis across the following three dimensions: At the level of brand strategy, the analysis focuses

on Pop Mart's approach to designing the iconography of its IP characters, examining how the company deliberately maintains narrative ambiguity in its official presentations to distill the IP into highly pure visual symbols. From the perspective of industry communication, this article examines how Pop Mart maintains public visibility and buzz, despite a lack of narrative backing, through strategies such as cross-brand collaborations, social media engagement, offline exhibitions, and theme parks. In terms of user engagement, the study examines how consumers transform "blank symbols" into vessels for personal emotion and identity—through acts of purchasing, collecting, displaying, and creating derivative works.

This study conducts a systematic coding analysis of two types of texts. The first category comprises official introductions and promotional copy from the brand (including those on official websites, Weibo, and WeChat official accounts). The coding dimensions include: (1) symbolic expression: the visual description and presentation of the IP character; (2) characterization: whether the IP's personality and background are defined, and the level of detail in these definitions; and (3) narrative expression: whether the official source provides narrative threads, plot developments, or world-building elements. The second category comprises content created and shared by consumers on social media (such as doll customization, showcases, and mini-skits on platforms like Xiaohongshu, Weibo, and Douyin). The coding dimensions include: (1) emotional projection: the emotions and psychological states consumers attribute to the IP; (2) secondary creation: consumers' modification of the original symbols, scene construction, and narrative elaboration; and (3) identity expression: how consumers use these symbols to articulate their identities and express their personalities.

The analysis proceeds in three steps: first, a thorough reading and preliminary thematic identification of the two types of texts; second, the categorization and coding of the texts based on the aforementioned dimensions; and finally, a comparison of the coding results to analyze the tension and interaction between the official symbolic strategy of "de-storytelling" and the consumers' emotional projection of "re-storytelling." Through comparative analysis, this study reveals the interactive mechanism between brand strategy and consumer reception, providing empirical evidence for the construction of a "weak-narrative, strong-symbol" paradigm.

4. Results

4.1 How "De-storytelling" Shapes IP Symbols: An Analysis of Brand Strategy

Case analysis reveals that Pop Mart deliberately maintains narrative ambiguity in its official descriptions. Labubu's initial official persona as a "forest elf" lacked a fully developed backstory, character arc, and world-building. According to the standards of narrative theory, an IP lacking the support of a story should struggle to establish an emotional connection—this is a fundamental premise of existing theory. However, Pop Mart's practice points to an opposing logic: narrative "blank space", or the deliberate omission of detail, is itself a semiotic strategy, rather than a mere absence of narrative.

From the perspective of Roland Barthes's semiotics, Labubu's minimalist design approximates what Barthes described as an "empty sign", a sign that carries no fixed signified, with its meaning "written" and "filled in" by consumers during the process of use [12]. However, Pop Mart's strategy goes a step further: rather than passively accepting the openness of symbols, it actively manufactures "emptiness" as a product attribute. Specifically, this strategy of "de-storytelling" shapes IP symbols in three ways: Firstly, the narrative density is compressed. Official information is reduced to the bare minimum (such as the four characters "Forest Elf"), eliminating any narrative details that might constrain consumer interpretation. Secondly, narrative ambiguity is maintained. The IP's personality, emotional state, and background story are not officially fixed, allowing a single expression to support multiple interpretations. Thirdly, the strategy of cross-media narrative coverage has been abandoned. Narrative content, such as animation or films, is not being produced, thereby avoiding the "anchoring" of symbolic meaning to a specific story.

The operational logic of this strategy is revealed by founder Wang Ning's notion that "there are a thousand Hamlets in the minds of a thousand people": An IP character is, in itself, merely a visual interface. Its meaning is not something that is "narrated," but rather something "projected" by consumers. Traditional IP uses storytelling to "inform" consumers about "what it is," whereas Pop Mart employs narrative "blank space" to "invite" consumers to define for themselves "what it means to me."

4.2 How UGC Reconstructs IP Meaning: An Analysis of Consumer Responses

Social media text analysis reveals that consumer understanding of IPs like Labubu is highly personalized. The same expressionless face is interpreted by different consumers as stubborn, vacant, disdainful, or soothing. This phenomenon confirms the logic of the “blank symbol”: the more silent the symbol, the more consumers can “project” their own emotions and identities into it.

More importantly, consumers do not merely engage in personalized interpretation. Rather, they actively imbue blank symbols with meaning through user-generated content (UGC). Analysis reveals three patterns in consumers’ UGC practices: First, emotional contextualization: consumers place Labubu within scenes from their personal lives (such as “taking Labubu on a trip” or “Labubu keeping me company while working late”), embedding the symbol into their own life narratives. Second, identity signaling: consumers assert their identity and establish their social positioning by showcasing specific Labubu models (particularly “secret” or limited editions) on social media. Third, meaning re-creation: consumers infuse the original symbol with narrative content through activities like customizing figures, creating dioramas, or staging mini-dramas, thereby transforming the “blank symbol” into a vessel for personal stories.

The research by Hua Yijiao and Zhang Guangli further reveals the deep structure of this process from a temporal dimension. They found that consumers achieve “retrospective emotional compensation” and “immediate identity construction” through Labubu [7]: the former refers to consumers using the symbol to revisit childhood memories and gain emotional solace, while the latter refers to consumers using it to establish group belonging and engage in social interaction in the present. In other words, the process by which UGC reconstructs the meaning of an IP is essentially one of using symbols as a medium to project consumers’ personal temporal experiences, comprising past emotional memories and present identity needs, onto blank symbols.

4.3 From “Narrative Transportation” to “Symbolic Projection”: A Comparison of Two Mechanisms

By integrating analyses at the levels of brand strategy and consumer response, this study reveals a mechanism of emotional connection that differs from traditional narrative theory. Escalas’s narrative transportation theory posits that brands “transport” consumers into a narrative world through stories. This is a “brand-led” process of meaning transfer, in which meaning flows from the brand to the consumer [1]. The case of Pop Mart, however, reveals the existence of another mechanism: consumers “project” their own emotions and identities onto “blank symbols” through UGC practices. This is a “consumer-led” process of meaning production, in which meaning flows from the consumer to the brand.

The core difference between the two mechanisms lies in this: narrative transportation relies on the brand actively telling a complete story, with the consumer acting as a passive recipient who immerses themselves in the narrative; conversely, symbolic projection relies on the brand intentionally leaving room for interpretation and the consumer actively projecting meaning, positioning the consumer as the producer and assigner of meaning. The former requires consumers to invest time and cognitive resources in entering the story world, whereas the latter demands only a momentary emotional resonance and a willingness to project oneself. In the digital age of fragmented attention, the latter holds a significant advantage in terms of efficiency: the emotional impact hits the moment the box is opened, and social sharing happens instantly.

5. Discussion

The aforementioned results reveal the operational logic of the “weak narrative, strong symbol” paradigm in fostering emotional connections with brands. This section further discusses three extended issues.

5.1 Contemporary Applicability of the “Weak Narrative” Strategy

The effectiveness of the “weak narrative” strategy in the contemporary consumer environment is closely linked to changes in consumers’ information-processing habits. Escalas’s narrative transportation theory relies on consumers possessing sufficient cognitive resources to be “transported” into the narrative world [1]. However, in the digital age of fragmented attention, the cost of deep narrative immersion has risen significantly. The “weak narrative” strategy does not require consumers to enter a pre-set narrative world. Instead, it waits

for them to spontaneously project their emotions during fragmented moments. This “low-barrier, high-efficiency” mode of connection aligns better with the cognitive pace of contemporary consumers.

5.2 The Mechanism of Emotional Connection in Symbolic Consumption

The emotional connection in symbolic consumption follows a progressive logic of “projection → filling → connection.” During the projection phase, when confronted with a blank symbol, consumers project their own emotional state onto it. During the filling-in phase, consumers infuse symbols with personal narratives through social media sharing and creative reinterpretation. This corroborates Escalas’s assessment that consumer-generated narratives are more likely to establish a self-brand connection than narratives prompted by advertising [1]. In the connection stage, symbols carry the consumer’s emotional projection and personal narrative, and are incorporated into the consumer’s self-concept to form an emotional connection. This mechanism shifts the research perspective from “how brands tell stories” to “how consumers project.”

5.3 Boundaries of Applicability for the “Weak Narrative” Model

Visual distinctiveness is the prerequisite for an IP with a “weak narrative” to succeed. Consumers must be able to generate an emotional response and a willingness to project themselves based solely on visual imagery, without the benefit of any background information. If an IP character lacks sufficient visual distinctiveness, a “weak narrative” strategy may result in the IP being overlooked rather than interpreted.

Product category influences the applicability of “weak narrative.” Blind boxes are non-functional consumer goods characterized by low decision-making costs and high emotional added value. When products shift toward categories involving high decision costs or a functional orientation, consumers rely more on narrative information to aid rational judgment. “Weak narrative” may prove ineffective in product categories where functional attributes dominate.

The brand life cycle influences the choice of strategy. “Weak narrative” is highly effective during the introductory phase, when a brand needs to rapidly establish recognition. However, when a brand enters the maturity stage and needs to deepen its relationship with users, narrative supplementation may become necessary. Pan Huimin (2025) points out that “de-storytelling” makes it difficult to sustain the vitality of an IP. Pop Mart’s production of animated content and development of theme parks represent a direct response to this limitation [8].

In summary, the “weak narrative, strong symbol” approach does not negate narrative value. Rather, it reveals a pathway for emotional connection that operates independently of narrative transportation. The core mechanism of emotional connection with a brand is shifting from a singular “narrative transportation” model to a diversified framework based on a dual-pathway approach—narrative and symbolic.

6. Conclusions

Taking Pop Mart as a case study, this research employs case study and text analysis methods to examine the alternative mechanisms of emotional connection between the brand and consumers under the strategy of “de-storytelling.” Research findings indicate that Pop Mart employs a strategy of narrative “blank space” through visual symbols, transforming its IP characters into symbolic spaces that host consumers’ emotional projections. Consumers’ emotional connection to “story-less” symbols is not achieved through narrative transportation, but rather through the active projection of their own emotions and identities onto the symbols. The “decontextualized” nature of symbols makes them effective media for social interaction and identity signaling among consumers during cross-cultural circulation. From this, the study concludes that in the digital age of fragmented attention, the “weak narrative, strong symbol” approach constitutes a paradigm of emotional brand connection distinct from traditional narrative-driven models. Its core mechanism is “symbolic projection”: consumers “load” their own stories into a blank symbol rather than being “drawn into” a pre-established narrative world. This paradigm does not negate the value of stories; rather, it reveals a pathway for emotional connection that is independent of narrative transportation. The core mechanism of emotional connection with a brand is shifting from a singular “narrative transportation” model to a diversified framework based on a dual-pathway approach involving both narrative and symbols.

This study offers a valuable reference for future research in this field, primarily influencing the following two aspects: Theoretically, this study refines the framework of brand narrative theory by shifting from the notion that “storytelling is the sole pathway” to a pluralistic model where “storytelling is one pathway and powerful symbols constitute another”, which thereby broadens the scope of research on emotional brand connections and addresses the paradox wherein symbolic simulacra, despite their lack of substantive content, successfully evoke deep resonance. From a practical standpoint, the study offers strategic insights for symbol-driven brands (such as designer toys and cultural-creative products), suggesting that managers, particularly during the brand launch phase or when targeting young consumers, can leverage “narrative gaps” within symbols to stimulate active consumer projection and engagement.

However, this study has certain limitations: the text analysis relies on publicly available data and lacks in-depth, first-hand interviews with consumers, resulting in a limited characterization of the psychological processes underlying projection mechanisms. Future research should focus on the following areas for in-depth exploration: experimental methods could be employed to examine the causal relationship between the “degree of symbolic blank space” and “consumer willingness to project,” while the conditions for the synergistic transformation of narrative and symbolic paradigms across different stages of brand development could also be investigated.

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Conflicts of Interest

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