

Narrative Study of Chinese Traditional Handicraft Brand

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Abstract. Shaping Chinese traditional handicraft brands through “brand narratives” is a systematic, comprehensive, and complex research and practical topic. This article innovatively adopts the perspective of “brand stories” and bases itself on brand narrative theory. It examines the current status of Chinese traditional handicraft brands in narrative practice, focusing on new narrative contexts such as the communication and consumption environments faced by the modern inheritance of traditional handicrafts. Furthermore, it proposes strategies for narrative construction of Chinese traditional handicraft brands, aiming to explore a path for shaping handicraft brands that is positive, modern, warm, and emotionally engaging.

Keywords: brand narrative, traditional handicraft brand, brand shaping

1. Introduction

“Narrative,” also known as “storytelling,” has been present throughout human history and is considered one of the oldest and most powerful forms of communication. Brand narrative theory extends the application of narrative studies into the realms of corporate management and marketing. From the perspective of brand-consumer relationships, when a brand tells stories that resonate with consumers’ worldviews, it allows consumers to emotionally connect and resonate with the brand, fostering belief in the brand story and evoking consumer desires, thereby achieving a “self-brand connection.” This enhances and reinforces consumer identification with the brand’s meaning, ultimately cultivating loyal followers. Chinese traditional handicrafts boast a long history and diverse categories, rich in profound stories and cultural concepts. This creates unparalleled conditions for brand storytelling in traditional handicrafts. Therefore, this study intends to explore the path of shaping and disseminating traditional handicraft brands guided by brand narrative theory.

2. Necessity and Feasibility of Brand Narratives for Chinese Traditional Handicraft Brands

Firstly, Chinese traditional handicrafts, with their long history and diverse categories, possess a rich and profound knowledge system, creation concepts, cultural traditions, and legendary stories. These handicraft brands have accumulated profound cultural deposits and spiritual sustenance in the course of history, based on their development, cultural inheritance, exquisite craftsmanship, and creative products. Over time, these stories have become deeply rooted in people’s memories, connecting emotional experiences from the past, thus creating an advantageous storytelling position for traditional handicraft brands.

Secondly, with the rapid development of digital technologies such as 5G, big data, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence, the narrative environment for traditional handicraft brands has undergone revolutionary changes. Concurrently, in new media contexts, consumer demands are increasingly personalized. Rather than simple product and quality information, consumers prefer content that meets their inner needs or evokes emotional resonance. However, current communication practices show that many traditional handicraft brands have not adapted to the current media environment. Their storytelling content has not effectively translated into the present communication context, and their value, functionality, and advantages have not been effectively communicated. Therefore, activating and constructing traditional handicraft brands requires attention to narrative and communication issues.

3. Narrative Status of Chinese Traditional Handicraft Brands

3.1. Expression of Relevant Stories Surrounding the Development of Traditional Handicraft Brands

Traditional handicraft enterprises typically unearth classic and unique brand stories from their historical development. These include stories such as the era background of brand establishment, the founder's experiences, the growth trajectory of the brand, stories linking the brand with historical figures, and narratives connecting the brand with urban or rural life memories [1]. These stories, expressed through drama, film, cultural publications, and other mediums, depict classic segments of brand stories, revealing the cultural origins and craftsmanship evolution behind traditional handicraft brands. This enables brand audiences to understand the cultural connotations of traditional handicraft brands through detailed insights.

3.2. Presentation of Cultural Tradition-Related Story Content

Traditional handicrafts embody the wisdom and experience honed through generations, with traditional handicraft brands serving as carriers of rich cultural traditions and historical significance. These cultural traditions include principles such as integrity, benevolence, the Middle Way, and prioritizing righteousness over profit in the management practices of longstanding brands. They also encompass the essence of ethnic cultural inheritance, including the transmission of skills, quality, and regional cultural heritage. Moreover, they entail historical responsibilities, social responsibilities, and the pursuit of innovation. These cultural traditions endow traditional handicraft brand storytelling with abundant resources and advantages. By reviving historical contexts, legends, stories, and heritage sites, and leveraging diverse communication channels, brands awaken collective memories among people, enhancing the brand's cultural depth and significance, thereby gaining a competitive edge in a homogenized market.

3.3. Narrative of Core Techniques in Traditional Handicrafts

The core techniques of traditional handicrafts are accumulated through the long-term practices of generations of skilled craftsmen, passed down through oral tradition, apprenticeship, mnemonic devices, and storytelling. These techniques have developed over time, forming a complete knowledge system rich in local characteristics that continues to this day [2]. In the narrative of traditional handicraft brand storytelling, the depiction of core techniques is prevalent, with virtually all brands considering this aspect crucial in their storytelling. These narratives encompass specialized knowledge such as techniques, materials, tools, methods, and aesthetics, as well as practical knowledge such as folklore and the common sense of purchasing, using, and maintaining handicrafts. Traditional handicraft brands convey information about exquisite craftsmanship, premium materials, and intricate production processes to their audience through these narratives, enabling a direct and profound understanding of traditional handicraft skills and their inherent value.

4. Narrative Strategy for Chinese Traditional Handicraft Brands

4.1. Focus on Narrative Themes of Chinese Traditional Handicraft Brands

According to narrative management theories, "brand stories belong to 'identity-type' narratives, aiming to inform consumers of 'who I am, where I come from, and where I am headed.'" These identity-type stories are reflected in the themes of the narratives.

Firstly, clarify the genuine needs of consumers and the personality of the brand to establish a clear brand positioning. Select suitable narrative themes based on different brand positions for presentation. Each traditional handicraft brand has its unique cultural genes and inherited skills, which are crucial components of its brand personality. Brand narratives need to delve deep into these unique aspects to showcase their distinctive charm. By emphasizing the brand's uniqueness, consumer impressions and identification with the brand can be deepened, thereby enhancing brand awareness and reputation. Secondly, select information that matches the brand positioning for creating brand stories. Due to the varying industries, technical attributes, and degrees of relevance to modern life of traditional handicrafts, there should be distinctions in theme refinement.

4.2. Creative Development of High-Quality Traditional Handicraft Brand Stories

If determining the theme of the story is about setting an agenda around a core value, then the content of the story is about unfolding that agenda. Shaping stories for Chinese traditional handicraft brands requires a comprehensive consideration of characters, plots, and the perceptual modes of target audiences.

Firstly, thorough research and organization of the historical and cultural context of handicrafts are essential. This involves uncovering classic story materials and representative figures that have shone brightly throughout millennia of handicraft history.

Secondly, the plot of handicraft stories should revolve around prototypes, with strengthened character settings that seamlessly integrate brand prototypes, founders, craftsmen, customers, etc., emphasizing influential brand agents to drive brand influence.

Thirdly, emphasis should be placed on setting conflicts and contradictions. Through diverse narrative timelines, conflicts should be set to demonstrate how traditional handicraft brands adapt to modern market demands while maintaining their core cultural values, achieving a climax in the storytelling that resonates with consumers and enhances the attractiveness of traditional handicraft brand stories. Such stories not only resonate with consumers and enhance brand attraction but also inject more cultural depth and vitality into the brand, promoting better inheritance and development.

Fourthly, attention should be paid to the authenticity and emotional appeal of the story content, telling sincere and touching stories of handicrafts spanning millennia to move consumers and enhance their trust and identification with the brand.

Fifthly, in crafting the narrative mode of traditional handicraft brand stories, it is crucial to align intrinsic historical aesthetics with contemporary life and the aesthetic demands of modern consumers. Firstly, adhere to traditional narrative transmission methods, creating “marketing windows” such as physical stores, museums, intangible cultural heritage experience centers with experiential economic features, to cultivate new scenarios for the dissemination of traditional handicraft brand stories [3]. Secondly, utilize modern transmission technologies such as 3D modeling, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) to vividly and intuitively present the brand stories of traditional handicrafts to consumers. By adopting narrative modes that are scenarized, digitalized, visualized, and interactive, the vibrant vitality of traditional handicraft brands can be sought after.

4.3. Following Brand Narrative Principles, Complying with Preference for Heritage Craft Stories

For Chinese traditional handicraft brand stories to leave a profound and dynamic impression on audiences, they must possess distinct brand positioning and personality, integrating communication consistently, differentiating, concisely, and systematically, while adhering to audience preferences for transmitting handicraft brand stories.

Firstly, the “consistency” principle relies on the culture and personality of traditional handicraft brands. In terms of content organization, narrative style, target audience, and channel selection, it revolves around the brand’s “core values and themes,” ensuring consistent, continuous, and stable content transmission. “Consistency” is not a rigid narrative requirement; as Jenkins pointed out, “narratives are cognitive constructs with an unchanging core meaning, yet can manifest in various forms.”[4] Various forms of expression should be guided by “core values,” adhering to the principle of “one brand, one story,” to maintain cohesive brand communication and establish a clear brand image in consumers’ minds.

Secondly, the “differentiation” principle distinguishes brands from competitors, tailoring narrative hierarchies to the characteristics and preferences of different consumer groups. The rule brands should follow is to “tell different versions to different audiences with consistent core ideas.” These “different versions” are targeted, utilizing multiple media channels and presentation styles to interpret different versions of handicraft brand stories, adapting to the perceptions and understanding of diverse target audiences.

Thirdly, the “conciseness” principle involves expressing story content in a concise, accurate, and clear manner to leave a lasting impression on consumers. Therefore, when telling traditional handicraft brand stories, it is essential to simplify as much as possible, making them concise, powerful, and easy to understand, without overcomplicating or attempting to cover every detail exhaustively. Adhering to the narrative rule of the “summoning structure” [5], it is important to weave the story in a way that leaves sufficient space for imagination, inviting the audience to deeply engage with the story or complete unfinished thoughts. This approach transforms the audience into participants and co-creators of the narrative, thereby bridging the emotional connection between the brand and consumers, and reinforcing their understanding and identification with the brand’s story concept.

Fourthly, the “systematic” principle integrates narratives based on the characteristics and requirements of different stages of brand growth. Around the “core values and key themes” of traditional handicraft brands, elements such as brand prototypes, story content, communication methods, and target audiences are adapted to specific stages of brand development. Timely and flexible adjustments and integrations of these elements create an organic whole.

5. Conclusion

Storytelling, as an ancient communication and thinking mode of humanity, is applicable to the cross-boundary transformation of traditional handicraft story resources in the context of the new media era. Over thousands of years, Chinese traditional handicraft brands have weathered the vicissitudes of time, inheriting profound knowledge systems, business philosophies, aesthetic functions, and other cultural connotations, thereby building rich story resources and narrative advantages. These story resources are not only connected to the everyday warmth, nostalgia, memory identification, and aspirations for a better life among ordinary Chinese households but also linked to grand narratives in areas such as national brand image building, national brand creation, and storytelling of China’s achievements in modernization. Based on a profound understanding of Chinese indigenous handicraft culture, the narrative of Chinese traditional handicraft brands should focus on brand story themes, create high-quality brand story content, follow brand narrative principles, and comply with preferences for transmitting heritage craft stories, aiming to guide brand practice activities of Chinese traditional handicrafts.

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