The Symbolic Meaning and Cultural Consumption of Virtual Celebrities in the New Media Environment: A Case Study of White Snake: Afloat

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Abstract: With the transformation of the media environment, the star system is also evolving, and virtual celebrities are increasingly visible in the public eye, playing dual roles. The relationship between virtual celebrities and new media is mutually beneficial: new media provides stable channels for promoting virtual celebrities, while the cultural and economic benefits brought by virtual celebrities inspire research into the creation and use of new media. The virtual celebrities in the film White Snake: Afloat offer a typical case for studying the symbolic meaning and cultural consumption of virtual celebrities. By analyzing the role of virtual celebrities in White Snake: Afloat, we can understand the relationship between the star system and media development, how virtual celebrities expand the "fan economy" in the market, promote the "long tail effect" in the film industry, and the reasons behind virtual celebrities as a symbol of mass aesthetics, thereby advancing the inheritance and development of traditional culture.

Keywords: Virtual celebrities, Star system, New media, Cultural consumption, Mass aesthetics.

1. Introduction

In the present era, with the development of the new media environment, the star system has undergone significant changes, and virtual celebrities have emerged as industrialized products that combine visual aesthetics and cultural consumption—an amalgamation of art and media. Virtual celebrities represent a new form of "image and capital," playing a vital role in both economic and cultural functions [1]. Studying "virtual celebrities" within the context of the new media environment allows for a deeper understanding of the new trends and characteristics in social and cultural development, revealing how media technology influences the production, dissemination, and consumption of cultural products. This enriches the theoretical framework of media imagery studies and provides theoretical support for the development of a culturally distinctive Chinese cultural industry.

This paper is based on the current economic and cultural phenomenon of "virtual celebrities," and it combines the history of the star system with the development of media. It aims to explore the cultural consumption and symbolic meaning of the star system, represented by "virtual celebrities," in the new media environment. Taking White Snake: Afloat as a case study, the paper investigates the roles that virtual celebrities play in the current networked digital era, including their cultural

functions of preserving traditions and values, helping people understand and interpret the world, enhancing public aesthetics, fostering communication across different groups, and promoting cultural innovation. Additionally, it examines the economic functions of virtual celebrities in promoting cultural consumption, achieving the long-tail effect, expanding the "fan economy," and driving the transformation and upgrading of the cultural industry.

The article is divided into three parts: The first part discusses the historical inevitability of the star system's dependence on media development and further clarifies the definition of virtual celebrities. The second part examines the economic functions of virtual celebrities through new media platforms and explores the underlying reasons behind these functions. The third part uses the film White Snake: Afloat to highlight the cultural functions of virtual celebrities in preserving traditions and guiding public aesthetics through new media technologies. The paper will delve into the concept of virtual celebrities, provide relevant examples to support the discussion, and deeply analyze how virtual celebrities in White Snake: Afloat fulfill their economic and cultural roles, elucidating the cultural consumption and symbolic meaning of the star system represented by virtual celebrities in the new media environment.

2.   Literature Review

Current academic research on this topic can be broadly categorized into three main directions: First, some studies view it as a new manifestation of fan culture, exploring the underlying values and cultural logic. For example, Liu Haodong points out, "The star system cultivates a special type of consumer who revolves around stars as commodities" [2]. Second, from the perspective of media pathways and cross-boundary mechanisms, research focuses on the interactive forms brought by virtual celebrities. For instance, Xu Hong notes, "Film audiences have shifted from being passive spectators in the traditional cinema viewing mechanism to becoming active participants in the film practice" [3]. Third, by combining cultural aesthetics with the entertainment economy, discussions focus on industrial consumption. "Virtual idols can collaborate with brands to achieve the goal of cross-boundary diffusion" [4]. From the existing research, most literature emphasizes the fan effects, technological empowerment, and cultural consumption triggered by "virtual celebrities," while there is relatively less attention on the cultural value they bring. Therefore, this paper traces the evolution of the "star mechanism" in the new media environment and analyzes, through the case of White Snake: Afloat, how "virtual celebrities" transform from a role in a film text into "stars" that symbolize public aesthetics, thereby leading new cultural trends and spawning corresponding cultural industries.

In the early 20th century, commercial strategies based on a specialized cast and popularized film texts emerged in Hollywood and gradually spread worldwide, evolving into the well-known "star system." The star system, at its core, is a profit-making mechanism centered on the special consumer group known as "fans." Within this system, stars can transcend the film text and engage in cultural and economic activities as social celebrities, guiding public cultural aesthetics and promoting mass cultural consumption. "They are both representatives of social groups and unique individuals within those groups" [5].

3.   "Image and Capital" in the New Media Era

Fundamentally, the rise and development of the star system are inseparable from media: Stars first emerged in the era of film, when the only way for most audiences to connect with stars was by watching films in theaters. Therefore, the role of stars in the film era, with film as the medium of dissemination, was relatively singular—primarily ensuring stable box office returns and securing profits. Later, with the widespread adoption of television as a medium, more details of stars' lives were revealed to the public, leading to another peak in the star system. More and more stars began to

break away from companies, operate independently, and collaborate with other industries, forming their own enterprises. Thus, stars with digital products as their medium of dissemination have a more diverse range of roles: not only can they stabilize box office returns, but they can also guide public opinion, stimulate market vitality, and promote cultural consumption. Today, with the proliferation of advanced technologies such as AI, "virtual celebrities" generated through computer synthesis—a graphic-based method—are favored by both producers and audiences due to their low cost, non-human nature, and strong controllability. "This suggests new sociocultural factors in the digital era that contribute to the appeal of virtual idols, which are accepted in the context of new media" [6]. Virtual idols not only provide new options for film text interpretation but can also break away from the text to engage in related entertainment and economic activities as individual entities, broadening the ways in which stars interact with their audiences.

"The driving factors of media evolution in its three stages are not just technological but also social, economic, and cultural; they are the result of collective public choices" [7]. Today, the public increasingly relies on media platforms like TikTok and Bilibili as information channels, indicating a growing emphasis on the immediacy and breadth of information. This provides a vast platform for the development of the star system, represented by virtual celebrities. Vertical short videos have become the "digital pickles" of information that the public consumes during their leisure time, with virtual celebrities like Luo Tianyi, Lezheng Longya, and Zhenwo Hertz thriving in the public eye through vertical short videos. Virtual celebrities carve out a space on various media platforms by engaging in activities such as cover singing, performing, and game commentary. Their audience base is continuously expanding, showing a trend toward diversification. On one hand, virtual celebrities are products of the new media era, generated by its methods of dissemination; on the other hand, they are the result of public choice—industrialized products that fulfill the public's spiritual needs.

4. The Reshaping of Chinese Aesthetics by Virtual Celebrities

In addition to the significant role virtual celebrities play in promoting cultural consumption from an economic perspective, their influence on guiding public aesthetics is equally noteworthy. A prime example of this is the recent success of the Chinese-style animated film White Snake: Afloat, which exemplifies innovation and breakthroughs in the cultural industry through the use of AI animation technology in the new media environment. White Snake: Afloat, adapted from the folk legend of the White Snake, is a film that creatively transforms traditional culture by leveraging new media technologies like AI, while being rooted in popular aesthetics. Compared to traditional works, White Snake: Afloat retains the personalities and storylines of characters like the White Snake and Xiaoqing, but uses new media techniques to introduce modern aesthetic features based on contemporary Chinese standards, redefining character relationships. The film narrates the story of the White Snake and Xiaoqing encountering the reincarnated Xu Xian and teaming up to fight Fahai. It has garnered widespread acclaim for its exquisite art style and outstanding character design. The film stands out for its unique reinterpretation of the White Snake legend, offering a detailed portrayal of the female protagonist while also giving depth to the traditionally underdeveloped character of Xu Xian, highlighting his loyalty, determination, and courage, thereby transforming him from a "flat character" into a more "three-dimensional" one. In addition to its intricate character design, the film's scene descriptions are equally remarkable: the production team used AI technology to generate models and infused them with Chinese ink painting techniques. Whether it's the delicate and serene beauty of West Lake or the grandeur of Fahai's battle formations, the film achieves perfect visual representation. This poetic atmosphere enhances the audience's immersion and significantly increases the film's appeal.

Unlike traditional Chinese film styles, the character designs in White Snake: Afloat do not rigidly adhere to conventional portrayals; instead, they retain the essence of the White Snake legend while

incorporating modern aesthetic elements into a new context. In traditional film and television dramas, the White Snake character often carries a certain "demonic aura," hinting at her otherworldly identity. However, in White Snake: Afloat, the "White Lady" is portrayed with a more "celestial aura," aligning more closely with the "gentle and virtuous" image that resonates with modern audiences. This shift is largely due to the willingness of Light Chaser Animation to embrace the changes AI technology has brought to the film industry. According to Light Chaser's CEO, Yu Zhou, "Light Chaser has an internal AI lab that has tested many new AI applications, especially in the 2D domain, such as refining backgrounds and details." Some of the production processes for the new film White Snake: Afloat utilized AI tools. The production team fed Midjourney software with features of Song Dynasty attire and Chinese aesthetics to create initial drafts of the White Snake and Xiaoqing characters. These drafts were then refined by human artists, and post-production was enhanced using Splashtop technology, resulting in the screen version of the "White Lady" that has been well-received by audiences. This design not only demonstrates the film's respect for the traditional culture of the White Snake legend but also provides viewers with visual options to interpret the film's characters, which is a key factor in the film's commercial success.

Following the release of White Snake: Afloat, many young people joined the trend of wearing traditional Chinese clothing, such as Tang and Song dynasty garments, at scenic spots and film locations, embodying the "White Lady" and expressing their love for traditional culture, creating a vibrant cultural scene. The beauty of Chinese style, promoted by virtual celebrities, not only allows people to experience the depth and continuity of history but also enhances their aesthetic abilities and cultural literacy. Therefore, virtual celebrities can guide public aesthetics and provide people with a unique aesthetic experience that is unparalleled by much of today's fast-paced culture.

5. The "Long Tail Effect" of New Media Platforms and Virtual Celebrities

Virtual celebrities play a cultural role in guiding public aesthetics towards a "new national style" that combines tradition with innovation. This shift enhances cultural confidence and awareness while cultivating a unique aesthetic system among contemporary Chinese people. This system can then be linked with economic industries to promote the "fan economy" and "mass consumption," ultimately achieving the "long tail effect" in the cultural industry. Cultural consumption refers to consumption that satisfies spiritual needs, primarily where people fulfill their spiritual desires through consuming cultural products and enjoying services [8]. Virtual celebrities are industrialized products that meet the public's spiritual needs. They guide the public in forming a new cultural aesthetic, which becomes a spiritual demand. Virtual celebrities, in turn, connect with other economic industries to satisfy this demand, thereby expanding economic benefits. This process of creating and meeting demand forms the operational logic of the "fan economy" and mass consumption. White Snake: Afloat provides a textbook example of how virtual celebrities promote the "fan economy." After the film's success, a series of derivative products based on the highly acclaimed virtual characters from the movie were developed, such as "Xiaoqing" figurines, "Baoqing Monk" costumes, and "White Lady hairpin" accessories. These derivatives can be sold through online e-commerce platforms and physical stores, not only satisfying fans' consumption needs for virtual celebrities but also generating considerable economic returns for related industries. Beyond these traditional profit methods, Light Chaser Animation also organized a tour that linked virtual celebrities with Hangzhou's cultural tourism. During these tours, virtual celebrities appeared on stage using 3D character generation technology to interact with fans, attracting many movie enthusiasts and boosting Hangzhou's cultural tourism economy.

On popular media platforms like Bilibili and Tiktok, the role of virtual celebrities in promoting "mass consumption" has been greatly developed. For instance, illustrators earn "monthly tickets" from viewers by creating fan art of White Snake and Xiaoqing; modelers "sell courses" by teaching

newcomers how to model the "Baoqing Monk" character; cosplayers draw attention and "gain followers" by portraying virtual celebrities from the film. These content creators not only promote virtual celebrities but also benefit from the economic gains brought by the "long tail effect" as described by Chris Anderson. Anderson's concept of the "long tail effect" in the context of new media information dissemination suggests that the audience's broad demands will lead to a long tail effect in the dissemination of new media news information. As audience demand increases, the dissemination of news information supported by new media will result in a more pronounced long tail effect [9]. As new media continues to proliferate, the popularity of virtual celebrities keeps rising. When one audience group can no longer provide substantial economic benefits, new media will push the content to other audience groups. If a new group accepts it, the "long tail effect" is realized. In other words, while new media platforms reap the economic benefits brought by virtual celebrities, they also unwittingly extend the lifespan of virtual celebrities, ensuring their continued popularity and vitality. This phenomenon reflects the current market trend brought about by virtual celebrities: "...the superstars, have accounted for a large percentage of sales in many markets." [10]. Furthermore, as new media evolves, the economic value behind virtual celebrities is being continuously developed. Similar to the operational mechanisms of traditional celebrity systems, virtual celebrities are accepted and loved by the public due to their inherent characteristics, becoming a "symbol." The groups that embrace this "symbol" are commonly referred to as "fans." When virtual celebrities collaborate with other economic industries to launch new products, these "symbolized" products naturally receive enthusiastic support from "fans," generating economic benefits. This process is a crucial part of the "fan economy" and mass consumption, as well as a concrete manifestation of the "long tail effect." Light Chaser Animation has stated that their team will continue to delve into the generation of virtual celebrities and the application of their derivative frameworks, aiming to achieve greater success in future markets. This demonstrates that virtual celebrities, by leveraging their symbolic characteristics, can promote mass cultural consumption and achieve economic integration between the cultural industry and other industries, revealing their considerable economic value.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the development trend of the celebrity system is its integration with media. Media enriches the ways celebrities are promoted, the forms of interaction with their audience, and can even influence their market positioning and commercial value. This integration transforms the functions of celebrities and brings new opportunities for the development of both the cultural industry and cultural enterprises. However, all of this relies heavily on the "mass culture mechanism." In the new media environment, virtual celebrities have gradually become a symbol of contemporary mass cultural aesthetics, attracting more and more consumers to engage in related cultural consumption. The openness, immediacy, interactivity, virtuality, influence, and ubiquity of the new media environment allow virtual celebrities to reach a broader audience and achieve the "long tail effect." However, the current system of virtual celebrities is still far from perfect and faces many issues. Scholars led by Sean Sands have pointed out: "We outline five broad challenges, including consumer reservations, unrealistic notions of beauty, inauthenticity, regulatory and ethical considerations, and consumer subversion." [11]. Virtual celebrities are gradually moving beyond the screen, shaping new cultural trends individually. "Just as one could not have a movie star without movie culture; one cannot have a virtual star without virtual culture." [12]. However, the "virtual culture" brought by virtual celebrities still has its shortcomings, the most typical being the "homogenization phenomenon." For instance, the virtual celebrity team launched by the Bilibili platform, including members like Yanhe, Yue Zhengling, and Mo Qingxian, although differing in attire, share many similarities in facial design, all of which are based on the character Luo Tianyi. This lack of distinctiveness in character design highlights the issue of homogenization. Additionally, the virtual celebrity teams

generally follow traditional performance methods such as cover singing and performing, lacking interaction with the audience. Moreover, due to AI technology limitations, their voices tend to sound overly electronic, leading to audience fatigue. Although Bilibili's virtual celebrity team has "re-created" many quality works and garnered some popularity, they still fall short compared to early virtual celebrity sensations like Luo Tianyi. This disparity is largely due to the blind pursuit of economic benefits and mutual imitation, resulting in the "homogenization phenomenon." This issue can be explained using the "information cocoon" theory: "The information obtained by consumers has become homogeneous, leading to the formation of the 'information cocoons effect.'" [13]. When every product and culture is tied to virtual celebrities, the public will inevitably experience aesthetic fatigue, which will hinder the dissemination and development of virtual celebrities.

Through White Snake: Afloat, we can observe the vitality of virtual celebrities in the new media environment, the status of traditional culture in mass cultural aesthetics, and the new possibilities for the development of the cultural industry and cultural enterprises. If the symbolic significance and cultural value behind virtual celebrities can be properly planned and utilized, it may be possible to organically combine virtual celebrities with traditional culture through new media means, showcasing the charm of traditional culture, spreading it to a broader audience, and promoting the modernization and internationalization of traditional culture.

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