

Research on Narrative Design of Creative Products Based on Regional Cultural Elements

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Abstract: The research explored the ways and means of narrative design in which regional cultural elements are integrated into cultural and creative products. It also researched a new way of thinking and methods of creative product design based on regional cultural elements in order to satisfy consumers' emotional and cultural experiences. Narrative theory takes the perspective of narrative expression in the design of cultural and creative products. The regional cultural elements were used for better interactive communication with consumers in the form of cultural and creative products. In the narrative of cultural and creative product design, intervening in the development of regional cultural and creative design from the perspective of narratology can better exert and create the cultural value of the region itself, with cultural and creative products playing an important role in "local cultural stories." This research adopted a qualitative approach and provided ideas and guidance for the narrative design and expression of regional cultural elements in creative products through comparative analysis of case studies. The research highlighted the role of narrative design in creating multi-layered experiences, weaving regional cultural stories into products, and the importance of deep understanding and effective use of regional cultural elements in design.

Keywords: Regional cultural elements; Creative products; Narrative design

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1. Introduction

The essence of creative products is to evoke emotional and cultural experiences in consumers. In recent years, these products have turned into regional cultural elements. This strategy not only preserves the nuances of regional culture but also allows consumers to develop a deeper connection with the product. In today's era of globalization, products that tell "local cultural stories" have a unique appeal. This research explores how narrative theory and creative product design can intertwine with regional cultural elements to create a richer product user experience.

China's cultural and creative industries are in a stage of rapid development, vigorously developing cultural-related industries. However, from an overall perspective, the technical level of research work in the field of cultural and creative design is in urgent need of improvement, particularly the problems of homogenization

of cultural and creative products, and blind expansion of products. Issues such as homogenization of categories arising from the lack of obvious characteristics of too many cultural and creative products, lack of competitiveness in the form of a single product, and design concepts that remain in the mere imitation of cultural relics without artistic aesthetics and principles, etc., need to be urgently solved ^[1]. There is a huge gap between consumer expectations and the reality of creative products, which highlights the need for new innovative design thinking for creative products. All kinds of problems are becoming increasingly prominent in the competition, and these problems mainly originates from the similar innovative design methods and means. To solve these problems, it is a new attempt to intervene in the thinking of creative product design through narrative design.

2. Narrative design in creative products

The development of modern design is expanding with the progress of the times and the design has developed from a functional service to an emotional, humane, and experiential focus. Thus, cultural and creative products are in great demand to meet people's emotional needs. Creative products, in addition to the integration of characteristics and related cultural elements, are embedded with unique characteristics of the cultural story. The excavation and use of these specific historical and cultural stories is the key to the success of creative products.

Narrative design is not just about storytelling but also about constructing experiences ^[2]. Creative products embedded with narrative elements can provide consumers with a multi-layered experience. It is similar to unfolding a story, with each design element revealing a facet of regional culture. For example, a teapot may be designed not only for practical use but also to tell a story about the history of tea drinking in China or the legends associated with it. Therefore, narrative design requires a deep understanding of both narrative and regional cultural elements. When these elements are seamlessly woven together, the product transcends its functional value and becomes a treasure trove of cultural stories.

The documents "Methodological Reflections on Narrative Design" ^[3] and "A Brief Discussion on Narrative Design Works and Applications" ^[4] have conducted professional discussions on the research design methods of narrative perspectives. In "Product Styling and Narrative Design," narrative theory is metaphorically referred to as a "tool for speech," and the possibility of introducing narrative theory is proposed in the design of product styling. Design can act as a story with a coherent and plot-based expression, rather than only a static presentation. This concept is also conveyed in the article "Research on Narrative Design of Products" ^[5].

3. Research methodology

In the contemporary field of academic research, the selection of an appropriate research methodology is crucial. Based on Yin's guidance, this study selected the case study methodology as the primary research methodology and further decided to adopt a multi-case study approach rather than limiting itself to a single case study exploration ^[6]. The case study methodology can deepen the understanding of the correlation between individual cases and theories, providing a solid foundation for theory-building and empirical research ^[7]. Secondly, it can effectively avoid any bias or misunderstanding that may arise from being limited to a single case, which helps to ensure the validity and generalizability of the findings.

Comprehensive observation was carried out when describing and analyzing the creative and artistic elements through the theory of organic unity by Ocvirk ^[8]. The main source of data for this study was the creative products in the creative shops of museums in some parts of China. Special attention was paid to those products with narrative elements and they were used to explore in depth how narrative can be integrated into

creative design. In order to conduct the analysis more systematically, a variety of data visualization works was collected and further in-depth analyses of these data visualization works were conducted, attempting to identify the key design elements in them, as well as classifying and summarizing these elements.

To ensure the quality and reliability of the data, diverse data sources were chosen. They included officially released blogs, professional visualization design books, and relevant academic research papers, which ensure the diversity and breadth of the data sources, and also help to provide in-depth exploration and analysis of narrative design elements from multiple perspectives and levels.

4. Creative product design narrative expression

This section aims to answer the following questions: How can creative products successfully interpret or tell “stories”? How do designers encode the textual story information of creative products and how do consumers decode the textual story encoded by designers through creative products?

The first step in this narrative process is for the designer to “write” the text within the narrative theme of the work, and to predetermine the content of the “story” [9]. The theme of the “story” needs to be set with regional characteristics and the commonality of the local culture should be explored, so that the story can better enter the psychology of the local people, and it is also a carrier to promote the local culture to the outside world. The setting of the content of the “story” and the development of the plot need to be cleverly set by the designer in all aspects of the product. Secondly, it is necessary to show and convey the relevant narratives through various material or non-material product props information such as the form, color, material, and environmental scenes of creative products. Lastly, consumers have a cultural understanding and emotional experience of creative products, thus promoting consumption behavior. The details are illustrated in **Figure 1**.

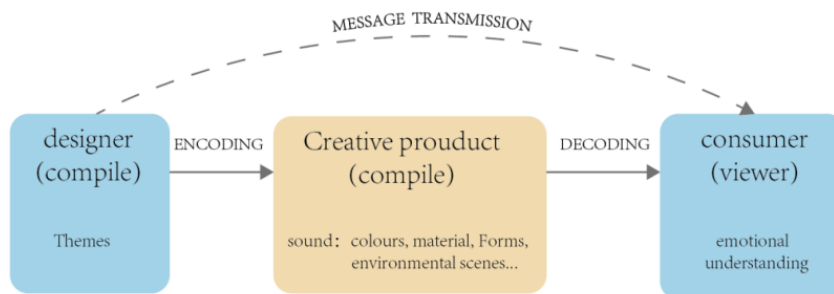


Figure 1. Creative product design narrative encoding and decoding process

4.1. Narrative expression of regional cultural elements

China’s regional culture contains human thinking and emotions condensed by thousands of years of development in China. These cultures are not only relics of the past but also dynamic entities that have evolved over thousands of years, forming a huge cultural narrative scroll. However, the contemporary presentation of these rich cultures is often superficial. Current representations of regional cultures often lack depth, leading to superficial depictions and a lack of communication with contemporary thought and culture, failing to resonate with the younger generation. In many of today’s cultural and creative products, the profundity, historical layers, and vibrant modern interpretations of these cultures are often not reflected.

The most obvious portrayal of regional characteristics is the difference in customs within ten miles and that within a hundred miles. Creative products, as the “spokesperson” of culture, are designed to find the

commonalities and individual characteristics expressed among products through regional culture, and to select appropriate carriers and creative means for product output. This is also one of the design ideas to improve the homogenization of cultural and creative products.

When designing creative products, the key lies in a deep understanding of regional cultural elements and the effective use of narrative design. To be fully aware of the role of regional cultural elements in the narrative design of creative products, designers must position themselves as participants in the cultural narrative through attending workshops and interacting with local artisans, and ethnographic research can also provide valuable insights. While observers may capture the external aesthetics, participants capture the essence of the culture of these regions, grasping the intrinsic emotions, stories, and meanings of the cultural symbols.

The Guangdong Provincial Museum has launched the 2023 “Opera in the Bay Area” New Year’s Gift Box with the theme of “Cantonese Opera” (Figure 2), a common cultural memory of the Bay Area, to express classic traditional operas in an innovative form. It is an innovative way to express the beauty of Cantonese opera, to pass on the culture of non-heritage Cantonese opera, and to demonstrate the new vitality of the Bay Area. It is inspired by the traditional theatre culture of the Lingnan region. Instead of simply embossing the pattern of the theatre, the designer studied the story in depth. The design of the gift box captures the key moments in the story, the different performances of various characters on the theatre stage under different periods of time, which is a manifestation of the rapid development of the times. The whole process of opening the gift box is like an exciting snapshot of a Cantonese opera from the entrance, opening, climax, and curtain call to the end of the show. The gift box contains a set of couplets, a Year of the Rabbit Cantonese red packet, a Chinese New Year wall plaque, a Chinese New Year lantern, and so on. In order to increase the richness of the gift box and the atmosphere of the New Year, and adhere to the concept of green and environmental protection, the outer packaging of the gift box can be reused for each accessory. By combining with the acrylic ornaments, the pine box, and the light strips, the consumers can create their own “Bay Area Opera.” The Gift Box is not merely a gift box but also a narrative masterpiece that illustrates the perfect combination of Lingnan regional culture and modern design.



Figure 2. New Year’s Gift Box of Bay Area Theatre

4.2. Borrowing product form semantics to “tell” stories

In terms of product design, semantics refers to the meanings and interpretations evoked by product forms^[10]. In essence, products are more than just practical objects; every curve, edge, texture, or color of a creative product carries specific connotations, memories, and stories. The expression of form is the most intuitive and direct way to show the theme story. It is not only figurative and expressive but also contains rich symbolism and symbolic semantics. By making the image of the cultural and creative products closely linked to the theme of the story and using figurative metaphors, consumers can quickly access the key information and deeply experience and

integrate into the atmosphere of the story. In short, form is a vivid and intuitive vehicle that connects narrative devices internally and externally. Through its form, structure, and semantics, a product can tell stories, evoke emotions, and make connections. When designers understand and effectively utilize these semantic cues, they can produce products that tell compelling stories. Selected from the five major trades of Cantonese Opera, namely Sheng, Dan, Jing, Mao, and Chou, the forms of these character elements are presented in a way that is both vivid and interesting. Not only are these acrylic character ornaments lifelike and detailed (**Figure 3**), but their design as cultural and creative products has incorporated a strong narrative element. The narrative power contained in these ornaments themselves can undoubtedly play a highly outstanding effect on the transmission and presentation of the storyline.



Figure 3. Cantonese Opera character pendant

4.3. Conveying information through color and material texture

Color and material texture in cultural and creative products provide people with direct visual and tactile experiences. When consumers experience intuitive feelings through colors, they can not only produce rich experience associations but also trigger physiological reactions, which in turn induce complex psychological effects. Compared with other modeling elements, color and texture have a unique advantage in expressing the storyline of cultural and creative products. The color of cultural and creative products not only reflects the artistry and aesthetics of the products, but also serves as the core of visual aesthetics, profoundly influencing people's visual feelings and emotional state, and laying a solid foundation for the transmission of storyline information in narrative design. In addition, the colors in cultural and creative products also have symbolic semantics, which can effectively create an atmosphere and emotions. In the narrative design of cultural and creative products, color selection requires designers to draw inspiration from the theme background, extract color elements related to it, and thus echo the theme. To summarize and select color elements with broad applicability based on consumer perception of narrative themes from user research, compare and integrate them with color elements extracted from narrative backgrounds, and select similar colors, the narrative of the appearance color of creative products often changes with the trend of trendy colors. In the process of selecting color factors, designers should combine color matching methods, cultural background, and other factors. Taking into account the three aspects of the body itself, we need to carefully consider and refine them repeatedly.

Creative red packets (**Figure 4**) often become a token of appreciation for people to give to their friends and relatives during important festivals or celebrations. It carries a deep blessing and goodwill to the receiver. Among the many colors, red and gold are undoubtedly the most striking and are universally regarded as symbols of warmth, prosperity, and festivity.



Figure 4. Creative red packets

In many cultural traditions around the globe, especially in the deep Chinese cultural context, the color red has always been associated with festivity, prosperity, and luck. While gold, the color of wealth, prestige, and splendor, is often associated with affluence, success, and prominent social status. When these two colors are combined, they evoke an emotional response of luxury, grandeur, and festivity, perfect for the unique atmosphere of festive celebrations. Color is more than just a visual accent, it has deep cultural and emotional significance. When these rich and compelling color combinations are brought to life, they create a visual experience of festivity, joy, and warmth, and give consumers a deep sense of unparalleled celebration and harmony during the festive season.

4.4. Connecting material function with narrative design

When crafting a product, it is essential to bridge its material function with its narrative design, ensuring the functionality complements the story being told. From various aspects such as visual, tactile, and olfactory senses, consumers can feel the charm of materials. For example, wooden materials are more natural and rustic, while the metal material is relatively cold and full of industrial vibe. Choosing a suitable material helps to express and convey the design intention. Material can intuitively reflect the millennium old historical and cultural characteristics of a place, and it is also one of the factors that designers must consider in product narrative design. The same design elements with different materials result in different semantic expressions in the final product.

For designers, creating powerful design works is important, but creative products imbued with profound cultural story connotations are the finishing touch of design works. The difficulty of achieving both is very high, so perfect integration is often not achieved in the modern design market. The market has different focuses on products in various fields, and industrial products often focus on functional display, emphasizing practicality and durability. For cultural and creative products, consumers pay more attention to their connotation and beauty, encouraging users to explore the product's connotation and resonate with its appearance.

The functional design of a cultural and creative product should not only be centered on the content of the story being told but also should be embodied in detail on both the material and spiritual levels. This embodiment may be obvious or subtle, and it incorporates rich symbolic and semiotic elements through the external characteristics of the product such as shape, color, and texture. Furthermore, combined with consumers'

physiological and psychological thinking patterns and usage habits, cultural and creative products are able to provide functional guidance, enabling consumers to further understand and feel the narrative experience that the product brings.

Mooncakes are an indispensable traditional food for the Mid-Autumn Festival. In order to incorporate more creative and cultural connotations into mooncakes, the Mid-Autumn Mooncake Music Box (**Figure 5**) is refined from environmentally friendly wood with a rounded appearance, similar to the shape of mooncakes. When consumers open the box, they can not only see the exquisite design but also hear a classic piece representing the Mid-Autumn Festival. The music not only brings a wonderful melody but also arouses people's homesickness, reflecting the reunion symbolized by the Mid-Autumn Festival. Combining the traditional mooncake culture with creative music elements, the Mid-Autumn Mooncake Music Box is a creative product that is both practical and full of emotions.



Figure 5. Disney Happy Child's Dream Mid-Autumn Mooncake Music Box

5. Integrating narrative and creative product design: The way forward

The field of creative product design is undergoing unprecedented innovation as a result of rapid technological change and consumer tastes. Delving deeper into the field of creative product design, narrative and creative product design are not two separate entities, but two sides of the same coin. The synergy between them can energize a product and make it more than just an object. They become cultural ambassadors, weaving stories of a region's traditions, spirituality, and evolution.

In this context, narrative becomes a key element in giving a product deep emotion and value. It not only enhances the intrinsic meaning of the design but also breathes life and soul into the product. Creative products and narratives are inherently intertwined. Ancient artisans did not just make objects, they wove stories into their work that conveyed their ideas, beliefs, and culture. This idea is still relevant today. The narrative does not only take place through words; it can also be expressed through the form, color, texture, and even function of a product. Furthermore, the narrative offers a whole new dimension to creative product design. It allows designers to explore and express more complex concepts such as culture, history, and individual experience. In the process, products are no longer designed merely to fulfill a certain utility but to convey a message and share a story.

A creative product inspired by a region's traditional art and culture not only showcases the aesthetics of the region but also conveys the culture, history, and values behind it. When consumers buy such a product, they are not just buying an object, they are buying a story and an experience. The combination of narrative and creative

product design has another important value, it helps bridge cultural differences. In today's globalized world, there is a growing desire to understand and appreciate other cultures. Through creative products that incorporate narrative, consumers can get a glimpse into other cultures, thus deepening their understanding and respect for them.

Overall, the role of narrative in creative product design is becoming increasingly prominent. It provides a platform for designers to share their perspectives, stories, and emotions, while at the same time offering consumers a deeper and richer experience. As we further research and practice in this field, we look forward to seeing more creative products with strong storytelling and cultural connotations.

6. Conclusion

In the modern world of rapid consumption, the lifespan of a product is often short and disposable. However, when a product is closely aligned with the cultural narrative of a region, it can imbue the product with lasting and far-reaching value. This is not just to make the product stand out from the crowd of similar products, but also to make the product carry an emotional and cultural narrative in addition to its functionality, thus making it not just an object that fulfills practical needs, but a storytelling experience.

Creative product narrative design should convey various aspects such as the semantic form, color, and material function of the narrative product, as well as the synergistic relationship between narrative and creative product design when producing culturally rich and emotionally resonant products.

Magic can be created when narrative and functionality merge perfectly. An object is no longer just produced to fulfill a task, it carries context, situation, emotion, and meaning. Users are not simply using it, they are interacting with the story behind this, and this immersive experience allows them to develop a deeper connection with the product. Products designed based on this not only have practical value, but more importantly, they have the ability to tell a story. This story may be related to regional culture, historical traditions, or social values, or it may be related to the emotional experience of a particular community or individual. This storytelling enables the product to touch the hearts of users, evoke their empathy, and establish a deeper emotional bond with them.

Due to this, the integration of regional cultural narratives into the design of creative products can make the products not only meet the practical needs of users but also emotionally resonate with them. Such products can naturally gain higher recognition in the market, thus enhancing their economic value.

China has thousands of years of cultural heritage, which provides us with rich narrative material. As China continues to develop and innovate in the field of cultural and creative products, designers are well-positioned to design products that are both innovative and deeply rooted in traditional culture. Narrative design is the key to this process, which can guide the direction of design in the pursuit of innovation, without forgetting the fundamentals of culture.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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