

A Study on the Application of Character Marketing Strategy in Reading Promotion (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] By examining the current state of reading promotion initiatives in China and drawing upon role marketing strategies from marketing science, this study aims to provide valuable insights and references for nationwide reading promotion efforts.

[Method/Process] Through case analysis of role marketing strategy applications in corporate product brand marketing and reading promotion activities both domestically and internationally, this paper proposes a comprehensive marketing strategy framework for reading promotion work encompassing role selection, role shaping, role dissemination, and role sublimation.

[Results/Conclusion] While adopting role marketing strategies to advance reading promotion initiatives represents a beneficial endeavor, the effective implementation of such strategies necessitates organic collaboration among numerous reading promotion stakeholders and requires a gradual, persistent process of role cultivation and application.

Full Text

Preamble

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Exploring the Application of Role Marketing Strategy in Reading Promotion

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] In light of the current state of reading promotion efforts in China, this paper draws upon role marketing strategies from marketing

studies to provide beneficial references for nationwide reading promotion initiatives.

[Method/Process] Through case analysis of corporate brand marketing and domestic and international reading promotion activities that employ role marketing strategies, this paper proposes a comprehensive marketing strategy framework for reading promotion work, encompassing role selection, role shaping, role dissemination, and role sublimation.

[Result/Conclusion] Applying role marketing strategies to advance reading promotion represents a worthwhile attempt. However, the effective functioning of these strategies requires organic coordination among numerous reading promotion entities and demands a gradual, persistent process of role cultivation and application.

Keywords: library; reading promotion; role marketing; role cultivation

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Reading promotion activities have been carried out for decades and have gained increasing attention worldwide. However, to date, there is no clear definition of reading promotion either domestically or internationally. Some propose that reading promotion aims to inspire people's love for reading, while others view it as the promotion of books, readers, and reading awareness. Regardless of the interpretation, the ultimate goal, as Professor Fan Bingsi stated, is "to make those who do not love reading fall in love with it, to teach those who cannot read how to read, and to help those who struggle with reading overcome their barriers." Similarly, this echoes the original intention behind the 1997 "Read Across America" initiative proposed by the American Education Association's Reading Task Force: "We create cheerleaders to excite children about football and remember which stars scored how many points. Why can't we do something to make children fascinated with reading?" [1] Likewise, in contemporary China, where young children are obsessed with "Boonie Bears" and "Pleasant Goat," teenagers blindly chase celebrities, college students indulge in Korean dramas and reality shows, and over 300 million people favor live streaming, the question of how to make readers develop a greater love for reading and transform reading into a lifestyle has become a pressing concern for reading promoters across all sectors.

With support from national policies, libraries, publishing houses, educational institutions, and numerous other reading promotion organizations have successively launched diverse reading promotion activities in recent years, such as "Scholarly China," "One City, One Book," and "The Reader." While these initiatives have contributed to fostering a national reading atmosphere, survey results from the China Press and Publication Research Institute reveal that although per capita book reading volume in China has increased slightly in recent years, the growth rate remains slow, with an annual increase of only 0.02 books per capita [2-3], consistently far below levels in Japan, France, South Korea, the

United States, Israel, and other countries. Although current reading promotion activities feature increasingly innovative formats, richer content, and growing scale and momentum, most suffer from homogenization, temporary impact, and hollow conceptualization. How can we effectively overcome these shortcomings, continuously convey reading concepts to the general public, subtly influence readers, guide them toward effective reading, and make reading a conscious behavior? Drawing on advanced experiences from corporate brand building and classic international reading campaigns, this paper introduces role marketing strategies from a marketing perspective into nationwide reading promotion activities, aiming to inspire and boost reading promotion efforts.

2. Role Marketing and Its Marketing Dynamics

2.1 The Meaning and Types of Role Marketing

The term “role” originally refers to protagonists in novels, dramas, and comic strips. Role marketing is a marketing approach where enterprises rely on specific individuals, objects, or create anthropomorphic images as product brand roles to guide and create market consumption behavior [4]. Roles generally fall into two categories: The first category consists of real individuals—renowned scholars, famous singers, celebrities, officials, or idol roles from film and television—whose fame, influence, and celebrity effect are leveraged to shorten the distance with consumers. This is somewhat equivalent to celebrity marketing or star endorsement. The second category involves anthropomorphic cartoon characters shaped by enterprises based on their cultural connotations, product brand essence, and consumer group positioning, such as Coca-Cola’s “Qoo,” a blue doll with a big head, one hand on its hip, holding a juice drink in the other hand, and intoxicatingly saying “Qoo...” It has become a household “celebrity” [5].

2.2 The Marketing Dynamics of Role Marketing

Role marketing strategies emphasize both the influence and appeal of the role itself on audiences/users and the “role-sensing” experience of audiences/users in each consumption behavior. These two aspects ensure people’s endorsement and loyalty to products, brands, or behaviors from four dimensions—cultural, emotional, psychological, and social—thereby enhancing the influence of marketing entities [6].

2.2.1 Value Identification as the Cultural Dynamic of Role Marketing Identification with certain values serves as the cultural foundation and ideological driving force for people’s role confirmation. “You are the Pepsi Generation” and “The Choice of the Pepsi Generation” have been Pepsi’s famous advertising slogans since the 1960s. The “new generation” depicted in these slogans is identified from a values perspective. By inviting modern American pop stars like Michael Jackson, NBA star Michael Jordan, and Hollywood actors

as protagonists in its commercials, PepsiCo conveyed to the American public the values of courageously pursuing individual liberation and seeking new self-worth. Ultimately, PepsiCo shaped a social role image pursued by American society, earning the admiration of all Americans seeking new values and conceptual changes. While identifying with the values advocated by PepsiCo, the public also confirmed a sense of cultural role belonging. This is the cultural dynamic driving the function of role marketing and represents the fundamental force.

2.2.2 Character Affinity as the Emotional Dynamic of Role Marketing Character figures in role marketing—such as stars and renowned scholars—already possess certain influence in society and have large fan bases and admirers, representing the public’s special emotions toward idol roles. Anthropomorphic cartoon characters also have significant advantages in capturing people’s emotions and shortening distances compared to ordinary people. Taiwan’s Dentsu Character Lab conducted a flyer distribution experiment to test how to better deliver advertisements. In the experiment, staff members and a cartoon “little bear” distributed flyers to passersby respectively. The acceptance rate for staff members was 38%, while the latter reached as high as 85% [7]. Many enterprises utilize the natural character appeal and affinity of their anthropomorphic cartoon characters to guide and change consumer behavior, providing emotional impetus for role marketing advantages.

2.2.3 Lifestyle Experience as the Psychological Dynamic of Role Marketing The yearning for and experience of a certain lifestyle represents people’s expectations and desires for that life, as well as the psychological motivation to fulfill such wishes. This psychological demand of consumers provides internal driving force for the realization of role marketing. For example, current household car advertisements create romantic, relaxed, and fresh life situations for certain roles, showing a family driving a certain brand of car toward happiness. These advertisements instill a lifestyle of returning to nature into families living long-term in cities, penetrating specific lifestyles into people’s thinking, thereby cultivating and guiding consumer intentions.

2.2.4 Identity Confirmation as the Social Dynamic of Role Marketing Many behaviors in people’s daily lives consciously or unconsciously pursue the realization and satisfaction of certain identity roles, providing the most basic social driving force for the effective implementation of role marketing. One means of brand role marketing is to provide consumers with an identity promise through brand image, allowing consumers to obtain a sense of identity confirmation when consuming the brand’s products. Examples include Beijing Celebrity Plaza’s advertising slogan “You are the celebrity of this life” and the “Boss” brand range hood, which uses an identity image as its brand positioning and marketing starting point from its very name.

3. Application of Role Marketing Strategies in Reading Promotion Activities

Role marketing strategies have been widely applied in corporate product brand building, with certain specific roles becoming core symbols and product brand endorsements. However, this theory has barely been mentioned in reading promotion research, although it has been extensively applied at the practical level, mainly reflected in the following reading promotion projects.

First, reading promotion activities using real individuals or characters from film and television dramas represent the most common form, generally concentrated in three types of projects:

- (1) **Reading Ambassador (or Reading Promotion Image Ambassador), Publicity Ambassador, or Literary Ambassador Programs/Activity Promotion.** Many reading promotion activities invite well-known individuals, celebrities, and singers with public influence, social responsibility, and public welfare enthusiasm to serve as reading image ambassadors or reading publicity ambassadors. For example, the 2010 “Read! Singapore” campaign invited Stefanie Sun to drive youth reading; the 2012 Australian National Year of Reading invited 43 publicity ambassadors to promote weekly activities [1]; and at the 2016 Qilu Reading Season launch ceremony, renowned scholar and writer Yu Qiuyu and Mao Dun Literature Prize winner Zhang Wei were appointed as “Shandong National Reading Image Ambassadors” [8].
- (2) **Reading List Recommendation Activities by Well-Known Individuals or Influential Figures in Specific Fields.** Some provinces have launched book recommendation activities by party secretaries and leaders. For instance, at the April 23, 2017 Hainan Book Festival and Scholarly Hainan Reading Season launch ceremony, the provincial party secretary recommended five books including *The World is Connected: The Logic of the “Belt and Road”*, which sold out rapidly with some books experiencing temporary shortages, demonstrating the significant driving effect of the secretary’s recommendations [9]. Many university libraries also hold reading promotion activities featuring presidents, party secretaries, professors, doctoral students, and reading stars.
- (3) **Idol Characters Who Love Reading in Film and Television Programs and Their Reading Activities.** For example, in the 2017 TV drama *Ode to Joy*, which garnered over 100 million viewers, books such as *Orchid in the Empty Valley*, *The Logic of Collective Action*, and *A Brief History of Humankind* were rarely noticed until mentioned by the female protagonist in dialogue, after which they were quickly sold out and publishers urgently reprinted them. Simultaneously, sales of related books by the same authors and series generally increased [10].

Second, there are also numerous cases of reading promotion activities using

self-cultivated anthropomorphic cartoon characters or already popular cartoon characters. The most successful case is the American reading promotion program “Read Across America,” which selected the widely popular Cat in the Hat from Dr. Seuss’s works as the entry point for reading activities. Combined organically with a map of the United States, it became one of the symbols of the national reading program. Every March 2nd, children gather wearing red-and-white striped hats to take oaths, listen to stories, and acquire new knowledge together, making the Cat in the Hat a typical role representative of this project [1]. Additionally, since 2000, the Library of Congress and the Advertising Council have collaborated on a public service advertising campaign using famous cartoon characters like Snow White and Curious George to produce videos, audio, and posters promoting parent-child reading. In the 2015 National University Library Reading Promotion Case Competition, “Reading Guide ‘Big Hero 6’”—a multi-type reading guide series from the East Campus Library of Sun Yat-sen University—won third place in the finals, utilizing the anthropomorphic cartoon character from the well-known animation *Big Hero 6* to successfully guide reading. Wuhan University Library’s cartoon image “Xiaobu” and Jimo City Library’s mascot “Momo” have also participated in reading activities.

Currently, reading promotion activities employ these two different types of roles to promote reading, achieving certain results. Specific roles have also played significant driving roles during certain periods. However, practical activities lack effective theoretical guidance, and the marketing dynamics of roles have not been fully utilized, ultimately failing to overcome the shortcomings of other current reading promotion activities.

4. Role Marketing Strategies in Reading Promotion Activities: Role Selection, Shaping, Dissemination, and Sublimation

How can role marketing strategies be correctly applied in reading promotion activities and truly play their role? This requires adherence to a role cultivation process and marketing strategy encompassing role selection, role shaping, role dissemination, and role sublimation.

4.1 Role Selection in Reading Promotion Activities

Among numerous reading promotion activity cases, using well-known individuals, performing artists, film and television idols, and other roles to publicize and recommend reading—leveraging celebrity/star effects to drive reading promotion—has certainly played a certain driving role. However, on the one hand, because different readers have different preferences for figures, the radiation group of idols is limited, and the influence range is restricted. Moreover, if the same figure repeatedly appears in similar activities, it can easily cause visual and emotional fatigue among readers, diminishing the celebrity effect and weakening role marketing. On the other hand, these character roles are organic

living individuals in real life with certain life cycles, and their personalities cannot be recreated. Additionally, their daily life behaviors are inevitably prone to mistakes, thus posing risks for using character roles for permanent reading promotion. Furthermore, some activities require substantial appearance fees. Therefore, reading promotion activities using real-life character roles lack sustainability and innovation, and the roles lack plasticity and permanence, making it unrealistic to rely persistently on a specific real individual to drive reading across society.

Anthropomorphic cartoon characters have played crucial roles in corporate brand building, such as Coca-Cola's Qoo and JD.com's metal dog in enterprises, and Curious George, Big Hero 6, and the Cat in the Hat in reading promotion activities, all widely loved by the public. This is because: First, cartoon images originate from animation and comics. Many famous characters have accompanied the growth of those born in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Children and teenagers are deeply attracted to them, and the elderly are influenced through their grandchildren. Anthropomorphic cartoon characters span wide age ranges and involve broad demographic groups. Second, anthropomorphic cartoon characters have strong affinity in their design. Taiwan's Dentsu Character Lab conducted a bench field experiment using hidden cameras to capture passersby's reactions, having a "little bear" approach strangers sitting on benches to test how close cartoon characters could get to consumers. The result showed that the bear character shortened the interpersonal safety distance from 45.7 cm directly to 0 cm [7]. Third, anthropomorphic cartoon characters possess strong plasticity and extensibility, providing vast space for activity innovation, with low costs and long life cycles. Additionally, anthropomorphic cartoon role marketing can avoid negative impacts from character scandals. Therefore, using anthropomorphic cartoon images as persistent reading promotion roles will be a better choice.

4.2 Role Shaping in Reading Promotion Activities

Anthropomorphic cartoon roles in reading promotion activities can be shaped through two approaches: First, through public solicitation or commissioning specialized companies by event organizers, such as Coca-Cola's "Qoo," Only Ming Vision's "Shenqi Zai," and activity mascot solicitations. Second, by adopting cartoon characters from animation, comics, and fairy tales that already have profound influence and recognition among the public and align with the activity's purpose, such as the Cat in the Hat from Dr. Seuss in "Read Across America" (see Table 1). However, it should be noted that beyond having distinctive, recognizable, and artistic external features [11], anthropomorphic cartoon roles also need to be endowed with the following "internal characteristics":

4.2.1 Endowing Roles with Vivid Life Characteristics

The marketing dynamic of roles lies in enabling users or readers to genuinely experience role sensation, intimacy, and identity confirmation. Role shaping should not merely leave the character in its initial static, symbolic, and token

state from design or solicitation. Instead, it must be endowed with life and personality traits, given a birth story, transforming it from a static, flat image into a vivid, three-dimensional figure with rich experiences and distinct personality traits. Only then can it engage in emotional communication with the public and convey reading concepts, influencing readers' reading behaviors and habits at a deeper level. This process is not merely about converting static drawings to animation but more importantly involves pre-designing and performing the "life" and "destiny" of anthropomorphic cartoon characters. This is also the most fundamental step in realizing role marketing dynamics.

4.2.2 Endowing Roles with Distinct Personality Traits

Just as corporate role shaping should focus on corporate philosophy, cultural characteristics, and product branding, roles cultivated in reading promotion also need to possess core styles determined by the fusion of cultural environment, contemporary cultural aesthetics, and reading promotion concepts. They should exhibit distinct characteristics such as love for reading, advocacy of reading, extensive knowledge derived from reading, and success achieved through reading. These need to be reflected in the role's growth process, allowing the public to identify with and imitate the role's behavior while recognizing the character itself through the dissemination of its life stories.

4.2.3 Endowing Roles with Sufficient Innovation Space

In addition to following artistic design principles, role design should pay special attention to reserving sufficient room for transformation, such as changes in role costumes to adapt to seasons and occasions. Simultaneously, it should provide space for innovation and expansion for the role. As reading promotion roles are widely disseminated and applied, to extend their life cycles and maintain sustainability, the role's family members, relatives, and friends can be further cultivated to achieve role expansion. Some libraries have designed cartoon mascot families, such as the Little Dolphin family launched by Nantong Children's Library. Similarly, for the 2012 "Read Across America" with the theme "Go Green," the character "Lorax" from Dr. Seuss's works, who protects forests, was added to the Cat in the Hat.

4.3 Role Dissemination in Reading Promotion Activities

Role dissemination in role marketing strategies includes three stages: role launch, role dissemination, and role reinforcement. After reading promotion activities or project roles are designed, the primary task is to seize the opportunity to launch them in a timely manner. For roles with existing images but no names, they can enter the public 视野 through name solicitation campaigns among the general readership. For roles with established names, they can be unveiled through reading promotion activity launch ceremonies, World Book Day and other important festivals, or through promotion by well-known character roles, meeting the public and making readers aware of the anthropomorphic cartoon characters.

Once launched, reading promotion roles require timely dissemination and promotion. Reading promotion organizers (entities) need to present role information through various media forms including text, sound, graphics, images, animation, web pages, and video, utilizing print media (newspapers, magazines), television, radio, the internet, and mobile media for integrated dissemination. This ultimately enables any reader to access information about reading promotion roles anytime, anywhere, through multiple terminals such as televisions, computers, and mobile phones, allowing the shaped roles to enter the lives of all citizens or specific readers and subtly influence the public.

In the role dissemination process, on the one hand, traditional media can be used in a single format to release and display identical advertisements about the role's reading philosophy, continuously cycling them across various media within a certain period to create auditory and visual effects, strengthening readers' attention, memory, and loyalty to the role and achieving comprehensive advertising effects. On the other hand, "all-media" platforms can employ diverse formats to publicize role information, ultimately selecting and adjusting media formats based on readers' personalized needs and the role's presentation focus to achieve comprehensive, personalized role dissemination.

After comprehensive dissemination, roles require long-term reinforcement to truly take root in readers' hearts. Reading promotion organizers (entities) need to broaden their thinking and achieve cross-field role marketing, mainly through joint strengthening of influence on readers and the public in fields such as animation film and television, role models, animation game development, and book publishing [13]. This is manifested in three aspects: First, creating animation work resources based on roles, producing humorous, eye-catching animations about role stories, role emotions, role reading experiences, and role traits in the form of TV series, movies, or micro-videos to attract readers. Second, designing role models based on role prototypes—the role derivative market—including role plastic models, plush toys, clothing with role logos, and cultural creative products, displayed in public places, library corners, or distributed to participants at every reading promotion activity site. Third, developing role games and book markets through games, novels, and other channels, such as the Alice Springs Public Library in Australia (2002) publishing a series of adventure stories featuring the cartoon mascot Booka for publicity [14]. Therefore, through strengthening and marketing roles in different fields, creatively influencing different groups, and attracting fans from various domains to the greatest extent possible, roles' popularity and reputation can be enhanced, achieving role reinforcement effects among the general public and corresponding reader groups.

4.4 Role Sublimation in Reading Promotion Activities

The process of role dissemination establishes the role as an idol in the hearts of the general readership. To maintain readers' enduring identification with certain role traits, roles must be sublimated and continuously promoted in practical applications beyond comprehensive three-dimensional dissemination. Role

application in reading promotion includes: First, applying roles to daily reading promotion activities to function as reading navigators, such as regularly conducting reading recommendation activities with well-known figures and developing reading lists to guide readers' daily reading. Second, applying roles to online consultation and social media for reading promotion to function as virtual consultants, providing timely assistance to readers, reminding them of relevant reading activity information in real-time through applications and penetration on QQ, WeChat, Weibo, and reading promotion homepages, maintaining effective interaction with readers, leveraging the role's affinity traits, strengthening emotional connections between the role and readers, and serving as a bridge. Third, having roles participate in both online and offline reading promotion activities at all times, accompanying readers throughout their reading activities, helping them establish correct reading values, develop good reading habits, and lead the entire society's reading trends. In summary, the purpose of role sublimation is to allow roles to enter readers' hearts, become their favorites and idols, endow readers with role experiences and role identity feelings, and thereby transform the reading ethos carried by the role into individuals' lifestyles and the entire society's positive atmosphere.

4.5 Considerations for Applying Role Marketing Strategies in Reading Promotion Activities

4.5.1 Application Requires Gradual, Persistent Effort

Applying role marketing strategies in reading promotion is essentially a process of role growth and cultivation. Whether from image shaping to role launch, dissemination, and application, or from the first meeting with the general readership to becoming a model and idol in readers' hearts, playing the function of promoting reading promotion spirit and disseminating reading trends, this is a long process that cannot be accomplished overnight. It requires the test of time and unremitting spirit. We must avoid giving up halfway and adhere to step-by-step marketing promotion, avoiding failure when success is within reach. Simultaneously, we must persist in the continuous application and expansion of shaped roles, avoiding frequent role changes.

4.5.2 Application Requires Joint Effort from Numerous Reading Promotion Entities

The successful application of role marketing strategies in reading promotion cannot be separated from close cooperation among reading promotion entities including libraries, publishers, various media, government agencies, and commercial enterprises. The planning, shaping, and promotion of reading promotion roles can assign different stage tasks according to each institution's functional advantages. If conditions permit, influential roles can be jointly shaped nationwide. However, if conditions are limited, regional or domain-specific reading promotion roles can be established, but their number should not be excessive to avoid affecting role effectiveness.

In conclusion, nationwide reading relates to national and ethnic development

and status, influencing the improvement of individual comprehensive qualities. Reading promotion work bears heavy responsibilities and has a long way to go. Reading promotion methods are continuously being explored by promoters across all sectors. “Promotion” is essentially “marketing.” Drawing on role marketing strategies to advance reading promotion work will be a beneficial attempt and reference.

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The Use of the Role’s Marketing in Reading Promotion

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Abstract: [Purpose/significance] Combined with the status of domestic reading promotion work, the paper draws upon role marketing strategies from marketing studies to provide useful references for nationwide reading promotion. [Method/process] Through case analysis of corporate brand marketing and domestic and international reading promotion activities employing role marketing strategies, the paper proposes a set of marketing strategies for reading promotion work encompassing role selection, role shaping, role dissemination, and role sublimation. [Result/conclusion] It is a significant attempt to drive reading promotion through reference to role marketing strategies. However, the effective use of role marketing strategies requires organic associations among numerous organizations and step-by-step, consistent role cultivation and application.

Keywords: library; reading promotion; role marketing; role nurturing

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TOP 10 Highly-Cited Papers of *Library and Information Service* (2015-2017)

1. An Empirical Study on the Effectiveness of University Library Reading Promotion Based on WeChat Official Platforms — Wan Muchen, Ou Liang (2015, Vol. 59, No. 22)
2. Research on Information Dissemination of Online Public Opinion in Mobile Environments Based on Social Network Analysis — A Case Study of “Smog” Topic on Sina Weibo — Wang Xiwei, Xing Yunfei, Zhao Dan, et al. (2015, Vol. 59, No. 7)
3. Content, Models, and Trends of Patent Information Services in University Libraries — Wang Liping, Yang Bo, Qin Xia, et al. (2015, Vol. 59, No. 6)
4. Library Promotion Strategies in New Media Technology Environments — (2015, Vol. 59, No. 1)
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6. Research on University Library Think Tank Service Systems — (2015, Vol. 59, No. 23)
7. Research on Diversified Trends of Library Reading Promotion — A Case Study of the First University Library Reading Promotion Competition — Xu Tiancai, Yang Xinya, Wang Ning, et al. (2016, Vol. 60, No. 2)
8. New Characteristics and Requirements of Information Security in the Big Data Era — (2016, Vol. 60, No. 6)
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