

Character Creation and Promotion in Social Media Era China

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Abstract

This research explores the creation and promotion of cartoon characters in China's social media era, focusing on grassroots creators who leverage digital platforms to participate in cultural production. Through a qualitative, case-study approach, the research examines four social media cartoon characters—Aoda Cat, Fan & Bao, Rumi, and Toby—using interviews with their creators and insights from experts in the field.

The study identifies the characteristics of social media as a context for character creation, highlighting the role of light content formats, iterative production processes, and audience interaction in shaping character image, personality, and engagement strategies. It also reveals the pivotal role of individual creators and their authentic expression in fostering relatable and impactful character designs. These findings are synthesised to generate an empirically grounded conceptual framework that illustrates and analyses the creation and promotion dynamics of cartoon characters in a platformed cultural production environment.

This research makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it enriches existing character-creation frameworks by incorporating insights from digital entrepreneurship and social media studies. Practically, it offers practical strategies for creators and industry practitioners to navigate the challenges of content creation in an algorithm-driven, fast-evolving social media landscape. By situating these findings within the context of China's digital ecosystem, this research provides a fresh perspective on character production and serves as a resource for creators and researchers seeking to understand and engage with the opportunities and complexities of social media character design.

Keywords: cartoon, character, character creation, social media, creative industries

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Terminology

This thesis may contain unfamiliar terms or those with multiple meanings, some of which will be detailed in later chapters. A glossary is provided for immediate reference.

2 Dimension/2D

2 dimension (2D), or 二次元 (erciyuan), is a Chinese translation of the Japanese word nijigen, which literally means ‘two-dimensional space’. This term now has become a popular jargon to describe the ACGN (Anime, Comics, Games, and Novels) subculture in China. Simply put, it refers to animated or gaming visual works presented on flat surfaces like paper or screens, where the characters are in graphic form, as opposed to live-action films and television shows that feature real actors.

Character

The characters discussed in this thesis are all cartoon characters, which refer to a fictional character in the form of an illustration that is usually drawn, sometimes animated, in an unrealistic or semi-realistic style.

Content creator/influencer

Content creators, in this research, if not particularly mentioned, refer to aspiring individuals who create and share content on social media platforms with the desire for remuneration. In the digital context, although there are some differences, content creators and influencers are generally the same things with different emphases. They are sometimes used interchangeably in this thesis.

Douyin

Douyin, or 抖音, is the mainland Chinese counterpart of the popular short-form video sharing platform TikTok. Both platforms are under the ownership of ByteDance (字节跳动), yet they maintain separate content libraries and databases and adhere to different rules and regulations, owing to the internet censorship policies in China.

Grassroots individuals

Grassroots individuals, or 草根 (caogen) is a prevalent term used in the Chinese context. While it generally means common people, or 老百姓 (Laobaixin), the term also implies the underprivileged class as opposed to elite culture or the elite class.

Legacy media

Legacy media, also known as old media, refers to the major forms of mass media that prevailed before the information age, such as print media, television, film, radio broadcasting, etc.

Platformisation

Platformisation is usually defined as ‘the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms’ (Poell et al., 2019, p.1).

QQ

QQ, also known as Tencent QQ, is an instant messaging software developed by Tencent. QQ is one of the earliest and most popular instant messaging app in China. Starting as a simple messaging application in 1999, it has now evolved into a full-fledged platform that offers multiple services including group chat, voice chat, micro-blogging, games, music, shopping, social games, and movies. Before the rise of WeChat, QQ was the most popular online communication method in mainland China, and its desktop version remains incredibly popular with white-collar workers (DeGennaro, 2020).

Red

Red, or 小红书 (Xiaohongshu), founded in 2013, is a popular social media and e-commerce platform in China. It is often described as 'China's Instagram.' (Olcott and McMorro, 2024) Unlike other e-commerce platforms, Red originated as a community-focused site. Initially, users primarily shared experiences about overseas shopping. Over time, the platform has transformed into a vibrant online hub that blends social media, e-commerce, and lifestyle content (Hu, 2023).

Social Media Entertainment (SME)

Social Media Entertainment (SME), is a term proposed by Cunningham and Craig(2019). SME is defined as an emerging proto-industry fueled by professionalising, previously amateur content creators using new entertainment and communicative formats, including vlogging, gameplay, and do-it-yourself (DIY), to develop potentially sustainable businesses based on significant followings that can extend across multiple platforms.

Sticker

Sticker in this thesis, if not specified particularly, refers to digital stickers used mainly on social media apps. Generally stickers are large, prominent graphics used similarly to emojis. The distinction between stickers and emojis lies in the fact that stickers are not constrained to a predefined set of symbols since they are not included in the Unicode standard.

Wallpaper

Wallpaper, or background, in this thesis refers to a digital image that serves as a decorative background for the graphical user interface on the screen of computers, smartphones or other electronic devices.

Webtoon

The term webtoon, a combination of web and cartoon, originated in Korea in the early 2000s (Jang and Song, 2017) and is also known as mobile cartoons, digital comics, web *manhwa* in Korean, and *keitai manga* in Japanese (Lynn, 2016). Sometimes it is used interchangeably with another term, ‘webcomic’, for example by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, online communities like Webcomic Alliance, Tapas.io and so on. Simply put, they are a type of digital comics or graphic novels published online, usually arranged in a vertical format that is optimised for personal computers or mobile devices.

WeChat

WeChat, or 微信 (Weixin) in Chinese, developed by Tencent Holdings in January 2011, is a mobile social media platform and one of Tencent’s flagship applications. WeChat has been described as China's ‘app for everything’ and a super-app because of its wide range of functions (Chao, 2017). As of 2019, WeChat was the world’s largest standalone mobile application,

boasting 1151 million monthly users, according to Tencent's 2019 WeChat Statistical Report (Tencent Technology, 2020).

Weibo

Weibo, or 微博, also known as Sina Weibo, is a Chinese microblogging (The word Weibo's literal meaning) platform and is one of the biggest social media platforms in China with 573 million MAU as of September 2021 (Sina finance, 2021). While many of Weibo's features resemble those of Twitter, like the character limits for each post (2000 characters after a 2016 upgrade), it has constantly incorporated more sophisticated functions, which transformed Weibo from a simple micro-blogging site to a comprehensive social media platform (Wan, 2019).

Note on Translations and Quotes

Except where specifically indicated, all translations in the text are done by the researcher. Except for the names of well-known places and individuals outside of China, all English translations of Chinese names, terms, and other words adhere to the pinyin romanisation system, used in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Chinese names are rendered in accordance with the customs of its culture, with surname first and give names last. For example, in the name 'Sun Wukong', Sun is the surname and Wukong is the given name.

Italicised quotes indicate that they are excerpts from interviews conducted by the researcher, while the regular quoted text indicates that they are from literature or other secondary sources.

1 Introduction

1.1 Emerging territory

In December 2017, the Chinese cartoon character Budding Pop (长草颜团子) (*Figure 1.1*) made a successful international debut at Tokyo Tower alongside the Noppon Brothers, the official mascots of Tokyo Tower (Anime World, 2017). This marked the first time a Chinese cartoon character had landed at Tokyo Tower, a must-see landmark of the city, since its construction. This popular Chinese cartoon character was created by Maotui (毛腿), who was then a high school senior at the time of creation. She had drawn Budding Pop as a way to relieve academic stress and shared it on social media (Zhao, S.Q., 2019). As she continued to update and develop this character, Budding Pop gradually became a beloved cartoon character on the internet. By 2017, sticker packs featuring Budding Pop had garnered more than 800 million downloads and were used over 17.5 billion times, earning the character the nickname of ‘national sticker’ (国民表情) (ibid.). This cartoon character, created by a grassroots individual, gained widespread attention in the Chinese industry and was considered by the media to have broken the old kingdom of domestic IPs in China (Anime World, 2017).



Figure 1.1 Budding Pop’s Chinese New Year (Source: Tuilisi’s Weibo, 1st February 2022)

Although character creation is often associated with major studios or media conglomerates such as Disney, Marvel, and Studio Ghibli, to name a few, within the context of grassroots creation and subcultures, other forms of character creation also exist. For example, graffiti artists often utilise urban public spaces to create compelling characters. Contemporary graffiti artist Banksy, for instance, uses his *Gangsta Rat* character to represent the struggles of the urban underclass and convey critiques of the status quo alongside a desire for change (Long, 2014). Similarly, another artist, STIK, employs his ubiquitous *stick person* characters to depict urban struggles and give voice to communities (Lynskey, 2015). Despite the simplicity of STIK's designs, their strategic placement, combined with subtle expressions and body language, effectively conveys complex emotions and narratives. These graffiti artists leverage existing public spaces to display and disseminate their works and characters, demonstrating an alternative approach to character creation. This sharply contrasts with the traditional methods of creating animated or comic characters typically employed by large corporations.

Today the rise of social media has also provided ordinary individuals with new opportunities to engage in character creation. In particular, since 2011, as China has increasingly entered the mobile internet era (Media Observer, 2024; Qianji Investment Bank, 2023), the proliferation of social media in the country has accelerated significantly (ibid.). These developments have encouraged grassroots designers and creator-entrepreneurs to bypass conventional industrial routes and pursue cartoon character creation through a bottom-up process on social media platforms.

The swift expansion of social media represents one of the most vibrant yet disruptive developments within the digital landscape worldwide over the past decade. Major social media have evolved into important platforms not only for communication and entertainment, but also cultural production. This platformisation of cultural production has fundamentally affected the operations of the cultural industries in general (Nieborg and Poell, 2018) and character creation in particular. The rise of social media platforms has shifted power largely to the individuals and communities that produce and engage with content on social media, further sharing it across various platforms (Edelman, 2010; Kotler, 2011; Berthon et al., 2012; Kumar and Sundaram, 2012; Gensler et al., 2013). The platformisation of cultural production places users at the centre of creative production, granting more autonomy to content creators (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). The traditional gatekeepers are removed, and in principle, everyone is treated equally by the 'objective' algorithms, be it celebrities or everyday individuals. Individuals who

were previously unable to find channels to reach the audience find themselves ready-made stages to showcase and monetise their talents. ‘The scale of potential audience reach for ‘ordinary’ people through social media is such that popularity and prominence no longer rest on the go-ahead from traditional gatekeepers (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2016, p.8)’. Platforms are frequently depicted as public stages that empower users to express themselves and become cultural creators in their own right (Duffy et al., 2019). This offers a springboard for grassroots individuals, or even more marginal classes to participate in cultural production, e.g., in China many migrant workers (农民工) who live in the rural areas create and share their content on platforms like Kuaishou (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). At the same time, coupled with the advancement of computer technology, content generation by individuals has never been easier (Armstrong, 2009).

All of these transformations have had significant impacts on the character industry in China. As a result, grassroots designers and creator entrepreneurs are breaking free from the conventional industrial route and seeking to create fictional characters from a bottom-up process via social media platforms. Network effects, fast interactions with other users, multiple forms of content, and low costs of trial and error: all these features set the stage for the booming of social media character creation around China. The aforementioned character Budding Pop is only one of the many successful cartoon characters that are springing up from Chinese social media including Tuzki (兔斯基) (*Figure 1.2*), Ali the Fox (阿狸) and Your Highness (吾皇), to name a few.

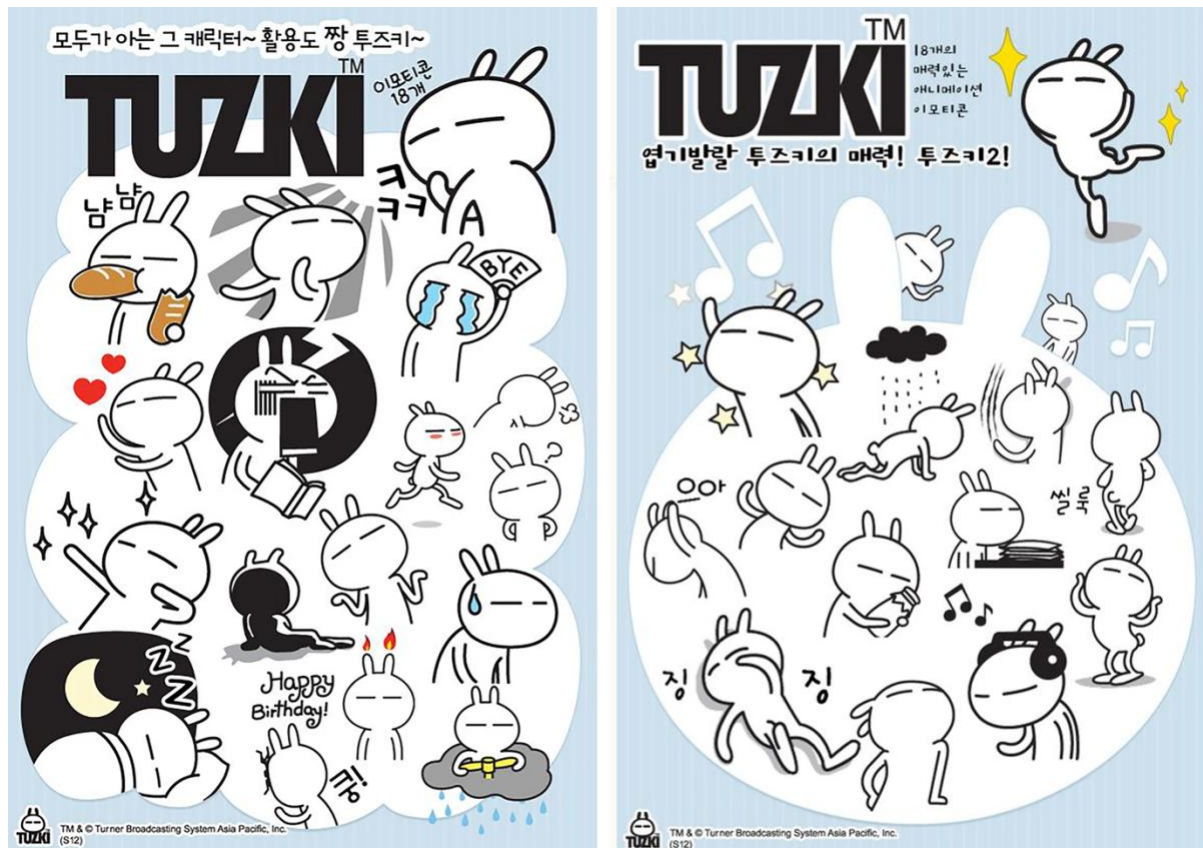


Figure 1.2 Tuzki stickers on Kaokao Talk (Source: momowang.co, n.d.)

Unlike conventional approaches in the media industries, where media conglomerates or studios normally create richly detailed narratives or storyline for the characters, on social media platforms creatives mainly centre around character's unique images and personalities. These characters normally do not belong or bind to any specific narrative or medium type, instead, they can easily traverse across the medial representation or textual context (for a more detailed description of the definition of characters under discussion, please see Section 2.2.1). These individual creatives mainly develop and promote their characters via light content (轻内容). Light content is a term circulating around the Chinese internet industries, and generally refers to relatively short, concise contents that fit the social media ecology, as opposed to those contents requiring heavy investment and long time to consume, such as animated movies or dramas. This kind of content is often characterised by its simplicity, ease of consumption, and entertainment value. Examples include stickers, webcomics, short-form videos, and the like. It can quickly capture the audience's attention and convey information or emotions within a short time. The narrative element here usually is largely reduced in such a fragmented context where 'short' (短), 'plain' (平) and 'fast' (快) are the fundamental requirements (Zhao, S.Q., 2019),

and draw on other users' interaction and participation—e.g. sharing or using as stickers—to speed up characters' promotion.

In this process, a crucial aspect is the role played by the audience in the development of these creations. They are not only users and consumers but also exert a substantial influence on content creation, echoing the observations of Gardner and Lehnert (2016) that this community both consumes and shapes the content simultaneously. Beyond providing feedback—whether active or passive—many internet users reinterpret characters through memefication and secondary creations, making them an integral part of contemporary internet culture.

These internet users combine characters they are interested in with recent trends in popular culture, creating internet memes, or spontaneously reinterpreting their favourite characters through secondary creations. This extends and enriches the content associated with the characters beyond the original creators' contributions. The secondary creations of cartoon characters by these users have transformed them into a cultural phenomenon of mass participation. This not only accelerates the dissemination of these characters but also collaboratively shapes their development, injecting new vitality into the original works.

A notable example is Pepe the Frog, a cartoon character created by artist Matt Furie, which was widely memefied by internet users and quickly went viral. It was even crowned 'the biggest meme of the year' by Tumblr (Hathaway, 2015; Digital Strategy Consulting, 2015). In China, Peppa Pig, a character from a British preschool animation, similarly gained unexpected popularity due to the enthusiasm and secondary creations of internet users. It became the subject of countless memes, jokes, and short videos (China Daily, 2018).

However, the memefication and dissemination of such characters are often beyond the control of their original creators and may even diverge from the creators' original intentions. For instance, the Pepe the Frog meme took on a range of complex and unintended connotations. In more extreme cases, it became associated with alt-right politics and was adopted as an icon of hate (Glistos and Hall, 2019). This development deeply frustrated its original creator, Matt Furie, who described the situation as a 'nightmare' (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017). Similarly, Peppa Pig became controversial in China due to its frequent association with 'gangsta' culture (社会人), sparking widespread societal debates and ultimately leading to its ban on the Douyin platform (BBC Chinese, 2018).

These processes highlight the collective and participatory nature of social media-based content creation, reflecting the dynamic relationship between users and character development. However, it is important to note that this study focuses on the original creation of cartoon characters and does not delve extensively into discussions about the secondary creations made by broader user communities.

The development of such a character is an ongoing process. The smaller scale of light content also enables creators to significantly increase their update speed, after all, speed is the name of the game, and constant uploading is necessary to maintain oneself in this social media economy (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). As Nieborg and Poell (2018) suggest, as content creators are becoming more platform-dependent, they are motivated to transform a conventional linear process into an iterative, data-driven approach, wherein the content is constantly adjusted to optimise distribution and monetisation on the platform. These creators continuously update and revise works around the character, gathering feedback from a diverse audience, and then iteratively output content accordingly. At the same time, they need to cultivate and sustain a close relationship with their followers to build a career as content creators (Baym, 2015). In this process, new creation logics and strategies are emerging, which have so far received little academic attention.

1.2 Rationale and contribution

Various opportunities are created through technological developments and the rise of social media, leading digital entrepreneurship to become a subject of great interest. This transformation has also significantly impacted content creation in general and character creation in particular. Despite being widely deployed by creator entrepreneurs and creatives in China, there is limited convergence research on how these social media cartoon characters are created and how their production and promotion strategies differ from those made by conglomerates. Although a few scholars have introduced the benefits of applying social media in character production and marketing (Miles and Ibrahim, 2013; Patterson et al., 2013), and Gough and Lee (2020) explicate Sanrio's 'media mix' strategies in this digital environment, the ways that character creation and promotion are evolving in this social media era largely

remain unexplored.¹ As Thon (2019) mentioned, Jens Eder's early observation 'many have written a little on characters while only a few have written a lot' (2008a, p.40; 'dass viele nur wenig und nur wenige viel zum Bereich der Figur geschrieben haben') still remains relevant today, and most of the extant literature addressing characters remains conceptual and explanatory. Han (2017) argues that compared to the abundant research conducted by Japanese scholars, academic publications in English that focus on characters are rather scarce. Simensky (2012) also highlights there is a literary absence on the topic of cartoon characters within Western academia, especially regarding character merchandising (2012, p.217). Besides, Hosany et al. (2013) note that 'little research exists on how to build and sustain brand characters' (p.48), not to mention from grassroots creatives' perspectives.

Moreover, the relationships between social media and fictional characters need further interrogation. With the rise of social media, research on how social media is affecting cultural production has developed rapidly (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Lin and de Kloet, 2019; Steinberg, 2020), but there are no specific theories or empirical investigations focusing on how social media facilitates character production, especially in the context of China's media landscape. There is a lack of effective frameworks for understanding, analysing and comparing social-media character creations. This research intends to bridge this gap in understanding and could significantly contribute to both further research and practical applications in social media character creation.

As of June 2020, China has exceeded 1 billion internet users (CNNIC, 2021), and become one of the world's largest digital economies (Bu et al., 2021). This offers substantial opportunities for both media conglomerates as well as grassroots entrepreneurs. Although the environment for creative economy in China has been widely criticised and questioned for institutional regulation and content censorship (Wang, 2004; O'Connor and Xin, 2006; Keane, 2006 and 2009), China's internet sector is still at the forefront of global innovation (Pun, 2020) as the country is developing many 'China-first' innovations in omnichannel retail, social media platforms, on-demand services, mobility, fintech, etc. (Bu et al, 2021). Many recent advancements in global online commerce, such as QR codes, digital wallets, messaging, and

¹ 'Media mix' is a term used widely in industry and popular discourse in Japan to describe the creation of serial connections between and across media texts. Its meaning is similar to the terms 'media convergence', or 'repurposing' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Jenkins, 2006) as in the Western media discourses (Steinberg, 2012).

live-streaming, have gained widespread adoption in China (Cunningham and Craig, 2019b). According to the Creative Economy Outlook report (UNCTAD, 2018), creative China is growing and buoying creative economy growth around the world. In this increasingly boundaryless digitalised world, both individuals and enterprises face a dynamic and interconnected international environment. Digital entrepreneurship in general confronts a notably high level of uncertainty (Kraus et al., 2019). To explore and understand the emergent phenomenon in such a complicated yet important market offers not only directions for local creatives and researchers, but also an alternative perspective on character production and marketing elsewhere. Creatives and managers outside China might consider these Chinese experiences as references to create their own strategy in today's increasingly globalised, digitised economy. Taken together with the emergence of social media characters in China's mediascape, and given their attractiveness to individual creatives as well as audience, there are opportunities for further research and exploration to develop and theorise new models for character production and promotion.

To address this gap, this investigation explores grassroots creatives' character creation and promotion on social media platforms. The main theoretical contribution offered by this research lies in the development of a conceptual framework that is based on empirical evidence, which facilitates comprehension, explanation, and analysis of character creation on social media (*Figure 7.1*). This model synthesises insights from the initial framework (*Figure 3.1*) and the empirical findings, collectively constituting a substantial contribution to character creation in the age of social media. It provides many new concepts, illustrates their relations, and describes and explains a phenomenon currently occurring in the field of platformed cultural production. Besides, this model also provides meaningful tools for a wide range of people: creatives and practitioners, consultants, social media managers or even general people involved in character business or cultural production in general, helping them leverage digital technology and social media for their character content creation.

1.3 Aim and objectives

This research focuses on the upsurge of social media characters in China. It aims to explore how cartoon characters are created by individual creatives through social media platforms in an era where grassroots' and conglomerates' powers collide. It builds a conceptual framework for understanding and implementing character design and promotion strategies on social media. To achieve this goal, the research objectives are set as follows:

- To define the concepts of character and identify the distinctive characteristics that make social media a compelling context for studying character creation.
- To analyse and theorise the creation process and promotion strategies of characters on social media.
- To identify and map out characters' commercial and monetisation patterns.
- To develop a conceptual framework to understand and explain character creation and promotion on social media.
- To make recommendations for social media character creation and promotion to both individual creatives and managers.

1.4 Approach

The research adopts a qualitative approach as it attempts to explore and understand character creation on social media, an emerging phenomenon that has not received enough attention. Interpretivism is adopted as the basic worldview. Interpretivists hold the view that reality is both multiple and relative (Bell and Thorpe, 2013), implying that knowledge within this field is socially constructed rather than objectively established and understood (Carson et al., 2001). This research primarily aims to describe and comprehend the process of character creation on social media, rather than trying to uncover universal laws. The research design chosen for this study is case-study research (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). According to Yin (2014), case studies are the preferred method, when, '(1) the main research questions are 'how' or 'why' questions; (2) a researcher has little or no control over behavioural events; and (3) the focus of the study is a contemporary (as opposed to entirely historical) phenomenon' (p.35). All of these align with the circumstances of this research.

Four case studies of social media characters (Aoda Cat, Fan & Bao, Rumi and Toby) are presented using multiple sources of evidence. Interviews with the creators of these case characters provide important insights into the subject in question. These are further reinforced through a series of key-informant interviews with external experts who specialise in social media and character-related matters in China or other parts of the world. The detailed research design is explained in Chapter 4. *Table 1.1* illustrates the relationship between the objectives of this study and the methodology adopted.

Objectives	Methods
To define the concepts of character and identify the distinctive characteristics that make social media a compelling context for studying character creation.	Desk research/literature review/semi-structured interviews
To analyse and theorise the creation process, and promotion strategies of characters on social media	Desk research/semi-structured interviews
To identify and map its commercial and monetisation patterns.	Desk research/semi-structured interviews
To develop a conceptual framework to understand and explain character creation and promotion on social media	Literature review/semi-structured interviews
To make recommendations for social media character creation and promotion to both individual creatives and managers	Semi-structured interviews

Table 1.1 Relationship between objectives and methods

1.5 Chapter summary

The thesis is structured into eight chapters including this one. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature around the themes of this research. It first discusses and defines the concepts of characters within the scope of this research. The purpose is to understand the distinctive characteristics of the characters in question while gaining insights into the state of current research on this subject. The rest of the chapter delves into the broader context of digital entrepreneurship and content creation, specifically emphasising the dynamic landscape of social media. It seeks to define social media and assess the roles and features of its various platforms in China, as well as to comprehend the overall landscape of content creation. Chapter 3 introduces initial conceptualisations. A preliminary framework is derived from the previous chapter's literature review and serves as a guide for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 outlines the research approach, offering details on the research strategy and design. It includes the selection and appraisal of the research methods—from the nature of this research, the basic worldview and the main research design to the research methods. Four case characters (Aoda

Cat, Fan & Bao, Rumi, and Toby) are examined to contextualise social media character creation within real-life scenarios. The selection of the case characters, the data collection and analysis process are also explained. Chapter 5 presents the case-study descriptions of Aoda Cat, Fan & Bao, Rumi and Toby. Each case study begins with an introduction to the methods and data sources used to assess each character, and an overview of the characters' backgrounds and statuses. The discussion then delves into their creation and promotion strategies, using key factors from the preliminary framework as a guideline for analysis and structuring (Perry, 1998). The case descriptions aim to detail character development and offer analysis and interpretation of their logic and reasons. The chapter's within-case analyses focus on the dynamics of each character's evolution and the rationale behind it. Chapter 6 focuses on the cross-case analysis. Having completed the individual case descriptions, this chapter proceeds to a cross-case assessment to identify and compare common patterns and themes. The analysis builds on the structure of within-case studies and includes insights from interviews with ten experts to enrich and validate the findings. This chapter refines the initial conceptualisation and develops additional themes. Chapter 7 offers an in-depth analysis of the results from both within-case and cross-case studies, examining the factors that impact the character creation process and discussing their characteristics. A conceptual framework grounded in empirical evidence is put forward to understand, explain, and describe the character creation on social media. Finally, Chapter 8 summarises the conclusions, encompassing the theoretical contributions of the research, the creative impact of the findings, the limitations, and potential directions for future research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW: Character and Social media

2.1 Introduction

The chapter has two major goals: first, to define the concept of character in this research and understand the unique context that makes character an interesting field to study. The term ‘character’ is first discussed and defined in the context of this research, then the chapter summarises the key research around characters, with an emphasis on studies related to the design and promotion of cartoon characters. Second, to outline the context in which the character creation emerges. It defines what social media is and introduces China’s social media landscape, aiming to comprehend the characteristics of various Chinese social media platforms. The associated platformisation is also discussed in detail, followed by digital entrepreneurship, content creation and key literature around these subjects.

2.2 Character creation

2.2.1 Character definition in question

Characters play a significant role in our present media culture. It is rare to find media content today that does not represent characters in some form or other. Although the interdisciplinary field of character studies is still evolving, as suggested by Thon (2022), there is no denying that characters are portrayed in various media formats. These formats encompass not only literary works, theatre productions, and films but also extend to mediums like comics and interactive media such as video games. It is worth noting that scholars from various schools of thought within media theory and other participants in related discussions may employ the term ‘character’ to describe slightly different subjects. Each specific field may have its own customs and approaches for understanding and discussing characters, so it is necessary to clarify its usage and meaning within this research first.

To begin with, the characters discussed here are all cartoon characters, which is an important characteristic in their visual presentation. Although there is no completely agreed definition of the cartoon character, in the context of this research the term refers to a fictional character in the form of an illustration that is usually drawn, sometimes animated, in an unrealistic or semi-realistic style. It is ‘an umbrella term for persons, animals or animated objects represented in manga, animation, movies as well as fairy tales’ (Han, 2014). It should be understood as some

kind of fictional entity, rather than ‘textual effects’ or ‘actantial functions’ (Greimas, 1983; Propp, 1968; Tomasi, 1988).² This working definition emphasises the presentation style of such characters rather than specifying their media, backgrounds, or narrative origins, making it applicable to illustration, comics, animation, or any other media. Indeed, the cartoon characters under discussion do not belong to any specific medium or text but can traverse across them freely. They are more like entities existing ‘above’ any specific media representation or textual context rather than being characters situated within the boundaries of media-constructed storyworlds (Bennett, 2017).

This form of media-agnostic understanding of character has become increasingly acceptable in today’s context. As Kim (2011) suggested, the development of diverse and complex media in contemporary society has made it challenging to establish precise distinctions and field-specific characteristics in the use of the term ‘character’. With the progress of technological and cultural media convergence, more and more characters across different media are emerging and receiving increasing attention. Media theorist Henry Jenkins contends that what links new and traditional media is a cultural phenomenon called ‘convergence’, which he defines as ‘the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want’ (Jenkins, 2006, p.2). This involves two interrelated dynamics: firstly the expansion of narrative creations and worlds through diverse media forms and platforms; and secondly, participatory practices associated with the creation of user-generated content. Therefore, it is not surprising that more and more theories in relation to characters in recent years are fundamentally thought of as transmedial: capable of being applied to representations of characters across a range of media such as film, television, comics, video games, etc (Wilde, 2019b). Thon (2022) also suggests that characters are often considered as phenomena or entities that move across media forms in various ways (Thon, 2022). With the cross-pollination of characters across various media and genres, it might even

² The detailed explanations of ‘textual effects’ and ‘actantial functions’ may require extensive background knowledge beyond the scope of this research. However, their basic ideas are to understand characters as tools that produce effects within the text (textual effects) or merely as functional units driving the narrative (actantial functions’), rather than independent entities with depth and complexity.

be debated whether it is necessary to distinguish between comic characters, movie characters, drama characters, animation characters, game characters, or fan characters (Kim, 2011).

Scholars have also attempted to engage in this pursuit in the hope of gaining a better understanding of these transmedia characters, although different scholars have varying perspectives on how to comprehend this transmedia phenomenon. Some hold the view that understanding this phenomenon should be confined to a narrative perspective. This has constrained the concept of characters to narrative media: media works that provide portrayals of a story world or a diegesis. As a result, characters are frequently regarded as ‘first and foremost elements of the constructed narrative world’ (Eder et al., 2010, p.9) or as ‘non-actual but well-specified individual[s] presumed to exist in some hypothetical, fictional domain’ (Margolin, 2007, p.66). Jenkins (2009) believes that there is a substantial difference between narrative characters and those forms currently popular across media: ‘We might well distinguish Felix as a character who is extracted from any specific narrative context (given each of his cartoons is self-contained and episodic) as opposed to a modern transmedia figure who carries with him or her the timeline and the world depicted on the ‘mother ship’, the primary work which anchors the franchise’ (para.13, web post).

Thon (2019) suggest characters should be thought of as represented entities with intentional inner lives that are located in story worlds. He also believes that characters across media should not be comprehended as the same characters because of ‘the conceptual difference between characters as represented entities with an intentional inner life that are (or at least can be) located in storyworlds, on the one hand, and the complex cultural constructs that arise from our contemporary media culture’s tendency to adapt, expand, and modify previously represented characters across the borders of both individual media texts and their respective media forms (2022, p.142)’. Instead, he proposes to understand this phenomenon as a complex transmedia character network.

Bertetti (2014) attempted to categorise these transmedia beings into two groups to better understand them, characters based on a single course of events and characters based on multiple courses of events shaped by the creative limitations and competition across various media industries. Denson and Mayer (2018) make a similar differentiation between series characters, which are the entities ‘represented in the more or less closed fictional universe of a serially-ongoing narrative’ and serial figures that ‘are shaped and reshaped through the repetitions, revisions, and reboots of their stories’. Bennett (2017) interprets James Bond not as a character

but as a ‘popular hero’ and a ‘hero figure’ detached from any specific media representation that has ‘assumed a semi-autonomous and quasi-real character, functioning as a ‘free-floating’ signifier’. In a similar vein, Brooker (2013) views Batman as a ‘cultural icon’ that is best comprehended as an ‘inherently multiple [. . .] amalgam of all his [Batman’s] different forms, stories and histories’ (p.151).

Bertetti (2014) also argued that transmedia is not a recent phenomenon that relies solely on convergence; instead, ‘it can be traced back almost to the origins of the modern cultural industry between the end of the 1800s and the early 1900s. At the base of older forms of transmedia franchises there may be a logic not focused on world sharing but on a character sharing’ (p.2346). In this context, Scott (2009) introduces the notion of character-oriented franchises, tracing the roots of transmedia productions back to the era of silent films and identifying economic and promotional strategies that are shared with those found in modern media franchises.

At the same time, discourse around the Japanese context provides a well-developed set of terms and concepts that can be used to address various issues related to the representation of characters across different media. Condry (2009) proposed a character-based analysis of cultural production through a series of ethnographic examinations of anime production in Japan. He suggests that in the context of Anime, the connection across different media is typically established not by narrative coherence, which refers to the story itself, but by the presence of characters.³ Marc Steinberg also stated: “[t]he double nature of the character allows it to function as the glue between divergent series: it is both a series of material embodiments and the immaterial entity that traverses and binds them. [...] Hence the character is both lodged within a particular material incarnation and constantly in excess of it” (2012, p.195).

Numerous Japanese characters, such as Hatsune Miku, mascots like Kumamon (*Figure 2.1*), and iconic figures like Hello Kitty, predominantly appear on non-narrative items like clothing, stationery, or decontextualised artworks. These characters are framed as *Kyara* within Japan’s media mix theory. Theorists like Itō (2005) and Azuma (2009) draw a clear distinction between *kyarakutā* (character) and *kyara*. The latter represents a pre- or meta-narrative ‘nodal point’ for

³ The word anime is a shortened form of the Japanese word *animēshon*, which means ‘animation’. This term is usually used to refer to animation from Japan.

various imaginative play scenarios. A *kyarakutā* (character) is then a represented entity, presumed to exist in a storyworld context – within some narrative. A *kyara*, in contrast, is a ‘highly stylized or simplified visual figuration that can be easily reproduced and consumed outside of its original context’ (Galbraith, 2009b, p.125). If characters without narratives, *kyara*, are seen to exist in a ‘proto-character state’ as Itō (2005) has labeled it, they essentially serve as hubs, interfaces, or intersections for various ‘games of make-believe’. They are not tied to a specific story context or authorial intent. As a result, every *kyara* could also be described as a transfictional ‘meta-narrative nodal point’ (Azuma, 2007, p.125). They can readily be integrated into diverse narrative contexts, functioning as contingent *kyarakutā*. This *kyara* character theory aligns with the character creation in the context of this research. In this study, characters created on social media are not tied to any specific narrative context but rather represent a kind of meta-narrative and higher-level state. Understanding the ‘*kyara*’ theory can provide better insight into the character production under discussion.

Thon (2019) has reservations about the theory of *kyara*, stating that it should not be equated with the concept of characters but seen as another complex phenomenon, and he questions the validity of Bertetti’s categorisation of two types of transmedia characters because characters based on different narratives cannot simply be understood as the same characters in his opinion. It is not the aim, and nor is it within the scope of this study to delve into a detailed analysis of these conceptual disagreements. In this context, the researcher adopts the *kyara* perspective because it offers practical benefits and facilitates a better understanding of the types of character creation in question. In the Chinese industry context, people tend to refer to such characters as ‘IP characters’ (IP 角色). While theoretically, any character is inherently an IP character, in the Chinese context, the meaning of it is closer to (but not synonymous with) the state of *Kyara*. It emphasises a character’s status above all media and the ability to transcend or enter any specific medium. Block 12 (十二栋) provides a more detailed definition of these IP characters, categorising them as ‘image-based IP’ (形象化 IP) to underscore that they are primarily built around a visual entity, rather than any specific medium, story, or background.⁴

⁴ Block 12 (<https://www.12dong.cn>) is a Chinese pan-entertainment consumer company driven by image-based IP. They recognised the potential of such image IPs in the mobile internet context and established a platform for character image incubation. They collaborate with artists to sign contracts, jointly incubating, nurturing, and supporting original Chinese cartoon image IPs. Additionally, they actively study the business model and

This definition closely aligns with the concept of ‘Kyara’ as a ‘highly stylised or simplified visual figuration that can be easily reproduced and consumed outside of its original context’ (Galbraith 2009 b, p.125).

In summary, this study focuses on cartoon characters. It emphasises their visual representation as assets and is not bound by any specific background or story. Such characters are nodal points primarily composed of highly emotional visual figurations to which generic characteristics and behavioural dispositions (ethos) are linked. The understanding of these characters is akin to the Japanese character theory of Kyara. Notable reference characters in this category include Miku, Kumamon (*Figure 2.1*), and Hello Kitty. These illustrated or animated images are particularly suited to traversing different media, spanning manga, anime, video games, etc. as well as to transforming into 3D forms like toys and figurines (Steinberg, 2009). They are a medium that connects different media, brands and users together, which is increasingly important in an age of media convergence. Being central to today’s cultural content, they are not only an appealing kind of commodity themselves, but also a ‘connective technology’ (Steinberg, 2009) and a ‘transferable logo’ (Yano, 2011), and can be also used to market other merchandise (Gough and Lee, 2020). The rest of this section provides a summary of current research on cartoon characters.



Figure 2.1 Kumamon in his South American debut in São Paulo, Brazil (Source: nippon.com, 2021)

monetisation methods of this line of IP creation, gradually forming a complete industry chain from creation to monetisation.

2.2.2 Character Creation

Cartoon characters play an important role in today's business and cultural production. In marketing studies, they are deemed to be effective communication tools (Kirkpatrick, 1953; Callcott and Lee, 1994; Phillips, 1996; Spears et al., 1996; Phillips and Goyerick, 1999; Garretson and Burton, 2005; Occhi, 2010; Liao et al., 2011). In the animation context, many scholars explain that success depends on the development and exploitation of animated cartoon characters (Calvert, 2008; Forgacs, 1992; Wasko, 2001; Zhou, 2005). As Walt Disney once quipped, 'it was all started by a mouse' (Rukstad and Collis, 2009). However, it is not easy to chart a complete landscape of cartoon characters as these studies are dispersed in different fields such as marketing, animation and comics. Han (2017) also noted that compared to the abundant research conducted by Japanese scholars, academic publications in English that focus on characters are rather scarce, while Simensky (2012) highlights there is a literary absence on the topic of cartoon characters within Western academia, especially regarding character merchandising (2012, p.217).

In marketing, research on cartoon characters is relatively abundant. Here, these advertising characters are normally referred to as spokes-characters⁵ or brand characters. While some researchers in this field focus on elaborating the definition of spokes-characters (Callcott and Lee, 1995; Barbara Phillips, 1996; Hosany et al, 2013; Brown, 2014), others attempt to explain why these fictional characters are effective (Spears et al., 1996; Lloyd and Woodside, 2013; Miles and Ibrahim, 2013; Veer, 2013). However, less attention has been paid to the creation of advertising characters, as Hosany et al. (2013) note that 'little research exists on how to build and sustain brand characters' (p.48).

Callcott and Phillips (1996) attempted to lay down a blueprint for creating likeable brand character. They identify four dimensions contributing to a brand character's perceived likeability: (i) personality; (ii) physical characteristics; (iii) humour; and (iv) consumer experiences. The first dimension—personality—is the core of the spokes-character.

⁵ The term spokes-character is introduced by Callcott and Lee (1995) as a way to address the advertising characters, implying a connection between fictional advertising product endorsers and their human equivalents (spokespersons), who serve a similar role by promoting a product or visually demonstrating its use (Stout, 1990).

Advertisers should create or license characters with distinct and likeable personalities. The second dimension—physical characteristics—defines the appearance of likeable spokes-characters. Neotenous shapes, relevant character props, and a contemporary appearance all contribute to the visual appeal of spokes characters. Besides this, they also suggest humour appears to play a large role in spokes-character likability. Consumer Experience is a broad dimension of liking that encompasses a consumer's prior cultural and character experiences. It focuses on the cultural meanings associated with animal or human spokes characters that can impact character likability. A consumer's cultural associations with ethnic groups may also affect spokes-character likability, depending on how a character is portrayed. In general, the first three dimensions can be controlled by advertisers, while the fourth must simply be understood.

Through a series of ethnographic examinations, Condry (2009) provided us with the chance to understand how the creation of animation and characters is conducted in Japan, showcasing the operations of professional animators and creatives at Japan's major studios. He was granted the opportunity to personally participate in meetings of anime production including Sony's Aniplex office and engage in in-depth conversations with creators. Through several animation projects that he followed in person, he demonstrated that in actual creative processes, the design of the characters themselves may be more significant than narratives. One of the projects, Dekoboko Friends, demonstrated that characters, even without narratives or connections between them, can independently generate a dramatic series. This illustrates the distinction proposed by manga theorist Itō Gō, who differentiates between *kyarakutaa* (character) and *kyara* (the character's personality). Itō contends that 'the personality (*kyara*) precedes the character itself, evoking the feeling of some kind of existence (*sonzaikan*) or life force (*seimeikan*)' (Itō, 2005, pp.94–95). While his research is primarily based on anime production, he also suggests that it is equally applicable to related sectors such as TV serials and video games.

Hosany et al. (2013) discussed the brand strategies of Sanrio's iconic character Hello Kitty (*Figure 2.2*). Their findings indicate that eight tactics helped to build and sustain the Hello Kitty brand: 1) keep it simple, 2) character licensing, 3) third-party collaboration, 4) capitalising on nostalgia, 5) product-line extensions, 6) brand extensions, 7) sustaining consumer interests, and 8) harnessing technology. Kanai et al. (2014) explore the strategies in creating and marketing characters. They classify consumers into three categories (consumption

of stories, consumption of interaction and consumption of products) and propose three corresponding marketing methods (making stories, providing societies and communities, and developing related products).



Figure 2.2 Hello Kitty and friends (Source: sanrio.com/blogs, n.d.)

In a more recent study, through a close analysis of the Sanrio Danshi (Sanrio Boys) (*Figure 2.3*), a new fictional boy band from the Sanrio brand, Gough and Lee (2020) discuss Sanrio's character production and marketing strategies in the 21st century. There is a visible shift by Sanrio away from its traditional kawaii character marketing to a multi-faceted structure in this contemporary context. Sanrio Danshi is the first character brand which is rendered in illustrative anime style human forms rather than traditional kawaii style (e.g., stunted limbs and large faces), and the first featuring only handsome male characters in romantic and lightly-eroticised contexts to its assumed female audience. This boy band announced their debut initially via a then Twitter (now renamed as X) account, @Sdan_sanrio. Since then, updates about the characters, merchandise, and related media have been published nearly every day. These tweets produce the impression that the account is shared and used by the five fictional boys. Following the tweets, Sanrio Danshi's media mix utilised different media, including manga, mook, a smartphone game, a 12-episode anime, and a live stage event, to provide consumers with multiple points of engagement, blurring the lines between fiction and reality.

⁶ It is also very important to note that Sanrio Danshi, while on one hand being used to promote other Sanrio merchandise, is also marketable entity itself. Through these production practices Sanrio Danshi forms a media ecology which opens multiple points of potential access and flow for consumers. This study reveals how media conglomerates utilise social media and other media together to create and market cartoon characters, establishing the character-driven network of images and things. As Web 2.0 and social media have shifted power largely to the individuals, it is also worth exploring how creative individuals and grassroots entrepreneurs use social media to create their own character businesses.



Figure 2.3 Sanrio Danshi boy band (Source: themagicrain.com, 2018)

2.2.3 Image & personality of characters

Although the exploration of character-related studies suggests that image is always an important aspect of these visual entities (Ball, 1976; Callcott and Phillips, 1996; Brockway, 2004; Deng, 2009; Steinberg, 2010; Kanai et al., 2014; Riyadi et al., 2016), studies on character design are not as common as might be expected. This might be in part because the nature of this practice is highly personalised and difficult to theorise, as Yi et al. (2016) explained:

⁶ The word mook comes from the Japanese 'mukku', movie book, a combination of magazine and book.

‘successful character designs are based on [the] individual designer’s creative skills and are therefore reliant on personal experience, learning, and research’ (p.369). It may be difficult to theorise design as practice, but design as output could still be understood through, for example, classification systems.

Despite these obstacles, some researchers still attempt to explain the visual design of characters. Yi et al. (2016) identified three synthetic strategies for novel character creation in film and game production. Through the study of a design project, Riyadi et al. (2016) introduce the process of designing a marketing character and discuss its potentials and functions. They conclude that the simplicity of the form and certain characteristics are important in enabling the audience to remember the characters. Yi (2017) proposed a structure to assist designers in more accurately reflecting the intention of the narrative when they visually design characters based on scenarios or narratives from films and games. Van Rooij (2019) focuses on character design in the animation industry, with a particular focus on 3-D animation. He proposes a shared strategy for characterisation used by three major animation studios, which is defined as a paradoxical combination of abstraction and lifelikeness, to generate maximum levels of empathy from audiences.

Among the existing literature, many scholars suggest ‘personality’ is the most important trait in successful characters (Callcott et al., 1996; Phillips, 1996; Hosany et al., 2013; Zhao, 2019). The advent of social media has given characters new ways of interacting and engaging with consumers, which better shapes their personalities. As Costa (2010) notes, social media demands that characters are more three-dimensional than before. Although a few scholars have briefly introduced the benefits of applying social media in character creation (Miles and Ibrahim, 2013; Patterson et al., 2013), how social media mediates the personality creation still needs more exploration, something that will be developed further in the empirical part of this study.

Patterson et al. (2013) suggest that a literary approach can lay the groundwork for the creation of a successful anthropomorphic mascot. Referring to the character Aleksandr Orlov (*Figure 2.4*), the authors illustrate how a combination of three literary genres (Russian literature, comic literature, and adventure literature) created the brand mascot. This set of literary genres not only make the character ‘denser, more complex and interesting’ (p.78), but also provide a variety of possibilities for further backstory, which is very important today to sustain the engagement of consumers. The incongruity between brand and character should be encouraged

to generate curiosity among consumers. They also note that the utilisation of social media is another key issue in creating a popular character. Social media interaction can ‘make this mascot more real, more human’ (p.80) and the continuous elaboration of backstory on Twitter (now X)/Facebook can develop/maintain the relationship with consumers as well. Although Orlov is not a human being at all, but in Patterson et al.’s comment the adjective ‘human’ does suggest that social media can make the character more relatable to the audience (or imbue them with personality).

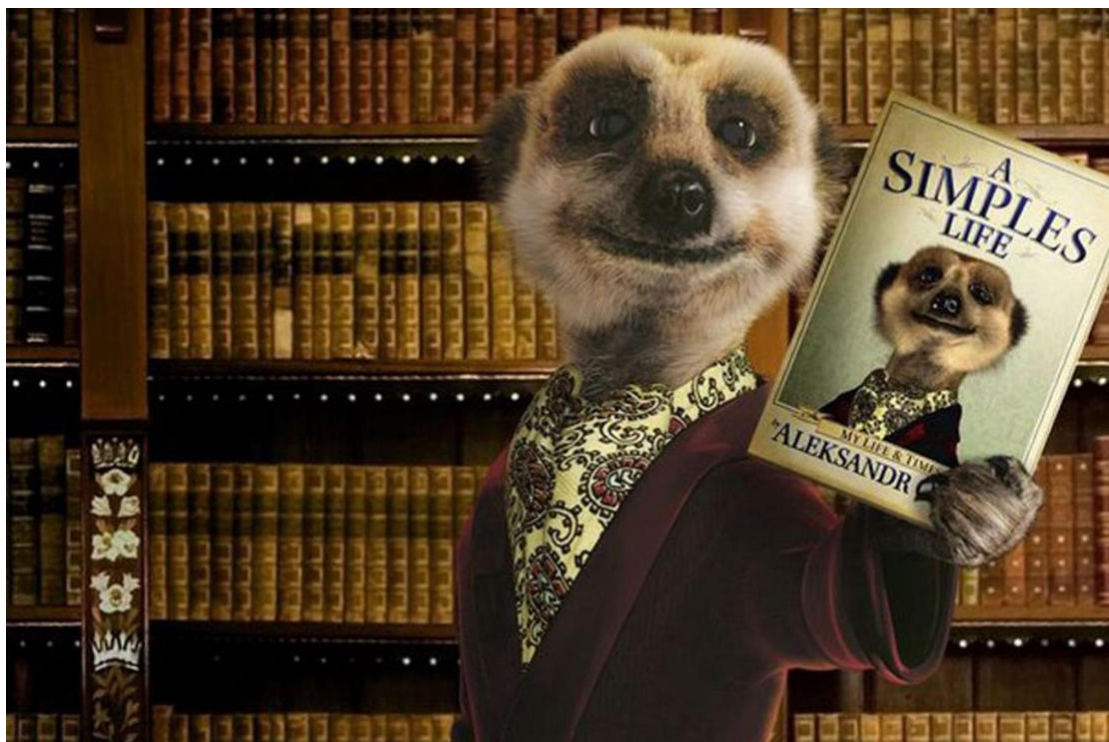


Figure 2.4 Meerkat Aleksandr Orlov (Source: thetimes.co.uk, 2017)

Odagiri Hiroshi’s monograph, *Kyarakutā to wa nani ka* (What are characters?) (2010) marked the initial comprehensive effort to establish a transmedial character typology within the Japanese context. Odagiri identifies three primary elements or levels on which characters can be understood, which are ‘image, inner personality and meaning’. Image, or iconography (図像 *zuzō*), relates to their visual representation; inner personality, or inner life (内面 *naimen*), highlights the individual personality of each character; and symbolic meanings (意味 *imi*) (2010, pp.115-125). A character is normally the integration of these three aforementioned elements (Saitō, 2011). However, Odagiri also argues that none of these three elements is absolutely necessary. Even if a character only has a name and one of these elements, as long as it can retain its consistency through them, the character can still be offered possibilities for

transforming and extending to other media or platforms. The character can then unify these diverse media, creating a cohesive and cooperative network, establishing a multi-media ecosystem centred around itself. This indicates how flexible a character can be which is one key attribute enabling them to travel across different media.

2.2.4 Character capability

The popularity of characters led to the emergence of character-based merchandising, which is often associated with Disney's character empire and Japan's anime industries. Sternberg (2009) explains that character merchandising is a term that refers to the licensing, production, marketing and consumption of goods and media based around the image of a character. He argues that character itself is another kind of media technology leading to media ubiquitisation, which means media texts are omnipresent and found in multiple media forms (e.g., the character Atomu can be found everywhere across manga, TV, physical stickers, toys): 'The character is a principal agent in the formation of the communicational environment that is the basis for contemporary media synergy and media ubiquity' (p. 129). In a later paper (2010), he concludes several principles of character merchandising, which include 1) connectivity, 2) (visual) stability and resemblance, 3) uniqueness of form, 4) face and 5) character-world relation.

In another study on Hello Kitty and its 35th anniversary, Yano (2011) discusses Sanrio's business strategies with characters. Here Yano brings about her key concept: 'touch', which in her explanation not only refers to sensory apparatus, but also social and emotional connectedness. To touch is to create connections and foster relationships. Gifting, which plays an important sociocultural role in Japan, is the first crucial element of Sanrio's strategy. Gifts can create touch and social communication, and Sanrio turned the gift exchange tradition into its 'small gift, big smile' mission to 'help people express their heart-felt feelings' (p. 24). Kawaii characters play an important role as enabler of touch in this heartfelt communication. They are not just commodities themselves, but more importantly 'transferable logos' which transfer almost everything into *kyarakutaa gudzu* (Japanese versions of English words; literally, 'character goods').

While Yano focuses on characters' ability to facilitate communication among people, Steinberg (2009) suggests character acts as a kind of 'communicative medium' or 'technology of connection' that allows for the communication or connection of media themselves. The

character's nature, in travelling across and between media and being embodied in each medium in distinct ways, allows for communication to take place across media series (and material products).

2.2.5 Chinese characters

When comes to characters from China, Monkey King is an unavoidable character, as plenty of research has been done on him and the 16th century novel in which he originated, *Journey to the West* (西游记) (Wang, 2018). Monkey King has attracted many researchers in literature (Hargett, 1988; Lei and Dechsubha, 2022; Lai, 1994; Wang, 2018; Ma, 2021)) and also has been frequently interpreted as cartoon character in many media works.

In recent years, the success of the Chinese domestic animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (西游记之大圣归来) (2015), has attracted the attention of many scholars. Fang et al. (2019) analysed the marketing strategies of *Monkey King: Hero is Back* and explored the film's successful experiences in the field of Chinese animated movies as well as future development strategies. Liang (2015) explored how to reconstruct this Chinese heroic legend for Western audiences through the English-dubbed version of the film *Monkey King: Hero is Back*. She specifically analysed aspects such as the dubbing of the film's trailer, dubbing standards, the dubbing of the Monkey King's name, and the dubbing of unique language. These analyses aimed to demonstrate how different dubbing strategies can be used to reframe the character of the Monkey King, making him suitable for the cultural and linguistic context of Western audiences. Tang (2015) primarily analysed the success of the two animated films *Monkey King: Hero is Back* and *Nezha: Birth of the Devil* (哪吒:魔童转世)(2019), and explored their significance in the development of Chinese animated movies. In the article, he examined the key elements of success for both *Monkey King: Hero is Back* and *Nezha: Birth of the Devil*, including their character design, box office success, and comparisons with previous Chinese fine arts films, Japanese anime styles, and American kung fu cartoons.

Nezha: Birth of the Devil (2019) is another recent Chinese animated blockbuster. The protagonist, Nezha (哪吒), is a popular Chinese character and originally comes from the classic 17th-century work *Fengshen Yanyi* (封神演义), and is a rebellious young deity who opposes traditional authority and paternal power. Whyke, Mugica and Brown (2019) explore this 2019 animated film *Nezha* and its representation of Chinese culture and identity. The authors

examine how *Nezha* reflects the concept of a ‘national style’ in Chinese animation, which they describe as the belief that Chinese animation should be deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, disseminating Chinese values and aesthetics.

The evolution of the character portrayal of Nezha in both past and recent artistic works has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Chen (2019) focused on the changes in the image of Nezha within traditional Chinese culture and *Nezha: Birth of the Devil*. In the film, Nezha is reimagined as a child burdened with heavy societal prejudices from birth and yearning for social acceptance to become a true hero. The article further explores the reasons behind the changes in Nezha’s image in the movie, pointing out that such transformations are inevitable in the process of cultural inheritance and dissemination, and are necessary for traditional Chinese culture to adapt to new generations and for its international transmission. You (2022) explored the evolution and interpretation of the Nezha in three Chinese animated films: *Nezha Naohai* (哪吒闹海) (1979), *Nezha: Birth of the Devil* (2019), and *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (新神榜: 哪吒重生) (2021). These films depict the character of Nezha in different ways, adapting his story to the societal backdrop and generational changes of their times. Each film reinterprets the myth, aligning it with the cultural and historical context of its time. The author discusses how the character of Nezha has evolved from initially representing rebellion and resistance to being adapted in contemporary animated films, reflecting changes in societal norms and values. Likewise, Whyke and Mugica (2021) also use these three animated films to examine how the portrayal of Nezha has changed over time. They apply the concepts of archetype and displacement in their study, drawing from the works of Northrop Frye and Gilbert Durand, to analyse how the character of Nezha reflects changes in Chinese society and culture. For example, in *Nezha Naohai* (1979), the character is portrayed according to traditional ethics, symbolising resistance against oppression. In contrast, *Nezha: Birth of the Devil* (2019) and *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021) present a more individualistic and modern interpretation, showcasing the struggles of a unique individual against a predetermined fate and societal expectations.

Jin and Kim (2017) focused on a Chinese comic character, Sanmao (三毛), who is a manhua⁷ (漫画) cartoon character created by Zhang Leping in 1935. Sanmao is one of the world's longest-running cartoon characters and remains a landmark as one of the most famous and beloved fictional characters in China today ('Sanmao (comics)', 2023). They delved into the origins and development of *Sanmao's Wandering Life* (三毛流浪记), the composition of the main character Sanmao's role, and a comparative analysis with foreign comics. In the article, they analysed the constituent elements of Sanmao's character, including his personality and symbolic meaning in Chinese society. They also compared Sanmao with the American comic character the Yellow Kid, discussing the significance of *Sanmao's Wandering Life* in portraying the social realities of the time, and how Sanmao's story expresses concern for social injustice and the suffering of the people.

The Monkey King, Nezha, and Sanmao are either classic characters created historically or contemporary reinterpretations of these characters, while the current Chinese animation industry rarely produces original characters that gain academic attention. In general, when it comes to character production, unlike countries like United States and Japan which have established mature industrial systems, China's animation and comic industries are faltering and yet to find suitable models. Therefore, many grassroots talents have to look beyond the conventional industrial paradigm for more opportunities. To explore and understand the emergent social media characters in China adds to our extant knowledge and offers an alternative perspective on cultural production and marketing for people elsewhere.

Japan's thriving anime industry exerts a considerate impact on China's general public and cultural producers. Driven by cultural exports and the global exchange of manga and anime, Japanese characters have gained international recognition and widespread acceptance. Nowadays more and more consumers across the world are consuming Japanese characters (Han, 2017). The aforementioned character, Hello Kitty is thought to embody 'Japan's Cute-Cool', which as a form of soft power has captivated the world (Yano, 2013). The Japanese characters

⁷ Manga (mainly used in Japan), manhwa (mainly used in Korea), and manhua are all terms derived from the Chinese term 'manhua', 漫画, which means 'impromptu drawings'. In general manhua can be understood as Chinese comics and narrated illustrations.

first entered the Chinese market in 1980, when Tetsuwan Atomu was broadcast on Chinese Central Television (CCTV). Following Atomu, many anime works were introduced to China, not only on CCTV but also on local Chinese television stations. Later, with the popularity of the internet, Chinese audiences can access Japanese anime and manga works more easily and many emerging character-related phenomena such as fan creations, databases of character elements, cosplay, and anthropomorphism, have also been introduced into China (Han, 2017).

A survey conducted in 2011 among 600 university students revealed that over half of them accessed anime and manga via the Internet, while 34 percent accessed it through television, and only 15 percent through books (Zhu and Chen, 2011). In another survey of 5,000 Chinese university students in 2008, respondents were asked about their favourite cartoons and comics. The results showed that 82.76 percent chose Japanese works, 8.8 percent preferred Western works, and only 8.5 percent Chinese works (Chen and Song, 2009). According to a 2015 report by the iResearch Institute on China's 2D industry (二次元产业) (2015), which encompasses anime and manga culture, approximately 550 million Chinese consumers have been involved in this industry since its first generation emerged in the 1980s. The number of core consumers who regularly engage with anime or manga each week has reached 50 million and is projected to peak at 80 million in 2017. When asked about their interests in 2D culture (二次元文化), 76 percent of respondents mentioned anime, 14.8 percent mentioned manga, and 2.8 percent mentioned Japanese games, which significantly outweighed those who mentioned Chinese comics (1.9 percent) and cartoons (1.2 percent). Regarding favorite characters, only one Chinese character made it into the top 20, with the remaining being all Japanese characters.

Genshin Impact (原神)⁸, one of China's most successful video games in recent years, also paid its tribute to Japanese anime, not only by its name (here the Shanghai studio miHoYo, rather

⁸ Ever since *Genshin Impact*'s release in September 2020, it has enjoyed huge success across the globe. The game has accumulated \$5 billion in revenue faster than any other game and become the Fastest-Growing Mobile Game of All Time (Rodriguez, 2024). It is thought of as reshaped mobile gaming and remains a leading force in the industry (ASO World, 2023). According to data from UK-based market research firm Fancensus.com, *Genshin Impact* was also listed as the 'most discussed game' on Twitter by garnering 12,571 tweets and nearly 4 million

than following Pinyin or English system, name its game as ‘Genshin’ which is the Japanese pronunciation for the word 原神, which means ‘original god’) but also its anime-influenced graphics which is described as ‘a nearly picture-perfect reproduction of Japanese fantasy role-playing games’ (The New York Times, 2022). It is also worth mentioning miHoYo’s slogan here, ‘Tech Otakus save the world’ (see *Figure 2.5*), which illustrates its founders’ passion for the so-called Otaku culture.⁹



Figure 2.5 Entrance of miHoYo’s headquarter (Source: hoyolab.com, 2023)

retweets throughout 2022. The number of retweets was more than the combined number of the next three games on the list—*Final Fantasy XIV*, *Elden Ring* and *Splatoon 3* (Cao, 2023).

⁹ Otaku (Japanese: おたく, オタク, or ヲタク) is a Japanese word that describes people with consuming interests, particularly in anime, manga, video games or computers. This term implied somewhat negative meaning initially, for people who were overly interested in manga, anime or other forms of media. However, over time this term has changed and is now used more broadly to celebrate people who are passionate fans of certain things, as a geek subculture.

2.3 Social media and platformisation

2.3.1 Introduction

The previous section has introduced the concept of characters under discussion and the major discourses around this subject. In this section focuses on the evolving social media environment. It discusses social media landscapes across the world in general, and in China in particular. The goal is to define social media and understand social media ecology in China in which the character creation in question takes place and understand how social media has enabled the platformisation of cultural production, which together outlines the context for this study. This section also provides a summary of the major literature within this field and highlights the important themes.

2.3.2 Defining social media

The fast expansion of social media worldwide represents one of the most vibrant yet disruptive developments within the digital landscape over the past decade. At the O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference of 2004, O'Reilly introduced the term 'Web 2.0' to describe the phenomenon as 'the Web as a platform' (Graham, 2005). Blank and Reisdorf argue Web 2.0 has two primary elements: the 'network effect' and the 'platform', which provides new forms of user engagement, communication and information gathering. They define Web 2.0 as: 'Using the Internet to provide platforms through which network effects can emerge' (2012, p.539). Based on this understanding of Web 2.0, Kaplan and Haenlein devised a definition of social media:

Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content. (2010, p.61)

This definition emphasises two factors important to this study: the empowerment of user creation and sharing with others. As Berthon et al (2012, p.263) put it, 'Creative consumers are the new locus of value in Web 2.0. It is they—rather than firms—who produce much of the value-added content in social media, and it is their networks of friends and associates that constitute the social'.

There are many kinds of social media (Harris, 2009) and technologies change rapidly with new applications emerging almost every day, so it would be challenging, if not impossible, to classify all of them (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Hanna et al., 2011; Timke, 2017). Timke

(2017) suggests there are four general types of social media: *social network sites* (SNSs), *user-generated content* (UGC) platforms, *trading and marketing sites* (TMSs), and *play and game sites* (PGSs) (italics in original). Drawing on a set of theories in media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure), Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) attempt to create a classification in a systematic manner. Based on the richness of the medium and the degree of social presence the application allows on one axis, and the degree of self-disclosure it requires and the type of self-presentation it allows on the other, they present six different types of social media: blogs, collaborative projects, Social networking sites, content communities, virtual social worlds and virtual game worlds, which is visualized in *Table 2.1*. In this study, Kaplan and Haenlein's definition and taxonomy will be adopted as the basic concepts to discuss social media platforms.

		Social presence/ Media richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation/ Self-disclosure	High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g., YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft)

Table 2.1 Classification of social media (by social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure) (adapted from Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010)

2.3.3 China's social media ecosystem

China is the world's biggest social media market (BBC, 2012; Lai Lin Thomala, 2021) with an estimated 927 million users in 2020, but its ecosystem varies considerably from the rest of the world. Major international social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are all blocked in the country due to the tight controls placed on internet content by the Chinese government (Zucchi, 2021). This in turn offers local companies the freedom and space to experiment and explore the giant domestic market (Plantin and de Seta, 2019). Therefore, China has notoriously established an alternative online ecology around state-based intervention, encompassing not only the prohibition of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram but also the incubation of its own massive tech giants (Keane, 2016). At present the leading social media apps in China are WeChat, Sina Weibo (micro-blog, hereafter referred to as Weibo), Tencent QQ and Douyin (Tik Tok's counterpart in mainland China), to name a few.

Although some may naturally attempt to match Chinese social media apps to their Western counterparts, e.g. Sina Weibo as Twitter of China, none of the platforms can truly be treated as the Chinese equivalent of Facebook or Instagram, ‘as Chinese platforms have evolved in ways that have enabled them to leap ahead of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram’ (Lu, 2021). According to Silvia Lindtner (cited in Lu, 2021), a professor at the University of Michigan, ‘In China, social media is deeply and fundamentally integrated with many other platforms, be that payment or food delivery or banking [or] navigating the city’ (para. 6). Some other scholars (Chen et al., 2018; Plantin and de Seta, 2019) also suggest that a significant trend in China was online social networks transforming into comprehensive infrastructure ecosystems. These ecosystems integrate various services, including real-time communication, live video streaming, gaming, news search, and public services, all within a unified platform environment.

WeChat, or 微信 (Weixin) in Chinese, developed by Tencent in January 2011, is a mobile social media platform and one of Tencent’s flagship applications. As of 2019, WeChat was the world’s largest standalone mobile application, boasting 1151 million monthly users, according to Tencent’s 2019 WeChat Statistical Report (Tencent Technology, 2020). The platform hosts over 1.2 million mini-programs, offering a wide array of services including transportation, online shopping, utility tools, and IT technology (iResearch.cn, 2019). Initially built as an instant messaging app, now WeChat has already evolved into a one-stop platform from which users can get almost everything from shopping, financial services, gaming and calling a taxi, to name but a few. DeGennaro (2020) suggests that WeChat can be likened to ‘a combination of the Chinese Facebook, WhatsApp, Google News, Tinder, and Pinterest combined’.

QQ, also known as Tencent QQ, is an instant messaging software developed by Tencent. QQ is one of the earliest and most popular instant messaging app in China (De Gennaro, 2020). Starting as a simple messaging application in 1999, it has now also evolved into a full-fledged platform that offers multiple services including group chat, voice chat, micro-blogging, games, music, shopping, and movies, like its younger brother WeChat. Before the rise of WeChat, QQ was the most popular online communication method, and its desktop version remains incredibly popular with white-collar workers (ibid.). Although QQ saw an overall decline in MAU (573.7 million as of September 2021, down 7.1% compared to 2020, Tencent, 2021) it is still an important player in the Chinese social media ecosystem. Both WeChat and QQ’s development demonstrate that an important strategy taken by mobile instant messaging providers (MIM) is convergence, which involves the gradual introduction of new features to

each MIM service. This strategy has resulted in MIM services increasingly resembling social networking sites. Consequently, applications like LINE, WhatsApp, and Weixin have evolved from mere short message service (SMS) alternatives into comprehensive services that rival Facebook and Weibo in functionality (Benney and Xu, 2018).

Weibo, or 微博, also known as Sina Weibo, is a micro-blogging website launched in 2009 by Sina. It is another one of the biggest social media platforms in China with 573 million MAU as of September 2021 (Sina finance, 2021). While many of Weibo's features resemble those of Twitter, like the character limits for each post (2000 characters after a 2016 upgrade), it has constantly incorporated more sophisticated functions, which transformed Weibo from a simple micro-blogging site to a comprehensive social media platform (Wan, 2019). Weibo's combination of microblogging, multimedia sharing, social networking, and advertising capabilities establishes it as a multifaceted platform that attracts a varied audience (Hu, 2023). However, Weibo is currently experiencing a clear decline. The growth rate of regular users, new registrations, and individual user activity has either decelerated or turned negative (Benney and Xu, 2018). In fact, with WeChat's ascension, QQ and Weibo, which rank second and third in China's most used social media application 2016, respectively, have seen significant user declines (Shi, 2016). This shift also illustrates the rapid evolution of the social media landscape in China (Benney and Xu, 2018).

Douyin, or 抖音, launched in autumn 2016, is the mainland Chinese counterpart of the popular short-form video sharing platform Tik Tok. Both platforms are under the ownership of ByteDance (字节跳动), yet they maintain separate content libraries and databases and adhere to different rules and regulations, owing to the internet censorship policies in China. It allows users to produce and browse quick-fire video clips lasting from fifteen seconds to one minute, to share funny and even nonsense videos widely online. With over 500 million global monthly active users (Xinhuanet, 2018) and over 250 million daily active users in China (Douyin big data report, 2019), Douyin (including Tik Tok) has been the most downloaded non-game app of iOS App Store globally since the first quarter of 2018 (Nelson, 2018).

Red (or 小红书, Xiaohongshu) is a social media and e-commerce platform founded in Shanghai in 2013. It provides a platform for users to share their daily life including shopping, beauty, food, traveling, personal experiences and so forth, at the same time, information generated by users serves as a guide for others who are curious about similar themes. Tian,

Xiao and Xu (2021) suggest that Red is one of the most typical examples of community e-commerce. The platform is mainly divided into two sections: a social sharing community and a shopping mall. Users can not only find beauty skills, clothes matching, home decoration, travel sharing, and even learning experiences in the social sharing community, but also conduct overseas online shopping in the ‘Welfare Club’, which is a shopping mall of Red, thus completing the business closed-loop (Wang, 2021). By August 2020, the registered users of XiaoHongShu have exceeded 450 million, and the monthly active users have exceeded 100 million (Xu and Pan, 2020).

Through even a cursory glance at these popular social media sites, one can see that in China social media tend to integrate as many functions as possible such that they are not merely media platforms, but also become critical infrastructure for everyday life (Plantin and de Seta, 2019). Steinberg (2020) mentions that this kind of do-everything app seems particularly prevalent in East Asia, e.g. Line (dominant in Japan) and Kakao Talk (dominant in Korea). Possible reasons for this include geographical proximity and a penchant for borrowing each other’s innovations (Sternberg, 2020).

Social media platforms like Weibo have fostered cultural production and character creation by prioritising user-generated content and encouraging decentralised production models. By reducing traditional gatekeepers and providing simplified tools for content creation and dissemination, these platforms have created some space for grassroots creativity to flourish. As previously mentioned, major social media platforms like Weibo have achieved significant success in their operations, establishing themselves as leading platforms in China. This success has attracted a large user base, enabling the maximisation of network effects. These network effects, in turn, serve as a major draw for creators to engage and produce content on these platforms.

The Chinese government plays a complex, dual role in this dynamic. On the one hand the Chinese authorities play an active role in the development of the platform economy. As Yu Hong (2017a, pp. 10-13) notes, the government has pledged to place Information and Communication at the centre of the national economic restructuring plan, using ICT as industries and infrastructures to transform traditional industrial sectors. In 2015, the state launched the ‘Internet+’ strategy (The State Council, 2015b) to encourage hundreds of thousands of people’s passion for innovation to build the new engine for economic development. Another initiative, “Mass Entrepreneurship” (The State Council, 2015a) was also

released the same year, and seeks to mobilise the creativity and innovative power of grassroots individuals for national economic Growth. On the other hand, the state not only wants to ‘profit’ from information and culture, but also to control and shape it so as to maintain social and political stability (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). Its tight oversight and censorship affect internet content, freedom of speech, and information dissemination (Cunningham and Craig, 2019a).

Against this context, user-generated content has to be in line with the authorities’ expectation of ‘what kind of stories should be told’ (Lin and de Kloet, 2019, p.4). According to the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), all content producers should ‘abide by the law, adhere to the correct values, and help disseminate socialist core values and cultivate a positive and healthy on-line culture’ (CAC, 2017). This poses a challenge to all the actors in China’s creative economy. Content producers have to carefully utilise their creativity to ensure the accumulation of online data traffic without breaching the state’s regulations.

2.3.4 Platformisation of cultural production

2.3.4.1 The concept of platformisation

Before moving on to platformisation, it is worth discussing meaning of the platform in question as there are different understandings of this term in different studies (Schreieck et al., 2016). Baldwin and Woodard (2009) outline three major areas of research related to platforms: product development, technology strategy, and industrial economy. For example, from a product development perspective, Meyer and Lehnerd (1997) describe a platform as a set of subsystems and interfaces that form a common structure from which a stream of derivative products can be efficiently developed and produced. In contrast, Gawer (2014) categorises platform research into two main streams: engineering design and economics. According to Gawer, platforms are conceptualised as technological architectures from the engineering design perspective and as markets within the economics framework. However, she highlights limitations in both perspectives. To provide a more comprehensive understanding, Gawer (2014) defines platforms as ‘evolving organisations or meta-organizations’ characterised by three key aspects: ‘(1) they bring together and manage constituent actors who can simultaneously innovate and compete, (2) they create value by leveraging economies of scope in supply, demand, or both, and (3) they are based on a modular technological structure comprising a central core and peripheral elements.’ (p.1239) Besides, Manikas and Hansen (2013) also provide their understanding from a software perspective.

These different streams each approach the understanding of platforms from distinct perspectives, focusing on various aspects of their functions. While the researcher acknowledges that Gawer's comprehensive framework is highly valuable, it is important to point out that in this study, the term is used with an emphasis on its role in social and communication contexts, as social media platforms are commonly perceived, described, and utilised by users primarily as tools for communication rather than merely as products or companies (Bayer et al., 2020). Because platforms are imagined as spaces where users interact and contribute as part of the product, the fundamental nature of it 'may be tied more to how users engage with it in their daily lives (Snapchat as a form of social interaction), as opposed to a product line or publicly traded company (Snap, Inc.).' (Rhee et al., 2021, p.4).

Simply put, platforms can be understood as dynamic public spaces where different actors interact with each other in various ways (social, economic, etc.). Beyond being static spaces, platforms are mechanisms that evolve through their technological architecture, governance, and user interactions. These interactions can be both direct, such as conversations between users, and indirect, such as engagements with content or algorithm-driven experiences. While this study emphasises the social and communication roles of platforms, it is also important to note their intertwined economic functions, as user interactions are often monetised. This understanding complements frameworks like Gawer's by foregrounding the social and communicative dimensions of platforms, while also acknowledging their conditional publicness shaped by corporate and regulatory factors.

The rise of contemporary platforms 'is reconfiguring the production, distribution, and monetization of cultural content in staggering and complex ways' (Duffy et al, 2019, p.1). This transformation is often understood as the process of 'platformisation', which has complex impacts at both the institutional level and in the everyday cultural practices of creators and audiences. Platforms have been raised to the level of essential utilities (Nieborg et al, 2020) which Plantin and Punathambekar (2019) suggested as an 'infrastructural turn in media and communication studies'.

Different schools of thought frame platform as a thing and platformisation as a process from different perspectives. For example, Helmond once provided a definition grounded in software studies, highlighting 'the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web and their drive to make external web data platform ready (2015, p.1).' Drawing from different scholarly perspectives on platforms—software studies, critical political economy, business studies, and

cultural studies, Poell et al (2019) attempt to develop a comprehensive understanding of the concept of platformisation. They propose to understand platformisation as ‘the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms’ (p.1).

As suggested by scholars (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2019), platformisation brings three major institutional changes in market structures, governance frameworks, and infrastructures. The first transformation is the reorganisation of the markets. This includes from one- or two-sided markets to complex multisided platform markets and strong winner-take-all effects affecting all sides in platform markets. Traditional market relations are predominantly one-sided with direct transactions between a company and its buyers. In contrast, platforms create complex multi-sided markets where they act as intermediaries facilitating transactions between end-users and various third parties. This market dynamics shift is not simply institutional, but also driven by the interaction of end-users, content creators, and other market participants like advertisers and data brokers. For instance, if a significant number of end-users quickly adopt a new platform, such as what occurred with Apple’s iOS, content creators and advertisers are likely to follow suit. Once a platform’s end-users and other actors reach a critical mass, it becomes increasingly difficult for new platforms to enter this market, or for content and service providers to ignore this platform.

The second is the changing governance. In a word, the platforms set the rules of the game concerning what is and what is not allowed. Firstly, platforms dictate the way end-users interact with each other and with complementors via graphical user interfaces (GUIs), providing certain affordances while limiting others, like the options to like, follow, rate, order, or pay, along with their respective metrics (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). This form of governance also is enacted through algorithmic sorting, prioritising some data over others, shaping what kinds of content and services are more visible and what stays out of sight (Bucher, 2018; Pasquale, 2015). At the same time, platforms also regulate how complementors access and engage with application programming interfaces (APIs), software development kits (SDKs), and data services (Langlois and Elmer, 2013; Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Moreover, platforms enforce governance through contracts and policies, in the form of terms of service (ToS), license agreements, and developer guidelines, all of which must be accepted when accessing or using a platform’s

services (Van Dijck, 2013). Under these measures, platforms monitor and control the content shared by end-users and complementors and their interactions (Gillespie, 2018).

The other shift is the development of data infrastructures, which is often understood as datafication. The concept of datafication describes how digital platforms convert various practices and processes that were traditionally non-quantifiable into data (Kitchin, 2014; Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier, 2013; Van Dijck, 2014; Meijas and Couldry, 2019). These include virtually every aspect of human interaction such as rating, paying, searching, watching, talking, friending, dating, driving and even walking patterns. This data is then normally processed by the algorithm and occasionally under strict conditions, haphazardly made accessible to a diverse array of external parties (Bucher, 2018; Langlois and Elmer, 2013). The widespread application of data analytics enables accurate user targeting, and allows for immediate reaction to trending topics, 'A/B' or split testing of various content aspects like headlines and formats, as well as in developing sustained strategies to attract and retain platform users.

Nieborg and Poell (2018) further argue that this transformation makes cultural production and cultural commodities 'contingent.' First, it is argued that cultural production is becoming increasingly 'contingent on' major digital platforms. This deepening relationship between cultural producers and platforms is also framed as 'platform dependence'. Content creators find themselves more 'locked in', not just on platform data but also having their skill development, tools, and payment systems fully integrated with platform ecosystems. Second, products and services provided and distributed on platforms are contingent because of their adaptability, modular design and responsiveness to data-driven user feedback. They are subject to ongoing modifications and redistribution, which can be understood as 'contingent commodities'. This encourages a shift from traditionally linear production to an iterative, data-driven process where content is constantly adjusted to optimise for distribution and monetisation.

2.3.4.2 Research in platformisation

The 'platform paradigm' (Burgess, 2015) prevails in the media, communication and online environment. The considerable size and scale benefits of major digital platforms are augmented by their first-mover advantage. Their inherent 'born digital,' 'network native', and 'mobile-friendly' characteristics amplify their network effects, enabling them to dominate the network economy more proficiently than traditional capitalist oligopolies (Cunningham and Craig,

2019a). Therefore many scholars focused on the critique of this imbalance of power between platforms and creators. The platform ecosystem has also nurtured new types of creative labourers, such as social media entertainers (Bishop, 2018; Cunningham and Craig, 2019a), influencers (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2015), and an extensive group of value-generating but unpaid digital labourers (Terranova, 2000). It has also been extensively criticised for this type of free and precarious digital labour it involves (van Doorn, 2017; Fuchs, 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

Regardless of being professional or amateur—a distinction that is vague today—contemporary cultural workers are subject to the governance frameworks of platforms and must, therefore, continuously adjust to their frequent ‘tweaks’, including changes to their algorithmic systems (From Duffy et al., 2019). That said, Flew (2018) argues although platforms are curating and moderating content on a significantly larger scale than before, in order to survive, they still must be open to the distribution of user-generated content to an extent that traditional publishers or media broadcasters would never tolerate. Foxman added, ‘cultural producers are encountering an increasingly rule-bound set of tools with which they must construct content. Those rules flow from the top down, rather than the bottom up, creating a path dependence for creativity’(2019, p.9). He then concludes that this path dependency does not necessarily result in adverse effects on content diversity or workforce diversity. This platform economy also offers opportunities for grassroots creatives and entrepreneurs and even marginal populations (Lin and de Kloet, 2019), to participate as producers in the digital creative economies. Likewise, Duguay’s examination of queer women’s micro-celebrity and self-branding approaches demonstrates how marginalised groups use social networking sites to gain better access to cultural production tools, or more precisely, cultural promotion methods (2019). Her study also reveals how these new creative practices increasingly intertwine with commercial strategies.

Cunningham and Craig (2019a) argue although on the surface, the power dynamics between individual creators and platforms may seem highly disproportionate, findings from network economics show that these power relations are more complex and diverse. Through a series of interviews with a global network of what they call ‘social media entertainers’, they emphasise the rise of new economic models that challenge the traditional power structures in the creative industries. They examine creators’ stances from two different perspectives. First, the focus is on scrutinising the interests of creators within the framework of ‘top-down’ governance undertaken by both the platforms and the state. Top-down creator governance is the exercise

of institutional power over creators. Although the platforms issue ‘rules, pronouncements, and punishments that purport to be in the best interest of their networks of users’ (Petre et al., 2019), platform governance over creators are primarily in the service of their own corporate interests. As demonstrated by Lessig (1999) and Sandra Braman (2006), tech systems employ latent and invisible forms of policy-making. This is particularly evident in the case of recurrent, iterative, and opaque alterations in algorithms, programmatic filters, and automated rights management systems. Some aspects of platform governance are more apparent, such as modifications in partnership programs, commercialisation features, and user interfaces. This platform governance may also enable the state to ‘govern at a distance’ (Rose and Miller, 2010). Meanwhile, the actions of other actors, including critics, journalists, advertisers, activists, and traditional media entities, also influence platforms in their efforts to regulate creators. State governance over creators can manifest through direct regulation or policy guidelines. More commonly, state governance over creators is indirect, primarily through the regulation of platforms, rather than direct censorship as seen in authoritarian regimes like China (Cunningham and Craig, 2019a).

Then, from a ‘bottom-up’ perspective, it explores how creators and their advocacy groups organise and take collective action to improve the opportunities for creators in this emerging industry. The findings suggest that the influence of creators is increasingly impacting the platforms, resulting in a series of reactive measures from the latter. YouTube, initially offering partnership agreements by invitation only, expanded access to all users, only to later impose new restrictions based on subscriber count and watch time due to advertiser concerns (Spangler, 2018). Soon after, YouTube introduced various monetisation options for creators, such as channel memberships and merchandise sales (Perez, 2018). Nowadays, creators are recognised as ‘partners’ on almost every platform. Following YouTube's example, Facebook introduced new features for creators (Cohen, 2018). Snapchat, previously hesitant to support its creators, has adopted a creator-focused approach (Weiss, 2018). Similarly, Twitch provides its creators with multiple revenue options and organises its own community events and conferences (Segarra, 2018). They conclude that, although this platform capitalism may lean toward oligopoly, it simultaneously offers expansive opportunities for ‘peer-to-peer, horizontal and potentially also democratic voices and self-expression’.

Through an analysis of Japan’s ‘super app’ LINE, Steinberg (2020) explores how platformisation has transformed cultural production. He suggests the process of platformisation

can be understood in three types of formatting. The first is the transformation and reorganisation of the cultural goods or contents so that they fit with the platform. Here he pays particular attention to one principal form of content formatted by the LINE platform: stickers, as they are a feature of the LINE platform. He also suggests that LINE stickers are the reason for the proliferation of stickers on Facebook, WeChat, and other platforms. Second, platforms format creator markets, creating sites of exchange for formatted cultural goods. Third, platforms format new cultural producers and consumers who participate in these markets. The potential to make money and become famous transforms ordinary people into independent, enterprising individuals. Steinberg argues that the LINE sticker market has been framed as the pre-eminent place to become an entrepreneur (p.6).

Today the platform economy has already become an economic pillar in China (Liu, 2019) and is regarded as the largest across the globe (Rothschild, 2018). The Chinese authorities play an active role in the development of the platform economy. As Yu Hong (2017a, pp. 10-13) notes, the government has pledged to place Information and Communication at the centre of the national economic restructuring plan, using ICT as industries and infrastructures to transform traditional industrial sectors. In 2015, Premier Li Keqiang launched the 'Internet+' strategy (The State Council, 2015b) to encourage 'hundreds of thousands of people's passion for innovation to build the new engine for economic development'. Another initiative, 'Mass Entrepreneurship' (The State Council, 2015a) was also released the same year, and 'seeks to mobilize the creativity and innovative power of grassroots individuals for national economic growth' (Lin and de Kloet, 2019, p.3).

Lin and de Kloet (2019) explore the platformisation of cultural production in China through the case of Kuaishou, an algorithm-based video-sharing platform targeting second- and third-tier cities as well as the countryside. The findings show the digital platform economy enables lower-educated, more marginal people to participate in the Chinese creative economy. They also point out that the complicated relationship between these social media platforms and the state governance distinguishes the Chinese cultural economy from its western counterparts. This relationship promotes and limits the platformised creative economy at the same time. On one hand, the aforementioned Internet+ and Mass Entrepreneurship policies boost the platformisation and encourage 'grassroots individuals' to become creative workers, pandering to the state's expectation of mass entrepreneurship and restructuring the economy. On the other hand, user-generated content has to be in line with the authorities' expectation of 'what kind

of stories should be told' (p.4). According to the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), all content producers should 'abide by the law, adhere to the correct values, and help disseminate socialist core values and cultivate a positive and healthy on-line culture' (CAC, 2017). This poses a challenge to all the actors in China's creative economy. Content producers have to carefully utilise their creativity to ensure the accumulation of online data traffic without breaching the state's regulations.

2.4 The boom of content creation

2.4.1 Introduction

Following the platformisation of many social and economic sectors, the content creation industry on social media has been booming. As discussed in previous sections, social media and platformisation have largely disrupted the traditional media ecology and offered a more significant opportunity for ordinary people to participate in cultural production. The character creation under discussion is one of the many forms of content creation against this backdrop and shares some commonalities with others. This section explores this emerging creator economy, setting up a better context for the research subject. First, it introduces and discusses digital entrepreneurship in general to provide a broader understanding of this industry. Then, it moves on to content creation in particular, addressing its characteristics, strategies, challenges, monetisation, and so on.

2.4.2 Digital Entrepreneurship

To begin with, it is helpful to point out here that content creators are not necessarily all entrepreneurs. Some of them just create content simply for fun. The content creators in question are those who exhibit entrepreneurial traits by understanding their audience, delivering value through their content, exploring monetisation strategies, and importantly based on social media rather than other traditional media. Cunningham and Craig (2019a) define content creators as cultural entrepreneurs securing some form of remuneration on major social media platforms. Entrepreneurship propels digital media industries forward, fostering the belief that success in this domain is attainable for anyone with a bit of intelligence, perseverance, and grit (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2013). Just like traditional entrepreneurs, they need to identify opportunities, strategise, and work diligently to achieve their objectives. This 'media entrepreneurialism' should first be understood within the discourse of digital entrepreneurship.

Digitalisation is not a recent development in the global business landscape; it has been reshaping traditional enterprises by incorporating digital technologies via the internet for several decades. This transformation gave rise to the concept of Digital Entrepreneurship, which is described as a subset of entrepreneurship where various or all aspects of what would typically be physical in a traditional organisation have been digitalised. Despite its emergence dating back to the early 1990s, it tends to be perceived as a relatively new phenomenon (Hull et al., 2007). With the rise of social media and platformisation, the discourse on digital entrepreneurship become more and more important and pertinent. Nonetheless, scholars have proposed slightly varying definitions of digital entrepreneurship over time.

Kollmann (2006) defined it as: ‘establishing a new company with an innovative business idea within the net economy, which, using an electronic platform in data networks, offers its products and/or services based upon a purely electronic creation of value. Essential is the fact that this value offer was only made possible through the development of information technology’. Hull et al. (2007) suggested: ‘Digital Entrepreneurship refers to technological advancement with new ways of establishing and performing business’. Later Davidson and Vaast defined Digital entrepreneurship as ‘the pursuit of opportunities based on the use of digital media and other information and communication technologies’ (2010, p. 2), which leads to the transformation of existing business models or the invention of new ones (Hitt et al., 2001). This is followed by Sussan and Acs’s (2017) outline: ‘Digital Entrepreneurship is the combination of digital infrastructure and entrepreneurial agents within the context of both ecosystems’. Furthermore, Nambisan (2017) framed it as the platforms, infrastructures, or things that employ computing power on universal public networks which are known as digital technologies and the intersection of digital technologies and entrepreneurship.

Digital technologies led to the democratisation of entrepreneurship, as highlighted by Aldrich (2014). Various tools, including social media, open-source software, crowdsourcing, crowd-funding platforms, online reputation assessment algorithms, 3D printers, etc. are empowering potential entrepreneurs and playing a role in diminishing the barriers between the invention of ideas and the establishment of new ventures (Kelly, 2016). With improved communication and growing specialisation, there are more opportunities for individual actors to participate in the digital economy (Zhao and Collier, 2016). For instance, in the networked economy driven by digital technologies, organisations are becoming smaller, with a proliferation of one-person companies and partnerships. The advent of new digital technologies like social media, big data,

and mobile and cloud solutions has given rise to fresh methods of collaboration and the utilisation of shared technologies and open standards in resource leveraging, product/service design, development, and deployment (Markus and Loebecke, 2013) and this has lowered the cost and increased the reach of different sides of digital platforms (Acs et al., 2002).

These technologies play a pivotal role in fuelling the digital economy, introducing a new range of opportunities with substantial business potential and the ability to significantly reduce costs for new ventures (Zhao et al., 2015). The access to huge amounts of information provides entrepreneurs with the capability to analyse what prospective customers are seeking. In contrast, traditional non-digital entrepreneurs lack access to such data (Hair et al., 2012). Through the utilisation of big data and algorithms, digital companies can even anticipate needs before (potential) customers become aware of them or influence consumer behaviour and attitudes, for instance, through selective and tailored advertising. Consequently, digital information and its effective management serve not only as the source of digital entrepreneurship but also as its perpetual driving force (Kraus et al., 2019).

In particular, the interactions and information sharing among users on digital platforms create opportunities for those with the ability to identify them (Song, 2019). The Internet in general and social media platforms in particular encourage user participation, and the socio-technological outcome of digitalisation, enabling universal participation on the internet, has fostered a volunteering culture. Researchers who have concentrated on customer-centric perspectives have long considered users as co-creators in processes like product development, service-oriented marketing process (Vargo and Lusch, 2004 and 2008), service ecosystems (Lusch and Nambisan, 2015), and the entrepreneurial marketing context (Read et al., 2009). Users engage in co-creation alongside other consumers, and companies play a role in enhancing value within the broader social context (Chandler and Vargo, 2011; Von Hippel, 2006; Webster and Lusch, 2013). The advent of Web 2.0 and the social web has underscored the significance of amassing a user base for Digital Entrepreneurship, as highlighted by Sussan and Acs (2007). To enable Digital Entrepreneurship to continually contribute to a sustainable Digital Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (DEE), the presence of an active and participatory Digital User Community is a prerequisite (ibid.). A substantial user base on a platform can also trigger significant network effects. Network effects, meaning support and endorsement from users, interactions and feedback from the digital community, present substantial potential for digital entrepreneurs (Kraus et al., 2019).

The establishment of new companies is a process influenced by economic and social factors specific to the context (Porfirio et al., 2016). According to institutional theory, institutional forces encompass various aspects, which Scott (1995) condensed and organised into three categories: regulatory, social, and cultural influences that support the endurance and legitimacy of an organization. These institutional forces can be either formal or informal, where formal ones refer to laws, regulations, and their supporting structures, and informal ones include social norms, values, and beliefs. These elements demonstrate the impact that a society's regulations, rules, social norms, and culture can have on the environment in which digital entrepreneurship can thrive. Given the important role that the economy and ICT can play, Zhao and Collier (2016) also considers them as environmental factors in the model of their study.

The production, distribution, and consumption of digital information create both fresh opportunities and potential risks for entrepreneurs, as discussed by Jean-Michel Sahut, Luca Iandoli, and Frédéric Teulon (2019). In contrast to traditional entrepreneurs, today's digital entrepreneurs do not adhere to a pre-established blueprint or highly detailed business plan. Instead, the actions and decisions of a digital entrepreneur evolve and adjust throughout the entire entrepreneurial journey. The continuous advancement of technology and ongoing engagement with the digital economy repeatedly initiates, shapes, and transforms the digital entrepreneurial process. Consequently, digital entrepreneurs navigate increasingly dynamic pathways influenced by various activities with uncertain timeframes (Nambisan, 2017) and entrepreneurial endeavours and outcomes confront a notably high level of uncertainty (Kraus et al., 2019).

As discussed by Paul, Alhassan, Binsaif and Singh in 2023, recent research in this field can be categorised into four primary themes: digital technologies, digital platforms, the digital transformation of businesses, and digital ecosystems. Most of the current entrepreneurship-related research has focused on understanding the entrepreneurial landscape and identifying the challenges it faces (Nambisan, 2017; McKelvie et al., 2011). Nonetheless, there is a growing demand for a new research phase that is more relevant to practical application and extends beyond explanatory research (Zaheer et al., 2019). This line of solution-oriented research approaches, involving collaboration with practitioners to formulate research questions, generates insights that can guide practice and policy (ibid.).

2.4.3 Content creators

Over the past decade, there has been a rapid rise of content creators, which has emerged as a catch-all term to describe digitally enabled cultural producers who create and share content on social media platforms, motivated by an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to establish their own 'media brands' (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020). These entrepreneurs are also described by various alternative names, including producers (Bruns, 2008), YouTubers engaging in vernacular creativity (Burgess and Green, 2009), influencers, vloggers, live streamers, gamers, key opinion leaders (KOLs), and Wang Hong (网红 in China) (Craig, 2019). Many creators initially started as amateur enthusiasts, through the network effects and diverse technological and commercial affordances of social media platforms, have managed to create sustainable, and in some cases, highly successful careers (Cunningham and Craig, 2019a).

These creators have disrupted the traditional pathways through which media talent typically emerges (Cunningham and Craig, 2019b). In describing Social Media Entertainment (SME), Cunningham and Craig (2019) position creators at the centre of this proto-industry that operates differently from traditional media. Leveraging social media platforms, creators produce content that diverges significantly from the longstanding model of intellectual property control and exploitation seen in legacy media industries. This evolving digital ecology is driven by inherently interactive technologies and strategies aimed at engaging fans, viewers, audiences, and communities (Cunningham and Craig, 2019b). This distinctive career trajectories and low entry barriers have resulted in a more diverse representation across race, culture and gender compared to mainstream media. This shift of converting vernacular or informal creativity into talent and content has made SME increasingly appealing to advertisers, brands, talent agencies, studios, and venture capital investors on a global scale (Cunningham and Craig, 2019b).

Just as the various alternative names for content creators suggest, the content they produce encompasses nearly anything one can imagine and should be understood in its broadest sense. Common content includes writing blog, sharing photos, gameplay, DIY/how-to videos, the personality vlogger, or streaming literally everything. Forbes' annual list of top-performing creators spans various content categories, featuring individuals such as 'entertainer' Lily Singh (also known as Superwoman II), gamer Markiplier, beauty vlogger Michele Phan, and toy unboxer Evan Tube (O'Connor, 2017). As Fung et al.'s (2022) research suggest, 'As a platform, Douyin collapses all categories of content onto a single app'(p.377).

In contrast to the professionals working in legacy media, these creators often lack the professional skills to become writer, producer, director or actor (Craig, 2019). However, it would be misguided to assess their innovation within this emerging industry solely against the standards of traditional entertainment storytelling, production, or performance. Instead, these creators have established their brands rooted in their personalities and through the discourses of authenticity prevalent in vlogging (Cunningham and Craig, 2019b).

In an age dominated by brand cultures, 'realness' has emerged as a pervasive and driving force (Banet-Weiser, 2012), particularly in the practices of content creators, who strategically embrace an ideal of authenticity from which they gain advantage (Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2017). Through an impression of authenticity, creators foster a sense of intimacy, accessibility and relatability, which is the foundation of emotional connections with followers (Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013, 2015). The commitment to authenticity also enables influencers to differentiate themselves from their peers by offering something unique to followers (Duffy, 2017). Moreover, an air of authenticity also distinguishes creators from traditional media and celebrities, who often present carefully constructed fantasies that contrast starkly with the everyday experience of 'real' people. Unlike traditional celebrities, who typically maintain a certain level of distance and establish hierarchical relationships with their fans, influencers leverage their authenticity to foster intimacy and equality with followers (Abidin, 2015). As suggested by Arriagada (2021), with their authentic style of communication in engaging with their audience, creators have started to challenge the traditional advertising agencies's intermediary role between brands and consumers.

This emerging ecology exists at the intersection of social media communication and entertainment content, characterised by a level of interactivity and viewer- and audience-centricity which is very different from traditional industry. Besides, the content created is predominantly 'born global.' Unlike conventional content industries, especially Hollywood and broadcast television, content creation is not primarily reliant on IP control. Subscriber or fan engagement is not just important; it is the catalyst for the revenue-sharing business model that replaces IP control (Cunningham and Craig, 2019b).

Although the growth of these content creation practices has been considered as heralding a new economic model, (Benkler, 2006) and more broadly it has been celebrated as potentially a politically and culturally emancipatory force (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Leadbeater, 2007), Brake shows his concern about the uneven distribution of content creators across the social

groups and globe (2014). Drawing on theoretical frameworks used in digital divide studies, he outlines differences in motivation, access, skills, and usage that appear to underlie and perpetuate differences in online content creation practices between social groups. Together the findings show that active Online Content Creation (OCC) is a minority of internet users, and they tend to have higher sociodemographic status (e.g., younger, better-educated, and higher-earning) than the broader Internet-using populations they come from (which in turn tend to be of a higher status than non-internet users). And accordingly, content relevant to disadvantaged groups is less likely to be provided online than content aimed at more wealthy and educated groups which may be exacerbating digital divides.

2.4.4 Creating the content

The social media environments are constantly changing, e.g., new affordances are introduced, terms of uses are updated frequently. Against this backdrop, Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) explore how content creators respond to such change and adjust their practices of presenting themselves on social media. Drawing on interviews with 35 Chilean content creators in the field of fashion and lifestyle, along with an analysis of their Instagram images, their findings show there are three interrelated levels of platform changes impacting the creators: first, the change of communicative styles and tools, especially regarding the transition of textual with image-based communication. Secondly, the temporal acceleration creates a new relationship with time for creators. Specifically, platform-dependent demands for content creation across blogs, Instagram, and Instagram Stories required more demanding and exhausting routines to establish a cross-platform presence or visibility. Furthermore, the distinct technical affordances of each platform contribute to the structuring and organising of creators' behaviour and their collective identity as cultural producers. They conclude that being a professional content creator entails constantly producing content across diverse platforms, adapting to new technical configurations and algorithmic structures, and navigating their identities within commercial circuits, potentially at the expense of maintaining a cohesive community of followers around their activities and branded content.

Craig (2019) suggests that 'the labour of making media might be better framed as creator management, or rather, self-management' (p.369). He argues that creators play a central role within the social media entertainment industry. The conditions of creator management span across platforms, various intermediary firms, and the creators themselves. Platforms manage creators, often through automated programmatic methods, exemplified by YouTube's partner

program, Creator Academy, and Ad Sense features. Besides, there emerges a variety of external firms and organisations operating liminally between platforms and creators, including multi-channel networks, talent representatives, publicists, influencer agencies, and third-party data firms, to name a few.

He further explains that in besides these external management, the strategies of creator self-management are crucial for the success of their SME brands and are frequently undertaken independently or with minimal assistance. Creator self-management involves a range of practices, including content creation and distribution, media entrepreneurialism, and community management. These strategies often originate from user behaviours and previous hobbyist pursuits before transitioning from amateur creation to professionalised commercial endeavours, often through trial and error. These skills require content production and management that align with the affordances of each platform. Adding to that, creator self-management also encompasses a range of entrepreneurial activities aimed at diversifying revenue streams. Platforms offer advertising partnerships with filtering systems for brand safety, necessitating creators to navigate and strategise to avoid demonetisation. Companion subscription platforms like YouTube Premium and Facebook Watch present new commercial opportunities but demand exclusive content and professionalisation. Live streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouNow enable virtual goods payments, while Chinese livestreamers profit from online companionship. Secondary platforms like Patreon and crowdfunding sites allow fan communities to subsidise creators, while Chinese creators integrate e-commerce into their channels. Additionally, creators monetise through transactional downloads, subscriptions, advertising, and influencer marketing deals, often dictating terms for branded content campaigns.

Based on 17 in-depth interviews with foodie micro-influencers, Miguel et al. (2023) explore the processes and procedures adopted by micro-influencers to create 'instagrammable' content. Their study first broadens the understanding of 'instagrammability' by examining it from the perspective of influencers crafting content to engage and expand their audience¹⁰. Secondly, it highlights two primary factors guiding influencers' content creation: a focus on either self-

¹⁰ The term 'instagrammability' is commonly used in both academic literature and mainstream media to describe content that is well-suited to the Instagram platform and likely to perform well on this platform.

expression or the audience. The approach to content development varied among influencers, with some prioritising audience needs while others maintained first and foremost a strong 'self-focus'. However, they also suggest that even among those who were highly responsive to audience preferences, a sense of 'self-focus' remained as an anchor point in all developed content, often tied to a personal passion for a certain type of food.

In contrast to the widely celebrated narratives of openness and equality within the content creation industry, Glatt (2022) portrays a rather gloom picture on the working conditions of content creators in this emerging field. He turns to his case study of the online video influencer industry to explore the lived experiences of small and aspiring entrepreneurial content creators and his research on creative labour highlights precarity and uncertainty as key characteristics. Based on his research findings, he argues that small and marginalised creators face algorithmic discrimination. To illustrate, YouTube's infamous algorithmic recommendation system is heavily biased towards amplifying content from established creators who are already popular. Essentially, the creators who generate the most profit for platforms are given the most exposure. This places small and emerging creators at a significant disadvantage, as Glatt explains,

Because of this, small creators are especially pressured to employ sophisticated techniques to grow their visibility within constantly changing algorithmic contexts, such as strategically timing posts to coincide with spikes in platform usage (Duffy, 2017), using eye-catching titles and thumbnails, producing exciting modifications of existing popular video trends/genres, finding a narrow content niche favored by the algorithm, utilizing effective metadata keywords for video SEO, promoting their content across platforms, focusing their energies on less competitive platforms, and filming "collabs" with other content creators'(p.3863).

Another significant insight from his findings is the importance of creators diversifying their platforms and income streams. The received wisdom in the online video industry suggests that creators must spread their labour and income across various platforms and projects to cultivate sustainable audiences and careers. Essentially, they are hedging their bets by diversifying their efforts to mitigate risks in a rapidly changing and unstable environment. Entrepreneurial creators perceive themselves as cross-platform, multimedia brands, both reliant on and independent from the platforms they engage with. Lastly, he discusses the quantification of self-worth. In an industry where visibility equates to value (Duffy and Hund, 2019), content creators undergo a process of self-assessment based on numerical metrics. Many interviewees noted that their emotional state and sense of self-worth are profoundly influenced by their success metrics.

As content creation is on the rise, content creators' ability to manage and guide their practices has become more important than ever. Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) attempt to capitalise on this phenomenon by assuming a pivotal intermediary role between creators and various stakeholders. Gardner and Lehnert (2016) explore the role of MCNs in shaping the practices of content creators. MCN is a term originally coined by Youtube and refers to organisations that offer assistance to channel owners in areas such as 'product, programming, funding, cross-promotion, partner management, digital rights management, monetization and sales, and audience development' (Youtube, n.d.), in exchange for a certain percentage of the revenue from the creators.

MCNs provide several benefits, including access to production resources, assistance with legal matters, facilitation of valuable brand partnerships, and, notably, gaining audience share. Additionally, an essential role of an MCN should involve helping partners negotiate specifics such as brand collaborations and product placements. So far MCNs have been quite successful; however, there is increasing resistance from creators who feel that their needs are not adequately satisfied by the existing model. There have been ethical concerns regarding whether MCNs are really valuable, the extent of control exerted over their members, and the distribution of revenue among creators, YouTube, and the MCNs (Gahan, 2015; Gutelle, 2012; Shields, 2015). Therefore, content creators must be cautious and ensure they are well-informed when deciding to collaborate or even create an MCN. The authors also offer some suggestions on how creators can assess whether joining or forming an MCN will add value to their work, expand their reach, or boost revenue. The initial step in leveraging an MCN relationship involves establishing a sustainable business model, audience base, and diverse content portfolio prior to considering joining or creating a network. Besides, creators should consider the compatibility of their content with the diverse audiences within a MCN when integrating with it.

In a thematic analysis of online interactions among Instagram influencers, Cotter (2019) proposes that the strategies creators employ on social media referred to as 'gaming the system' can be reframed as 'playing the visibility game'.¹¹ Today algorithms play an important role in

¹¹ The tactics used by these creators are often regarded as 'gaming the system' by the media and scholars (e.g. Brown, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). In this scenario, 'gaming the system' means users leverage their understanding of an algorithmic system to achieve specific desired outcomes (Cotter, 2019).

shaping our online interactions and experiences (Beer, 2009; Bucher, 2012; Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Gillespie, 2014). Therefore influencers have actively engaged in understanding the algorithms which determine visibility on social media in order to expand their follower base.

Unfortunately, in reality, no one can truly clarify how the algorithms work. Social media platforms share few details about their algorithmic mechanism and sometimes intentionally obscure information related to their algorithms and update them frequently, which makes it difficult to pin down its actual mechanism. For example, due to the limited details Instagram reveals about its algorithms, many influencers are doubtful of claims concerning the algorithms (Cotter, 2019). They often question the validity of information shared by others, asking for ‘factual’ and ‘incontrovertible’ ‘evidence’. Moreover, influencers’ discussion over different tactics often escalates into a heated debate e.g., which interpretations of Instagram’s algorithms are legitimate. This contradiction is epitomised in creators’ two basic interpretations of algorithms (Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013), which also represent two general tendencies among creators. The first interpretation is that algorithms are capable of identifying tactics that circumvent genuine engagement, implying that influencers ought to concentrate on cultivating authentic connections with followers. Conversely, the other interpretation argues that ‘real’ relationships can be convincingly simulated in ways that algorithms cannot detect, where specific strategies can convey an illusion of popularity to the algorithms, even without many strong connections. Cotter (2019) categorises influencers who adopt these two different understandings as relational influencers and simulation influencers and explains them in detail.

Relational influencers believe in the ‘social’ aspect of social media, insisting on the importance of genuine or human connections. They also focus on producing high-quality, original content that resonates with other users. Many of these creators take pride in their creativity, using Instagram as a platform for artistic expression and for connecting with others who share their aesthetic sensibilities. On the contrary, similar to hackers, simulators explore opportunities based on their comprehension of the fundamental logic of codes (Galloway, 2004). Their simulation methods are similar to ‘cheesing’ in gaming, which involves using strategies that take advantage of the system’s strategic technical possibilities, not anticipated or explicitly prohibited by the game creators (Moeller et al., 2009, n.p.). Many influencers acknowledged that the simplest form of simulating engagement was through automation services or ‘bots’ that interact with posts or follow accounts. After the crackdown on bots, influencers developed new strategies to enhance engagement in ways that appear legitimate to algorithms, as one

influencer described (Melotti, 2017). A favoured method is participating in reciprocal engagement groups, also known as ‘pods’, where influencers gather in private group messages to share newly published posts so others in the pod can ‘like’ or interact with them. Pods rely on mutual exchange: members must interact with others' posts before sharing their own within the group. Content creator Olys shared her belief on the importance of the follower metrics, ‘Once that number hits 10k, whether your followers are organic or not, you can fully take advantage of having a business account’ (Duffy et al., 2021, p.4). For Olys, this was a major motivation for creators who applied seemingly surreptitious practices, like ‘buying followers’ or other methods aimed at ‘gaming the system’ (Petre et al., 2019; Ziewitz, 2019).

These two approaches are actually at odds with each other, reflecting creators' differing imaginations of algorithms, the result of the algorithmic opacity (Bucher, 2017). Creators rely upon algorithmic imaginaries or ‘folk theories’ (Eslami et al., 2016; DeVito et al., 2017) to make sense of purportedly ‘black-boxed’ algorithmic systems. This makes the discussion about the algorithm much more complex than it appears, and the effectiveness of its related strategies is also difficult to verify. Plus it is worth bearing in mind that even a small tweak in the algorithm can nullify the implicit knowledge the creators accumulate while gaming the system (Fung et al., 2022). However, despite the volatility of platforms’ algorithmic systems, creators whose livelihoods directly depend on this platform ecology, still invest time, energy and even money to learning strategies of growth and visibility in hopes of capitalise on this ‘algorithmic literacies’ (Klawitter and Hargittai, 2018), which is widely regarded as a necessary part of the job (Duffy et al., 2019; Duffy and Sawey, 2021). As suggested by Duffy et al. (2021), ‘platforms’ systems are inscrutable, yes; but perhaps it is more apt to frame them as more or less scrutable’ (p.9).

2.4.5 Engaging the audience

Berthon et al. (2007) suggest, users are taking an increasingly active role in co-creating everything from product design to promotional messages. As mentioned before, the core of this social media business model is to continuously create content to attract the audience and build one's own follower community. In the end, they are the ones who sponsor the work, either directly by purchasing merchandise and subscriptions or indirectly by viewing advertisements (Fung et al., 2022). As Gardner and Lehnert (2016) point out, an individual who engages with consumers every week, shares their interests and values, and establishes a personal connection with them will possess more referent power compared to even a well-liked and respected

celebrity. In a report by DEFY Media (2015), individuals aged 13 to 24 used the following phrases to describe YouTubers: 'just like me,' 'understands me,' 'someone I trust,' 'has the best advice,' 'doesn't try to be perfect,' 'genuine,' 'someone I feel close to,' and 'likes the same things I do.' This implies that these viewers establish a stronger personal connection with these content creators than that of traditional commercial brands or even celebrities. Through continuous daily interaction, the followers invest their emotions in this relationship and place trust in these creators. The intimacy of the relationship makes the followers more loyal and willing to sponsor the creators or try products recommended by the creators. This unique nature of the connection between content creators and their audience is one of new media's biggest strengths (Gardner and Lehnert, 2016). From an 'audience-centric' viewpoint, content is understood as a persuasive tool for communication to attract audiences, including strategies to enhance visibility (Cotter, 2019; Scolere et al., 2018), as well as maintaining, entertaining, and gaining the trust of followers (Audrezet et al., 2018; Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Baym (2015) frame this 'regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work' (p.16) as relational labour. He proposes that contemporary work is feminised and challenges traditional gender binaries, as working conditions such as precariousness and flexibility historically associated with women are now being experienced by men commonly in Western societies. As a result, 'artists are expected to be constantly accessible, especially on social media, offering unique and intimate moments to their fans' (Hillhouse, 2013). He concludes that new media platforms intensify the need for continuous relationship building and maintenance in ways resembling interactions with friends and family more than with customers and clients. Building audiences that form emotionally connected communities represents the future of work.

As artists venture into the realm of digital entrepreneurship, they encounter an additional challenge: the clash between the artistic culture as something sacred and immeasurable, and the pragmatic economic demands of entrepreneurial labour (Abbing, 2002; Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006; Lindström, 2016; Lingo and Tepper, 2013; McDonald et al., 2020; Warnke, 1993). By evaluating 40 English-language Patreon campaigns categorised under drawing and painting, Hair (2021) conducts a thematic analysis and reveals that digital artists employ

parasocial relational work to obscure the economic nature of crowdfunding.¹² He argues that Patreon artists are required to construct imaginary connections between themselves and numerous hypothetical, unmet individuals in a mass communication context, which can be understood as parasocial relational work. The term parasocial means, (1) an imagined relationship, (2) purposefully cultivated by a media (3) to strengthen their connection with a mass of unknown fans, (4) with economic benefit (typically loyalty) as the objective (Turner, 1993).). Thus, the term neatly encompasses the key aspects of relational work (Zelizer, 2005) carried out within a digitally-mediated, one-to-many environment.

However, providing intimate and multi-valued rewards comes with its own cost for creators. The fusion of oneself and one's work can lead to a self-as-product, characterised by an ongoing process of self-branding where not only creative content but also all observable social interactions are regulated by the creator's brand (Duffy 2017; Neff et al., 2005; Scolere, 2019; Senft, 2008). As one creative worker put it, 'You learn to objectify yourself' (Neff et al., 2005, p.15). Taken to extremes, self-branding jeopardises work-life balance and blurs the line between personal and public identity, with significant implications for the creator's well-being. Therefore, while intimacy may add value for fans, it also imposes invisible labour on creators, particularly those uncomfortable with disclosing personal information or constantly engaging with fans (Hair, 2021).

Fung et al. (2022) explore how platformisation reorganises our sense of everyday life. Collaborating with Douyin of ByteDance, they surveyed 2375 active content creators on the Douyin platform and conducted in-depth interviews with 50 of them. For any content creator, the relationship with the audience holds significant importance. According to their interviewees, besides gaming the algorithms, understanding one's audience is a common strategy to stay relevant on the platform. They argue that while there is the illusion of audiences being more connected than ever to content creators in terms of engagement, they are simultaneously abstracted through platform analytics, reducing them to mere statistics for creators' reference. Apart from this, the redefining platform time has also been shaping creators' lives. Modern

¹² Patreon is a subscription crowdfunding platform, that provides business tools for content creators to run a subscription service and sell digital products. It markets itself as spaces where digital creative workers can secure stable income from a loyal group of patrons, and where patrons can reap exclusive rewards and strengthen their relationship with beloved creators.

technologies like streaming have facilitated the near complete commercialisation of time. All time is now seen as potential earning time, with platform features enabling various monetisation methods alongside traditional merchandising efforts. For many, their labour is entirely dependent on the platform, in a sense, they become the hostages of the platform.

Shih et al. (2014) suggest that fans must be considered core to the business. By examining the social media practice of Xiaomi Corporation, a Chinese designer and manufacturer of consumer electronics and related software, home appliances, and household items, they highlight that the success lies in leveraging fans' power and contributions and propose a framework for building a powerful fan base as is shown below.

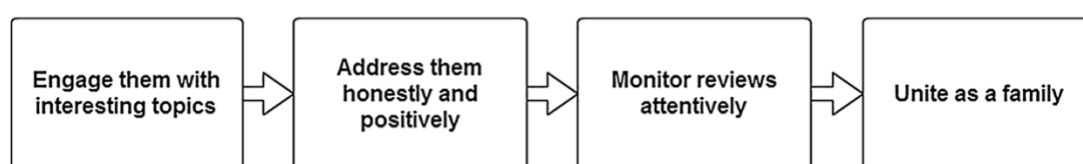


Figure 2.6 Framework to build fan power (Source: adapted from Shih et al., 2014)

2.5 Conclusions

This chapter first presented an overview of the understanding of the character under discussion and the key research themes around it. This research focuses on the creation of cartoon characters. These characters are understood as entities exist ‘above’ any specific media representation or textual context rather than being characters situated within the boundaries of media-constructed storyworlds (Bennett, 2017). Overall, the literature review illustrates that cartoon characters are effective marketing tools (Kirkpatrick, 1953; Callcott and Lee, 1994; Phillips, 1996; Spears et al., 1996; Phillips and Gyoerick, 1999; Garretson and Burton, 2005; Occhi, 2010) and are key to the success of animations (Calvert, 2008; Forgacs, 1992; Wasko, 2001; Zhou, 2005). While many researchers in marketing focus on elaborating the definition of spokes-characters (Callcott and Lee, 1995; Barbara Phillips, 1996; Hosany et al., 2013; Brown, 2014) and explaining why these fictional entities are so effective in communication, less attention has been paid to the creation of spokes-characters, as Hosany et al. (2013) note that ‘little research exists on how to build and sustain brand characters’ (p.48). Although a few scholars have introduced the benefits of utilising social media in character production and marketing (Miles and Ibrahim, 2013; Patterson et al., 2013), and Gough and Lee (2020)

explicate Sanrio's mix strategies in this digital environment from media conglomerate's perspective, the relationships between social media and fictional characters and how social media empowers creative individuals to create their own characters remains largely unexplored, highlighting a gap in our knowledge. To bridge this gap, this research seeks to develop an empirical framework for grasping and applying strategies for character design and promotion on social media, which can be helpful to both creative individuals and professional managers.

Then this chapter shifts the focus to the context in which this line of content creation emerges. Firstly, the term social media was defined and discussed. The rapid expansion of social media has influenced every facet of our lives and the associated platformisation 'is reconfiguring the production, distribution, and monetization of cultural content in staggering and complex ways' (Duffy et al, 2019, p.1). Unlike the rest of the world, the Chinese social media ecology is dominated by homegrown platforms like WeChat and Weibo (Cunningham and Craig, 2019a), which are often 'Swiss-army-style' apps that do almost everything. Another characteristic feature of China is the pervasive direct intervention of the state. Scholars also suggest that while institutional regulation and censorship are often thought to curb creativity, the state agenda of 'Internet+' and 'Mass Entrepreneurship' also facilitate both traditional media companies and grassroots individuals to establish and expand their online practices (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). Besides, the existing research also shows that platformisation has disrupted the traditional media ecology and brought three major institutional changes in market structures, governance frameworks, and data infrastructures (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Poell et al, 2019). Under this transformation, cultural production becomes increasingly platform-dependent (Nieborg and Poell, 2018) and has also nurtured new types of creative labourers, such as social media entertainers (Bishop, 2018; Cunningham and Craig, 2019), influencers (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2015), and an extensive group of value-generating but unpaid digital labourers (Terranova, 2000). Cunningham and Craig (2019a) position these creators at the centre of this Social Media Entertainment (SME) that operates differently from traditional media. Authenticity and entrepreneurial spirit are the two key characteristics of these creators (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020; Duffy and Hund, 2015). Through an impression of authenticity, creators foster a sense of intimacy, accessibility and relatability, which is the foundation of emotional connections with followers (Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013, 2015). This unique nature of the connection between content creators and their audience is one of new media's biggest strengths (Gardner and Lehnert, 2016). Berthon et al. (2007) suggest, users are taking an increasingly active role in co-creating everything from product

design to promotional messages. Follower community management arguably stands out as the most distinctive aspect of creators' development (Craig, 2019), which is framed as 'relational labour' (Baym, 2015). Being a professional content creator entails constantly producing content across diverse platforms, adapting to new technical configurations and algorithmic structures, and navigating their identities within commercial circuits, potentially at the expense of maintaining a cohesive community of followers around their activities and branded content (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020).

Some initial important patterns regarding the character creation on social media also emerged during the literature review. Based on the findings, three foundational constructs are derived, namely image, personality and connection and some other external factors are also identified. These will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

3 Preliminary Conceptual Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the preliminary conceptual framework derived from the literature review for explaining character creation strategies. The aim is to establish the basis for creating a framework that is based on empirical evidence. Constructed from the literature review, this preliminary framework guides both the following data collection and analysis.

3.2 Preliminary framework

A preliminary framework serves as a tool for understanding and depicting a phenomenon, and it may also help explain its development to a certain extent (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2002). Specifically, this framework is developed by assessing the important elements related to characters and content creation based on existing literature, offering direction for data collection and analysis. Existing theory therefore suggests the focus of the data-collection phase through research issues identified in the literature review (Perry, 1998, pp.790–791). As mentioned above, in Chapter 2 the literature review in relevant domains provided initial factors that could be valuable in delineating the process of character creation on social media. These initial factors are Image, Personality as well as Connection, coupled with some external factors including external environment and audience/followers participation. Each of these factors is discussed below. *Figure 3.1* illustrates the key factors (and their relationships) that will be adopted by the research.

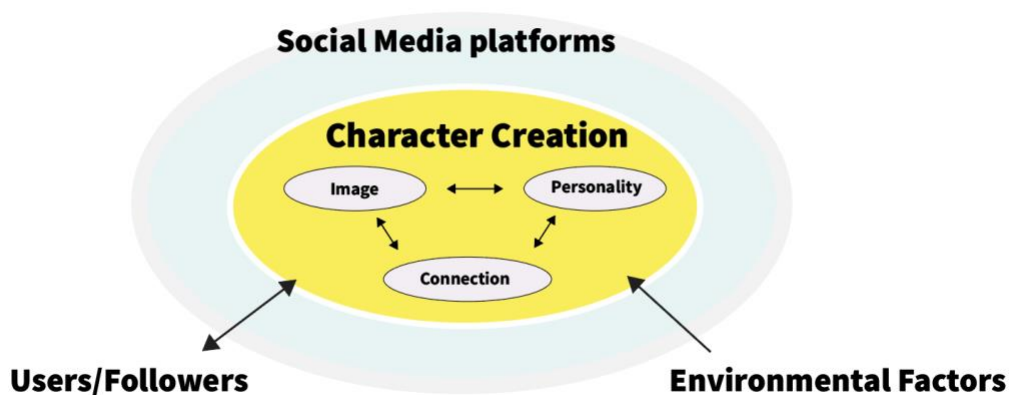


Figure 3.1 Preliminary conceptual framework

During the literature review, some recurring themes emerged, including image, personality, and communication. As previously discussed, literature on cartoon characters is scattered across various fields, each addressing different aspects, making quantitative analysis challenging. However, the researcher specifically referred to the following frameworks to validate the relevance of these recurring themes, as these scholars provide relatively comprehensive frameworks for understanding characters:

Callcott and Lee (1995) present a multi-dimensional framework for spokes-character definition, this framework includes 1) the physical Appearance of the character; 2) the Medium it appears in; 3) advertising or non-advertising Origin; and 4) spokes-character Promotion of the product (AMOP).

Callcott and Phillips (1996) identify four factors for creating a likeable character: 1) personality; 2) physical characteristics; 3) humour; and 4) consumer experiences.

Odagiri (2010) proposes three primary elements or levels to understand character, which are 'image, inner personality and meaning'.

Steinberg (2010) summarises seven principles for character merchandising, which is 1) connectivity, 2) (visual) stability and resemblance, 3) uniqueness of form, 4) face and 5) character–world relation.

Although these frameworks differ in their focal points and approaches, they all consider a character's image—referred to by some scholars as appearance or physical characteristics—as an essential factor (Steinberg's concepts of (visual) stability and resemblance, uniqueness of form, and face can all be interpreted as aspects of image). This emphasis is intuitive, as the character, being a visual subject—or what is often termed an image IP in China—undeniably relies on its image as a crucial attribute.

Secondly, both Callcott and Phillips (1996) and Odagiri identify personality as a fundamental factor (in Callcott and Phillips's framework the humour factor actually can be thought of as representing a specific type of personality). Callcott and Phillips even highlight that personality is the core of the spokes-character. Similarly, McMahan emphasises the interplay between visual image and personality, asserting that 'It is important that both aspects are present' (Phillips, 1996, p.150).

On top of this, Steinberg's (2010) concept of connectivity, while not explicitly included in other scholars' frameworks, emerged during the literature review as an implicit characteristic of characters—their ability to make connections or their communicative nature. In marketing studies, advertising cartoon characters are often regarded as tools to communicate with consumers (Kirkpatrick, 1953; Phillips, 1996; Phillips and Goyerick, 1999) and to establish personal connections (Callcott and Lee, 1995; Mize and Kinney, 2008; Yano, 2011; Gough and Lee, 2020; Belson and Bremner, 2004). In the context of today's media convergence, both Steinberg and Condry (2009) further argue that characters also function as tools for connecting various media and media series. Based on these insights, the researcher refers to this communicative ability of characters as connection.

As for other factors mentioned in these frameworks, they are largely too specific and lack broad consensus across the literature, they were not adopted in this study. Through the literature review, the three initial constructs of image, personality, and connection were ultimately identified.

3.2.1 Image, personality and connection

The image of the character, or visual representation, serves as a starting point in developing a social media cartoon character. The Image in this research refers to the visual features of the character, such as their physical appearance, clothing, facial expressions, body posture, and other visual characteristics, some scholars also use appearance or form to suggest the same meaning. Much literature suggests that image is an essential aspect of visual characters (Ball, 1976; Callcott and Phillips, 1996; Brockway, 2004; Deng, 2009; Steinberg, 2010; Kanai et al., 2014; Riyadi et al., 2016). Steinberg (2010) emphasises the important role of a character's unique form, noting that this uniqueness contributes significantly to its memorability and longevity. He also specifically highlights the paramount importance of the character's face, stating that the recognition and interaction with character incarnations depend as much on the distinctiveness of the character's face as on the uniqueness of its overall form. Kanai et al. (2014) also believe that the figure (the form of character) is the most important factor for making characters as consumers care most about the figure, not anything else.

As discussed in Chapter 2, these emerging social media characters are also called image-based IP (形象化 IP) in China, emphasising the crucial role of the image itself. Luanluan (乱乱) (Partner and COO of Block 12, for more information about Block 12 please refer to section

2.2.1) highlighted in an interview with Ciweigongshe (刺猬公社), ‘What we are doing, essentially reclassifies IPs in the animation and comic industry, one category is narrative-based IPs, and the other is image-based IPs’ (Zhao, 2019).¹³ She also believes that previously, the field of ACG (Animation, Comics, and Games) mainly focused on narrative-driven IP:

Narrative-based IPs attract users through their worldviews, and story plots. Their advantage is strong fan loyalty, with followers emotionally reacting to the storyline’s ups and downs. However, a disadvantage may be a lack of recognition for the characters within. Meanwhile, in the era of mobile internet, there is a trend toward short (短), flat (平), and fast (快) information consumption, leading to a gradual decline in the spread of narrative IPs.

In this context, character images today are becoming increasingly important and can be developed as an independent asset. For such images, ‘having distinctive features is more important than just looking good’, addressed by Luanluan. This is crucial for the dissemination of an image, especially in this era of information overload, where everyone is bombarded daily with various images and information. In such a scenario, recognisability is of utmost importance. These character images also seem to exhibit some new characteristics of the era, which, in Luanluan’s words, need to have a sense of Internet feeling (网感). Internet feeling is a commonly used term in the Chinese internet context, referring to the general ability to perceive and understand the internet. It essentially means having an intuition for the web, as described by Banpiesishu (2022). If you can quickly discern trends and user feedback online, and create targeted content accordingly to achieve your goals, then you can be considered a person with a strong sense of Internet feeling. It implies that such a character or content is very suitable for or simply going to do well on the internet, rather than following the standards of other traditional media.

¹³ Ciweigongshe, or Hedgehog Society, is a Chinese vertical media focusing on the digital content industry, covering areas such as internet news and social media, long and short videos, internet audio, film and entertainment, content entrepreneurship and self-media, subculture, and otaku culture.

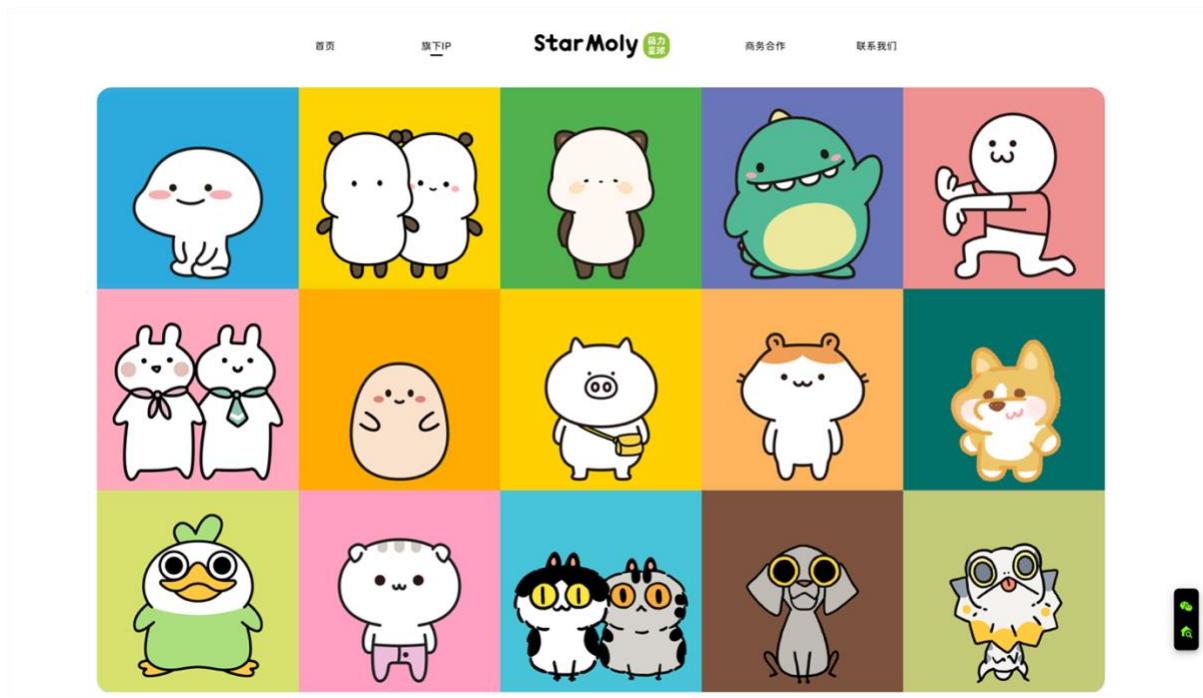


Figure 3.2 Starmoly official site exhibiting its characters (Source: Starmoly.com, n.d.)

However, a character with a sense of Internet feeling appears to be somewhat abstract and difficult to summarise. Upon observation, most social media characters share a common characteristic: their forms are simplified and stylised, often with exaggerated features like oversized faces/heads and miniature limbs (See *Figure 3.2*). Moreover, they tend to be very cute, seemingly influenced by the globally popular Kawaii (cute) trend. This fascination with cuteness or Kawaii emerged in the 1970s and dominated Japan's pop culture in the 1980s (Kinsella, 1996, p.220). It then began to spread to other East Asian regions, starting with Taiwan (Chuang, 2005, p.21). In some parts of East Asia, the public presence of cuteness far exceeds that of other regions worldwide, enjoying increasing public attention (Dale, 2016). Some visionary scholars have even claimed that cuteness has become the dominant aesthetic of digital culture (Wittkower, 2009) and consumer culture (Ngai, 2012) in the current century. Speaking of this, it is also worth clarifying that, as noted by Dale, regarding the meaning of cuteness, 'there are key differences in its specific linguistic usages' (2016, p.5). The English word 'cute', derived from 'acute', has negative connotations such as 'cunning' and 'shrewd' that are not found in continental European or Asian languages. In Asian languages, Kawaii or its Chinese equivalent, 可爱, literally means something is lovable, which is the stance of this research. On top of that, Callcott and Phillips (1996) also highlight that consumers like

characters who have a neotenous shape and are cute, employ miniature props, and effect a contemporary appearance.

In the meantime, the simplicity of most characters – being non-photorealistic, iconic entities – enables their ease of translation across media forms (Steinberg, 2010). Their visual inspiration often comes from various internet elements. For instance, the facial expression of Budding Pop is actually derived from popular Kaomoji found online. These inspirations give them a unique visual appeal and a sense of fun. Kaomoji is a Japanese word that is composed of kao (face) and moji (character), meaning face characters, which are emoticons made up of keyboard characters. In English, Kaomoji is often referred to as face marks, face symbols, text faces, or Japanese emoticons (Kaomoji, n.d.). Unlike Western emoticons where most attention is paid to the mouth, in Japanese emoticons the most important part is the eyes (*Figure 3.3*).



Figure 3.3 Examples of Kaomoji expressions (Source: kaomojikuma.com, n.d., organised by the researcher)

On the other hand, this simplified style is also mediated by the technological infrastructures of social media platforms and mobile devices. Today, over 55% of website traffic comes from mobile devices and 92.3% of internet users access the internet using a mobile phone (Howarth, 2024). Thus, social media characters are often designed to be more recognisable and visually

impactful on smaller screens and social media apps, meaning simpler, bolder designs are favoured.

At the same time, many studies indicate ‘personality’ is the most important trait in successful character creation (Callcott and Phillips, 1996; Phillips, 1996; Hosany et al., 2013; Zhao, 2019). The personality here refers to the psychological traits, behaviour patterns, emotional states, and ways of interacting with other characters that the character exhibits in the story or work. Odagiri (2010) suggest the character normally consists of three primary elements, image, inner personality and symbolic meaning. Hosany et al. (2013) generalise characters into three categories and argue that the three character categorisations share one common feature – humanised personalities – giving life to the characters and increasing their attractiveness. Brand characters demonstrate distinct, identifiable personality traits (e.g. Energizer Bunny as reliable, Snoopy as sincere) appealing to consumers. Callcott and Phillips (1996) suggest personality—is the core of the spokes-character. In the interviews they conducted, every respondent listed personality characteristics when asked why they liked a particular spokes-character. They conclude that first step toward developing likable spokes-character advertising is to choose or create a character that has a distinct, identifiable personality that embodies traits and characteristics liked by consumers. Kanai et el. (2014) use the intrinsic, (sometimes called the core of character) to refer to a similar concept. They suggest that the intrinsic decides characters’ identity and influences consumer’s attitudes to characters.

The advent of social media has given characters (or their creators) new ways of interacting and engaging with consumers, which better shapes their personalities as an ongoing process. As Costa (2010) notes, social media demands that characters are more three-dimensional than before. A few scholars have briefly introduced the benefits of applying social media in character creation (Gough and Lee, 2020; Patterson et al., 2013). Patterson et al. (2013) used the example of Aleksandr the meerkat to show how a brand character can exhibit various interesting traits through managing social media, building a follower base, and convincing people of Aleksandr’s real-life existence. Gough and Lee (2020) provided a real-life example of how Sanrio effectively used a combination of social media and real-world events to shape and promote their new character, Sanrio Danshi. The Sanrio Danshi Twitter (now X) account does not simply post pictures of merchandise, but images that combine product placement and a form of access to the closed world of the boys’ personal lives. This approach of layering

reality with fiction blurs the line between the fictional existence of the boys and the potential for a consumer to access this existence (Gough and Lee, 2020, p.10)

Connection is another important theme which examines the strategies used by creators to produce content on social media platforms. Steinberg (2009) calls fictional characters ‘connective technology’ as they can tie images, media platforms, things and consumers together. In a later study, Steinberg (2010) goes on to note that: ‘The character is never a stand-alone image or thing, but always facilitates a proliferation of media forms and objects that constitute an extensive, inter-communicating network’ (p.211). From users’ perspectives, this connection can be read as an imagined relationship (Gough and Lee, 2020) or emotional bond (Belson and Bremner, 2004) between the character and consumers. Yano (2011) discussed the successful strategy of Hello Kitty, centring on social communication. Through gifting, Hello Kitty achieved emotional connectedness between people. She emphasises ‘Directly addressing a human need for connection, Sanrio positions Hello Kitty as, in effect, an enabler of communication’(p.35). She also suggests the ownership of character products generates the possibilities of buying into and creating an intimate relationship with some part of what the figure represents. Gough and Lee (2020) also noted that the character Sanrio Danshi through combining a series of real and virtual content in their approach, creates an imagined relationship between the characters and the consumer, one which is mediated and expressed through the familiar practices of contemporary social media (p.11). This is the nature as well as the objective of character businesses, enabling communication across different media, between consumers and characters, consumers and consumers, and relentlessly pumping out new contents and products. Both the creation of appearance and personality goes towards making connections with the audience. This theme will mainly focus on how case study characters create and structure content to establish connection effects. The literature on content creation in general also suggests that a sense of authenticity is the characteristic of these individual creators (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Abidin, 2015; Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020). This authenticity helps these creators to form emotional connection with followers (Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013, 2015). Whether social media characters, created by individual content creators, possess this similar authentic quality will also be explored further in the empirical investigation.

At the initial phase, it is presumed that the creation of social media characters starts from building personality and image, which in turn together affect how to structure content and make

connections. The dual pointing arrow between personality and image illustrates that these two factors can influence each other.

3.2.2 Social media platforms

In addition to the aforementioned factors for character creation, the literature review on content creation in general also identified some other factors that could influence this creative process. The key infrastructure is social media platforms, which connect all the parties together and enable this individualised character creation to take place. The rise of social media and the platformisation brings forth a new model of cultural production, where users are placed at the heart of creation and granted more autonomy (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). In theory, the algorithm treats everyone equally, regardless of whether they are celebrities or everyday individuals. This system removed the traditional media's gatekeeper model, providing a model that appears more 'objective', as it is based on AI-driven analysis of user data instead of the 'subjective' choices of editors (*ibid.*). However, it is important to point out that although social media significantly shifts power into the hands of a vast number of users, they are not neutral entities (Fung et al., 2022; Duffy et al., 2021).

Overall, they determine the rules of the game and influence content creation in various ways. Platforms dictate the way end-users interact with each other and with complementors via graphical user interfaces (GUIs), providing certain affordances while limiting others, like the options to like, follow, rate, order, or pay, along with their respective metrics (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). This form of governance also is enacted through algorithmic sorting, prioritising some data over others, shaping what kinds of content and services are more visible and what stays out of sight (Bucher, 2018; Pasquale, 2015). At the same time, platforms also regulate how complementors access and engage with application programming interfaces (APIs), software development kits (SDKs), and data services (Langlois and Elmer, 2013; Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Moreover, platforms enforce governance through contracts and policies, in the form of terms of service (ToS), license agreements, and developer guidelines, all of which must be accepted when accessing or using a platform's services (Van Dijck, 2013). Sometimes platforms also influence content creation through more direct methods, such as direct content moderation, content restrictions, or the promotion of certain accounts (Gillespie, 2018).

3.2.3 Other factors

The creation of characters in particular and digital entrepreneurship in general are affected by economic and social factors specific to the context (Porfirio et al., 2016). The literature review also identified the impact of environmental factors on cultural production in China, including both state regulation and censorship as well as state initiatives that encourage individual entrepreneurship. These elements demonstrate the impact that a society's regulations, rules, social norms, and culture can have on the environment in which digital entrepreneurship can thrive. As suggested by Cunningham and Craig (2019a), state governance over creators can take the form of direct regulation or policy guidelines. More commonly, state governance over creators is indirect, primarily through the regulation of platforms, rather than through direct censorship as seen in authoritarian regimes like China. In China, institutional regulation and censorship from the government are pervasive. This kind of oversight and censorship affects internet content, freedom of speech, and information dissemination. The content created has to be in line with the authorities' expectation of 'what kind of stories should be told' (Lin and de Kloet, 2019, p.4). The Chinese government actively promotes a carefully crafted national image to wield 'soft power' internationally, while simultaneously cultivating a conforming culture that ensures social stability and national unity. Consequently, the platform governance is subject to state regulations, which promote and circumscribe platformed cultural production at the same time (ibid.). Cunningham and Craig (2019b) mentions that one of their key Chinese informants Cai meticulously outlines four strategies employed by the Chinese government to regulate online video content: 'blocking the channel; licensing (to be a legal video distribution platform, one needs a permit called an "Internet broadcasting license"); censoring (which effectively means most video platforms self-censor); and subsidizing (the government hires "Internet commentators," who are paid by the propaganda department to write comments favoring the government). If one or more of these interventions fail, the final option is banning outright'(p.243). How is character creation affected by or implicated in aspects of the larger national context/culture? The monodirectional arrow in the external environment means that this influence is mainly passed down to the creator's side. However, the extent to which this could influence character creation still needs more empirical research.

Many scholars (Edelman, 2010; Berthon et al., 2012; Kumar and Sundaram, 2012; Divol, Edelman and Sarrazin, 2012; Gensler et al., 2013) have noted users' important role on the internet in general and social media platforms in particular. As Berthon et al. (2007) suggest,

users are taking an increasingly active role in co-creating everything from product design to promotional messages. The advent of Web 2.0 and the social web has underscored the significance of amassing a user base for digital entrepreneurship, as highlighted by Sussan and Acs (2007). For social media content creators in general, the relationship with the audience is important (Fung et al., 2022). Afterall, followers are the ones who sponsor the work, either directly by purchasing merchandise and subscriptions or indirectly by viewing advertisements (ibid.). This community both consumes and influences the content at the same time (Gardner and Lehnert, 2016). Therefore content creators often feel compelled to interact with their followers as a form of ‘relational labour’ (Baym, 2015) to sustain a relationship with followers to build a career. Shih et al. (2014) also suggest that fans must be considered core to the business. Their engagement is at the heart of profit generation. Character creation on social media is also inevitably impacted by or proactively draws on users’/fans’ participation in its process. Connection is the stage where the interaction with users takes place. The dual pointing arrow here indicates that connection is influenced by and also influences users or fans. This part will also be explored further in the empirical investigation.

3.3 Conclusion

To sum up, the literature review identified several foundational factors are useful for understanding and articulating the process of character creation under discussion. The three foundational factors are image, personality as well as connection. At the same time, the literature review also led to the development of an preliminary conceptual framework consisting of the three initial factors, based on social media platforms, and two external factors: environmental factors and users’ participation. These foundational factors will facilitate the exploration of social media character creation in the empirical section of this study. Specifically, the preliminary framework and its components will not only guide the data collection process but also be employed as headings for organising data analysis and the concluding chapters. It is important to note that the Preliminary Conceptual Framework developed during the literature review serves as the foundation for the analytic model and does not presuppose any criteria for the selection of characters. Rather, it is designed to examine and analyse the selected cases, rather than to restrict the scope of the sample. The case selection and details on conducting the empirical research will be provided in the next chapter.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to present the research methodology, and the corresponding methods employed in this research. An important aspect of this research is that it focuses on an ongoing phenomenon in social media in which social media platforms and content are important research sources. The chapter begins by presenting the study's fundamental research philosophy and research strategy. The research design is then discussed, illustrating how these research questions are appropriately addressed. A brief discussion of the reason for choosing the case study design is then provided, along with the rationale for employing multiple case studies and an explanation of the criteria for selecting each case, followed by a detailed explanation of the data collection and data analysis processes and methods. The chapter concludes with the assessment of reliability and validity, while ethical considerations and risk assessment are considered as well.

4.2 Research Approach

The research adopts a qualitative approach as it attempts to explore and understand character creation on social media, an emerging phenomenon that has not received enough attention. Research approaches are plans and procedures for research that span the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. There are three basic types of research approaches: (1) qualitative, (2) quantitative, and (3) mixed methods (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). These three types are not as different as they appear to be. Qualitative and quantitative approaches should not be viewed as rigid, distinct categories, polar opposites, or dichotomies. Instead, they represent different ends on a continuum (Creswell, 2015; Newman and Benz, 1998). Patton (2015) suggests that qualitative research is very suitable for studying how things work, understanding context: how and why it matters and understanding people's perspective and experiences. Strauss and Corbin (2008) also emphasise that qualitative research allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), when a concept or phenomenon needs to be explored and understood because little research has been done on it or because it involves an understudied sample, then a qualitative approach should be adopted. Qualitative research proves particularly valuable when the researcher lacks knowledge of the key variables to

examine. Character creation on social media is an emerging phenomenon and has not previously been explored within a specific sample or among particular groups of people, and existing theories fail to apply to the specific sample or group being investigated (Morse, 1991). Therefore, the qualitative approach is necessary in this case.

When planning a study, researchers must carefully consider their underlying philosophical beliefs, which shape their worldview. They should align the research design with this worldview and select appropriate methods or procedures that reflect their approach in practice. The worldviews, the designs, and the methods all contribute to a research approach that tends to be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed, this will be explained in detail in the following paragraphs.

This study adopts interpretivism as the basic worldview. The term worldview in this research means ‘a basic set of beliefs that guide action’ (Guba, 1990, p. 17), as a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study. Others have called them paradigms (Lincoln et al., 2011; Mertens, 2010); epistemologies and ontologies (Crotty, 1998), or broadly conceived research methodologies (Neuman, 2009). Although philosophical ideas remain largely hidden in research (Slife and Williams, 1995), they still influence the practice of research and need to be identified. Interpretivists hold the view that reality is both multiple and relative (Bell and Thorpe, 2013). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), these multiple realities also depend on other systems for meanings, which make them even more difficult to interpret in terms of fixed realities. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. The knowledge developed in this discipline is formed through social interactions rather than being established and perceived through objective means (Carson et al., 2001). The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied. As this research explores character production in an increasingly complex digital world, in which many social actors interact with each other, the typical methods and standards of the natural science, such as positivism, are unsuitable. As Bell and Thorpe (2013, p.47) note, some other scholars use words like ‘social constructivism’ to describe generally the same philosophy.

This research’s primary focus is not to uncover universal laws, but rather to explore and comprehend the perspectives of grassroots creators on social media character creation. Besides, an interpretive worldview was selected because its capacity to explore the reasons behind occurrences, as well as their broader context and potential future developments (Easterby-

Smith et al., 2014). This is appropriate for investigating how characters are created by individuals on social media, a process that may not be readily discernible even to those actively engaged in it (Saunders et al., 2009). This approach centres around the specifics of a circumstance, the reasons underlying these specifics, and the subjective meanings that drive behaviours.

Based on the previous discussion, the research design chosen for this study is case-study research (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). It seeks to understand the complexity and specificity of particular instances rather than generalising across cases to create universal laws. Research designs are types of inquiry within qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches that provide specific direction for procedures in a research study. They have also been referred to as inquiry strategies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Various books have compiled and outlined these diverse types, providing comprehensive methodologies for specific qualitative inquiry approaches (Creswell and Poth, 2018). For instance, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) constructed a picture of what narrative researchers do. Moustakas (1994) delved into the philosophical foundations and procedures of phenomenology, and Charmaz (2006), Corbin and Strauss (2007, 2015), and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) explained the methodologies of grounded theory. Fetterman (2010) and Wolcott (2008) provided comprehensive overviews of ethnographic procedures and the multifaceted nature of ethnographic research strategies. Stake (1995) and Yin (2009, 2012, 2014) outlined the processes involved in conducting case study research.

According to Yin (2014), case studies are the preferred method, when, '(1) the main research questions are "how" or "why" questions; (2) a researcher has little or no control over behavioural events; and (3) the focus of the study is a contemporary (as opposed to entirely historical) phenomenon' (p.35). All of these align with the circumstances of this research. Regardless of the specific area of interest, the distinctive need for conducting a case study arises from the aim to understand complex social phenomena. In a word, a case study enables researchers to concentrate on a specific 'case' while maintaining a comprehensive and real-world viewpoint. In this study, social media characters, as relatively independent entities, are particularly suitable to be seen as cases to study. Furthermore, interpretivists argue that producing universal knowledge related to complex realms of human activity, such as character creation, is highly challenging, if not unattainable, due to their heavy reliance on individual involvement (Bell and Thorpe, 2013). In this study, this method was considered especially

appropriate, given the collaborative nature of social media in character creation. The details of the research design are provided in Section 4.3. The onion diagram (*Figure 4.1*) below summarises the research methodology employed.

The Research Onion

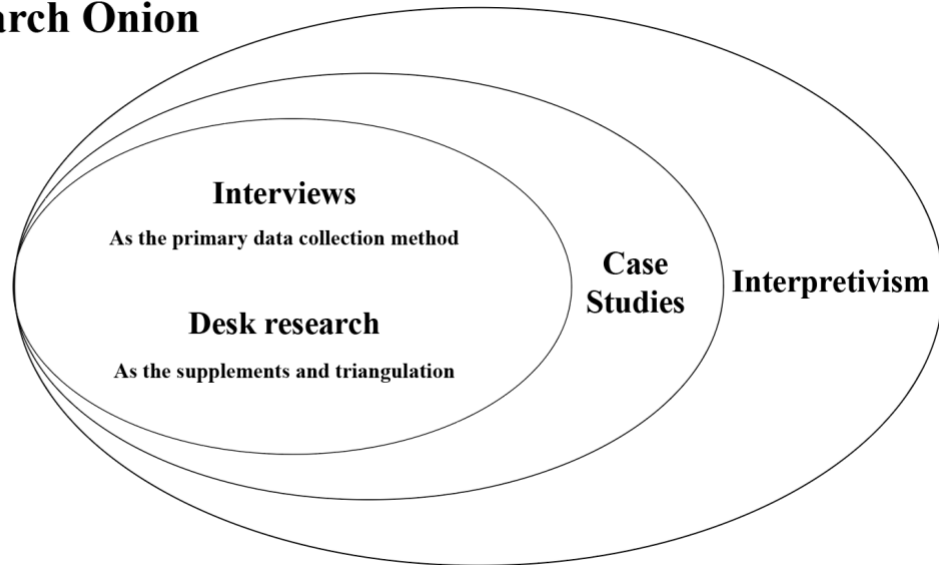


Figure 4.1 The research methodology diagram (Source: adapted from Saunders et al, 2009, p.108)

The final component, whether consciously or unconsciously considered in the research process, involves acknowledging the value standpoint. Simply put, this refers to the researcher's personal values, objectives, and convictions (Easton, 1995). The individual training and life experiences of researchers also play a role in shaping their chosen approach. Researchers acknowledge that their own backgrounds significantly impact how they interpret data, and they position themselves within the research to acknowledge that their interpretation is influenced by their personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Describing the value perspective can be challenging, but an effort is made here to explain the factors that have shaped the development of the research orientation.

The researcher's personal motivation for this research is two-fold. The first is creative or empirically oriented since the researcher himself is a creative practitioner and is interested to fully understanding as well as leveraging the opportunities offered by social media for character creation at an individual level. From a creative perspective, this research is important because an increasing number of content creation including character creation is being conducted across social media platforms in China and worldwide. Given its important role

today in cultural production, social media presents a fascinating area for study, making it crucial to develop a strategic approach for its use. A shared framework is essential for discussing and comprehending the process of character creation on social media, whether from a creative or managerial standpoint. To facilitate this, a conceptual framework for creating social media characters (*Figure 7.1*) has been developed, with related challenges explored through empirical findings. Chapter 8 delves deeply into creative insights particularly emphasising their contributions in the section under 'Creative Contributions of the Study'. The second is academically oriented, as establishing proper concepts and definitions holds significant importance. The researcher wants to grasp and articulate this line of character creation using practical and insightful concepts tailored specifically for this context. This value standpoint evolved throughout this research journey, shaped by feedback from the researcher's supervisors and insights shared by key informants.

4.3 Research Design

Research design are guided by the fundamental goal of improving the understanding of social media character creation by individuals. To achieve this, the adoption of a case-study design was considered appropriate. A case study conducts a detailed and in-depth inquiry of a particular phenomenon (case) in its real-world context, where the lines between the case and its environment are blurred, thus requiring corroborative evidence from different sources (Pettigrew, 1989; Yin, 2009). Given that the primary objective here is to gain insight into grassroots character creation in the digital age through extensive and diverse data sources, the case study approach is deemed suitable (Yin, 2009; Stake, 1995, p.39). The rationale behind utilising the case-study method will be explained in detail.

To begin with, it is crucial to acknowledge the philosophical foundations for this research again. These foundational principles recognise that reality is multifaceted and subjective (interpretivism), emphasising that knowledge is socially constructed rather than being objectively established (Carson et al., 2001). This orientation leads to a case-study research. In interpretive study, the understanding of the practice hinges on the perspectives of those who directly engaged in it (Bell and Thorpe, 2013). Secondly, the time-related aspect in this research also presents a complex scenario. Considering the fast-paced changes within the realm of social media, a cross-sectional case study was considered the best fit to explore this practice at a specific moment. Thirdly, the goal of this research is to create a model based on empirical evidence for creating characters on social media. Thus, the case-study method is suitable as it

allows for gaining insights, observing and developing explanation for phenomena in the real-life context.

4.3.1 Defining the the cases

The first thing in the case study research is to clarify what is meant by ‘case’, the unit of empirical analysis, as the terminology and associated concepts are often not clearly defined (Yin, 2009). In this dissertation, a case is an IP character (see discussion in section 2.2.1 for detailed explanation of this term) that is created and developed on social media in China by individual or grassroots creatives. This research examines four case characters, each demonstrating important facets of character creation on social media. For every character, the analysis centres solely on the content and creative process in relation to the creation and development, without taking into account any creations from third parties. For example, the fans or followers may create their interpretation or version of the characters in question, and this content will not be covered in this study.

4.3.2 Multiple case-study design

In this research, multiple cases are employed to explain the process of creating characters. While single-case studies can describe the existence of a phenomenon (Siggelkow, 2007), multiple-case studies typically provide a stronger basis for theory building (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; Yin, 1994). The theory is ‘better grounded, more accurate and more generalizable’ because ‘the propositions are more deeply grounded in varied empirical evidence’ (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p.27). Besides this, utilising multiple cases facilitates both comparisons and a expansive investigation of research questions and theoretical development (Eisenhardt, 1991; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

In this research, four social media characters are selected to demonstrate and explain the differences in the characters’ creations and developments on social media (the selection of these case characters will be presented shortly). It is worth noting that more cases might offer additional insight into the phenomena, which is acknowledged as a constraint of this study. On top of this, multiple cases have been chosen because a result of the exploratory nature of this study is that the researcher lacks a well-defined theory to substantiate a single case (Yin, 2009). According to Easton (1995), the employment of multiple cases might compromise the study’s

depth. However, in this investigation, the concern is addressed by conducting rigorous data collection from various sources, comprehensive analysis and thorough reporting.

Futhermore, evidence derived from multiple cases is frequently viewed as more convincing (Yin, 2009) as it offers readers robust, contextually grounded evidence. Every selected character plays a particular role in addressing the research inquiries. The first character, Aoda Cat, is a cheeky and cute character created and operated by the experienced independent artist Murongaoao. This creator refuses to collaborate with any companies and infuses his character with humor and mischievousness, embodying a rebellious spirit. The second character, Fan & Bao, illustrates the creation process of a healing-type character and focuses on the monetisation of brand merchandise. The third, Rumi, demonstrates a flexible collaboration between an artist and a company. The creator has transferred all the rights of the character to the company Moly Star but continued jointly developing it for a long time. Finally, the character of Toby provides an example of a character created by an amateur artist with no prior experience. It also showcases the creator's strategy of using the character to convey personal feelings. Thus, four characters offer richful and detailed insights into the process of character creation on social media.

Choosing cases is a crucial stage, and existing literature provides diverse perspectives on the selection process (Eisenhardt, 1991; Perry, 1998; Pettigrew, 1989; Stake, 1995;). Eisenhardt (1989) proposes choosing cases for theoretical purposes until saturation is achieved, while Pettigrew (1989) advises selecting cases where the object of focus is easily observable. Stake (1995, p.4) underscores the importance of maximising learning potential, and Perry (1998) suggests choosing cases abundant in information. The guiding principle shared by these scholars is to purposefully select cases with a theoretical basis to maximise learning potential. Moreover, it should be evident that the research contributes to the advancement of knowledge. These three methodological and theoretical criteria are assessed with consideration of the research's objectives (Stake, 1995, p.4). Nonetheless, the decision regarding the number and specific cases to be selected remains the researcher's own decision (Romano, 1989, p.36).

The case (character) selection in this research follows the theoretical sampling logic, which means cases are chosen for theoretical rather than statistical reasons (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling simply means that 'cases are selected because they are particularly suitable for illuminating and extending relationships and logic among constructs' (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p.27). The purpose of understanding and explaining character creation

and promotion on social media in China requires compliance with several important criteria: first, the cartoon character must be created originally via social media platforms from a bottom-up process in China, by individual creatives; second, the development and presence of this character on social media should be observable and social media data collection possible; third, that the creator or the promoter of the character should be available for interview.

In today's digital landscape, there are many individual artists creating characters on social media. Thus, the selection process cannot be based on evaluating every possible cases. For content creators on social media, the number of followers can be considered an important metric. Content creator's qualification can be evaluated by diverse metrics including likes, shares, comments etc., across which the abstracted number of the audience or users of the platform becomes the primary criterion (Fung et al., 2022). These numbers are commonly reviewed by advertising agencies and other organisations (Carah 2014; Gandini 2016; Hearn and Schoenho 2016). In the actual selection process, the researcher only paid attention to characters with at least 100,000 followers. Having 100,000 followers is considered a moderate level of achievement by many standards (such as those of platforms like Red and influencermarketinghub.com, *Table 4.1*) and these creators are generally regarded as mid-tier influencers. It is worth noting that there is no consensus or universal standard on how to categorise creators based on their follower count, and different platforms or companies may have slightly different classification standards. In China, Red is the only major platform that offers official suggestions on this issue, dividing creators roughly into three classes based on the follower number, namely, head creators (头部达人), waist creators (腰部达人) and tail creators (尾部达人) (Red official website, n.d.). Head creators have over 500K followers, waist creators between 50K and 500K, and tail creators between 5,000 and 50K. Most of the platforms like Weibo and TikTok do not openly divide influencer tiers, and WeChat accounts¹⁴ (微信公众号) do not reveal their follower base publicly (although one can get the number by using some third-party analytic tools). In this research, the researcher mainly refers to the Influencer marketing hub's (influencermarketinghub.com) categorisation standard. It is also

14 A WeChat public account is also known as a WeChat Official Account. Similar to a Facebook Page, it is a public profile which allows individuals or organisations to publish content, attract followers, and sell their products and services. It serves as a communication channel for account owners to influence and engage with their followers (Huang, 2021).

important to bear in mind that although this is an important metric for marketing practices, it might not fully reflect a character's content quality and artistic achievements.

Nano-influencers	1,000–10,000 followers
Micro-influencers	10,000–50,000 followers
Mid-tier influencers	50,000–500,000 followers
Macro-influencers	500,000–1,000,000 followers
Mega-influencers	1,000,000+ followers

Table 4.1 Influencer marketing hub's categorisation of social media influencers

Having 100,000 followers generally implies that the character's account is not newly created and has accumulated a significant follower base over some time. Additionally, the character's content has gained recognition from a substantial number of the audience, so their creative process and content are worth studying and investigating. The researcher then browsed information and content related to these characters on social media to identify potential subjects that can better reveal the creative process. In the first round, the researcher listed characters with a substantial follower base, including Budding Pop, Gon's Marmot, Ali the Fox, and others. They all have a long history and significant popularity. Subsequently, the researcher attempted to contact these creators through social media by sending private messages or emails. However, the response rate is very low: only the creator of Ali the Fox responded but he dropped out later. Consequently, the researcher had to expand the scope to try to contact more creators. After several rounds of such attempts, four creators who both met the criteria and were willing to participate the interview were confirmed. Unfortunately, one of the case characters, Fan & Bao, had its creator, Muzi, initially agree to an interview but later decided to withdraw due to personal reasons. In fact, during the case selection process, the overall response rate from these creators was less than ideal. As suggested by some researchers, China is a low-trust society (Kriz et al., 2014) and '... social research in Asian societies [particularly China] proves to be much more difficult in terms of collecting empirical data, [...] compared with Western societies' (Liu, 2009, p.63). Although many scholars have noted that building a 'guanxi tree' is a crucial aspect of collecting empirical data in China (Li, 2003; Tsui, 2009; Yang, 2002), this process is also associated with ethical implications and issues, as the

exchange of favours plays a key role in establishing guanxi¹⁵ (Luo, 2005). To avoid ethical complications and potential impacts on data collection, the researcher chose not to rely on such practices and instead respected the creators' decisions regarding participation.

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that in the case of Fan & Bao, the absence of direct interview data limited the researcher's ability to delve deeply into the motivations, strategies, and perceptions of the creator regarding the character's dissemination and audience reception on social media. This lack of direct insight rendered the reflective analysis of the design logic behind the creation more indirect, relying instead on publicly available information, such as the creator's statements on social media platforms, the character's published content, and related online literature. Consequently, this introduces certain limitations to the case study's validity. That being said, focusing on media texts or media works remains a common research method (Stokes, 2003). It provided useful comparisons and supplementary insights for analysing other cases, while also presenting an alternative approach to study these characters.

Table 4.3 offers a brief introduction to the case characters selected. It is also worth mentioning that the visual representations of these characters are similar to some degree, but this is actually due to a coincidence rather than a deliberate choice by the researchers. Although this visual representation style represents a popular trend in China, many other styles of social media characters exist. In a word, due to the theoretical sampling logic, the chosen characters may not represent the full breadth and diversity of social media character-scape and share some visual similarity.

¹⁵ Guanxi is a Chinese term which is broadly defined as personal connections and/or relationships (Kriz and Keating, 2010) and is perceived to be critically relevant within China today (Chen et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2005).





Case Character	Character Image	Time of Creation	Brief Description
Aoda Cat		2013	Aoda Cat was created by Murongaoao(慕容嗷嗷). It began with webcomics and gained popularity via stickers, followed by short-form animation and picture books. At the date of writing in 2024, Aoda Cat has accumulated 638k+ followers on Weibo (Weibo.com). https://weibo.com/murongaoao
Fan & Bao		2018	Fan & Bao are two cartoon characters created by Muzi (木子) on social media. At the date of writing in 2024, Fan & Bao have accumulated 273k+ followers on Weibo (Weibo.com). https://weibo.com/u/2797456760
Rumi		2015	Rumi is a cartoon character created by then college-student Chenxiaotao (陈小桃) in 2016. It started with sticker designs. At the date of writing in 2024, Rumi has accumulated 865k+ followers on Weibo (Weibo.com). https://weibo.com/mengrumi
Toby		2016	Toby, created by Hualishu (花栗鼠), made its debut on Weibo in 2016. This cartoon image went viral in 2017 in the form of short-form video series. To date it has achieved 1.1 million+ fans and almost 60 million views on Weibo in total (Weibo.com). https://weibo.com/babychara

Table 4.2 Case characters selection and introduction

Extensive material related to the characters was gathered and examined to gain a deeper understanding of these characters (see the next section and Chapter 5 for details). All four case characters maintain a presence on social media platforms with a wide range of content available. These creators simultaneously manage multiple Chinese social media accounts, creating various forms of content such as stickers, webtoons, short videos, profile pictures, and so on. They actively engage in cross-brand collaborations and produce a diverse range of branded merchandise. These characters also have distinct personality traits, and their creators represent various different creative approaches. Given the exploratory nature of this research, four case characters were considered sufficient to offer extensive knowledge on character creation and promotion on social media in China.

4.4 Data Collection

Access to data is an important issue in case-study research. The researcher needs to consider the advantages and drawbacks associated with every data-collection method (Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Yin, 2009). *Table 4.4* presents the types of data identified and used in this research. This table depicts the various data sources used during the selection, research and analysis of case characters. Literature searches were carried out in both academic and business-oriented databases. The design and assessments of interviews were based on findings from the literature review. Social media content and other online resources are collected from each of the case characters. Next, the main data collection method, the interview design, will be explained in detail.

Case Character	Data collection methods	
Aoda Cat	Social media content (Weibo, Red, Douyin and WeChat)	Interviews with external experts Senior professionals in creative industries (10)
	Online resources (Baidu Tieba forum, articles and news, etc.), print books	
	Interviews with its creator (10-2-2023)	
Fan & Bao	Social media content (Weibo, Red, Douyin and WeChat)	
	Online resources (articles and news, etc.) , promotional materials	
Rumi	Social media content (Weibo, Red, Douyin and WeChat)	

Toby	Online resources (Baidu Tieba forum, official websites, articles and news, etc.), print books	
	Interviews with its creator (19-4-2023)	
	Social media content (Weibo, Red, Douyin and WeChat)	
	Online resources (articles and news, etc.), print books	
	Interviews with its creator (6-4-2023)	

Table 4.3 Data collection methods of case characters

In this research, interviews were selected as the primary data collection method because they provide a means to explore the varied perspectives and perceptions of various stakeholders, as highlighted by Daymon and Holloway (2002). Yin (2008) also emphasises that interviews are among the most important sources of information in case studies. In general, interviews are designed to gather individuals' experiences and insights (Patton, 2002), which is the focus of this study. Moreover, interviews are particularly suitable when the research delves into an unknown territory with unpredictable research outcomes. Given the expectation that the research subjects, namely social media and character creation strategies, would yield multifaceted responses and might need clarification and further elaboration from the participants, the interview method was deemed the most suitable approach for this study.

Yin (2008, 2009) suggested that a prevalent form of interviews is the in-depth interview. For this study, in-depth interviews were selected as they enables the researcher to inquire about both the factual aspects of the phenomenon and participants' thoughts on it. In certain instances, participants can be encouraged to share their own perspectives on specific events, which can be used as a starting point for deeper exploration. Consequently, interviews may be conducted over a longer period rather than in one single session (Yin, 2009).

The interviews conducted in this study use a semi-structured method (Yin, 2009; Arksey and Knight, 1999). This type of interview was employed as it gives researchers to flexibly collect data during interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Daymon and Holloway, 2002;). While the interview themes were pre-decided, covering topics such as social media, character design, and content creation, the questions and interview script were designed with a flexible structure, enabling adjustments or improvisation during the interview process (Hirsjärvi et al., 1997). Yin

(2009) suggests that case study interviews are more like guided conversations than rigid inquiries. Put differently, while a logical progression of questioning was pursued, the precise order of questions during a semi-structured interview was typically adjustable rather than fixed (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). This method offered better chances for interpreting responses compared to questionnaires and enabled the interviewer to respond and seek further insights when important information emerged, as suggested by Hirsjärvi et al. (1997) and Daymon and Holloway (2002). Furthermore, it allowed for the emergence of new themes throughout the process which may not initially have been considered but were essential to research themes (Patton, 2002).

The interviews were arranged into two stages. The first stage of the interviews was conducted with the creators of these selected characters (Murongaoao, Chenxiaotao and Hualishu). The goal was to gain direct insights from these creative creators into the character creation and development. After this, ten interviews with external experts outside the case characters were conducted to provide further insight into social media character creation. The aim of these external expert interviews was to validate and supplement the findings emerging from the case characters. These external experts come from across the world (6 based in China, one in London, one in Berlin, one in New York and one in Mumbai) and include experienced character designers as well as content creators on social media with relevant insight and expertise in the content creation in general or character creation on social media in particular. The informants were recruited through the researcher's personal and professional connections by a snowballing method. For example, Li Mengke was a co-worker with the researcher back in China a few years ago. Later on, she quited the job and began creating characters and cultural content on Red (小红书) and accumulated over 100,000 followers along with significant related experience. Therefore, the researcher contacted her and invited her to share her thoughts on character creation on social media. During this process, the researcher sent the information sheet (Appendix 3) and consent form (Appendix 4) to the interviewees, so they could understand the nature of this research and decide whether to accept my request. Following the interview with Li, the researcher asked her to recommend other relevant people to be interviewed who have the expertise and knowledge important to this research. So she recommended a suitable candidate, Zeng Zhou, to the researcher. The researcher promptly conducted a brief assessment of Zeng's background and established initial contact to ensure that the recommended individual was the most appropriate. After conducting an interview with Zeng, he, in turn, recommended another suitable candidate named Apple (online alias) to the

researcher. This process continued in a similar manner. If the expected type of insights were not obtained, additional interviews were held with other relevant people. The following *Table 4.4* introduces the selected key informants (Some artists prefer online alias to represent themselves as specified in the consent forms). While experts from China are undoubtedly more familiar with the phenomena under investigation and possess advantages in analysing the localised practices and cultural contexts of character creation, including experts from other regions offers additional value. Their cross-cultural perspectives can provide insights into both the universality and distinctiveness of character creation, enriching the research with alternative viewpoints and comparative analysis. This broader engagement helps to supplement and refine the researcher's interpretations, ensuring that the findings are not confined to a single cultural or regional perspective.

External Experts	Role	Introduction
Li Mengke (Interview: 14-6-2023)	Social Media Content Creator (Based in Guangzhou, China)	An independent content creator primarily produces content in the form of journaling, with a following of over 100,000+ fans on Red (小红书).
Zeng Zhou (Interview: 1-8-2023)	Entrepreneur, Character Designer (Based in Chengdu, China)	Founder of Chengdu Qingshan Zhiyu Culture and Technology Co.,Ltd., creator of characters and collectables.
Apple (online alias) (Interview: 22-7-2023)	Independent Artist (Based in Chengdu, China)	Independent digital artist now, formerly employed at NetEase Games with 11 years of industry experience.
Sun Qi (Interview: 10-8-2023)	Senior Visual Designer (Based in Shanghai, China)	Senior visual designer in the TikTok creative team at Byte Dance, formerly worked at Tencent in the Musician Interaction Design Team, with lots of experience in designing social media apps.
Bobo (online alias) (Interview: 25-8-2023)	Independent Illustrator (Based in London, UK)	A London based independent Illustrator. Her works mostly originate from her own perspective, with herself as the main character in

		her creations. She actively promotes her works on various social media platforms.
Juanfazi(卷发子) (online alias) (Interview: 24-7-2023)	Social Media Content creator, illustrator (Based in Chongqing, China)	Illustrator with ten years of experience, currently employed at Socialab Chongqing, also a fashion content creator on Red.
Shiwu(十五) (online alias) (Interview:5-8-2023)	Character designer (Based in Chongqing, China)	Independent Brand IP designer and blind box designer. Works include the ‘Rhino Little Shiwu’ IP series and the ‘Savage Growth’ series of blind boxes.
Alex Kiesling (Interview:29-7-2023)	Character designer, illustrator and animation director (Based in New York, USA)	A Brooklyn based illustrator and animation director. His has done commission work for many notable brands and publications such as Google, Adobe, Apple, Robinhood, <i>The New York Times</i> , etc.
Mira Felicia Malhotra (Interview: 9-8-2023)	Principal designer and founder of Studio Kohl (based in Mumbai, India)	The principal designer and founder of Studio Kohl, a boutique design house based in Mumbai. She also creates her own character illustrations and other forms of character works and shares them on her social media accounts, with 100K+followers on Instagram.
Lars Denicke (Interview:1-9-2023)	Co-founder of Pictoplasma (based in Berlin, Germany)	The co-founder of Pictoplasma, the world’s premier platform for contemporary character design and art which debuted in 2004 and is held on an annual basis.

Table 4.4 External experts introduction

At last, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Although more interviews were possible, the amount of information gathered for the analysis of social media character creation was adequate, making additional interviews unnecessary. All interviews were conducted online

via different platforms according to interviewees' preferences. The use of online interviews in social science research has become more widespread over the last decade (Hooley et al., 2011; James and Busher, 2009; Salmons, 2015). Conventional social science research tends to favour face-to-face interviews as the ideal qualitative interview methodology, relegating other modes to the 'second-best' choice (Holt, 2010). However, this perspective assumes that all researchers have access to similar time frames, budgets and resources, which is seldom the case in reality. Fortunately, advancements in technology, including online videoconferencing platforms, have opened new and valuable possibilities for qualitative research (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; James and Busher, 2006; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2008). In the past decade, online research methods have gained acceptance as a legitimate approach to data collection in the field of social science, removing some of the concerns about the suitability of established research methods for technologically mediated interactions (Hine, 2005, p.1). Indeed, the use of an Internet-mediated methodology is moving from being considered novel and innovative into the mainstream and routine (O'Connor and Madge, 2018). Lobe et al. (2020) also suggest that online research is a valuable tool in the face of social distancing protocols.

In this study, the researcher is based in London, while the primary participants reside in China, and some external experts are located around the world. Conducting face-to-face interviews would require time and financial budgets that exceed the resources available to this study. Additionally, due to the recent recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, long-distance travel and in-person meetings could pose risks of infection for both the researcher and participants. Furthermore, some participants, for reasons of shyness or personal preference, find online conversations more comfortable and conducive to open discussion. For instance, one of the external experts, Bobo, despite living and working in London where the researcher is based, insisted on conducting the interview online. Taking all these factors into consideration, the researcher adopted online interviews as the primary mode of interview.

Today internet technologies like Skype or Zoom offer many advantages, including low costs, ease of access and minimisation of ecological dilemmas, while the live video feed helps address challenges related to spatial constraints and physical interaction. O'Connor et al. (2008) suggest that online interview methods can overcome geographical distances, enabling access to participants who might otherwise be inaccessible or difficult to reach. However, the downsides of online interviews include difficult cross-cultural logistics (Lawrence, 2022). This may include language barriers, cultural differences, time zone issues, and other related cultural

and social considerations. Since the researcher is from China, communication with participants in China poses no issues. Other participants outside of China are proficient in English, eliminating language barriers. In this study, one of the main challenges lies in managing time zones, as everyone operates in different time zones. Coordinating a suitable interview time becomes important. The researcher initiated discussions and communication with participants to find a mutually convenient time. However, if a participant could only participate at a specific time due to personal reasons, the researcher respected their choice and worked around their schedule. For example, during the interview with Aoda Cat's creator, Murongaoao, the interview had to take place at 3:00 AM GMT to accommodate his schedule. But such instances were rare, and in most cases, a mutually convenient time were negotiated.

Besides this, technological difficulties and digital competencies is another issue for online interview here. O'Connor et al. (2008) highlight that a participant's technological competence can affect the researcher's access to them (Seitz, 2016). Fortunately, in this era of widespread smartphone usage and social media, all the participants are proficient in using smartphones and some basic social media apps. To ensure participant preference and competence, the researcher asked participants to select which computer-mediated communication (CMC) platforms they would feel comfortable using before the interview and used the participant's preferred mode accordingly. For all the participants from China, WeChat was used as the platform for interviews.

An important issue worth noting here is conducting interviews with participants from Mainland China generated some significant cultural-specific challenges (Lawrence, 2022). Firstly, the Chinese government's online censorship has led to the banning of many Western online platforms in China, limiting the available interview platforms. Secondly, the ubiquitous online monitoring on Chinese media platforms imposes restrictions on the kind of speech that can be expressed through these platforms, which must avoid controversial or politically sensitive topics. Given that participant and researcher safety should be the top priority, questions had to be carefully designed to facilitate data collection while adhering to Chinese legal standards.

As platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Google Hangouts, or Microsoft Teams are all banned in China, of the available options, Skype, Zoom, and WeChat were considered the most suitable choices due to their convenience, cost-effectiveness, and user-friendliness. When the researcher inquired with participants from China, they all independently chose WeChat as their communication platform of preference. Therefore, the researcher respected

their preference and used WeChat for the interviews. WeChat, owned by Tencent Holdings Ltd., is the most widely used social media application in China. With over 1.5 billion registered users, it encompasses a wide range of utilities beyond chat messaging, including calls, video, photo sharing, music, shopping, banking, and more (Tencent, 2019). WeChat has become an integral part of daily life in China and is a convenient tool for remote research owing to its widespread usage (Sie et al., 2016). While the platform's familiarity and ease of use were clear advantages for participants, the researcher faced challenges related to WeChat's monitoring, censorship. As for how to address monitoring and censorship issues on this platform and in China, there is a more detailed discussion in the subsequent risk assessment section.

Although videoconferencing was the preferred method for conducting online interviews, the use of video during these interviews was carefully considered to ensure participant comfort, anonymity, and ethical compliance (Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Seitz, 2016; Sipes et al., 2019). Hanna (2012) points out that participants may feel more at ease with online interviews conducted through Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services, as they can remain in their preferred and safe environment. While the researcher personally favoured using video to observe background settings and nonverbal cues, the decision regarding video usage was left to the participants on the day of the interview. Participants from China expressed discomfort with using video during the interviews, and the researcher respected their choice, choosing not to enable video cameras.

The topics for the interviews were designed to cover a variety of essential themes including the creator's inspiration, strategies, and role of social media during this process. The interview questions were developed based on the preliminary conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 3. The first section, Background, consists of general questions aimed at gathering contextual information about the interviewees. The second section, Character Creation, focuses on the concepts of image and personality, exploring the design and creative processes behind the characters themselves. The third section, Character Development, and the fourth section, Character Promotion, centre on connection, social media platforms, and external factors, examining how characters are further developed to engage audiences, the role of social media in this process, and the impact of external influences on promotion strategies. Finally, the fifth section, Reflection, invites participants to share their personal insights and experiences regarding the entire process. However, the interview questions remained flexible, enabling adjustments and improvisation if needed (Yin, 2009; Hirsjärvi et al., 1997). Put differently, the

researcher only provided an outline of the topics and themes, while encouraging interviewees to express themselves freely. During the interview process, if there is any omissions or the interviewee seemed to avoid certain topics, the researcher would look for opportunities in the subsequent conversation to gently remind the participants. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 5 and Appendix 6 (for creators and external experts) and an example of interview transcripts in Appendix 7.

All the interviews were recorded, with the interviewees' consent always obtained beforehand. During the interview, the researcher often took notes, which were compiled together later. After each interview, initial impressions and reflections were noted down.

Many scholars suggest that despite the possibility of conducting case studies with only one source, the significant strength of this approach lies in the ability to employ various sources of information (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2008). By using different data sources together, triangulation was achieved to enhance the credibility of the results and enable deeper interpretation through various data sources (Denzin, 1989). The use of multiple sources of data helps mitigate potential bias that might arise from relying on one single method (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the researcher collected material from various sources, especially the social media content of these case characters. This social media content played a crucial role in selecting the cases, identifying interviewees, and analysing the character-creation process and strategies. The initial distinct stage involved collecting academic and managerial literature related to the case characters, although there is not much literature studying these characters directly. Then the researcher reviewed books and articles related to case studies and interviews.

After this, online news portals, online databases and social media were also searched to gather more information about the chosen characters. This information provided valuable context information for the interviews and was referenced at various points later in the analysis and discussion of these characters. Furthermore, social media content from these character accounts was collected and analysed both before and after the interviews. This ongoing analysis helped the researcher better understand the characters before the interviews and facilitated the comparison and validation of the creators' discourses afterwards.

In summary, the selection of interviewees was the result of both the theoretical criteria and the actual availability of the potential participants. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the case characters creators and external creatives. Relevant information from

multiple sources was also collected and compiled accordingly. The following section will present the methods of analysis.

4.5 Data Analysis

The analysis of case-study data is a crucial phase of the entire research strategy. As stated by Stake (1995), the primary purpose of the analysis phase is to interpret the collected data and give meaning to it. However, it is worth noting that various sources illustrate that the analysis of case-study data lacks comprehensive elaboration (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.16).

When it comes to analysis, one common strategy is to employ theoretical propositions that are based on existing literature, while the other is to develop a case description (Yin, 1989, pp.106-107). A third approach is to combine both theoretical propositions and case descriptions together, evaluating and reviewing them in light of each other. In this study, the third approach was adopted. The researcher has created case descriptions based on empirical and theoretical insights, aiming to generate propositions from each case study. These propositions can serve as a basis for future research.

To analyse qualitative data is 'the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data' (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p.112). To be more specific, this process can be broken down into five key phases: organising data, generating categories, themes and patterns, testing the emergent hypotheses against the data, searching for alternative explanations of the data and writing the report (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p.114). This aligns with Yin's (1989, p.105) perspective on this matter.

The researcher began the analysis by acquiring the necessary skills for conducting interviews and analysing the data. Following the completion of the interviews, each interview was transcribed verbatim (for an example of the transcript, see Appendix 7). As suggested by Arksey and Knight (1999, p.141), transcription plays an important role in organising and managing data, serving as a form of interpretation of the actual interview. Initially, complete verbatim transcripts were generated, and as the analysis progressed, non-significant words or natural pauses were omitted from the transcriptions. However, it is important to note that the transcripts were not condensed. For the sake of readability, minor edits have been made to the excerpts presented in this dissertation.

During the data analysis process, the researcher did not use analysis tools such as NVivo. This decision was based on the manageable size of the dataset and the nature of the data, which did not necessitate software for efficient processing or coding. By employing manual methods, the researcher was able to engage more deeply with the data and intuitively identify emerging patterns and themes. This hands-on approach also fostered greater familiarity with the dataset and increased confidence in the analysis process.

Initially, the researcher thoroughly reviewed the interview transcripts, social media content, and other online data sources, using handwritten notes and paper-based materials for annotations. This phase focused on familiarising with the data and identifying keywords and preliminary themes relevant to the research questions. For organising and structuring the data, the researcher mainly relied on spreadsheets (e.g., Microsoft Excel) as a supporting tool. In Excel, data points were labelled, and codes were systematically categorised into tables for easy access and manipulation. To help visualise relationships between themes, the researcher manually sketched frameworks and models on paper, illustrating the connections among codes, themes, and dimensions in a clear and straightforward manner. This approach allowed for a more organic exploration of the data and the development of conceptual insights.

In the actual data analysis, the researcher referred to Gioia's methodology (2012) which is designed to bring 'qualitative rigor' to research analysis. Gioia suggests a three-step systematic approach to conducting the data analysis wherein first-order codes, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions are developed step by step. In the first-order coding stage, the researcher adhered to informants' voices and made little attempt to distil categories. In this stage, the focus was on the familiarisation with the empirical data. The collected materials, including social media content, various online sources and the interview transcripts, were all reviewed repeatedly (Miles et al., 2014). This process marked the initial steps in handling the raw data, with the purpose being the extraction of meaningful and significant information (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.430). This led to the emergence of a large number of descriptors and categories and a comprehensive compendium of first-order terms was developed. Then the first-order codes were organised into a manageable number, that is, second-order themes which might help describe and explain the phenomena on the theoretical level. This phase is also referred to as the process of data reduction: the 'process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the 'raw' data as part of analysis' (Miles and Huberman, 1984,

p.21). After this, the second-order themes were further distilled into overarching theoretical or aggregate dimensions.

The process of generating second-order themes and aggregate dimensions involves several steps, including sorting, reducing, and aggregating first-order codes. This is an iterative exploration, revisiting and re-evaluating the emergent data, themes, concepts, and dimensions and the relevant literature, preliminary conceptual framework to gain a deeper understanding and to gain potential patterns, connections or new insights. Classification is very crucial in data analysis (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973; Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, pp.45–46; Arksey and Knight, 1999, pp.150–155). The basic task in the analysis of qualitative data can be said to be that of discovering significant classes of things, persons and events and the properties which characterise them (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973). With the first-order codes, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions, a data structure (see *Table 4.5* for an example of this data structure) is set up to illustrate the connections among all the terms, themes, and dimensions involved (Gioia, 2021).

Example of Data Structure		
First-order codes	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 72-hour working rule. • Stay close to life. • Keep absorbing emerging things and methods. ... 	Working style	Creator
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neutral gender image may appeal broader audience. • Animals people are familiar with can be more versatile. • Cat can take on complex personalities. 	Character Image	Character Creation

...		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative fleshes out the character. • Stickers is emotional expression. • Stickers have the ability to self-circulate. ...	Light content creation	Character Creation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Followers come up with interesting ideas. • Accept followers' suggestions and comments. ...	Suggestion/Feedback	Relationship with Followers

Table 4.5 Example of data structure

The data analysis, including reading, sifting and generating of themes, was conducted across all cases. While there were some minor variations in the process between the cases, in general, they were similar. Some of the earliest identified themes underwent some changes, but the majority remained the same through the process. After the data collection and reduction were done, case narratives were written to display the data (Miles and Huberman, 1984, pp.21–22).

The analysis was conducted both within and across cases. Throughout the sorting and condensation of interview data, as well as the development of case-study descriptions and character design processes, the connections between interview data and existing research were taken into account. The within-case analysis considered the internal dynamics of each case, investigating how and why things are going as they are. Following the completion of these case descriptions a detailed cross-case analysis was conducted by pooling segments from each case description to facilitate the comparison and contrast of recurring patterns and themes. Once the data has been collected, reduced, analysed and presented in narrative forms, the next step is to

draw final conclusions and validate them. Conclusions are an integral part of the analysis process and emerge both before and after data collection, as well as during the phases described earlier (Miles and Huberman, 1984, pp.21–23, Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp.428–429).

The analysis phase was completed by documenting the four cases detailed in Chapter 5. While numerous methods exist for presenting a case report (Marshall and Rossman, 1989), this thesis attempts to bridge theory and practice by integrating a range of sources and interview narratives. The purpose of the case descriptions is not only to recount the historical context but also to shed light on the present status and future developments of these characters. The researcher has also included excerpts from the interview transcripts to provide further insights into relevant aspects.

4.6 Reliability and validity

The quality of research is evaluated through the lenses of validity and reliability (Creswell, 2014). This section outlines the understanding of validity and reliability in this research and describes the efforts taken to strengthen them at every stage of data collection and analysis.

The literature presents a variety of discussions on the terms 'validity' and 'verification' (see e.g. Cook and Campbell, 1979; Yin, 2009; Robson, 2002; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2010; Silverman, 2010). According to Saunders et al. (2009), validity is concerned with whether the findings are really about what they appear to be about. Yin (2009) suggests there are four tests to consider for the quality of empirical social research: construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability.

Construct validity refers to the suitability of the methods employed for the specific concepts under investigation (Yin, 2009, p.40; Gummesson, 2000). Internal validity, relevant only to explanatory or causal case studies, is not a critical consideration for this thesis as it does not seek causal links or test hypotheses in a single case study. Nevertheless, external validity holds great significance as it shows the credibility of findings and the extent to which they can be applied beyond the study's scope (Yin, 2009). It is worth noting that case studies are extended to theoretical propositions rather than populations or universes (Yin, 2009).

In this dissertation, the research philosophies, research aims, research design and case-study strategy are carefully planned and consistently presented. The key terms spanning from cartoon

character, social media, to the factors in the preliminary conceptual framework are clearly explained, and followed by the identification of the operational measures that match these concepts.

The validity of case studies often hinges on the alignment between theory and reality (Gummesson, 2000). In this research, the alignment is ensured by iteratively refining the evolving conceptual framework based on the empirical data under investigation. In the development of the empirically grounded conceptual framework, careful attention was given to ensuring that the concepts employed in the preliminary framework and subsequent conceptual model were logically consistent, pertinent, and testable (Eisenhardt, 1989, p.548). The conceptual framework was crafted to provide a comprehensive description of the phenomenon by distinguishing the factors and their attributes (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). This prevented the formation of contradictory relationships among the constructs employed in the empirically based conceptual framework. On top of that, a diagram was created to visually represent these factors and their characteristics, which helps clarify the researcher's own thinking and the reader's comprehension (Whetten, 1989).

Another aspect of research quality is the reliability, which is often associated with research methodologies (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Yin, 1989, p.38; Gummesson, 2000, p.91). It assesses the extent to which data collection methods or analysis procedures consistently produce the same results (Saunders et al., 2009). Babbie (1998) emphasises that a research is considered reliable when applying the same research methodology repeatedly on the same subject yields consistent outcomes. Yin (1989, p.40) reinforces this concept by indicating that when operational procedures, such as data collection, can be replicated with consistent results, the study demonstrates reliability. Therefore, it is important for researchers to establish a chain of evidence, follow the research protocols and maintain a comprehensive database (Yin, 2008). One prerequisite for allowing other investigators to repeat a case study is the need to document the procedures followed in the case (Yin, 2014). Lacking such documentation, even the original researcher could not repeat the work. In this study, the researcher carefully explained his research methods and the entire research process. The researcher provided detailed explanations for certain aspects, such as online interviews, including addressing concerns and challenges encountered. All of these efforts contribute to enhancing the overall reliability of the research.

A series of interviews were conducted with both the direct creators of the characters and the creatives in the industries. This approach was chosen because the perspectives of these informants can differ based on their involvement in the creation and development of social media characters. By interviewing multiple informants, the reliability and validity of this research are enhanced (Bagozzi et al., 1991; Kumar et al., 1993). The selection of interviewees was conducted carefully, and the information they provided was accurately reported. However, it is important to note that these interviews were not fully structured. Another threat to the reliability of the interviews is subject or participant bias (Saunders et al., 2009). For example, interviewees may have been saying what they thought their bosses wanted them to say. The researcher explained carefully to the interviewees the protocol of the research and ensured the confidentiality of the participant's data to establish trust. The researcher was also careful in analysing the interview data, for example by comparing it with data collected from other sources, to ensure the data are reflecting the reality. These measures contributed to an increased potential for generalisation (Tull and Richards, 1980).

Furthermore, data triangulation was used in this study to identify and examine potential misinterpretations between the interviewees and the researcher, thereby enhancing the study's validity (Yin, 2009). Data triangulation in this research included the incorporation of various data sources collected, organised, and analysed from multiple perspectives. The data triangulation enhances the validity and reliability of this research (Eisenhardt, 1989).

By ensuring that the same researcher conducts all interviews and asks understandable questions to interviewees capable of providing answers, the study minimises inherent interview biases and enhances its reliability. After each interview, the researcher reviewed their notes to ensure completeness and clarity. Interviews were recorded with the interviewee's consent. Following each interview session, the researcher briefly documented their overall impression of the session. Transcriptions were conducted promptly after the interview while the information was still fresh. Consistency in the transcribing procedure for each interview helped avoid systematic errors, thus contributing to increased research reliability. The data collection and analysis methods were carefully documented. Transcripts were shared with the interviewees, who were encouraged to identify and correct any errors or misconceptions. Some minor adjustments have been made to the text to improve readability when necessary.

Due to the theoretical sampling method (please refer to section 4.3), the results may not be generalisable to all the character designs on social media in China. The conceptual framework

developed might be applicable to describe different types of character creation on social media with some adjustments; more research is required to confirm its adaptability.

4.7 Ethical considerations

Most relevant data are searched and collected from the internet and social media sites without contact with participants. These data are mainly open and previously published materials. Ethical concerns in this study are primarily associated with the interviews, and many fundamental ethical principles remain the same in online and face-to-face contexts (Lobe et al., 2020). To ensure the rights and interests of interviewees, all individuals received an information sheet (Appendix 3) detailing the project's objectives beforehand and are requested to provide informed consent by signing a consent form (Appendix 4). Participants were explicitly reminded of their rights throughout the research process, including the right to decline answering any question, the strict confidentiality of their responses, and their ability to withdraw consent at any stage without repercussions. They were also provided with contact information for the UAL Research Support Office, should they wish to seek independent advice regarding their rights.

Interviewees also had the option to choose for how they could be identified: (1) full identification, disclosing their name, job position, and company; (2) generic identification, using descriptors like 'marketing professional'; and (3) anonymous, in which no personal data beyond contact details and job title would be retained during the project. This level of identification was reiterated verbally at the start of each data collection session.

All interviews were recorded and the data, including interview transcripts, were treated with utmost confidentiality. Transcripts are only shared with the researcher's supervisors or examiners. Audio files of the interviews are securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher, housed on UAL servers. Electronic transcripts and backup audio files are stored separately in password-protected files within UAL systems. Following the research project's completion, all physical and digital data files will be securely destroyed.

4.8 Risk Assessment

Due to the pandemic and geographical distance, the interviews were conducted remotely via online platforms, to reduce the risk of contracting and spreading the Covid-19 virus to the

minimum. During the interview process the participants did not take any risks that were higher than the normal experience of their daily professional lives. It is also worth noting that the Chinese digital environment differs largely from the Western. With the widespread institutional censorship and regulation, many western online platforms are banned in China, limiting available interview platforms. Online speech or actions contrary to the state's expectations could lead to consequences for its citizens. This means the interviews could be monitored or recorded beyond the researcher and participants' knowledge, so the safety of both researcher and participants were put top priority. Prior to the interview, the researcher planned the questions carefully and reflected on 'red line' topics that he felt would encroach upon political or controversial dialogue and ensured that all questions were designed to steer clear of these topics for the safety of the researcher and interviewee. Although most of the researcher's questions have nothing to do with potential 'red line' topics in China, some may still trigger controversial and sensitive dialogue, especially the exploration of how external environment, regulation or policy may affect character design. The researcher was very careful with his wording during the interview and ended these conversations directly if they veered into controversial topics, regardless of the importance of this data to this study.

4.9 Conclusions

In summary, this research adopts interpretivism as the worldview which posits that reality is multifaceted and contingent (Carson et al., 2001). According to interpretivism, knowledge within this field is socially constructed rather than objectively established and understood (ibid.). This research's primary focus is not to uncover universal laws, but rather to explore and comprehend the perspectives of grassroots creators on social media character creation. The chosen research design for this study is case-study research (Yin, 2008). Four case characters (Aoda Cat, Fan & Bao, Rumi and Toby) were chosen to explore character creation within a real-world setting. The 'case' here is a character which is created and developed originally on social media platforms by individuals. Four cases were chosen to diversify the knowledge that could be learned. Besides this, 10 validation interviews were conducted with external experts across the world. The semi-structured interview approach was employed for both the character creators and external experts. In addition to this, a range of materials was also compiled such as social media content, other online sources, and trade magazines. The information collected was analysed carefully and rigorously to guarantee the validity and reliability of this research.

These methods enable the researcher to study character creation on social media in China, which is a complex interplay of individual creativity and audience interaction. The diverse array of materials collected and analysed, including social media content, interviews with creators and experts, and industry publications, has provided a rich perspective on the subject. However, the study is not without limitations, as the chosen cases may not represent all types of social media characters. Future research could expand on this work by exploring a wider range of characters and including quantitative methods to complement the qualitative insights gained here. The next chapter will move on to present the findings of the case studies.

5. CASE STUDIES

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the case study findings from the characters Aoda Cat (嗷大喵), Rumi (野萌君 Rumi), Fan & Bao (饭粒猫与包子鸭) and Toby (花栗鼠 Toby). Each case study starts with a brief introduction to the methods employed as the data sources differ slightly from each other, followed by a brief overview of the characters' backgrounds and current statuses. Then the characters' creation and promotion strategies are discussed in detail. The key factors in the preliminary framework (see Chapter 3) provide a perspective to steer the analysis of data and will serve as section headings to format the case study descriptions. The objective of these case descriptions is not only to provide a detailed account of the characters' development and their creators' thoughts, but also to discuss these through the researcher's own analysis and interpretation. These analyses in this chapter discuss what happens within each character's development and promotion, and how and why things are developed in that way, and the following chapter will bring these individual characters together through a cross-case analysis.

5.2 Content formats on social media

Character creators use various formats to structure and present their character content. This section briefly introduces five art forms that are commonly used by these creators which will be discussed widely in the following sections. These art forms include stickers, profile pictures, webtoons, short videos, and wallpapers, all of which are very common in daily social media scenarios. Despite their differences in format and style, these art forms share the common features of social media content, that is, 'short'(短), 'plain'(平) and 'fast'(快) (Zhao, 2019). This expression means the content is brief, concise, straightforward, and quickly consumable, as it is designed to capture and maintain the audience's attention in a fast-paced, highly fragmented digital environment. The small scale of the content makes it possible for independent production from grassroots creators, and it can also help to attract new audiences that might be intimidated by longer, more complex content.

5.2.1 Stickers

The use of emoticons, emojis, and stickers have become an integral part of modern messaging culture (Tang and Hew, 2018). They are believed to enhance human interaction on messaging

apps and social media platforms by allowing people to express emotions with ease (Derks et al., 2008). Although these terms are often discussed together, and in some cases used interchangeably to refer to the same thing, each of them actually represents different forms of emotional communication in the computer-mediated communication environment.

Emoticons, or emotional icons, usually consist only of standard keyboard characters used to form a simple facial expression that conveys the corresponding emotional reaction. For example, the emoticon :-) is the representation of a smile. Emojis, which originated in Japan in the late 1990s, are usually small digital images or icons for emotional expression. The main difference between emojis and emoticons is that an emoji is an actual pictograph rather than a simple combination of keyboard characters. It is worth mentioning that emojis are normally standardised across different platforms and coded in Unicode standard (Davis and Edberg, 2015), with little variation in their design and sizes. They may also be implemented automatically (e.g. when I input :-) it may automatically be converted to the relevant emoji 😊, depending on the programme). Compared to the aforementioned two forms, stickers have much more freedom in visual presentation. These digital images are often larger and more detailed as they are intended to be used as standalone images in communication rather than to fit into a line of text like emojis, which enables them to deliver more complex meanings and emotions. The stickers can be either static or animated, and they often feature popular characters, memes, or phrases. The content can be textual, pictorial or a combination of both (Tang and Hew, 2018). One important merit of stickers is customisation. They can be customised with unique designs and characters and are open for creation by anyone who knows the basics of graphic editing and processing, which can even be achieved through the simple graphic processing features built in messaging apps like WeChat.

Aware of the popularity of the stickers, Chinese social media platforms rolled out their official sticker services to turn stickers into profit. WeChat launched its official Sticker Gallery at the end of 2013 that allows creators to upload, display and sell their own original stickers. WeChat does not break down its revenue by individual services or features, meaning it is not clear how profitable the Sticker Gallery has been for the company but we can refer to another Asian super platform, Japan's LINE, for some insight into how valuable sticker marketplaces can be. In April 2014, LINE launched its sticker marketplace, the Creators' Market (LINE App, 2014), and before long this service became a significant source of revenue for the company. In 2020, LINE reported that direct sales of stickers generated over \$200 million in revenue (Deck, 2022).

Steinberg (2012) introduces LINE's Creators' Market as 'a site of potential—potential to get famous for some creators, to get rich for others, and a perfect source of side income for yet others' (p.5). Some creators have become rich and quit their jobs because of their LINE income stream, becoming Internet celebrities in the process (Abidin, 2018). That said, this is feted not as user-generated content but as entrepreneurial productivity.

Stickers in WeChat's Sticker Gallery are generally offered in two formats—singles and sticker sets. Singles are just an individual sticker, while sticker sets comprise a pack of a dozen individual stickers that can express a variety of emotions such as happiness, anger, sadness, and joy. Based on the creator's intentions and settings, these stickers can be accessed either for free or through paid acquisition. Sticker sets are often but not necessarily created under a theme. For example, a New Year's sticker pack features a variety of stickers related to the New Year activities, while a Campus sticker pack might be about activities taking place in school (*Figure 5.1*). Another issue worth noting here is that although anyone can easily turn any image into a sticker for private usage on WeChat, customised stickers may need to go through the censorship process by the platform before they can enter the sticker marketplace for public display and sale. This process usually checks stickers for offensive or inappropriate content such as hate speech, sexual content or violence. For example, WeChat has specified the requirements and considerations for the design of its sticker packs (WeChat Emoticons Design Specifications, n.d.). However, in China, such a process could be much stricter as China has one of the world's most restrictive media environments (Xu and Albert, 2017) where the state exerts tight control over both traditional and internet content.

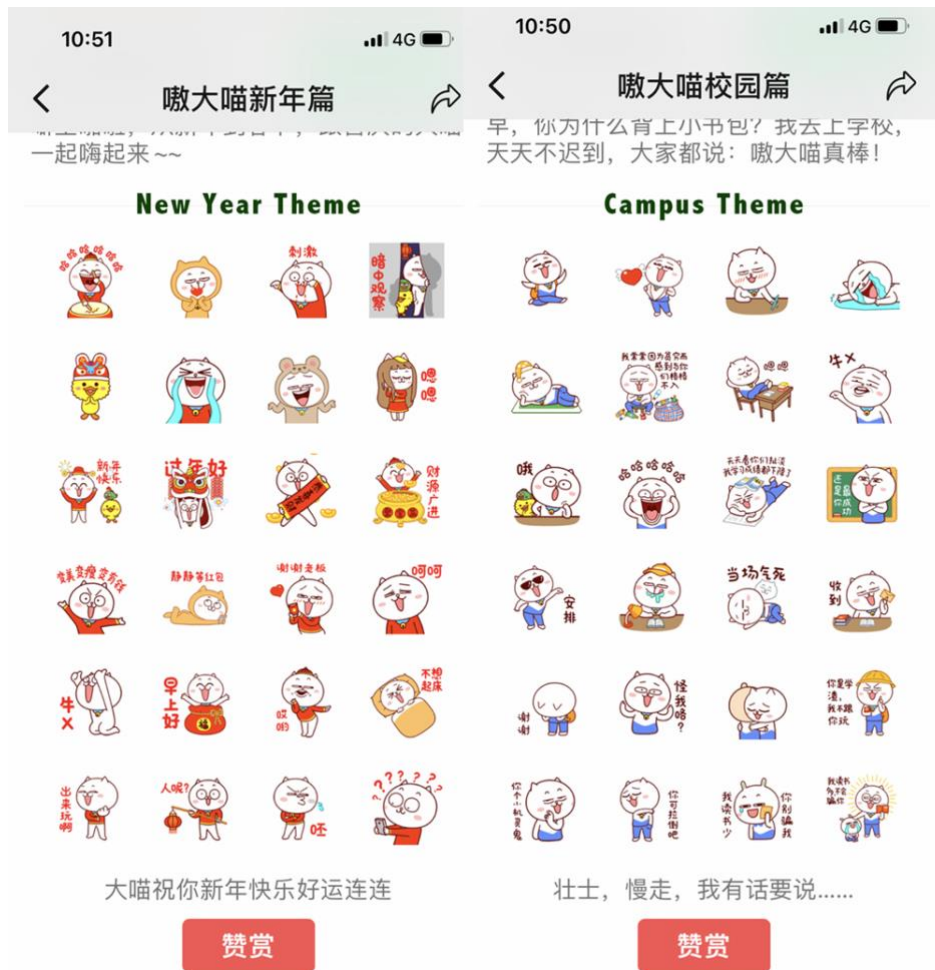


Figure 5.1 Examples of Aoda Cat's sticker sets (source: screenshots of Aoda Cat's WeChat Sticker Gallery, reorganised by the researcher).

5.2.2 Webtoons

Webtoons are another popular form creatives like to use to create character content. The term webtoon, a combination of web and cartoon, originated in South Korea in the early 2000s (Jang and Song, 2017) and is also known as mobile cartoons, digital comics, web *manhwa* in Korean, and *keitai manga* in Japanese (Lynn, 2016). Sometimes it is used interchangeably with another term, 'webcomic', for example by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, online communities like Webcomic Alliance, Tapas.io and so on. Simply put, they are a type of digital comics or graphic novels published online, usually arranged in a vertical format that is optimised for personal computers or mobile devices. In China, this is also called Tiaoman (条漫), a literal translation of comic strips, as it resembles the comic strips in magazines and newspapers.

As the general public relies more and more on smartphones and the internet for entertainment, paper books have been decreasing, and webtoons have become an ideal format for readers to consume comics (Mizuki Khoury, n.d.). They can be published easily on websites or social media platforms, and readers can access them from anywhere with an internet connection.



Figure 5.2 Aoda Cat's webtoon on 8-12-2015 (source: Murongaoao's Weibo, 2015).

As mentioned above, these webtoons are typically designed to be read vertically, with panels stacked on top of each other, so the storytelling and visual style are slightly different from traditional print comics (see *Figure 5.2*). The vertical scroll format usually makes readers focus on one panel or scene at a time, and the story in turn plays out in sequential order. However, while webtoons are a very convenient format for browsing, this does not mean that all webtoons are designed with vertical layouts. There are also many other more complex forms of composition. In some cases, creators arrange comics content in different formats such as a 2 x 2-panel square comic, but all examples will be referred to as webtoons in this study for convenience. Webtoons tend to have a simpler and more streamlined style, with bold lines and bright colours. They often focus on character development and interpersonal relationships, with a slower pace and a greater emphasis on facial expressions and dialogue. In contrast, traditional comics often have a more detailed and realistic visual style, with intricate linework and shading. They tend to use more dynamic panel composition and layout to augment the visual effects and guide the reader through the story. The flexible panels and visual styles are good at representing speed, action and dramatic scenes. Webtoons are often shorter but released with greater frequency. To meet the demands of mobile users, they are often structured as short episodes that can be read in a few minutes. This allows readers to quickly and easily consume each episode on the go, without having to commit to a longer reading session. As a multimedia format, webtoons can also incorporate elements such as sound effects, music, and animations (Jang and Song, 2017), to enhance the reading experience.

In considering character creators, however, it needs to be made clear that the webtoons created by the Chinese creators discussed in this thesis are generally at a very basic level compared to works produced by professional cartoonists. The compositions are basic and standard, and the narrative structures are linear and simple. It is hard to find any transition effects between two bordering panels, not to mention multimedia elements. This is understandable because these creators are not professional comic artists and nor have they received specialised training in the creation of comics. Their comics are focused mainly on presenting small humorous or interesting moments featuring the character rather than on visual artistic language.

5.2.3 Short animated video

Since Douyin (TikTok's counterpart in mainland China) first launched in 2016, short videos have become an incredibly popular form of entertainment and communication in recent years.

As of June 2021, the number of short video users in China reached 873 million, accounting for 87.3% of all mobile internet users in the country (CNNIC, 2021). The average daily time spent on short video apps in China was 110 minutes in 2020, up from 96 minutes in 2019 (QuestMobile, 2020). The popularity of short video has attracted a large number of creators, who produce and share short video content on various platforms. Short video platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Bilibili have millions of active content creators, who use the platforms to showcase their talent, share their experiences, and connect with their audience. Many character creators have also jumped on the bandwagon, creating and promoting short character videos on these platforms.

These short, animated videos mainly consist of clips or sequences that illustrate the character's personality or story and are created using a variety of animation techniques, including hand-drawn, vector-based animation, 3D rendering or even stop-motion animation, based on the creators' capabilities. The quality and styles vary as the creators have different levels of animation backgrounds—some might graduate from this subject in college, while others might only possess very basic knowledge and skill from self-learning. Most of creators in this line of creation have been experimenting with their own style of 'animated' video production with very limited manpower and resources. With a few exceptions (mainly more established characters like Ali the fox (阿狸) and Wuhuang (吾皇), who are able to invest more resources into producing animations), it would be difficult to argue that the production quality of many characters' animations reaches an industrial standard equivalent to professional production. For example, in some cases (like Aoda Cat) the creator pieces together a video story by connecting different animated stickers one after another, with captions and music added, and this strategy is not uncommon across these creators (see *Figure 5.3*). This pragmatic approach towards animation making demonstrates that the focus lies in character representation and production efficiency, rather than exploring or polishing artistic style or narrative skill.



Figure 5.3 Stills from Aoda Cat's short video on 8-1-2018 (source: Murongaoaot's Weibo, 2018, reorganised by the researcher).

The plot of character animations is usually driven by scene changes and dialogue, with limited representation of action and movement. Details including backgrounds, props, and lighting are often overlooked or totally absent. However, this does not mean these works are unentertaining or lacking in artistic quality. For example, videos of Gon's Marmot have their own distinctive style characterised by cute and charming character designs, colorful visuals, interesting narrative tempo and over-the-top reactions and expressions. This kind of alternative but primitive art style makes it hard to pin down whether these animated works are artistic animation or amateur production.

5.2.4 Profile Picture

Profile pictures, also known as avatars or display pictures, are images that users choose to represent themselves on social media platforms. Profile pictures are often small and circular or square in shape, and appear alongside the user's name and other information on their profile page (see *Figure 5.4*). Profile pictures are often the first information that users have about each other before making contact (Wu et al., 2015), so they are important parts of online identity construction (Vasalou and Joinson, 2009; Salimkhan et al., 2010).

Some users choose to use a photo of themselves as their profile picture, while others may opt for an image that represents their mood, hobby, or favorite characters. Character artists create profile pictures featuring their characters in order to promote their art, gain more exposure and expand their followings. A well-designed and eye-catching profile picture can attract more followers and draw attention to their character, potentially leading to more sales or commissions. Profile pictures are often shared and used widely among social media users, which can help to spread the artist's work and increase their visibility; in other words, profile pictures can serve as a form of advertising or promotion for the character itself. If the profile picture features the character in a unique or interesting way, it can pique the curiosity of viewers and encourage them to seek out more information or content related to the character. Social media platforms may have specific guidelines or recommendations for profile pictures, such as image size and format. For example, Adobe has offered detailed guidelines for Instagram image formats. Some platforms may also allow users to add additional images to their profile, such as a cover photo or background image, to customise their online presence further.



Figure 5.4 Aoda Cat's profile pictures on 26-6-2023 (source: Murongaoao's Weibo, 2023).

5.2.5 Wallpaper

A wallpaper or background (also known as a desktop background, desktop picture or desktop image on computers) is a digital image (photo, drawing etc.) used as a decorative background of a graphical user interface on the screen of a computer, smartphone or other electronic device. As English psychologist Donna Dawson claims, the wallpaper and organisation of icons of that individual's computer background could suggest an individual's personality (Lee, 2015). Users often customise their wallpapers when setting up a new device, as it can have a significant impact on the overall look and feel of the interface. Wallpapers can be a useful tool for character creators to promote their work and engage with their fanbases. Many character creators create one wallpaper each month for their audience (e.g. Murongaoao, see Figure 5.5). It is a good way for the artists to showcase their skills and creativity. If the wallpaper is well-designed and visually appealing, it can serve as a form of promotion for the character, as others may ask the user where they obtained the wallpaper or become interested in the character themselves. Additionally, when an audience uses a wallpaper that features a character they like,

they are likely to strengthen the bond and connection towards that character. This can lead to increased brand loyalty and likelihood that the audience will seek out more content featuring that character.

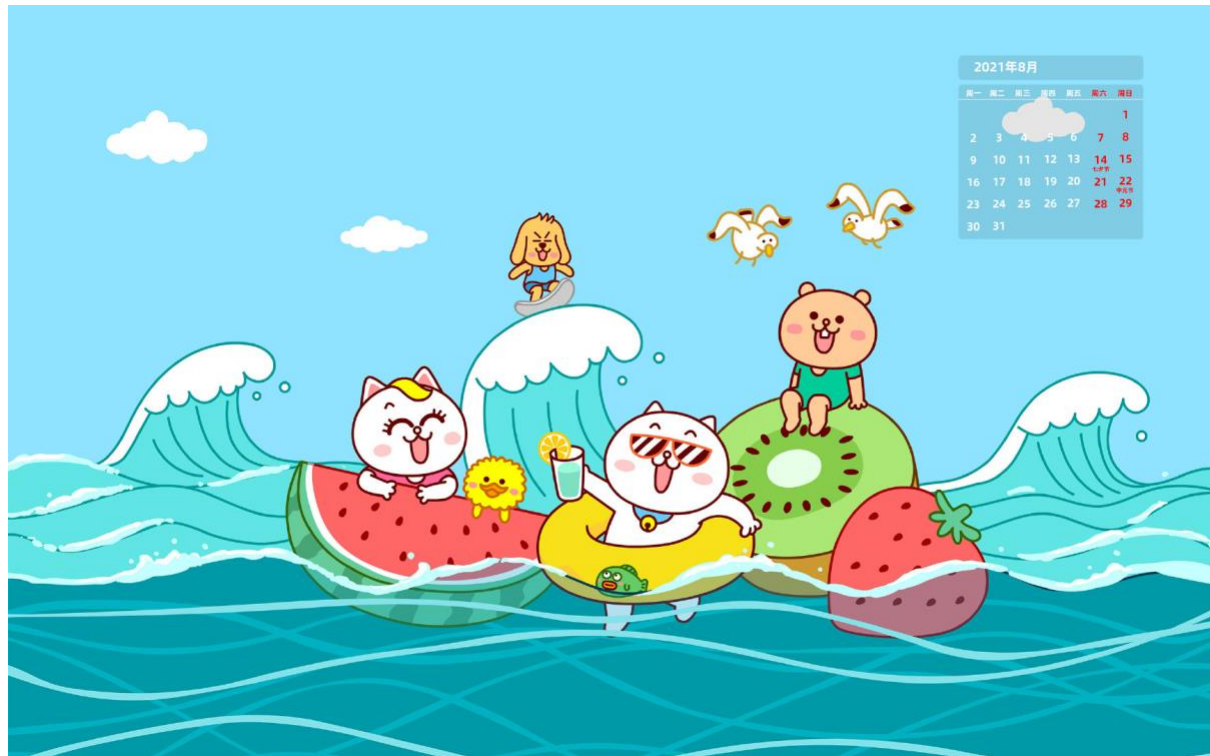


Figure 5.5 Aoda Cat's wallpaper for August 2021 (source: Murongaoao's Weibo, 2021).

5.3 Case Study of Aoda Cat

5.3.1 Background

This case study investigates and discusses the character Aoda Cat's (嗷大喵) creation and development strategies. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the character Aoda Cat, the researcher conducted an extensive analysis of its social media content, tracing its development from its origins to the present day spanning from December 2013 (the debut of Aoda Cat) to the end of 2022. The key social media content was sourced from Weibo: Posts from December 2013, when Aoda Cat first emerged, to the end of 2022. Weibo, where Aoda Cat emerged in the first place, also has the largest follower base, so it is the main site researched (this applies to other case characters as well). Other social media includes: WeChat Official Account (ID: 慕容嗷嗷): Content from December 2013 to the end of 2022. Douyin (ID: 嗷大喵): Videos from October 2017 (earliest available record; this applies to all the case characters) to the end

of 2022. Red (Xiaohongshu) (ID: 嗷大喵Aoda Cat): content from October 2022 to the end of 2022. Stickers: All sticker sets are sourced from Murongaoao's (慕容嗷嗷) WeChat sticker gallery. Given the overlap in content across platforms, priority was given to Weibo as it has the more comprehensive data. Other resources include: online articles and news (searched with keyword: 慕容嗷嗷 or 嗷大喵), the Baidu Tieba forum of Murongaoao, Baidu Encyclopedia, and two books authored by the creator: *Aoda Cat is Great: Hilarious Edition* (嗷大喵真棒I: 爆笑篇) and *Aoda Cat is Great: Joyful Edition* (嗷大喵真棒 欢腾篇). Following the digital fieldwork, the researcher had the opportunity to interview the character's creator, Murongaoao (慕容嗷嗷) providing valuable insights into the motivations and inspiration behind the character's creation. This is crucial to provide empirical experience and knowledge about how characters are created and promoted on social media platforms.

Before creating Aoda Cat, its creator Murongaoao, working under another pseudonym of Uncle Ao (嗷叔), had already published a few webtoons online, including *Call Me Mr Chunjie* (请叫我小纯洁) and gained some popularity on the Internet. Around 2013, he left the company Xiaoliantonghongwenhuafazhangongsi (小脸通红文化发展有限公司) and embarked on the journey of being an indie creator. On 6th December 2013, Aoda Cat made its debut on Weibo in a webtoon. On 23rd January 2014, the first Aoda Cat sticker set was uploaded onto the QQ and had accumulated over 62million downloads by 5th August this year (Murongaoao's Weibo, 2014), as its cute but mischievous image and characteristics gained immediate popularity among youngsters('Murongaoao', n.d.). During the course of almost ten years, Aoda Cat has generated over 60 sticker sets (across the WeChat and QQ platforms, Aoda Cat's stickers have been sent more than ten billion times since 2014, according to the creator's own WeChat account statistics), over 100 webtoon episodes, countless single stickers, profile pictures, wallpapers, short videos, spin-off products including figures, stationary, calendars and has held several theme exhibitions in Guangzhou and Chengdu. At the time of this writing in January 2024, Aoda Cat has 624K followers on the Weibo platform, and can therefore be regarded as a macro-influencer. This influencer tier is an important consideration when it comes to influencer marketing. By dividing influencers into different tiers based on their follower count, brands can more easily identify and evaluate potential influencers for their campaigns. It helps us understand the reach and impact of an influencer and its content in a general sense.

5.3.2 Image and Personality

As suggested by its name, Aoda Cat's image is, first and foremost, a cat, or to be more precise, an anthropomorphic cat (*Figure 5.6*). He has a round head with two small, pointed ears on the top, supported by a tailless human-like body below. The muzzle area is highly abstractive, with two small round blush marks adorning each side. His eyes are the most expressive parts and can be represented in many different, sometimes even inconsistent styles, paired with two slender anthropomorphised eyebrows, to deliver the character's over-the-top gamut of emotions. The only ornament (or 'clothing' as the creator puts it) he wears is a bell attached to a blue striped ribbon around his neck. Designing the image around cats seems to be a popular choice just by looking at the cat characters on the market, be it Hello Kitty, Felix the Cat, Tom Cat, Garfield, Puss in the Hat, etc. Indeed, cats are a popular and beloved animal that has many appealing characteristics, which are found in all sorts of works including books, comics, movies, myths, folklore, and fairy tales. They are often seen as playful, curious, independent, and graceful, making them a great source of inspiration for character design. Besides this, cats are highly versatile animals that can be depicted in many different ways. They can be portrayed as cute and cuddly, or as sleek and crafty predators. This flexibility allows character designers to create a wide variety of characters that can appeal to different audiences and serve different purposes. In the interview with the researcher, Murongaoao, observed that *'in fact the cat's looking, gives it very sneaky [feel], capable of accommodating different kinds of complex characteristics'*. The character Aoda Cat has been endowed with distinct, and at times, contrasting personalities to establish an intriguing complexity, which will be discussed in detail shortly.



Figure 5.6 Images of Aoda Cat (source: stills extracted from Aoda Cat's stickers)

Another important trait Murongaoao mentions is that Aoda Cat has a relatively neutral gender identity:

Based on past experience, then, I feel the image of this animal has no gender difference. Although it is given a male gender by default, you can say it is a girl as well. So first of all, this [image] can be universal for boys as well as girls, [and] its reception, the scope of its audience will be broader.

The image of a cat does have a certain level of neutrality and ambiguity, something that has also been exploited by the creators of other feline characters. For example Jim Davis, the creator of Garfield, mentioned in a 2018 interview that ‘Garfield is very universal. By virtue of being a cat, really, he’s not really male or female or any particular race or nationality, young or old’ (Neumyer, 2018). However, whether this genderless neutrality helps appeal to more audiences is open to debate as there is little empirical research or data addressing this issue; the creator Murongaoao’s assumption seems to come from his own intuition. Apart from this, genderless characters do offer a certain degree of flexibility to the creator as Jim Davis remarks: ‘[this ambiguity] gives me a lot more latitude for the humor for the situations’ (ibid.). They do not carry the cultural baggage and stereotypes that may be associated with gendered characters, and can be used in a wider variety of contexts and scenarios, playing different gender identities according to the needs. This is particularly evident and effective in purely visual media like cartoons, but not necessarily in more complex forms of media, such as films. For instance, in the case of Garfield, because Bill Murray provides the voice in the movie version, it tends to give the impression that the character is male right from the start.

Another essential trait of this image is *jian-meng* (贱萌), as the creator emphasised, ‘*[the image] must be jian-meng, so that people will like him.*’ *Jian-meng* is a popular internet term in China for describing a character’s personality that does not have a direct equivalent in English. *Jian-meng* consists of two Chinese characters, *jian*(贱) and *meng*(萌), each of which stands for a different, and perhaps opposed, characteristic. *Jian*’s original meaning in Chinese is cheap and inexpensive, as opposed to expensive, so its meaning can be extended to low price, low social status, and low personal quality. In general, it can be understood as base and mean. *Meng* is the Chinese equivalent of the Japanese word *moe* (萌え), a term used by the Japanese to express their love-like affection for the girl characters in cartoons, animations, games and other works. After wide circulation, it has also been extended to express affection (not limited to love-like feelings) for anything (not limited to anime or girls). It literally means ‘acceptable for affection’

or ‘possible to love’ and has been translated as meaning ‘cute,’ ‘adorable,’ ‘sweet,’ ‘precious,’ ‘pretty,’ ‘endearing,’ ‘darling,’ and even ‘little’ (Aschaft, 2021). These two seemingly opposite characteristics form a contrasting yet interesting effect, which can be seen in *Figure 5.2*: on the one hand, Aoda Cat has an adorable and endearing look, while on the other he seems mischievous and bad.

When talking about why he bestowed Aoda Cat with this complex personality, Murongaoao explains, ‘*above all, I like things that are jian-meng*’. ‘Meng’ (or moe) is a quality attracting many young people nowadays. But why ‘jian’? The creator believes that the quality of being naughty and mischievous is, to some degree, possessed by everybody. In daily life, constrained by social etiquette and moral code, most people behave formally and seriously. But on the internet, where there are fewer constraints and less pressure, many people will act much more lively, showing a different side of themselves than they would be comfortable displaying in in-person situations. Murongaoao thinks that Aoda Cat’s image and personality deliver this tacit feeling, and this is why this character resonates with so many young people. As discussed earlier, the versatility of cats also enables them to take on different kinds of complex characteristics.

Aoda Cat’s high-contrast persona is quite in line with the gap moe (gyappu moe, or in Chinese 反差萌) concept, where moe is found in the contrast between a character’s expected personality or behavior based on their appearance or representation in other texts (Ōunsha, 2012, p.154). It describes the charm felt by observers when a person’s behaviour or personality suddenly reveals a side that is drastically different from their appearance or known characteristics. As a matter of fact, Aoda Cat’s personality should be seen as a particular form of gap moe. In Baidu Baike’s (‘Gap moe’, 2024) explanation, gap moe is, ‘a popular term on the internet, is a type of ‘moe’ attribute, which refers to the state of moe produced when ACGN characters exhibit features that are different from their original image or contradictory features’. These two or more moe points are in opposition but complement each other. The expressions are varied but can generally be categorised as temporal and spatial contrast, personality contrast, appearance contrast, and so on. The core of gap moe is the indispensable opposing traits, which creates an unexpected and endearing effect. For example, a tough-looking macho man who is seen performing a cute dance, would be considered gap moe, as the contrasting traits of a rugged, masculine appearance and a soft, feminine action create a charming and unexpected effect. In an internet article, the author claimed that ‘in various popular literature, films, and

even video games today, gap moe is almost always the first choice for creators when designing characters' (17173.com, 2020), and another article suggests 'when it comes to female celebrity, being gap moe is the best way to attract fans' (The Bund, 2019).

The popularity of gap moe on the internet can be attributed to a few factors. First, it offers a fresh and unexpected take on character design and storytelling and gives the character more depth and complexity. By juxtaposing seemingly contradictory or unexpected traits, gap moe characters stand out from the crowd and catch people's attention. Besides this, gap moe is often associated with a sense of humour and playfulness. The contrast between different traits can create a comedic effect that can be appealing to audiences who enjoy lighthearted entertainment. On top of that, as Murongaoao has mentioned before, the internet offers a space for people to express themselves freely and anonymously, which encourages people to embrace their quirky and unique personalities. This can be further interpreted as a reflection of larger cultural trends of subversion and nonconformity in media and entertainment that challenges the existing norms and establishments. In mainland China, where the government enforces a unified collectivist ideology and people's daily behaviour and speech are highly monitored and regulated, these non-conformist characters have become one of the few places where netizens can display their resistance and dissidence against the official narratives.

Over the course of Aoda Cat's adventure, Murongaoao has introduced a few friends to accompany him, including another cat character Miaomeimei (喵美美), who is explicitly presented as female, a dog called Wangdefu (汪德富), a bear named Xiongxiaoer (熊小二), a duck Memeya (么么鸭) and a rabbit Muxiaotu (慕小兔), which together form a big family (see *Figure 5.7*). Murongaoao explained the reasoning behind this extension of the character cohort as coming about:

...mainly because sometimes the character Aoda Cat needs other characters to contrast [with], in order to bring it out, to make it more solid. In other words, when designing other characters, the main focus is differentiation, that is, the differentiation of personality between Aoda Cat and other characters.



Figure 5.7 Aoda Cat's wallpaper for June 2019 (From left to right: Muxiaotu, Xiongxiaoer, Wangdefu, Miaomeimei, Memeya and Aoda Cat) (Source: Murongaoao's Weibo, 2019).

5.3.3 Making Connection

Media entertainment is specifically designed to encourage emotional attachment through the 'fleshing out' of characters (Sheldon et al., 2021). A well-developed character with depth and relatable traits can help readers or viewers connect emotionally with the story and feel invested in the character's journey. For Murongaoao, the central objective underlying his creations is, *'to excavate the relatable feeling and emotion among the people, or in other words the sympathy'*, just as he thinks the reason for the positive reception of jiang-meng lies in the idea that it echoes many people's hidden selves, the alter ego. Audiences tend to feel a stronger sense of identification with characters that they find similar or have something in common with, as Sheldon et al. (2021) argue these individuals may possess qualities and traits that viewers admire or believe to see reflected in their own personalities. Murongaoao continues, *'to stay close to life, close to us, and to rely on the everyday lives and thoughts of people in this internet era. This is the starting point of my creation, and I think it is also the most important method.'* He values real-life experiences very much and believes that this is the fundamental point for establishing a connection and resonance with his audience. Murongaoao's content does not have an overarching frame; instead, it is mainly the recording of everyday experience

fragments and emotional moments. *‘As for what to draw, there is no specific theme. Sometimes when I run across something in life, I record it and then draw it. That’s basically how it is,’* he explains. This may make it easier for audiences to appreciate any piece of the content without knowing the context of the character, which fits the fragmented nature of social media reading.

However, it is worth noting that the emotion it aims to evoke is not commonplace. It delves into the deeper, often concealed aspects of one’s heart—feelings rarely shared on ordinary occasions or even the mischievous side. Just like the personality of jiang-meng explained before, everyone might possess a little bit but showing it explicitly in public might be considered inappropriate or uncivil. Taking his webtoon from 14th February 2014 as an example (*Figure 5.8*), Aoda Cat is expressing his feeling towards Valentine’s Day (Murongaoao, 2014a). In the first panel, he asks, ‘Many single people are cursing the lovers with malicious language on Valentine’s Day, is it really right to harbour such jealousy?’, followed by his reflection of ‘Being in a relationship is sweet, but being single also has its benefits’ on the 2nd panel. In the next picture, he meets a couple on the street where he suggests, ‘when we see a happy couple, why can’t we let go of our grievances and send our blessings?’. Then in the following cell, he walks up to the couple and sends his blessing: ‘hi girl, you quit your job at Dongguan?’ and rushes away in a blink of an eye.¹⁶ Based on this context, it can be easily inferred that Aoda Cat does not know the girl in question, nonetheless he tries to sow discord between the lovers by making groundless accusations towards the girl. His sanctimonious internal monologue contradicting his actual naughty act creates a hilarious effect that might spark a knowing smile among many, as, after all, many people might have had such mischievous thoughts before. Many people find pranks to be funny or entertaining, either because they enjoy seeing others react to unexpected or absurd situations, or because they appreciate the creativity and skill involved in designing and executing a good prank, and it is only on the internet that many pranks are deemed acceptable.

Although Aoda Cat’s prank here might be deemed offensive against women, and exhibits open discrimination against sex workers, in the 100+ comments below that post, not a single one critiques or challenges Aoda Cat’s behavior. Instead, most react by posting ‘hahaha’ or

¹⁶ Dongguan, 东莞, a Chinese city next to Shenzhen, was well known for its sex industry and had once earned the nickname ‘the Eastern Amsterdam’

approving of this action. This is interesting considering 65% of Aoda Cat's followers are female (according to Aoda Cat's WeChat account statistics), which suggests they may have tacitly accepted this phenomenon or simply did not notice the disrespect towards women inherent in it. There is another interesting detail in this episode's final narration. Other Aoda Cat webtoon episodes usually close with the slogan, 'Everyone says, Aoda Cat is great', which acts as a kind of signature. But in this episode only the first half of the phrase is included, ('Everyone says,') and the second half is deliberately left out, leaving only the quotation marks on either side indicating speech. When asked about this detail, the creator did not provide much explanation but simply stated that he just wanted to encourage comments and interaction from readers. This departure from the usual closure, a rare move that is not found in many of the episodes, appears to be a strategic choice. This deliberate departure from the norm suggests a nuanced understanding of the sensitivity surrounding the subject matter, prompting an intentional effort to provoke deeper conversations within the community.

嗷大喵真棒 ©慕容傲傲 2014

单身的在情人节的时候都吵着情侣去死，带着这么深的怨念真的好吗？



恋爱有恋爱的好，单身有单身的好。



当我们看见幸福的一对，我们为什么不能放下怨念，送上温馨的祝福呢？



喵喵妹妹，东莞的工作辞啦？



人们都说：“

”

 慕容傲傲
weibo.com/murongaoao

Figure 5.8 Aoda Cat's webtoon on 14th February 2014 (Source: Murongaoao's Weibo, 2014)

5.3.4 Content and Platform Strategy

As discussed in section 5.2 the content that grassroots creators produce is usually small-scale and easily consumable, and Murongaoao's work is no exception. His content includes webtoons, stickers, wallpapers, short videos and other spin-off products, among which webtoons and stickers are regarded as the two most important formats. Murongaoao publishes Aoda Cat's content simultaneously on Weibo, WeChat, Red and Douyin, and the content on each platform may vary according to its speciality. The sticker sets mainly go to Sticker Gallery (表情商城) on QQ and WeChat. Weibo and WeChat official accounts are mainly for webtoons, profile pictures and wallpapers. Short videos and animations are uploaded to Douyin and WeChat video accounts.

During 2013 to 2015 of working on Aoda Cat, Murongaoao published two print comic books. However, he eventually gave up on this production completely, explaining:

... first the print books have indeed waned, on a downhill trend. And another point, is that the creative cycle [for the print book] is too long, [and] this prolonged cycle causes serious delays to my other creative works.

The rise of digital platforms has significantly impacted traditional comic book creation. In comparison to traditional print, digital platforms offer a quicker feedback loop and a more flexible creative cycle. The rapid dissemination on the internet reaches a broader audience. This shift led Murongaoao to gradually abandon print books entirely and focus on the creation of webtoons. Webtoons are the major narrative format used by the creator, albeit on a very small scale as mentioned before: *'The creation of webtoons makes the character more solid. [Webtoons] give him some stories, endow this image with more stories, it fleshes out this image'*, he added. His webtoon series is mainly created under the hashtag #AodaCatIsGreat! (嗷大喵真棒!). Its subject matters cover all aspects of people's lives, ranging from nonsensical jokes and imaginative scenarios to personal experiences, mostly in the form of comedy. Many of his webtoons apply the reversal technique to create unexpected and humorous effects. The comedic reversal technique involves applying unexpected plot twists at the end of a story or during a climax to create surprise and humour, leaving the audience with a sense of shock and amusement and is extremely popular on the internet. The Valentine's Day webtoon discussed earlier exemplifies this technique by creating a strong contrast between what happened first and what came later. Apart from the 'Aoda Cat is great' series, there are also some commissioned webtoons incorporating product placement. Product placement is the purposeful

incorporation of commercial content into non-commercial settings, that is, a product plug generated via the fusion of advertising and entertainment (Ginosar and Levi-Faur, 2010). These webtoons are usually commissioned by a brand and product, and the creator skilfully integrates the brand image or the target product into a customised story plot without making any direct hard-selling statements. Its purposes include achieving prominent audience exposure, visibility, attention, and interest; increasing brand awareness; increasing consumer memory and recall. Due to media fragmentation, media proliferation, and declining advertising efficacy, product placement is becoming an increasingly effective way to reach consumers and non-users (Mackay et al., 2009). These webtoons do not have the #AodaCatIsGreat! hashtag, to distinguish them from his own creations. This type of creation is also one of the important sources of income on Weibo.

As for the sticker, Murongaoao believes it is a unique form of expression thriving in this era of instant messaging and social media:

Sticker is a very unique existence. It is neither as boring and dry as texts nor easily getting embarrassed as in face-to-face communication. So it is an expression of emotion, to express the tacit emotion, so that it can play an important role during communication.

He sees stickers as a perfect vehicle for delivering delicate emotion, something that might not be easy to communicate directly in language and text. On top of that, they get widely circulated among users. Taken together, these factors make stickers Murongaoao's favourite content format.

Single Aoda Cat's stickers' releases are very frequent; once Murongaoao has a new idea, he will make it and upload it immediately. Sticker sets take a longer time to develop and update less frequently. Except for one set of text-based stickers, all the other stickers are image-based, occasionally captioned by text to indicate the emotion. Many of the stickers are designed to be humorous and playful, often incorporating puns, jokes, or witty comments that can add some fun and lightheartedness to online interactions. Aoda Cat's facial expressions and body language are very expressive and often exaggerated, which makes the stickers more relatable and fun to use. Some of the stickers may also reference popular culture or current events, making them timely and relevant to the online community. Profile pictures are also updated frequently, but many of them can be regarded as a by-product of the stickers, as they are basically stills or keyframes extracted from stickers. Every month, a wallpaper based on the

seasons theme (spring, summer, autumn or winter depending on the specific month) is usually created, unless there are special circumstances.

Following the rise of short video platforms, Murongaoao has been experimenting with the format since 2017. His first short animated video was uploaded in 2017. It was very simple and just introduced his new sticker set. He explains, ‘*in other words, following the trend of the times, [find] which platforms can help spread this image, and then use those platforms, adapt to them, and capture those platforms*’. Although he does not have a systematic background in animation and video production, he still jumped on this bandwagon promptly. He recognises the strategic value of short videos as an emerging platform and hopes to cash in on it quickly. That said, Murongaoao’s short video animation production is very simple, basically just clipping different images or stickers one after another and combining them with voiceovers or music to create a micro-narrative. This can lead to the animations feeling quite rudimentary, somewhat akin to a PowerPoint animation. However, this primitive approach itself generates a weirdly mesmerising amateur style that fits in well with other content found in the online context. Although he did not mention it in the interview with the researcher, a close reading of Murongaoao’s social media content makes it clear that another strategy he uses is trend-jacking, namely creating content around recent events or popular trends. The idea here is to piggyback on the buzz and attention generated by a news story, social media trend, or cultural moment and use it to capture the interest of readers and acquire viral exposure. For example, the 2015 stock market crash in China was the topical issue of that year, so the creator introduced a series of content based on this despite knowing little about the stock market. This method has been widely used by content creators worldwide, and trend jacking can be seen as opportunistic or insincere if not done properly. Murongaoao’s approach is walking a fine line between being funny and being aggressive—he will not exaggerate the topic or make shocking headlines that might incite the audience’s antipathy.

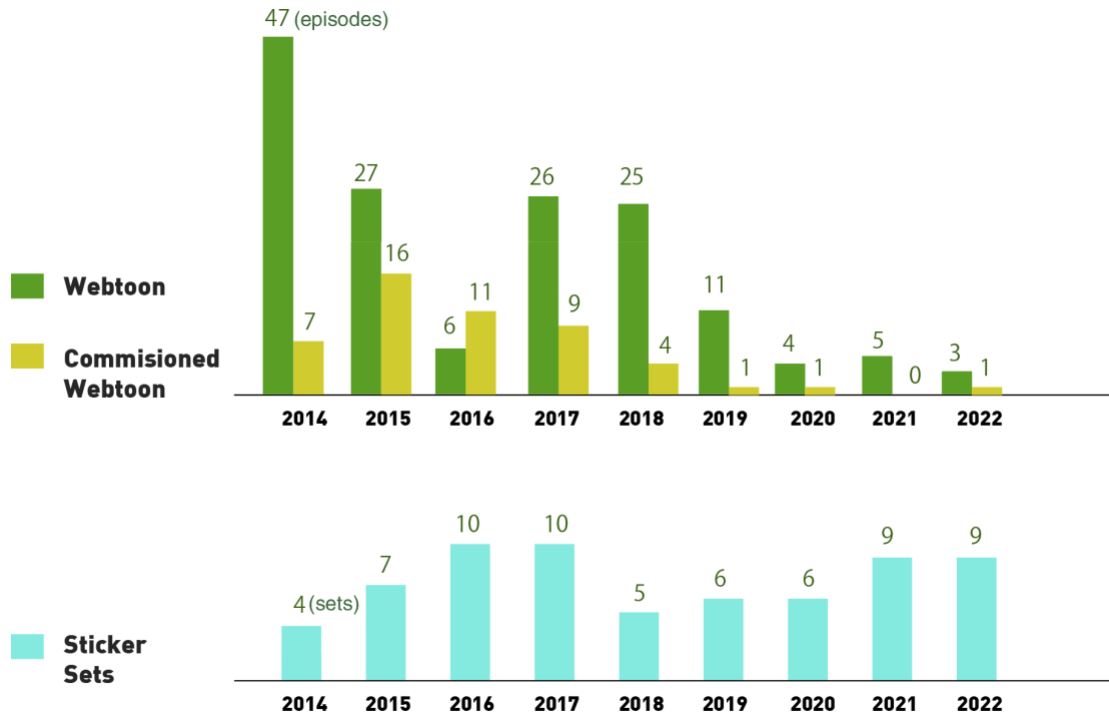


Figure 5.9 Aoda Cat's content production comparison between 2014-2022

At the same time, Murongaoao's content creation is constantly adjusting and changing with the development of social media platforms. For example, it can be seen from *Figure 5.9* that his webtoon creation was very active at the beginning, but it decreased significantly after 2018, while the production of sticker sets has remained stable since 2014. For this kind of change, the creator explained that it is mainly because before 2018, Weibo's momentum was going upward, and the reward for it was very considerable. However, with the gradual improvement of various functions of WeChat and the rise of Douyin and Red, the income from webtoon creation began to decrease, while on the other hand, stickers, especially after WeChat launched the sticker gallery, remained stable in terms of exposure and income. This can also be confirmed by the number of commissioned webtoons he posted on Weibo. Commissioned webtoons' development trajectory is very similar to that of his personal webtoons, and it has plummeted sharply after 18 years (see section 5.3.4 for the explanation of commissioned webtoons). His follower growth on Weibo also follows this pattern. *'The increase of followers on Weibo, is mainly due to making webtoons in the past few years. Later as the updates [of the webtoons] slumped, the growth also slowed,'* he explained. The creator attributes this shift in content creation to *'everything should be based on reality (一切从实际出发)'*. If the platforms or trends change, the creation will change accordingly. For example, as has been discussed in

previous paragraphs, in recent years, short videos have become the new trend, so he also began to pick up the production of videos and operate video platform accounts.

5.3.5 Relationship with Followers

Followers have played an important role over the course of Aoda Cat's development. Like any social media creator, the number of followers is an essential metric to measure the creator's popularity and economic potential. They actively comment, share and promote Aoda Cat's content. Many of them make their own suggestions or requests. On 20th April 2014, Xiaoyouyu (小鱿鱼) replied, 'Uncle Ao make mobile wallpaper ok[?]' and Qiangkoutianjiangjiadiantang (呛口甜酱加点糖) begged, 'want the high-resolution profile picture from the sticker 'come out and chat'! On my knees, boss Ao' (Murongaoao, 2014b). The creator interacts enthusiastically with his followers, and when fans express their admiration, he will respond promptly and repost it onto his own account. In the gaps between the release of new works, he will also launch some daily life topics, such as posting the food he cooks, the drama he has been watching recently, and commenting on late events, etc., to maintain followers' engagement, as the algorithm of social media platforms normally tends to prioritise accounts with high update frequency and interaction rates. Frequent posts or updates can increase exposure and interaction opportunities, which in turn can lead to higher visibility and engagement.

Besides this, the creator often actively seeks his followers' suggestions about what he should create. For example, shortly after releasing a new sticker set, he usually posts to ask how they (followers) feel about the new stickers. Sometimes he directly asks what the followers want to see in the content to come. On 22nd June 2017, he even consulted his followers about what name he should register for his own character company (Murongaoao, 2017a). All these have deepened their connection. The creator describes his relationship with his followers as '*mutual growth*' in which they appreciate and learn from each other at the same time.

5.3.6 Promotion and Monetisation

When comes to promotion, Murongaoao emphasised in the interview that as he has no budget for marketing like big companies, all he can do is create good quality content that can spread organically: '*[Spending money] on promotion might not be feasible for us, so I think the most important thing is always our product. It will always be like this; content is king at all times.*

Only in this way can you stand firm and go far in this market'. But from his Weibo posts, we can see that he does have some promotion strategies in place. At the basic level, he uses his different social media accounts to advertise for each other in order to direct traffic from one platform to another. Another frequently used method is to offer giveaways to those who share or forward his content. The rewards vary, and include cash, premium stickers and spin-off products, etc. In a post on 8th July 2017, he wrote: 'five babies will be drawn from those who forward this post, and each one will be awarded one PVC figure set (three figures as a set)! Uncle Ao's signature is attached! Next Friday 14th announces the drawing result!' (Murongaoao, 2017c) This method has been reused across the years and does effectively boost sharing. This post eventually gathered 1279 reposts, a significant increase from the 69 reposts of his #AodaCatIsGreat webtoon, released on 4th July 2017.

There are also more implicit strategies. The creator focuses on the creation of stickers, profile pictures and wallpapers for a reason: to occupy followers' online spaces. One's messaging chatbox, screen display or social media account homepage, and profile picture can be seen as natural online advertisement spaces for creators. This can be considered an effective way of building bonds between characters and users, while also increasing user stickiness. Furthermore, when other users see someone's character avatar, they might also become interested in and curious about the character, which serves as a form of promotion.

At the same time, Murongaoao has been searching incessantly for new platforms and channels in the hope of establishing a first-mover advantage on the potential big-hit platforms. Like his short video creations, while it is apparent that his animation skills are very limited, he still jumps on the bandwagon and tries to catch the wave of this trend. There is a humorous saying in China's internet industries, 'Even a pig can fly when standing on the windward side' (站在风口上猪都能飞上天). This expression is used to describe companies or individuals who follow the right trend or direction in their industry, meaning they can achieve success even without outstanding management or innovation capabilities, as long as they are in an emerging thriving market environment.

On top of this, in previous years on Weibo, the creator and other familiar creators would help each other share and comment on their new posts to increase their media exposure, by connecting to each other's follower communities. For example, on 28th September 2016 Murongaoao reposted @qiuqiudehua's (@球球的画) new webtoon on his own account and

made a comment expressing his interest. @qiuqiudehua did the same when Murongaoao posted his new webtoon. This was a reciprocal strategy that benefited all the involved creators, as he explains ‘*which was a win-win approach*’. However, as Weibo’s popularity has been waning over the years, this happens less often.

In general, according to its creator, Aoda Cat’s monetisation consists of three major sources: stickers, advertisements and licensing. Stickers have always been a reliable source of income over the years, especially after WeChat introduced the Sticker Gallery and reward system. This ‘reward’ (打赏) feature allows users to show their appreciation for the creativity and talent of the sticker creators by giving a monetary reward to the creators of the stickers (effectively a tip in addition to the money used to purchase a particular set of stickers), and it also provides an incentive for creators to continue producing high-quality stickers. Advertising income falls into two categories: direct advertising and product placement. In direct advertising, the character’s account shares or forwards the client’s post or ad with a straightforward promotional line, while in product placement a customised Aoda Cat webtoon is made embedding the brand or target product implicitly, as discussed earlier. Another major part of income comes from licensing, a business arrangement where the owner of a fictional character grants permission to a third party to use that character in certain ways, including figures and toys, packaging, theme exhibitions (Figure 5.10), printing the character on other products, etc. Apart from these, it can be learned from his social media posts that the creator is also creating some spin-off products by himself, like calendars, keychains, and actual stickers (Figure 5.11), which can be found on the online Taobao store managed by himself. As the creator did not mention this source of income in the interview it may not be particularly significant.



Figure 5.10 Aoda Cat’s commercial exhibition (Source: Murongaoao’s Weibo, 2022)



Figure 5.11 Examples of Aoda Cat's merchandise (Source: Murongaoao's Weibo, reorganised by the researcher)

5.3.7 Reflection

Murongaoao thinks '*the biggest difference*' between his character and those created by media conglomerates

lies in the degree to which individual vision is emphasised. For example, the characters I created, as well as those created by most sticker artists, have a strong personal style and unique characteristics. If a different artist were to create the same character, it might not have the same flavour or style.

He highlights the importance of individuality and creative freedom in the development of characters and artistic expression, for in his eyes, those works of conglomerates that are often developed by teams of professionals might compromise the artist's personal style. Besides this, those big companies' characters are often driven by complete storylines or universe design while his character mainly relies on fragmented emotional moments. He believes that indie creators like him have more freedom in shaping the character, in emphasising what he wants the most. The difference in the level of creative freedom and individuality that is present in independently developed characters seems important to him and could be part of the reasoning behind how he chooses to identify himself: '*between entrepreneur and artist, I definitely prefer artist, I wouldn't even think about entrepreneur*'. This indicates that his primary motivation for creating is the creative process itself, rather than commercial success or entrepreneurship. In fact, Murongaoao has received many offers for collaboration from different agencies (these agencies to some extent function similarly to Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) on YouTube, for a more detailed discussion please see section 7.3), but rejected them all. He wanted to maintain his independence and keep control in his own hands (China National Radio, 2018).

This perspective is shared by many independent creators, who prioritise artistic expression and the freedom to develop their ideas over the pursuit of profit or corporate success.

He emphasises that the most crucial point of sustaining the character's development is to '*constantly absorb new knowledge, keep learning*', '*keep up with the times and keep up with the changes in technology and society*'. This is extremely important for content creators, for the rapidly changing social media landscape presents constant challenges, as well as opportunities, for them. New features are introduced regularly, algorithms and policies are constantly changing, and new platforms are emerging one after another. Those who can adapt and stay ahead of the curve have the potential to achieve great success and reach new audiences, while those who are slow to respond risk falling behind and losing relevance.

In retrospect, Murongaoao feels he is among the lucky ones who rode the wave of this industry and has achieved some success now. In the conversation, he referenced the Pareto Principle, noting that the circumstances for most creators are far from ideal. He argued that only about 20% of creators manage to earn a substantial living through their work, while the vast majority struggle to sustain their creative endeavours. In his study of the LINE app, Steinberg (2020) also mentions that the 'winner-take-all' mechanism is at work in the sticker world, as LINE data showed that only 1.7% of all stickers in the Creators Market made over 2 million yen (US\$18,000), and half of all creators made absolutely no money at all (Hirose, 2015, pp.103–104). Lukács (2020) and Duffy (2017) also mention similar phenomena in Japan and the North American digital context. While the winner-takes-all phenomenon can create significant rewards for the winners, it can limit opportunities for new entrants. For new creators who are eager to join, competition will be even more intense, and they will have to produce higher quality works in order to stand out. However, this has not deterred hundreds if not thousands of creators from joining in, as the temptation of success is massive. This is not only about monetary rewards but a manifestation of the sense of personal achievement, which is what many young people aspire to today. As Murongaoao concludes,

I think the best thing during this process is that I can realise my value by utilising my talents in my work and gaining recognition from the masses. I feel this manifests the individual value, which is the most important and satisfying aspect, followed by the ability to support myself and my family through doing what I love and what the public enjoys. These two points are basically the most important.

5.4 Case Study of Fan & Bao

5.4.1 Background

This case study investigates and discusses the character Fan & Bao's (饭粒猫与包子鸭) creation and development strategies. The researcher conducted a comprehensive analysis of the characters' social media content, tracing its evolution from its inception in June 2018 to March 2023, primarily on Weibo, the platform where Fan & Bao originated. The social media content is collected from: Weibo: Posts from June 2018 to March 2023; WeChat Official Account (ID:饭粒猫与包子鸭): content from February 2022 to March 2023; Douyin (ID: 饭粒猫与包子鸭): Videos from January 2022 to March 2023; Red (Xiaohongshu) (ID:饭粒猫与包子鸭): content starting from July 2021 to March 2023; Stickers: All sticker sets are sourced from Muzi's(木子) WeChat sticker gallery. Other resources include: online articles and news (searched with keyword: 饭粒猫与包子鸭), and promotional material shared by the creator. Although attempts were made to contact the creator Muzi (木子, real name Joe Bog) and the company with which he is collaborating to develop this character for interviews, the creator declined and instead provided some self-organised promotional materials, claiming everything he wanted to say was already there. This investigation is therefore limited by the lack of the creator's insight, making it difficult to confirm the intentionality or motivation behind the characters' development, which can only be inferred from social media content and other materials.

The character Fan & Bao, or more precisely characters as they are in fact a duo (see *Figure 5.12*), made their debut in June 2018 as sticker set images. Prior to Fan & Bao, their creator Muzi (木子) had already been creating stickers and making figurines on the Weibo platform and had already released two sets of stickers called Tianzhong Muzi (田中木子), featuring a cat character which could be the precursor to Fan & Bao. So Fan & Bao was actually Muzi's third set of stickers, and unlike the previous ones that consisted of a single character, this time it featured two characters that acted in tandem. Fan & Bao's name comes from the names of the two characters: Fan is a feline character whose name translates literally as Rice Grain Cat (饭粒猫), while Bao represents a duck character Bun Duck(包子鸭). Despite being relatively new, as of February 2021, when the eighth set of stickers set was launched, Fan & Bao's sticker sets had already garnered a billion total sends and 20 million downloads (with an average of

about 2.5 million downloads per set), according to data in the material provided by the creator. Currently, Fan & Bao are active on various social media platforms, including Weibo, Red, WeChat Official Account/Video Account, Douyin, and have their own independent Taobao store. Besides content like webtoons, stickers, avatars, wallpapers, and short animation videos, Fan & Bao have also been featured on a wide range of branded merchandise including figurines, blind boxes (盲盒), stationery, daily necessities, and children's products, etc. At the time of this writing in April 2024, Fan & Bao had 273K+ followers on the Weibo platform, which can be regarded as a mid-tier influencer.

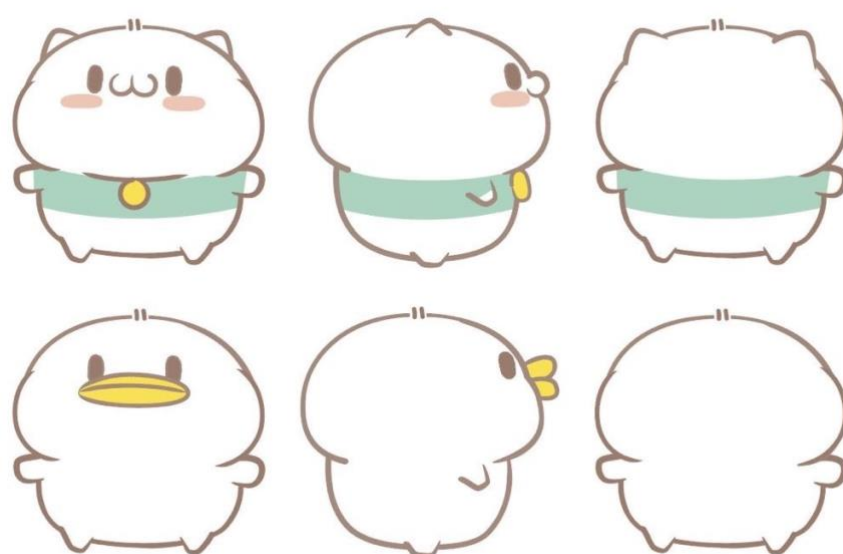


Figure 5.12 Images of Fan & Bao (Source: Fan & Bao's Weibo, 2018)

5.4.2 Image & Personality

The visual forms of Fan & Bao can be said to be representative of moe characters (*Figure 5.8*). They have a two-head-tall proportion, that is, the height of their body is the same as their head, which looks very cute. The cat and the duck are both round, fluffy white creatures with small simple features. Their heads are very simple and almost the same in silhouette, except that Fan Cat has two small, pointed ears on top of its large round head. At the centre of the top of their head, there are two strands of hair commonly referred to as 'Daimao' (呆毛) which can be understood as a tuft of hair or cowlick in English. Daimao or cowlick (also known as silly hair, stupid hair, or even 'antenna') is a term used commonly in the Anime, Comic, Game, and

Novel (ACGN) community to describe a cute attribute in anime characters. It refers to a tuft (or tufts) of hair that sticks up and out from the top of the character's head ('Daimao', 2023). The Daimao hair on anime characters' heads often changes form (such as standing up or shrinking) following their owner's mood or will, making it a very expressive feature. At the same time, visually, it breaks up the overly smooth line at the top of the cartoon-style head representation, avoiding the feeling of a helmet being stuck on the head. In a word, Fan and Bao's facial features are highly abstractive and symbolic.

In terms of facial features, Fan Cat is nearly identical to another more well-known social media character in China, Budding Pop (长草颜团子) (see *Figure 5.9*), although Budding Pop was introduced much earlier than Fan Cat. The face of Budding Pop is actually derived from Kaomoji (颜文字), a combination of this kind of keyboard characters with anime-style drawing (Songtianshiliaodongman (宋天师聊动漫), 2019). Kaomoji is a Japanese word that is composed of kao (face) and moji (character), meaning face characters, which are emoticons made up of keyboard characters. In English, Kaomoji is often referred to as face marks, face symbols, text faces, or Japanese emoticons (Kaomoji, n.d.). Unlike Western emoticons where most attention is paid to the mouth, in Japanese emoticons the most important part is the eyes (see *Figure 3.2*). As can be seen in *Figure 5.13*, Budding Pop, whose original name was Budding Kaomoji (长草颜文字) draws the idea directly from Kaomoji marks ('• ω •'). It is impossible to judge whether the similarities in facial features between Fan Cat and Budding Pop are merely a coincidence or due to other reasons, and this sort of controversy has been discussed widely on the Chinese Internet. For example, Budding Pop has been accused of long-term plagiarism of the Taiwanese characters 'Lai Lai & Zhi Zhi' as well as of riding on the popularity of the kaomoji trend (ACTime, 2018), while another popular social media character, Xiaoliu Duck (小刘鸭), has been accused of plagiarising Elizabeth in the Japanese anime *Gin Tama* (银魂) (Zhihuyonghu5Pj6Yf, 2021).

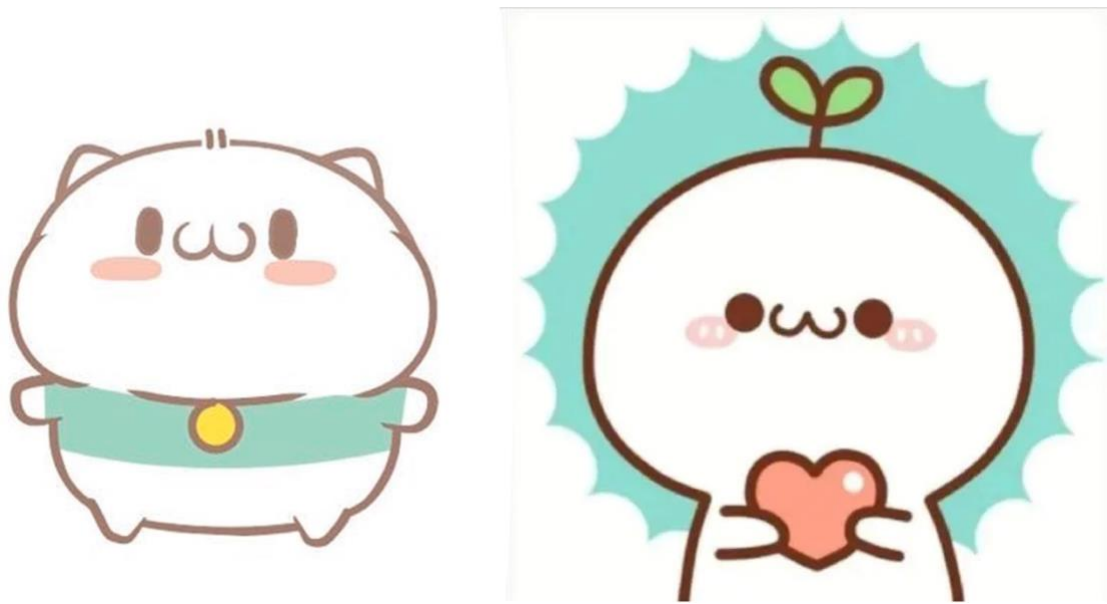


Figure 5.13 Fan Cat and Budding Pop (right) (Source: Fan& Bao's and Tuilisi's Weibo, reorganised by the researcher)

Fan Cat's companion Bao Duck has a facial design that is close to minimalist. According to the creator's description, its head is in the shape of a Baozi (also known as a steam bun in English), with only the yellow beak in the middle indicating that it is actually a duck. The use of shading is minimal, with only slight shading at the bottom of objects to suggest volume. In terms of colour, the basic colour palette is dominated by bright pink and orange, with other colours such as light blue or red added in. The use of colour is carefully considered, with low saturation to create a soft visual stimulus that emphasises the softness and warmth of the characters, providing a pleasant visual experience. As a lively cat whose visual inspiration comes from kaomoji, Fan Cat's facial expressions are very rich. On the other hand, Bao Duck's facial expression is relatively simple and not as varied, which creates a contrast with the cat.

Fan Cat is usually depicted wearing a blue T-shirt and carrying a yellow bell, while Bao Duck's body is even simpler with no clothing or accessories. It seems that bells are a common accessory for cat characters as Aoda Cat also has one around his neck. However, these are just the basic outfits for Fan & Bao. In related content, it can be seen that Fan & Bao changes into a variety of costumes according to the specific context and narrative needs. Overall, Fan & Bao have a standard cute character design that is suitable for portraying themes such as fairy tales, love, and warmth. Their highly abstracted form makes them easily readable on social media, and suitable for being made into various branded merchandise.

Like cats, it is not uncommon to use ducks as characters in cartoons and anime. Ducks have a round and cute appearance that easily captures the audience's affection. Their thick and protruding beaks are very distinctive, with high recognisability. In the Chinese-speaking world, ducks also have a special trait because their Chinese pronunciation 'ya' (鸭) is the same as the onomatopoeic word 'ya' (呀), which is frequently used in spoken Chinese to express surprise, exclamation, doubt, reminder, and other meanings, usually at the beginning or end of a phrase. For this reason, the two terms are often used in homophone puns. For example, to express surprise or regret, such as 'Ya, I forgot it completely!' Or to express admiration or praise, such as 'That's amazing ya!'. In internet language, 'ya' (呀) is often replaced with 'ya' (鸭) to create a humorous and cute expression. An example of this can be seen in *Figure 5.14*: 'Let's go ya!!!' (大家冲呀!!!) is a common encouragement expression in Chinese, but replacing the 'ya' at the end with the duck word, so it literally reads 'Let's go duck!!!' (大家冲鸭!!!) creates a cute pun, making the otherwise commonplace phrase more interesting and generating a compelling visual representation. As this example demonstrates, in China ducks have a high degree of functionality and versatility as characters.



Figure 5.14 Let's go ya!!! (大家冲鸭!!!)(Source: 973.com, 2019)

The gender of Fan and Bao is also a very interesting issue. As we discussed before, the image of the cat itself has a certain degree of neutrality, and the image of the duck is the same. In the description given by the author himself, he uses the Roman alphabet 'ta' to describe the characters' genders. Mandarin Chinese usually uses three separate written forms to refer to the third person pronoun, 他 (as he), 她 (as she), and 它 (as it) all with the same pronunciation 'ta' (see Chan, 2011). So by using the genderless non-standard third person pronoun 'ta' written

using the Roman alphabet instead of the standard Chinese characters, the creator intentionally blurs the genders of these two characters. In his study of celebrity verified accounts on Weibo, Sluchinski (2020) suggests that incorporating the gender unspecified ‘*ta*’ into narratives could solicit empathy or alignment from the readers. It seems that the creator Muzi is also using neutral or fluid gender to deconstruct traditional gender stereotypes, and enable audiences from different genders, ages, and cultural backgrounds to resonate with them. From reading their creative content, it can be clearly seen that their genders are actually in a fluid state. In the narratives found in much of their content, there is an implication that Fan and Bao seem to be a couple. They stay together every day and sleep on the same bed, and in this domestic context Fan seems to take the role of a female and Bao Duck the male. However, in different contexts or stories, their genders can change to suit the needs of those contexts, with Fan Cat playing male roles, and Bao Duck taking on female roles as needed (see *Figure 5.15*).



Figure 5.15 The fluidity of Fan & Bao’s genders (Source: Fan & Bao’s Weibo, reorganised by the researcher)

Muzi has created very detailed backstories and personalities for these two characters, an approach that is not common among social media characters. According to their official backstory, Fan and Bao come from an asteroid outside of Earth called FB0401, where they are a species named Moe-food-monsters (萌食兽) who are in charge of food production. When the Blue Planet (蓝星) faced a shortage of food, the Moe-food-monsters helped humans overcome their difficulties and provided them with nutritious food. In recent years, they discovered that only solving the food and shelter problem is not enough to bring happiness to humanity, so asteroid FB0401 sent Fan and Bao as interns to Earth to observe and help humans. The creator’s own material describes these two characters thus:

Fan Cat is a clingy and playful little cat who longs for freedom and is a super active cat. Ta [here ‘*ta*’ is a pronoun] provides humans with heat, protein, and other nutrients, which can be quickly absorbed and released as energy. Ta can also stimulate the production of

dopamine in the human body, making people full of vitality. Fan Cat's companionship can bring unlimited happiness to people, and even improve their luck.

Bao Duck has a blank and innocent expression and likes to follow Fan Cat, silently guarding ta. Bao Duck is a very thoughtful warm bun~[sic]. Ta provides humans with minerals that promote metabolism and relieve stress, and can also stimulate the production of endorphins in the human body, which has a healing effect, just like a rainbow after the rain. (Fan & Bao, 2022g)

Here it can be seen that both Fan and Bao are closely associated with food, in terms of their names, background stories and personalities. This is an interesting phenomenon, which may be related to the creator's own interests. The creator explained once on his Weibo (see post on 22nd June 2018) that when he was a child, he was as small as a grain of rice, which inspired him to name one of the characters Rice Grain Cat (literal translation from Chinese). In any case, food is an essential part of human life, and associating characters with food seems a good strategy that could increase people's fondness and closeness to the characters by tying into existing food preferences. This creates more opportunities for content creation, such as cooking, tasting, and sharing related scenarios, which we can clearly see in their social media content (e.g., see posts on 7th October, 11th and 25th December in 2023, also see later section 5.4.3 for more discussion of this). Content related to food usually resonates across different cultures and age groups. People often have strong emotional memories and associations with certain foods, such as childhood snacks or signature dishes at family gatherings. These memories are usually linked to feelings of happiness and comfort. Creating content around these themes can evoke these positive emotions. These scenes can further flesh out the characters' personalities, emotions, and background stories. Their personalities can be largely categorised as those of a typical 'healing' character or belonging to the iyashikei genre. The word iyashikei (治愈) originated in Japan. Iyashikei is Japanese for 'healing', a term originally used for anime and manga created with the specific purpose of healing or soothing the audience (Ren, 2020). In 1999, iyashikei was chosen as the word of the year in Japan (Hiroko, 2022), and then the term gradually started to become popular in other regions.

Nowadays, particularly in anime and other 2D (二次元) works, 'healing' refers to characters or works that provide viewers with positive emotions such as love, sunshine, warmth, peace, and other forms of positive energy. These characters usually have cute, gentle, kind, optimistic, and patient characteristics and are often given attributes that make people feel happy, warm, and hopeful, such as healing power and happiness. One of China's official mouthpieces, China National Radio (CNR) reported that 'Urbanites face enormous pressure every day and are in

need of heartwarming and healing stories to soothe their minds. This has led to a surge in the popularity of film and television works with a ‘healing’ theme in the Chinese market in recent years’ (2017). This state-endorsed trend has also extended to social media platforms, where many creators are producing characters with a ‘healing’ theme. Giving characters a healing personality seems to be a very safe and mainstream approach, with a wide audience appeal that can be enjoyed by both young and old. Moreover, this approach aligns with the Chinese state’s propaganda of promoting so-called ‘positive energy’ (正能量). This term generally refers to the need for uplifting messages as opposed to critical or negative ones, which is important in guiding public opinion and shaping state image. At the Central Forum on Arts and Literature in 2013, Xi Jinping, the top leader of the PRC, told artists gathered at the event that works ‘should be like sunshine, blue sky and the spring breeze, inspiring minds, warming hearts and cultivating taste’. Cultural creation, said Xi, should brim with ‘positive energy’ (China Media Project, 2021).

5.4.2 Making Connections

As mentioned briefly in the last section, Muzi imbues this duo with qualities that are universally admired, such as cuteness, gentleness, empathy, optimism, and patience. Fan & Bao’s cute and adorable looks can elicit a positive emotional response from people, which makes people feel happy, relaxed, and uplifted. Besides that, healing characters can provide a sense of emotional comfort and security to people. They can create a safe and positive environment, which can be especially important in times of stress or uncertainty. In the creator’s own description (Fan & Bao, 2022), the responsibility of Fan & Bao is to help everyone, solve problems for everyone, playing a healing role. He hopes to establish a connection with the public through this form. They are here to alleviate the tension, pressure, and negative emotions of real life, helping people find inner peace and relaxation. On 25th September 2018, Muzi shared a screenshot of a private message from a follower on Weibo, in which the follower described how he and his father had a strained relationship, but they were able to break the ice by using the Fan & Bao stickers to communicate silently with each other on a chance occasion (Fan & Bao, 2018). This helps them resolve their long-standing issues and heals this follower’s long-term emotional trauma. It is clear that Fan & Bao and their stickers serve as useful tools for those who struggle to express their emotions in words. By using stickers to convey their feelings, they can feel more comfortable and confident in expressing themselves, which can be a valuable step towards emotional healing. At the same time, they are often depicted as having relatable

struggles and vulnerabilities. By portraying characters who face challenges or overcome them, the audience can see that they are not alone in their own struggles and find inspiration and hope in the character's journey. For example, on 30th October 2022, in the mini webtoon under the #FanCat'sSmallTheatre(饭粒猫小剧场), Fan cat shared its gaming experience (*Figure 5.16*). In the first panel, Bao Duck is skilfully operating his game controller before the TV, and the caption reads 'Other people gaming: 眼疾手快 (quick hands and sharp eyes)'. In the next panel, Fan Cat is holding the game controller and seems to be struggling, with large beads of sweat dripping down its head, and the caption changes to 'Me gaming: 眼疾 (ocular disease)'. In this case, the creator played a pun with the phrase 眼疾 in Chinese, which can be interpreted as 'sharp eyes' or 'ocular diseases'. Therefore, when it comes to clumsy Fan Cat playing the game, the 手快(quick hands) is gone, and the remaining 眼疾 has also become 'ocular disease', suggesting it has a problem keeping up with the game. This mini scene depicts lots of people's clumsy gaming experience in a cute and relatable manner and has resonated with many followers. In the replies below, Xiaofeiyyinyin(小肥银银) said, 'It's me', Futejiaaishangxuebi(伏特加爱上雪碧) exclaimed 'So true', and WufanxingRPG(无反型 RPG) laughed, 'That's my girlfriend, no doubt' (Fan & Bao, 2022f).



Figure 5.16 Fan & Bao's Webtoon on 30th October 2022 (Source: Fan & Bao's Weibo, 2022)

5.4.3 Content and Platform Strategy

Fan & Bao's content is very diverse, ranging from webtoons, stickers, profile pictures and wallpapers to short videos. Stickers are mainly launched in the WeChat sticker gallery, while WeChat Video account and Douyin accounts operate short video content. The characters' official WeChat account and Weibo mainly publish webtoons, profile pictures, wallpapers and other static content, and Red publishes both video and static content. Among these platforms, Weibo also serves as an information hub across these platforms, and interactions with fans are mainly conducted on Weibo, including soliciting opinions, initiating voting, and so on.

Content does not have an overarching storyline but does centre around the themes of healing and helping. Food can be said to be one of the most important themes, which is consistent with the setting of their moe-food-monster identities. China has an old saying, 'food is the first necessity of the people (民以食为天)'. The Chinese writer Zhang Jiajia (张嘉佳) also has a famous line in his book *I belonged to you* (从你的全世界路过), 'Only delicious food can combat all the sadness and bewilderment from the world'.¹⁷ It is evident that food holds an extremely important position in the lives of Chinese people. Incorporating food into the content of healing characters is therefore a very effective way to attract audiences and establish emotional connections because in such works, audiences can appreciate the delicacies while experiencing a warm and comfortable atmosphere. This type of content can better touch the emotions of the audience, helping them relax and achieve a healing effect. Muzi labelled a series of webtoons under #FanCatFoodDrama, in which Fan and Bao teach everyone how to cook various types of delicacies. Although there are many popular tutorial programs for teaching cuisine across social media platforms, presenting cooking tutorials in the form of cartoons is a relatively rare approach. However, it seems that the audience does not really care whether they can actually learn to cook from these webtoons, but instead focus more on the two protagonists' funny cooking experiences. For example, in the comments of the webtoon

¹⁷ Zhang Jiajia was originally a grassroots creator who gained popularity through a series of bedtime stories posted on the Weibo. After gaining large amount of online followers, these stories were collected and published as a book titled *I belonged to you*. In December 2014, Zhang Jiajia, at the age of 34, was named China's highest-earning writer by the ninth edition of the China Writers Rich List, which is similar to Forbes' annual billionaires list.

about making braised pork belly (红烧五花肉) released on 1st February 2023 (Figure 5.17), instead of focusing on the cuisine itself, they mainly focus on the cooking process. Zhongyishutiaowuzhongyishuzai (中意薯条唔中意薯仔) commented: ‘The cat can’t peel the egg’; Xiaopangfuzai (小胖夫仔): ‘The duck [put] meat in the pot already, but the cat still hasn’t finished peeling’; -XiaochengciCc-(-小橙子 Cc-) even made up a plot to explain why the cat in the picture is sweating, ‘Why is she sweating so much? Peeling the egg is annoying... So she is about to lose her temper, that’s why Bao Duck rushes to help her peel the egg together.’(Fan & Bao, 2023c)



Figure 5.17 Fan & Bao’s Webtoon on 1st February 2023 (Source: Fan & Bao’s Weibo, 2023, reorganised by the researcher)

In addition to food, Muzi’s content covers a wide range of topics, demonstrating that he is paying close attention to his surroundings and makes good use of trend jacking, creating

content around recent popular events to increase the exposure of his works. For example, when a certain TV drama became popular, he quickly updated content related to the show on the same day, such as on 18th June 2022 and 26th July 2022. When popular singer Jay Chou (周杰伦) released a new single, he followed up with content on the same day (6th July 2022). When the Winter Olympics were held in China (from the 4th-20th of February), he produced content related to the Winter Olympics on 7th, 8th, 9th, and 11th of February, 2022, and so on. This approach is quite similar to that of other practitioners, like political cartoonists in newspapers, who also respond rapidly to current events. In this mode of creation, timing is the name of the game; once the moment passes, the audience may lose interest in reading.

One point worth noting here is that Fan & Bao's content places particular emphasis on following the mainstream ideology of mainland China. For example, on days like Army Day, National Day, and the founding day of the Chinese Communist Party, special content is made to express support and praise for the motherland and the Party, something that is rarely seen in the previous character Aoda Cat's content. In China, there have been many cases where celebrities have been condemned and boycotted by the public for not expressing blessings and loyalty to the motherland and the Party on important days, or as netizens observed,¹⁸ 'not praising enthusiastically enough is also guilty (赞美的不够热烈也是错误)' (Kanrenjianwuchangshijianbaitai, 2022), as in the case of singer Jacky Cheung (张学友). Therefore, adhering to the so-called 'political correctness' in line with the official ideology is actually very important for content creators in mainland China. This way, even if they do not get the official endorsement, at least they will not be subjected to various forms of direct or indirect suppressions.

In terms of the content forms, stickers can be considered one of Murongaoao's most important creations and the starting point of Fan & Bao's success, running throughout the entire journey. In the first three years, he maintained a release rate of 2-3 sets per year, while in 2022, the creator released 10 sets of stickers, and in the first two months of 2023 (as of the time of writing), he has already published another 2 sets. The creation frequency is close to one set per

¹⁸ Netzen, a portmanteau of 'internet' and 'citizen,' is used to describe an individual who actively participates in the online community. In the Chinese internet context, it is often translated as wangming, 网民.

month, which reflects the creator's passion for sticker creation and the popularity of this art form. Another important thing to note is that all of Fan & Bao's stickers are available for free download, which is different from some other characters such as Aoda Cat, who has a large proportion of sticker sets available only for paid download.¹⁹ This allows us to infer that Muzi does not rely on the income from stickers and uses them only as a means to occupy followers' social space and promote other income streams, which will be discussed in more detail later. In his 14th set of stickers released on 11th June 2022, the creator tried to use a full 3D modelling production method (*Figure 5.18*), which is relatively rare in the mainstream stickers style because 3D modelling is more labor-intensive and time-consuming and has a relatively higher level of technical difficulty. Unfortunately, this experiment did not receive a favorable response among fans, and many fans commented that the 2D style is more suitable for Fan & Bao (Fan & Bao, 2022c), so this form was not continued. The updates of individual static stickers/profile pictures (these two can often be used interchangeably) are very frequent, with new ones appearing every few days. Their content is often closely related to the current cultural and social trends, as mentioned earlier.

¹⁹ 12 out of Aoda Cat's 15 sets are paid sets, although the price is quite low, generally ¥1.5 RMB per set, equivalent to around £0.2 GBP, considering the download volume, the total income should still be considerable



Figure 5.18 Fan & Bao's 3D modelling sticker set (Source: screenshot of Fan & Bao's WeChat Sticker Gallery)

Webtoons only started appearing around October 2021, and one of their distinctive features is that many webtoons are presented in an extremely small form, with only two panels, relating a special moment. This two-panel format is particularly concise, easy to understand, and allows the audience to quickly grasp the humor or emotions involved. During short breaks, such as waiting, commuting, or resting, audiences can easily spend a couple of minutes on these webtoons. For example, in the webtoon published on 9th January 2023 (*Figure 5.19*), Bao finds a book in a bookstore with the title ‘Solve 50% of Your Life’s Problems’ in the first panel. In the following panel, Bao is handing two copies of the book to the cashier, implying that buying two copies could solve all of life’s problems. These two panels create a humorous and healing moment. The previously mentioned gaming scene (on 30th October 2022) also belongs to this category.

Moreover, due to their short length and concise content, these mini two-panel comics are more likely to be shared on social media, attracting more viewers. Nonetheless, the mini two-panel comic format has its limitations, such as difficulty in displaying complex plots and character development, it also requires the creator to convey one’s ideas concisely and clearly. While other art forms like political cartoons often include a lot of information in a single panel, creators here need to be mindful of balance, avoiding overloading limited space with information, as short, plain and fast are important characteristics of social media content creation.



Figure 5.19 Fan & Bao's Webtoon on 9th January 2023 (Source: Fan & Bao's Weibo, 2023)

Different from other content forms, Fan & Bao's short animated videos centre around relationships, stories of couples, and their emotions in daily life. By focusing on themes like love, companionship, and the ups and downs of relationships, and other broadly applicable topics in everyday life, Fan & Bao can create content catering to slightly different groups of people than their other forms of works. This content helps the audience to feel understood and comforted, which aligns with the main goal of healing characters - to provide positive emotions and a sense of warmth and comfort. Their short video 'When boyfriend fell asleep during a quarrel' which was released on 17th September 2022 depicts Fan & Bao as a couple having an argument in bed at night. When Fan Cat remains fuming with anger, Bao Duck already falls asleep. At this point, Fan Cat feels speechless yet helpless, all she can do is keep tossing and turning, and sulk silently until dawn. When Bao Duck wakes up in the morning, it seems he has already forgotten what happened the night before and wants to kiss her girlfriend. Finally, the volcano gets to erupt as Fan Cat yells furiously at him to get lost. This animation resonated with many audience members, who praised its authenticity. Within two weeks it earned 130k likes, 48k comments, and 113k shares (at the time of the video's release, Fan & Bao's Douyin

account only had a total of 100k followers). To put this in context, while their Weibo account has more than 250k followers, not a single one of their Weibo posts has ever received more than 1,000 likes and 500 comments. Even though Douyin is more popular than Weibo at present, this still indicates that their short video strategy is indeed effective.

5.4.4 Relationship with Followers

Social media and other online contexts imply that Muzi believes a loyal and engaged audience is the key to his success, so he treats his followers with great respect. He often interacts with followers through comments and direct messages. By responding to feedback and answering questions, he can build a sense of community and make his followers feel valued. Moreover, he frequently expresses his gratitude to them. For example, on 21st February 2021 he wrote on Weibo, ‘After going through ups and downs, we have persisted until now, adjusting internally for future growth, the two little characters will always be with you all - healing you all. Muzi is grateful to you all (bows at a 90-degree angle) and will continue to work hard, love you all.’ Sometimes he also showcases followers’ private messages or posts, such as the one mentioned earlier, where Muzi shared a screenshot of a private message from a follower on Weibo, to encourage fans and thank them for their love. He positions himself as a humble person, repeatedly telling his fans that he will double his efforts and create better works. He values followers’ opinions and ideas, frequently soliciting their preferences and requirements for his works. For example, on 11th April 2020, he initiated a poll asking fans if they prefer Fan & Bao to be slightly fatter or thinner (Fan & Bao, 2020a), and after making adjustments, he launched another poll on 30th June in the same year to see followers’ reactions. In addition, he often asks fans about their preferred stickers or what kinds of spin-off products they would like. When fans’ receptions of his works are not positive, he responds quickly, as we mentioned earlier about the 3D sticker set, which he abandoned after seeing followers’ requests. On top of this, he has also set up fan groups on WeChat, in the hope of better cultivating and managing Fan & Bao’s follower base. During his low productivity periods, he would also specifically post to comfort everyone, telling them that new work is on the way and not to worry. Although sometimes he would chat casually with fans, bringing up some topics, such as asking everyone about their feelings on the first day after the long holiday on 5th May 2022 or discussing his recent plan for weight loss on 9th May 2022. But generally speaking, his interaction with fans rarely involves his personal life, unlike Aoda Cat’s creator Murongaoao, who actively invites fans into his daily life and treats them more like real friends.

5.4.5 Promotion and Monetisation

In general, Muzi uses many common strategies used by other creators on social media. The cross-platform promotion has become a standard strategy for most creators today. Leveraging multiple social media platforms allows Muzi to reach a wider audience and increase his content's visibility. By sharing content on different platforms, Fan & Bao can optimise their reach and grow their fan base. As discussed before, Muzi is good at trend-jacking, he often uses popular hashtags and participates in trending topics or challenges hosted by social media platforms to increase content visibility and attract new followers. For example, around September 2022, with the broadcast of the variety show 'The Most Beautiful Chinese Opera', works created around #TheMostBeautifulChineseOpera (最美中国戏) began to gain popularity on Weibo. Muzi quickly jumped on the bandwagon by posting his own content around this theme on 8th September 2022. Outside this type of very current content, hosting giveaways may be Muzi's most used method to encourage engagement and create fuss around his content. Offering giveaways is a popular promotional method on social media. Normally, participants are asked to perform certain activities, such as following social media accounts, sharing posts, tagging friends, or commenting under a specific post, in order to have a chance to win the giveaway. The purpose of this is to increase interaction on social media, expand the follower base, and enhance the visibility of a brand or individual. Participants get the opportunity to receive free gifts, while the organisers attract public attention and participation through these events, thereby achieving their promotional goals. While many creators only require users to repost to participate in the giveaway, Fan Bao's followers generally need to repost and comment at the same time to participate in the giveaways. For example, on 18th January 2023, when new sticker set was released, it was also mentioned in the post that 'among those who repost and comment, there will be a draw for three winners to receive burger/fries keychains' (转评抓 3 位送汉堡/薯条挂件~). Sometimes, users even have to meet the 'repost, comment, and like' requirement to participate in the giveaways (e.g., 13th February 2023).



Figure 5.20 Moer's weibo post on 6th June 2020 (Source: Moer's Weibo, 2020)

Muzi also deploys some more advanced strategies such as collaborating with other creators, which helps Fan & Bao reach new audiences and gain credibility. These collaborations can take the form of guest appearances, and co-created content. On 5th June 2020, Fan & Bao and another social media cartoon character, Moer (萌二), collaborated on a travel-themed campaign. In this campaign, the two characters toured the world together and took pictures at famous landmarks (Figure 5.20), sharing them on their respective social media platforms. Later, on 30th September 2020, they took a step further to launch a joint sticker set on WeChat gallery featuring Moer and Fan & Bao. By appearing in each other's content, creators can introduce their works to new audiences, potentially leading to increased fanbases for both parties. These collaborations are not limited to only other creators: Fan & Bao also partner with brands that align with their niches or values, which offers benefits to both parties. On 19th August 2020, Fan & Bao and electronics brand Konka jointly released a co-branded oven (Figure 5.21). Konka Group Co., Ltd. is a Chinese manufacturer of electronics products, with refrigerators and other kitchen appliances being its important product lines. As Fan & Bao are designed as Moe-food-monsters, this collaboration is very apt and gives another layer of appeal

to Konka's products. On the other hand, for newly emerging characters like Fan & Bao, leveraging the big brand Konka's influence is advantageous to increase and promote their own visibility.



Figure 5.21 Fan & Bao's weibo post on 19th August 2020 (Source: Fan & Bao's Weibo, 2020)

As mentioned previously, all of Muzi's content is free, and these contents serve primarily promotional purposes. Unlike Murongaoao, who relies on stickers, advertisements, and licensing for profit, Muzi's core monetisation strategy is merchandising, which simply means selling branded merchandise such as clothing, toys, stationery, keychains, and other accessories. Although Fan & Bao only made its official debut in June 2018, the merchandise and packaging were already on the market in November, and by December, there was already a wide range of products available, including T-shirts, cups, clothes, pillows, phone cases, figurines and so on. In contrast, Aoda Cat did not have any branded merchandise over its first couple of years, and items like figurines were licensed to third parties later. It can be said that Muzi is very clear about monetising his characters as soon as possible and seems very confident about it. Of course, this is also attributed to the increasingly mature platform economy based on social

media in recent years. When Murongaoao first started creating Aoda Cat, this creative route was just beginning, and everyone was still learning by trial and error, out of which many were doing it just for fun. Many people had yet to realise the immense commercial potential of content creation on social media. Today, with the rapid platformisation and booming growth of this field, along with the success stories of many grassroots characters like Budding Pop, there are increasingly more examples to learn from and a variety of monetisation models to emulate. Creators now have a clearer understanding of the opportunities in social media content creation and a strong desire to quickly capitalise on their talents. Now, Fan & Bao have their own online stores on WeChat, Taobao, and Douyin (*Figure 5.22*), managing a diverse product line, launching new products frequently, and occasionally doing live promotions.



Figure 5.22 Fan & Bao's online store interface (From left to right: Douyin, WeChat and Taobao)
(Source: screenshots of Fan & Bao's Douyin, WeChat and Taobao store interfaces, reorganised by the researcher)

5.5 Case Study of Rumi

5.5.1 Background

This case study delves into and discusses the character Rumi (野萌君 RUMI) (*Figure 5.23*), focusing on the development and implementation strategies of this character. To obtain a

comprehensive understanding of Rumi, the researcher conducted an extensive analysis of the character's social media presence, tracking its progression from its debut in December 2015 to March 2023. The social media content is collected from: Weibo: Posts from December 2015 to March 2023; WeChat Official Accounts (ID: 萌力星球 and 小桃部落): Content from February 2017 and September 2017, respectively, to March 2023, 请注意这两个账号都不是野萌君的专属账号，所以研究者 focusing solely on content related to Rumi; Douyin (ID: 萌力星球): Videos from July 2018 to March 2023, focusing solely on content related to Rumi; Red (ID: 野萌君 Rumi): content starting from from April 2022 to March 2023. Stickers: All sticker sets are sourced from Moly Planet's (萌力星球) and Chenxiaotao's (陈小桃 momo) WeChat sticker gallery. Other resources include: online articles and news (searched with keyword: 野萌君), the Baidu Tieba forum of Rumi, trade magazine article (The Panda Without Dark Circles and Its Creator 丢了黑眼圈的熊猫和它背后的创作者) (2022), and the print book *Rumi's Diary: Love is Trouble, I Just Want to Trouble You* (野萌君日记 恋爱真麻烦，就想麻烦你). After completing the digital fieldwork, the researcher had the opportunity to interview the character's creator, Chenxiaotao (陈小桃), which shed light on the motivations and inspirations behind Rumi's development. This offered practical insights and understanding of the processes involved in creating and popularising characters on social media platforms.

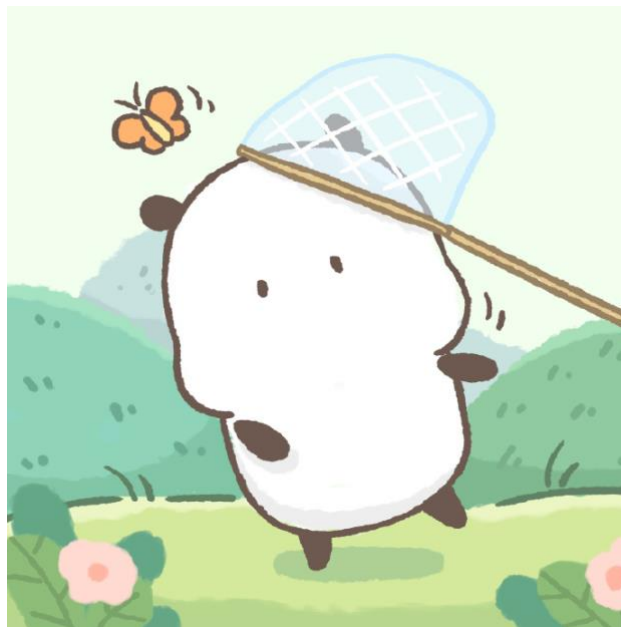


Figure 5.23 The image of Rumi (Source: Rumi's Weibo, 2019)

2015 was the year when digital stickers became extremely popular in China. At that time, Chenxiaotao was studying animation at Tianjin University, and she enjoyed using comics to document her everyday life. As the WeChat Sticker Gallery feature had just been launched, out of curiosity, she decided to submit her work to give it a go. She spent a month creating her first sticker pack based on her good friends. This attempt, although unsuccessful, provided her with a wealth of experience and gains:

The protagonists of the first set of stickers were good friends. After the submission, I started to think about and discover more about sticker creation. I also hoped to broaden my horizons and design a set of stickers suitable for a wider audience and more chat scenarios. Thus, Rumi was created...

After Rumi's first sticker set was created, she continued to post content about Rumi on Weibo. Her creations quickly caught people's attention, and in the summer of 2016, a company called Star Moly (萌力星球) bought out the copyright and began co-managing the Rumi character with her.²⁰ Since transferring the copyright, the creation, operation, and commercial cooperation of Rumi are mainly handled by Star Moly. Meanwhile the character's original creator, Chenxiaotao, can also continue creating Rumi content simultaneously. This makes the creative content of Rumi quite interesting because it consists of two lines developed in parallel: one led by the company, and the other by the creator herself, with the two lines complementing each other. Over the past few years, under the leadership of Star Moly, Chenxiaotao and Star Moly have not only created various branded merchandise, but also participated in various anime events, opened a theme cafe called 'Let's Moly', and set up their own offline retail shop. They also organised a special sticker exhibition with the Shanghai Yuz Museum (上海余德耀美术馆) in 2019 and carried out promotion campaigns with many brands. According to the data from the official website of Star Moly (ibid.), Rumi has accumulated more than 483 million downloads and more than 19.3 billion sends on social media. As of the time of writing in April 2024, Rumi has accumulated 865k+ fans on Weibo, which the Influencer Marketing Hub would classify as a macro-influencer.

²⁰ Star Moly (<http://www.starmoly.cn>), established in 2016, is a company 'based on the incubation and operation of sticker IP, and revolves around IP licensing, creative content, and creative merchandise' (Star Moly official website, n.d.). They specialise in signing contracts with independent creators to incubate and operate their characters, forming their own character universe.

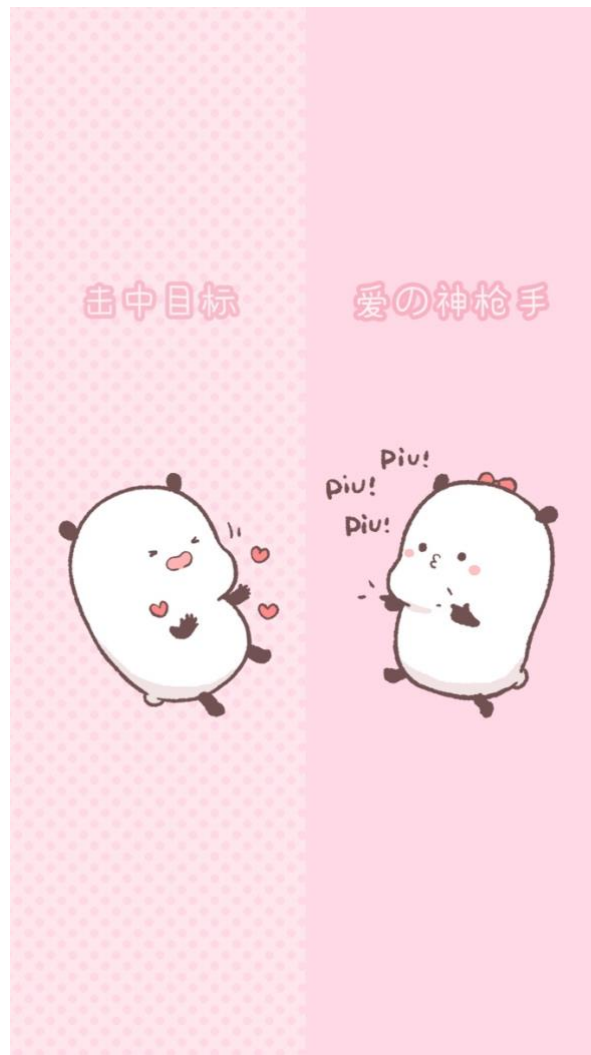


Figure 5.24 Rumi and Runi (Source: Rumi's Weibo, 2019)



Figure 5.25 Inspirations of Rumi: pandas without dark circles (Source: screenshot of Chenxiaotao momo's Weibo, 2016)

5.5.2 Image & Personality

Although Rumi is the name of a single character, he usually appears in a pair with his friend Runi (野萌子)(Figure 5.24), with their overall visual image being derived from pandas. Outlining her approach to the characters' design, Chenxiaotao explained:

As mentioned earlier, after my first attempt at submitting a sticker pack, I wanted to create a new series of stickers. I hoped that they would be suitable for a wider audience and various scenarios. Therefore, I thought that the main character of this sticker pack should be something everyone likes, preferably something all Chinese are familiar with. After trying out various human, animal, and virtual forms, I finally chose to use the panda as the main subject.

The panda, due to its rarity, is referred to as a national treasure in China. It has unique black and white patches, a round body, and interesting facial expressions and behaviours, all of which make it deeply loved by the public. However, Chenxiaotao did not simply follow the conventional image of the panda. In an interview with China Cartoon & Animation Museum (2022), she stated, 'I wanted to give it a unique appearance, so I started with the shape of its dark circles...After various attempts, I actually decided to take off its dark circles. I think that's

its most distinctive feature.’ She offered her own interpretation by removing the black patches around the eyes, which exposed the eyes directly. This added a comedic touch to this image, increasing its recognisability (see *Figure 5.25*). Chenxiaotao jokingly commented, ‘It’s just because it rested so well that it slept off its dark circles.’ Besides this, Rumi’s round body also has a two-head-tall proportion as Fan & Bao. Its limbs and ears have been minimised, making it appear delicate. However, this design does not immediately convey a panda’s image, deviating from people’s common impression. Many audience members could not recognise it as a panda at first glance, instead jokingly refer to it as a hippopotamus (for example, see Weibo posts on 13th October and 17th November of 2016). Over time, even Rumi’s own account began to self-mockingly use the hippo term to refer to itself (see post on 5th May 2017) and accepted the nickname (see 1st Jan 2020).

The female character, Runi, differs from the male only by adding two blushes on her face. This difference is humourously explained in the webtoon on 3rd September 2016 (*Figure 5.26*). In this webtoon, Rumi is introducing his family to his friend, a bird called Nageniao (那个鸟). Rumi emphasises, ‘in addition to having blush on her cheeks, a girl’s eyes will also tend to be rounder and larger’, then his friend, the bird jumps out, looking through a magnifying glass at the Runi’s face. After a close examination, the bird concludes that it ‘Can’t tell [the difference]’. This immediately brings Rumi to tears. This small humorous scene shows how similar Rumi and Runi are despite the different genders. Although the two characters do not have specific costumes by default, they wear various outfits according to the specific context to highlight the theme. For example, in a webtoon posted by Chenxiaotao on 11th Sep 2016, to depict a school scenario, both Rumi and Runi are dressed in school uniforms with red scarves.



Figure 5.26 Rumi's webtoon on 3rd Sep 2016 (Source: Chenxiaotao momo's Weibo, 2016, reorganized by the researcher)

As an animal with a unique appearance, characters based on pandas are not uncommon. For instance, Disney's blockbuster *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) and its sequels successfully crafted the panda character Po, a kung-fu enthusiast who fights evil and promotes good. However, the

distinctive image of pandas can also make it difficult to create a breakthrough in their representation. This has led to a certain similarity between this character and Moer, another character from Star Moly based on a racoon (*Figure 5.27*), and the frequent jokes about the character being a hippo also indicate that the recognition of this character as a panda is very low. However, this does not seem to affect the audience's affection for the character. At least from this point, it can be seen that the fans do not seem to care what kind of animal it is, only whether the image is attractive enough. Just as one fan, Minglang (鸣琅、), commented on Rumi's post on 13th October 2016: 'At first, I thought it was a shapeless cotton ball, then I thought it was a chubby kind of animal or a white dumpling with ears. Later on, I found out... it's actually a panda without dark circles around its eyes! However, it doesn't matter at all, whether you are a hippo, a panda, or a cotton ball. You are Rumi, and you are adorable! That's all that matters!'(Rumi, 2016e)



Figure 5.27 Rumi (Left) and Moer (Right) (Source: starmoly.cn, edited by the researcher)

Rumi and Rumi's Chinese names are Yemengjun (野萌君) and Yemengzi (野萌子), which can be literally translated as 'Wild Moe Gentleman/Lady'. To some extent, these names reflect their personalities, being wild yet moe at the same time. However, the creator Chenxiaotao, also explained that at the beginning, she did not set a clear personality for Rumi. As a character for stickers, he does not have as fixed or complete a personality or settings as animated or comic characters:

It actually doesn't have such a clear personality trait. Basically, it is designed for the expressions of the stickers in the first place. Through the continuous design of expressions, the personalities of Rumi and Rumi are fleshed out.

She emphasised that she did not want to give this character a label in the first place, but to let it develop naturally, so that Rumi's personality was very diverse and could grow and evolve

over time. However, after Star Moly became involved, they began to emphasise and highlight Rumi's personality trait, solidifying the character's personality. This is a common step taken by the company after taking over to package the IP. This approach makes the character's personality traits easier to remember and facilitates collaborative work to generate content, rather than relying solely on the creative inspiration of a single artist. Gradually, Rumi's wild characteristics became evident through the build-up of content, while Rumi primarily played the role of a good-natured boyfriend, always showing deference to Rumi. For example, in a popular sticker (posted on 19th Sep 2016), Rumi, with a ferocious expression, holding a duster, interrogates Rumi, 'Are you going to take me out to play or not?' while Rumi, covered in bruises, kneels on the ground, not daring to resist, swallowing his grievances. Or in the National Day webtoon of 1st Oct 2016, when Rumi suggests that Rumi is fat, he immediately receives a blow from Rumi, leaving a big bump on his head. Or like in the 'Stop hitting, it's not too late to withdraw now' from 9th Jul 2020, where Rumi beat Rumi again over an unsatisfied reply. In part, Chenxiaotao believes that the personality traits the company emphasises make sense, as they might be more favoured by fans:

Hence, they could only extract topics that are of interest to the fans, for instance, topics like 'what to do when your girlfriend is angry' or 'how to become a warm-hearted man'. So they could only build these character traits around such topics.

Such a character setup of a 'naive man and wicked woman' is not uncommon. As early as 2001, a popular South Korean movie, *My Sassy Girl* (엽기적인 그녀),²¹ successfully shaped the character of a 'wild girlfriend', providing audiences with a novel and interesting form of character interaction. This setting breaks the stereotypical image of male dominance and female passivity in traditional love stories, demonstrating a more equal and modernised romantic relationship. The independence, confidence, and strong personality of the 'wicked woman' made the film especially attention-grabbing at the time, while the 'naive man' character resonated emotionally with audiences. The film has also enjoyed success outside Korea and led to the emergence of a global media series, which includes film remakes,

²¹ The film was very successful in South Korea, where it was the highest-grossing comedy of all time, and one of the top five highest-grossing films ever at the time (Koreanfilm.org, 2001).

television versions across various regions, and a sequel.²² In fact, for a long time afterwards, the content of Rumi often used #MyWildMoeGirlfriend (我的野萌女友) as a tag, which is a pun on the Chinese translation of *My Sassy Girl* (我的野蛮女友), indicating that the content was, to some extent at least, inspired by this media franchise.

5.5.3 Making Connections

‘From a creative perspective, my works all belong to the world I’ve created, sharing the same worldview - a world that can bring warmth and strength to people.’ Chenxiaotao thinks that her creations are meant to bring joy to others. She herself likes content that is relaxing, fun, warm, and stress-relieving, so she infuses these elements into her work. She believes her work appeals to people who are similar to her in type, *‘I feel that my audience is those who are just like me... attracting readers who share the same feelings as me.’* Her works for Rumi keep these features, for example, in a series of illustrations posted on 11th January 2017 on her personal Weibo (Weibo account: Chenxiaotao momo (陈小桃 momo), not Rumi’s weibo), the title reads, ‘Rumi says: “I want to be a panda who is organised, cherishes life, can withstand pressure, shoulder responsibilities, and is both wild and moe.”’ Then, in the following nine illustrations, each is paired with a personal confession, such as ‘With your companionship, the night is neither cold nor lonely (有你的陪伴，夜晚没有寒冷，没有孤单)’, ‘Sometimes, even though I want to shut you up, I still want to listen to your nagging (有时虽然想堵你嘴，但还是愿意听你叨比叨)’, and ‘A good friend is someone who makes you happy and lets you bully them (好朋友就是让你开心，任你欺负)’. Although these confessions sound a bit like ‘chicken soup for the soul’ or clichés, they are still welcomed by the audience when paired with Rumi’s cute image.

In the works Star Moly has created for Rumi, they have continued this persona established by Chenxiaotao, and focused on the relationship dynamics between Rumi and Runi to appeal to the audience. Romantic relationships are a universal topic in human life, and almost everyone can find something relatable in them. Therefore, creating content about relationships can attract

²² In 2008, an American remake featuring Jesse Bradford and Elisha Cuthbert directed by Yann Samuell was released. That same year, a Japanese drama adaptation starring Tsuyoshi Kusanagi and Rena Tanaka began airing in April. A sequel titled *My New Sassy Girl*, a joint Korean-Chinese production was released in 2016.

audiences of all ages, genders, and backgrounds. The emotions and experiences involved in romantic relationships - such as love, loss, arguments, reconciliation, etc., provide a rich context for creators to express in various forms of creative expression. In this short webtoon titled ‘Girls Were Truly Magical Creatures’ published on 21st June 2021 (*Figure 5.28*), they represent the humorous contrast and paradoxes in everyday couple relationships. In the first image, the subtitle ‘Can’t Open the Lid During the Day’, shows Runi, a girl, who lacks the physical strength to open a jar lid and has to seek help from Rumi. This scene portrays a common stereotype that girls are physically weaker than boys. However, the next image titled ‘Can Grab All the Blankets at Night’, humorously reverses the situation. Runi is shown as incredibly strong when she sleeps, pulling the blanket over to her side, leaving Rumi shivering on the side with just a corner of the blanket. This contrast between day and night, weakness and strength, forms the main humour of the story. The portrayal is both vivid and interesting, which can resonate with people as these situations often occur in everyday life. Male readers might find self-identification in Rumi’s predicament, feeling that this experience of being ‘bullied’ is very familiar, while female readers might see themselves in Runi’s behaviour, triggering laughter. This clever character setting and situational design make this story both universal and individual, enabling it to resonate with the audience.



Figure 5.28 Rumi’s webtoon on 21st June 2021(source: Rumi’s Weibo, 2021)

5.5.4 Content and Platform Strategy

As mentioned in previous sections, the content creation for Rumi is carried out in two tracks simultaneously, by Chenxiaotao herself and by the company Star Moly. Content created by

Chenxiaotao is normally published on her own personal Weibo, Chenxiaotao momo (陈小桃 momo), while content created by Star Moly on a dedicated Weibo account called Yemengjun Rumi (野萌君 Rumi). In the meantime, Star Moly also has an official Weibo account in which it posts content from all the characters under its label. However, the platforms used for Rumi's content creation are not as diverse as the aforementioned ones. Apart from Weibo and Red, Rumi does not run an independent account on WeChat, but is affiliated to Chenxiaotao's personal account and Star Moly's account. Similarly, on Douyin, Rumi does not have an independent account but is tied to Star Moly's account. As for the content forms of Rumi, they cover all the basic forms previously mentioned, including profile pictures, webtoons, stickers, wallpapers, and short videos.

Stickers were the format used when Rumi first debuted, and it is a content form that Chenxiaotao has always placed great emphasis on. It can be said that the character was initially designed because of the intention to create sticker sets. In response to this, Chenxiaotao explained, *'I first confirmed the direction of creating stickers, and then designed Rumi following this direction, so the main format of Rumi's early works has always been stickers.'* Regarding the use of the sticker format itself, the creator noted:

the production cost of stickers is relatively low. Compared to traditional forms of work such as illustrations and animations, sticker production is quicker and simpler, it can be completed by one person with a computer, without much cost.

In addition,

stickers have the ability to self-propagate. When people like a sticker, they spontaneously send it to more people, and in this way, a sticker can quickly spread and become familiar to more users.

Since both Chenxiaotao and Star Moly are creating content, different sets of Rumi's stickers can be found under these two brand names in the WeChat sticker gallery. On 23rd January 2020, they also collaborated with 'Onmyoji' (阴阳师), a very popular mobile game in China, and released a Rumi-Onmyoji sticker set. To date, Chenxiaotao has released 8 sets, and the company has also released 7 sets of stickers, 6 of which require payment. Rumi's stickers are mainly themed around cuteness. Compared to the previously mentioned cheeky character Aoda Cat, Rumi's expressions are relatively limited, appearing less expressive (Figure 5.29).



Figure 5.29 Example of Rumi's sticker pack (source: screenshot of Rumi's WeChat Sticker Gallery, n.d.)

Besides stickers, Chenxiaotao has also created a lot of webtoons and profile pictures. Her webtoons are light-hearted and interesting, as exemplified in the Mid-Autumn Festival webtoon released on 15th Sep 2016. The webtoon depicts a scene where Rumi and Runi are preparing the traditional Chinese snack, mooncakes. When Runi, having prepared the dough and filling, realises that she cannot find the mould to shape the mooncakes, she asks Rumi, who has been on his phone, but he does not know where it is either. Runi continues her search until she finally discovers that the mould has been sat on by Rumi. At this point, Runi's veins pop out in anger, revealing her wild side as she scolds Rumi and tells him to go away. The simple and honest Rumi is left silently heartbroken. In the end, the camera zooms in on Rumi's buttock, showing that the mould has imprinted the words 'Happy Mid-Autumn Festival' on it. Rumi is a cute and honest character, whose unintentional action (sitting on the mould) triggers a series of troubles. This kind of absurd situation often appears in Chenxiaotao's webtoons. Although this narrative structure is not particularly creative, its adorable presentation still wins people's love. For instance, in the comments, user Sabulajijiligulu (傻不拉叽里咕噜) said, 'So cute... I love Xiaopotaojun's [小破桃君, a nickname for the creator] imagination', Kelaierliu (克莱尔刘) commented, 'Thank you Mengmeng, you're so cute, why are you so cute', and Bujueputao (不觉葡萄) 'Haha, so cute, I want to eat it'. (Rumi, 2016b)

On the other hand, the webtoons created by Star Moly were very thematic for quite a long time, mostly revolving around love and relationship issues. As previously mentioned, the romantic relationship is an attractive topic, and following this the profile pictures created are also mainly images of Rumi and Runi as a couple. It can be said that Star Moly is very clear about its goals and target audience. Chenxiaotao also highlighted that:

because their company often needs to find brand collaborations, if the relationship between Rumi and Runi were emphasised, they could more specifically find matching brand collaborations.

However, this trend began to change significantly after 2022. The content shifted from love to everyday life, gradually becoming the main theme, as can be seen in the webtoon on 4th November 2022 (Figure 5.30). The webtoon, titled 'Good news, time to make the weekend plan' (好消息, 可以开始做周末计划啦!), depicts the story of Rumi actively making plans to make good use of the weekend. In the first panel, Rumi ambitiously drafting weekend plans, seemingly ready to accomplish a lot. In the following panel, with the caption 'Easily breaking the plan' (轻松打破计划), it can be seen that when Rumi wakes up sleepily, it is already 12

o'clock, and the schedule next to him says to get up at 8 and go for a morning run at 9... In the last panel, Rumi has given up the struggle and has started to slack off, with the caption saying 'Calculate the time well, cross off the things you haven't done' (计算好时间, 划掉没做的事情). These comics that reflect daily life, under the hashtag #DailyComplaints (#日常吐槽), gradually came to make up a large part of the content. Regarding this shift, Chenxiaotao expressed that since she does not participate in the daily operations of Star Moly, she is not clear about the specific reasons. But she speculated,

I think there might be several reasons for some changes in the content: first, I didn't assign too many settings to Rumi in the early stage, so the company has a larger space to play with content. They might try different themes based on the market and fans' preferences. Secondly, I guess that personnel turnover in new media companies is relatively quick, and they have to manage different characters simultaneously, which makes the direction of the works not very fixed.

Over time, the same theme might become tiring. There might be more readers or fans who hope to see more diverse content. The company might also be trying different things, or if the person in charge of creation changes, it could change the whole direction of the character's development. These are things that are quite hard for Chenxiaotao to control.





Figure 5.30 Rumi's webtoon on 21st June 2021(source:Rumi's Weibo, 2021)

Animation and short videos are not formats Chenxiaotao excels at. She admits that she prefers static image content, so nearly no animated content can be seen on her own Weibo. The short video and animation content about Rumi, on the other hand, is produced by Star Moly. The theme is basically a continuation of the theme of the romantic relationship, but it is worth mentioning that in Rumi's animated videos, the company's involvement makes the artistic presentation of the content very diversified, rather than limited to the artist's personal strengths. For example, early works like the animation from 1st July 2017 adopted a 3D modelling form of expression, but this style was quickly abandoned. For quite a long time, many works explored the form of stop-motion animation with dolls, such as on 8th December 2017. Of course, traditional 2D animation also occupies a large part, such as on 14th September 2022 (Figure 5.31). On 6th December 2017, Star Moly also collaborated with Taobao to release a 12-minute stop-motion animation to build momentum for Taobao's Double 12 Shopping Festival.



Figure 5.31 Screenshot of Rumi’s short animated video post (source: Rumi’s Weibo, 2022)

Interestingly, Star Moly has created social media accounts for Rumi’s friend Runi to interact with him. The two accounts often comment and repost each other’s messages, sometimes even bickering, just like a real couple. On 22nd August 2017, Runi announced that she had registered a Weibo account and jokingly claimed that her purpose was to monitor whether Rumi was loyal. In response, Rumi also responded on his own Weibo, stating, ‘Emmmm... an upright bear does not fear a crooked shadow (ㄟ´ω`ㄟ) (嗯...熊正不怕影子歪)’. In another example, on 22nd July 2020 Runi retweeted and commented on Rumi’s Weibo post saying, ‘I think our feather duster was specifically bought to hit you, wasn’t it?’, showcasing her wild nature. This approach of running different social media accounts for both Rumi and Runi, which interact with each other, is quite interesting and engaging. It gives depth to these characters and makes them feel more real and relatable to the audience. This strategy not only boosts audience engagement but also enhances the storytelling aspect, as the characters’ interactions can reveal more about their personalities, their relationship, and the world they inhabit. It also adds an element of spontaneity and unpredictability, as followers can look forward to and engage with these ‘conversations’ in real time. It also provides a unique opportunity for audience interaction as followers can comment on, react to, or even potentially influence the characters’ interactions.

While Chenxiaotao emphasises that her creations mainly stem from her own passion and preferences, she also mentions the use of data analytics on social media platforms to make some adjustments to her creative content:

I like to regularly check the backstage data of my public account. With a character image in my works, the backstage data can help me evaluate the quality of each post and understand the reading preferences of my followers. Interestingly, in terms of the form of the work, sometimes a piece of content that I spent a lot of time carefully crafting has very average reading data. On the other hand, a simple illustration that I updated casually can receive a lot of interaction from the readers. Therefore, this data can play a role in the planning of subsequent work forms and content.

For creators on social media, using backend data to adjust creative direction and planning is a common and practical strategy. Creators can assess the performance of their content among the audience by looking at likes, shares, comments, and other data, which can help them understand which content is more popular and which might need improvement. Based on these data, creators can better formulate their content strategies, such as determining when to post content and what kind of content to post.

5.5.5 Relationship with Followers

Chenxiaotao places great importance on her follower community. She firstly believes that the expectations of her fans are the inspiration for her creative content:

Actually, starting from the Rumi stickers pack, my creation has been interest-oriented. I wanted to upload stickers to spice up chats with my friends. Now I have more and more followers, so I also consider fans' expectations in terms of the form of my work. For example, if fans like the calendar wallpapers I create, I will update one at the beginning of each month... For me, the support of my fan friends is the driving force for my creation, and no matter how many fans there are, I will persist in creating.

For instance, on 23rd February 2017, she specifically drew stickers that her fans liked, and on 8th May 2017, she sent blessings to all those who had recently married. In addition, she highly values the opinions given by her fans and their perspectives, which are very helpful:

The feedback from fans is mostly very authentic, and they will also come up with some interesting ideas, so I often read comments and sometimes draw inspiration from them. I will also actively seek fans' opinions to refine my creation.

However, Chenxiaotao herself believes that she should have more interaction with her fans:

Actually, at present, most of my time is occupied by creation, and I haven't specifically set aside time to interact with my fans. I feel that every time I publish a work, the process itself is a form of communication with my fan friends. So, I try to maintain a certain frequency of updates to make everyone feel that the characters I draw are also living with them.

There is also a lot of interaction with followers on Rumi's own Weibo account, which shows that Star Moly also places great emphasis on cultivating its fan community. For example, on 13th October 2016, a fan's private message was shared where the fan referred to Rumi as a hippo rather than a panda, to which Rumi responded playfully with 'pouting, angry, hands on hips' (嘟嘴, 生气, 叉腰). On 13th April 2017, Rumi specifically posted funny pictures of himself created by fans and pretended to be upset, saying, 'I'm still a child, doesn't your conscience hurt!!!' (我还是个孩子呀, 你们的良心不会痛吗!!!)

5.5.6 Promotion and Monetisation

Unlike the previous two characters, Rumi has been operated largely by Star Moly, which brings a significant edge in terms of promotion. Chenxiaotao, Rumi's own account, and Star Moly's main account can all cross-promote and recommend each other, forming a triangular relationship of dissemination on Weibo. In a single event, Chenxiaotao, Rumi, and Star Moly can repost each other, allowing for a wider spread of information. For instance, in April 2018, when Rumi attended The 14th China International Cartoon & Animation Festival in Hangzhou, Chenxiaotao, Rumi, and Star Moly all reported and forwarded this news. In this way, they form a virtuous cycle of mutual promotion, where each entity amplifies the others' messages.

This type of cross-promotion is not just limited to these accounts. As mentioned before, Star Moly has other contracted characters under its label, and collectively packages them as the 'Moly Band' (萌力天团), often promoting them as a whole, much like an idol group. This ensures that every character within the company benefits from the promotion. The characters of the Moly Band often cross-promote each other: Rumi often interacts with another character named Waang (汪蛋). For example, on 7th February 2017, Rumi made an illustration of himself riding on Waang's back with the text 'Let's go together, Eggy' (蛋蛋我们一起走), and tagged Waang. In response, Waang also reposted this Weibo post on his own account and interacted with a comment. In the summer of 2020, Star Moly launched a 'Summer Travel Diary' (夏日旅行记) campaign, inviting many other characters not affiliated with the company to create content and interact. In this campaign, Star Moly used the theme of summer travel to invite characters outside Star Moly on Weibo to pair with their own branded characters to create shared travel stories. For example, on 16th July 2020, Rumi reposted the summer travel webtoon and illustration published by Little Bear Ivan (小熊伊万) and Happy Rabbit (欢乐

兔), and interacted with comments. By cross-promoting content, they can reach each other's follower bases, thus expanding their overall audience.

Common promotional practices like riding on trending topics, sharing and participating in giveaways, etc. are also widely deployed by Rumi. In addition to these, Star Moly has also organised entertaining competitions to motivate fans to further participate in and promote the character. On 14th December 2017, Rumi announced on Weibo that the first 'Rumi Cup Story King'(野萌杯第一届故事王大赛) competition was officially launched. From that day, they invited fans to post screenshots of their short stories created with Rumi's stickers, and tag Rumi and Chenxiaotao. Any fan whose story was shared by Rumi would be nominated for a prize and receive a postcard with Chenxiaotao's autograph. They encouraged fans to let their imaginations run wild. Then, over the following week, Rumi would introduce the nominated works every week, and finally, on 29th December 2017, the top three winners were selected. By creating a competition that encourages fans to use Rumi's stickers to create their own stories, the organisers are not only promoting the use of the stickers but also stimulating creative interaction among fans. Fans who participate in the competition get a chance to have their work featured and acknowledged by Rumi, which can be highly motivating. Overall, this kind of event can help to strengthen the bond between the creator and the fan community, while also promoting the creator's work in a fun and engaging way. Moreover, this strategy encourages user-generated content, which can greatly expand the reach and visibility of the brand. This is because fans are likely to share their competition entries within their own social networks, thus exposing the brand to a wider audience.

Under the operation of Star Moly, Rumi had more opportunities to collaborate with some significant brands, further boosting his visibility. For instance, on 13th December 2017, she appeared with entertainment star Du Haitao (杜海涛) in a promotional event for Taobao (映像淘宝). On 2nd Mar 2018, he participated in a Lantern Festival promotion as a member of Moly Band, along with the male idol group BC221. On 24th Aug 2020, as a member of Moly Band, he interacted with Hatsune Miku, a super popular virtual idol from Japan, for Miku's 13th-anniversary event. On 22nd October 2020, he collaborated with the popular mobile game 'Onmyoji' (阴阳师), featuring in their promotional music video. The examples are numerous and extend well beyond these. As can be seen from these events, the character seems to have benefited significantly from the company's management, leading to collaborations with big brands and broader visibility. The company has more resources, both financial and human, to

invest in promoting the character. Companies often have more experience and established networks for marketing, licensing, and brand collaborations.

Chenxiaotao transferred the copyright of Rumi to Star Moly in 2016 in a one-time transaction and subsequently receives a share of the profits from Star Moly's operation of Rumi annually. Additionally, the income from the stickers pack of Rumi created by her and the corresponding reward from the followers goes directly to her. Although the detailed composition of Star Moly's income from Rumi is not publicly known, it is evident from their website that their primary revenue sources are brand licensing, content customisation (including custom stickers, webtoons, and short video production), offline customisation, and sales of sticker packs and various character merchandise. Brand licensing here refers to the process where a company (the licensor) authorises another company (the licensee) to use its character's name, image, design, or intellectual property. For example, allowing the licensee to print Rumi's image on their products to enhance their appeal. Content customisation primarily refers to creating specific content tailored to the client's particular needs and preferences. For instance, Star Moly could customise stickers, webtoons, or short videos to help a brand with its promotion or sales according to its requirements. Offline customisation refers to tailored services provided in physical environments. For example, Star Moly might offer specialised exhibition display services for a brand during a physical event, such as in a shopping mall.

5.5.7 Reflection

Reflecting on her creative journey, Chenxiaotao said:

I think the most challenging part of this journey was at the very beginning, when I first chose the path of independent creation. After all, this is a unorthodox profession in the eyes of my family and friends, and none of my friends had similar experiences to refer to, so the journey ahead was filled with unknowns and challenges. I think the entire process of this journey was wonderful because I was able to turn my hobby into my profession, for which I consider myself fortunate. Along the journey, I had the support of family and friends, made new friends, and got the opportunity to understand the world through drawing.

Chenxiaotao's reflection on her creative journey provides a compelling testament to the challenges and rewards of pursuing a non-traditional career, especially in the creative field. Her initial struggle highlights the uncertainty and risk often accompanying the character-creation practice, particularly when it deviates from more conventional paths. The lack of precedents or mentors can indeed amplify these feelings of uncertainty. However, her

reflections also emphasise the fulfilling aspects of such a path. Being able to turn a hobby into a profession can be a joy and privilege.

When discussing the difference between characters created by independent artists and those created by media conglomerates, Chenxiaotao says:

I think the IP characters of large companies may consider market demands more in their image creation. They ponder what kind of image can satisfy the taste of most consumers or cater to the current social trends, so the creator's freedom and personal style might be somewhat constrained. The personal style and characteristics of independently created characters are more distinctive. You could say the creation is more targeted. The purpose of creation is to satisfy the author's personal preferences or the preferences of a specific fan group. However, it may not reach or need to reach the scope of large company IPs regarding commercial promotion.

Although Chenxiaotao and Murongaoao have similar views on this issue, their actual approach differs greatly. Murongaoao maintains independence in his creations and does not collaborate with any agency, while Chenxiaotao chose to transfer the copyright to Star Moly for joint creation. It can be seen that with the company's participation, the quantity and forms of content have indeed been enriched and improved, and the promotion has been more successful and effective.

5.6 Case Study of Toby

5.6.1 Background

This case study examines and explores the creation and development strategies of the character Toby (花栗鼠 Toby) (Figure 5.32). To gain a comprehensive understanding of Toby, the researcher carried out a thorough analysis of the character's social media content, tracing its evolution from its inception in July 2016 to May 2023. The primary research site is Weibo, where Toby first appeared, with supplementary data from platforms such as WeChat, Douyin and Red. The social media content is collected from: Weibo: Posts from July 2016 to May 2023; WeChat Official Account (ID: 花栗鼠 Toby): Content from December 2016 to May 2023; Douyin (ID: 花栗鼠 Toby): Videos from June 2018 to September 2021 (operations ceased afterwards); Red (ID: 花栗鼠 Toby): Posts from August 2018 to April 2023 (operations ceased afterwards); Stickers: All sticker sets are sourced from Toby's (花栗鼠 Toby) WeChat sticker gallery. Other resources include: online articles and news (searched with keyword: 花

栗鼠 Toby) and the print books *I Can Do Nothing But Acting Cute* (除了卖萌我什么都不会) and *Would You Like a Dumb One?* (你会喜欢笨蛋吗?). Following the digital fieldwork, The researcher reached out and interviewed the creator, Hualishu (花栗鼠, referred to as Huahua hereafter). At the creator's request, the interview was conducted in a text-based, intermittent manner and lasted a considerable amount of time. However, Huahua withdrew halfway through due to personal reasons. Based on her explanation and my readings of her content on social media, it seems that there may have been some issues with the company she is collaborating with, which led her to discontinue the topic, but the researcher was granted permission to continue using the dialogue already obtained. Although these interview dialogues are not complete, they provide valuable insights into Huahua's creative process. Additionally, Huahua enjoys expressing her feelings in writing. Her confessions on social media, as well as her memoir of her working experience on the internet titled 'Worker's Memoirs' (打工人回忆录) (Hualishuhuahua, 2020) (note this Hualishuhuahua is another Weibo account from the creator under a similar name), offer a great number of insights and give us a chance to glimpse into her inner thoughts as well. These are essential for providing empirical experience and knowledge about the processes involved in creating and promoting characters on social media platforms.



Figure 5.32 The image of Toby (The text reads 'Do you like me?') (source: Toby's Weibo, 2019)

The experience of Huahua, the creator of Toby, is quite interesting. She is not a professional art student, nor has she received any formal training. She graduated from a regular university and started working at a state-owned enterprise. The daily repetitive work made her feel

oppressed and empty, so she began to relieve her life anxieties and vent her emotions through drawing. She initially posted what she self-described as ‘disorderly trash comics’ on an app called ‘Qingxiangliancai’(轻想连载) (Hualishuhuahua, 2022), which caught the attention of her first partner agency (later due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they parted ways, and she was introduced to another agency for collaboration) who persuaded her to create her own content and manage her own account on Weibo, one of China’s biggest social media platforms. Huahua then transitioned to Weibo, initially drawing some ‘silly four-panel comics’ (ibid.), until she created the character Toby. ‘At that time, I had no idea of operations and monetisation, I didn’t even know what an IP was, I could say it was purely for fun and sharing’ (ibid.), she stated in her memoir posted on Weibo. Toby first appeared in a webtoon on 30th July 2016. In this webtoon, Huahua explained the origin of Toby’s name and introduced it to everyone. According to her recollection, around 2016 was the heyday of Weibo, so her content creation journey there went particularly smoothly, but it was not until she launched the first set of stickers that she formally signed a contract for IP development with her partner. Her partner (later renamed Senyu Culture (森雨文化)) established a small team for her, rented a studio, and recruited personnel to help her create products, shoot new releases, and manage authorised collaborations. Throughout this, Huahua was solely responsible for the creative process and no one else interfered.

According to the introduction by the China Copyright Protection Center (2020), between the year 2016 and 2020, Toby won the 17th China Animation Golden Dragon Award for the Best Virtual Image IP Design, and the 9th “Animation Beijing·Golden Wing Award” for the Most Investable IP Comic. Up to 2020, 10 sets of Toby’s sticker packs were released (5 more sets were released afterwards), with a total sending volume exceeding 1.4 billion. The average reading volume for illustrations and webtoons has surpassed one million. On top of that two physical books of Toby was published: *I Can Do Nothing But Acting Cute* (除了卖萌我什么都会) and *Would You Like a Dumb One?* (你会喜欢笨蛋吗?). Now, Huahua also has published her works of Toby on WeChat, Red and Douyin. Additionally, there was a dedicated Weibo account, TobyStudio_official, which managed the promotion and sales of branded merchandise. Recently, the frequency of updates on Toby’s social media has significantly

dropped, due to issues between Huahua and the company she's currently cooperating with.²³ Regardless, as of the time of writing in April 2024, Toby has accumulated over a million followers on Weibo, which undoubtedly marks Huahua as a mega social media influencer.

5.6.2 Image & Personality

Toby's image originates from a duck, or an anthropomorphised duck. However, it is clear to see that the image of this character has undergone a distinct evolution process (*Figure 5.33*). In her earliest versions, Toby had a very long body and relatively long limbs, giving the character an overall impression of being slender. Around March 2017, her body shape began to gradually shorten and round out. By mid-2019, Toby's form and body further compressed into its current state, with a proportion resembling just 2 or even 1.5 heads in size. Its nose (or beak) has also evolved into a style where the top and bottom are different sizes. The chubby cheeks remind one of a baby, conveying a sense of youthfulness and vulnerability that invites protection, as Huahua herself has always emphasised that Toby is her little baby, hence it must be treated with extreme care. As mentioned before, the author does not have a formal background in art training. Therefore, both her drawing skills and style have been evolving continuously, and quickly. This might explain the swift changes in Toby's image. Initially, Huahua did not capture the characteristics of a duck very well, but eventually, she found a more mature and stable character setting. In her article 'The Cute Factor' (2006), Angier wrote, 'Cuteness is distinct from beauty, researchers say, emphasising rounded over sculptured, soft over refined, clumsy over quick.' Toby's image evolution maps directly onto these characteristics, having become increasingly rounder, softer and clumsier as the character developed.

²³ Huahua only subtly mentioned this during the communication with the researcher but did not provide a clearer explanation.

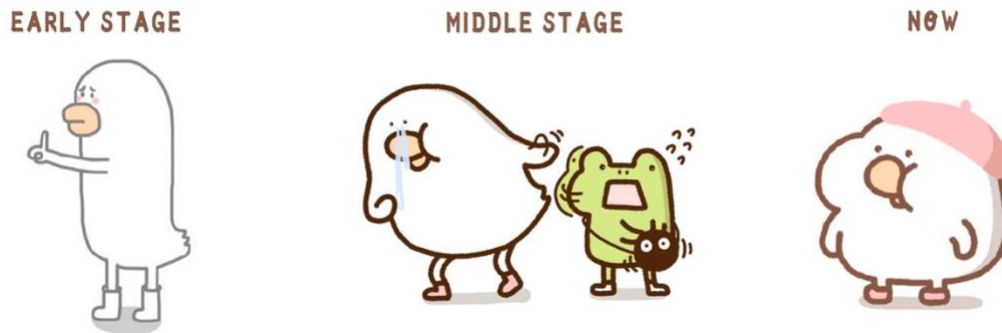


Figure 5.33 The evolution of Toby's images (source: Toby's Weibo, reorganised by the researcher)

In general the face of Toby is very minimal, with an ellipse like, round beak that indicates it is a duck. The eyes are just two simple dots, with a curved line that gives an expression of chubby cheeks. Toby's attire is not fixed and often changes to accommodate different scenarios, but her most common attire includes a pink beret and a crossbody bag. The hat and the bag add a splash of colour and character to the minimal body design. The character utilises a limited colour palette, predominantly white, which suggests a soft and approachable nature. The brown and pink accents provide a gentle contrast that adds to its charm without overwhelming the viewer. The style of the character is rounded and fluffy, resembling a marshmallow or a cloud, which contributes to its cuddly appearance. The absence of sharp edges or complex textures makes the character visually soothing and friendly.

Compared to other characters, Toby does not have prominent personality labels. When asked about this, the creator, Huahua, described Toby's personality as '*dull, pure, and kind*' (呆, 纯真, 善良). This personality actually reflects the creator herself, as Huahua essentially uses Toby to narrate her own life. Although this personality seems ordinary compared to characters with bizarre contrasting personalities such as Aoda Cat, it can also resonate with readers or audiences because these characteristics are authentic in daily life. We might all see our own reflections in this character. However, the author also states that Toby's personality is evolving, '*The character's personality is a reflection of the creator's experiences at the time. It will change at each stage, but after the IP matures and becomes established, the personality and other aspects will become solidified*'. In the beginning, the creator did not define Toby's personality traits explicitly, nor did she set up exaggerated backgrounds or origins for her. Instead, she projected herself onto Toby, depicting her as an inexperienced newcomer, continuously learning and growing from life's hardships, with her personality and insights constantly evolving. But gradually, due to the company's requirements and the character's

development, there was a need to standardise and stabilise the character's personality, rather than constantly changing it along with her own changes. As with the company that manages Rumi, when a story or IP develops, a character's personality needs to be stabilised to a certain extent. This is done to maintain the continuity of the story and the consistency of the characters, as well as the collaboration across a group of designers or artists. If a character's personality is always changing, it can lead to confusion for readers or viewers, making it hard for them to truly understand and immerse themselves in the story.

In the development process of Toby, Huahua, like many other creators, has created several companions for Toby (*Figure 5.34*), including a little frog Guagua (呱呱), who is always happy to accompany Toby, a strong and protective rabbit named Shufen (淑芬), and a dung beetle with only one tooth, Shishi (屎屎) (China Copyright Protection Center, 2020). Multiple characters can bring more diversity and depth to the content, offering greater storytelling scope than a stand-alone character (Brown, 2014). Each character can have their own unique traits and personalities, which makes the story more interesting and engaging. Different characters can interact with each other in different ways, creating more dynamic and complex storylines, and in turn expanding the universe of the content, offering more possibilities for storylines and scenarios.



Figure 5.34 Toby's friends: Guagua, Shufen and Shishi (From left to right) (source: Toby's Weibo, reorganised by the researcher)

5.6.3 Making Connections

Unlike some artists like Murongaoao, Huahua's works do not intentionally seek to gain the sympathy or favour of the audience. She calls herself an 'experientialist' (体验派), simply wanting to record her life experiences and feelings and share them with everyone. In her work, there are no exaggerated plot twists, nor a relentless healing story, but rather a careful

description of life experiences. Much of the content seems like her own confession or personal insights. She explains,

In fact, painting really doesn't have that many rules and reasons. If I think of a flower today, I paint a flower. If something happens tomorrow that makes me emotional, I will paint that thing. Relatively speaking, it's a very relaxed and happy thing from which I can get energy. To put it a bit shamelessly, I think this is my calling [frowning]. It has a different kind of feeling from work and career.

This indicates that she seems to have realised that this way of creation does not conform to the current mainstream. It can be seen that Huahua has retained more of the artist's independent spirit and has a certain wilfulness. She has an uncompromising spirit towards life, and even if she is in difficult circumstances, she hopes to maintain a certain sense of self.

For instance, in the webtoon posted on 28th December 2018 (Toby, 2018c), titled 'Just Stay With You Till Here' (就陪你到这里吧) (Figure 5.35 and 5.36), we can clearly see Huahua's creative style. This webtoon is composed of six strips, and aside from the final 'Goodbye' and a few onomatopoeic words, there are no texts, with the story being told entirely through the actions and interactions between different characters. It broadly describes Toby meeting a person who shares his toys with Toby to cheer him up. They gradually become acquainted, and this person spends a lot of joyful time with Toby. However, in the end, this person has to take back his belongings and embarks on his new journey, leaving Toby alone in place. In the last few panels, the camera zooms out to see Toby sitting alone, which is quite poignant and strongly resonated with fans. This webtoon to some extent reminds of Raymond Briggs' children's picture book *The Snowman*.²⁴ Both of these stories are wordless, relying on graphics to narrate the story. Besides this, they both touch on themes of the fleeting nature of life and happiness. This suggests that some classic elements and modes of expression from traditional children's picture book still hold influence in social media and can be reinterpreted and disseminated through modern technology and platforms. This webtoon has elicited a strong response from the audience, _ReginaPhalange commented, 'Having seen so many comics with the same theme, only this one almost made me cry'. Xiaochensuisuinian (小陈碎碎念) said: 'This is the first time a comic has made me cry'. Huhuandiyushaonv (呼唤地狱少女): 'I cried

²⁴ The story of *the Snowman* is about a young boy who builds a snowman in his garden and the snowman comes to life. The boy and the snowman embark on a magical adventure together. However, when he wakes up the next morning and rushes outside to see his friend, he finds that the snowman has melted.

three times, cried three times, read comments and cried again. My mom said isn't this about you? I'm really upset, especially the one with the watch! The time between people is really short. You have to cherish it! Say I love you more often!!!!' Banyuanjunjunmoxiao (半缘君君莫笑): 'I wonder what kind of mood the artist was in when creating this comic. Wouldn't the unstoppable tears pause the pen...' In fact, in this webtoon, Huahua does not make it explicit who this person is, which leads to different interpretations among the audience. Some people think this is a metaphor for the year 2018, since the piece was published near the end of the year. For instance, a user named Sheisheijiadexiaosheia (谁谁家的小谁啊) commented, '2018, you go, leave the bear and rabbit to me.' Others saw their own love stories reflected in it, such as zzealot: 'When this was first published, we were still together. I thought in my heart that I must not treat her like this in the future. In the blink of an eye, we've been apart for a year. Seeing it again instantly makes my heartache.' And yet others saw friendship in it, such as the user Wangjiatunxingjundaochuanlingbing (王家屯行军道大总管传令兵): 'It seems like a sad day. My close friend came and went. Zz1tai [an e-sports player liked by this user] retired. All good things must come to an end. Although the story is not over yet, it's time to say goodbye here. I wish you a bright future.' These comments illustrate where Toby's success lies. Everyone can see their own reflection in it, have their own interpretation, and establish an emotional connection with the character.



Figure 5.35 Toby's Webtoon on 28th December 2018 (first half) (source:Toby's Weibo, 2018, reorganised by the researcher)



Figure 5.36 Toby's Webtoon on 28th December 2018 (second half) (source:Toby's Weibo, 2018, reorganised by the researcher)

Compared to those concise webtoons discussed before which compose of only a few panels, this is a long work and needs more time to consume, which seems to not particularly fit the social media context. However, Huahua seems unfazed by all of these elements (for instance, whether the content length is appropriate, and if the theme aligns with mainstream preferences), simply creating in her own style and rhythm. ‘*I purely follow my feelings, without any plan,*’ she emphasised. She seems not to want to be restricted by too many factors, preferring instead to express her feelings genuinely in the moment. She delicately portrays a touching experience, but more importantly, she exhibits sincerity and courage in her creations. Despite lacking exaggerated personalities and twists, her work is full of emotion, allowing the audience to not only appreciate the artwork but also experience her inner world. This honest and candid expression resonates with the audience, establishing deep emotional connections. Although her creative approach does not seem to align with the typical model, surprisingly, her character has gained the largest fan base among these four case studies (1.1 million+ as of April 2024, while Aoda Cat 638k+, Fan & Bao 273k+ and Rumi 865k+). This may be the power of authenticity.

5.6.4 Content and Platform Strategy

In terms of content format, Toby is similar to other characters, including sticker packs, webtoons, wallpapers, profile pictures, short videos, etc. Currently, the main platforms for publishing content are Weibo, Red, WeChat (WeChat Official Account: 一箱花栗鼠), and Douyin. Regarding content and themes, most of them come from her own observations and feelings from life. She is a very free and casual creator, relying heavily on her own intuition and talent. She emphasises,

But in reality, there really aren't that many restrictions. I just follow my experiences. Whatever happens in daily life, whatever I see, hear, or experience, whatever feelings I have, I will draw them down and want to share them with my fans. Sometimes there is a resonance, and it gives a great sense of achievement. For instance, sometimes, while walking outside, a strange idea suddenly pops into my head. I will note it down and draw it when I get home. There's a 72-hour rule: if I don't draw it down or finish drawing it within 72 hours, I will think this idea is no longer interesting, so the stories that come out are always fresh. In short, there are no restrictions, no comparison with others, and no expectations for myself about what it needs to look like or what style to maintain. I purely follow my feelings, without any plan.

So we can see that her works are quite diverse in content. Some are the result of wild ideas in her mind, like the short webtoon series ‘Food Kingdom Adventure (食物王国大冒险),’ which started on 4th January 2019 (Toby, 2019c), telling the story of Toby and Guagua being

magically shrunken and embarking on adventures in the kingdom of food. Some of her works reflect introspection and sentiment about recent life situations, such as the aforementioned webtoon called ‘Just Stay With You Till Here.’ At times, they might simply be a record of an ordinary event that happened on the day, like playing with a mobile phone on the sofa with her father, as depicted on 5th May 2017 (Toby, 2017b). The 72-hour rule she describes is interesting and seems to act as a personal mechanism to ensure freshness and authenticity in their work. If an idea is not translated into a drawing within 72 hours, the artist suggests they lose interest in it, which might indicate a focus on capturing spontaneous emotions and moments, avoiding overthinking or over-complicating their work. This method might not be suitable for everyone, as it heavily relies on the artist’s ability to continually generate new ideas and feelings, but it seems to work well for this creator. It is an interesting approach that emphasises the immediacy and personal connection inherent in their work, as well as their desire for freedom from restrictions and expectations.

As mentioned previously many authors are adept at trend-jacking in content creation, but Huahua seems to be rather indifferent to this approach. She seldom shows much attention to mainstream ideologies, and she explains,

[I] still refuse to follow the mainstream, draw what [I] want to draw, do what [I] think, and draw what [I] want it to look like. If [I am] unhappy, then [I] don’t draw. Although it may seem irresponsible, [I] don’t want drawing to become a burden or anything. [I] just want to draw because [I am] happy, and then to be happy because [I] draw. Most importantly, passion, without passion, it would be very painful.

And she also jokes, ‘Not being popular, not being seen, is actually the norm. Toby here made me feel lucky enough for once.’ Overall, this reflects her free, flexible, and emotional approach to creation. She seems to see creativity as a form of fun and stress relief, rather than just work or a career. She admits that she will not draw when she is unhappy, which shows how important she considers passion to be for her work. She views creation without passion as painful. This perspective is reflected in her art — it originates from heartfelt enthusiasm and sincerity. This attitude helps maintain the passion and innovative spirit in her creation and also helps foster a strong emotional resonance with her followers. However, due to the lack of a clear framework or guidance and the absence of a plan, there are certain risks and potential negative impacts. A creative approach that overly relies on personal emotions and passion could affect the stability of creation. Particularly considering the aspect of commercialisation, this free-spirited creative style might encounter some

difficulties. Commercial projects typically require clear direction, plans, and quality standards, which may clash with her current mode of creation. Huahua told the researcher that sometimes, when she is in a bad mood or lacks inspiration, she cannot draw for a long time, which has a significant impact on the development of her character. After all, in this industry, if you cannot produce content consistently and steadily, many viewers will gradually fade away. While pursuing artistic authenticity and individuality, one should also consider the universality and stability of the work, as well as its sustainable development in real life. For these character artists and creators, this undoubtedly poses a challenge of balance and compromise.



Figure 5.37 Toby's profile pictures for Halloween 2020 (source: Toby's Weibo, 2020)



Figure 5.38 Doodles of Toby on real-life photos (source: Toby's Weibo, reorganised by the researcher)

Doodles and illustrations are Huahua's favourite forms of expression. They contain a variety of profile pictures (*Figure 5.37*) and casual doodle-like works. Worth mentioning is that, for a long time since she began serialising Toby, she liked to draw directly on photos, combining her characters with the real environment (*Figure 5.38*). This approach of adding cartoon objects to our real world, although not original, provides an interesting visual experience for her audience. During our conversations, she mentioned wanting to maintain daily updates to encourage herself to be more productive, and this practice of retouching photos is evidently convenient and quick to achieve that goal. At first, she drew Toby in any place she visited, but soon, merely drawing her own pictures seemed to no longer satisfy Huahua's appetite. So she started to widely collect fans' photos to draw on, bringing Toby to various places around the world. Webtoons are also one of her favourites to express her ideas. The format of the webtoons she holds varies in length, entirely depending on her mood to express. For instance, she may just use one picture to record her mood of the day, as she did on 8th November 2021. Other times, she might release longer webtoons like 'Just Stay With You Till Here' as discussed before where she uses six long strips to depict her feelings. Four-panel webtoons are also a common form for her, which is labelled as the 'Energy Quadrant' (元气四格) series. For example, the webtoon titled 'When I am exceptionally happy' (当我特别开心的时候) on 30th November 2018, continued her life experiences and insights (*Figure 5.39*). In the first picture, Toby stands with a person tagged with 'life' (生活), metaphorically representing life itself (and in the webtoon 'Just Stay With You Till Here' (就陪你到这里吧) this person represents an important man in her life, these suggest Huahua's common strategy to represent the abstract concept). In the following pictures, Toby is seen excitedly dancing around 'life,' indulging carefreely before 'Life' signals Toby to sit down properly. In the last picture comes the climax: suddenly, with a sweeping kick, 'Life' sent the stool flying, causing Toby to fall flat on her back. This portrayal of being beaten down by life is something that most young people cannot avoid, which resonated widely with the audience. Yaochidouzima (要吃豆子嘛) commented, 'It's drawn too realistically'. Heermeng33(鹤儿萌 33) said, 'The real me, heavily kicked by life'. Riridoushidushuri(日日都是读书日): 'too real'. Jiayiyi(佳乙一): 'Hahaha, it's too realistic, makes me want to cry and laugh at the same time'...(Toby, 2018b)



Figure 5.39 Toby's Webtoon on 30th November 2018 (source: Toby's Weibo, 2018)

Starting from scratch, Huahua gradually learned how to create GIF pictures and began to publish a large number of works using GIF animations. Examples include 'The First Fire in Spring' (春天里的第一把火) (Toby, 2021a) published on 12th March 2021 (Figure 5.40), 'Forwarding Koi Fish' (转发锦鲤) (Toby, 2021b) on 19th April 2021, and 'A Bit Hot' (有点热) (Toby, 2021c) on 20th July 2021. GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) is a bitmap image file format, whose biggest feature is that it supports animation. That is, a GIF file can contain multiple frames of images, giving it an animated effect. This is one of the main reasons why GIFs are widely popular on the internet. However, GIF animations do not have sound. Compared to single images, GIFs offer a richer expression: they can show a series of continuous actions and expressions. They typically last a little longer than stickers, allowing them to convey emotions and small scenes more vividly. Meanwhile, with the current mature internet conditions, the dissemination of GIFs is now relatively convenient.

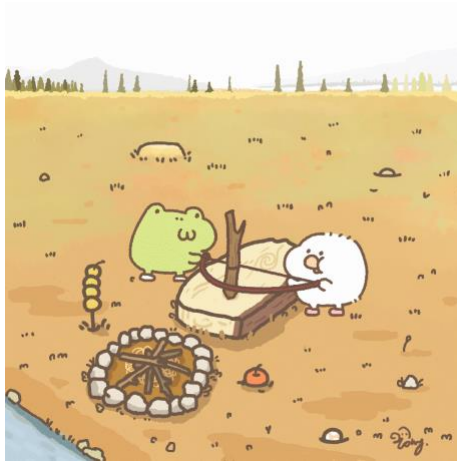


Figure 5.40 Toby's Gif on 12th March 2021 (source: Toby's Weibo, 2021)

Short videos also started to be uploaded in August 2017, although Huahua acknowledged that the production was not completed by her but was assisted by colleagues. It was mentioned before that Huahua does not have a background in the relevant field, so she cannot create content like videos and animations. Therefore, in her small team, she has assistants who help turn some of her ideas and creativity into animations. Most of the short videos do not have specific plot or story arrangements. Instead, they mainly focus on capturing the interesting and humorous moments in life. For example, many episodes of the videos revolve around the theme of 'awkward dance' (尬舞) which is a term originating from the Chinese internet, referring to a dance style characterised by exaggerated movements, a lack of rhythm, often out of sync with the music beat, making people feel extremely awkward, hence the name 'awkward dance.' An example of this can be seen in content from 9th August 2017, 11th August 2017, 17th August 2017, 17th September 2017, and 13th June 2018 (Toby, 2017d, 2017e, 2017f, 2017g and 2018a). In these episodes there is no specific story, but just clips of Toby or her friend Guagua awkwardly dancing to music. Besides, a large portion of short videos come from wild imagination, such as the video titled 'Little Dinosaur Egg' released on 2nd October 2019 (Toby, 2019f). It depicts Toby and Guagua finding a small dinosaur egg. Just as the two are overjoyed, a little dinosaur hatches from it, breathes fire, and scorches both of them. The video ends with the mischievous smile of the little dinosaur (Figure 5.41). This reflects Toby videos' typical style, no context, no follow-up, just a nonsensical funny moment. These very micro perspectives allow audiences to experience the unintentional joy in life in a relaxed way.



Figure 5.41 Stills from Toby's short video on 2nd October 2019 (source: Toby's Weibo, reorganised by the researcher)

5.6.5 Relationship with followers

When talking about her relationship with followers, Huahua believes that they are more like friends who grow up together, meaning '*companionship and mutual growth*'. She shows deep gratitude and respect for her followers, which is a very positive and commendable attitude. She recognises that data on social media is not cold and uncaring, but represents real people with genuine feelings. She sincerely appreciates and thanks those who have supported her over the long term and gives positive feedback for their support. Moreover, she enjoys the interaction with her fans and loves the intense sense of experience it brings. On 28th March 2019 (Toby, 2019b), she expressed on her Weibo, 'I hope everyone visits my Weibo more often. I'll periodically select some friends and visit your page to leave a comment at random to foster friendship.' On 19th June 2019, she posted an invitation for fan interaction, writing, 'Let this post be your garbage truck, throw in whatever you want to say!'(Toby, 2019d) Huahua continued,

For many years, there have been no offline events, but I am still persistent and longing for that vibrant experience. Being surrounded by people who genuinely love my work, hearing their warm voices, and feeling the emotions that can't be conveyed through a screen by looking into their eyes, it all seems like a lively dream. However, I am still supported by these specific individuals, not so lonely, and maintaining precious enthusiasm and hope to explore and create something new.

It can be seen that online communication is not enough, she yearns for that kind of face-to-face interaction, where she can directly feel others' emotions and hear their voices, as well as see the genuine feelings conveyed through their eyes. She seems to really enjoy the emotional fulfilment that this career brings to her, and she regards the love from her fans as the motivation to move forward. In practice, she is willing to bring her followers' opinions into her creative

process. For instance, on 12th December 2016, she posted asking for everyone's opinions on naming Toby's friend (Toby, 2016b), and again on 15th March 2019, she posted to solicit names for a new rabbit character who was eventually named Shufen (淑芬) (Toby, 2019a). She also invites her fans to actively contribute photos for her to use in her artwork, and on 10th July 2017 she exhibited drawings made from the photos submitted by her followers (*Figure 5.42*). On 1st November 2018, she posted asking for her fans' help in collecting inspiration. The post was for collecting keywords for stickers: 'Leave the keywords you want to use but haven't found the right emoticon or that you particularly like, and I'm about to start drawing the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth sets (suddenly diligent?). This post is valid for a long time!'.



Figure 5.42 Screenshot of Toby's Weibo post on 10th July 2017 (Source: Toby's Weibo, 2017)

Although Huahua often mentions that she is an artist who works entirely based on her own feelings, she also knows how to manage her follower community. By allowing followers to participate in the creative process, they could feel more closely related to the creator and the works. On the other hand, comments and feedback from followers may spark new ideas or perspectives for the creator as well, promoting innovation. Soliciting fans' opinions can help the creator better understand their needs and expectations.

5.6.6 Promotion and Monetisation

Huahua mentioned that when she just started posting her works online, her former partner convinced her to showcase her drawings on Weibo and told her to focus on drawing while her partner would help drive traffic to her account through their own accounts. In this context, the ‘traffic drive’ (引流) she mentioned refers to other people using their accounts to guide their followers or viewers to view her work, thereby increasing her visibility and influence. Although she did not go into details about how the traffic driving was done by her former partner, based on common experience, it might involve a few approaches: recommendation – her partner might directly recommend Huahua through his own account(s), introduce her work, and encourage his followers to follow her; sharing - he may repost or share Huahua’s work, spreading it among their followers and guiding them to her account for more content; collaboration - he may also collaborate with her, such as co-creating some works or mentioning her in their own works to attract their followers’ attention. This is somewhat similar to how Star Moly uses its own account to promote the various characters under its brand (see section 5.5.6). Apart from the support from the company, Toby also interacts with other characters to help drive traffic to each other. For instance, she frequently interacts with another character, Perfunctory Bear (敷衍熊). On April 26th, 2017, Toby posted her creation related to Perfunctory Bear, titled ‘The Two Silly Sons of Me and Perfunctory Bear’, and tagged Perfunctory Bear (Toby, 2017a). Then, on May 4th, 2017, Perfunctory Bear also reposted Toby’s post and interacted, ‘I also love to pinch Toby’s ball!’

Toby herself also carries out quite a few promotional activities. For instance, offering giveaways, a popular way to encourage followers to interact and share, is one method. What is interesting here is that in addition to providing material rewards, Toby also creates what can be regarded as spiritual rewards to attract participation. For example, on 30th April 2019, she posted that anyone who shared this particular Toby post would get good luck in May, and this post ended up receiving 13,000 shares. Then, on 12th October 2022, she posted claiming that anyone who shared that post would get rich (发财), coining it as the ‘money-making puppy’, and this one received 19,000 shares (Toby, 2022c). Considering the number of shares of posts before and after this one was only 420 (15th November 2022), 247 (10th October 2022), and 62 (8th October 2022), this can be seen as an extremely effective boost.

It is quite surprising that so many people participated in these posts as they did not offer any tangible rewards. However, from another perspective, this can also be read as a new application of the chain letter format on contemporary social media. Texts leveraging superstition to promote their replication or dissemination have circulated for more than a thousand years (VanArsdale, 1998). Such messages, urging recipients to make copies and forward them to a specified number of others, are commonly known as chain letters. According to VanArsdale (1998), chain letters' motives span from piety, luck, charity, petition to money, among which luck chain letters primarily rely on superstition, offering the promise of good fortune upon replication and potential misfortune if it is not. In the past twenty years, the internet's expansive reach and human inclination toward connection have given these chain letters new life and ubiquity. This only happens because having superstitions is a part of being human. Chain letters appeal to our desire for control, as forwarding allow us to believe that we can influence the future (Stephen, 2018). Nevertheless, this strategy does have its risks. If used excessively, it may make followers feel tricked, and the 'magic' of the message may diminish. This type of message may also be irritating to the audience, as described by Schulz (2020), such messages often carry a hint of coercion, causing distress to those who do not want to forward them. They may wonder, 'Will I really have bad luck if I don't forward this?' It is like a carefully designed trap that could be very annoying to some people.

While the specific details of Huahua's collaboration with her former partner and current company (name undisclosed) are unclear, and it is uncertain how Huahua and the company distribute their income, making it difficult to speculate about the specific composition of their income. However, it can be inferred from what she displayed on Weibo that sales of branded merchandise, brand licensing, and advertising promotions should account for a significant portion. Their small team used to run a dedicated Weibo account called TobyStudio_official to manage and promote Toby-related merchandise sales (*Figure 5.43*), mainly on the Taobao store (closed after Covid-19 hit). This account was responsible for the introduction and advertising of new products, and also releases some Toby-related stickers and illustrations, but according to Huahua, this content was mainly created by the colleagues who are in charge of promotion. Huahua mentioned in her memoir that the Taobao store was unexpectedly popular in the early stages, often causing her to return home late at night as so many products were ordered and needed to be sent (Hualishu Huahua Weibo, 2022), suggesting that the sales were very strong at that time. Toby has also taken on a lot of brand licensing, for example, on 20th December 2020 she collaborated with Chinese local beauty brand Abby's Choice (完子心选)

introducing Abby's Choice x Toby Winter Limited Joint Gift Box, and on 4th November 2021 with Mistine (蜜丝婷) rolling out MISTINE×TOBY Double 11 party. In addition, advertising revenue should also be an important income for these creators, including doing product placements for various brands, such as with Nike on 15th August 2019 and 16th March 2020, or more directly carrying out advertising promotions, such as on 29th September 2022, advertising for the Moody X LINE FRIENDS beauty contacts series.



Figure 5.43 Screenshot of TobyStudio_official's Weibo post on 21st December 2022 (source: TobyStudio_official's Weibo, 2022)

5.5.7 Reflection

Although everything was going very smoothly at one point, Huahua is now facing significant challenges. In China, after several rounds of lockdowns during the pandemic, the entire economy has been hit hard. The industry that Huahua is in has also inevitably begun to decline. Her current office, according to her account, has permanently shut down their Taobao store

and studio, laid off some of her colleagues from the startup phase, and the remaining colleagues who could not bear the situation have quietly left. Despite facing many difficulties, Huahua's passion for continuing to create does not seem to have changed. However, in her memoir of her working experience, she also discussed her reasons for persisting with her art:

Due to poor traffic and difficulty finding content directions, there were several times when [I] wanted to put it aside. But when emotions took over, the desire to express [myself] still needed an outlet. As long as [my] keen awareness remained, [I] couldn't stop creating. Gradually, the traffic is not that important anymore. If [I] couldn't afford food, then [I] don't eat, but if [I] couldn't speak or express, [I] can't survive. (Hualishuhuahua, 2020)

Reflecting on her first partner agency and its boss, she is filled with gratitude. She believes they provided not only creative freedom and financial support but more importantly, the hope to move forward. After all, this is an unconventional path, which requires great courage to embark on. She's also a person who likes to reflect. On 19th December 2021, she penned her thoughts on the relationship between characters and creation:

Can my works walk independently from me? Or to put it another way, when people first see them and exclaim, 'Wow, that's so cute', is it the same feeling as when they see a good-looking stray kitten on the street, or do they want to get to know its story and history behind? To put it more simply, do people love my works longer because of their cute appearance, or because of the spiritual value I instil into the works, their experiences, the emotional resonance that comes from the fuse with the author's own experiences? I'm not sure about the latter, but if people's love only stays at the former stage, they wouldn't buy a bunch of similar-looking plush toys to take home.

The sales of leading IPs in the blind box market are astonishing, but most people buy them because they are cute and delicate, and everyone else is buying them, so they also want to bring a box home. Very few people can actually recall the creator's name or know the story behind the work, but that's okay, because 'it's-beautiful-and-everyone-else-has-one' is enough.

Every year, there are many invisible 'IP graves' standing on the land. Some creators stop drawing due to practical reasons. I'm still desperately waiting for a creator who hasn't updated in nearly 3 years to come back and say something, even just drawing a blade of grass would be fine, but I know he won't come back. Some characters are 'cheated' out of their creators' hands, yet [the companies] are too stupid to know how to develop them. These characters that have been separated from their souls are already 'dead' from the moment they leave their creators because the creators' feelings and thoughts can't be duplicated, and even the best artists cannot 'resurrect' them. I've deeply felt the tenacious vitality born from many works and creators, and I've also deeply felt the weakness and powerlessness of the creator as an individual. (Toby, 2021d)

These words express Huahua's attitude towards the relationship between characters or more broadly, works and their original creators. She raises an important question, namely whether the value of a character lies in its external appeal or in the internal spirit and emotions it conveys. This is a fundamental question in artistic creation and one that all creators need to think about. From her description, it can be seen that she leans more towards the latter. She believes a character should be closely tied to its original creator, who alone can infuse it with an inner spirit and emotions, rather than just an attractive image and a character that can be easily ascribed. Just as we can actually feel this fullness of emotion in Huahua's works. And these thoughts and emotions cannot be replicated by a company through mass operations. That is why she argues that when a work is 'cheated' away from the original creator, it loses its vitality. Even with the best personnel to draw and create, it lacks spirit. Her depiction of the 'IP graveyard' is also very interesting. In today's cultural market, many works have a short lifespan, and original creators often face various real-life pressures and cannot continue to create. This is a challenge for all creators, especially independent ones, and is an issue that cannot be overlooked. Their struggles are not just personal battles but reflect a broader issue within the industry – the need for a supportive ecosystem that values and nurtures originality and the creator's connection to their work. This calls for a concerted effort from all stakeholders in the cultural market, including creators, audiences, and industry entities, to foster an environment where creativity can flourish sustainably and creators can continue to enrich our world with their unique visions and voices. In speaking of this, though, it becomes necessary to mention another important issue, which is the problem of copyright protection.

Huahua mentioned original creators being cheated by companies and losing rights to character creations, which reflects the significant problems with the existing copyright system in China. Huahua herself has also run into issues with her current partner agency, this could be the reason she made such statement. While she is unwilling to reveal the specifics, according to Toby's recent post on Weibo, it appears that there are significant problems related to the contract and copyright issue, and Toby's update frequency has decreased substantially. On the surface, China's copyright law now has much in common with copyright laws in other parts of the world, and China's policymakers, creative professionals, and businesses are gradually recognising the value of acknowledging and protecting intellectual property rights. However, China still faces strong criticism from trade partners for its failure to effectively enforce copyright. The reform in China's cultural sector has not led to a system that is entirely based on market freedom or the rule of law. In reality, copyright enforcement remains weak,

government-protected monopolies persist, and widespread state intervention and censorship restrict producers and frustrate consumers. State-protected monopolies significantly limit the role of copyright as a mechanism to reward investment in creativity, and a large portion of what is often regarded as ‘core copyright industries’ remains centrally controlled (Montgomery and Priest, 2016), e.g. the film, music and publishing industries. China’s copyright industries also lack a reliable infrastructure for royalty distribution and sales auditing, making it difficult for copyright owners to ensure payment of negotiated shares of revenue. In this context, individual creators have little hope of securing favorable terms of use or achieving meaningful copyright enforcement (Montgomery and Priest, 2016).

Moreover, many grassroots creators lack sufficient legal awareness, which often puts them at a disadvantage regarding copyright issues. This situation is particularly typical in the chaos surrounding the ownership of online literature IPs. Many well-known authors, due to their early ignorance of copyright, have easily sold their adaptation rights for a low price. For example, the author of the *Ghost Blows Out the Light* (鬼吹灯) series, Tianxiabachang (天下霸唱), once publicly stated that he had ‘signed a contract in a daze after a few drinks.’²⁵ (TMTPOST, 2019) Top IP authors have not been able to strategise the overall operation of their works, resulting in film and television adaptation rights being chaotically scattered among online literature platforms, film and television companies, and even individuals outside of the authors (ibid.). At the beginning of their creative careers, many grassroots creators do not know whether their work will be successful, nor do they realise the great potential of their work. Therefore, when agencies or partners invite them to collaborate, they often join blindly, lacking the ability to discern the terms of contracts. This could lead to a very disadvantageous position later on, sometimes even resulting in the loss of their copyright, just like the trouble Huahua is currently involved in.

²⁵ Tianxiabachang was not originally a professional writer. His *Ghost Blows Out the Light* was first serialised in 2006 on Tianya Forum (天涯论坛), and later, Qidian Chinese Network (起点中文网) acquired the serialisation rights. In September of the same year, *Ghost Blows Out the Light: The Lost Caverns* was published, sparking a nationwide craze for tomb-robbing novels. As of 2020, more than ten film and television adaptations have been produced based on this franchise.

6 Cross-case analysis

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, a detailed analysis is conducted within each individual case to understand their internal dynamics and development. Now is the time to move on to a more comprehensive cross-case assessment. This involves drawing together descriptions from different cases to identify and analyse common patterns and themes shared by these characters. As Miles and Huberman (1984, p.151) suggest, comparing different sites or cases allows us to determine the extent to which a finding or explanation applies universally and to identify the specific circumstances where that finding is relevant.

The within-case analysis followed the initial headings outlined in the case study descriptions.

After completing the case studies, the researcher also conducted another round of interviews with ten external experts. These experts include Li, Zeng, Apple, Sun, Bobo, Juanfazi, Shiwu, Kiesling, Malhotra and Denicke (see section 4.4 for the details of these interviewees). Their insights offer an external, reflective layer of analysis that complements the findings from the case characters and also are used to substantiate and compare the findings. In this chapter, the preliminary set of codes will be further refined, and new themes will be generated.

6.2 Backgrounds of creators

The findings reveal that the four artists involved in the creative process have diverse backgrounds and experiences. For instance, before creating the character Aoda Cat, Murongaoao had already accumulated considerable experience in art creation and had gained popularity on the internet. In contrast, Chenxiaotao was a college student during her creative process, and, even more notably, Huahua had no prior formal training in art before entering this field; she was originally an office worker in a company. In this type of creation, there are no hard requirements for professional skills. No matter your expertise, as long as you can showcase it, you seem to be able to find your audience. Even participants with an amateur background, like Huahua, can find their own niche. As can be seen, Toby and the recent popular bear character Boocha (*Figure 6.1*) both feature a casual and doodle-like style, yet they still enjoy widespread popularity. Zeng and Apple also agree with this, arguing that the requirement

for drawing skills here is quite low, unlike certain industries such as games or animation, which have higher expectations for artistic proficiency.



Figure 6.1 Example of Boccha's sticker sets (Source: screenshot of Boccha's WeChat sticker gallery, n.d.)

This significantly lowers the barrier to entry, offering ordinary individuals, and those from marginalised backgrounds, more opportunities to engage in cultural production and character creation. Shiwu also added her perspective on this,

...I can say that this is a really good era. It's essentially a time where there is virtually no fear of being buried or ignored and unable to present or be discovered by the public. This situation is basically non-existent.

However, this does not suggest that success in character creation is easy to come by. On the contrary, the lower barriers may lead to more intense competition. Bear in mind that the creators in question started their work relatively early. For instance, Murongaoao began in late 2013, while Chen Xiaotao and Huahua started in 2015 and 2016, respectively. Even the less-famous artist, Muzi, began in 2018. This early entry into the field provided them with a significant first-mover advantage, making their success relatively easier to achieve. Li shared her thoughts on these case characters' success,

At that time, the concept of IP in China was still relatively unfamiliar, and there wasn't much awareness about it. Everything was commonly referred to as mascots or cartoon characters. It was only when the founders of Block 12 (12栋) recognised the business opportunity and began producing these types of IPs that this form of IP suddenly gained tremendous popularity. Since then, it has flourished and proliferated widely.

Social media provides a platform for individuals from various backgrounds to showcase their talents and creativity, allowing them to come into the spotlight, which might have been difficult to achieve in the past. However, as more people realise the immense potential of social media and join in, the competition in content creation becomes increasingly fierce. Standing out in such a competitive environment has become a challenge.

6.3 Image & Personality

The image is the first impression with which visual media characters interact with their audience, playing a crucial role in their attractiveness and influence. The four character prototypes in this study are all based on different animals: Aoda Cat and Fan cat are both cats, Rumi is a panda, and Bao duck and Toby are ducks. It is evident that animals are a popular source of character imagery. According to Dan McLaughlin who taught animation at UCLA, 'there are at least two forms of narration particularly suited to animation: bringing inanimate objects to life, and giving animals human characteristics'(2017, p.25). Animal characters can possess human personalities and emotions yet remain slightly removed from reality. This

affords creators a lot of freedom, as they can reflect the human world through these characters without adhering strictly to the common rules of human society (Clarke, 2012). Such virtual creatures may not face the same level of scrutiny or criticism as human characters on sensitive issues, like the disrespect towards women depicted in Aoda Cat's webtoon, providing a safe space to avoid various interrogations. Animals can cross national and cultural boundaries, making them ideal for a broader audience while human character's skin colour, features, and attire might become sensitive topics for some viewers (unless they are highly abstracted, like matchstick figures).

While Bobo acknowledges the charm of animal characters, stating that '*[characters] must be an animal, and essentially, they are all animals. It can't be a human because people generally don't like human characters,*' Malhotra suggests that this affection for animals might reflect a significant cultural difference. According to Malhotra, from India, most characters are based on human beings. Their views represent their respective professional or personal experiences, and verifying the authenticity of these cultural differences falls outside this research's scope. However, it is undeniable that, aside from animal characters, characters based on humans or inanimate objects also exist in abundance. Characters like Rocketman (发射小人) and Freeze Girl (制冷少女) (Figure 6.2) are quite popular on Chinese social media and are based on human beings. As previously mentioned, this study does not include all character types; all case characters are based on animals.



Figure 6.2 Freeze Girl (Source: screenshot of Block 12's website, n.d.)

In terms of their image design, these four characters all have highly abstract and minimalist designs, filled with rounded lines and numerous circular shapes, which align with the general concept of cuteness. Their body proportions are basically compressed between 2 to 3 head lengths, making them appear like chubby lumps overall. The advantages of these cute features and two-head-tall proportions can be concluded from visual experience. First of all, this design highlights a big head, and as Angier (2006) pointed out in her article, a big round face is a signal of cuteness because it enhances the character's adorability and a large head and short body are often associated with babies or young children, which can evoke a sense of affinity and protective instinct in the audience. In the 1940s, the Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz suggested objects tend to be perceived as cute if they have the following characteristics: large head and round, soft body; short and thick extremities; big eyes and chubby cheeks; small nose and mouth, and a wobbly gait (Lorenz, 1943). These case characters and the characteristics he proposed largely coincide. Li also pointed this out, saying that '*many mainstream IPs nowadays tend to have a slightly chubby appearance*'. Bobo commented on this, '*I feel that your IP should not be too complex, and it must be cute, something the general public can accept*'. Kiesling also identified with this trend, '*And the minimalist design of all these characters also just feels very clean and easy to consume as a person*'. Another merit

of this proportion and minimal design is more practical to the technological side. Much of contemporary content consumption happens on mobile devices, especially smartphones. Smartphone screens are relatively small, and simplified character designs help ensure that the character's features and expressions can be clearly displayed even on small screens. Kiesling shared his thoughts on this matter as well, *'maybe they're more cute and small because they fit better on the phone screen and are more easy. It's like way easier to read as a character design'*.

The colour palette is soft and pastel-like, enhancing their approachable and charming appeal. Their facial expressions are also very simple and abstract. When these character images are put together, one will notice that they also share some similarities. They all appear to be white, marshmallow-like creatures, seemingly inspired by the famous Sanrio character Hello Kitty. Malhotra also notes these characters in question may have been influenced by companies like Sanrio in Japan, displaying a certain regional characteristic. She thought this sets them apart from characters from India or the West. Indeed, when putting many of the character images popular in East Asia together, such as Japan, South Korea, and China, one can notice many similarities. This is probably due to the geographical proximity of these countries which leads to certain cultural and aesthetic similarities.

As far as the personality, these characters also have their own distinct traits. Aoda Cat has a fascinating and mischievously cute personality, which means having two extremely exaggerated contrasting traits within one character, creating a sense of dramatic contradiction. Fan & Bao both embody the typical healing-type characters, Yumi has a wild yet cute personality, and Toby is a pure, kind, and endearingly naive little duck. From this, it can be observed that while their personalities have specific differences, a common denominator is their 'cuteness' or 'being cute', which is the core quality. While there are critics who argue that Kawaii consumer culture contributes to societal infantilisation and may be responsible for a generation of youth struggling to confront reality, no one denies that cute sells (Garger, 2007). Bobo agrees on this as well, *'so, I feel like East Asian character IPs lean more towards the cute type, no matter how you look at it, they're cute'*. Cute characters and the 'kawaii' culture often evoke emotional resonance in people. These characters typically exhibit characteristics of innocence, kindness, and naivety. This pure and innocent image and personality can touch the soft parts of people's hearts, eliciting feelings of warmth and joy. Cute characters and the 'kawaii' culture can provide a form of psychological escape. In everyday life, people may face

various stresses and challenges, and interacting with cute characters can temporarily help them forget their worries and experience happiness and relaxation.

Adding to this, combining the cuteness with another quality seems to create a more intriguing effect. This is generally regarded as gap moe (for more detailed discussion, see section 5.3.2). This combination of cuteness with another contrasting quality really gained momentum in recent years. Examples like Aoda Cat's jian-meng (贱萌, a mix of cheeky and cute) and Yumi's ye-meng (野萌, a mix of wild and cute) both reflect this trend. In this era of homogenisation, these contrasting characters tend to stand out and differentiate themselves from others. This provides the character with multiple dimensions and a sense of depth, making the character more three-dimensional and attractive. Zeng also added on this trend,

In recent years, what has become quite popular and something I personally enjoy is the kind that's a bit ugly-moe (丑萌), meaning it has a mix of both ugliness and cuteness. It's not like the pure and universally adorable characters we used to love. Just being cute on its own has become somewhat difficult [to impress the audience] today.

Additionally, the relatively gender-neutral aspect of these animal characters is an interesting quality. Murongaoao intentionally portrays his character as gender-neutral to appeal to a broader audience. At times, this neutrality can even become fluid, as seen in the case of Fan & Bao, where the character's gender can change as needed in the actual scenarios. Malhotra also believes this is an advantage of using animals as character prototypes, 'so they're actually kind of powerful in that way'. Indeed, such characters, because they are not confined to specific gender identification, seem not to exclude any particular audience based on gender characteristics. And for creators, they often have the opportunity to explore and develop characters without being constrained by traditional gender roles or stereotypes. Speaking of this neutrality of gender, Denicke extends it into the ambiguity of these characters' representation in general. Denicke stresses that maintaining a certain amount of ambiguity in a character's representation is important to attract a broader audience. He explained,

If it is very specific (a clear representation of someone in the real world), it will be easy to identify for all who feel to be similar or feel sympathy for this someone, but for all who don't feel this similarity it might result in the opposite. If you just give the most basic hints, just enough to feel empathy, but don't represent a specific someone or group, the identification can happen for more people.

Denicke's perspective offers a beneficial approach to creation to achieve widespread resonance and inclusiveness. This method avoids stereotyping specific groups (not just gender), thereby

promoting a more diverse and inclusive representation. In today's diverse society and global cultural context, avoiding limiting characters to specific genders, races, or cultural characteristics can attract a broader audience and foster wider cultural exchange and understanding. However, excessive ambiguity may also lead to a lack of depth and complexity in characters, thus impacting the authenticity and engaging nature of the story. Creators need to find the right balance between maintaining the universal appeal and specificity of characters.

In addition to creating a single character, these creators also develop multiple characters to enrich and complement their main IP character. For example, Murongaoao has created characters like Miaomeimei, Wangdefu, Xiongxiaoe, among others, to accompany Aoda Cat. Yumi and Yuni have Neigeniao as a friend, and Huahua has crafted friends like Guagua, Shufen, and Shishi for Toby. Having multiple characters allows for greater diversity and depth in content, expanding the storytelling possibilities beyond what a single character can offer (Brown, 2014). Li also explained, *'after a while, there might be some fatigue associated with the main character. At this point, it becomes necessary to introduce subsidiary characters, like offspring, cultural artifacts, or friends, as a sub-IP'*. Brown (2010) also discussed the common strategy of creating mascots through Multiply. He suggests Multiply, which means creating more characters based on the original character, 'epitomises marketing's more-more-more mentality, the belief that if one critter is good, two critters are better and a swarm of brand critters is best of all' (p.218). It can also expand the breadth of your content and allows you to experiment with slightly different character creations. Especially when you encounter a creative bottleneck with your original character, this could be a good breakthrough.

6.4 Making Connections

How to engage the audience and establish a connection is the key to character creation. The connection does not simply refer to creators interacting with their audience on social media, like replying or liking, mentioning, as discussed in Baym's article (2015). Instead, it refers to how the character and content engage the audience, causing them to resonate with and identify with the character. While some people may be solely attracted by the character's image, for most characters, this alone does not seem sufficient to create long-lasting appeal. From the interview and the reading of the characters' content, it can be found that creating emotional resonance is the key to engaging the audience. These case characters are all striving to create a form of emotional resonance with the audience, albeit in slightly different ways.

Murongaoao mentioned that the key to his creation is *'to excavate the relatable feeling and emotion among the people, or in other words the sympathy.'* His starting point for creation is the insight into life, and everything originates from life. In his creation, he attempts to evoke the hidden emotions within people, perhaps the mischievous or dark side inside their hearts. Muzi, on the other hand, strives to create a sense of connection and empathy among people by creating a healing character. He believes that Fan & Bao can help soothe people's souls, portraying them as relatable figures trapped in the struggles and frustrations of everyday life. This approach aims to resonate with the audience, offering a source of strength through shared experiences. Chenxiaotao also focuses on creating light-hearted, stress-relieving content with the aim of bringing joy to her viewers. Meanwhile, Yumi's content delves into depicting aspects of romantic relationships and explores the slice of life experiences of Yumi and Yuni, making it a universally relatable topic that connects with audiences of various age groups. As for the amateur artist Huahua, she enjoys sharing her own emotions and experiences through her creations. She describes herself as an experiential artist, using Toby's intricate portrayal to convey her life's encounters and insights. This approach has struck a chord with a wide audience, as evidenced by her substantial number of followers. Huahua's experience is a bit surprising, as amateur creator she might have some advantages and different viewpoint when entering this field, which creates a kind of freshness to the audience. Shiwu also mentioned this during the discussion, *'on the contrary, it's the amateur artist who, despite being an emotionally rich individual, manages to take a unique and unconventional approach in their creations'*. However, Huahua's carefree and unplanned approach to creation has encountered difficulties today and led to challenges in her current work. For creators lacking a professional background, their unconventional approaches can be a double-edged sword. Success can only be sustained when one knows how to properly leverage their strengths and systematise them.

Across their approaches, the commonality is the sense of realness or authenticity from their creators. It is suggested that social media content creator has two strategic advantages, that is authenticity and entrepreneurial spirit (Duffy and Hund, 2015). While authenticity is a complex concept, it often hinges on conveying a sense of genuineness to foster intimacy and connection with followers (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015). Duffy (2017) suggests that an air of authenticity differentiates social media influencers from traditional media and celebrities, who often serve audiences carefully crafted fantasies that stand in stark contrast to the lived experiences of 'real' people. These comparisons between social media creators and traditional celebrities can also be applied to social media characters and traditional media characters, where the former reflects

mainly the creators' real-life feelings and experiences rather than fancy superhero stories. As discussed before, be it Murongaoao's everything-comes-from-life or Huahua's narration of her life, being authentic is the name of the game. This authentic expression also creates a margin from the celebrity characters of media conglomerates, resonating and connecting with the audience by offering something relatively unique to their followers (Duffy, 2017). Denicke's thought echoed this point,

all the examples I know are that the character and the narratives, these short punches ones, reflect the personality of the person. They are all coming from a certain struggle. Yeah, they're all related, relating to problems in life. They are very sincere about that.

Zeng and Juanfazi also suggested the reason these characters become popular with the masses is that they have a personal touch and feel very relatable. Zeng stated, '*he may have a warmer touch in his work, and it resembles the creator himself more, while companies tend to produce more standardised content*'. Juanfazi argued that individual creations certainly have various weakness and drawbacks compared to the works of large studios. However, these are also what makes them appealing. She thinks it is similar to the popularity of internet celebrities. Although they may not be as perfect as those real movie stars or actress, it is precisely why they are more relatable and closer to ordinary people that make the masses like them. Kiesling also emphasises that compared to characters from large studios, these individual creations place a stronger emphasis on the artist's personal style and imprint,

And I think like there's maybe less artistic voice, in that sense where they are very much trying, and marvel and Disney specifically are just trying to meet. Whatever is the general public's view as good, whatever makes the money they'll make it look like that. I think like they maybe have less of an artistic voice in the sense of an individual artistic voice.

Because characters from conglomerates mainly target larger markets and audiences, their portrayal tends to be more universal and balanced. In contrast, social media characters modelled after individual authors can be more unique, specialising in very niche taste markets. As suggested by Burgess and Green (2018), niche taste cultures are going to supplant the mass customisation in the digital age's cultural productions. This is the reason that the personalities and content of these characters often stem from the personal experiences of their creators. For example, Murongaoao describes himself as a humorous and playful kidult, and he naturally passed these qualities onto Aoda Cat. Huahua uses Toby to narrate and document her own life experiences, while Chenxiaotao explains that Yumi reflects her inner world. Zeng also expressed his thoughts on this,

Because if you have to create an image out of nothing, it might be more difficult. But if you start from your own personality and this kind of image, it might be more unique, you know, it's yourself. And if you communicate with the fans in the long term, you actually immerse yourself in it. I think that's quite good.

Juanfazi added that this is a principle she follows in her own creations. Bringing oneself into the creative process can make creation more genuine and natural, as it involves working in a field and with experiences that one is familiar with. Furthermore, this approach can also help creators find inspiration and storylines more easily during the creative process, since they can draw material from their own life, emotions, and experiences. For individual creators who lack the collective wisdom of a team, this could be a practical approach.

6.5 Content and Platform Strategy

These creators primarily use light content as their main creative medium, including stickers, webtoons, short-form animations, profile pictures, wallpapers, etc. The creation of these types of content fleshes out the characters and allows the audience to better understand them. From the journeys of these creators, it can be seen that stickers have played a significant role in their development and promotion. For example, Murongaoao and Chenxiaotao achieved success by using stickers, and Huahua also gained support from her company to co-create the character Toby through the popularity of her sticker sets. This unique form of emotional expression has become a mainstream means of communication today. In the meantime, some interviewees like Apple, Li, and Sun have expressed concerns about this format. They believe that the sticker market is oversaturated today, flooded with too many stickers sets, making it challenging to gain popularity solely through this method. Li explained,

As you know, the situation has changed over time. In today's context, trying to promote through stickers alone can be really challenging. Everyone can create stickers, so if you create them without a substantial follower base, it's possible that only your friends and family will see them. It's hard for others to discover them if you don't have much visibility. That's why many creators first focus on creating content and building a fan base. Once they have a follower community, they create stickers and rely on their fan base to download and spread them, which could be more effective.

Sun also mentioned that stickers creation may have passed its prime, as the novelty of using them in communication has gradually worn off. Besides, due to a plethora of imitations and low-quality stickers flooding the market, it has become more challenging today to create stickers that capture people's attention compared to a few years ago. In general, as the market becomes saturated and users' passion stabilises, sticker creation faces new challenges. This

reflects the fast pace of innovation and rapid trend changes in the online cultural sphere, nonetheless stickers still remain a very solid form of creation for character creation.

Webtoons are also a popular format for character creation. They have a relatively lower entry barrier compared to stickers and short video animations, as this is mainly a static 2D medium, which requires less professional skill from the creator. For example, Huahua, who lacks a professional background, started her creation by posting her casually created webtoons. Webtoons offer a high degree of flexibility in terms of length and format, from simple two-panel comics like the ones Muzi enjoys creating to longer, more elaborate narratives like the ones Huahua produced for Toby. Webtoons can convey more narrative elements compared to stickers. They can provide a more elaborate context for the characters and help fans know them better. With the continued popularity of video-centric social platforms like TikTok, short videos have become one of the most favoured content formats today. They combine visuals, motion, and sound, making them more attractive than static images alone. The four case study character creators have all ventured into creating their own short video animations. However, it is worth noting that producing short videos is more time and energy-consuming. In terms of quality, the short video animations created by these creators are still quite basic, just like many of the videos made by Murongaoao has demonstrated.

When it comes to the themes of content, although each character has their own positioning – for example, Aoda Cat enjoys interpreting quirky stories, Yumi focuses on depicting couples' romantic lives, Fan & Bao specialises in stories related to food and healing, and Toby reflects the creator's personal life experiences and thoughts—overall, riding the trend of the moment is a common strategy shared by them. This involves leveraging existing popular topics or events to amplify one's influence and enhance their visibility, yielding significant results with less effort. As seen in the findings, Murongaoao, Muzi, and Chenxiaotao have all used this strategy to some extent. They closely follow recent trending topics and create content around them, such as the case of the Winter Olympics in February 2022. Indeed, riding the trend can make a creator's content more timely and relevant to the public, as it connects with current events and societal interests. This helps attract a broader audience since people tend to seek out discussions and content related to recent events. Furthermore, integrating one's content with trending topics can also stimulate a creator's creativity and diversify their content offerings.

However, in the pursuit of traffic and attention, some creators may only superficially associate themselves with trending events, lacking depth and authenticity. This can lead to shallow

content that struggles to establish genuine audience relationships. Over-reliance on riding the trend can make a creator's content appear dull, repetitive, and lacking in their unique style and personality. In fact, on social media, it is common to see an overwhelming influx of content related to a trending event or meme. This content is often poorly executed imitations and mass replication, which can become tedious and potentially harm the creator's image among their audience. During her creation of Toby, Huahua actually sticks to her own rhythm. She claims to dislike following trends and prefers to maintain her enthusiasm for creating things she loves. Juanfazi also expressed agreement on this approach, and emphasised that she does not readily chase after trends or hot topics, *'because first, I feel that when you're running an account, There are always new and hot things coming up, chasing trends and pursuing traffic is never-ending. Only when you create something unique and people genuinely like [it], that I would call success'*. Overall, riding on trends as a content creation strategy has its rationality and effectiveness, but creators need to balance the pursuit of traffic with maintaining their uniqueness while also paying attention to the depth and authenticity of their content to ensure it has a positive impact on the audience.

Social media platforms provide creators with rich user data and interactive feedback, which can be used to further refine and improve their creative plans. The continuous accumulation of data on today's platforms enables even small individual creators to utilise tools that were previously available only to large enterprises (Fung et al., 2022). If used wisely, these tools can provide significant support to creators' work. However, aside from Chenxiaotao, who mentioned utilising this data to optimise her creations, other creators in question have not delved much into this area. Several experts have added their own relevant experiences to this aspect. Li, for instance, mentioned that,

You shouldn't focus on how many followers you have, but instead, you should post your content and observe the reactions from your followers. Look at how people react to your character and whether they like it, how many likes and follows you receive. If you've been posting consistently but still can't generate much attention or engagement, it might indicate that you need to adjust the content of your work. It could be an issue with the content itself or how you're promoting it, and various factors might be contributing to this situation.

Li's perspective emphasises the importance of flexibility and real-time feedback in social media content creation. Apple also mentioned that it is essential to continuously optimise and adjust creative content based on the characteristics of the target audience, which is the follower profile. The follower profile on social media refers to a description of the features and attributes

of the fanbase that follows, interacts with, or supports a specific social media account, brand, or individual. Follower profiles aim to help understand followers' backgrounds, interests, behaviours, consumption habits, social interactions, values, emotions, and more. Juanfazi also noted the importance of analysing user data and summarising experiences to improve your content creation, and she explained how to use this method through the experience of another creator:

And when she just started her account, for example, the first 5 posts, each of them had a different background. She would experiment with different backgrounds to see which one would attract more traffic. Then, she would stick to the background and pattern that worked best. She told me that she changed the background once in the middle, and it was clear that the engagement data dropped significantly for that post. After getting back to her previous background, the data immediately started to bounce again.

Her illustration shows a basic method of using data analysis to aid in content creation, somewhat similar to A/B testing. This kind of test evaluates two or more versions of a webpage or product to see which one performs better. It typically involves two variants, A and B, but can extend to multiple variants. In A/B testing, variants are randomly shown to users to observe which one achieves higher performance metrics, like click-through rates, conversion rates, or user satisfaction. This type of testing helps make informed decisions based on actual data rather than guesses or intuition. By incorporating such testing, creators can more purposefully produce content that resonates with their audience.

On top of that, each social media platform has its specific affordances and audience, This means that what works on one platform may not necessarily work well on another, and creators should be flexible to learn and understand the structure, operation, and differences between the formats of each platform to maximise the followers (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020). Apple agreed on this, adding '*to focus on a particular platform, one needs to carefully consider the characteristics of that platform, study its recommendation algorithms, and tailor their content as much as possible to suit the platform's dynamics*'. These creators have not shared much information in this regard, but their development trajectories show that they initially focused on Weibo as their primary platform. Thus, Murongaoao, Chenxiaotao, and Hua Hua all started with webtoons and then supplemented their work by creating stickers for WeChat's Sticker gallery. With the rise of short video platforms like Douyin, they began to create and publish animated content in short video form. Another notable aspect is that they all manage multiple platforms at the same time (this will be discussed in more details shortly in a later section). While this generates an extra burden for the creators, they often leverage and repurpose the extant content;

they strive to replicate their creations across different platforms. For instance, they would post their short videos on Weibo and adapt static comic strips into simple animated slideshows for short video platforms like Douyin, maximising the use of their creations. After all, as personal or small team creators lacking resources, time, and energy, finding ways to achieve more with less is crucial.

6.6 Relationship with Followers

As can be seen from the findings, Murongaoao actively engages with followers, responding promptly to comments, and seeking their input for content creation. The creator maintains a high posting frequency to maximise engagement. This relationship is characterised by frequent interaction and mutual appreciation. Muzi values a loyal and engaged follower community. He interacts regularly with followers, addressing their feedback and showcasing their contributions. His approach emphasises building a sense of community and involving followers in creative decisions. Chenxiaotao relies on followers' expectations for creative content and seeks their opinions. She acknowledges the importance of feedback but admits time constraints limit direct interaction. Her relationship with followers is primarily driven by creative collaboration. Huahua expresses deep gratitude and values followers' emotional connection. She longs for face-to-face interaction and actively involves followers in the creative process, aiming to bridge the gap between creator and audience through direct engagement. All in all, all four creators understand the significance of their followers and actively engage with them, whether through frequent interaction, community-building, creative collaboration, or emotional connection. Each creator's approach reflects their unique style and objectives in nurturing these relationships.

It is worth noting that these creators also place a strong emphasis on the emotional support they receive from their followers. The companionship and support of followers provide creators with emotional comfort and the motivation to keep going, and also help them power through many hard times. This sentiment is shared by creators such as Muzi, Chenxiaotao, and Huahua, who repeatedly express their gratitude to their followers and acknowledge that this support is what keeps them motivated to continue creating. Huahua once showed me a message she had written to her fans,

Being quietly loved and supported by a specific person in a corner of the earth that I don't know about for six years, from every piece of my work and every ups and downs in my life, to my daily trivia, are all well remembered. When I really meet and receive gifts

and letters full of heartfelt intentions, I still find it very magical. Love turns from scattered internet data into something tangible and warm. I am grateful for choosing to create and connect with specific people, even when no one else is interested, this connection at least makes two people not lonely.

This demonstrates another form of spiritual strength that followers provide to creators, showing that they are more than just abstract numbers and tools for monetisation. As a creator herself, Juanfazi also stated that followers' presence is essential,

Because there's one thing that's keeping me going right now, besides the support from my family, it's really the encouragement and support from others. There are some followers, a few who have been following me since I started a long time ago. Whenever I post something, no matter what it is, they always come and give me likes, and even if there's no one else, they will leave comments and shower me with compliments. They make me feel really warm, especially during my low moments.

Besides a close relationship and emotional connection, followers have an impact on the creation itself. As discussed in Chapter 5, the individual case study, interactions with the audience provide creators with a lot of feedback and inspiration and direct requests from the audience can also change their creative direction and style. In the previous section, it is mentioned that by analysing specific audience data, including views, likes, and shares, creators can quantify this interaction and make timely optimisations and adjustments to their creations. However, this immediate feedback and metrics from the audience also bring another dilemma to the creators. Do they use these tools to shape the content according to possible audience preferences, or do they follow their own path? (Fung et al., 2022). This often results in a conflict between what is desired by the followers and the content creators' self-expression (Woodcock and Johnson 2019). The most popular pieces might not be the works that the creators value the most, and the ones with which the creator is most satisfied on the contrary might have only a few views. There is no universal answer to this situation, and different creators respond in various ways. As suggested by Miguel et al. (2023), some influencers being very conscious of responding to their audiences' needs (like Muzi who is more audience-oriented) whereas others maintained first and foremost a very strong 'self-focus' (like Huahua). Denicke also added that although the interaction with followers provides some convenience for creators, this kind of relationship 'can be love-hate relationship to a certain degree'. He believes that 'the creativity needs a kind of safe space'. When the audience can provide timely evaluation and feedback on social media, it may 'destroy the safe space a little bit for you'. Faced with direct pressure from the audience, can creators maintain their independence and originality? Kiesling also expressed his concerns,

So I think the artist is heavily influenced by specific numbers in quantitative data that says, like, how many likes means that this must be good things? How many comments? Meaning this is a good thing?

In Glatt's (2022) interviews with content creators, many also shared that their mood and sense of self-worth are significantly influenced by their metric success. One creator Steve stated, 'It really does make me depressed seeing numbers constantly (ibid, p.3864)'. These concerns are worth thinking about. If the quality of one's creative work is solely determined by this data, creators may become lost in the data and, in turn, miss out on opportunities for artistic expression and breakthroughs. Of course in reality, it could never be said that an influencer fell fully into either the 'self-focus' or 'audience-focus' category (Miguel et al., 2023). Creators normally hover at a certain point on this spectrum, and even the most self-focused creators are somehow influenced by whether their content can be disseminated (Campbell et al., 2022). Catering to followers' preferences may enhance the popularity and engagement of a work immediately, which is crucial for creators seeking broad influence and commercial success. In the long run, adhering to one's creative principles may help build enduring artistic impact and a loyal followers, although this might require time and patience without immediate short-term benefits. Therefore, creators need to decide how to respond to instant feedback on social media based on their goals, values, and long-term vision. Finding a personal balance is an ongoing process of adjustment and exploration

6.7 Promotion and Monetisation

Regarding the promotion of their characters, or their content in general, creators like Murongaoao and Chenxiaotao have indicated that they do not focus extensively on this aspect. Huahua also mentioned that she has not given much thought to this issue. On one hand, this might be due to the absence of substantial financial backing like those from conglomerates or big studios. On the other hand, they believe that creating excellent content is the most critical factor. In this social media era, they contend that quality work will naturally find its audience and gain recognition. Shiwu has backed up this perspective,

This is a very favourable era, where there's essentially no fear of being buried or unable to present oneself to the public. It's highly unlikely to occur. If someone feels that they are being overshadowed or something of the sort, well, that might be rooted in their own self-conceit. It's more likely to be attributed to their own issues. In this current media age, if you're truly outstanding, you will inevitably have your moment to shine.

While it is true that good content is fundamental, in today's increasingly saturated market where everyone is vying for more traffic and visibility, especially with the existence of platform algorithms, the situation becomes more complex. A few experts also emphasised the importance of promotion in this age,

So the key is how you run your content, how you operate it... and then you will gradually realise that sometimes, traffic can outweigh the quality of your work itself, or the meaning you give to your work behind the scenes can be more important than whether your work is well-executed or not. (Sun)

So, for today's creators, their focus shouldn't be primarily on polishing their work to perfection. Instead, they should concentrate on increasing their personal exposure. How can I raise my personal exposure, make more people aware of me as an individual, and when people know who I am, they will know what I'm currently working on or creating. It's not about how amazing your material is in terms of substance, but it's about how much social media capability you have. (Apple)

Yes, the channel, the channel is the most important thing. I have been doing this for quite a time, and feel channel is paramount. In other words, even if you create something really exceptional, if only a few people know about it, like your private domain or your follower base, it might just be a small group. (Zeng)

These discussions highlight the complex challenges faced by creators in today's content creation and promotion environment. On one hand, high-quality content creation remains fundamental, but content quality alone cannot guarantee sufficient attention and recognition. For independent creators, a key issue is how to effectively use various channels and platforms to increase visibility and engagement while maintaining the quality of their creations. This is where platform algorithms have become a hot topic that many creators cannot avoid. Interestingly, the creators in question did not openly discuss this issue during the interviews. This might be because they see themselves as artistic creators who genuinely do not care about the algorithm's impact, or they consider it the elephant in the room. This could be a limitation for these creators, as algorithms significantly shape our experiences on social media (Beer, 2009; Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2014). It is important to carefully consider the algorithms during one's creation and publication process.

On social media platforms in China, apart from the opaque algorithms, many platforms even offer tools for paid promotion. In a documentary about the Chinese platform Kuaishou called *Family-Status of Chinese Influencers* (2022), one interviewee confessed that in today's environment, gaining a large amount of traffic often requires spending money. You can pay for traffic and visibility or even be pushed to the front page of the Kuaishou platform. Another

popular platform in China, Red, offers a self-service traffic promotion tool called ShuTiao (薯条), which is described as a ‘Note (the content is referred to as note, 笔记 on Red) quick heating tool that efficiently boosts note popularity and activates user interaction’ (Red official site, n.d.). It enables users to select promotional targets, such as increasing the exposure, interaction, or number of followers of their notes (see *Figure 6.4*), to help non-commercial compliant notes gain more attention. Users can complete the promotional settings via mobile devices and monitor the data in real-time, track the effectiveness of the promotion, and conduct post-promotion reviews. Additionally, ShuTiao supports promotion time customisation, and targeted audience setting, allowing users to customise their promotional strategies based on characteristics such as gender, age, region, and interests (see *Figure 6.3*). More importantly, it has a low threshold for entry, with the minimum expenditure for promotions starting at just ¥75 (around £8), and your content will not be tagged as ‘sponsored’ or ‘advertisement’, meaning the audience will not discern whether you have used a promotional tool. On the more popular platform Douyin, there is also an official promotional marketing tool called DOU+. When you purchase and use it, it can recommend your video to more interested users, increasing your video's views and interactions (see <https://doujia.douyin.com>). Similar to ShuTiao, in this process, users can also customise promotional goals, duration of the promotion, target audience, budget, and other parameters.

These social platforms have entered the arena themselves, turning the game of competing for visibility into a blatant business, though evaluating this goes beyond the scope of this paper. While the barriers to using these promotional tools are not high, this still disadvantages individual creators who lack funds, making these so-called ‘objective’ platform practices more unfair. However, it is important to note that although bought visibility can lessen your time and effort in promoting your content, paid promotion alone does not guarantee your success. As discussed by the website Huodongju (活动聚) (2021), since ShuTiao sells exposure and does not guarantee results, the real effectiveness of your campaign is closely related to your content. Some people might spend ¥50 (around £5) and get nearly a hundred interactions and over 50 new followers, but others might have their campaigns abruptly stopped by ShuTiao, unable to spend their money. It is not uncommon to find posts on Baidu claiming that ShuTiao's promotion is ineffective (e.g., Yangguangshuxiakuairen (阳光树下快乐人), 2023), and there are even posts warning others not to use ShuTiao for promotion (Dongmianshaonv (冬眠少女), 2021). Juanfazi also mentioned that her experience with ShuTiao was very inconsistent,

sometimes good and sometimes very poor. Although these might just be individual creators' or organisations' experiences, a more rigorous study might be needed to evaluate ShuTiao's promotional effectiveness. Nonetheless, it is evident that ShuTiao is not the turning-lead-into-gold tool or panacea one might imagine. Its effectiveness will only be realised when using together with good content creation, proper presents, and networking among your audiences and allied communities. As Zhubajie Net (猪八戒网) (2023) suggests, 'the use of Xiaohongshu's ShuTiao promotion must be based on relatively high-quality content or signs of potential viral posts to achieve good results'.



Figure 6.3 Screenshot of ShuTiao promotion configuration page (Source: Red app, n.d.)

Although these creators do not reveal whether they promote their content through paid methods, by analysing their creative output, it is evident that they are using various methods to increase the visibility of their work. As discussed earlier, riding the trend of the moment is a popular content-creation strategy, at the same time, it is also an effective method to increase visibility and attract traffic. Popular trends attract the attention of large audiences. When creators produce content related to trending topics or popular events, audiences interested in these trends are likely to click and watch. Additionally, social media algorithms generally tend to promote content that is trending at the moment, so works that align with these trends are also more likely to be displayed and promoted. This approach is used extensively by characters like Aoda Cat and Fan & Bao in their creation and promotions. Experts including Zeng, Bobo and Apple, also agreed on this point,

It's essentially about how you can seize the hot trends. The advantage of this approach lies in its quick output. For example, creating a comic or a short video may take some time, and by the time it's finished, the trend may have passed. However, with a single illustration or a sticker, many of which are essentially flat images, you can quickly catch up with current events. When your own IP isn't very well-known and you're in the phase of building up your follower base, not many people may recognize you. However, by engaging with current events, you can create associations that might make more people aware of you (Zeng).

I think the most convenient approach should be to integrate with current events. For example, if there's a current trend or something popular, you create content related to that trend. For instance, the new Barbie movie is released recently and you have a character IP, then you can just create content around Barbie. It will attract a lot of attention because as soon as you generate clicks, it will become popular (Bobo).

In a word, grassroots creators with limited resources need to find cost-effective and easy-to-operate promotional methods. Apart from riding the wave, these creators also demonstrated other pearls of wisdom. Firstly, they all manage multiple social media accounts. For instance, Murongaoao and Muzi both handle platforms such as Weibo, Red, Douyin, WeChat Official Accounts, and more. This allows creators to reach a broader audience, attracting people with different interests and preferences. Multiple platforms may offer more opportunities, such as collaborations, sponsorships, and brand partnerships. Being present on multiple platforms increases the chances of accessing these opportunities. Creators can also cross-promote their content between different platforms, expanding their reach, to illustrate, although the stickers are mainly used on the WeChat, whenever there is a new set of stickers coming out, Murongaoao will post notifications on various other social media platforms to remind everyone to check out the new stickers set on WeChat. In the meantime, managing multiple platforms

also places an additional burden on creators by demanding further investments of time, energy, and creative attention (Duffy et al., 2021). From the comparisons of their different platform content, it can be seen that they also repurpose other forms of content with simple adjustments and then duplicate them across various platforms to maximise the value of this content, which somewhat reduces the difficulty of operating multiple platforms simultaneously, addressing the lack of time and manpower.

This multiple-platform approach is very essential as many creators think that building a brand across multiple platforms can better withstand the unpredictability of the platform ecology (Cunningham and Craig, 2019a; Glatt, 2022). Similar to any other product, social media platforms also have a life cycle (Benney and Xu, 2018). Today a great threat is that the platform on which creators rely would decline or even disappear without warning (Duffy et al., 2021), as was the case when the well-known platform Vine shut down in October 2016. In China RenRen (人人网), often referred to as the Chinese counterpart of Facebook, experienced rapid growth in 2009 and 2010, but then dramatically declined when encountered competition from emerging social media platforms (Millward, 2014). Cunningham and Craig (2019a) have framed this phenomenon as ‘platform precarity’ which pushes content creators to adopt patterned self-branding practices to reduce uncertainty. As Glatt (2022) suggests, not putting all your eggs in one basket has become a pervasive metaphor in the industry, advising creators to diversify and not rely too much on a single platform or income source. Entrepreneurial creators need to develop themselves as cross-platform, multimedia brands, simultaneously dependent on and independent from the platforms that they work across (ibid.).

Another common trick is to offer giveaways. This is typically done in the form of a lottery where fans can enter simply by sharing or reposting content, which is a way to encourage fans to spread the creator’s work, thereby expanding their reach to a wider audience. The rewards for these giveaways can range from the creator’s autograph, electronic products, branded items, figurines, or even just a fictional stroke of luck. This method is indeed effective in increasing engagement, as seen in the example of Toby’s luck post in the case study session, which boosted its data significantly. However, while giveaways can boost interaction, fans’ motivation to participate in such activities is often primarily driven by the prospect of rewards rather than a genuine interest in the content. Therefore, it serves as an expedient promotional strategy, and it should not be excessively exploited, otherwise the audience may quickly lose their enthusiasm for sharing.

On top of that, some of these creators employ more advanced promotional measures, such as collaborating with other creators to co-create content. These collaborations span from guest appearances to joint content creation. For example, in June 2020, Rumi and Moer (萌二) collaborated on a travel-themed campaign and subsequently released a set of joint stickers set. On July 16th, 2020, Rumi reposted a summer travel webtoon and illustration published by Little Bear Ivan (小熊伊万) and Happy Rabbit (欢乐兔), engaging with comments. Collaborations between different characters can lead to creative collisions and generate fresh and interesting content. Additionally, these collaborations enable the cross-pollination of audiences from two different social media characters, increasing exposure, and attracting new followers and viewers. This can spark more discussions and interactions on social media, helping both parties expand their follower communities, increase their visibility, and enhance their influence. All in all, it can be considered a mutually beneficial approach.

From the findings, it can be seen that the primary monetisation methods for these characters can be broken down into brand licensing, content customisation (including custom stickers, webtoons, and short video production), offline customisation, and character consumption (normally including the sale of sticker packs and various character merchandise). Brand licensing here refers to the process where a company (the licensor) authorises another company (the licensee) to use its character's name, image, design, or intellectual property. For example, allowing the licensee to print Rumi's image on their products to enhance their appeal. Content customisation primarily refers to creating specific content tailored to the client's particular needs and preferences. For instance, Star Moly could customise stickers, webtoons, or short videos to help a brand with its promotion or sales according to its requirements, like product placement in its content. Offline customisation refers to tailored services provided in physical environments. For example, Star Moly might offer specialised exhibition display services for a brand during a physical event, such as in a shopping mall. In this way, these characters actually combine advertising with their content creation, promoting other brand's message in a sense of intimate and close communication with fans and audiences (Abidin 2016; Duffy 2017).

The overall advertising industry is dealing with transformation today, where money is gradually moving from traditional TV, radio or newspapers, to social media, blogs, and websites (Arriagada, 2021). Content creators are emerging as competitors in this shifting landscape with their advantages—closer to consumers through their ability to craft appealing

content for their audience and possessing greater digital expertise than traditional advertisers. They aim to become the authentic and resonant ‘face’ for brands and products (Abidin 2016; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016). This is generally framed as ‘influencer marketing’ in a broader industrial context, a practice whereby clients often directly approach content creators to use, mention, or promote their products, brands, and services (Cunningham and Craig, 2019a). Because of their abilities to connect with their followers on a personal level, these creators are considered more likely to influence consumers than even a liked and respected celebrity (Gardner and Lehnert, 2016). In general Advertising has become one of the significant forms of monetisation for these creators and their characters, and from another perspective, it can also further enhance the creators' (characters') exposure and visibility.

Another major revenue comes from character consumption. Character consumption in general refers to the purchase and use of specific commodities—character goods derived from character merchandising (Han, 2017). These character commodities can range from digital work like sticker sets to various physical merchandise. While the stickers business has become more and more competitive, the sale of sticker sets is still a reliable source of income for creators like Murongaoao. Besides the direct sale of the stickers, the Sticker Gallery on WeChat also features a reward system. This ‘reward’ feature allows users to show their appreciation for the creativity and talent of the sticker creators by giving a monetary reward to the creators of the stickers (this is not the money used to purchase a particular set of stickers). Many other platforms also have similar mechanisms for creators to expand their revenue, like Douyin’s (and TikTok’s) ‘Reward’ function and real-time donation function in streaming platforms like Twitch. Physical brand merchandise can cover a wide range of products, from clothing, everyday items, toys, and stationery, to keychains, accessories, and more. These four characters all release various merchandise and have even set up dedicated social media accounts to manage the online store (such as Toby, which was closed after the pandemic). In recent years, blind boxes based on characters have also become very popular. A blind box is a sales method for toys, collectables, or other items where the buyer does not know in advance what specific item they will receive. They are typically sold at a fixed price, but buyers cannot determine what they will get until they open the box or packaging. The appeal of blind boxes lies in their mystery and collectable nature; people are willing to purchase blind boxes to experience the excitement of opening the unknown and to collect a complete series of items. Aoda Cat, Toby, Fan & Bao, and Rumi have also followed this trend by launching their own blind box products. However, this sales method can also generate some controversy because buyers cannot be sure

what they will receive, and sometimes they may get items that are not ideal or need to purchase multiple blind boxes to obtain the style they want.

6.8 Conclusions

In this chapter, a comparative assessment was conducted by amalgamating segments from the separate case descriptions. This approach aimed to highlight patterns and themes present in the cases, allowing for comparisons and contrasts. As suggested by Eisenhardt (1991, p.620), different cases may shed light on various facets of a phenomenon. Eisenhardt also recommends (1989, p.540) examining empirical data from various angles, including the selection of categories or dimensions and the exploration of both similarities within groups and differences between groups. During the analysis phase, the researcher concurrently focused on various levels of examination and their connections. Character processes were scrutinised at an individual case level, and in addition, a cross-case analysis was conducted. This approach aimed to uncover how context and process affected the various analytical levels. The diverse array of empirical data collected from various sources, as detailed in the preceding sections, along with the use of semi-structured interviews involving key informants closely associated with the case companies, facilitated this comprehensive analysis.

The present research reveals that in all four characters studied, character creation is notably distinct yet shares some common key factors. Despite differences in their backgrounds and artistic styles, these creators' creations share a similar paradigm. This paradigm revolves around these creators' own personalities and specialties for creation, this is the key to giving these characters a sense of authenticity which is what mainly distinguishes them from those celebrity characters. The analysis also indicated that personality and image are fundamental to character creation, as shown in the preliminary framework, and offered new perspectives on how content is constructed to connect with the audience. The portrayal of character image and personality has been developing through the creation of light content, including stickers, webtoons, short-form animation, etc., which naturally lends itself to circulation on social media platforms. Throughout this process, the creators' individual backgrounds, styles, work methods, the influence of their followers, and external factors all play different roles in shaping their creative output. One crucial aspect is their reliance on social media platforms for creative content creation and promotion. Although social media platforms' mechanisms and algorithms are to some extent opaque and mysterious, creators still employ various strategies and methods in an attempt to gain an advantage in this competition for visibility.

In summary, the literature review highlighted a notable gap in understanding how social media empowers creative individuals to create and develop their own characters. The empirical results from this study offer fresh insights into this subject area, as all four characters exhibit strategic methods for character creation and promotion on social media. To address this gap, a conceptual model has been introduced, drawing from the empirical findings of this study. The initial framework (*Figure 3.1*), which originated from the literature review, served as an organisational tool for structuring the analysis of the case studies. The examination of these case studies has revealed the necessity of incorporating additional factors to comprehensively depict the process of creating characters through social media. Through both within-case and cross-case analyses, certain recurring patterns have emerged, underscoring the significance of various emerging factors in the creation and development of characters on social media. The next chapter consolidates these patterns into a cohesive conceptual framework for the research.

7 Analysis of the findings

7.1 Introduction

With data collection, analysis and presentation completed, encompassing both individual and comparative case studies, it is now the moment to make final conclusions from the displayed findings and subsequently confirm their validity. This chapter offers an analysis of the findings and introduces a conceptual framework for social media character design based on empirical evidence. The analysis is organised into two main aspects: first, the process a creator takes in creating a social-media character; and second, the factors that influence this development process. The chapter begins with an analysis of the core of the character creation, followed by an examination of other factors that may have an impact on this process, including creators, followers and external factors. Then a reflection on this practice is conducted. The chapter concludes by introducing a conceptual framework to understand and explain the process of grassroots social-media character creation in China.

7.2 Character Creation

As demonstrated throughout the study, the visual image and personality of a cartoon character are critical for its success. A compelling visual image creates an immediate and recognisable impression, while personality fosters emotional resonance and audience engagement. These two aspects are interdependent: the image captures initial attention, and personality deepens the connection through continuous content creation.

One common characteristic of the case study characters is that they are all animal-based designs. Animals offer creators flexibility, as they can embody human emotions while maintaining a degree of separation from reality. This enables them to transcend cultural and social boundaries, making them more adaptable for diverse audiences. Additionally, animal characters are often perceived as gender-neutral, enhancing their versatility in content creation.

The visual design of these characters is simple and abstract, with soft, rounded lines and small body proportions emphasising cuteness. This style aligns with East Asian aesthetic preferences and caters to social media consumption habits, where small-screen readability is essential. While the “cute” element is a consistent trait, creators often pair it with contrasting attributes,

creating a layered personality through techniques like "gap moe." For example, Aoda Cat combines cuteness with mischievousness, while Yumi balances wildness and adorability.

In terms of personality, the study confirms that uniqueness and authenticity are central to successful character creation. Many creators infuse their own traits into their characters, making them more vivid and relatable. This authenticity not only enhances audience connection but also supports the sustainability of creative output. Moreover, creators often expand their narratives by developing supporting characters, enriching the main character's story while providing fresh content opportunities.

The prevalence of light content on social media is another key factor in the success of these characters. Formats such as stickers, webtoons, and short videos are quick to produce and easy to consume, catering to the fast-paced browsing habits of social media users. For creators, the lightweight nature of such content allows for experimentation and rapid iteration, enabling them to adapt to audience preferences in real-time. For instance, Yumi's creator Chenxiaotao and Toby's creator Huahua both started with casual doodles and gradually refined their characters through ongoing feedback and creative exploration.

In summary, the success of these social media characters lies in their adaptability to digital platforms, their ability to foster emotional connections through authentic personalities, and their use of light content formats to sustain audience interest and creative momentum.

7.3 Creators

From the findings, it can be seen that in this creator-centric creative practice, the background, working style, and creative mode of creators have a significant impact on the development of characters and artistic creation. Background represents the creator's professional or work background, working style reflects their personal preferences and creative habits, and creative mode indicates the specific approach the creator takes in their creative process, whether it is entirely independent creation or different forms of collaboration with agencies or companies. These aspects all play a crucial role in shaping the creator's creative process and outcomes.

The background of creators includes their education, career experiences, and professional expertise. These backgrounds influence how creators understand and express character creation. For instance, a creator with a background in art and design may place greater emphasis on the

visual representation of characters, while someone with a background in psychology may focus more on the emotions and behavioral psychology of characters. Huahua is an amateur creator, and this is evident because when she first started, her drawings were a bit clumsy, but she focused on detailed descriptions of her life experience with abundant emotions. This is also an important reason why her work received very positive feedback. During the interview, Shiwu mentioned a popular amateur creator she knows, highlighting how their background can shape their approach to character creation, *'he is, on the contrary, just an amateur, but one with abundant emotions, and he is able to find a different path in creating something'*.

A creator's work style reflects their personal characteristics and creative preferences. Some creators prefer a cute and humorous style, while others may lean towards more realistic or serious portrayals, which are influenced by their own personalities, interests, and other factors. This work style also influences the image of characters, emotional expressions, and the narratives they create. For example, Murongaoao is a playful and mischievous person, so he naturally imbues his playful personality into his character Aoda Cat. Huahua, as an amateur, likes to go with the flow and has a somewhat carefree feeling to her work. Her creations have become a record of her life experiences. In a word, it can be seen that these creators primarily draw from their own specialties and preferences, integrating their personalities and experiences into the characters. This natural and genuine expression imbues these characters with a sense of authenticity that sets them apart from celebrity characters, which is an advantage of these social media characters. Only by revealing their inner worlds can characters become more vivid and lasting. Sincerity in creation is essential, along with emotion. In this way, their stories are more likely to resonate with the audience. Denicke, Zeng, and Juanfazi also agreed that character creation should stem from one's inner self and strengths, without being overly influenced by external factors.

A creator's mode of creation reflects their creative habits and collaboration tendencies. Some creators prefer independent creation, where they can freely unleash their creativity and build their character's world, like Murongaoao. Despite receiving invitations from various agencies, he declined them all because he wanted absolute control over his artistic creations. On the other hand, other creators like Chenxiaotao, Huahua, and Muzi all choose to collaborate with some kinds of agencies. These agencies function more or less like Multi-Channel Networks (MCN) on YouTube. MCN is a term originally coined by YouTube and refers to organisations that offer assistance to channel owners in areas such as 'product, programming, funding, cross-

promotion, partner management, digital rights management, monetisation and sales, and audience development' on YouTube platform (YouTube Help, n.d.), in exchange for a certain percentage of the revenue from the creators. Collaborating with agencies can provide many benefits to the creators. Just like most social media creators today, these individual character creators need to be jack-of-all-trades entrepreneurs in the first place (Glatt, 2022), simultaneously taking on so many roles including project manager, illustrator, brand ambassador, merchandise producer, marketer, and PR rep, etc. Although actual collaborating models vary, many agencies can help with promotion and discuss various brand collaboration, and legal matters, offering more professional support in data and market analysis, so the creators can focus more on the content creation part, as is seen in Huahua's case. Gaining audience share is another benefit of collaborations. Each content creator who joins an MCN begins pooling its audience with those of similar channels (Gardner and Lehnert, 2016). Just like the character Rumi, its parent agency Star Moly shares its follower base across its collaborating characters. And Huahua's agency also helped her to get traffic and share its followers with her. This cross-pollination of audiences not only helps grow the individual audiences of each creator, but also strengthens branding efforts (ibid.). In the meantime, as discussed before, there is increasing resistance from creators who feel that their needs are not adequately satisfied by the existing agency model. There have been concerns regarding whether agencies are really valuable, the extent of control exerted over their members, and the distribution of revenue models. Creators frequently discover that the services offered by these agencies and their management come at high costs with limited returns, often resulting in creators seeking alternative options (Craig, 2019). The collaboration could also mean losing control of the character creation, necessitating a compromise between creative freedom and market demands. Therefore content creators must be cautious and ensure they are well-informed when deciding to collaborate with any agency.

7.4 Followers

For social media content creators, the relationship with followers is important (Fung et al., 2022), as followers provide both monetary support (through merchandise and subscriptions) and psychological encouragement. The findings highlight how the creators studied prioritise nurturing these relationships, actively engaging with followers and involving them in the creative process. This sets them apart from celebrity-driven characters by fostering a more interactive and collaborative dynamic.

Followers also influence content creation significantly, as their interactions—likes, comments, and shares—offer valuable feedback for creators. For instance, some creators proactively seek input from their followers about future content directions, while others use audience engagement data to refine their strategies. This feedback loop aligns with the interactive nature of social media platforms and underscores how creators rely on their audiences not only for validation but also for inspiration and direction. However, creators must balance follower-driven input with their own artistic intentions. While catering to audience preferences can strengthen engagement, overreliance on data risks compromising originality and self-expression. Maintaining this balance is essential to preserving authenticity and sustaining a constructive relationship with followers.

In summary, the creator-follower relationship is mutually reinforcing: creators inspire their followers through their work, while followers' engagement and support motivate creators. A relationship built on respect, sincerity, and shared values ensures a dynamic that benefits both sides while enabling creators to maintain their individuality.

7.5 Social media platforms

Social media platforms play a central role in content creation by providing the infrastructure and tools that creators rely on. They eliminate traditional media gatekeeping and allow creators to reach audiences directly through algorithm-driven systems (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). However, as the findings suggest, these platforms are not neutral entities (Fung et al., 2022; Duffy et al., 2021); they influence content visibility and user interaction through algorithms, terms of use, and content moderation practices.

The findings show that creators must navigate these platforms carefully. Firstly creators need to learn and understand each platform's structure, functioning, and nuances in their content formats to maximise their follower base (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020). At the same time the media world is changing rapidly, and so do the social media platforms. To fight against this 'platform precarity', creators are advised to spread their work and revenue sources over multiple platforms and projects to develop sustainable audiences and careers (Glatt, 2022). Besides, Creators need to develop algorithmic literacy to optimise their visibility while avoiding potential limitations or bans. Additionally, the findings reveal the competitive challenges posed by paid promotion tools on Chinese platforms, where visibility can be directly purchased, creating additional complexity for creators. To mitigate risks associated with

platform instability and ever-changing rules, creators are advised to diversify their efforts across multiple platforms, as seen in the successful multi-platform strategies employed by the case study creators.

In summary, social media platforms are dynamic and constantly evolving infrastructures (Duffy et al., 2019). Creators must stay informed and adaptable, leveraging platform-specific affordances while managing risks in a fast-changing digital environment.

7.6 External factors

Another set of factors that affect the creation comes from the environment. They can be broken down into regulation, society and technology. While there is some level of scrutiny and regulation on social media platforms worldwide, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced in China, where institutional regulation and censorship from the government are pervasive. Normally state governance over creators is more indirect, like through the state's regulation of platforms, in China, this is often practiced through direct censorship (Cunningham and Craig, 2019a). This kind of oversight and censorship affects internet content, freedom of speech, and information dissemination. The content created has to be in line with the authorities' expectation of 'what kind of stories should be told' (p.4). According to the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), all content producers should 'abide by the law, adhere to the correct values, and help disseminate socialist core values and cultivate a positive and healthy online culture' (CAC, 2017). The Chinese government actively promotes a carefully crafted national image to wield 'soft power' internationally, while simultaneously cultivating a conforming culture that ensures social stability and national unity (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). Consequently, the platform governance is subject to state regulations, which promote and circumscribe platformed cultural production at the same time (ibid.). On top of this, the Chinese government often deliberately uses vague language regarding censorship and internet restrictions, without clearly explaining the boundaries of what is permissible. This further increases the randomness and unpredictability of their censorship, adding another layer of uncertainty to people who make a living online. Content producers have to carefully utilise their creativity to ensure the accumulation of online data traffic without breaching the state's regulations.

The society in which creators reside is also another important factor. Any artist's creation is influenced by the era and social environment in which they exist, and this is a universally

observed phenomenon. When a work reflects the society and culture of its time, the audience is more likely to connect with it, experiencing common emotions and reflections. On one hand, it also represents the spirit of the era, as Denicke mentioned, *'but still, you have to understand what the Zeitgeist is at the moment. You can't do stuff that's not relevant'*. Li added, *'preferences vary from one era to another, so when you create an IP or content, you certainly need to align more with aesthetics and trends of the current time'*. This reminds artists that they need to stay sensitive and adaptable to the changes of the times to ensure that their works can connect with contemporary audiences and conform to the evolving social aesthetics and trends. This adaptation does not mean losing personal style or originality, but rather maintaining their unique perspective while engaging in a dialogue with the times, making their works more broadly appealing and influential.

At the same time, different eras and regions have their own cultural traditions and values, and this diversity is also reflected in the creation output. Various social backgrounds can provide artists with rich sources of inspiration, enriching and diversifying their work. Social and cultural factors influence the values and interests of the audience, thus shaping the direction and style of commercial artists' creations. They may choose to incorporate images related to specific social groups or cultural themes in order to better attract their target audience. As discussed before, these case characters all share a similar visual style which reflects the regional aesthetic taste. Kiesling also noted this cultural difference,

And there isn't really anything quite similar to it [these social media characters] in the Western market. It's, it's definitely, we, in the western media, [have] a different view on what is cartoon characters and animation, [which is perceived] very differently by people from Asia.

Social and cultural factors influence the themes and content chosen by commercial artists. They may determine their creative direction based on social trends, cultural currents, and audience interests. This helps make their work more readily accepted and noticed by the audience. For example, as mentioned earlier, many creators frequently leverage trending topics to increase the exposure of their content. In a word, commercial artists on social media are a blend of creativity and business. They need to actively perceive social and cultural factors and incorporate them into their creative and marketing strategies.

On top of that, these creators are also affected by technological factors, which manifest in various ways: the advancement of technology has made high-performance computers and

digital drawing tools more widespread and accessible. Artists and creators can use various drawing software, digital tablets, drawing boards, and other tools to create characters and related content, anytime and anywhere, making the creative process more efficient and convenient. They can easily make corrections, edits, and save their work, thereby enhancing the quality and productivity of their creations. During an interview with the Guardian, Michael Rosenbaum's comment illustrates this empowerment by technology,

'It doesn't cost anything to make broadcast quality video, all you need is talent. The tools out there are so cheap and easy to use that any nine-year-old can operate them . . . Ten years ago if you wanted to create a TV network you needed to have a billion dollars to invest . . . Today, we have this explosion of platforms on the internet in general but also it's the amount of screens that are out there today. As screen technology becomes less expensive and streaming and compression algorithms improve, it means that every screen is going to be populated with video' (Smith, 2012).

Needless to say, social media platforms themselves are the epitome of technology advancement as well, providing artists and creators with channels to browse and showcase their work, interact with audiences, and promote their content. Different social media platforms have different features and audience demographics, allowing commercial artists to choose the platform that best suits their target audience for sharing their work. Furthermore, technology has made data analysis and market research more precise and actionable. Commercial artists can use data analysis tools to understand audience behaviors, preferences, and trends, enabling them to create and market their content with greater precision.

In a word, technological factors have had a profound impact on artists and creatives who create IP characters on social media. They have not only improved the efficiency of creative tools and channels but also created new modes of creation and business opportunities. The breakneck pace of evolution is a well-known feature of the technology sector, so content creators need to continually update their technical knowledge to keep up with technological advancements and incorporate them into their creative and marketing strategies.

7.7 Introducing the conceptual framework

Drawing the literature review and the empirical findings together, this research introduces a conceptual framework designed to facilitate understanding, explanation, and description of the social media character creation process (see *Figure 7.1*). This model is based on the preliminary conceptual framework derived from the literature review (*Figure 3.1*) which serves as a scaffold and guideline to organise the analysis of case studies. Through the case studies of four

social media characters, new factors important to the development of social media characters emerged: creators and light content. These newly identified factors, combined with the preliminary conceptual framework, form the basis of this new conceptual model.

The proposed conceptual framework consists of the following key components: (1) social media character design including the image and personality of the character, light content creation; (2) the social media platforms as infrastructure (3) the factors that influence the relationships between the primary factors and results, including creator, followers and external factors, as shown in *Figure 7.1*. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that although this model portrays followers and external factors as moderating factors, additional factors could also impact the outcomes. The exploration of further variables is subject to future research, which will be discussed later.

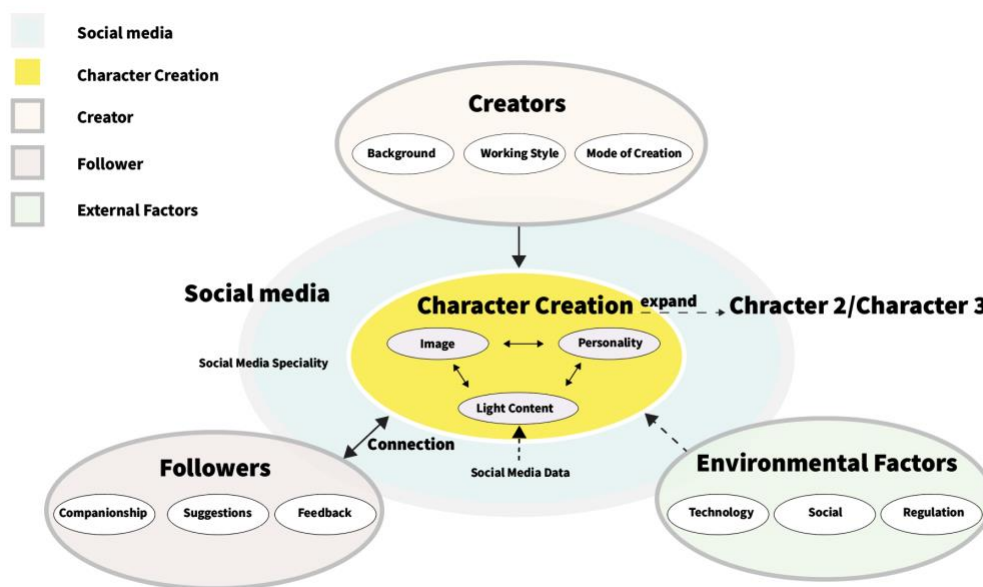


Figure 7.1 The Conceptual Framework

At the centre of this model sits social media character creation, the core subject of this research, which includes two basic elements derived from the literature review: Image and Personality. The Image typically refers to the visual features of the character, such as their physical appearance, clothing, facial expressions, body posture, and other visual characteristics. The personality refers to the psychological traits, behavior patterns, emotional states, and ways of interacting with other characters that the character exhibits in the story or work. These two elements are the core of the character, and not only influence each other but also impact the

creation of light content. The creation of light content replaces the Connection in the Preliminary Concept Framework, or PCF (*Figure 3.1*), as the findings revealed that light content plays a crucial role during this process. Light Content typically refers to content that does not require a significant amount of time, effort, or cognitive load to browse or consume. This content is often characterised by its simplicity, ease of consumption, and entertainment value. Examples include stickers, webtoons, short videos, and more. It can quickly capture the audience's attention and convey information or emotions within a short period of time. At the same time, its production is easier and less time consuming, enabling even individuals to complete it and maintain continuous updates. It serves as the core for further development and promotion of characters while making connections should become the purpose of content creation to connect characters and followers together. According to empirical findings, during the creation and development of light content, both image and personality also evolve and develop alongside. Moreover, to expand the current content, creating additional characters is also a very common strategy, as it enriches the product line and storyline, and helps in shaping the main characters.

Another major change between the PCF and the conceptual model is that the analysis within and across cases revealed the important role of creators' role in this practice. In this individual-centred creative practice, the creators' backgrounds, working styles, and modes of creation significantly shape their characters' development and artistic creation. The background represents the creator's professional or educational background. Working style represents the creator's personal preferences and creative habits. These factors contribute to making these creations more personalised and authentic in feel. Mode of creation represents the creator's working mode, which can vary from being completely independent to various forms of collaboration with companies.

The findings also indicate that followers play an increasingly active role in this process. They are not only consumers and audiences of these character content but also provide inspiration and emotional support to the creators. Many followers also actively provide creators with suggestions on character development, storylines, and creative approaches. They may offer opinions and recommendations on aspects such as character personalities, plot directions, and future creative directions. This interaction can assist creators in better understanding audience expectations and adjusting their creative strategies based on feedback. In addition to these more direct interactions, the behavior of followers on social media—such as browsing, liking, and

sharing—feeds back to creators in the form of social media data. This social media data serves as a valuable reference for creators to analyse and can further influence their content creation.

External factors also influence the creation. Through empirical findings, they can be broken down into Regulation, Culture and Technology. These are primarily external environmental factors that affect creators. Regulation refers not only to platform monitoring of content and behavior but also includes government oversight and censorship of society as a whole, which is particularly prominent in China. The socio-cultural environment also has a significant impact on artistic creation, and technological development is the foundation for creators' work today. The single direction arrow in the external environment means that this influence is mainly passed down to the creators' side.

What brings all these elements together is social media platforms. Social media continues to serve as the infrastructure, connecting all the parties together and enabling this line of character creation to take place. At the same time, social media, as the ruler of the game, influences creators' work through algorithms, terms of use, or even more direct interventions. Different social media platforms have distinctive features and target audiences, which further influence the format and direction of the content. Additionally, the vast amount of user data generated by social media can be analysed and utilised by creators to optimise and adjust their creations.

7.8 Reflection on the findings

So far, a lot of strategies and tactics employed by content creators have been discussed, but the extent to which these personalised strategies and styles can succeed or how far they can go still remains uncertain in this complex environment. In the previous section, we mentioned these creators' first-mover advantages which gave them a lot of momentum during their development. But today's entire social media landscape has undergone a drastic evolution, as Glatt noted, 'how far the industry has come from its amateur early days before the career aspiration of influencer even existed, and the algorithm, AdSense, and brand deals were unheard of' (2022, p.3863). Today, despite the widespread existence of folk theories and strategies, how to achieve success on social media still seems elusive for many creators. In their research collaborating with Douyin, Fung et al. (2022) interviewed many content creators on this popular platform in China. Many creators highlighted the unpredictability surrounding why and how one can become successful or not knowing when their hard work will pay off and the algorithm will favour them to become successful. The capricious nature of success makes it challenging for

many to assess the quality and value of their work. Duffy et al. (2021) also note that the creators they interviewed across multiple platforms and genres shared a similar view on the social media content market: it was fickle, elusive, and, ultimately, hard to foresee what would ‘do well’. Juanfazi suggests that success is only achievable when an individual’s unique taste aligns perfectly with those of the public,

If the image of your IP creation, and it happens to align with the preferences of the masses, such as with popular trends, and it resonates with the public. For instance, the ‘Buddhist-style’ [佛系] approach. A few years back, people didn’t really like it, but in recent years, people have started to appreciate this kind of combination of good and bad with a touch of Buddhism. It just happens to tap into the spirit of the times and becomes a hit. So, I think it’s quite random and depends a lot on serendipity.

Her comments further suggest that rather than an aspiration that leads to becoming a content creator, it is often simply the result of happenstance. Shiwu also mentioned that serendipity plays a very important role in this type of creation, and it is something that is difficult to control,

Basically, I think this kind of model [the conceptual framework figure 7.1] is a summarised viable business model, but it also needs to include an element of serendipity. However, this serendipity, apart from the creator’s emotional abilities, includes everything else. For instance, some companies may operate many accounts simultaneously because this model theory might be based on referencing some characters that became popular. But the popularity of these things itself may also involve an element of serendipity.

Indeed, serendipity is often thought of as a crucial part of many innovations, inventions, and entrepreneurial opportunities (Denrell et al., 2003, 2015; Dew, 2009; Liu and de Rond, 2016; Ramus et al., 2017; Busch and Grimes, 2023). Although the researcher acknowledges serendipity’s role in the entrepreneurial cause, he also believes that it is a must-have quality for every aspiring individual and does not need to be specifically included in the model. As suggested by Dew (2009), in public perception, entrepreneurship and serendipity are generally tightly connected. People prefer the idea that ‘lady luck’ also has an important role in the entrepreneurial process (regardless of the scientific accuracy of this preference). From this, it can be discerned that the popular image of successful entrepreneurship implicitly identifies an important role for serendipity in entrepreneurship, i.e. the social psychology of entrepreneurship involves lucky accidents as well as individual effort and sagacity. However, it is also important to clarify the difference between serendipity and luck here as these two concepts are easily conflated. Serendipity is an ambiguous word and a somewhat elusive concept. While different scholars frame this concept in different ways, it generally lies between

these two concepts: individuals are involved in some kind of search effort when they accidentally discover something that they were not looking for (Dew, 2009). ‘While good luck may befall the inert or lazy, serendipitous discovery occurs only in the course of an energetic quest’ (Denrell et al., 2003, p.989). So what is more important is your presence; as long as you are hanging in there, serendipity might fall on you, not the other way around. Or to understand it in another simple way, chance favours the prepared mind only.

Besides, precarity and instability are also features of this industry. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Huahua's career suffered a significant blow, forcing her to part way with her previous agency which could not continue operating. Additionally, due to some copyright issues with her current agency, her character Toby now entered a semi-hiatus state. Now, she has to start from scratch and create a new character on the side. Although careers in creative industries have long been characterised by intermittent or freelance work, low and/or delayed pay, and the warning that one's value is only as high as their most recent project (Blair, 2001; Gill, 2010; McRobbie, 2016), the current platform-based creative economy—driven by a neoliberal approach to self-promotion, redefining self-employment as ‘entrepreneurship’, and an oversaturated supply of talents—intensifies many of these challenging aspects (Glatt, 2022; also refer to Bishop, 2019; Duffy and Sawey, 2021). Unstable income, absence of a safety net, unpredictable work hours, uncertainty about continuing employment, the blurring of work and leisure time, and paired with fewer legal protections, the lack of collective support (e.g. Worker union), are the common labour conditions in the global platform economy (De Peuter, 2011). Duffy et al. summarise this precarity experienced by creators into three levels,

(1) *market precarity*, or the volatile changes in audiences’ tastes and advertisers’ demands; (2) *industry precarity*, or uncertainty that stemmed from the hyper-competitive ecology of mainstream creator platforms; and (3) *platform precarity*, or the changes enacted by individual platform companies in the form of updates to their features and algorithms (2021, p.4).

And the responsibility for handling this precarity falls entirely on individual creators, who must maintain a rapid pace of content production and spread their efforts across multiple platforms to reduce the risk of failure (Glatt, 2022). But it is also important to point out that this situation is not solely created by the greed of capital; it is also a self-choice of many modern creative individuals. Profiles of independent immaterial workforces consistently emphasise a strong desire for autonomy, particularly in terms of having more control over one’s time and choice of work (Clinton et al., 2006; Fraser and Gold, 2001; Storey et al., 2005). This is essentially a

gamble on the ability of self-employment to create, as Bologna (2007) puts it, ‘better ways of life than waged labour’.

So even the success is fickle and income is uncertain, more and more people are still entering this industry. As Banks (2007) suggests, the temptation of autonomy ‘is sufficiently powerful to override any misgivings, constraints or disadvantages that might emerge in the everyday reproduction of this highly competitive and uncertain domain’ (p. 55), despite this being a very complicated version of autonomy, especially with the existence of ‘the algorithmic boss’ (O’Connor, 2016; Prassl, 2018; Rosenblat, 2018).

Those creators’ success stories highly visible on platforms and in media portrayals add to the temptation, significantly influencing the aspirations of young viewers. The rise of creator entrepreneurialism has led to significant revenue growth, although quantifying its scale and impact is difficult. According to a report on the ‘New Creator Economy’ (Shapiro and Aneja, 2018), there are approximately 15 million online creators generating revenue from these platforms in the United States alone. Estimates of the total value of the ‘influencer economy’ vary widely, ranging from \$1 billion US dollars (Mediakix) on Instagram alone to over \$50 billion US dollars (Northzone) globally. In China, the industry is even more accelerated, with some creators earning nearly \$50 million US dollars in a year (Tsoi, 2017). According to the Drawing the Future report (Chambers et al., 2018) which surveyed over 20,000 British primary school children, social media and gaming rank as the fourth-most popular career choice among 7 to 11-year-olds in the UK. The report also notes that online celebrities and YouTube gaming vloggers are becoming more influential among children and young people than traditional TV and movie stars. Juanfazi also share her own experience,

Because nowadays, young people, including those born after 2000, don’t just want to make money; they all want to become social media personalities and create their own accounts. Even I have joined many content creators groups, and there are many youngsters in these groups, including college students and even high school students, all of whom are trying to be content creators...I think this will bring about significant changes in the work status of these people in the future. Many of them will become freelancers, managing their own careers through these platforms, and it won’t be like before when they had to rely heavily on finding a traditional job. This will fundamentally change the way people work.

Many experts have also expressed their concerns about this phenomenon and worry that this will become an intensive rat race (Apple, Bobo, Li, Juanfazi, Shiwu). This situation is expected to further intensify in the future. In June 2023, China’s National Bureau of Statistics announced

a youth unemployment rate of 20.8%, and the bureau declared that it would temporarily stop publishing related data in the future. This implies that a large number of young people are struggling to find stable employment, and some of them may be pushed to enter this field of content creation as it is considered no entry barrier. Regardless of whether more creators are joining the industry voluntarily or out of necessity, it is making the competition in this field increasingly fierce. Therefore, studying and understanding this practice is becoming more and more important, both for the academic community and practitioners.

7.9 Summary of findings

The literature review revealed a lack of approaches for understanding and evaluating social media character-creation and pertinent strategies. To bridge the gap, a conceptual framework is proposed based on the empirical findings. This conceptual framework incorporates all the key points emerging from this study.

Firstly, creators were identified as an important factor influencing the character creation process. Indeed, in any form of content creation, creators are undoubtedly crucial. However, in such a highly personalised creative practice, this becomes even more pronounced. In the absence of team research and careful consideration, without the support of investment and under pressure, a personal creator's background, work habits, and creative patterns directly determine the output of character creation. During this course, Creators typically infuse the characters with their own personal traits and emotions, embedding them with a clear imprint of the author's individuality. This showcases more relatable and authentic sentiments, which is a significant characteristic of social media characters.

Second, the findings also suggest that during this process followers are an essential influencing factor. Followers are not only the audience or consumers, but also provide companionship and emotional encouragement to creators. Their interactions and preferences can also directly influence many creators' creative plans. In particular, the findings suggest that user data generated through audience interaction is highly valuable and should be effectively utilised. By intelligently analysing this data, creators can optimise and adjust their creative strategies. These factors have a significant impact on the creator's further creative process.

In addition to creators and followers, social media, as the rule-maker of this game, also exerts significant influence on content creation, whether through algorithms, Terms of Use, or even

direct intervention. Moreover, a broader range of macro factors also influences the creators' creation, including regulation from the state, the socio-cultural context, and the level of technological development. Strict government censorship and regulation is a significant characteristics of content creation in China, which constantly shapes the practice of cultural production on Chinese platforms.

In particular, the findings introduces a conceptual framework to aid individuals or even organisations in developing and promoting characters on social media by highlighting the important factors and their relationships. These constructs and factors are all drawn from empirical research and are elaborated and substantiated through existing literature. The core of this subject, social media character design consists of three key elements, that is image, personality and light content. This practice is influenced by 3 sets of influencing factors, namely creators, followers and external factors. Each of these influencing factors can be further divided into sub-factors. Social media provides the platform where this practice can take place, enabling these different factors to interact with each other. However, it is important to acknowledge that although this model identifies several key factors, there may be additional factors at play. The investigation of these additional factors is a subject for future research, which is addressed in the final chapter.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

In general, social media platforms are transforming major economic sectors and various aspects of life, including journalism, transportation, entertainment, education, finance, and healthcare (Poell et al., 2019). The platformisation of cultural production are reconfiguring the production, distribution, and monetisation of cultural content in staggering and complex ways (Duffy et al., 2019). It is suggested that the platformed cultural production system places users at the heart of creation, granting content creators more autonomy (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). In theory, the algorithm-based platforms offer a more objective model that treats everyone equally, regardless of whether they are media conglomerates or grassroots creatives.

This greatly empowers individual creators, enabling them to participate in cultural production. The social media-driven production environment has also given rise to a new production culture. Unlike the linear and long-cycle production processes of traditional cultural industries, it promotes an iterative, fragmented, and interactive mode of creation (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Mediated by social media, this process is inherently more participatory, with users playing a crucial role. They are not only consumers of these products but also active participants in the creation process through various means (Ivanova, 2023). This participatory production culture offers significant support to creators, yet it also places considerable pressure on them to continually cater to audience expectations and platform algorithms. Notably, grassroots creators often lack systematic professional training and may have limited technical expertise, as reflected in their relatively simple animation techniques (see section 5.2.3 for reference). However, their focus on emotional authenticity over technical sophistication is still regarded as an expression of vernacular creativity (Voci, 2023).

The practices of grassroots creators are frequently referred to as amateur creation, which is considered ‘a crucial and defining feature of twenty-first century everyday lives’ (Motrescu-Mayes and Aasman, 2019, p. 2). The innovative aspect of such creation lies in its rebalancing of production quality and expense on the one hand and meaning-making on the other (Bardzell, 2007). Amateurs have demonstrated, in remarkably diverse ways, that low-production-quality work can nonetheless carry culturally significant meanings (ibid.). These creations have developed their own aesthetic and logical systems, which interact with and influence large-

scale industrial production models. This has led to a blurring of the boundaries between amateur and professional creation (Ivanova, 2023).

The contemporary social landscape in China presents a complex picture. As previously discussed, political and market restrictions directly shape the cultural practices of today's youth. While the Chinese government implements internet firewalls and seeks to control young minds through various forms of political education, the youth, despite outwardly displaying satisfaction and compliance, continue to mobilise creative strategies to negotiate with authorities and carve out their own spaces for expression, particularly through new media (Fung and de Kloet, 2017). Social media has provided a platform for many young people to imagine alternative lifestyles, extending its influence to even rural regions. This has enabled marginalised youth from disadvantaged areas to find avenues for upward social mobility (Li et al., 2020), leading many to enthusiastically engage in social media creation as a means to pursue economic advancement. However, it is important to recognise the dual nature of these technologies and mobile devices. While they offer liberating opportunities for expression, they can also be used as tools for surveillance and censorship (De Kloet and Fung, 2017). The relationship between the state and youth thus becomes paradoxical, co-creating youth culture in a way that reflects both tension and collaboration.

These intertwined factors—including the dynamic relationship between amateur and professional practices, the influence of youth culture, and the pressures of economic and social identity—underscore the diversity and complexity of grassroots creation in China. It is within this intricate context that social media character creation has emerged and evolved. Yet, little attention has been paid to understanding and explaining this emergent practice, revealing a significant gap in our knowledge—one that this study seeks to address.

This study was conducted to understand and explain this emerging practice of character creation on social media. More particularly, the goal was to construct a conceptual framework based on empirical findings that facilitate comprehension and explanation of the process of character creation and promotion on social media. This goal was divided into the following specific objectives:

- To understand the causes and contexts through which this phenomenon emerged.
- To analyse and theorise the creation process and promotion patterns of characters on

social media.

- To identify and map out these characters' commercial and monetisation strategies.
- To develop a conceptual framework to understand and explain character creation and promotion on social media.
- To offer guidelines for social media character creation and promotion to both individual creatives and managers.

This chapter consolidates the proposed responses to these questions, addresses the limitations of the study, and proposes directions for future research. Firstly, the theoretical and then creative contributions of the study are presented, followed by an evaluation of the main findings. Then, the limitations of this study and potential paths for further research are discussed.

8.2 Theoretical contributions

The main theoretical contribution offered by this study lies in the development of an empirically grounded conceptual framework that facilitates comprehension, explanation, and analysis of character creation on social media (*Figure 7.1*). This framework synthesises insights from the initial framework (*Figure 3.1*) and the empirical findings, collectively constituting a substantial contribution to character creation in the age of social media.

Although social media has a huge impact on today's cultural production, there are no specific theories or empirical investigations focusing on how social media facilitates character production, especially in the context of China's media landscape. Practical models for creating, analysing and comparing social media character are still missing. There has been a need for this type of research from both theoretical and creative perspective, across multiple platforms and objectives, and this research provides much-needed insights. Undoubtedly, the empirically rooted framework stands out as the paramount theoretical contribution of this research. The framework aims at explaining, developing, and comparing the grassroots process of character creation in the platformed content creation industry.

Reviewing the existing research and literature on cultural production and digital entrepreneurship reveals that content creation and entrepreneurship in this era have undergone

a major transformation, largely due to the rise of social media as a key driving force. Social media has facilitated a shift in power dynamics, empowering individuals and grassroots, along with consumers. Through the internet, especially via social media, grassroots creators have gained greater control, information and influence than ever before. In China today, social media such as Weibo, Douyin, Red and WeChat have become important sites of cultural production and content creation, providing substantial opportunities for grassroots individuals and creatives. Researching this development makes an important contribution in social media practice and digital entrepreneurship in general. Despite the increasing significance of social media in industrial as well as academic context, there remained a noticeable gap in the literature regarding building a conceptual understanding of the character creation on social media from a bottom-up process. Some of initial studies mainly touched on specific characters' strategies related to social media use, rather than strategies designed for social media character development.

While most cultural industries existed before the Internet and social media, the social media content creation is a rare example of one that grew out of it. These character creators are important for understanding the lived experiences of platformised creative practices (Glatt, 2022). The interviews with case characters' creators plus some external experts provide a richly detailed understanding of expert knowledge concerning character creation on social media. This approach has enabled a comprehensive and detailed collection of data and generated valuable knowledge for social media character production in particular and content creation in general.

Although the literature on cartoon character creation remains underdeveloped, analysing the current studies in this domain has revealed some preliminary patterns highlighting crucial factors of character creation and development. Moreover, the analysis of the current literature also led to the development of a preliminary theoretical framework as explained in Chapter 3. The image and personality arising from the literature review serve as a starting point in developing a conceptual framework for describing the process of social media character creation. These characters, based on animal prototypes with minimalist design and an overall cute tendency, are consistent with the literature findings. Cuteness is the core of both their appearance and personality traits, aligning with the popular culture of cuteness in East Asia. Additionally, their personalities often combine two contrasting traits, creating an interesting

contrast. This aligns well with the ‘gap moe’ phenomenon popular in the ACG world, where characters exhibit contrasting characteristics pervasively.

Specifically the finding revealed that individual creators play a core influential role in this practice. Their background, personality, preferences, and working style are greatly integrated into the characters they created, making these characters more relatable and authentic. This authenticity is one of the biggest features of social media characters, aligning with what scholars perceive as a common advantage of social media creators’ content, distinguishing them from celebrity characters. From the literature review, it is evident that followers play a significant role in today's social media content creation, as they support the work, either directly by purchasing merchandise and subscriptions or indirectly by viewing advertisements (Fung et al., 2022). Creators need to cultivate relationships with them, and the data generated by these followers can also be used for analysis and evaluation, indirectly influencing the direction of creation. Furthermore, empirical findings show that the relationship between followers and creators is more complex. They are not just abstracted numbers; they actively influence your creation and provide essential emotional support, serving as a crucial force to keep creators moving forward. The findings also identified the significant value of light content in this type of creation. Represented by stickers, webtoons, short videos, etc., light content has a small volume and is easy and quick to read, making it highly suitable for circulation on social media and becoming an important way for people to consume cultural content today. Adding to this, this form of content has a shorter production cycle and is easy to modify, allowing individuals or small teams to produce it relatively easily and maintain continuous content output.

Building on these findings, a conceptual framework based on empirical evidence was introduced to guide the social media character creation, identifying the key factors and their characteristics. The preliminary framework, made up of several initial factors (image, personality and connection, followers, external environment) from the literature review, serve as a tool to organise the analysis of the case studies. Drawing on the empirical data, some other factors were identified (creators, light content, follower feedback and suggestions etc.) and integrated into the proposed conceptual framework that facilitates comprehension and explanation of the process of character creation on social media. This empirically grounded conceptual framework is the main theoretical contribution of this research. Nevertheless, it needs to be acknowledged that while creators was identified as the primary influential factors during the process, additional factors could also impact the creation and development. The

exploration of further variables is subject to future research, which will be outlined in the final section of this chapter.

Regarding knowledge and novel insight, this study has introduced a variety of new concepts, explains their relationships, and describes and explains an ongoing phenomenon in the field of cultural production. Furthermore, this research has proposed various avenues for future research (see Section 8.4). In summary, this research has enriched the present knowledge structures of cartoon characters and opened up new lines of questioning.

8.3 Creative contributions

Apart from contributing to the current theoretical discussions on character design, this research also attempted to offer practical tools for a wide range of people: creatives and practitioners, consultants, social media managers or even general people involved in character business or cultural production in general, leveraging digital technology and social media for their entrepreneurship. The creative perspective in digital entrepreneurship has long called for practical research of this nature (Zaheer et al., 2019) and the study delivers the essential insights.

Social media serve as the infrastructure and primary instruments to create and promote individual character IPs, engage audiences and monetise talents. The researcher thoroughly discussed the process of creating a social media character, complemented by detailed instances from the real-world context regarding how social media characters were developed and highlighting the crucial factors to be taken into account. While establishing a presence on different social media platforms may seem straightforward, the development of a sustainable character IP presents a more intricate challenge. The primary creative contributions of this study involve presenting concepts and instances designed to help individuals and even managers understand and develop strategies for character creation on social media.

The conceptual framework summarised from this research serves as both a creative and managerial instrument to facilitate the development of social media character creation and to identify the relevant important factors. Specifically, the framework (see *Figure 7.1*) can be used to understand and direct the process of character creation on social media and its relevant strategies. With this model's assistance, either individuals or managers can better understand their own strengths, and mobilise their resources logically and pinpoint the key factors worth considering. In addition to this, this framework is designed to direct creative initiatives towards

a sustainable approach, fostering long-term competitive advantage. That being said, it is important to recognise that the conceptual framework is quite simple, the actual challenges experienced by creatives is considerably more complex and intricate. Therefore it serves as a guideline rather than a fixed rule, and the practitioners should adjust and apply theory flexibly according to the actual situation.

Based on the conceptual framework, several influential themes are important and deserve the attention of the creatives.

-1. Understand Yourself and Leverage Authenticity

First, the study highlights that authenticity is a significant advantage for social media creators, setting them apart from the creations of large corporations. For individual creators, striving for industrial standards or technical perfection may not be realistic. Instead, they should focus on expressing genuine emotions and personal experiences through their work.

Visual Design and Personality Creation: A character's visual traits and personality should reflect the creator's individuality, drawing from their real-life experiences to resonate emotionally with audiences. For example, creators can find inspiration in their own characteristics or life stories, incorporating these elements into their designs and narratives.

The Power of Authenticity: Content rooted in genuine emotions and personal experiences not only evokes audience empathy but also lays a solid foundation for long-term engagement. Audiences tend to connect more deeply and enduringly with characters that feel authentic and relatable.

In the competitive social media landscape, creators should fully explore their unique strengths and authenticity, transforming them into core creative assets.

-2. Encourage Audience Participation and Co-Creation

The research also reveals the significant role of audiences in content creation. Engaging with audiences and encouraging their active participation in the creative process can significantly enhance the success and relevance of social media characters. Creators should view their audiences as collaborators and community members, harnessing their collective creativity and insights.

Invite Fans to Contribute Ideas: Allow fans to take part in the creative process by suggesting ideas for new content, contributing designs, or participating in polls and discussions.

Integrating fan-generated ideas into content creation can not only inspire creators but also increase audience engagement and strengthen the bond between creators and fans.

Strengthen Community Ties: By fostering a sense of belonging and creating opportunities for interaction, creators can transform passive followers into active and loyal fan communities.

This not only broadens the reach of the characters but also provides a continuous stream of new ideas and insights for creators.

-3. Navigate External Environmental Factors Wisely

In the Chinese digital landscape, creators must operate within strict government regulations and censorship policies. To succeed in such an environment, creators need to anticipate and adapt to these external constraints while staying attuned to evolving internet trends.

Self-Censorship and Content Strategies: Creators should proactively conduct self-censorship when producing content to avoid potential violations or platform restrictions. Being aware of sensitive topics and adjusting content accordingly can help prevent content from being flagged or its visibility reduced. While this may limit individual creativity and freedom of expression, it is a practical strategy for navigating such an environment.

8.4 Limitations and directions for further research

Every research has its constraints and limitations, which can be identified, criticised and opened up for discussion. Some of the limitations of this research have already been addressed briefly in previous chapters. However, there are some inherent limitations that need to be further explained.

To begin with, it is important to note that this research aimed to understand, explain, and describe character creation on social media from a bottom-up process, rather than seeking statistical generalisations. The literature on this subject was very limited, therefore the nature of this study is mainly exploratory and combines different areas of expertise. This research does not to assert to provide outcomes obtained from verification research or comparative study in nature. These findings are by no means exhaustive, and much work remains to be done in terms of mapping out this creative process. However, this exploration is still able to inform the

researchers and practitioners about important insights regarding this particular subject. It serves as a potential basis to further explore character production on social media on an individual level.

The research explored four case characters originating from social media (Aoda Cat, Fan & Bao, Yumi and Toby). Four characters were selected instead of fewer or more due to the possible uniqueness of only one or two cases within a field, whereas four were considered to have provided relatively ample insights on the social media character creation and development. Therefore, the researcher deemed additional characters unnecessary, though it is acknowledged that more cases could have enriched the amount of data. As discussed in section 4.4, it is worth noting that the selection of characters was based on theoretical purpose and also limited by the actual communication with different creators, resulting in some similarities among the chosen characters (all four characters are animal-based rather than based on humans or objects, and they share certain visual styles). Therefore these characters do not represent the most comprehensive types of characters on the Chinese internet, and the conclusions drawn may be only valid within a certain scope, such as animal characters. These results may only be partly transferable to other types of characters. However, it is important to reiterate here that although including more characters would undoubtedly diversify the data and information obtained, this study is more focused on exploring and understanding the creative process. The types of characters and visual diversity are not the major objectives. In the future, researchers are recommended to include a bigger variety of characters (e.g., characters based on human or inanimate objects or characters in more different artistic styles) to validate, contrast or expand the knowledge of this study.

Apart from the case characters, 10 key informants outside the cases were interviewed. While the case character creators offered first-hand and important knowledge into the character creation on social media, engaging external experts could yield a more comprehensive understanding of this. While inviting more external experts could provide additional insights, the interviews already conducted have sufficiently covered the research topic and subjects. The representativeness of the chosen experts ensures the depth and breadth of the study, allowing the results to reflect the core trends and issues in social media character creation. Considering the constraints of time and resources, the decision not to conduct further interviews was based on an assessment of the adequacy of the existing data. However, it would also be valuable to further expand the number of participants in the study. Gathering the insights and feedback

from more experts would allow us to expand on the findings and get a more in-depth knowledge of the issues.

The timeframe of this study also did not allow for a more elaborated sample to be collected or a more in-depth study to be conducted, resulting partly in the previously mentioned limitations. As suggested by Lee and Zoellner (2019), the research on media production is also hindered by the limited availability of resources, particularly time and funding. In the future, if time allows, it would be also beneficial to conduct longitudinal studies. Researchers could follow or collaborate with particular individual creator(s) over prolonged periods, to study the characters' development and the interaction of pertinent factors. By doing this, researchers can summarise the development and strategies of the creation at each time point, as well as assess how different factors influence the character's development and popularity over time. Furthermore, one can incorporate the derived conclusions and improvement strategies back into the next phase of creation and continue to evaluate their effects and continue doing this cycle.

Besides, any particular research approach has its limitations by default. This study is heavily based on interviews as the data collection method. Although these creators' and experts' thoughts and opinions offer first-hand knowledge to understand social media character creation, these insights are interpretative in nature and the following research analysis could also be considered subjective to a certain degree. Future research could combine some quantitative approaches and start from more data analysis to analyse strategies and work more objectively. To illustrate, designing surveys to collect data from creators about their character creation. This can include questions about their creative process, strategies used, target audience, and how they evaluate their own success, etc. Through online tools, this can reach a broad group of social media character creators and collect a substantial amount of data for analysis. As suggested by scholars by software studies, platforms offer their own research opportunities. Digital platforms can be 'both part of the methodology and the object of study' to explore how they 'format and formalize cultural, social and other relations' (Weltevrede, 2016, p. 15). To illustrate, the researchers could utilise the Application Programming Interfaces (API) of social media platforms to fetch relevant creative content and associated metrics (such as likes, shares, comments, etc.) in a structured way. By closely reading these data, it is possible to quantitatively understand which types of characters or creative strategies have gained more user interaction and recognition.

Furthermore, the empirically established conceptual framework is founded on several factors and their interrelations and interactions could be further examined and validated in future research. It is recognised that creating and developing characters on social media is complex and continually changing, which makes it challenging to clearly distinguish the specific factors and their interrelationships. Unknown additional factors may also play a role, and with continuous changes, some new factors may emerge and start to exert effects, which will require more future research efforts. For instance, future researchers or creators could also apply this suggested model to character creation practices to test the reliability of its various factors and discover whether there are other emerging factors. Besides, researchers could further develop this suggested model and explore it more by adapting it to different contexts, for example, by adjusting the central core creative part of the model while retaining the rest of the influencing factors, it seems possible to adapt this model for use in other content creation industries. Expand the models to specific brand situations and possibly other contexts. The model could also be further developed based on specific social networks, using examples and case studies from existing design campaigns.

This study focuses on character creation on Chinese social media platforms, partly because the researcher is more familiar with the social media ecosystem and socio-cultural context here. The primary platforms involved in the research are Weibo, Douyin, WeChat, and Red, which are also the platforms most commonly used by the case character creators. However, there are various other platforms in China, such as Bilibili, which mainly caters to fans of anime, comics, and games (ACG), and Kuaishou, which is known for its grassroots user base. Each of these platforms has its own unique features and user groups. Including such other platforms in the future could enrich the current framework with fresh perspectives. On top of this, it is possible to conduct further research into creators outside of China, exploring how they engage in character creation across the globe, such as on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, or X. As suggested by the findings, apart from the different degrees of government censorship regulation, different cultures and regions seem to have varying preferences and tendencies toward characters. Research and findings from different areas can be used to compare and synthesise with the experiences and strategies of these Chinese creators, enriching this body of knowledge.

Finally, the study briefly discussed the characteristics of these social media characters and the reasons they are liked by the audience, as well as how they differ from those celebrity characters made from media conglomerates. However, these insights are based on existing

literature and the opinions and experiences of experts. Future research could focus on the audience to delve deeper into what they consider to be good character design, why they are drawn to these individually created characters, and how they perceive the differences between these social media characters and celebrity characters. By better understanding the audience community, creators can better shape their character design and content creation.

In summary, social media character creation is an emerging and complex phenomenon that lacks adequate theoretical attention. To fully understand and explain it requires ongoing research and sustained follow-ups. Here many limitations of this study have been discussed and some potential future research directions are provided. Although this discussion only scratches the surface of potential avenues, it at least points out several promising directions to further explore this subject. Despite this, the researcher believes that the research is not compromised by its limitations in terms of the quality of the findings or its capacity to answer the research questions effectively. A notable strength of this study is its efficiency in addressing the research questions within a relatively short period of time. This study is an important step towards understanding the character creation on social media, its exploratory nature opens up many other valuable avenues for further scholarly inquiry. The researcher hopes that this study will inspire more exciting research into contemporary character creation and spark ideas for further research that have not yet been imagined.

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APPENDICES

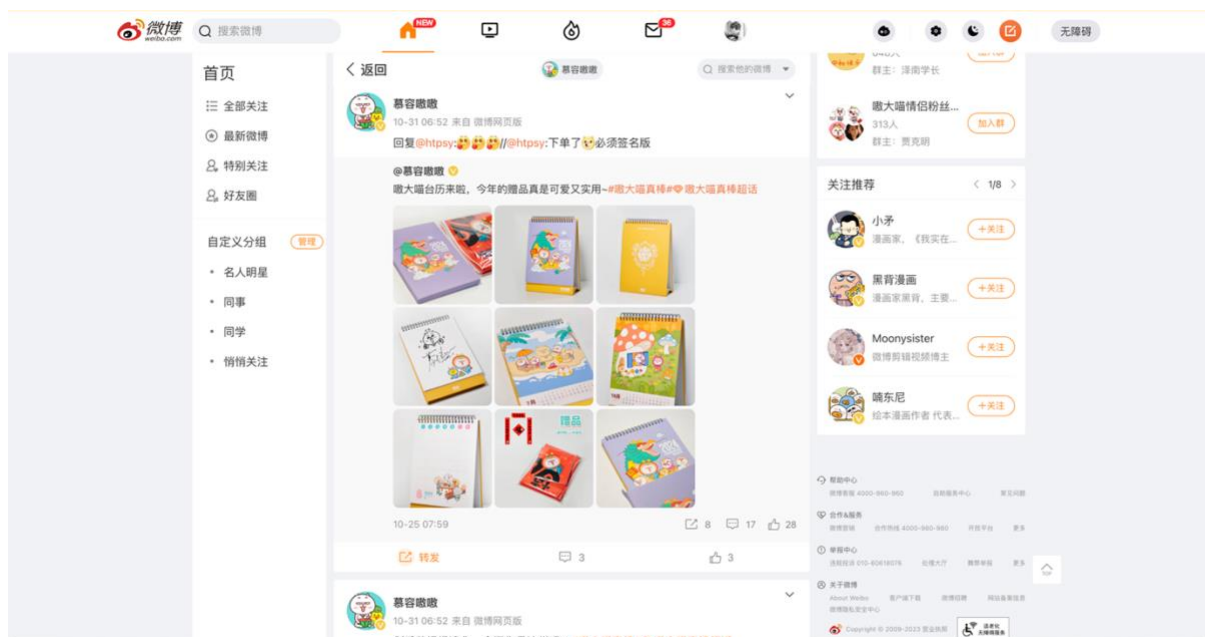
APPENDIX 1: Example of case characters' content

Case Character 1: Aoda Cat (嗷大喵), <https://weibo.com/murongaoao>

Screenshot from Aoda Cat' Weibo head page on 27 November 2023



Screenshot from Aoda Cat' Weibo feed on 31 October 2023



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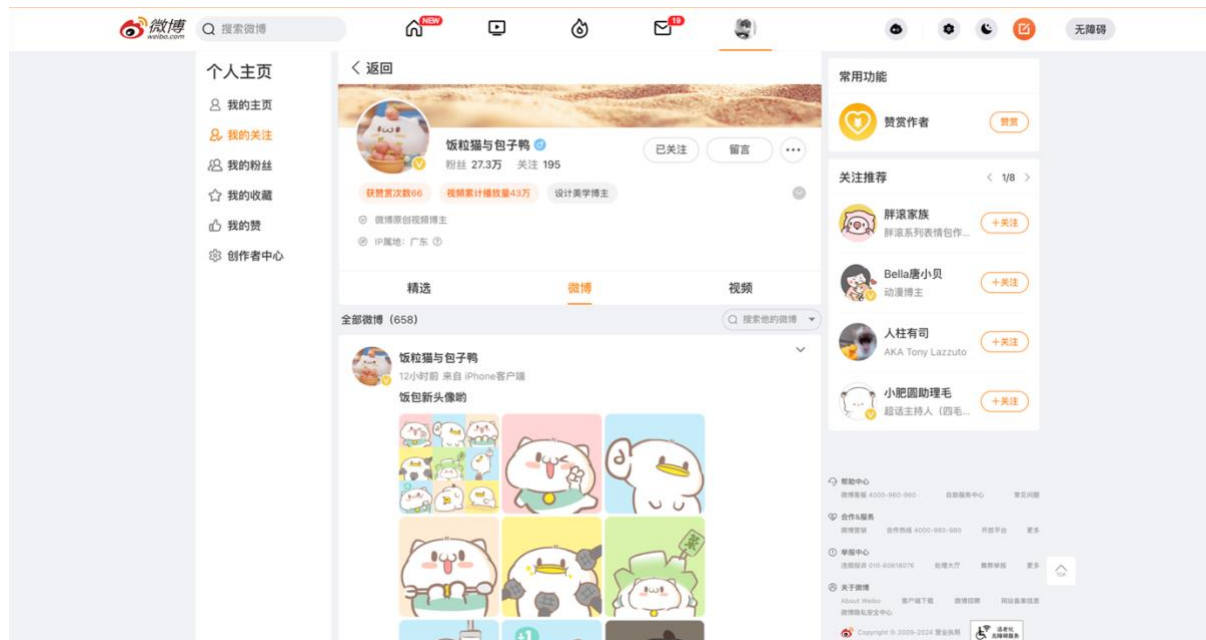
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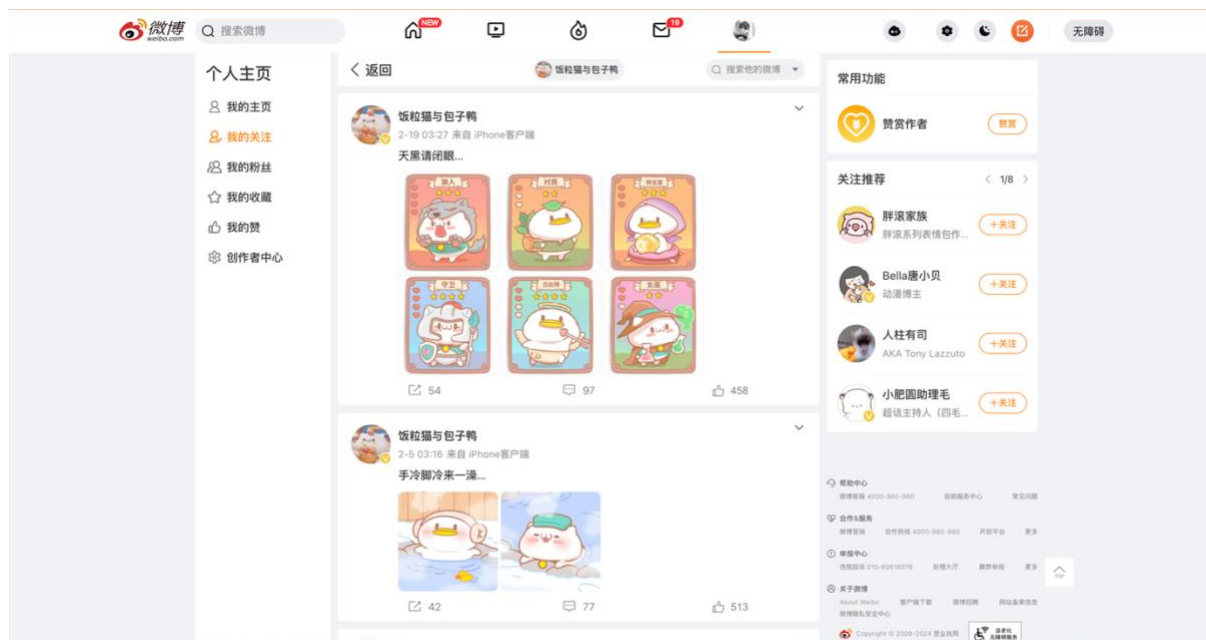
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Case Character 2: Fan & Bao (饭粒猫和包子鸭), <https://weibo.com/u/2797456760>

Screenshot from Fan & Bao' Weibo head page on 10 May 2024



Screenshot from Fan & Bao' Weibo feed on 19 February 2023



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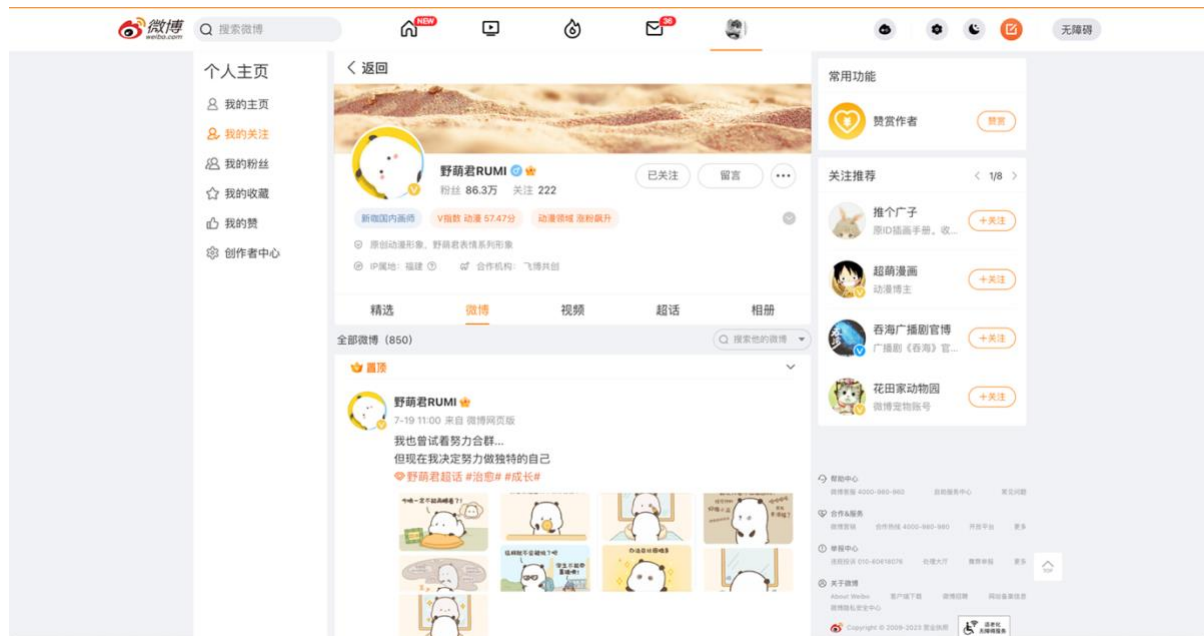
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Case Character 3: Rumi (野萌君 RUMI), <https://weibo.com/mengrumi>

Screenshot from Rumi's Weibo head page on 27 November 2023



Screenshot from Rumi's Weibo feed on 22 November 2023



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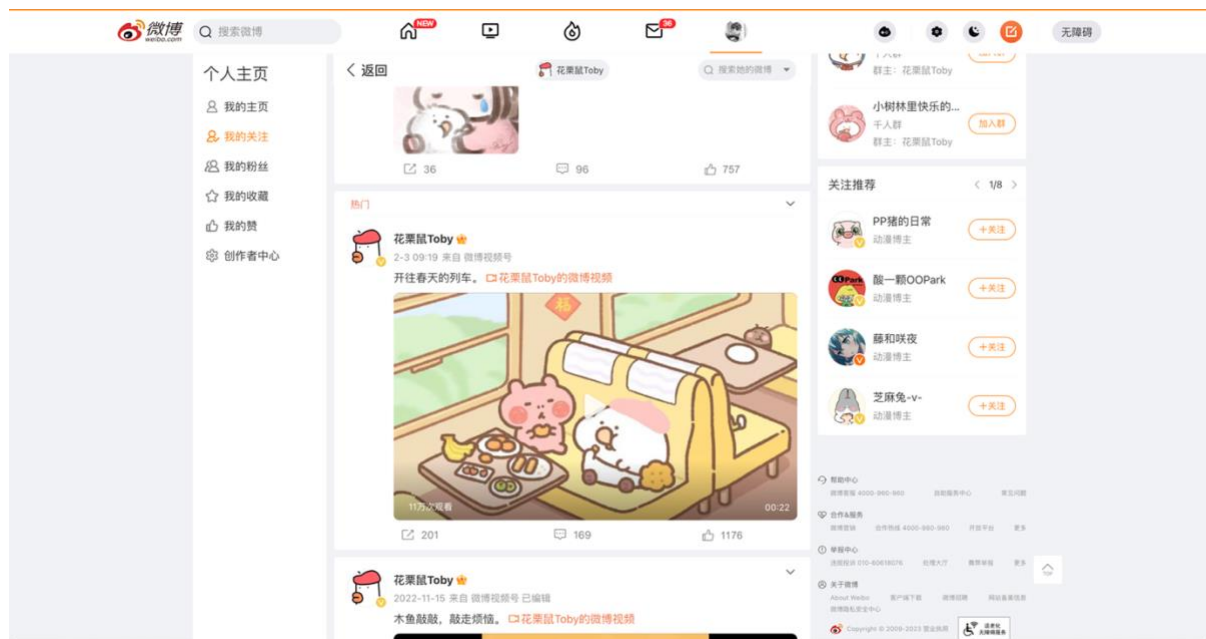
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Case Character 4: Toby (花栗鼠 Toby), <https://weibo.com/babychara>

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Screenshot from Toby's Weibo feed on 3 February 2023



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APPENDIX 2:List of interviewees

1 Case-character creators

Murongaoao (慕容嗷嗷) Creator of Aoda Cat

Chen Xiaotao (陈小桃) Creator of Rumi, <https://weibo.com/u/2962184681>

Hualishu (花果鼠) Creator of Toby, <https://weibo.com/u/7205521431>

2 External experts

External Experts	Role	Introduction
Li Mengke	Social Media Content Creator (Based in Guangzhou, China)	An independent content creator primarily produces content in the form of journaling, with a following of over 100,000+ fans on Red (小红书).
Zeng Zhou	Entrepreneur, Character Designer (Based in Chengdu, China)	Founder of Chengdu Qingshan Zhiyu Culture and Technology Co.,Ltd., creator of characters and collectables.
Apple (online alias)	Independent Artist (Based in Chengdu, China)	Independent digital artist now, formerly employed at NetEase Games with 11 years of industry experience.
Sun Qi	Senior Visual Designer (Based in Shanghai, China)	Senior visual designer in the TikTok creative team at Byte Dance, formerly worked at Tencent in the Musician Interaction Design Team, with lots of experience in designing social media apps.
Bobo (online alias)	Independent Illustrator (Based in London, UK)	A London based independent Illustrator. Her works mostly originate from her own perspective,

		with herself as the main character in her creations. She actively promotes her works on various social media platforms.
Juanfazi(卷发子) (online alias)	Social Media Content creator, illustrator (Based in Chongqing, China)	Illustrator with ten years of experience, currently employed at Socialab Chongqing, also a fashion content creator on Red.
Shiwu(十五) (online alias)	Character designer (Based in Chongqing, China)	Independent Brand IP designer and blind box designer. Works include the ‘Rhino Little Shiwu’ IP series and the ‘Savage Growth’ series of blind boxes.
Alex Kiesling	Character designer, illustrator and animation director (Based in New York, USA)	A Brooklyn based illustrator and animation director. His has done commission work for many notable brands and publications such as Google, Adobe, Apple, Robinhood, <i>The New York Times</i> , etc.
Mira Felicia Malhotra	Principal designer and founder of Studio Kohl(based in Mumbai, India)	The principal designer and founder of Studio Kohl, a boutique design house based in Mumbai. She also creates her own character illustrations and other forms of character works and shares them on her social media accounts, with 100K+followers on Instagram.
Lars Denicke	Co-founder of Pictoplasma (based in Berlin, Germany)	The co-founder of Pictoplasma, the world’s premier platform for contemporary character design and art which debuted in 2004 and is held on an annual basis.

APPENDIX 3:Information sheet

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH/PROJECT

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: **Character Creation and Promotion in Social Media Era China**

Student Lead: Danqing XU

Email address: d.xu0620201@arts.ac.uk

Dear Sir or Madam

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project. Before you decide to take part it is important that you understand the nature of the project and your involvement. Please read this information sheet carefully before giving your consent. You are welcome to discuss this with others; likewise, please ask me if you would like clarification or more information.

About the research project

Contemporary character creation is both exciting and ever-evolving. With the popularisation of advanced production methods (high-performance computers and graphic software) as well as the rise of social media, technology has democratised the production of characters beyond the privileges of studios and corporates to grassroots creators and individuals for creating and publishing.

China's vibrant digital landscape has seen the thriving of these social media characters in the last decade, as an increasing number of grassroots designers and creatives scramble to create and publish their characters on social media platforms. The successes of a series of self-authored characters who shot to fame attract more and more to this bottom-up process.

Despite this social-media-driven approach being widespread, there is little research on how these IP characters are created and how their development and marketing strategies differ from the ones created and developed via traditional media. Through

a series of case studies and key-informant interviews, my study explores the field of Chinese social media IP character development and introduces the topic into the academic context.

Why me?

I am inviting you to participate because I respect your expertise and contribution in this field. Interviewees include marketing and design professionals. I believe your experience and knowledge will assist me in compiling valuable information about the relatively undocumented understanding of IP characters in social media era.

If I agree to participate, what will I be required to do?

I would like to conduct an interview with you that will last approximately one hour. It will be scheduled at your convenience and will take place via an online platform. The interview will consist of a general discussion about the design and development of IP characters and the corresponding marketing and monetization strategies that may lead to more questions about your perspective and experience in the field, including related projects you have been involved in. The interview will be recorded.

What will happen to the information I provide?

The data from your interview will be confidential and solely accessed by me. The interview will be transcribed and information will be stored in a secure location on UAL's servers. Material from your interview may be discussed with my supervisors at University of the Arts London: Dr Ian Hague, my Director of Studies; and Dr Alessandra Vecchi, my Supervisor. No personal data will be kept on you, with the exception of contact details and job title for the duration of the project. At the completion of the research project, I will destroy any physical and electronic data files pertaining to your participation in the research.

Following your interview, you will be asked to select one of three levels of 'identification' on the attached consent form. During the course of the project, you are welcome to change what level of identification you are comfortable with, and I will double check with you before the project is published.

Intended results of the project

This research project will take form of a written doctoral thesis. I hope that its findings will contribute to the understanding of the logic and creation strategies of IP characters in the era of social media and to the broader field of cultural studies and marketing.

What are my rights as a participant?

- The right to withdraw from participation at any time
- The right to request that any recording cease
- The right to have any data withdrawn and destroyed, provided it can be reliably identified, and provided that so doing does not increase any risk to you
- The right to be de-identified in any photographs intended for public publication, before the point of publication
- The right to have any questions you have about the project answered within a reasonable timeframe

Whom should I contact if I have any questions?

If you have any concerns about the project or your participation in it, please contact me immediately. My contact information is provided above. You are also welcome to learn more about participants' rights by contacting the Research Office at: University of the Arts London, 1 Granary Square, King's Cross, London N1C 4AA; +44 (0) 207 514 9389; researchegrees@arts.ac.uk.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to working with you.

APPENDIX 4:Participant consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

You are being invited to take part in a research project by PhD Student XU Dan Qing from London College of Communication, University of the Arts London.

Please read the accompanying information sheet carefully before giving your consent. You are welcome to discuss this with others; likewise please ask if anything is unclear or if you would like more information.

Set forth below, please find the different aspects of the project for which your consent is sought:

Activity consents

I give my consent to be interviewed by the researcher XU Dan Qing to discuss the creation and marketing of social media IP characters, as outlined in the accompanying information sheet. I understand and have had explained to me any risks associated with this activity.

I wish to be identified in any publication or dissemination as follows (please tick one):

I may be identified by name and company or affiliation (where applicable) ____

I wish to be identified only generically (e.g. marketing manager at a Chengdu-based creative company) _____

I wish to be anonymous with no indication of company or affiliation (e.g. advertising marketing professional, key informant) _____

I acknowledge that:

- a) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied (unless follow-up is needed for safety).
- b) The project is for the purpose of research. It may not be of direct benefit to me.
- c) The privacy of the personal information I provide will be safeguarded and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law.
- d) The security of the research data will be protected during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published. Any information which will identify me will not be used, except in accordance with the level of identification I have indicated above.

All the collection and protection of data for this study is aligned with the UK's Data Protection Act 2018 and UK GDPR as well as GB/T 35273-2017 Information Technology – Personal Information Security Specification, the national standard on personal information protection in China.

Statement of consent

I hereby fully and freely consent to participation in the research project, which has been fully explained to me.

Participant's name (in block capitals):

Participant's signature and Date:

Researcher 's name (in block capitals):

Researcher's signature and Date:

Contact

If you have any enquires about the project or your participation in it, you can contact the researcher at d.xu@lcc.arts.ac.uk Should feel you need external advice you can contact the Research Office at the University of the Arts London, 1 Granary Square, King's Cross, London N1C 4AA; +44 (0) 207 514 9389; researchdegrees@arts.ac.uk.

Thank you for your participation and support of this research project!

APPENDIX 5: Questions for case character creators

Part 1: Background questions (Interviewee's background and identity)

1. Could you please introduce yourself briefly? (prompt: education, work experience/current character project)
2. Let's move on to this character you created, could you explain what brought you to creating the character on social media in the first place?
3. When you started to create and develop it, how do you see yourself? (identity: e.g. entrepreneur or artist?)

Part 2: Character creation

4. To start with the character's image, why does the character look like this? Where did you get the idea or inspiration?
5. From the contents we can see the character has a personality of ...(this varies among different characters), why does the character have this kind of personality? Where did you get the idea or inspiration?
6. You have talked about some contexts and inspirations for creating the character, could you elaborate more on how you created the character? (prompt: process/methodology for visual presentation, constructing personality or the context?)
7. Has your work been influenced by environmental factors? (prompt: giving example, cultural trends, regulations and laws?)
8. Is there anything in relation to character design you would like to add?

Part 3: Character development

9. What do you do once you have created the image and personality of the character? Do you keep developing or updating your character after the creation?
10. How do you keep developing your character (content)? (prompt: strategies/ the origin of ideas and inspirations? 'What drives the continual development of the character?'

11. Which social media platform(s) are you using (platform name(s))? Why do you use it/them? (prompt: does the affordance/format of the platform suit your content? / does this particular platform function better than others?)

12. Do you interact with your followers/users? If so, how?

13. What are the role(s) of followers or users in this process? (character development) (prompt: users could take on more than one role in this process: offer suggestion/ request/ engage in character world construction...)

14. Is there anything else in relation to character development you want to talk about?

Part 4: Character promotion

15. Apart from continuing to produce character content, do you promote or market your character at the same time?

16. How do you promote or market your character? (prompt: what strategies you use to help the content circulate? do you use other platforms to advertise at the same time...)

17. What is the role of social media platforms in this process? How does it affect your promotion (including affordance, and algorithm, etc.)?

18. Is there anything else in relation to character promotion you want to talk about?

Part 5: Reflections

19. What is the most **challenging** part/best part of **this approach** to character creation? (prompt: creation/development/promotion)

20. Nowadays in China it becomes a trend that grassroots artists/designers create their own characters and content on social media and expect they could shot to fame; these characters seem to live in parallel with those characters from big publication and titles. **Why** do you think this is happening? What do you think of the difference between **grassroots** and **big company** characters? (prompt: in terms of artistic style/character personality/reception/economic potential...)

21. That's all I would like to ask in this interview, is there anything else you want to add?

APPENDIX 6: Questions for external experts

1. We can see that with the rise of social media, the general public and every talented individual have had the opportunity to participate in the cultural production and develop their character IPs. What do you think of this line of practice?
2. What do you think is the key aspect of this kind of character creation?
3. Do you think there are any particular aspects to pay extra attention to when designing these social media characters in terms of their image and personality?
4. What do you think of these light content forms, like stickers, webtoons
5. How should they produce attractive and self-propagating content?
6. What do you think the role of audience or followers play in this practice?
7. What do you think of the diagram (conceptual framework) I have shown to you? Do you think it needs any modifications? Are there any additions or deletions that need to be made?
8. Do you think there are any differences between characters created in this way and those created by media conglomerates and big studios like Marvel and Disney?
9. Do you have any suggestions for these characters' future development?

APPENDIX 7: Example of transcribed interviews

The aim of this appendix is to provide a sample of the interview texts and demonstrate how the researcher has used the interview content to construct the case studies and develop the framework proposed. This example transcript presents the interview with the case character Aoda Cat's creator Murongaoao (慕容嗷嗷). This was selected to represent all interview texts and some of the data included are quoted in the descriptions of the case studies (text in bold). Some parts of the original text have been edited, modified, and omitted for better readability and fluency. In the interview text, R indicates the researcher, M indicates the creator Murongaoao and the other names mentioned have been replaced by A, B and C for confidentiality reasons.

R: First of all, thank you very much for your willingness to participate in this academic research, Uncle Ao. Could you please start by a brief self-introduction? You can simply talk about your background, such as your education, work experience, or what your situation was like before creating Aoda Cat.

M: Hello, Danqing. I entered university in 2004, majoring in industrial design. After graduation, I joined a company founded by my classmates and started working as a designer. Initially, I was mainly involved in graphic design and designing stickers. However, around 2009 or 2010, our company relocated to Beijing. It was from there that I began to explore creating comics. After creating some stickers alongside the comics, a few years later, around 2013, I left the company and started independent creative work. I began creating Aoda Cat, producing webtoons, and stickers, and publishing books featuring Aoda Cat, which continues to this day.

After leaving my previous company, I wanted to create a new character. **Based on past experience, then, I feel the image of this animal has no gender difference. Although it is given a male gender by default, you can say it is a girl as well. So first of all, this [image] can be universal for boys as well as girls, [and] its reception, the scope of its audience will be broader. And this image, must be Jian-meng, so that people will like him.** Basically, I started creating the image of Aoda Cat by establishing these two points.

At that time, the most important platforms were basically instant messaging platforms like QQ and later WeChat. These were very important platforms where these stickers could be widely disseminated and liked by the public. At the same time, I was also doing webtoon creation. **The creation of webtoons makes the character more solid. [Webtoons] give him some stories, endow this image with more stories, it fleshes out this image.** So basically, these two points, stickers and webtoons, have been produced consistently.

R: Have you created the content of Aoda Cat all by yourself, or do you have partners?

M: All of it is done by myself. The webtoon's story, graphic, and stickers, are basically all done by me alone.

R: When you are creating and developing Aoda Cat, how do you see yourself in terms of your identity? Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur or an artist?

M: [Please note Murongaoao mistakenly interprets ‘entrepreneur’(创业者, chuangyezhe) as ‘creative’(创意者, chuangyizhe). These two words sound similar in Mandarin Chinese.] The creative may not necessarily be an artist, but the artist is definitely a creative, although the latter might include the former in some cases. During the process, I didn't consciously make a clear distinction between these identities. Personally, I might lean more towards being an artist. Because, after all, there are so many fans, and I do a lot of things. Unlike in the past when I was purely creative without fans, I may have fewer concerns. But as an artist, you also have to consider many things, such as the impact of your work and whether some things should be done on a larger scale, whether it will be too controversial for fans or even backfires, and so on, yes.

R: Agreed, in the era of social media, all creators more or less have to face this issue. So, I want to delve a bit deeper into the character itself. For example, I'm curious about how the name Aoda Cat came about. Also, regarding the image of this character, as you mentioned earlier, you wanted him to have a mischievous personality, so perhaps that's why he has such an image? Or, you could also say, why give him such a personality?

M: Murongaoao was actually a nickname I came up with when I first started using QQ, and I've been using it ever since. The name originated from my early days using QQ, where 'aoao' (嗷嗷) is a Northeastern Chinese expression that roughly translates to 'very, very.' Since I'm from Northeast China, 'aoao' is a common adverb in our dialect, aoao great!(嗷嗷棒!) Aoao good!(嗷嗷好!) As for 'Murong' (慕容), it gives off a classical and martial arts vibe. So, combining the two, it creates a blend of martial arts and Northeastern culture, which I found interesting.

Speaking of Aoda Cat himself, the jian-meng (贱萌) personality setup, well, **above all, I like things that are jian-meng.** Because stickers are a way to convey emotions, there are many things you can't express in person with a jian-meng attitude. But online, you can easily amplify the jian-meng inside your heart, that kind of emotion, that kind of personality. Because we can see that many people in real life are more reserved, more serious, and more normal. But online, they may behave very lively, without so many constraints.

Overall, I believe that being jian-meng is something universal, something everyone should have to some extent. It's a personality trait that can be conveyed through stickers, and it's quite popular because it's relatable. People feel that they can express their emotions accurately, but in reality, they wouldn't necessarily act that way, right? And Combined with this era's instant messaging medium, so I designed a character with this personality trait. With this character's personality and **in fact the cat's looking, gives it a very sneaky [feel], capable of accommodating different kinds of complex characteristics.**

R: Besides Aoda Cat, I see that you have created a series of characters including Wang Defu, Xiong Xiao'er, Mu Xiaotu, etc., which seems to gradually form a big family or character universe. So, when you design these characters, do you have a set of methods or processes? Also, why design so many characters? Because I noticed that you later specifically designed stickers for characters like Mu Xiaotu and Ao Xiaohu. Of course, you might say you just enjoy doing this, but why not focus entirely on Aoda Cat as a character?

M: Creating other characters, **mainly because sometimes the character Aoda Cat needs other characters to contrast [with], in order to bring it out, to make it more solid. In other word, when designing other characters, the main focus is *differentiation, that is,***

the differentiation of personality between Aoda Cat and other characters. For example, Aoda Cat is a neurotic character. No, for example, Aoda Cat is a funny character, lazy and jian-meng. So, Mu Xiaotu is a particularly neurotic character, but without much intelligence. However, Wang Defu is a very clever bookworm, but may be slightly serious. And Xiong Xiao'er might be an innocent, somewhat naive character. Each character has their own distinct personality traits.

Designing other characters actually has two main reasons. One is, as I mentioned earlier, both webtoons and stickers require other characters to complement and contrast. Because other characters have different personalities, they can better highlight the personality of Aoda Cat, right? Another point is that I also want to try different character personalities in my creation because many facial expressions and actions cannot be performed by Aoda Cat. For example, a particularly cute expression or many neurotic aspects might be more suitable for other characters. It's mainly based on these two points.

R: Understood, you explained it very clearly. So, what do you think is the most important aspect visually or personality-wise for characters created by independent designers or creators like yourself? Or, what do you emphasise the most when you're creating? Since these characters are mainly circulated on social media, and they differ from those created by large companies like Disney or Marvel, not only visually but also in other aspects, what do you think is the most crucial element?

M: For me doing stickers, compared to large companies that focus on story-driven IP, my work like Aoda Cat or his family, primarily revolves around individual IP images or a small group of characters, which is entirely different in form. What do I think is the most important aspect? It's about **to excavate the relatable feeling and emotion among the people, or in other words the sympathy.** For example, why does everyone like it? Like the stickers I create, each set has expressions like laughter or crying because these are the types of emotions people express the most in their daily lives.

Of course, different characters may have varying personalities, but the overall principle, as I see it, remains consistent— that is, they still need to be close to everyday life, **to stay close to life, close to us, and to rely on the everyday lives and thoughts of people in this internet era. This is the starting point of my creation, and I think it is also the most important method.**

R: You've actually created quite a variety of content around this character, including some narrative webtoons, short videos, and even stickers, wallpapers, among others. For example, these webtoons often tell interesting stories. Where do you typically draw inspiration from for them? Also, is there an underlying logic or a larger narrative structure connecting these stories? Another aspect I'm personally interested in is, since Aoda Cat was created in 2013, how did you manage to publish a physical book so quickly in 2014? Was there already some prior connection with the publishing house? Additionally, why haven't there been any new books released after the two initial ones? Because I've noticed many fans are also asking why there haven't been any new books.

M: To answer the first question, regarding the internal logic of those webtoons, it's actually similar to creating stickers. It's all about tapping into the relatable emotions and experiences of people in this internet age. We seek to find common ground, to resonate with others, because only then can we truly connect. So, the basic logic behind it is finding that common ground, staying close to real-life experiences, so that everyone can relate. As for what to draw, there isn't a specific theme. Sometimes, I run across something in daily life, jot it down, and then draw it out. That's basically how it works.

The second question is about the books. I didn't have any reserves before. I started drawing in 2014, and concentrated on it for a period of time. After about three months, the script, drafts, and comics were created, and then the books were published. After publishing two books in total, there were no further publications. What was the main reason for this? **First the print books have indeed waned, on a downhill trend. And another point, is that the creative cycle [for the print book] is too long, [and] this prolonged cycle causes serious delays to my other creative works.**

R: I've compiled all your posted works on Weibo and plotted them on a timeline. I noticed that in the early stage, the updates for 'Aoda Cat is Great' webtoons were quite frequent, but after 2018, they noticeably decreased. However, the production of stickers has consistently remained stable. What is the reason behind this?

M: This change is based on the actual situation, **everything should be based on reality**. Before 2018, Weibo was experiencing a significant upward trend, and creators could receive a lot of advertising and promotion opportunities by maintaining a certain frequency of creation. However, after that, Weibo's revenue potential decreased due to platform limitations and

the emergence of advertising from Weibo itself and other media platforms, which weakened the income generated from webtoon creation on Weibo.

However, stickers have consistently remained a stable way to promote characters, later WeChat introduced the paid stickers, they have consistently provided a stable level of exposure and income. Therefore, the main reason for the change around 2018 is whether it's primarily due to practical considerations and changes in the actual situation, which led to adjustments in strategy.

R: Because you've created numerous stickers and seem to excel in this area, how do you perceive emojis, which have only become popular as a content form with the rise of social media and instant messaging apps in the past decade or so?

M: My view on stickers is that they used to be a subculture, something mainly young people played around with. Initially, during the early days of the internet, instant messaging apps existed, but they weren't as widespread as they are now in the era of mobile internet, when almost everyone can access the internet. As instant messaging apps became ubiquitous, stickers emerged as a way to express emotions. **Sticker is a very unique existence. It is neither as boring and dry as texts nor easily getting embarrassed as in face-to-face communication. So it is an expression of emotion, to express the tacit emotion, so that it can play an important role during communication.** For instance, many people use stickers during chats to alleviate very awkward situations or to express very subtle emotions. You know, like when two people are angry or upset, and then they use stickers to convey very delicate nuances that language, text, or even face-to-face communication cannot express. So, I think stickers are a very unique form of expression.

R: How have you managed to sustain your creativity over so many years? Do you feel your work is influenced by the environment?

M: The first question is about how to maintain high productivity in creativity. It mainly involves staying close to life, understanding life more, feeling life more, and primarily learning and keeping up with the times. Whenever new things emerge, such as new trends,

new slang, or new methods of expression, I make sure to learn them. Thus, maintaining a high frequency of creativity and innovation largely depends on continuous learning.

So, regarding whether external pressure has a significant impact, it's actually not too much of a concern. The main factor lies within oneself, in maintaining the drive and passion for creativity. As for external pressures, such as economic factors or expanding exposure to reach more people, they mainly revolve around practical matters like increasing visibility for potential licensing opportunities. However, these external pressures don't significantly affect the creative process itself.

R: Let's talk about social media because the rise of these new platforms has given many people, including talented individuals, the opportunity to participate in the cultural industry. How do you see social media playing a role in your creative process?

M: Social media is definitely a very important platform for me. Not only platforms like Weibo, but also in the early days, I used forums like Tianya (天涯) and Mop (猫扑) to share my comics. From Tianya and Mop forums to the rise of Weibo, blogs, WeChat, and now short videos, I believe they all serve as crucial mediums for disseminating our IP. As times change, the forms may vary, but as long as there is interest in cultural images and IP consumption, these platforms remain invaluable for exposure and engagement. Currently, the main focus depends on the platform. For instance, on WeChat's sticker gallery, I upload sticker packs. On WeChat public accounts and Weibo, I promote webtoons or profiles. On short video platforms like WeChat's Video Account and Douyin, I primarily create short videos. It's all about tailoring the content format to fit the unique characteristics of each platform.

R: Could you briefly comment on the differences or advantages of these platforms?

M: Like the WeChat sticker gallery, it mainly uploads sticker packs for customers to download and use during chats. Whereas platforms like Weibo and WeChat official accounts primarily feature articles, webtoons, and images. As for short video platforms, they focus on short videos. So, the differences between these platforms are quite apparent.

R: You currently have around 640,000 followers on Weibo. How long did it take for you to reach this level, and have you noticed any particular stages where the growth of your followers was faster? Also, I've noticed that you interact a lot with your followers on Weibo, sometimes actively seeking their opinions. How do you perceive the role of these followers in the overall growth of Aoda Cat, and what is your perspective on your relationship with them?

M: **The increase of followers on Weibo, is mainly due to making webtoons in the past few years. Later as the updates [of the webtoons] slumped, the growth also slowed.** My relationship with my followers is actually one of mutual growth. I believe that many things they feedback to me, because a lot of what I create is based on my personal feelings. However, what they see might be perceived differently, perhaps they think something is better and can be further developed in the future. On the other hand, they may also offer suggestions or opinions, which I generally consider and often adopt.

R: Besides continuing to create better content, what methods do you primarily use to promote or advertise your characters now? Because you mentioned the issue of exposure just now, increasing the number of followers is actually a very important task for creators on social media.

M: Following the IP as before, it's just that if there are new channels, we may explore new channels, if new platforms emerge, we explore new platforms, it is to constantly learn and **keep up with the times and keep up with the changes in technology and society.**

R: I noticed that you often interact with other creators like A, B, C on Weibo, whom you're presumably familiar with. Do you have any agreements on this with them? I'd like to know more. Also, if we're talking specifically about promoting or advertising the characters, do you have anything else you'd like to mention? Or what do you think is the most important aspect?

M: [These interactions] are in the past now. Back then, we helped each other increase exposure, **which was a win-win approach**. However, now with the decline of platforms like Weibo, such collaborations have become rare.

The most important thing is to focus on our originality and create works that resonate with the characteristics of this era. Other things are not as important. As for those big companies that spend money on promotion, **might not be feasible for us, that's something we might not be able to achieve, so I think the most important thing is always our product. It will always be like this; content is king at all times. Only in this way can you stand firm and go far in this market.**

The new means are actually like this: for example, originally it was only possible on forums, then new platforms emerged, blogs, Weibo became popular, and then people moved to Weibo, and WeChat. Then WeChat public accounts became popular, followed by the rise of WeChat stickers, and then short videos became popular. **In other words, following the trend of the times, [find] which platforms can help spread this image, and then use those platforms, adapt to them, and capture those platforms.**

R: Can you briefly talk about how you generate income from character creation?

M: Mainly, the income comes from paid stickers, stickers revenue, some advertising promotions, and some commercial licensing. Commercial licensing mainly includes things like mall decorations, as well as the use of our images on some product packaging or promotional materials for products.

R: Then I'd like to understand, for example, with your current number of followers and the products you're creating, how do you feel about your income? You don't need to give me any specific numbers, I just want to understand this aspect of a creator's life.

M: Well, I should consider myself relatively fortunate. I rose up during that wave, and perhaps my product has some unique features that appeal to the public, so in my opinion, I'm doing okay. I'm fairly satisfied with my current life situation. Although I'm not in a state of great wealth, my daily life is still quite decent. But for the majority of practitioners, it's like this. Basically, in every industry, I acknowledge the existence of the 80/20 rule. Currently, I

might belong to that top 20%, but most practitioners are probably doing this part-time. I'm just saying I'm doing okay, while for most practitioners, they might be a bit worse off.

R: Ok, thank you. Finally, I have a few more comprehensive questions. This year should mark the tenth year of Aod Cat's existence. So, throughout this journey, what do you feel has been the most challenging aspect of character creation or entrepreneurship? What do you find most difficult? Or, are there any difficulties you're facing currently?

M: For companies or individuals engaged in IP creation like us, there are basically two main challenges: one is the bottleneck in creativity, that is, how to create something that the public will like; the other is the economic aspect, namely monetisation. If you say you don't have pressure in these two aspects, then it's definitely not true. However, I believe that creatively, it's about **constantly absorbing new knowledge, keep learning**, and economically if you can maintain the originality of your work and do good promotion, I think monetisation is still achievable.

R: So, what do you think is the best aspect or the most worthwhile aspect of this process?

M: **I think the best thing during this process is that I can realise my value by utilising my talents in my work and gaining recognition from the mass. I feel this manifests the individual value, which is the most important and satisfying aspect, followed by the ability to support myself and my family through doing what I love and what the public enjoys. These two points are basically the most important.**

R: So, one last thing is, at the beginning, we also mentioned that you're definitely first and foremost an artist, but on the other hand, you're also an entrepreneur, right? As a creator and a fan, including this environment, this trend, the relationship is actually quite subtle. How do you balance this relationship between artistic expression and economic benefits?

M: In my creative process, of course, I consider the fact that what I create is inherently commercial. However, because my personal style is quite strong, there are certainly things I want to create for myself. Yet, I am also aware that some of these things may not be easily

understood or appreciated by many people, so I might consider removing them. Additionally, the most important thing for me in the creative process is to first satisfy myself. If I just imitate others, or if I try to anticipate what others might like but I'm not satisfied with the result myself, then I can't accept it. I have to satisfy myself first, and I believe that if I am satisfied, then the public will be too.

R: And my final question is, do you feel that the characters you create coexist with those from major studios and companies like Disney and Marvel? Do they each occupy their own market or have their own audience? From your perspective, what are the differences between the independently created characters like yours and the big IP characters from major companies?

M: I think there is a difference, from my perspective, the biggest difference **lies in the degree to which individual vision is emphasised. For example, the characters I created, as well as those created by most sticker artists, have a strong personal style and unique characteristics. If a different artist were to create the same character, it might not have the same flavour or style.** The creations of large companies are developed within highly mature commercial mechanisms and managed by entire creative teams. They primarily focus on storytelling, and the characters they produce are just part of that narrative. While these characters have their own distinctive traits, they lack the individual uniqueness associated with personal creations. These characters are normally designed towards a broader audience community. Essentially, as long as the team controls the character's personality configuration, they can be created by the entire team. I think this is one of the key differences.

R: Alright, I've finished asking my questions. Thank you very much for your time. From your perspective, is there anything else you would like to add?

M: No problem at all. There's nothing else I need to add. Feel free to reach out to me if you have any further questions.