Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.34416

Balancing Tradition and Youth-Oriented Narratives in Chinese Time-Honored Brands—A Comparative Study of Three Classic Brands

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of the "Guochao" culture (national trend boom) and digital communication, resolving the tension between inheriting cultural heritage and pursuing youth-oriented development has become the core issue for the sustainable growth of time-honored brands. Taking narrative theory as the core framework, this study integrates brand revitalization, brand authenticity, and intergenerational communication, and uses Beijing Tongrentang, Yunnan Baiyao, and Shanghai White Rabbit as case samples to systematically analyze the internal contradictions, tension structure, and dynamic balance logic of the "old-new" narratives of time-honored brands. The findings show that the narrative balance of time-honored brands is not a static compromise, but a dynamic adjustment process anchored by core values, shaped by modern expression, and oriented to intergenerational adaptation. The theoretical framework and practical paths constructed in this paper can provide solid theoretical support and a feasible reference for the modern transformation of time-honored brands and other traditional cultural commercial carriers.

Keywords: time-honored brands, narrative balance, intergenerational communication, brand authenticity, brand revitalization.

1. Introduction

As living carriers of China's industrial and commercial history and culture, Chinese time-honored brands carry profound collective memory and cultural identity. According to statistics from the Ministry of Commerce, by 2025, the number of officially recognized Chinese time-honored enterprises has exceeded 1,400, but their overall operation shows significant differentiation. Only 10% of enterprises achieve large-scale operation and stable profitability, 40% are in a break-even state, nearly half are under operating pressure, and some brands have become stagnant with only a name but no market products. At present, the transformation of time-honored brands generally falls into the dual dilemma of "conservative solidification" and "radical renewal". On the one hand, radical innovation easily leads to the dissolution of brand authenticity and triggers doubts about "losing traditions"; on the other hand, sticking to traditional narratives makes it difficult to break through intergenerational circles and fall into the "museumization" dilemma. How to establish a balance between inheritance and innovation through narrative strategies has become an important

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proposition related to the survival and development of time-honored brands. Based on brand narrative theory, this paper integrates brand revitalization, brand authenticity, and intergenerational communication to build an analysis framework for the "old and new narrative balance" of time-honored brands. Through in-depth analysis and comparative study of three typical cases, it reveals the internal mechanism of narrative balance and provides theoretical reference and practical schemes for the modern transformation of traditional time-honored brands.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural value and inheritance dilemma of time-honored brands

Early research on time-honored brands mostly focused on cultural heritage protection, emphasizing their living inheritance attributes, historical value, and cultural symbolic significance. Scholars generally hold that the brand trust assets accumulated over a long period by time-honored brands constitute their core competitive advantages [1]. Against the backdrop of rapid iteration in the consumer market, some time-honored brands strive actively for innovation yet lose their original brand characteristics. They fail to win favor among younger consumers while also alienating middle-aged and elderly customers, leading to increasingly prominent development bottlenecks [2]. Existing studies agree that the inheritance of time-honored brands should not be a simple copy of historical forms, but a creative transformation and innovative development in the contemporary context [3]. However, existing results lack a systematic sorting of risks such as cultural value loss, brand meaning dilution, and vague identity positioning, and have not clarified the logic of inheritance, inheritance methods, and the connection between inheritance and innovation boundaries.

2.2. Brand revitalization theory and youth-oriented practice

Brand revitalization theory aims to awaken the market vitality of declining brands and reshape brand value identity through systematic strategic adjustment, breaking the deadlock of brand solidification from product upgrading, image innovation, and communication iteration [4]. Current studies on time-honored brands mostly focus on revitalization approaches, including cross-border co-branding and digital short-video marketing [5, 6]. Existing studies have obvious limitations: they overemphasize short-term traffic popularity and communication data, ignoring the continuity and long-term value accumulation of brand historical identity; meanwhile, they fall into the cognitive misunderstanding of "innovation is omnipotent", failing to face up to the natural conflict between brand youth-oriented revitalization and adherence to authenticity. Excessive trendy transformation easily weakens consumers' perception of the original characteristics of time-honored brands, which is particularly prominent in the transformation process.

2.3. Brand authenticity theory: the core basis of inheritance

Brand authenticity theory focuses on consumers' subjective perception of the originality, historical inheritance, and unique scarcity of brands. The essence is that brands adhere to historical original aspirations, core techniques, and original value commitments [7]. Authenticity is the core intangible asset that distinguishes time-honored brands from emerging Internet-famous brands, but existing studies have not effectively solved the collaborative problem between adhering to authenticity and

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youth-oriented innovation, lacking a theoretical analysis framework for dynamic adaptation and organic unity of the two.

2.4. Intergenerational communication and differences in audience cognition

Intergenerational communication theory takes the differences in values, information receiving habits, and consumption preferences of different age groups as the research core. Generation Z pursues greater fun, social communication value, and self-expression in consumption, and tends to regard time-honored brands as vehicles for trendy styling and social check-ins [8]. Intergenerational cognitive differences directly lead to the mismatch between brand narrative supply and audience demand [9]. However, most existing studies focus on communication strategies for young groups alone, lacking a balanced perspective taking both generations into account, making it difficult for brands to balance tradition and innovation effectively.

2.5. Brand narrative and communication strategies

Brand narrative takes storytelling expression as the carrier to build emotional bonds and value consensus between brands and consumers, which is an important path for cultural transmission and image building of time-honored brands. In recent years, academia has gradually introduced narrative theory into the research of time-honored brands, putting forward core ideas such as dual-line narratives of history and contemporary times [10, 11]. However, existing studies still have obvious gaps: first, they fail to deeply integrate narrative theory with brand revitalization, brand authenticity, and intergenerational communication, lacking an overall integrated analysis framework; second, they ignore the transfer of narrative discourse power in the new media environment, and how to achieve controllable content co-creation has become an important unsolved issue.

3. Theoretical framework: tension and balance of "old and new" narratives of time-honored brands

3.1. Integration of core theories

This paper takes narrative theory as the hub to connect the three basic theories: first, narrative balance is connected with brand revitalization theory, taking core inheritance as the foundation and innovative revitalization as the means to achieve innovation without losing authenticity and renewal without losing heritage; second, narrative balance is connected with brand authenticity theory, transforming static adherence to authenticity into dynamic identity anchors, with constant core values and moderate innovation in expression forms, communication scenarios and product forms; third, narrative balance is connected with intergenerational communication theory, breaking single audience positioning and building layered narratives according to intergenerational cognitive differences.

3.2. Three tensions of "old and new" narratives

3.2.1. Temporal tension

Brand narrative needs to establish a meaningful connection between the vertical depth of historical accumulation and the practical relevance of contemporary life. Historical heritage is the source of authoritative endorsement and trust assets of time-honored brands, but excessive indulgence in

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.34416

historical narratives easily falls into nostalgic solidification and is separated from the living context of contemporary young people; deliberately weakening historical inheritance will lose the unique recognition of time-honored brands and become ordinary commercial brands.

3.2.2. Value tension

There is an internal game between adhering to brand authenticity and market-oriented innovative practices. Brand authenticity requires adhering to traditional techniques, core formulas, and cultural original aspirations, which is the foundation of time-honored brands; market youth-oriented innovation requires breaking the inherent business model, iterating products and communication methods, and the two have natural conflicts in strategic focus, resource allocation, and expression forms, which is the core internal contradiction in the transformation of time-honored brands.

3.2.3. Audience tension

Intergenerational cognitive barriers form differences in narrative acceptance. According to the 2023 survey data of China Brand Research Institute, 65.2% of elderly audiences expect time-honored brands to maintain their traditional original appearance and reject excessive commercial transformation, while 78.9% of Generation Z hope that time-honored brands will make bold breakthroughs and keep up with the trend. The distinct opposition of value expectations between the two generations directly increases the difficulty of brand narrative balance [12].

3.3. Three mechanisms of narrative balance

3.3.1. Identity anchor

Establish the core value symbols that brands cannot compromise as the cornerstone of all narrative activities, corresponding to the objective authenticity of the brand. For example, Tongrentang's ancestral motto of "Cultivating benevolence and morality, benefiting the world and nourishing life", Yunnan Baiyao's confidential formula and core hemostatic effect, White Rabbit's classic milk fragrance, and blue-and-white visual symbols all have a sense of historical profundity, emotional cohesion, and unique recognition.

3.3.2. Communication flexibility

Carry out modular and expandable modern expression around identity anchors to meet the needs of brand revitalization and innovation. Flexibly innovate in narrative language, media carriers, consumption scenarios, and product forms, transform traditional cultural symbols into content that young people can perceive, consume, and spread, to keep the core but not the form.

3.3.3. Crisis resilience

When narrative imbalance triggers public controversies, the brand has the ability to respond quickly, clarify meanings, and repair narratives. Relying on long-term accumulated brand trust, smooth diversified communication channels, and flexible strategy adjustment mechanisms, avoid the escalation of local disputes into a comprehensive brand trust crisis.

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3.4. New characteristics of the digital narrative environment

Social media and algorithm recommendation mechanisms have completely reshaped the communication logic of brand narratives of time-honored brands, presenting three new characteristics: first, the diversification of narrative subjects, ordinary consumers participate in narrative co-construction through comments, secondary creation and word-of-mouth sharing, and brands no longer have absolute discourse power; second, the fragmentation of narrative content, short videos and hot search information streams compress users' attention, and brands need to continuously produce lightweight content to maintain popularity, which easily leads to superficial and fragmented narratives; third, the increased risk of contextual misreading, fragmented communication separated from the original cultural context easily triggers one-sided interpretation and negative association of audiences, impacting the stability of brand narratives.

4. Research design

4.1. Case selection

This paper selects three time-honored brands, Beijing Tongrentang, Yunnan Baiyao, and Shanghai White Rabbit, as research cases. The selection basis is as follows: first, industry representativeness, belonging to three mainstream time-honored tracks of traditional Chinese medicine, daily chemical health and leisure food, covering different business characteristics; second, transformation typicality, the three brands have systematically promoted youth-oriented strategies in the past five years with obvious different paths, which have horizontal comparative research value; third, controversy typicality, all have triggered online public opinion controversies due to the imbalance of old and new narratives, and the process of narrative adjustment and balance can be directly observed; fourth, data availability, corporate annual reports, social responsibility reports, brand white papers and industry public opinion data are open and complete, meeting the requirements of empirical analysis.

4.2. Research methods and data sources

This paper adopts the multi-case comparative research method to realize the mutual verification of theoretical construction and case empirical evidence. The research data are mainly divided into three categories: first, text data, covering official brand copy, official account tweets, executive interviews and in-depth reports of authoritative media from 2018 to 2025; second, visual materials, including comparisons of previous versions of brand logos, product packaging, offline stores and advertising images; third, quantitative and public opinion data, integrating industry reports of iiMedia Consulting and China Brand Research Institute, as well as user comments and public opinion feedback on platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu and Zhihu, to ensure the authenticity and objectivity of the research.

5. Case analysis: practice and dilemma of three narrative modes

5.1. Beijing Tongrentang

5.1.1. Narrative core

With "cultivating benevolence and morality, benefiting the world and nourishing life" as the spiritual core, adhere to the professionalism and seriousness of traditional Chinese medicine culture, uphold

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.34416

the value proposition of genuine materials, ancient processing methods, and efficacy first, and consolidate the professional authenticity foundation of the time-honored pharmaceutical brand.

5.1.2. Youth-oriented strategy

Lay out the "Zhimai Health" offline new retail space, cross-border launch of new categories such as traditional Chinese medicine coffee, herbal desserts, and Chinese prescription skin care; create lightweight content such as "punk health preservation" and "little-known knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine" on Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and other platforms, realizing the innovation of spiritual core keeping, product, and communication extension.

5.1.3. Communication platform

Official website, official official account, and professional medical channels carry traditional professional narratives; Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and urban pop-up stores carry youth-oriented experience narratives, forming a communication pattern of dual-channel division of labor and complementary coordination.

5.1.4. Audience reaction

According to Tongrentang's 2022 social responsibility report, young customers under 35 years old account for 72% of Zhimai Health stores, effectively absorbing young consumer groups; elderly audiences highly recognize the brand's professional image of adhering to traditional Chinese medicine traditions, but 41.6% of medical professionals question that the excessive entertainment of the brand dilutes the professional attributes of medicine [13].

5.1.5. Risks and controversies

The Internet-famous operation mode of traditional Chinese medicine cafes is questioned by public opinion that "traditional pharmacies have become Internet-famous punch-in places", with the potential risk of weakening medical professional attributes and diluting brand authenticity, falling into the internal conflict between serious medical narrative and life-oriented health preservation narrative [14].

5.1.6. Balance method

Take the traditional Chinese medicine theory of "homology of medicine and food" as the innovation boundary, all youth-oriented new products are anchored to the core function of health preservation and conditioning, not deviating from the origin of traditional Chinese medicine; at the same time, rely on endorsements from national medical masters and professional physicians to strengthen the professional background of the brand and resolve public opinion controversies caused by entertainment.

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5.2. Yunnan Baiyao

5.2.1. Narrative core

Take "sacred medicine for trauma, century-old formula, hemostasis and healing" as the narrative origin, rely on century-old pharmaceutical technology accumulation, build dual narratives of professional medical treatment and national daily health protection, and adhere to the authenticity of technical formulas and medical inheritance.

5.2.2. Youth-oriented strategy

Reuse core pharmaceutical formulas and technologies to daily chemical consumer products such as toothpaste, toiletries, and physiotherapy patches, extend to life-oriented consumption scenarios such as sports protection and daily health care, and expand brand narrative from single injury treatment to national health prevention and daily maintenance.

5.2.3. Communication platform

Corporate official websites, pharmaceutical chains, and professional academic channels convey traditional medical professional narratives; e-commerce platforms, sports event sponsorship, and short video social platforms convey youth-oriented healthy life narratives.

5.2.4. Audience reaction

According to Yunnan Baiyao's 2022 corporate annual report, the daily chemical sector accounts for 38% of revenue, successfully expanding the audience from traditional patient groups to the national health consumer group; young users' recognition of the brand concept of "same origin of medicine and technology, herbal maintenance" reaches 69.4%, but some traditional loyal audiences question that the brand is overly daily chemicalized and deviates from the original intention of the main medical business [15].

5.2.5. Risks and controversies

Multi-category cross-border extension leads to a vague brand professional image, and public opinion has controversies of "de-medicalization and becoming an ordinary daily chemical brand"; some new products have a weak correlation with Baiyao's core medical narrative, weakening consumers' real perception of the brand's origin.

5.2.6. Balance method

Take the core confidential pharmaceutical technology as the value anchor, all extended daily chemical products are marked with Baiyao formula endorsement; continuously strengthen the brand's medical background through medical qualification certification and professional health science content, and keep the bottom line of professional authenticity.

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5.3. Shanghai White Rabbit

5.3.1. Narrative core

Take childhood collective memory, classic milk fragrance taste, and national nostalgic candy as the emotional core, rely on blue-and-white classic packaging and brand sentiment symbols, build an intergenerational emotional connection narrative, and become a cultural symbol type time-honored brand carrying the youth memory of several generations.

5.3.2. Youth-oriented strategy

Carry out high-frequency cross-border co-branding cooperation, launch derivative products such as lipsticks, aromatherapy, and cultural and creative peripherals in conjunction with trendy beauty, clothing, and tea drinking brands; layout urban pop-up stores and nostalgic theme marketing, activate sentiment consumption, and realize lightweight and trendy translation of brand symbols.

5.3.3. Communication platform

Xiaohongshu, Weibo, and offline pop-up stores lead youth-oriented trendy communication; traditional TV media and supermarket offline channels maintain classic nostalgic narratives, taking into account the sentiment of old customers and young fashion needs.

5.3.4. Audience reaction

According to White Rabbit's 2021 brand youth-oriented white paper, young consumers account for 85% of cross-border co-branded products, and Generation Z is keen on social punch-in and sharing communication; but 53.7% of senior consumers think the brand excessively consumes sentiment and blindly over-co-brands [16].

5.3.5. Risks and controversies

Some co-branded products focus on packaging marketing and neglect product quality, deviating from the main candy business; excessive symbolization overdrafts sentiment value, triggering public controversies of brand symbol dilution and weakening emotional authenticity.

5.3.6. Balance method

Stick to the two emotional anchors of classic milk fragrance taste and blue-and-white visual symbols; all cross-border co-brands retain core brand logos. At the same time, return to the main business to upgrade the quality of classic milk candy products, support symbol innovation with physical product heritage, and avoid hollowing out of sentiment.

6. Discussion: theoretical deepening of narrative balance

6.1. Dialogue with brand revitalization theory

Traditional brand revitalization theory emphasizes comprehensive innovation as the core driving force, activating declining brands through all-around renewal of products, images, and communication, but naturally has the inherent bias of emphasizing innovation over inheritance. The

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three cases in this study all carry out limited innovation on the basis of adhering to their own core values. The 2023 data of the China Brand Research Institute verifies that time-honored brands adopting core-keeping revitalization have a significantly higher increase in brand favorability than those with pure traffic innovation, proving the practical value of coordination between inheritance and innovation.

6.2. Combination with brand authenticity theory

Brand authenticity theory mostly focuses on the static adherence to history, technology, and values, which easily leads to brand conservatism and separation from the market. This paper proposes that the authenticity of time-honored brands is a unity of core static adherence + formal dynamic expression: Tongrentang adheres to ancestral motto and medical ethics, Yunnan Baiyao adheres to core formula, White Rabbit adheres to classic symbols, all of which belong to unshakable objective authenticity; while the innovation of product form, communication voice and scene carrier belongs to constructive authenticity adapting to the contemporary market. This conclusion echoes the cultural translation theory, and data shows that brands adhering to core authenticity while moderately innovating expression have far higher consumer real perception than those simply sticking to or blindly innovating, confirming that dynamic authenticity adapts to the transformation needs of time-honored brands.

6.3. Integration with intergenerational communication theory

Intergenerational communication theory clearly defines the cognitive and preference differences of different age groups, but does not propose implementable adaptation strategies. Based on this, this study deepens and improves, constructing a set of communication logic of core, layered narrative and intergenerational compatibility: strengthen the positive and heavy narrative for traditional audiences, create a lightweight, interesting and socialized narrative for Generation Z, making up for the limitation of previous studies that only focus on young groups and ignore intergenerational balance. According to iiMedia Consulting data, time-honored brands adopting layered narratives have significantly narrowed the intergenerational satisfaction gap, effectively solving the problem of mismatch between narrative supply and audience demand.

7. Practical path of narrative balance for time-honored brands

7.1. Content construction: anchor the core, modular expression

First, extract 1–3 uncompromisable brand narrative anchors to lock core values such as technology, formula, spirit and symbols, and consolidate the foundation of authenticity; second, build a modular narrative resource library, develop combinable content modules such as historical stories, technical analysis, scene experience and user co-creation around core anchors; finally, design gradient narrative content, create in-depth cultural version, lightweight interesting version and functional practical version respectively to adapt to the audience needs of different generations and platforms.

7.2. Communication implementation: cross-media collaboration, orderly co-creation

Build a differentiated media matrix, official authoritative channels carry positive narratives, social short video platforms carry youth-oriented innovative narratives, realizing division of labor and complementarity; reasonably guide user content co-creation through topic collection, design

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competitions, experience sharing and other forms, and delimit value boundaries to avoid narrative deviation; layout brand museums, experience workshops and theme pop-up stores offline to create immersive narrative scenes, making old and new cultural narratives perceivable, participatory and empathetic.

7.3. Management guarantee: dynamic monitoring, crisis adjustment

Establish a cross-departmental narrative coordination team, integrate brand, product, public relations and operation teams, unify the narrative caliber of all channels, and ensure the consistency of brand value; establish a real-time public opinion monitoring and early warning mechanism, focus on controversial signals such as excessive entertainment, deviation from traditions and sentiment overdraft, and predict and intervene in advance; improve the crisis response mechanism, clarify core values, explain innovation logic and fine-tune narrative strategies immediately after disputes occur, and quickly repair brand narrative balance and public trust.

8. Conclusion

8.1. Research conclusion

First, the essence of the old and new narrative balance of time-honored brands is the organic integration of the three theories of brand revitalization, brand authenticity, and intergenerational communication. Balance is not a simple compromise, but a dynamic process of adhering to authenticity, moderate innovation, and continuous negotiation of intergenerational adaptation. Second, the three narrative modes of Tongrentang's core-keeping type, Yunnan Baiyao's technology extension type, and White Rabbit's emotional symbol translation type adapt to the characteristics of different industries, such as medicine, daily chemicals, and food, and all follow the underlying logic of taking authenticity as the foundation, revitalization as the means, and intergenerational compatibility as the goal. Third, digital communication not only brings development opportunities for narrative co-creation of time-honored brands, but also potential risks of narrative out-of-control and value deviation. Adhering to core value anchors, controlling innovation boundaries, and implementing layered intergenerational narratives are the key paths to achieving old and new narrative balance.

8.2. Theoretical contribution

This paper deeply integrates narrative theory with brand revitalization, authenticity and intergenerational communication, constructs a three-dimensional theoretical framework for the old and new narrative balance of time-honored brands, making up for the defect of theoretical fragmentation in previous studies; revises the single cognition of brand revitalization emphasizing innovation over inheritance and brand authenticity emphasizing adherence over expression, and puts forward new ideas of core-keeping revitalization and dynamic authenticity; based on the perspective of intergenerational audience differences, improves the layered adaptation logic of time-honored brand narratives, and enriches the theoretical research system of youth-oriented traditional brands.

8.3. Research limitations and future directions

This paper only selects three typical time-honored brands for case research with limited industry coverage. In the future, it can expand to more industries such as catering, clothing and handicrafts to

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carry out cross-regional and cross-category comparative research of time-honored brands; this paper mainly adopts case qualitative analysis, and in the future, quantitative methods such as large-sample questionnaires and empirical experiments can be combined to test the impact of different narrative strategies on consumer identity and purchase intention; with the development of new technologies such as metaverse and AI-generated content, the long-term impact of intelligent media on the narrative form, co-creation mode and balance mechanism of time-honored brands can be further explored in the follow-up.

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