

A Study on the Evolution of the Design Performance of Rock Record Cover

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ABSTRACT

In China, as the quality of life of consumers has improved in recent years, the level of emotional consumption, which focuses on sympathy and reflection, has risen from purely purchasing-based consumption to emotional consumption. Therefore, there is a need to understand the factors that can be conveyed through public relations and marketing to alleviate the emotional aspects of consumers, and to conduct three-dimensional research that can effectively express such emotions. In order to make sense of their surroundings, humans attempt to organize what they perceive into a form or contextual structure. In Gestalt psychology, humans actively interpret the various stimuli in their lives and accept them in their own form, seeing them as a whole and considering them to be of greater value than the sum of their parts. This corresponds to the 'paradigm' described by Thomas Samuel Kuhn and Herbert Read in *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. In line with this concept, this study seeks to integrate the policy, cultural and social aspects of album design with previous research on human nature and emotional perception. Thus, this study aims to understand how rock album art design as emotional design stimulates consumer emotions in a variety of media, and what visual representation features are used in promotional and marketing effects. Through this study, we hope to understand the contemporary expressive features of Chinese consumers' visual preferences over time, thereby providing foundational data for research and development of similar designs such as rock album art design.

KEYWORDS

Emotional design; Improving; Rock and roll album cover design

1 Research background

The history of rock and roll is like an old, dusty book filled with stories. People who had experienced the world wars grew tired of the images of war, which were so tragic they left one breathless with grief. They began to seek hope for life, using a different voice to confront the cruelty of war. Rock and roll, as a new form of music, used a rebellious and even questioning voice, along with vibrant, bold melodies, to reignite the spirit of life. Its story began to unfold on the stage of history.

As the birthplace of rock music, the United States made indelible contributions to its development and promotion. A suitable cultural environment allowed rock music to become the mainstream of American popular music. Since then, rock music has played an important role in the spiritual world of Western people as a new form of musical art. Rock music is a diverse genre encompassing various musical styles and cultural elements. From American rock to British rock, and its variations around the world, rock music demonstrates the power of cultural exchange and integration.

The development of rock music in China began relatively late, primarily in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This period marked a series of significant societal transformations in China, including economic reform and opening-up policies and cultural liberalization, which created conditions for the emergence of rock music. However, due to the influence of policies, markets, and cultural factors at the time, its development was significantly constrained.

From a design perspective, rock music derivatives—from album covers to promotional posters, to performers' attire and accessories—are imprinted with symbolic meanings. Album covers from different periods of China's rock music history bear the distinctive characteristics of their respective eras. They established a new aesthetic standard in the field of visual design, sparking a visually revolutionary movement within the design community.

Today, to design classic rock-related graphic works, one must have a comprehensive understanding of rock history and grasp the patterns of rock style evolution. Only by analyzing the visual expressions of rock album covers to understand their essence and design concepts can one create excellent works. The key lies in how to harmoniously integrate visual and auditory elements—this is the core of rock album cover design.

2 Research objectives

This study aims to deeply explore the interactive relationship between music and visual art, analyze the manifestation of cultural transformation, examine the influence of technology and media, highlight local characteristics and international influences, and contribute to preserving the historical record of music culture. This research seeks to understand how album covers interact with music through visual elements such as images, colors, and text, reflecting the emotions, themes, and styles of the music. Additionally, album cover design reflects the social atmosphere, political sentiments, and cultural values of different eras, aiding in a deeper understanding of the evolution of Chinese society and

culture. From a sensory design perspective, the study will also analyze album covers from different periods and music genres to examine how they align with musical content, creating a sensory connection, and how they have transformed designers' creative processes and audience interactions. Ultimately, this research will provide valuable resources and perspectives for the historical documentation and future study of Chinese rock music culture.

It is hoped that the analysis of the evolution of Chinese rock album cover design will lead to reflections on the design philosophy and methods of Chinese rock album cover design, ultimately culminating in insights with practical value and real-world significance.

3 Research methods and scope

3.1 Inductive summary method

By conducting extensive research on historical materials and rock album cover images, this paper combines relevant historical facts to provide a multi-angle, multi-dimensional summary and analysis of the design concepts and methods of rock album covers across different eras and social contexts. Through case analysis, not only can relevant theoretical knowledge be obtained, but the scientific validity and universality of the theories can also be verified through specific cases.

3.2 Citation method

During the research process, extensive reading of domestic and international literature was conducted, utilizing library journal databases and online resources to collect and analyze literature materials on various album cover designs. Information was selected from these sources, and their interrelationships were analyzed. Relevant arguments and evidence from related literature were used to provide theoretical basis and factual support for the research topic. A thorough understanding of current research on rock album covers is essential, and relevant research findings and theories from Western studies on the typical characteristics of each stage of rock album cover development should be actively referenced. This will enable the derivation of arguments applicable to this paper.

3.3 System analysis method

Adhering to a holistic perspective, systematic and comprehensive analysis and research should be conducted. The different psychological characteristics of the audience should be systematically analyzed, and all aspects should be considered. Specific cases should be used to verify the scientific validity and universality of the theories.

The scope of this study aims to deeply explore the evolution of album cover design in the history of Chinese rock music. The timeframe of the study will cover the period from the emergence of Chinese rock music to the present, with a focus on the rock music field. The study will analyze aesthetic elements in album cover design, such as images, colors, and text, while also considering the interactive relationship between design and social, cultural, and political contexts. Additionally, the study will examine the influence of sensory design in production and dissemination, as well as whether Chinese rock music album cover design has been influenced by international music culture. A clear definition of the research scope will help ensure the depth and consistency of the study to meet the specific objectives and questions of the research project.

4 Innovation points

Through the framework of sensory design, the study can more deeply analyze how album cover design evokes emotional resonance and aesthetic experiences among audiences. The study can explore how different cover designs evoke different emotions, such as joy, sadness, anger, or shock, and investigate how these emotions are interrelated with the emotions and themes of the music. The visual design of rock album covers can be studied from the perceptual perspectives of synesthesia, transference, and empathy. The current state of Chinese rock album cover design can be studied from a comparative perspective.

5 Theoretical background

5.1 Definition and theory of emotional design

Emotional design is a design method and philosophy that emphasizes considering people's emotions, feelings, and

emotional responses in the design of products, services, experiences, or environments. It aims to create designs that can trigger, guide, or enhance users' emotional experiences, enabling them to develop positive emotions and emotional connections when using products or participating in experiences. Emotional design focuses on users' subjective experiences, emphasizing that design should meet users' emotional needs rather than merely functional or practical needs. Emotional design typically includes the following key elements and principles. First is emotional experience, emphasizing that design should evoke users' emotions, such as joy, satisfaction, comfort, and trust, to enhance user satisfaction and loyalty. Second is sensory stimulation, which involves creating appealing sensory experiences through visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory channels. Emotional connection refers to the ability of design to establish an emotional connection with users, enabling them to form a personal, emotional bond with the product or service. Third is user engagement and resonance, where sensory design encourages user participation and resonance, allowing them to immerse themselves more deeply in the design to fulfill their emotional needs. Sensory design is widely applied in fields such as product design, brand building, advertising, user experience design, architecture, and environmental design, aiming to enhance the emotional connection between users and design, improve user satisfaction, and strengthen the market appeal of brands or products.

5.2 Theoretical background of record cover design

5.2.1 Definition of record cover design

Record cover design refers to the external visual design of music records (such as CDs, vinyl records, digital music covers, etc.), aiming to provide a unique visual expression and identity for musical works. This design typically involves the selection of images, artistic elements, text, typography, and colors to convey the emotions, themes, and styles of the music while capturing the audience's interest and attention. Album cover design not only serves an aesthetic and promotional purpose but can also become an integral part of the musical work, complementing the music and providing listeners with a richer sensory experience.

A complete record includes the cover, sides, and record itself. The cover content includes basic information such as names, titles, and main images. The cover size is generally 12.5 x 12 cm, and it is customized for different themes. A record cover is like a delicious dish—we may not have tasted its flavor yet, but we can observe its color, presentation, and ingredient selection to determine its true quality. Just like a record cover, we first perceive the intrinsic essence of the record it conveys. Another characteristic of record cover design is its role in driving record sales, thereby possessing significant commercial value. Beyond its artistic and aesthetic value, it also carries commercial value. This requires its design to align with current and future market trends, remain up-to-date, and meet mass aesthetic demands.

5.2.2 The functions of album cover design

Album covers embody both the artistic and commercial value of the album itself. Initially, album covers served only to protect the album from wear and tear, facilitate storage, and aid in categorization. However, with the evolution of the times, they have also been endowed with higher artistic and aesthetic value.

5.2.3 Presenting the theme content

When consumers first encounter a music record, the first thing they see is the album cover. The album cover provides consumers with the most direct and clear first impression, as it highlights the record's theme content, making it one of the key factors influencing whether consumers decide to purchase the record. Album covers typically present the record's theme content by highlighting the composer, song title, performer, subject matter, and style.

Rock music album covers typically highlight the performers, as rock music creators are often the performers themselves. For rock music, audiences perceive performance as more important than creation, so rock music album covers are designed with the band members as the primary design elements, while the music creators take a secondary role. (2). Music genres are diverse, including classical, ethnic, and popular genres. Classical genres include symphonic music, opera, ballet, piano, and chamber music. Ethnic genres include traditional, folk, and modern music. Popular genres include musicals, rock music, and ballads. Some album covers are also designed according to genre. Music can be categorized by style into Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Modern styles, among others. Modern style can further be divided into Neo-Classical, Expressionist, Neo-Nationalist, and Avant-Garde styles. Album cover designs typically use instruments representative of the era's style to highlight the theme and reflect the musical style.

5.2.4 The entertainment function of pleasing the senses

The human body has various physiological organs for perceiving the outside world, including eyes, ears, nose, mouth,

hands, and tongue. When these organs are stimulated by the world around them, the human mind responds accordingly. Music primarily acts on the human ear through rhythmic and melodic sounds, which are transmitted to the brain via the auditory system, enabling the brain to respond to and perceive the music. Therefore, in the past, people often perceived music as its essence. With the development of technology and societal progress, music can now be presented through various means such as painting, images, photography, and videography, making it not only an auditory phenomenon but also a visual phenomenon and a comprehensive cultural and artistic phenomenon. Music imagery takes many forms, rich and diverse, including album covers, CD designs, posters, videos, MTVs, and television media. Album covers are one of many visual elements, inseparable from the essence of music. A beautiful album cover can delight the eyes, please the senses, and evoke a positive emotional response toward the album, making it easier for people to connect with the album and perceive the visual beauty of music. For example, radical psychedelic imagery can create a visual impact, sparking rich imagination and evoking a sense of mystery and wonder, allowing people to fully enjoy the spiritual pleasure music brings. On the other hand, fresh and adorable illustrations can bring a refreshing and invigorating atmosphere, giving people a sense of novelty and clarity, thereby stimulating their love for the album's music.

6 The definition and characteristics of rock music

The influence of traditional musical forms has made it difficult for many people to accept rock music, and they often hold biases and prejudices against it. They frequently label rock music with derogatory terms such as “trash,” “rebellious,” and “decadent.” Upon closer examination, it is simply one of many musical expressions, no different from others. Performers simply seek to express and release their inner, indescribable psychological states through this alternative form.

7 Sensitive album cover design in the development of Chinese rock music

Before China's reform and opening-up, revolutionary music dominated the Chinese music scene, characterized by its passionate and stirring melodies. Record cover designs typically reflected the content and themes of the music. Chinese music and art were heavily influenced by politics, and many artists and musicians faced restrictions on their creative work. As a result, record covers from that era often centered on political propaganda, praise for leaders, and ideological themes, with designs typically featuring a red background to establish a connection with the masses. After reform and opening-up, Chinese society underwent significant transformation, with rock music entering the Chinese market and people's mentalities becoming more diverse. The design concepts of rock album covers primarily exhibited irrationality and rebelliousness, which also served as a reinterpretation of the essence of the rock music contained within the albums. This rebellious spirit perfectly embodies the Dionysian spirit in Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy, “releasing imagination, association, passion, and madness.” This rebellious spirit is an important component of album cover design concepts, endowing the designs with vitality and primal energy. Through the use of extreme visual forms and content that deviates from traditional notions, the rebellious spirit of rock album cover design is brought to the forefront. The long-suppressed emotions of the people are released (7), and the rebellious nature of rock music connects with the release of public emotions, making rebellious design a prominent cultural phenomenon.

8 Visual aesthetics of Chinese rock album cover design

Sensory design has had a significant impact on the aesthetic characteristics of rock album cover design. Under this design philosophy, rock album covers emphasize the communication of emotions and emotional resonance with the audience. This is reflected in the use of images, colors, typography, and artistic elements on the cover to express the emotions of the music, often employing abstract and non-figurative expressions to trigger the audience's emotions and thoughts. The use of color is crucial; vibrant hues convey energy and passion, while cool tones may express calmness and melancholy. Typography and font selection also play a key role in enhancing the emotional expression of text. Additionally, sensory design may guide the audience's emotional experience by constructing a story or narrative, which can be achieved through illustrations, image sequences, or symbolic elements. In summary, sensory design emphasizes uniqueness, creativity, and personalization, aiming to establish a deep emotional connection, making music covers not only works of art but also tools for emotional expression.

9 The Rise of chinese rock album cover design

Based on the artistic characteristics and influencing factors of rock album cover visuals discussed above, let us take a look at the Chinese rock music market. Rock album cover design in China is currently in an immature state as a niche industry, but this situation also implies that it has significant room for future development. First, we need to briefly discuss the current state of China's rock music development. Understanding the current reality is the foundation for developing the visual expression of rock album covers. Only under this premise can we achieve the true design objectives of rock album covers. Second, when studying the visual expression of Western rock album covers, the cultural connotations of rock music always serve as a foundation. Therefore, research into the cultural connotations of China's rock music is also indispensable.

In the West, rock music spans the entire music spectrum, catering to the tastes of fans across all social strata, and boasts a vast music market. The visual design of rock album covers also has ample room for expression and a unique design aesthetic. However, in China, the intense rhythms of rock music and its associated extreme Western artistic concepts have led many Chinese people to feel repelled by it, making it difficult for them to accept it overnight. Rock music emerged in the West in 1950 amid open and rebellious ideas. However, China's social background and development model differ significantly from those of Western societies, creating fundamental cultural barriers. Intellectual constraints and inadequate social conditions in China have hindered the development of rock music.

Due to rock music's weak and niche market presence in China, there has been little emphasis on the design of rock album covers, resulting in limited progress in this area. Meanwhile, design companies responsible for album packaging have also noticed the downturn in the market, reducing their focus on the rock album market. They have not respected this art form ideologically, let alone provided professional, personalized designs for it. Although there have been a few shining stars in this wave, such as Moyan and Hongxing, overall, it has not formed a significant trend. The designers creating covers for Chinese rock albums are generally non-mainstream amateur designers, a group lacking in the comprehensive skills and individuality required for design. While there are still some underground bands in China, their album covers occasionally exhibit visual expressiveness, but the investment in design costs and the scope of the market have not achieved the desired results, making development challenging. Western rock album cover design draws on modern art and the diverse cultural heritage of society as its cultural foundation, enabling continuous innovation in form, the introduction of new design concepts, and ultimately the presentation of personalized styles. However, modern art in China is still in a stage of development and exploration, and it is unable to exert a significant influence on the design of rock album covers in terms of design consciousness.

The above points regarding China highlight the disadvantages in the development of Chinese rock album cover design. However, this should not lead us to dismiss Chinese rock music. Looking at Japan and Cuba, rock music is also an imported art form for them. Yet they have adapted it to their national circumstances, incorporating their own artistic characteristics into rock culture and connecting with the aesthetic preferences of their domestic audience, ultimately forming an independent design style. For example, Japanese singer Takihara Pistol's album covers incorporate Eastern visual language, creating a design style that blends Eastern modernity with local flair (26). Even though rock music is not an indigenous art form in Japan, such integration makes it more fashionable and innovative. China also possesses rich and diverse cultural traditions and history, providing abundant inspiration and elements for album design. Designers can blend traditional Chinese culture with contemporary elements to create unique cover designs. Additionally, China's music market is growing rapidly, attracting an increasing number of musicians and bands. This offers designers more opportunities to participate in music projects and exercise creativity in album design.

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