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Multimodal Semiotics and Cognitive Schema: A Grounded Theory Analysis of Political Cartoons in Shaping Government Image Perception

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ABSTRACT

With the shift from “textual narrative” to “visual expression” in the context of new media, cartoons have been increasingly used in political image building and political discourse dissemination due to their multimodal visual characteristics of graphic and textual bi-construction. The public’s perception of the political effect of cartoons is of great significance to the image building of the government. Based on Multimodal Semiotics and Cognitive Schema Theory, this study employs the Grounded Theory approach to explore how multimodal symbols in government-affiliated cartoons activate the cognitive schemas of the audience and subsequently shape their perception of government image. Through in-depth interviews with thirty interviewees from diverse occupational and political backgrounds, the study applied a systematic three-level coding process—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—until theoretical saturation is achieved. The analysis reveals that: First, multimodal activation mechanism: the cartoonised image of the leader activates the cognitive frame of “friendliness” through exaggerated proportions and soft tones; Second, metaphorical embodiment: the image of the anti-epidemic “Dabai” builds up an all-white protective suit and a smiling expression through the cartoons; Third, cognitive load optimisation: the cartoon of the new health insurance policy replaces the complex text with a flowchart, which reduces the cognitive difficulty of understanding the policy. Based on this, we propose the “Symbol-Cognition Alignment Model”, which reveals the cognitive path of the government cartoons in reconstructing abstract governance concepts through visual-verbal symbol interaction. This model not only deepens the theoretical understanding of the symbol-cognition interaction mechanism in

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multimodal political communication but also provides practical guidance for government agencies to optimize visual policy communication and enhance the efficiency of public cognition.

Keywords: Multimodal Symbols; Cognitive Schema; Government Image Perception; Embodied Metaphors; Grounded Theory

1. Introduction

As a mass medium deeply rooted in Chinese social life, cartoons have historically served as a vital communication channel. During the Anti-Japanese War (1931–1945), cartoon art played a pivotal role in awakening national consciousness and disseminating progressive ideologies. In contemporary China, cartoons continue to serve as a powerful visual medium in a variety of contexts, including pandemic-prevention campaigns, public-health policy promotion, legal education, and even diplomatic communication. Currently, discussions in the international academic community on “Animation Diplomacy” mainly focus on cultural export strategies such as Japan’s Cool Japan and South Korea’s K-pop wave. However, there is insufficient attention has been paid to how China constructs political cognition through localized visual narratives like government-affiliated cartoons.

The global proliferation of Japanese and Western animation since the 1970s–1980s has drawn academic attention to the “cultural export” and “animation diplomacy” phenomena, highlighting cartoons’ dual cultural-political functions. As an international visual lingua franca, cartoons increasingly manifest national soft power. China’s 2006 strategic policy framework, notably the *Several Opinions on Promoting the Development of China’s Animation Industry*, formally recognized animation’s socio-cultural significance in advancing socialist core values, fostering youth moral education, and meeting the public’s growing cultural needs.

Subsequent national initiatives, including the *13th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development and Reform*^[1] and the *14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Industry Development* by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism^[2], have elevated animation to a strategic industry with expanding roles in China’s cultural governance, economic development, and diplomatic communication.

This analytical perspective reveals the enduring interconnection between cartoon media and state governance/diplomacy. As a robust political communication in-

strument, cartoon art has been strategically employed across three operational domains: facilitating party-mass cohesion through visual narratives; institutional image construction spanning governmental, municipal, and national levels; systematic monitoring of public perception dimensions encompassing cognitive engagement, interpretative comprehension and ideological acceptance.

However, existing research predominantly focuses on macro-level policy analysis or communication-effectiveness evaluation. There is a notable lack of mechanistic exploration of how cartoons activate the public’s cognitive schemata through micro-level semiotic interactions and subsequently shape the government’s image. In response to this research gap, this study adopts the Grounded Theory approach to conduct an in-depth analysis of how government-affiliated cartoons influence the public’s perceptions of policies and the government image everyday life scenarios. By doing so, it aims to uncover the pathways through which these cartoons propaganda, political, and social functions are realized, and ultimately explore a paradigm for constructing the government’s image with distinctive Chinese characteristics in the new era.

2. Literature Review

Reviewing the development of cartooning, it is clear that cartooning as a political propaganda tool makes it independent of other art forms. The most important function of Chinese cartoons is its participation in social revolution and movements. Experiencing the old democratic revolution and the new democratic revolution, Chinese cartoon developed a powerful social-propaganda function in the development and construction of new China, with a wide mass base. With the robust export of European, American, Japanese, and Korean cartoons in the 1980s and 1990s, the rapid development of the cartoon culture industry and the emergence of social phenomena such as ‘secondary yuan’ and ‘subculture’, cartoons have taken root in every aspect of social life as a popular art

form. Nowadays, scientific and technological progress and the Internet popularisation have accelerated the advent of the ‘map-reading era’, and contemporary culture has entered the ‘image turn’^[3]; and the development of visual communication has made the visual narrative advantages of comics more and more prominent.

2.1. Political Attributes and Propaganda Function of Comics

In modern China, where salvation and revolution are the themes, comics also bear political missions. In the anti-Japanese propaganda movement, Feng Zikai once pointed out that ‘comics are the vanguard of pen and pencil resistance’, and Ling Chenghwei and Zhang Huailing, through studying the comics movement during the anti-war period, believed that the unique critical, sharp and combative nature of anti-war comics made the edifying and critical function of comics to be brought into full play^[4]. On the political mobilisation function of cartoons, Hou Songtao pointed out that ‘political propaganda cartoons’ and ‘political satirical propaganda paintings’ during the period of anti-Americanism and aid to Korea ‘stimulated and inspired the masses’ thoughts and feelings with their prominent images, distinctive colours, and eye-catching and forceful inscriptions^[5]. They also heightened the emotions of love and hatred and active fighting, thus achieving ‘the purpose of mobilising the people’. This also shows that the wartime cartoon movement practiced the ‘popularisation’ and thus politicisation of art in the process of ‘transforming the masses’. Zhu Yuanyuan and Li Gang affirm the mobilising effect of wartime cartoons from a perspective of visual mobilisation, and reveal that the visual expression of cartoons can drive the public to achieve universal and in-depth political mobilisation, which is essentially its successful construction of national identity^[6]. Cartoons are also a form of political communication, Liu Jufang clarifies the inspiring effect of red cartoons on uniting and educating the masses and combating and destroying the enemy by collating the red cartoons of the Central Soviet Area^[7]. Wei Wei and Zhang Yukun examined the trajectory of political cartoons in China over the past century and verified the advantages of political cartoons in ideological construction and expression^[8]. During the construction of New China, some scholars have pointed out that ‘political

cartoons’, which have both propaganda and political functions, play an important role in ideological propaganda and political propaganda. Whether in the war of resistance and national salvation or in the promotion of production and construction of new China, cartoons have played an active role in social education and propaganda.

2.2. Political Discourse Dissemination and Social Context of Cartoons

Abstract political issues, political phenomena, political relations, and political identities can often be visualised through cartoons, which also give political connotations to cartoons. Ray Morris found that political cartoons complete the construction of group discourses and complex power structures through the metaphorical strategy^[9], and Yus pointed out that in political cartoons, cartoonists use the ‘conventional linguistic metaphor’ through ‘re-visualisation of conventional linguistic metaphors’ to give the cartoons visual impact and achieve the effect of political satire and criticism^[10]. McVey analysed the operation mechanism of visual rhetoric in the communication of political cartoons^[11]. It is not difficult to see that as a kind of visual modal discourse combining the two symbols of images and verbal text, political cartoons can reflect political ideology and national position. Scholars focus on the visual rhetoric in caricature and believe that caricature completes political metaphor and identity construction multimodally. Political caricatures are related to social contexts; Thomas Nast’s political caricatures bring to light the opinion-guiding power of caricatures. Analysing political cartoons in Japanese news reports, Masaru Ibaraki explored the relationship between political caricatures and social norms, emphasising the social significance constructed by caricatures^[12]. As Pan Yanyan notes, the communicative purpose of political cartoons is to comment on society, criticise and expose ugly social and political phenomena, and reflect and influence the basic direction of public thinking^[13]. The social nature of cartoons stems from the joint roles of power organs, news media, and popular consciousness, positioning political cartoons as a form of journalistic commentary. In the social context of the new era, cartoons become a medium for spreading excellent traditional virtues and social mainstream values, and give full play to their social opinion supervision function in social life.

2.3. Cartoons and the Construction of National Image

Alongside carrying the function of political-propaganda and constructing social-significance, comics participate in the construction of national image. Takashi Yamamura examined the application of manga characters in city branding and the resulting economic and tourism effects in Sakaiminato City, Tottori Prefecture, Japan as an example^[14]. Yasuyuki Uchida et al. proposed the idea of applying manga to regional revitalisation and international exchange based on the world influence of Japanese anime^[15]. The Japanese government put the animation industry at a strategic level, implemented ‘animation diplomacy’, and promoted Japanese culture and national image through the development of comics and related industries, so as to enhance the international recognition of Tokyo. Cai Rongkai used Japan’s national image through comics as a typical case, pointing out that comics have different advantages from other cultural carriers in carrying out national image export public relations work^[16]. It can be seen that comics participate in the construction of national image and play an important role in international communication. Compared with Japan and the United States, due to the lack of international discourse in the 20th century and the relative lag in the development of modern comics, there are fewer successful cases of China constructing and disseminating its national image through comics. With the development of international communication and exchange, the mainstream media have gained a positive response by anthropomorphising the national image through cartoons^[17] and cartoonising the image of leaders^[18]. Zhao Xinli emphasised that new media communication methods represented by cartoons and animation are very useful in softening the party and government image and empathetic communication^[19]. The creation and development of Chinese comics are closely relate to the construction of our party, and the participation of comics in the party and government propaganda in the new era is also the requirement of the times for art to serve the people. Comics are closely integrated with the national image and political and cultural stance, showing the image of the Chinese government, Chinese political culture and Chinese core values.

2.4. Localized Innovation Breakthroughs of Chinese Government-Affiliated Cartoons

Visual government communication refers to government communication activities carried out through visual image carriers. It integrates the characteristics of visual culture and government communication, featuring a dialogue - oriented concept, supported by visual technology, and precisely serving diverse subjects. It contains multiple values and functions, contributing to shaping the government’s image^[20]. This study reveals that in the practice of exploring localized political communication paths, Chinese government-affiliated cartoons, as a visual communication medium, demonstrate three aspects of innovation.

In terms of working mode, animation art is gradually being applied to government publicity work^[21]. Relying on the “media convergence strategy”, local or central government agencies have developed lightweight visual products such as Government Strip Cartoons and Policy Infographics, achieving precise policy dissemination via WeChat and Weibo. Regarding symbolic construction, the anti-epidemic cartoon *A Mighty Blow* released by the China News Cartoon Network depicts a fist striking an exaggerated image labeled “coronavirus”, demonstrating the nation’s determination to defeat the epidemic^[22]. This not only activates collective cultural memory but also strengthens political identity.

In cultural communication, the “Political Cutenization” phenomenon in the online cultural space has attracted attention. Official political entities have adopted “cutenization” as an important production and communication strategy. However, the “cutenization” of politics also poses the risk of diluting mainstream ideology^[23]. Although these practices have expanded the application scenarios of government - affiliated cartoons, a systematic theoretical framework to explain the “symbol - cognition” transformation mechanism has yet to be established.

2.5. The Integration Framework of Multimodal Semiotics and Cognitive Linguistics

As a typical multimodal discourse, the meaning generation of political cartoons not only relies on the representational function of a single semiotic modality, but also stems from the dynamic interaction of multiple semiotic resources,

such as visual, linguistic and spatial resources. Based on the above background, this study integrates the theoretical tools of multimodal semiotics and cognitive linguistics to construct an interdisciplinary analysis framework.

Based on Forceville's theory of multimodal metaphors, political cartoons visualise abstract governance concepts through graphic and textual synergies. Take the image of 'Big White' in the anti-epidemic cartoon as an example, as a visual symbol, the all-white protective suit symbolises professional protection, and the smiling expression conveys affinity, which together with the linguistic symbol of 'health protector' constructs the metaphorical network of 'the government is the protector'. This cross-modal mapping not only activates the audience's embodied cognition, but also reinforces the psychological solidification of the 'protector' schema through repeated exposure. From the perspective of cognitive syntax, political cartoons reduce the cognitive load of policy comprehension through Image Schema. For example, the 'path schema' (SOURCE-PATH-GOAL) of the skiing track in the Winter Olympics-themed cartoon is a metaphor for the milestones of policy implementation with visual dynamic composition; the cartoon of the new health insurance policy adopts the 'container schema' (CONTAINER), using a flowchart framework to encapsulate complex textual information into a sequence of actionable steps. This design strategy is in line with the principle of cognitive economy of the audience, so that the abstract policy can be transformed into an embodied experience. Frame semantics reveals how government cartoons activate specific cognitive frames through symbolic choices. When cartoonised leaders with rounded lines and soft colours are juxtaposed with the slogan 'Listen to Public Opinion', the 'reliability' of visual symbols and the 'interactivity' of verbal symbols are activated together. When visual symbols are juxtaposed with slogans of 'listening to public opinion', the 'affinity' and 'interactivity' of visual symbols together activate the framework of 'participatory governance' and dissolve the stereotype of traditional bureaucratic images. On the other hand, excessive use of entertainment symbols, such as exaggerated emoticons, may trigger the 'frivolity' frame and lead to cognitive schema conflicts.

A review of the relevant literature shows that scholars paid attention to the relevance of cartoons to politics at an early stage, but focused more on the political propaganda function of cartoons, as well as the interpretation of

cartoons in the construction of political discourse and political identity. Comics have been consciously applied to the image building of cities, regions, and countries, all of which are closely linked to the guidelines and policies of local as well as central governmental institutions, but there is still some room for research on the interaction mechanism between comics as a medium, its audience, and the main institution of political activities, i.e., the government. By integrating the research frameworks of multimodal semiotics and cognitive linguistics, this study analyzes the systematic collaboration of visual-verbal symbols in cartoons, and at the same time, reveals the dynamic reconstruction mechanism of the symbols' meanings by the audience's cognitive schema, which provides innovative perspectives on understanding the 'symbol-cognition' interaction in political communication. This provides an innovative perspective for understanding the 'symbol-cognition' interaction in political communication.

2.6. Limitations of Existing Research and the Positioning of this Study

A comprehensive review of existing research reveals the following deficiencies: Firstly, there is an urgent need for methodological integration. Studies from a semiotic perspective mainly focus on text deconstruction, while political communication research tends to emphasize the measurement of macro-level effects. Both overlook the empirical tracking of micro-level cognitive processes. Secondly, the mismatch of cultural contexts weakens the explanatory validity. Western cognitive schema theories struggle to decode the emotional arousal mechanism of Chinese people towards political symbols such as "red cartoons", and a localized cognitive model has been lacking for a long time. Thirdly, there is insufficient interdisciplinary integration. Multimodal research and cognitive linguistics have developed in parallel for a long time, and a complete causal chain of "visual symbols → cognitive schemas → political identity" has not been established.

In response, this study proposes an integrated framework using Grounded Theory as the methodology, it combines the theoretical perspectives of multimodal semiotics and cognitive linguistics. Through a systematic three - level coding process, it analyzes the collaborative mechanism of visual - linguistic symbols in government - affiliated car-

toons, reveals the dynamic reconstruction patterns of the audience's cognitive schemas on symbolic meanings, and fills the gap in explaining the micro - level cognitive transformation mechanism in Chinese political communication.

3. Research Design

3.1. Methodology

This study adopts the grounded theory methodology proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which systematically integrates empirical research with theoretical construction through inductive analysis of raw data. As a mass medium deeply rooted in daily life, comics have historically served as vehicles for disseminating political ideologies and values from their role as 'intellectual resistance vanguards' during wartime to their current applications in shaping governmental and national imagery. Public perceptions of comics, including their interpretative engagement, acceptance, and evaluative outcomes, remain central to understanding their sociopolitical impact. Consequently, this research employs grounded theory to conduct in-depth interviews with the public, aiming to analyze authentic perspectives on how comics contribute

to institutional image-building. Through coding, categorization, and thematic analysis of interview data, the study seeks to identify practical challenges in semiotic-political communication, construct a theoretical model of image mediation, and propose actionable strategies for optimizing comics' efficacy in governance narratives.

3.2. Participant Recruitment and Sampling Strategy

This study employs theoretical sampling, with participant selection adhering to the following principles: First, within the broad conceptual framework of comics, participants were required to possess a foundational understanding of comics, demonstrating perceptive awareness of their applications across educational, professional, and quotidian contexts; second, given the universal outreach and inclusive nature of comics in governmental image construction initiatives, the sampling strategy prioritized maximal demographic heterogeneity across gender, age, educational attainment, occupational background, and political affiliation. The finalized sample comprised 30 interviewees, detailed demographic statistics are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Interview Participants.

	Basic Information	Number of Participants	Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	15	50
	Female	15	50
Political Affiliation	Communist Party Members	10	33
	Communist Youth League	8	27
	General Public	8	27
	Others	4	13
Age	≤ 18 years	2	7
	19–25 years	11	37
	26–39 years	10	33
	≥ 40 years	7	23
Educational Background	High school and below	3	10
	Undergraduate	15	50
	Postgraduate and above	12	40
Occupation	Students	10	33
	Teachers	6	20
	Public Institution Staff	6	20
	Corporate Employees	5	17
	Freelancers	3	10

Note: Percentages are rounded to the nearest integer based on the total sample of 30 participants.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, allowing flexible adjustment of question design based on interviewees' demographic variability. Prior to formal interviews, standardized explanations were provided regarding

core concepts (comics definition, visual/linguistic semiotics, governmental image construction) to ensure conceptual alignment across participants with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. With prior informed consent, all interviews

were audio-recorded under strict confidentiality protocols that limited data usage to academic purposes. Audio files were subsequently transcribed verbatim, systematically organized, and

subjected to content analysis, yielding approximately 90,000 words of interview transcripts. The complete interview protocol is detailed in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Interview Protocol.

Interview Theme	Sample Interview Questions
Key Concepts And Scope Definition	Comics, communication media, image construction
Basic Information	Name, gender, political affiliation, age, educational background, occupation
Participants' Perceptions of the Functions and Roles of Comics	1. When did you first encounter comics? 2. What initial impressions do you associate with comics? 3. Which comic genres/styles do you primarily engage with? 4. Through which platforms/channels do you typically access comics? 5. How do comics interact with your personal, professional, and educational spheres? 6. As a communication medium, how would you evaluate comics' current sociocultural penetration within China's media ecosystem?
Participants' Understanding of How Comics Contribute to Government Image Construction	1. What distinguishes comics from other media in conveying value propositions and political ideologies? 2. Have you encountered comics addressing sociopolitical agendas or current affairs? Which iconic characters or works left significant impressions? 3. Analyzing exemplars like epidemic-prevention comics, space exploration narratives, or Winter Olympics-themed imagery-what sociopolitical functions do these works fulfill? 4. Have you observed government/city-branding comics in public spaces (parks, transit hubs) or virtual platforms (government social media accounts)? 5. What roles do comics play in constructing institutional and urban identities? 6. What critical elements should inform comics' deployment in governmental image-building initiatives? 7. How do you envision comics' future applications in sociopolitical communication and national image cultivation?

4. Research Findings

4.1. Open Coding

Open coding constitutes the initial phase of conceptual abstraction through systematic data disaggregation and categorical induction. At this stage, researchers performed line-by-line decomposition of transcribed interview data, extracting core concepts through verbatim coding to ensure analytical objectivity. The process involved transcribing 20

audio-recorded interviews into textual data, followed by iterative coding cycles that generated 137 validated conceptual units. Subsequent conceptual clustering, guided by thematic relevance and axial relationships, yielded 25 preliminary categories. This multi-layered analytical approach facilitated a multidimensional perspective on comics' semiotic-political dynamics. The complete conceptual taxonomy, including representative participant quotations and categorical affiliations, is systematically presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Open Coding.

No.	Initial Category	Sample Concepts (Partial Quotes)	Respondent Characteristics
1	Exposure Degree	Started watching at age 3 or 4 (early exposure); watched less as I grew up (less later) ...	P4, male, 32 years old, teacher, Party member, PhD
2	Content Exposure	Mostly watched domestic productions at first (Chinese comics); earliest foreign ones were American superhero cartoons (American comics) ...	P5, male, 21 years old, student, League member, undergraduate
3	Access Methods	Accessed through internet or TV in primary school (online; TV) ...	P10, male, 20 years old, student, League member, undergraduate
4	Traditional Cognition	Very strict and formal (strict; formal) ...	P18, female, 35 years old, company staff, mass, master's degree
5	Psychological Cognition	Not as strict, more relaxed viewing (less strict; relaxed) ...	P18, female, 35 years old, company staff, mass, master's degree

Table 3. *Cont.*

No.	Initial Category	Sample Concepts (Partial Quotes)	Respondent Characteristics
6	Visual Perception	Visually impactful (visual impact) ...	P20, female, 29 years old, company staff, mass, master's degree
7	Content Perception	Clear and vivid, often humorous, easier to understand than long text (concise; humorous; understandable) ...	P12, female, 40 years old, teacher, mass, master's degree
8	Functional Cognition	Mainly entertainment for teenagers (leisure function) ...	P10, male, 20 years old, student, League member, undergraduate
9	Audience Cognition	Mainly young people, but also accessible to older groups (broad audience) ...	P02, male, 49 years old, enterprise and public institution staff, mass, undergraduate
10	Government Image Cognition	Feels distant and abstract (distant; abstract) ...	P06, female, 20 years old, student, League member, undergraduate
11	Policy Perception	Policies feel very strict and far from daily life (strict; distant) ...	P05, male, 21 years old, student, League member, undergraduate
12	Political Content	Cartoons promoting socialist core values (value content) ...	P17, female, 27 years old, enterprise and public institution staff, Party member, master's degree
13	Political Imagery	Impression is shallow or unclear, but can be improved through design (weak impression; design improvable) ...	P20, female, 29 years old, company staff, mass, master's degree
14	Political Communication Medium	Seen on short videos and social media (social media; publicity) ...	P16, female, 48 years old, freelance, mass, high school education
15	Political Communication Function	Simplifies and visualizes government policies for the public (simplification; dissemination) ...	P19, male, 39 years old, enterprise and public institution staff, Party member, undergraduate
16	Political Communication Role	Important for promoting cultural literacy and development (cultural role) ...	P12, female, 40 years old, teacher, mass, master's degree
17	Political Communication Effect	Bridges the distance between government and people (bridging effect) ...	P02, male, 49 years old, enterprise and public institution staff, mass, undergraduate
18	Content Elements	Should address social issues and evoke empathy (social resonance) ...	P14, female, 22 years old, student, Party member, master's degree
19	Cultural Elements	Can include traditional Chinese elements (traditional culture) ...	P09, male, 18 years old, student, League member, undergraduate
20	Design Elements	Content matters more than form (content over form) ...	P04, male, 32 years old, teacher, Party member, PhD
21	Publicity Elements	Needs continuous renewal to attract people (renewal) ...	P17, female, 27 years old, enterprise and public institution staff, Party member, master's degree
22	Spatial Elements	Should expand online and mobile platforms (online space) ...	P16, female, 48 years old, freelance, mass, high school education
23	Issues Identified	Bridges gaps but may also reduce perceived authority (credibility risk) ...	P11, female, 26 years old, teacher, other, master's degree
24	Public Attitudes	Generally optimistic if produced with sincerity (optimism; sincerity) ...	P08, female, 20 years old, student, League member, undergraduate
25	Practical Significance	Comics are a future trend (trend) ...	P17, female, 27 years old, enterprise and public institution staff, Party member, master's degree

Note: P = Participant Number. Due to the extensive content of coding, only representative or thematically significant statements are presented here as examples.

4.2. Axial Coding

Axial coding facilitates the identification of organic connections among categories derived from open coding, systematically revealing the relational architecture within qualitative data. Aligned with the ‘Condition-Action-Consequence’ paradigm—where respondents’ comic engage-

ment is shaped by contextual conditions, leading to cognitive schema formation that mediates their sociopolitical environmental perception—this study synthesized 25 preliminary categories into 7 core categories. This analytical progression elucidates how individuals’ contextualized comic consumption (Condition) informs interpretative frameworks (Action), ultimately structuring their comprehension of governmen-

tal image construction through comics (Consequence). The resultant categorical matrix, demonstrating hierarchical inter-

relations and paradigmatic logic, is comprehensively mapped in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Axial Coding and Core Categories.

Category	Code	Core Category	Initial Subcategories
Semiotic Input	1	Conditional Constraints	Degree of exposure, content exposure, access methods
Cognitive Processing	2	Attribute Identification	Traditional cognition, psychological perception, visual perception, content perception, functional understanding, audience cognition
	3	Applied Experience	Political content, political imagery, political communication methods
Perceptual Output	4	Value Experience	Political communication functions, roles, and effects
	5	Political Perception	Government image cognition, policy understanding
Policy Feedback	6	Constructive Orientation	Content elements, cultural elements, design elements, promotional elements, spatial considerations
	7	Problem-Driven Direction	Problems identified, attitudes, practical implications

4.3. Selective Coding

Through iterative analysis of raw data, open codes, axial categories, and analytical memos, this study identified ‘Semiotic-Cognitive Alignment Mechanisms in Government-Affiliated Comics’ as the core category integrating all conceptual dimensions of audience perception in governmental image construction. Building upon this conceptual framework, the derived narrative trajectory elucidates a dynamic cycle: external stimuli (exposure channels and content charac-

teristics) activate audiences’ functional and formal cognition of government comics. This cognitive engagement, mediated through multimodal semiotic interactions and value-laden communicative experiences, fosters political sense-making of institutional imagery and policy narratives. As visually synthesized in **Figure 1**, such perceptions generate optimization proposals and societal feedback, culminating in an iterative loop of ‘Semiotic Design → Cognitive Activation → Image Construction → Policy Refinement’.

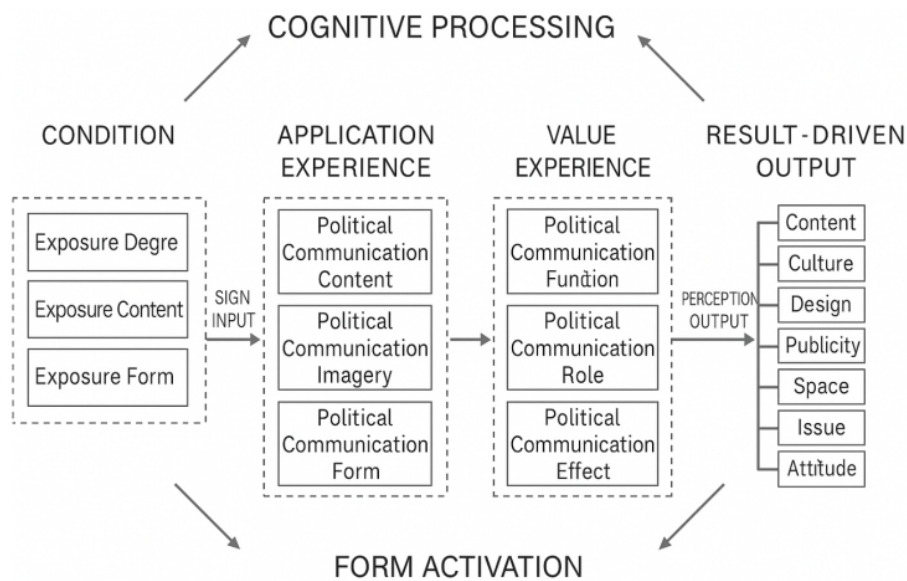


Figure 1. A Theoretical Model of the Semiotic-Cognitive Mechanism Underlying Governmental Image Perception in Comics.

4.4. Theoretical Saturation Validation

This study conducted theoretical saturation testing using the remaining 10 interview transcripts. Through rigorous

comparative analysis, the findings revealed that all emergent concepts in this subset were fully encompassed by the four established core categories: semiotic input, cognitive processing, perceptual output, and policy feedback. No novel

concepts or categories influencing the central theoretical framework were identified, thereby confirming the model's saturation. The verification steps confirm the coding framework's reliability and solidify the conceptual structure that maps how audiences interpret political cartoon imagery. This refined model accounts for observed patterns in collected datasets, showing consistent analytical validity.

5. Theoretical Model Elucidation

Through grounded theory analysis, this study establishes a theoretical model of the perceived mechanism of government cartoon image. The following section verifies and explains the inner logic and operation mechanism of the main category by restoring specific cases, so as to analyse the audience's perception of the cartoon in the process of constructing the government's image in terms of the way it is perceived, its communication effect and its practical value.

5.1. Symbolic Input: Internal and External Environment for Forming Image Cognition

Both the cartoon and the government's image perception are subject to certain conditions. The way of contact, the content and the degree of contact form the external environment of cognition. Although the perception of cartoons is not the same due to different external factors, the basic feelings of psychological perception, image cognition and functional positioning of cartoons have a high degree of similarity: firstly, the cartoons bring the mental experience of relaxation, humour and stress reduction ('it mainly serves as a relaxing effect' (A-1)); secondly, comics have the visual characteristic of simple image (Compared with reading words, this is easier to understand and read in.' (A-2)); Third, respondents highlighted comics' function as a key form of everyday entertainment ('The overall feeling is that it is still a form of entertainment, although it can't be said to be necessary, but it would still be hard to live without it.' (A-4)). The visual experience and psychological feelings brought by manga make it a natural advantage in reaching the people. Although the popularity of anime in the youth population makes some people think that comics are a representative of low culture, the study found that comics have an extremely wide audience in China, and the masses show a high degree of acceptance of the application of comics in social and cul-

tural life, which is the basis for the application of comics in the dissemination of political ideas and the construction of governmental image.

5.2. Cognitive Processing: the Real Mirror Image of Cartoon Political Application

In the new media era, visual rhetoric creates the most extensive political dialogue^[24] and political communication is transforming from traditional textual rhetoric to visual rhetoric^[25]. As a dual-constructed visual language, cartoons have the characteristic of integrating both visual and textual resources^[26], and have a unique advantage in the expression and transmission of meaning. The important value of cartoons in political communication and political interaction is also gradually recognised and practiced. The role played by cartoons in the process of political communication and understanding is reflected through the public's own perception, and this study found through grounded theory that in terms of the application experience, the current political narrative of cartoons is not widely perceived, for example, 'I don't take the initiative to look for these things (to see them), I may just see them during the process of brushing the video or surfing the Internet but I don't pay attention to them actively.' (A-6), Barnhurst points out that when young people reject stereotypical and unidirectional forms of political communication, political communication must transform itself through the perceptual influence of new media. It is clear that although cartoons are used in political narratives, from a receptive point of view, there is a 'passive acceptance' and 'insufficient attention' in the choice of content. It should be emphasised that the cartoons that are 'factual' and 'rich in content' are still impressive, such as 'the most impressive is the Dabai (related cartoon) of epidemic prevention, which is empathetic and touching to the heart.' (A-7). Through the cross-modal collaboration of visual and verbal symbols, the image of 'Dabai' anchors the abstract role of the policy implementer as a 'bodily protector', so that the public can form the cognitive schema of 'the government is the guardian' in their embodied experience, which significantly enhances their willingness to cooperate with the policy. National awareness of the state and emotional orientation can be stimulated through the catalyst^[27], and spiritual symbols and cultural symbols as such catalysts are visually expressed through cartoons, thus forming the visual construction of

national identity. This conceptual embodiment is realised through multimodal metaphors. In terms of value experience, the positive evaluations of ‘bringing the distance closer’ and ‘promoting understanding’ are particularly prominent, such as ‘it can bring the distance between the people and the government closer, and make the people feel that the government is not so serious and so stereotypical’ (A-8). ‘The cartoon image of the leader is very cute’ (A-10), cartoons by its own affinity, humour, conciseness to reduce the burden of the public in the process of obtaining information on the work of the government, to alleviate the boredom, and to play the function of political propaganda in a subtle way.

5.3. Perceived Output: Providing Direction for Government Image Building

A good government image can enhance the public’s sense of identity, cohesion and appeal. As to how cartoons play a role in the construction of government image, according to the views of the interviewees, they can provide some thoughts on the direction of the development of government image. In the new-media era, ‘personality’ communication has gradually become a trend, and created a series of ‘out of the circle’ political new media, such as the creation of the Communist Youth League Central Committee ‘Tuan Tuan’ persona. Media, in order to enhance the publicity impact at the same time also strengthen the audience’s attention and acceptance. The ‘personification’ communication focuses on the approachability of the language and the publicity image, which is consistent with the perception of the interviewees. On external image, Interviewee A said that ‘traditional Chinese cultural characteristics can be eye-catching, including ink painting (and other styles), but it doesn’t mean that all of them have to be traditional, (or) have characteristics (A-14). Appropriate use of cultural elements can deepen the sense of common identity, but more respondents are more concerned with the content than the external image. Regarding the presentation of content, Respondent X pointed out that ‘it is necessary to understand the policy, but at the same time, it can be visualised or simplified, and refined to convey it to the general public’, and ‘when I go to the hospital or run errands, I see the flow chart and find it very simple and easy to understand’, which suggests that the narrative is more effective in reducing the cognitive load. Simplification strategy is an effective way to reduce the cognitive load, to achieve the

organic combination of external image design and content is the core element of the successful construction of government image. In terms of communication modes, the rapid development of smart communication devices has promoted changes in media communication methods. Regarding the city image publicity cartoons, socialist core values promotion cartoons, and environmental protection cartoons set up in the traditional public space, most interviewees said that they habitually play with their mobile phones to kill time no matter whether they are waiting for a bus or having a meal, and it is very easy to ignore the publicity information in the public space. In contrast, cartoon landscapes in the virtual space are more capable of attracting the attention of the public, and it is easier to achieve the effect of promotion and publicity. The operation of government short videos, government microblogs and official WeChat public numbers also pay attention to this point, and the effective integration of cartoon elements and government content can create an IP effect and become an effective means of ‘sucking in the fans’ of government new media.

5.4. Policy Feedback: the Significance of Cartoons in Building Government Image

Harold Lasswell proposed that the examination of social communication phenomena, in addition to focusing on the structural characteristics of the communication content, should also focus on the role and effect of communication, that is, the function of communication for the construction of the government’s image, compared with the traditional media publicity, the public expect to see the new era of government image with the times. Respondents felt that the image of the government ‘needs to be constantly renewed’ (M-17) and that ‘it needs to explore ways to attract people’ (H-18). The application of new elements and media plays an important role in the construction of government image. For example, chibi-style caricatures of political leaders have gone viral, the cute design of visual symbols and the youthful expression of linguistic symbols synergistically activate the ‘affinity schema’, which confirms the effectiveness of symbolic synergy in reconstructing the cognitive framework. As a popular culture around the world, comics are undoubtedly an effective medium, and most of the interviewees have a positive attitude towards the prospect of the application of comics in the construction of the government’s image, for

example, ‘This is definitely a trend, and it will become more and more popular’ (D-19), ‘I maintain a relatively optimistic attitude’ (D-20). While caricature enjoys a broad public appeal for the construction of government image in the new era, but at the same time, it must be realised that only when caricature is truly integrated into politics can it achieve the desired effect, as Interviewee X said, ‘If we really use cartoons as a medium, really promote and produce them with our hearts, not as some kind of indicator to cope with, the effect will still be quite good’. The use of cartoons as an effective way of building government image and disseminating political ideas helps to achieve good interaction between the party and the public, and is also of practical value for the dissemination of China’s international image in the new era.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Research Findings

Based on the Grounded Theory, this paper constructs the relational concepts linking the internal and external environments of functional of comic-image perception, the real mirror image of comic political applications, intention feedback of government comic image construction, and comics’ practical value for government image building. It derives a theoretical model of the perception mechanism of government comic images, with the following key findings: 1) Verifies the logical relationship between multimodal symbols and cognitive schemas. The study systematically defines four core categories of comic political communication: political propaganda functions, political application experiences, government image elements, and image-shaping values. It empirically validates action chain: the multimodality of government-affiliated comics → activation of audience cognitive schemas → shaping of government image perception. 2) Reveals the working principle of the symbol-cognitive alignment mechanism. As a tool of “visual governance,” the effectiveness of government comics depends on the precise matching between symbol design at the production end and cognitive schemas at the reception end. 3) Cognitive activation enhances policy communication effects. The public’s cognitive degree of political propaganda functions significantly and positively influences policy comprehension. 4) Specific paths for building Party-mass relations. Multimodal symbols significantly reduce the perception of

power distance through affinity coding, but excessive use of entertaining symbols should be cautioned against, balancing solemnity and affinity.

6.2. Research Contributions

This study focuses on the public’s cognition and experience of the political propaganda function of comics, and explores the practical path of constructing the government image through comics through real feedback. Based on the interview data, a coding analysis was conducted through the grounded theory research method to explore the connotation of the relationship between the public perception of comics as a medium and the construction of the government image. Finally, four main categories such as the symbol input layer and seven sub-categories such as conditional restrictions were defined, adding new content to the connotation of the relationship between the public’s perception of the political application of comics and the construction of the government image by comics. It provides a novel research perspective. Additionally, a theoretical model of the government’s cartoon image perception mechanism was established, reflecting that the public’s perception of cartoon images and functions formed the cognitive basis for the political propaganda function of cartoons. The public’s application experience and value experience of cartoons in the dissemination of policies, guidelines and political concepts can activate the relevant cognitive schemas and have a direct effect on the dissemination effect. The multimodal collaborative function and cognitive schema activation function that comics possess have enabled them to play a positive role in the relationship between the Party and the masses and the construction of the government image. As a mass medium with a solid mass foundation, comics have always played an important role in the process of government image construction.

According to the research of this article, when functional departments use comics for the publicity of Party and government work and the shaping of the image of the government and the country, they should consider the following aspects: (1) Give full play to the multi-modal characteristics of comics with both text and images, and achieve both internal and external quality. First of all, it is necessary to clarify that comics are merely a form of publicity and means. Although exquisite and excellent image design can catch the public’s attention, if it is only superficial, it cannot fully

play the role of publicity and promotion. Therefore, it is necessary to have rich ideological connotations, explore external manifestations that conform to its characteristics, and achieve a high degree of unity between “form” and “spirit”, so as to create a government comic image with a strong core. (2) Pay attention to the boundary between seriousness and entertainment, and take into account the dual nature of cognitive schema activation. First of all, comics are widely recognized and accepted by the public due to their grassroots nature. They are a mass medium with a good mass foundation. The application of comics in political propaganda has a remarkable effect of bringing the Party and the people closer and inspiring and motivating the masses, and can improve the public’s fixed impression of the government as “serious”. However, it must be noted that comics in the new media era have obvious entertainment attributes. Excessive or improper use of comics may pose the risk of reducing the credibility and seriousness of the government. On the basis of maintaining the authority of the national government and official media, comic elements are introduced for harmonization, so as to achieve an organic combination of seriousness and liveliness, increase the interaction between the government and the people, and create a new era government image. (3) Give full play to the function of comics in reducing cognitive load during the process of building the government’s image. For example, in the flowchart of the new medical insurance policy, its narrative simplification strategy reduces cognitive load and is more efficient in cognitive processing, thus effectively enhancing the understandability and acceptance of policy information. In the subsequent policy promotion, concise design and information processing are the key means to enhance policy awareness.

6.3. Shortcomings and Prospects

Despite its contributions, this study still has certain limitations and deficiencies. Firstly, the theoretical model of constructing the government image through comics explored and formed in this study is based on a limited sample and has certain limitations. In subsequent studies, the selection range of the samples will be further expanded. Secondly, although the grounded-theory procedures and methods were strictly followed during the research process, it might still be influenced by the subjectivity of the coder. Finally, the

construction and analysis of the theoretical model relied the perspective of the masses. The study has not conducted in-depth investigations and interviews with practitioners, researchers, and experts and scholars in the field of comics. In future research, the views of creators and designers should be integrated as soon as possible to further optimize and improve the symbolic and cognitive interaction mechanism of the audience’s perception of government comic images.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

To protect participant confidentiality, the complete research data cannot be publicly archived. De-identified excerpts may be made available upon formal request to the corresponding author, contingent on express written consent from the interviewed individuals.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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