

Original Paper

Symbolic Capital and Youth Identity: A Study of the Ne Zha Phenomenon in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Guided by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital and field, this study examines the reception of the animated franchise Ne Zha (2019) and Ne Zha 2 (2024) among contemporary Chinese youth. Using a netnographic approach and systematic coding of 2,159 online comments, the research analyzes how mythological narratives are reinterpreted as symbolic resources within digital cultural fields. The findings indicate that the films function as a cultural mirror through which young audiences reflect on structural pressures associated with education, employment, and social mobility. By connecting mythological struggles with contemporary discourses such as involution and the phenomenon of the "small-town exam striver", audiences reinterpret the character of Ne Zha as a symbolic figure that articulates generational anxieties. The analysis further demonstrates that the circulation of symbolic capital varies across digital platforms. On Bilibili, interactive practices such as danmu (bullet comments) encourage subcultural interaction and collective interpretation, whereas Weibo operates as a broader public arena characterized by visibility-driven debates and ideological positioning.

Overall, the study shows that youth engagement with the Ne Zha franchise follows a process in which affective resonance gradually develops into symbolic claiming. Through this process, popular cultural texts become shared discursive resources that enable young audiences to negotiate generational identities and interpret their social experiences within contemporary Chinese society.

Keywords

symbolic capital, Ne Zha, youth identity, digital platforms, cultural consumption

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Context: The Ne Zha Phenomenon and Youth Cultural Resonance

Since the release of *Ne Zha* (2019) and its sequel *Ne Zha 2* (2025), the franchise has become one of the most influential animated productions in contemporary Chinese cinema. According to the China Film Data **Information** Network (Note 1), the series has achieved remarkable commercial success, with the sequel generating more than 15.4 billion yuan in box office revenue. Beyond its commercial performance, the popularity of the *Ne Zha* films reflects a broader cultural resonance among young audiences.

Through the reinterpretation of a well-known mythological figure, the films transform the traditional archetype of *Ne Zha* into a symbol of resistance against predetermined fate. This narrative framework resonates strongly with the psychological condition of contemporary youth who face structural pressures related to social mobility, identity formation, and generational expectations. As Song (2025) argues in an exploration of cultural subjectivity within the franchise, this resonance allows the *Ne Zha* series to function as a significant medium for expressing the lived experiences of the new generation. Consequently, the franchise has emerged as a widely discussed cultural phenomenon through which young audiences articulate emotional experiences and negotiate cultural meanings within the digital media environment.

1.2 Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Capital and Cultural Meaning-Making

To interpret the cultural resonance of the *Ne Zha* franchise, this study adopts a multidimensional analytical perspective drawing on the sociological insights of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly the concepts of field, capital, and habitus. From this perspective, cinematic texts may be understood as symbolic arenas in which cultural meanings and social positions are negotiated.

In addition, the study engages with Stuart Hall's encoding–decoding model to account for the interpretive dynamics of media reception. This approach foregrounds the active role of audiences, emphasizing that media meanings are continuously interpreted, negotiated, and sometimes contested within specific social contexts.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a conceptual orientation for analyzing the *Ne Zha* franchise as a symbolic field in which young audiences reinterpret cultural symbols and negotiate identity within the digital media environment. The following section elaborates the theoretical framework that guides the empirical analysis.

1.3 Methodology and Analytical Framework

This study adopts a netnographic approach to examine youth discourse surrounding the *Ne Zha* film series across major Chinese online platforms. The data collection period focuses on the peak phases of online discussion following the release of *Ne Zha* (July 2019–April 2020) and *Ne Zha 2* (February–April 2025). The dataset was collected from three major platforms—Douban, Weibo, and

Bilibili—using keyword searches including “Ne Zha”, “My fate is determined by myself” and “Shen Gongbao”. After removing advertisements, duplicated entries, and irrelevant content through manual screening, a total of 2,159 valid comments were obtained.

The final dataset includes 301 comments from Douban, 639 from Weibo, 1,168 bullet comments from Bilibili, and 51 extended discussion posts from Bilibili. Among these platforms, Bilibili plays a particularly important role due to its interactive comment system and strong youth community, which allows real-time emotional expression and discursive interaction among viewers. The collected data were subsequently analyzed through thematic coding, including open coding, category aggregation, and theoretical mapping, guided by Hall’s encoding-decoding model and Bourdieu’s field-capital-habitus framework. The procedures of data collection and analysis are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Design and Data Analysis Procedures

| Category | Description |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Data collection period | July 2019-April 2020 (after the release of Ne Zha), and February-April 2025 (after the release of Ne Zha 2) |
| Data sources | Bilibili, Douban, and Weibo |
| Sample size | 2,159 user comments |
| Data collection method | Netnography using keyword-based searches and platform observation; data include popular comments, danmu (bullet comments), and user reviews |
| Coding and analysis procedure | Open coding → category aggregation → theoretical mapping; guided by Hall’s encoding-decoding model and Bourdieu’s field-capital-habitus framework |
| Emotional categories | Twelve categories including positive, neutral, negative, nostalgic, anger, identification, and satire |
| Analytical tool | Microsoft Excel |
| Ethical considerations | Data anonymization, removal of identifiable information, and adherence to online research ethics |
| Coding reliability | Intercoder agreement verified through repeated coding and discussion |

Through a systematic coding process—including open coding, category aggregation, and thematic interpretation—the study identifies twelve categories of emotional expression, including reflexive, affirmative, critical, and satirical responses. Based on the above theoretical and methodological considerations, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What narrative and symbolic mechanisms in the Ne Zha films generate strong emotional resonance among contemporary youth audiences?

RQ2: How do young audiences utilize the Ne Zha franchise as a symbolic field to negotiate identity, social anxiety, and cultural belonging?

RQ3: How does digital discourse surrounding the Ne Zha films facilitate the negotiation of symbolic capital and the formation of cultural legitimacy?

2. Theoretical Framework: Cultural Capital, Tactical Practice, and Subcultural Style

2.1 Structural Field and Tactical Agency: Bourdieu and De Certeau in Cultural Consumption

This study employs a dual-layered theoretical approach that reconciles the structural distribution of resources with the agency of individual consumption. Central to this framework is Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) multidimensional conceptualization of capital. Bourdieu posits that power within a social field is determined not only by economic assets but by the accumulation of cultural capital, which manifests in three states: embodied (internalized dispositions and aesthetic sensibilities), objectified (cultural goods and symbolic artifacts), and institutionalized (formal credentials). Within this perspective, the Ne Zha franchise functions as a carrier of objectified cultural capital. As youth audiences engage with cinematic narratives, they internalize themes of resistance and self-determination, transforming these elements into embodied capital and symbolic resources to navigate their positions within broader generational contexts.

However, while Bourdieu emphasizes the structural distribution of capital, Michel de Certeau's (1984) theory of "everyday practice" provides a necessary complementary lens on audience agency. De Certeau distinguishes between the "strategies" of dominant institutions and the "tactics" of individuals. While strategies reflect the organized power of the cultural industry, tactics refer to the creative, opportunistic practices through which ordinary users navigate and reinterpret existing systems. This process, which De Certeau terms "poaching" (braconnage), describes how audiences selectively appropriate elements of dominant cultural production and redeploy them within their own contexts of meaning.

By synthesizing these perspectives, the consumption of the Ne Zha franchise can be understood as an active cultural practice embedded in digital participatory environments. Through "tactical" engagements—such as bullet comments (danmu), memes, and fan-generated content—youth audiences do not merely consume a commercial product; they "poach" its symbols to generate new social uses. This theoretical intersection reveals how the Ne Zha IP is transformed from a static media text into a dynamic symbolic field, illustrating the evolving relationship between the structural logic of cultural capital and the tactical agency of digital youth.

2.2 *Subcultural Style and Symbolic Re-coding*

The reinterpretation of the *Ne Zha* figure can also be understood through the concept of subcultural style developed by Dick Hebdige (1979). He conceptualizes subcultural style as a semiotic practice through which marginalized youth groups appropriate and re-signify elements of dominant culture. Through such processes of symbolic transformation, everyday cultural objects and signs are re-coded to express resistance, identity, and collective belonging. Through processes of symbolic transformation, everyday cultural objects and signs are re-coded to produce alternative meanings that express resistance, identity, and collective belonging.

Within this perspective, subcultural style operates as a semiotic practice through which marginalized or youth groups articulate their social positions. By selectively appropriating elements from dominant cultural forms and recombining them in new contexts, subcultural actors create visible markers of distinction. These stylistic practices do not merely reflect cultural preferences; rather, they function as symbolic strategies through which subcultural communities negotiate power, identity, and recognition within the broader cultural field.

The contemporary cinematic portrayal of the *Ne Zha* character—marked by rebelliousness, outsider status, and resistance to predetermined fate—resonates strongly with this logic of subcultural style. For many young audiences, *Ne Zha* becomes an emotionally charged symbolic figure through which themes of autonomy, social pressure, and generational frustration can be expressed. Through the reinterpretation and circulation of *Ne Zha*-related symbols in digital media environments, youth audiences transform a traditional mythic archetype into a contemporary cultural signifier that reflects ongoing negotiations of identity, belonging, and social mobility.

2.3 *Analytical Integration: A Framework for Symbolic Negotiation*

By synthesizing the theoretical perspectives discussed above, this study conceptualizes the *Ne Zha* franchise as a dynamic cultural field in which symbolic meanings are negotiated through everyday digital practices and subcultural reinterpretations. This integration enables the analysis to move across multiple analytical levels—from the structural distribution of symbolic resources emphasized by Pierre Bourdieu, to the everyday tactical practices described by Michel de Certeau, and finally to the symbolic expressions associated with youth subcultures identified by Dick Hebdige.

Building on this theoretical synthesis, the study proposes an analytical model structured around the sequence “Emotional Response—Value Orientation—Symbolic Claiming”. This model traces how affective engagement with cinematic narratives evolves into broader processes of value interpretation and symbolic positioning within youth cultural discourse.

Stage 1: Emotional Response (Affective Habitus)

At the initial stage, audience engagement begins with affective resonance between the cinematic narrative and the lived experiences of young viewers. This stage examines how the film evokes specific

emotional responses—such as empathy, frustration, or irony—which reflect shared generational sensibilities and elements of youth habitus.

Stage 2: Value Orientation (Tactical Decoding)

Building on these emotional reactions, audiences interpret the film's themes through processes of negotiated and tactical decoding. Drawing on the insights of de Certeau and Stuart Hall, this stage explores how viewers reinterpret narrative elements—such as fate, autonomy, and social mobility—in ways that resonate with their own social realities.

Stage 3: Symbolic Claiming

Finally, these interpretations become externalized through symbolic practices in digital media environments. Through online discussions, memes, and fan-generated content, youth audiences transform narrative symbols associated with the Ne Zha character into markers of identity and collective belonging, thereby mobilizing symbolic capital within the digital public sphere.

Taken together, this analytical framework illustrates how popular cultural texts can function as shared symbolic reference points. It highlights how contemporary youth move from individual affective engagement with media to collective processes of cultural meaning-making and symbolic positioning in the digital age.

3. Findings: Symbolic Negotiation in Youth Reception of the Ne Zha Franchise

3.1 Affective Habitus: Emotional Resonance and the Narrative of Defying Fate

The reception of the Ne Zha franchise extends beyond aesthetic appreciation and can be understood as a form of what Margaret Wetherell (2013) describes as “affective practice”, in which patterned emotional responses emerge from shared social conditions. Across digital platforms such as Bilibili, Weibo, and Douban, the film's central narrative—the struggle against predetermined destiny—functions as a powerful affective anchor. The iconic line, “*My fate is determined by myself, not by heaven*” has become a frequently cited expression within youth discourse, reflecting the lived experiences of young people navigating pressures related to education, employment, and social mobility.

To further examine the emotional structure of youth responses, the study categorized the emotional tendencies expressed in online comments. As shown in Figure 1, comments categorized as “neutral/reflection” account for the largest proportion of responses (56.8%), followed by nostalgic/warm (13.2%) and questioning/dissatisfaction (12.6%). Positive emotional responses such as “touched/tearful” also appear frequently. This distribution suggests that young audiences do not simply respond emotionally to the film but often engage in reflective interpretations that connect the narrative to their own social experiences.

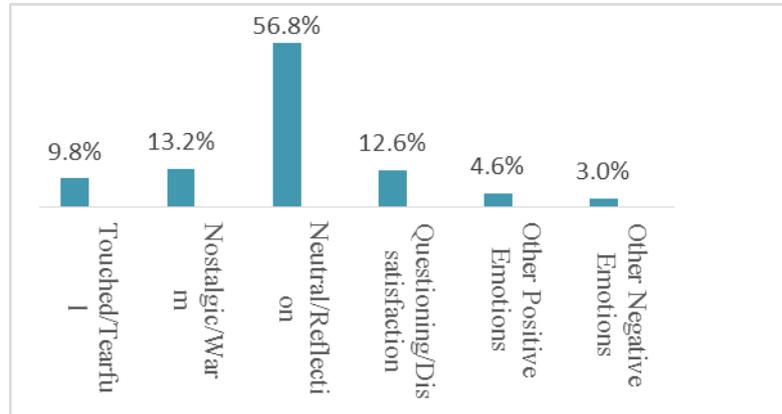


Figure 1. Distribution of Emotional Responses among Young Audiences

Comments on Bilibili’s bullet comment system (danmu) frequently include statements such as “*This feels like my own struggle against my background*” Such responses suggest that viewers interpret the narrative through the lens of their own social experiences rather than engaging with it purely as mythological entertainment. This process resembles what Michel de Certeau describes as the “poaching” of meaning, in which audiences appropriate cultural texts and reinterpret them within their own everyday contexts.

These reactions reveal an affective dimension of youth habitus. As Sara Ahmed (2004) argues, emotions tend to “stick” to particular cultural objects and circulate within social relations. In this context, the figure of Ne Zha becomes a “sticky” cultural symbol that accumulates associations with frustration, aspiration, and resistance among young audiences. Through this affective attachment, the character functions as a symbolic mediator that enables youth to articulate generational anxieties within a broader social field.

3.2 Tactical Decoding: Symbolic Allegories of Social Stratification

Beyond emotional identification, youth audiences engage in what Stuart Hall (1980) terms “negotiated decoding” of the film’s narrative metaphors. In particular, the binary opposition between the “Demon Pill” (mowan) and the “Spirit Pearl” (lingzhu) is frequently interpreted by viewers as an allegory for structural inequality and inherited social status.

In the narrative framework of the film, Ne Zha is born as the reincarnation of the Demon Pill and is therefore stigmatized from the moment of his birth. This narrative element resonates strongly with the experiences of individuals who feel constrained by social labeling or structural disadvantage. As a result, the character’s struggle against predetermined destiny becomes a symbolic representation of resistance to rigid social hierarchies.

This interpretive pattern becomes even more pronounced in discussions surrounding Ne Zha 2, where the conflict between the heavenly court and the demon race is widely interpreted as a metaphor for

class hierarchy and structural oppression. In online discourse, users frequently employ contemporary socio-cultural vocabulary—such as “small-town exam striver” (xiaozhen zuoti jia, 小镇做题家) and “involution” (neijuan, 内卷)—to describe the characters’ struggles. As Biao Xiang and Qi Wu (2023) elucidate in their discussion on the socio-structural constraints of modern China, these terms reflect a profound collective anxiety regarding the stagnation of social mobility. Such interpretations demonstrate how mythological narratives are recontextualized as critical frameworks for understanding the structural pressures and limited opportunities for advancement in contemporary Chinese society.

At the same time, the symbolic meaning of the Ne Zha character does not emerge solely through top-down ideological imposition. Rather, it reflects an ongoing process of negotiation among multiple social actors. While the narrative framework of Ne Zha (2019) aligns with broader cultural discourses emphasizing perseverance and struggle, it simultaneously constructs a symbolic space through which youth audiences articulate resistance and personal aspiration. In this sense, the cultural symbol of Ne Zha emerges through the interaction between institutional narratives and audience reinterpretation, transforming a traditional mythological figure into a shared symbolic resource within contemporary youth culture.

3.3 Symbolic Claiming: Identity Articulation and Digital Cultural Practice

The final stage of the reception process involves symbolic claiming, where narrative interpretations are translated into active cultural practices. Through the circulation of memes, fan art, and critical reviews, the character of Ne Zha is transformed into a “spreadable” signifier (Jenkins et al., 2013), evolving from a cinematic protagonist into a flexible cultural symbol of generational identity.

Within what Zizi Papacharissi (2010) describes as the “affective public sphere” references to Ne Zha function as shorthand for resilience and resistance to structural constraints. By invoking the character’s narrative of defiance, young users symbolically position themselves within a broader discourse of generational solidarity. In this process, engagement with the film moves beyond individual consumption and becomes a collective practice of meaning-making.

These dynamics illustrate how popular cultural texts can operate as resources for symbolic negotiation in youth cultural discourse. Through the collective reinterpretation and circulation of Ne Zha-related symbols in online environments, audiences mobilize symbolic capital and articulate shared cultural identities within the digital public sphere.

4. Discussion: Emotional Projection and Symbolic Capital in Youth Cultural Participation

4.1 Affective Resonance and Intergenerational Negotiation in Youth Media Engagement

The findings presented in the previous chapter reveal an important reflexive tendency in youth media engagement. While Section 3.1 identified the presence of shared emotional patterns in audience responses, these patterns also carry broader sociocultural implications. The high proportion of

comments categorized as “neutral/reflection” (56.8%) suggests that the Ne Zha franchise functions not merely as a source of emotional stimulation but as a reflexive platform through which young audiences interpret their own social experiences. Rather than reacting only through emotional identification, viewers frequently relate the film’s narrative to lived realities shaped by educational competition, employment uncertainty, and pressures surrounding social mobility. In this sense, the film operates as a cultural mirror through which youth audiences evaluate their positionality within contemporary social structures.

This pattern resonates with the concept of affective practice proposed by Margaret Wetherell, which emphasizes that emotional responses are socially patterned and embedded within everyday practices rather than existing as purely individual psychological states. The emotional engagement observed in youth discourse therefore reflects a reflexive interpretive process in which narrative themes—such as defying predetermined fate—are translated into meaningful reflections on personal experience. For example, many users reinterpret Ne Zha’s struggle against his predetermined identity as a metaphor for overcoming structural constraints in education and employment. In this way, emotional responses to the film become part of a broader process through which young audiences interpret their own life trajectories.

From a cultural-sociological perspective, this reflexive engagement also illustrates the evolving character of youth habitus in the digital era. As Sara Ahmed argues, emotions tend to “stick” to particular cultural objects and circulate through social relations, gradually accumulating symbolic meanings. In this context, the figure of Ne Zha becomes a symbolic anchor that gathers associations with frustration, aspiration, and resistance among young audiences. The character’s narrative of challenging fate therefore functions as an affective symbol through which dispersed personal experiences—such as anxiety over academic competition or frustration with limited social mobility—are articulated as part of a shared generational discourse.

Importantly, this reflexive engagement extends beyond individual emotion to the negotiation of family relationships. The empirical finding that 73.9% of the discourse centers on parent–child dynamics indicates that the family remains a crucial arena for youth identity formation in China. The interpretive evolution observed between the first and second films—shifting from radical defiance toward Li Jing to a more empathetic understanding of his paternal responsibilities—reflects a process of intergenerational negotiation. Rather than simply rejecting parental authority, viewers reinterpret Li Jing’s actions as responses to broader structural pressures, including economic insecurity and social expectations surrounding parental responsibility.

This shift also points to a contemporary reinterpretation of filial piety (xiao, 孝). Rather than emphasizing unilateral obedience, recent scholarship suggests that filial norms in contemporary Chinese society increasingly involve negotiation and mutual understanding between generations (Yan,

2009). Within this framework, the relationship between Ne Zha and Li Jing is frequently interpreted by viewers as an allegory for reconciling personal autonomy with familial obligation. The film therefore provides a symbolic vocabulary through which youth audiences articulate both their desire for independence and their recognition of parental intentions.

Ultimately, the Ne Zha franchise functions as a cultural mediator in the negotiation of generational identities. By projecting their own experiences onto the relationship between Ne Zha and Li Jing, young viewers reinterpret family relationships in ways that reconcile individual aspirations with familial responsibilities. Cinematic narratives thus become symbolic resources that help youth audiences navigate the tensions between self-realization and intergenerational expectations in contemporary Chinese society.

4.2 Symbolic Appropriation and the Expression of Class Anxiety

The reinterpretation of cinematic characters as socio-political metaphors constitutes a critical dimension of youth engagement with the Ne Zha narrative. In particular, the transformation of the antagonist Shen Gongbao into the symbolic archetype of the “small-town exam striver” illustrates how young audiences actively reinterpret fictional characters in relation to contemporary social realities. In Chinese public discourse, the *xiaozhen zuoti jia* phenomenon is often discussed in connection with the broader condition of “involution” a term popularized in recent scholarship to describe a form of intensified competition within a structurally stagnant system (Xiang, 2020).

Within this interpretive framework, Shen Gongbao is frequently understood not as a conventional villain but as a tragic embodiment of structural constraint. Just as Shen’s “demon race” (*yaozu*, 妖族) identity prevents him from gaining recognition within the heavenly order, the “striver” demographic faces increasing barriers to upward mobility in contemporary Chinese society. As studies on educational stratification suggest, the expansion of higher education has produced a form of credential inflation that weakens the traditional promise of meritocratic mobility (Chen, B. H. Y. & Zhou, Y., 2024). The resonance between Shen’s stigmatized identity and the lived experiences of rural-to-urban migrants reflects what some scholars describe as “meritocratic disappointment” (Lan, Y., 2026)—the growing perception that examination success no longer guarantees elite status in a highly stratified society.

From the perspective of symbolic capital, this symbolic appropriation enables youth audiences to convert a commercial media narrative into a shared discursive resource. By circulating these reinterpretations in digital fields, young audiences participate in the collective production of meaning, transforming the figure of Shen Gongbao into a symbolic reference point for discussing class anxiety and social mobility. In this process, the Ne Zha franchise evolves from a mythological fantasy into a cultural framework through which young people interpret their own social positioning and critically reflect on the dominant narrative of meritocratic success in contemporary China. This interpretation

reflects a sophisticated form of tactical decoding, in the sense described by Michel de Certeau. Rather than passively accepting the narrative logic of the film, young audiences “poach” elements of the story and reinterpret them within their own everyday contexts. Online discussions often describe Shen Gongbao as a metaphor for individuals who work relentlessly within an exam-oriented system but remain marginalized due to their social origins. Through this reinterpretation, the character becomes a symbolic reference point through which youth audiences express frustrations related to meritocratic competition, unequal access to educational resources, and the persistence of social stratification.

Such interpretations are closely linked to the contemporary discourse of “involution”, which describes a social condition characterized by intensified competition without corresponding improvement in opportunities or outcomes. In this context, Shen Gongbao’s narrative trajectory—marked by extraordinary effort yet constrained by his “demon” origin—resonates strongly with the experiences of young people who perceive themselves as trapped within increasingly rigid structures of mobility. By mapping Shen Gongbao’s stigmatized identity onto their own lived experiences of social labeling and rural–urban disparity, youth audiences transform mythological narrative elements into frameworks for interpreting structural inequality.

From the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital, this process demonstrates how cultural symbols acquire social meaning through collective interpretation. In particular, the reinterpretation of Shen Gongbao’s struggle allows young audiences to convert cinematic narratives into shared discursive resources. By circulating these symbolic reinterpretations through online discussions, memes, and commentary on platforms such as Bilibili and Weibo, youth audiences actively participate in what can be understood as a process of symbolic claiming.

This circulation of meaning also reflects the accumulation of what Sarah Thornton (1996) terms subcultural capital. Within youth online communities, the ability to recognize and reinterpret the symbolic significance of characters like Shen Gongbao becomes a marker of shared cultural knowledge and generational experience. Consequently, the Ne Zha franchise is transformed from a commercial cultural product into a symbolic arena in which young audiences negotiate their social positionality. Through these discursive practices, the narrative of Shen Gongbao’s failure becomes a medium for articulating class anxiety and questioning the dominant cultural narrative of effortless upward mobility in contemporary Chinese society.

4.3 Digital Fields and the Circulation of Symbolic Capital

The empirical findings reveal that the circulation of symbolic meanings is closely shaped by the socio-technical architecture of digital platforms. The contrast between Bilibili and Weibo demonstrates how “platform habitus” (He, X., Wu, D., & Zeng, T., 2025) influences the patterns, tempo, and visibility of audience discourse. Drawing on the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu, these platforms can be understood as distinct cultural fields in which the rules governing the accumulation and deployment of

symbolic capital differ substantially. In this sense, digital platforms do not merely host discussions but actively structure the conditions under which cultural meanings are produced, circulated, and legitimized.

Bilibili functions as a participatory subcultural field characterized by strong community interaction and shared cultural codes. In this environment, symbolic capital is frequently accumulated through forms of “vernacular creativity” described by Jean Burgess (2006), where users reinterpret cultural texts through commentary, remix practices, and fan-based participation. The platform’s distinctive danmu interface further facilitates what Zeng, D. (2025) calls “affective synchronicity”, enabling audiences to engage in real-time collective interpretation during the viewing process. Through these synchronized responses, viewers not only react to the narrative but also to each other’s interpretations, creating a layered communicative environment. As a result, discussions surrounding the Ne Zha narrative on Bilibili often emphasize shared generational experience, narrative symbolism, and collective emotional resonance.

In contrast, Weibo operates as a broader public opinion arena structured by rapid information circulation and algorithmically amplified visibility. In this environment, symbolic capital is frequently generated through “affective polarization”, where emotionally charged expressions and ideological positioning gain greater visibility within platform dynamics. Discussions of the Ne Zha franchise on Weibo are therefore more likely to intersect with wider debates about social identity, generational values, and cultural politics. This pattern reflects Tarleton Gillespie’s (2010) concept of the “politics of platforms”, which highlights how platform design features—such as trending hashtags, repost mechanisms, and algorithmic ranking—shape the forms of participation that become most visible within public discourse.

Taken together, these observations suggest that youth engagement with the Ne Zha franchise unfolds through a layered interpretive trajectory moving from affective resonance to interpretive negotiation and ultimately to symbolic claiming. Within these platform-specific digital fields, cinematic narratives are transformed into semiotic resources, shared cultural symbols that can be mobilized to interpret social experiences. By navigating different digital environments, young audiences do not merely consume media texts; they actively mobilize the Ne Zha narrative to articulate structural anxieties, negotiate generational identities, and participate in the circulation and redistribution of symbolic capital within the digital public sphere.

5. Conclusion

Based on the systematic coding and analysis of 2,159 online comments, this study has examined the cultural significance of the Ne Zha film franchise within contemporary youth discourse. By analyzing the interaction among cinematic texts, digital users, and broader social structures, the research demonstrates how youth audiences reinterpret popular cultural narratives as symbolic resources

through which they interpret and articulate their social experiences. The findings suggest that symbolic capital should not be understood as an inherent property of the cultural text itself, but rather as a dynamic form of value that emerges through audience interpretation and circulates across digital cultural fields, where it becomes embedded in processes of identity negotiation.

The analysis further shows that the resonance of *Ne Zha* (2019) and *Ne Zha 2* (2024) extends beyond their aesthetic innovations or mythological reinterpretations. Instead, the films operate as cultural mirrors that enable young audiences to reflect upon structural pressures associated with education, employment, and social mobility. Through the reinterpretation of characters such as Ne Zha, Ao Bing, and Shen Gongbao, youth audiences transform fictional figures into symbolic archetypes through which broader concerns about generational identity, intergenerational relationships, and class-based anxieties are expressed. This interpretive practice illustrates the active role of audiences in the co-construction of cultural meaning.

By integrating network ethnography with a Bourdieusian analytical framework, this study identifies a multi-stage interpretive process through which youth engagement with the *Ne Zha* franchise unfolds. This process begins with affective resonance, develops through interpretive negotiation, and ultimately culminates in forms of symbolic claiming within digital discourse. Within platform-specific environments such as Bilibili and Weibo, these interpretations circulate through participatory practices including commentary, reposting, and meme production, transforming a commercial film narrative into a shared cultural resource. In this process, youth audiences accumulate forms of discursive capital that enable them to articulate their social positioning within an increasingly uncertain social landscape.

More broadly, this research suggests that the production and circulation of animated cultural symbols play a central role in contemporary youth meaning-making practices. Within the digital public sphere, young audiences are not merely passive consumers of media texts; rather, they actively mobilize these texts as interpretive frameworks through which structural grievances and generational identities can be articulated. By bridging perspectives from media studies, youth studies, and cultural sociology, this study provides an interdisciplinary framework for understanding how symbolic appropriation and affective habitus operate within digital media environments. Future research may further extend this approach by examining how similar processes of symbolic reinterpretation emerge across different media forms and cultural contexts.

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Notes

Note 1. The box office data for Ne Zha (2019) and Ne Zha 2 (2024) are sourced from the China Film Data Information Network. The statistical date for Ne Zha is July 26, 2019, while the statistical date for Ne Zha 2 is June 30, 2025. All data were retrieved on July 21, 2025 (China Film Data Information Network. <https://www.zgdypw.cn/>, July 21, 2025.).