



Visual Fusion and Re-creation Strategies of IP Images in Food and Beverage Brand Co-branding Design

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Abstract. Brand collaborations using IP images co-branded with IP images have become a key strategy for modern catering brands to overcome limitations and grow. We consider leading Chinese catering brands HEYTEA, NAIXUE, Luckin Coffee and KFC as examples. Based on multi-case analysis, we identify six strategy for visual integration and re-creation of IP images based on the co-branding practices of these brands, and we develop a typology model based on direct application, element grafting, style interpretation, scene interaction, abstract concepts and anthropomorphic re-creation. We describe the strategy operation in four analytical dimensions: IP loyalty, creative autonomy, brand consistency and visual extensibility.

Keywords: Brand co-branding; IP image design; Visual integration strategy; Visual semiotics

1 Introduction

IP image co-branding is becoming popular in food and beverage industry especially in China's fast changing consumer market. Since 2019, chain restaurants, new tea brands and coffee shops have teamed up with anime characters, cultural symbols, fashion brands and entertainment IPs to create striking co-branded products. These collaborations include Luckin Coffee with Moutai and HEYTEA with FENDI.

This is an indicator of a shift in the catering industry value creation strategy from product differentiation strategy to user experience and identity model. Generation Z and Millennials increasingly prefer brands that have cultural resonance, and IP images are now the most culturally meaningful images.

While brand IP co-branding is common, design aspects are not well studied in academic studies. Most studies focus on brand equity transfer and economic effects (Paydas Turan, 2021[1]; Brand et al., 2025[2]), treating IP images as interchangeable brand elements rather than unique visual systems (Spence & Van Doorn, 2022[3]; Gu et al., 2026[4]). No systematic classification of IP image integration approaches.

This study uses a multi-case analysis method to develop a typological framework for IP image integration and re-creation strategies, addressing the previously mentioned research gaps. It identifies six distinct strategies and examines each in detail across four

analytical dimensions: IP fidelity, creative autonomy, brand consistency, and visual extensibility.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

Research Question1: What distinct strategies do catering brands employ to incorporate IP images into co-branding designs through visual methods?

Research Question2: What theoretical principles underpin each strategy? What are the corresponding design logics?

Research Question3: In what ways can these strategies be expanded and implemented across various brand touch points?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theory of Brand Co-branding

Brand co-branding involves collaborating with different brands to create value using resources together. Paydas Turan (2021)[1], through a comprehensive meta-analysis, found that the relationship between partner brands—particularly brand image fit—has a significantly larger impact on co-branding success than individual brand characteristics such as brand equity. Brand et al. (2025)[2] further expanded this understanding by identifying eight interrelated brand co-creation performances when multiple actors collaborate in brand building.

Aaker and Keller (1990)[5] proposed a framework for the evaluation of brand extensions, emphasising that consumers assess extended products on perceived fit. Keller (1993)[6] identified four aspects of brand equity: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Lanseng and Olsen (2012)[7] found fit in function, symbol, and experience can help consumers accept co-branded products. However, IP images are often considered generic brand elements, not a unique visual system that requires specific design. Recent research on brand anthropomorphism suggests that visual representation of brand personality plays a crucial role in consumer engagement (Ye et al., 2026)[8], indicating that IP images should be treated as complex visual systems.

2.2 Visual Semiotics and Brand Anthropomorphism

Barthes (1977)[9] introduced denotation and meaning in visual information. An IP image has denotation meaning (literal and intuitive representation) and connotation meaning (cultural associations). When two visual systems merge, meanings interact and create new meanings. Peirce's triadic model of icon, index, and symbol (1931–1958)[10] provides another useful representation of visual information. Spence and Van Doorn (2022)[3] further demonstrated that consumers associate specific visual packaging features with product properties such as taste and flavour, establishing crossmodal correspondences that vary across cultural contexts. In Chinese colour semiotics, for instance, vermilion carries culturally encoded connotations of festivity and vitality, while cyan-blue evokes refinement and restraint—associations that function as crossmodal cues

capable of evoking sensory and emotional responses beyond the visual channel, a mechanism directly exploited in abstract conceptualisation co-branding strategies.

In terms of brand anthropomorphism, Fournier (1998)[11] conceptualised brands as relationship partners. Recent studies (Khan et al., 2024[12]; Lourenço et al., 2025[13]; Diwanji et al., 2026[14]) have confirmed that anthropomorphic brand characters significantly influence consumer attitudes, engagement, and trust. Hosany et al. (2013) [15] developed a typology of strategies for building and sustaining anthropomorphic brand characters, using case studies of iconic characters such as Hello Kitty, Peter Rabbit, Mickey Mouse, and Ronald McDonald. This framework helps describe visual changes during IP integration. However, there is no systematic classification for the scope of creative strategies. This study addresses this gap.

3 Theoretical Framework

This paper introduces a four-dimensional analytical framework based on three different theories. First, Peirce's semiotic model of icon, index, and symbol (1931–1958)[10] defines the degree of visual change between original IP and co-branded adaptations in terms of IP fidelity and creative autonomy. The extent to which an IP's iconic features are preserved (fidelity) and the degree to which designers reinterpret those features (autonomy) represent two complementary axes of semiotic transformation. Second, brand identity theory—particularly the brand equity framework of Keller (1993)[6] and the brand extension model of Aaker and Keller (1990)[5]—grounds the dimension of brand consistency, which captures the alignment between an integrated IP image and the host brand's established identity and positioning. Third, integrated marketing communications theory emphasizes coherent deployment of brand messages across multiple media and contact channels (Spence & Van Doorn, 2022)[3] grounding visual extensibility, which is the design ability to adapt to packaging, retail, peripheral products, digital channels. Together, these four dimensions form an interconnected framework that maps both the creative logic and the strategic potential of each IP integration approach.

IP fidelity refers to how well the core visual recognition features of the original IP image are preserved. High fidelity indicates that the iconic features of the IP are fully retained, whereas low fidelity permits considerable alteration and adjustment of the original image. This dimension operationalises Peirce's concept of iconicity: high fidelity preserves the indexical and iconic bonds between the IP image and its original cultural referent.

Creative autonomy refers to the degree of creative freedom a brand possesses when reinterpreting an IP. High autonomy allows for a substantial redesign of the original IP image, whereas low autonomy permits only minimal modifications to the original image. This dimension reflects the symbolic transformation capacity posited in semiotic theory, wherein designers shift IP imagery from iconic reproduction towards novel symbolic encoding.

Brand consistency refers to how well the core attributes of an integrated IP image align with a brand's identity, values, and positioning. High consistency fosters a seamless match between the brand and the IP, whereas low consistency can introduce a

unique sense of novelty by highlighting contrasts. This dimension is grounded in Keller's (1993)[6] brand association framework: high consistency ensures that the IP integration reinforces, rather than disrupts, the existing brand schema in consumers' memory.

Visual extensibility refers to an integrated IP design's capability to adapt across various brand marketing touch points, encompassing scenarios like packaging, peripheral products, retail environments, and digital channels. High extensibility enables brands to execute comprehensive, full-link integrated marketing activities. This dimension draws on IMC principles: designs with high extensibility can sustain semantic coherence across different brand touch points, amplifying the co-branding investment.

The four dimensions mentioned are interconnected, collectively delineating various strategic positioning intervals. This analytical framework is summarized in Table 2 and will be explored in detail in the subsequent analysis section.

4 Research Methods

This study employed a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018)[16], which is suitable for exploratory theory building work where no classification framework exists. The primary objective of this study is to construct a new typology of IP image integration strategies rather than to test pre-existing hypotheses. This distinction is methodologically important: quantitative content analysis requires pre-defined coding categories derived from an established framework, making it suitable for hypothesis testing but inadequate for framework generation (Eisenhardt, 1989)[17]. In contrast, multiple-case methodology enables inductive pattern recognition across rich contextual data, allowing emergent strategy types to be identified and theorised. The nine selected cases provided sufficient variety to achieve theoretical saturation across six distinct strategy patterns (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007)[18].

Case selection is based on four criteria: (1) General strategy coverage - six different strategy types, (2) Measurable influence and consumer engagement; (3) Visual design with new research value; and (4) Time frame 2022-2025.

Nine cases were studied: KFC Pokémon, NAIKUE Sailor Moon, NAIKUE The Powerpuff Girls, Luckin Tom and Jerry, Luckin Intangible Cultural Heritage, HEYTEA FENDI, HEYTEA BEARBRICK, Pizza Hut Tom and Jerry, CHAGEE Chinese Colors. Data sources included official brand announcements, visual materials (packages, peripherals and retail displays), social media content, media reports and consumer feedback from review platforms and social media comments. Content analysis and visual semiotics analyses were applied to all case materials and each case coded according to strategy type, design method, scope and consumer response mode. Six basic co-branding strategies were identified. Case selection is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Case Selection and Strategy Classification

Case	Co-brands	Strategy Type	Year
Case 1	KFC x Pokemon	Direct Application	2022
Case 2	NAIKUE x Sailor Moon	Element Grafting	2024

Case 3	NAIXUE x The Powerpuff Girls	Element Grafting	2024
Case 4	Luckin x Tom & Jerry	Scenario Interaction	2023
Case 5	Luckin x Intangible Cultural Heritage	Style Transposition	2025
Case 6	HEYTEA x FENDI	Abstract Conceptualization	2023
Case 7	HEYTEA x BEARBRICK	Direct Application	2024
Case 8	Pizza Hut x Tom & Jerry	Anthropomorphic Re-creation	2025
Case 9	Bawang Cha Ji x Chinese Colors	Abstract Conceptualization	2024

5 **Analysis and Findings**

5.1 **Direct Application**

Direct application: Changing the IP image with little modification and integrating it into the brand's visual identity. For example, KFC and Pokémon 2022 campaigns in 2022: Using the IP image, we did not deform the image. Instead, classic Pokémon characters like Pikachu were used directly on product packaging, merchandise and store display without alteration. The original colors, proportions, and iconic expressions were retained with no modification for localization or context. It From an implementation standpoint, this design approach is “high fidelity and low autonomy”. The brand relies solely on the existing national-level recognition, which means we can't represent brand individuality by redesigning the brand. Rather, we use the emotional connection inherent in the IP to appeal to its consumers. Replicating the original artwork is somewhat limited in how we can extend visual elements across different touch points, but in essence we can still maintain the authenticity of the IP. Overlapping the two brands logos invokes the memory of the fan group and trigger brand associations.

5.2 **Element Grafting**

The element grafting approach takes recognizable symbols from an IP and integrates them into a brand's visual structure. For instance, in 2024 NAIXUE and Sailor Moon collaborated not directly on the complete anime characters but on the theme "transformation" and its color palette of pink, blue and gold with recognized graphic symbols like crescents and stars. We reinterpret the IP elements to NAIXUE's aesthetic. The emotional connection between the IP and audience is maintained through color psychology and semiotics. We applied this approach to avoid story stagnation with incomplete images, and it also works effectively on other touch points like packaging, cups, peripheral products and other touch points such as packaging, cups, etc. This approach proved highly extensible across multiple brand touch points. Offline, NAIXUE launched limited-edition themed stores featuring Sailor Moon visual installations that functioned as dedicated photo-taking destinations, encouraging consumer check-in be-

haviour. Online, the campaign released nostalgia-driven co-branded merchandise—including character cups, tote bags, and collectible accessories—which drove purchase intent among existing fans. On social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu (RedNote), consumer-generated content sharing and community discussion amplified organic reach, while coupon incentives distributed through the app converted engagement into repeat consumption, completing a full-loop digital marketing cycle from awareness to purchase. This multi-channel deployment demonstrates the high visual extensibility characteristic of the element grafting strategy, whereby abstracted IP elements can be consistently reproduced across heterogeneous brand contexts without compromising visual coherence.

5.3 Style Interpretation

Style interpretation is the art of translating the visuals of IP into design languages that reflect modern tastes. This is particularly true for cultural heritage IPs. Luckin Coffee and Chinese intangible cultural heritage collaborated in 2025. This approach is not only a replication of tangible elements but also a modern interpretation of traditional patterns, calligraphy, and textures. Characterized by “low IP fidelity and high creative autonomy”, designers renounced the original simple forms of intangible cultural heritage to create visual symbols that reflect modern coffee consumption. This deep style integration demonstrates a brand with cultural value and aligns with Luckin's strategy of high quality, and, if a strong visual adaptation, enables marketing efforts from online to offline.

5.4 Scenario Interaction

Scenario interaction seeks to break the static boundary between brands and audiences by creating a contextual narrative space that encourages embodied audience participation. The 2023 co-branding between Luckin Coffee and Tom and Jerry exemplifies this approach. Rather than deploying IP images as static decorative elements, Luckin translated iconic animation sequences—Tom chasing Jerry into the store, Jerry stealing coffee—into spatially enacted brand narratives. This strategy was most vividly realised in a series of limited-edition themed stores across China, where the retail environment itself became a narrative stage. In the Chongqing Jiefangbei store, themed “Jerry's Underground Cave Kingdom”, the ceiling featured a hand-painted mural of Tom and Jerry in mid-chase; the service counter was designed to resemble an oversized block of cheese; and the booth seating reproduced the curved, cave-like enclosure of Jerry's animated burrow, immersing consumers in the spatial logic of the original cartoon. This translation from 2D animation tension into 3D spatial consumption experience yielded medium-high IP fidelity and medium-level creative autonomy. By embedding the IP's narrative logic into the physical retail environment, Luckin reinforced its brand identity as lively and approachable, surpassing the limitations of conventional co-branding that relies solely on planar image superposition.

5.5 Abstract Conceptualization

Abstract conceptualization is a de-concretization strategy for co-branding that takes into account the spiritual essence and basic symbols of IP to metaphorically express brand value. Examples include HEYTEA with FENDI (2023) and Bawang Cha Ji with traditional Chinese colors (2024). HEYTEA adopted FENDI's signature vibrant yellow for its beverage packaging. Bawang Cha Ji used abstract color blocks and gradients to convey the joy of “vermilion” and the elegance of “cyan-blue”. This strategy reflects low fidelity to original IP image but high creative autonomy and brand consistency. Instead of relying on fans' memory of specific images, color psychology and semiotic associations for connecting brand to high-end cultural meanings in the audience. Employ de-concretization—replacing explicit imagery with abstract value associations—to articulate the brand positioning.

5.6 Anthropomorphic Re-creation

Anthropomorphic re-creation merges biological features with brand traits to create a novel hybrid image which lures users to the site. Pizza Hut's partnership with Tom and Jerry 2025 showed how this can be done using the combination of pizza ingredients, brand mascot outline. Customers can customize their pizza base with decorative Tom or Jerry toppers. The result preserves the original work humor while re-creating the IP: "medium IP loyalty and very high creative autonomy". This deep image fusion creates a sense of novelty and reinforces the brand's "joy and fun" image by bringing inanimate food with personified energy. Additionally, this unique hybrid image also offers strong exclusivity and copyright protection to support development of peripheral products and limited edition marketing.

Table 2. Cross-strategy comparison under four analytical dimensions

Strategy Type	IP Fidelity	Creative Au- tonomy	Brand Con- gruence	Visual Exten- sibility
Direct Application	High	Low	Variable	Low-Medium
Element Grafting	Medium	Medium-High	Medium-High	Medium
Style Transposition	Low	High	High	High
Scenario Interaction	Medium-High	Medium	High	Medium
Abstract Conceptual- ization	Low	Very High	Very High	Very High
Anthropomorphic Re- creation	Medium	Very High	Medium-High	High

6 Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical advances in this paper are in three parts: first, we develop a typology framework with 6 paradigms: direct application, element integration, style interpretation, scenario interaction, abstract notion and anthropomorphic re-creation, which addresses the gap between co-branding marketing and the design classification. It also defines the boundaries of design practice, and fosters dialogue between visual semiotics and brand anthropomorphism theory, which exposes the complexity of IP co-branding as symbolic consumption.

Second, we extend previous cases by introducing a four-dimensional analysis matrix consisting of IP loyalty, creative autonomy, brand consistency, visual extensibility and a quantifiable structure for co-branded designs. It allows us to analyze how different levels of creativity control the dynamic transfer of brand assets between two co-branding parties and boundary conditions.

This paper bridges design practice with macro theory by linking specific design decisions to the semiotic structure of the “denotation/connotation” and the “icon/index/symbol” model from the role-consumer relationship theory, and the role-consumer relationship model from the anthropomorphism theory. Design decisions are not autonomous exercises in form, but theoretical vehicles that carry deep semantic transmission and emotional engagement. We hope this approach can help design management research to be integrated into marketing studies and communication studies.

6.2 Practical Significance

Brand managers and designers can use the strategy map developed in this paper to guide them from selection to implementation. At the strategic level, companies need to align their strategy with market objectives. If the goal is to engage existing users and lower cognitive costs, high IP loyalty (direct application and element grafting) should be adopted. Fans should care about the original image to be monetized. If the brand is upgrading, changing or seeking a differentiation, high creative autonomy (style interpretation, anthropomorphic reconstruction) should be applied to reconstruct brand perception.

At tactical implementation level, this framework optimizes resource allocation and channel planning. High visual extensibility (style interpretation and abstract conceptualization) strategies support a comprehensive marketing campaign across packaging, peripherals, spaces and digital media because they can be adaptive and create a 3-dimensional brand presence. Low visual extensibility strategy targets product lines or short-term pop-up campaigns because they use precise contact strikes rather than broad approaches.

6.3 Research Limitations

This paper has some limitations. First, since we sample Chinese food and beverage brands, and this is important considering recent surge of co-branding among new brands, we have doubts whether results are generalized to cross-cultural contexts (luxury goods, industrial manufacturing, etc.) and industry-specific. Second, we study from 2022 to 2025. While this timeframe captures post-pandemic marketing trends, it does not show long-term evolution of IP integration design. Future work could be expanded in two directions: first by integrating cultural dimension theories for comparing IP symbol decoding mechanisms between Eastern and Western contexts; and second, by using longitudinal tracking design for studying long-term dynamic effects of various strategies on brand equity and generational shifts in consumer psychology.

7 Conclusions

We develop a typology system for co-branding design for catering industry by analyzing multiple cases groundedly. Six strategies are identified: direct application, element grafting, style interpretation, scenario interaction, abstract conceptualization, and anthropomorphic re-creation. Unlike previous studies which focused on marketing effects, we present a four-dimensional analysis matrix consisting of IP loyalty, creative autonomy, brand consistency and visual extensibility that demonstrates how each strategy functions internally.

The theoretical significance of this paper is that it identifies a link between design practice and macro-theory. By linking specific visual operations with visual semiotics (denotation/connotation) and brand anthropomorphism theory, the results show that co-branding design is more than a collage of aesthetic forms, but rather a reconstruction of meaning. In practice, it offers industry “strategy-tactic” decision support tool. Brand owners can accurately match their strategic needs (like fan retention or cognitive reshaping) within the six-strategy spectrum and predict effectiveness of these strategies on different media touch points using four-dimensional indicators.

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