



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Impact of Chinese Visual Elements on Brand Recognition and Customer Loyalty in the Milk Tea Industry

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the significance of Chinese visual elements in gaining insights for brands to achieve these goals and will provide valuable insights to scholars and practitioners. The study establishes how Chinese visual elements contribute to enhancing brand identity and its recognition in both the local and global markets. The research would identify which of the visual cues are most effective in establishing a more memorable brand image. It also focuses on how Chinese aesthetics influence customer loyalty, essentially in repurchase and advocacy. The research assesses whether consumers may be more predisposed to be loyal to brands that take into consideration Chinese cultural aspects as part of their visual identity. The study also evaluates how a brand can be truly Chinese with its aesthetics while staying globally relevant. This objective will identify potential advantages or failures connected with the use of Chinese visual sensibility in branding, especially vis-à-vis a global market. The study will yield recommendations for brands on how to strike a balance between cultural authenticity and more universal consumer appeal. The findings offer insight for practitioners regarding the integration of Chinese visual elements into branding strategies, in combination with practical recommendations. Brand managers and marketers in the milk tea industry will be able to derive practical insights for creating more effective, culturally fit branding campaigns able to improve branding value and consumer loyalty. It will also cover some specifics regarding how brands can jump over the hurdles of maintaining global appeal while at the same time retaining cultural roots so that they remain fresh for assorted markets.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

There has been huge growth in the global milk tea industry over the decade, from a niche market to a wide-reaching phenomenon. Milk tea was originally from Asia, but the beverage has an international status as today most brands expand outside of Asia (Saber, 2010). Factors responsible for the fast growth include new flavor combinations, changing consumer tastes, and cultural aspects that surround the beverage itself. The global milk tea expansion, in large part, is founded in East Asia, more precisely in the lands of strong cultural heritage where the visual elements in setting consumer trends and preferences towards products have a huge role. Especially for Chinese brands, visual elements from traditional motifs to contemporary adjustments have become the hallmarks of difference between brands competing in this marketplace. For the Chinese, aesthetics is rooted deep within the narratives of history and symbolism, with some related

concepts being prosperity, harmony, and balance (Schroeder et al., 2015). On the canvas of the milk tea industry business, such aesthetic elements can help narrate a much better story for a brand and, for that matter, make a much better connection with a product for consumers who share those values of Chinese culture or simply wish to return to them. In international markets, this can also be used strategically because cultural uniqueness can be a great selling point. These visual features play an important role concerning brand recognition and customer loyalty in the milk tea sector. Effective branding can also contribute to enhanced customer loyalty, as consumers would come to prefer brands that so accurately reflect their cultural identity. The main purpose of this study is to find out how Chinese visual elements contribute to creating brand recognition and customer loyalty in the milk tea industry and what insights can be drawn from those brands that are willing to use these elements to build a market presence.

1.2. Research Questions

The research questions that the study will address are

- How do Chinese visual elements impact brand recognition in the milk tea industry?
- What is the influence of Chinese visual elements on customer loyalty?
- What are the ways to identify the challenges and considerations in the market for brands using Chinese visual elements in the strategy for establishing brand equity?

1.3. Significance of the Study

This research could be important in terms of the development of cultural branding for milk tea, as it provides further insight into Chinese visual elements. As the global market size of milk tea continues growing, it becomes harder for the brands to make differentiated self-positioning and to build strong bonds with the consumer. This study contributes to the existing literature on branding and visual aesthetics of food and beverage industries. It contributes to the literature with a primary focus on Chinese visual elements, in that it raises awareness of the increased knowledge of the role played by cultural aesthetics in influencing the perception of brands ahead of making decisions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of Brand Recognition and Visual Elements in Branding

Brand recognition refers to the ability of the consumer to identify the brand by using visual or other sensory features associated with the brand, for example using specific logos, colors, or slogans. Visual identity is what differentiates the brand from its competitors, hence the establishment of brand recognition through the creation of a solid visual identity is important to establish a connection with the consumers (Karjalainen & Snelders, 2010). In the milk tea industry, the interior of the shop, logos, and packaging design are particularly important elements to make a very memorable brand image. In fact, much of the previous research into visual branding argues for consistency in the visual elements, as this repetition is seen as a means of cementing the brand's identity within consumers' minds (Phillips et al., 2014). For instance, simple, symmetrical, and distinctive logos are simply more likely to be remembered by consumers. Moreover, culturally relevant visual elements do arouse brand recognition because of familiarity and resonance created among the target consumers.

2.2 Visual Elements in Branding

The main ingredients of a visual brand are logos, colors, symbols, typography, and design style. All these in combination with one another give an overall design style, which expresses a message or set of values for a brand to the consumer whose psychological influence is well-documented in the marketing literature. Particularly, it is stated that different colors encourage some peculiar feelings and reactions in consumer behavior (Labrecque & Milne, 2012). Specifically, red tends to cause an increase in excitement and overt passion, while blue leads to a sense of competence and reliability, and black represents sophistication (Labrecque & Milne, 2012). Logos are the visual backbones of brand identity. If well designed, a logo is easily identifiable, and, through form, shape, and color combination, the essence of a brand can instantly get across

with a simple but forceful visual punch. Symbols and Typography similarly create brand imagery impressions in the minds of consumers. Symbols that relate to culture or history may suggest authenticity or tradition, and typefaces may affect ideas about modernity or professionalism in brands. For example, a Chinese-based visual element using a "dragon", "lantern", or "calligraphy" may strongly express the identity and heritage as a Chinese.

2.3. The Role of Chinese Aesthetics in Consumer Culture

The aesthetic is really entrenched in Chinese history and cultural tradition. Some of the essential elements that define Chinese aesthetics are symbolic colors such as red and gold, classic themes or motifs like dragons and phoenixes, and calligraphy (Williams, 2012). These are very positive elements with values that are normally associated with prosperity, good luck, and harmony in cultures with which consumers might identify. Over the past few years, interest in Chinese aesthetics has been renewed, both within China and overseas due to which Chinese aesthetics is a very powerful tool for any brand willing to connect with this audience.

2.4. Customer Loyalty in the Food and Beverage Industry

Customer loyalty is arguably the most important aspect of business in the food and beverage industry. A fair measure of repeat order likelihood, business through suggestions to friends, and insensitivity to changes in prices are good indicators of loyal customers. Customer brand loyalty with milk tea is usually driven by quality, service, or brand identity (Ong et al., 2021). In addition, an emotional connection between customers and the brand, specifically in the food and beverage sectors, is also very important. Loyal customers are defined not just in terms of repeatedly buying a particular product or service but also as having an emotional tie to that brand. In the context of the milk tea industry, the use of Chinese visual elements has the power to further strengthen this emotional connection by creating and developing the brand's identity in the hearts of consumers.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Even though a considerable amount of literature regarding visual branding and loyal customer relationships is present, there has not been much study conducted on the milk tea business. While earlier studies focused on cultural aesthetics in branding, there was little research on how cultural aesthetics would be interpreted when used for products that hold international appeal. Stated more specifically, the relationship between how Chinese visual elements is perceived by international and local audiences and how they can be used and integrated into a branding strategy that attracts elements from different sectors in a way that is reflective of local culture but targets global consumers is fraught with many gaps. This study tried to fill this gap through an in-depth analysis of the milk tea industry, with a sole focus on the effects of the Chinese visual elements on brand recognition and customer loyalty.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this research is based on two concepts, namely cultural branding and brand equity theory, through which the influence of Chinese visual elements upon brand recognition and customer loyalty in the milk tea industry is understood.

3.1. Cultural Branding

Cultural branding utilizes cultural symbols, values, and narratives uniquely applicable to a given cultural group or population to develop a brand identity that truly resonates with that cultural group. As Holt (2004) informs, a product or a brand becomes an icon in a culture by placing itself as a valued asset in the cultural narratives that symbolize the values, beliefs, traditions, and institutions of such a culture. In fact, cultural branding entails using these very cultural elements to extol the virtues of powerful emotional connections with consumers when distinguishing a brand in a noisy marketplace. Cultural branding, in general, and in the case of the Chinese catering industry, refers to a way of incorporating traditional Chinese visual elements, such as colors, symbols, and motifs into a brand's identity. These are not just aesthetic choices

but instead are purposefully endowed with certain cultural meanings that urge predetermined emotions from consumers, particularly those who associate themselves with Chinese culture. For example, red and gold are very deep symbols in Chinese culture, and in the branding standards, red means happiness and good luck, and gold means wealth and prosperity. When such elements are used, a sense of cultural pride and nostalgia is instilled in a brand, thus arguably creating a strong sense of attachment and loyalty amongst consumers. Brand authenticity is also at the core of regular cultural branding theories (Napoli et al., 2014). With the increasing concern among consumers for brands that show sensitivity towards their cultures and heritage, higher affinities towards such brands are found with which they feel authenticity in gaining association. Brand authenticity will be attained by the company in maintaining consistency with regard to the use of culturally potent visuals and the power of storytelling and effective brand narratives in association with the cultural identity of the potential consumer group.

3.2. Brand Equity Theory

Brand equity is the value a brand adds to a product beyond its functional benefits. Severi and Ling (2013) identify that brand equity is based on several basic components, which they refer to as brand recognition, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. In this theoretical framework, brand recognition and customer loyalty are two critical elements to boosting brand equity. Thus, it could be understood that by applying Chinese visual elements, the company would enhance brand equity through an increase in brand recognition and customer loyalty. Some of the cues that help the consumer recognize the brand from others are visual elements, logos, colors, and symbols. If these elements are culturally relevant, they will form strong brand associations, which would increase perceived quality and an emotional connection, adding further to the brand equity. Further, Brand Equity Theory emphasizes the role of customer loyalty in protecting and contributing to the value of brands. Chinese visual cues can establish an emotional connection with the consumers that may lead to consumer loyalty because of increased brand relatability and cultural relevance. The latter would further over time and gradually strengthen the equity of the brand, as loyal customers would very probably purchase again, refer the brand to others, and not be price-dependent.

In integrating the two theories, cultural branding theory and brand equity theory, the following research framework will be beneficial in giving an in-depth understanding of how Chinese visual elements affect brand recognition and customer loyalty. The cultural branding elaborated on the emotional and cultural resonance of these elements. The brand equity theory highlights the elements through which it affects brand value like recognition and loyalty. Therefore, the three theories might work in support of each other to further the hypothesis that branding strategies with Chinese visual elements may help increase brand identity sharply, form a more loyal customer base, and increase overall brand equity in the Chinese catering industry.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The approach taken in this research is qualitative, to look at how Chinese visual elements influence brand awareness and customer loyalty in the milk tea industry. Qualitative research best fits this study, as it offers a deep study into the complex and subtle ways in which the aesthetics of culture bear upon consumer perception and behavior. Research design involves the use of semi-structured interviews and case studies as the two main methods of data collection. In semi-structured interviews, major themes can be most deeply investigated while providing an opportunity for subjects to express their thoughts and views in their own words. Divergently, case studies present an opportunity to analyze how different milk tea brands have executed this idea of integrating the visual elements of China within their branding and how these strategies have fared.

4.2 Sampling and Data Collection

The sample will be composed of brand managers, designers, and consumers as key stakeholders in the milk tea industry. Brand managers and designers will include in-depth interviews for professional knowledge and familiarity with brand strategy and their role in creating strategies of visual identity surrounding milk tea brands. Consumers will include those who are familiar with milk tea brands and are interested in cultural aesthetical views.

The following are the criteria that will be used for the selection of the milk tea brands as case studies:

- i. If the brand has adopted Chinese visual elements in its brand?
- ii. Is the brand distributed locally and internationally?
- iii. Innovation and cultural relevance of the brand.

4.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis will follow the thematic analysis method in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data. The following steps are to be followed in thematic analysis, namely data familiarization, theme search, reviewing themes, defining themes and naming, and write-up of findings. Thematic analysis will bring out repeating themes and patterns of the impact of Chinese visual elements on brand recognition or customer loyalty from the date of the interview.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

The research is guided by the principles of scientific research. Thus, every participant is adequately informed and has consented to participate in the interview process. The participants are briefed on the purpose of the study, their participation, and their nature to exit the study at any given moment without prejudice. Anonymity is assured since the participants will be only identified by code, and all their information will be stored as per the transcripts of the interview or in any other material that may be safely kept.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Impact of Chinese Visual Elements on Brand Recognition

Brand recognition is important for any consumer-facing industry and the milk tea industry does not stand as an exception. In a market filled with heavy competition, especially for regions where milk tea is a very common type of beverage consumed by almost every average taxpayer, striking visual elements can be instrumental for a brand to stand out and assert a noteworthy presence. Against this backdrop, Chinese visual elements, deeply rooted in rich cultural symbolism, have played a big role in enhancing brand recognition for quite a few leading milk tea brands. The following section elaborates on how brands like HeyTea and Gong Cha operationalize these components and the general impact it has on brand identification within the industry.

5.1.1. Case Study Insight:

HeyTea has established itself as the trendsetter within the milk tea industry by artistically combining traditional Chinese aesthetics with modern design trends. The brand identity is fundamentally based on an elegant Chinese calligraphy logo and its playful design (Geng & Qiu, 2021). The typography isn't used by chance, as this gives the Chinese characters their cultural weight, often used to denote elegance, heritage, and authenticity. The minimalist design aesthetics adopted in the Logo and the overall branding strategy of HeyTea focus on achieving simplicity and elegance that befits the elements of balance and harmony, as it is in Chinese traditional aesthetics. Due to its rooted cultural sense with stunning visual implications, this approach made HeyTea more significant and outstanding compared with the other milk tea brands. Its stores often contain modern interpretations of traditional Chinese interior elements, like clear lines, natural products, and a primarily neutral color palette, which further cements the brand (ArchDaily, 2021). These

create a cohesive brand experience that becomes instantly recognizable, in China or any international market. In doing this, HeyTea has been able to lock in strong brand recognition across borders.

Another leading brand of the milk tea industry is Gong Cha which use more conventional Chinese colors and symbols. Gong Cha uses the Chinese conventional colors of red and gold in their logo and marketing items, extremely cleverly reflecting the two colors often considered lucky in Chinese culture. Red is believed to be the most auspicious color in Chinese culture, conveying good fortune, happiness, and all other positive attributes. Red in the logo also shows the element of gold or prosperity. These are visually appealing colors that create positive associations with the brand among customers who understand the significance of Chinese culture. Moreover, a traditional Chinese seal is attached to the Gong Cha logo, enhancing its cultural legitimacy. Seals have been used in China for thousands of years as a symbol of power and undisputable authority, so within its branding, the use of seals helps establish Gong Cha as a trustworthy and legitimate brand. To epitomize this point, such an element also clearly differentiates Gong Cha from the market space and thereby signals the respect the brand pays to Chinese heritage.

5.1.2. Interview Insight

Industry professionals, moreover, reiterated that Chinese visual elements helped a lot in ensuring better brand visibility in the market. Designer C, who had spent much of his time working on the branding of Gong Cha, explained that traditional Chinese visuals are mainly functional in markets with considerable Chinese cultural dominance. As he testified, "Traditional Chinese visuals like red and gold offer instant brand recognition in these markets. They are culturally resonant and immediately evoke a sense of familiarity and trust among consumers." However, Designer C also made the point that modernization was, indeed, relevant in some situations. "We've also found that subtle, modernized versions of these elements can really help maintain that recognition in more diverse, global markets," he said. This insight resonates with the broader trend of cultural adaptation visible within global branding: traditional elements are to some extent reused or at least reinterpreted in a way that they are relevant and attractive to contemporary taste, but not in a way that erodes their cultural essence. This makes the balance between tradition and modernity so important for Gong Cha.

5.2 Impact of Chinese Visual Elements on Customer Loyalty

In contemporary competitive business ecosystems, particularly in the context of milk tea, customer loyalty goes beyond the quality of the milk tea, it is indeed much more rooted. In this regard, the establishment of brand identity and emotional bonding, essentially stemming from the visual elements proves to be of critical essence (Wheeler, 2012). Even with rich heritage and symbolism, Chinese visual elements evoke familiarity and a sense of pride, allowing consumer loyalty to be forged. This chapter will help the readers to enlighten how brands like Nayuki and HeyTea have firmed the links and relate these elements to long-term loyalty.

5.2.1. Case Study Insight

Nayuki, as a brand, attempts to bring together traditional Chinese motifs with modern designs to attract and retain customers. Aesthetically, it integrates soft pastel colors that would appeal to young demographics, traditional Chinese floral patterns, and classical Chinese typography. Besides this, Nayuki further imprints tea culture directly into the store environment and unlike coffee shops, they offer a warm and bright gathering experience with a stylish design allowing the customers to enjoy tea physically and mentally (Nayuki, n.d.). Its shops, mostly enclosed with modern interiors, heavily use elements of traditional Chinese culture such as bamboo and natural materials. This warmed up the environment and made it welcoming, signifying a contemporized version of traditional Chinese Tea culture. It provides these elements that make consumers, especially those with a strong cultural identity, emotionally attached to the brand, therefore, making the store more than a retail point for drinks but rather a view or perception of values. In addition, the simple lines, neutral colors, and classic Chinese characters help consumers feel modern, yet traditional, setting them apart from this brand. Very much similar in its approach, HeyTea deploys minimalism to extract the best from both modern and traditional Chinese design principles for the

creation of sophistication. The respect for cultural heritage, coupled with a modern and trendy presentation, increases the emotional bond with the brand for consumers. Another reason that has contributed to the high level of success HeyTea has achieved is consistency in its visual identity across locations. Be it any metropolitan area in China or international outlets, HeyTea has a coherent branding that keeps the brand identity clear, hence familiar and trustworthy for customers who come back. This helps in cementing the brand in the consumer's mind and getting them to return.

5.2.2. Interview Insight

The depth interview with Consumer B from Nayuki further shows how deep-seated Chinese visual elements in the brand translate to customer loyalty. Consumer B mentioned that the balance of traditional and modern design elements by Nayuki made them feel close to the brand. "It is more than just about the tea, it is about what the brand represents, which are my cultural values. This sense of connection keeps me coming back," they said. This insight underscores the role of emotional resonance in creating loyalty. To Consumer B, Nayuki represents something much larger than a beverage supplier, it embodies a brand related to his identity and cultural pride. The place of this emotional link in driving loyalty should not come as a surprise. The more consumers feel that a brand mirrors their values or identity, the more likely they will be to create a deeper bond with the brand. It translates into repeat purchases, brand advocacy, and, to a certain extent, tolerating minor shortcomings such as higher prices or occasional issues with the service. In this way, Chinese visual elements become that bridge between the brand and the customer, leading to attachment beyond the product itself.

5.3 Formation of a Framework to Establish a Robust Brand Identity

Brand identity is one of the most important elements of any business, and in the fiercer competitive atmosphere of the Chinese catering industry, a well-built brand identity could make a difference. Based on deep cultural traditions, Chinese visual elements give ample chances to come up with a powerful, recognizable brand identity that resonates with local and global audiences. However, the crux of the issue with these elements is the critical effectiveness for the brand in striking a balance between cultural authenticity, modernity, and adaptability. The exploration in this chapter focuses on how brands such as Gong Cha and Xing Fu Tang were able to blend Chinese visual elements effectively across their branding strategies to flesh out a usable framework for other similar brands in the Chinese catering industry.

5.3.1. Case Study Insight

Gong Cha is an appropriate example of how a brand can be culturally true to the self and yet have a global appeal. For example, the brand uses a basic system of the brand pattern based on four colors that Gong Cha associates with different elements, where red aligns with tea, blue with the product, green with people, and beige with time (Gong Cha (n.d.)). The brand tries to combine these four elements and create images that can be used from multiple applications to build a unique brand image (Gong Cha (n.d.)). However, the Gong Cha brand has shown its flexible side in tweaking its visual elements for different markets. For instance, in some areas, the company has softened its standard trademark to more neutral color schemes or modern typography that would fit local tastes. This balance between tradition and adaptation allows Gong Cha to maintain its core identity while appealing to a broader audience.

The other popular milk tea brand, Xing Fu Tang, also heavily hosts traditional Chinese characters and imagery inside of its branding. Its name in Chinese characters describes the brand to be the Hall of Happiness, highlighting the kind of friendly and positive connotations the name creates (Kamrupa Design Group, 2021). Calligraphy and imagery that relate to elements of Chinese traditional festivals are included in the marketing materials and store designs. Xing Fu Tang, like Gong Cha, modernizes its visuals to retain relevance to modern audiences. This playful mix of the old and the new allows for a complete presentation of cultural brand identity and value but presents no issues in attracting an equally culturally diverse consumer base.

5.3.2. Interview Insight

In an interview with Brand Manager A Xing Fu Tang, he highlighted that adaptability in branding is crucial, and stated “Our approach has been to retain the spirit of Chinese culture in our visuals while making sure that we are flexible enough to penetrate the different markets”. This adaptability is a prime ingredient in transcribing the strong and cohesive brand identity that works globally and shows the view that brands should be cultural but not restrictive and at the same time open to change and innovation. Flexible visual branding helps break through into different cultural contexts and consumer preferences.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Impact of Chinese Visual Elements on Brand Recognition

6.1.1. Cultural Resonance and Recognition:

Using Chinese characters for branding like HeyTea brings the communication back to a more cultural level. Chinese calligraphy is generally regarded as art, and so using it for branding purposes would mean elegance, tradition, and sophistication. That would automatically give a cultural touch to the brand for customers who understand that culture. These characters can even fascinate consumers in non-Chinese markets and place the brand as unique and culturally rich. Red and golden colors are symbolic in Chinese culture, for example, red is used in festivities, happiness, and good luck. Hence, it really acts as a very strong visual cue that could connect visual brand identity to brand recognition.

6.1.2. Crowded Market Differentiation:

There are a lot of brands in the market that actually sell milk tea, so using traditional Chinese motifs and imagery might look more classic compared to others in the crowded market. HeyTea makes a differentiation from other competitors by having a reduced minimalism with Chinese characters in the logo since other competitors are more modern, stylized, or Westernized. Likewise, Gong Cha reinforces its brand with a Chinese seal, which again accurately adds authenticity to it to have a different air compared to other brands. These distinctive visual elements build up the brand identity in customers' minds. Both HeyTea and Gong Cha have very effectively provided consistency in terms of visuals across their different markets, which is prime for the formation of strong brand recognition. Whether a customer uses HeyTea in China or outside the country, the primary visual identity elements of the brand, including its logo or store design, remain consistent, reinforcing identification with and recognition of the brand.

6.1.3. Customization for Universal Appeal:

While traditional Chinese visual elements work very well in a market that is culturally familiar, these have to change to impress global audiences, especially in the case of modernization of traditional motifs or simplifying its design to be one with universal appeal. For example, HeyTea and its design minimalism is a modern take on traditional aesthetics, relatable to both Chinese and international consumers. The brands thus need to balance their traditional roots with modernity and maintain their cultural identity while broadening their appeal. Though traditional Chinese visual cues can bring about brand recognition, there is a risk of cultural misalignment in those markets where these symbols are not as well understood. Brands thus need to be very careful in how their visual cues get translated across different cultural contexts so as not to imply some meanings that could be misunderstood or worse, enfranchisements of consumers.

6.1.4. Cultural Education Opportunity:

Through cultural storytelling, brands can bridge different cultural understandings and bring consumers closer to the brand. This enhances brand recognition that lends value to the consumer experience through meaningful and enriching storytelling. By strategically using traditional motifs, symbolic colors, and culturally significant imagery, Xing Fu Tang and Gong Cha have been able to carve out brand identities that are unmistakable, memorable, and truly resonate with at-home and international consumers. The challenge, of course, is to ensure that those visual elements are successfully adapted and modernized in a way that

makes the brand feel fresh and innovative and that they remain aware of issues of sensitivity and cultural coherence.

6.2 Influence of Chinese Visual Elements on Customer Loyalty

6.2.1. Emotional Bonding Through Cultural Identity:

Across Chinese visual cues, most consumers get personal feelings of pride, nostalgia, and an emotional feeling of belonging to a larger cultural context. Nayuki inlaid traditional Chinese motifs with gentle pastel colors, which not only endows the visual identity but resonates with young consumers who care about the heritages as much as modern aesthetics. Such a connection breeds loyalty as consumers are more likely to patronize brands that reflect their values and identity. The use of minimalist design together with traditional Chinese elements can make HeyTea equivalent to a touchstone of culture for its customers (Zhang, 2022). The word and brandmark mark engage HeyTea emotionally with their consumers, who see the brand as an extension or a reflection of their cultural values, hence creating that very bond needed for loyalty, which is visits and advocacy.

6.2.2. The Role of Visual Consistency:

One of the reasons behind customer loyalty is how their visual identity consistency shows up across various touchpoints. Nayuki and HeyTea maintain a consistent visual identity across stores, packaging, and marketing materials. This enhances the brand's image in consumers' minds and makes it more memorable. For instance, the continuity of minimalist design and traditional Chinese typography of Heytea across locations in all its stores creates a sense of familiarity and trust creating brand loyalty. In addition, the minimalism of HeyTea's design is universal enough to communicate to a global audience but also stays very close to its cultural roots. One builds loyalty in disparate markets within this fine balance between consistency and adaptation. In addition to the aesthetics, the brands must still be a component of a larger strategy from what is offered to the service and total customer experience. For example, what makes Nayuki excel in loyalty building is not only its brand identity but also its good products and cozy stores. At HeyTea, where the cleanliness of aesthetics meets an equal drive for innovation in products and experience, this integrated approach ensures the emotional connection developed through its visual elements is matched by a consistent and fulfilling branded experience. On the other hand, the most common problem or challenge in retaining customer loyalty by using visual elements is having to adapt to changing consumer preferences. For instance, if the taste of a younger, globalizing consumer is heading more to universal or Westernized designs, Nayuki and HeyTea must constantly update their visual identity so that they do not alienate these consumers while only focusing on cultural authenticity.

6.3 Development of a Framework to Establish a Strong Brand Identity

6.3.1. Core Cultural Elements

At the heart of any brand strategy that includes Chinese visual elements, it is important to single out and keep core cultural elements that form the identity of the brand. This may be a particular color, symbol, type, or detailed Chinese spirit. For example, Xing Fu Tang emphasizes cultural authenticity by using traditional Chinese characters and calligraphy. It is considered crucial that these core elements be carried through with consistency in all brand touchpoints for communicating and reinforcing cultural authenticity. From in-store design to packaging, advertising, and digital visage, visuals play a significant role in creating a uniform image. As a result, a brand will forgo the negative effects of inconsistency and, more critically, not lose its differentiation in the eyes of the consumers who revere Chinese cultural traditions. It will help a brand make a name for itself in the crowded market, as well as separate itself from other competitive brands trying to attract the same consumers through a visual hook of their own. However, the cultural core elements should not be allowed to get too monotonous and archaic with time. Brands need to refresh their visual identity every now and then to keep it pertinent and interesting to modern audiences. This might be done through the refreshment of the design of traditional elements to lend them a more contemporary feel or it might be done through new trends that fit in well with the cultural roots of a brand.

6.3.2. Adaptability

While the core cultural elements are important to remain, the brands must be adaptable in their visual approach for each new market they seek to enter. Adaptability in this context shows that a brand's visual identity, though guided by a core strategy, is flexible enough to accommodate specific local preferences and cultural nuances while retaining its core essence. Gong Cha has done a good job of assuaging its traditional visuals in some markets. The company adjusts colors or typography, which allows Gong Cha to remain on remit but at the same time ensures that the brand can be recognizable and appealing to local consumers. Flexibility in this design strategy allows plenty of room for different cultural contexts and changing consumer expectations. Adaptability also involves being open to changes in consumer preferences that are not directly in the control of the brand in its home market. For example, the rapid cross-culturalization of the younger generations in China implies that, with changing tastes, even a brand such as Xing Fu Tang should contemporarily evolve its look, include modern design sensibilities, or move to a new visual direction that speaks to more youthful consumers all whilst retaining the heritage of the brand. Branding with flexibility requires an understanding of the core identity of the brand and the cultural dynamics present within the market it resides in. Brands should be constantly doing market research to know where the local trends and consumer preferences are, to be able to apply adaptations to their visual identity at any given moment.

6.3.3. Cultural Storytelling

When integrated into a larger narrative, visual elements can create emotional engagement and make the whole brand experience more memorable and involving. Cultural storytelling involves the brand's values, heritage, and mission represented through visuals (Mathews & Wacker, 2008). For example, traditional Chinese imagery for festivals is embraced by Xing Fu Tang which not only enhances their visual identity but also tells a brand story connecting it with Chinese tradition and celebration. Such a storytelling approach adds depth to a brand and makes it more relatable to the consumers who share or appreciate these cultural values. The brand can use cultural storytelling to explain the importance of the visual elements it uses. For example, a brand could explain the symbolism of the colors, motifs, or typography to support its marketing, thus allowing consumers to better recognize and understand such concepts, which Gong Cha does and explains on their identity page. The brand's marketing strategy must ensure that cultural storytelling is integrated within its overall marketing strategy, with its backbone being the visual dimension. It must take the chance to tell its cultural story at any given touchpoint, from in-store experiences to social media campaigns, and keep the story compelling and consistent.

6.3.4. Integration with Quality and Service

While Chinese visual elements are crucial in achieving customer attraction and engagement, it is the quality of the products and services that will sustain their loyalty over time. Visual branding may well create an impactful first impression, but customers ultimately stay because of the entire experience with the brand. For example, while the visual identity of Gong Cha is culturally resonant, it is also paired with a commitment to using high-quality tea and delivering standardized customer service. For Xing Fu Tang, traditional images are further strengthened by the fact that they also use authentic good ingredients and an attractive in-store environment. In this regard, the visual could catalyze the quality of the product and service to affirm the cultural promise of quality towards stronger customer loyalty. The branding of a visual identity should also reflect the overall brand's values and missions. If a brand stands for being culturally authentic, it should bridge that cultural gap using products and services. For example, a brand using traditional Chinese imagery needs to get authentic ingredients to be certain that the product is truly reflective, and that its service reflects values associated with Chinese culture, such as hospitality and respect. When visual branding combines with quality and service, the brand can create a holistic experience that has something to say to the customers beyond what words can express. In other words, such branding builds trust and loyalty since consumers believe that the brand will consistently deliver what was virtually promised to them.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary of Findings

The paper has dealt with how traditional visual symbols, colors, and typography of China are impacting brand recognition and customer loyalty within the milk tea industry. The results highlighted that these elements play a very significant role in maintaining a unique and memorable brand identity. Those brands with proper Chinese visual elements may signal themselves out in a competitive market and build up more brand awareness. There is a tendency for customers to be more emotionally loyal to brands that have a sense of cultural identity. In this sense, it also points out that, on the other side, even when there are considerable benefits related to Chinese aesthetics, there are also challenges to face, including ensuring cultural sensitivity and global appeal.

7.2 Contributions to Knowledge

This work contributes to knowledge in several valuable ways to the extant literature on cultural branding and the milk tea industry. This is an in-depth analysis of the milk tea industry that has not received sufficient attention in the context of cultural aesthetics and global branding. In investigating the specific use of Chinese visual elements, the research was thus able to contribute to existing gaps in research and provide an entirely new orientation on how to improve brand recognition and brand loyalty in both the local and globalized markets. This study thus is significant to brand managers and marketers accountable in the food and beverage industry since their work provides specific instructions on how cultural aesthetics can be effectively integrated into their respective branding strategies. The study also feeds into the broader understanding of the role cultural elements play in global branding, showing how traditional aesthetics can be incorporated into modern international markets.

7.3 Limitations of the Study

While the study has considerable scope in the insights it gives, limitations should be borne in mind. For example, due to the use of qualitative data, which richly details and deepens but may not generalize to all contexts. Thus, the findings are based on the response of one group of stakeholders that belongs to the milk tea industry and their applicability to other industries or even general consumers is limited. This study specifically relates to the milk tea sector, which is culturally and in terms of market dynamics is unique and the results may not be generalized broadly across different sectors and regions. Future research could overcome these limitations with the usage of quantitative research methods, thus leading to a more general overall conclusion or making comparative analyses across different industries or cultural contexts.

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