
IP Visual Symbol Reconstruction and User Emotional Connection Construction of HEYTEA's Cross-Border Cultural and Creative Co-Branding in the Context of New Consumption

Xiaoyang Hu*

Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou 571126, Hainan, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: In the new consumption era, there is a deep integration of the China-Chic revival and the experience economy. Competition in the new-style tea beverage industry has shifted from the functional level to the value and emotional levels, and cross-border cultural and creative co-branding has become a core approach for brands to achieve differentiated competition and enhance brand value. As a benchmark brand in the new-style tea beverage industry, HEYTEA has formed a large-scale layout in its cross-border cultural and creative co-branding practices. As the core carrier of co-branding communication, IP visual symbols are not only a visual integration of the brand and cultural and creative IPs, but also a crucial bridge connecting user emotions and conveying brand philosophy. Taking HEYTEA's cross-border cultural and creative co-branding practices as the research object, this paper, based on the core characteristics of the new consumption context and combined with relevant theories such as semiotics, emotional design, and brand IPization, systematically explores the reconstruction logic and implementation paths of IP visual symbols in HEYTEA's cross-border cultural and creative co-branding, and analyzes the internal correlation between visual symbol reconstruction and user emotional connection. This study provides theoretical support and practical references for HEYTEA and similar new-style tea beverage brands to achieve user emotional resonance and enhance core brand competitiveness through IP visual symbol reconstruction, while enriching relevant research on brand cross-border co-branding and IP visual communication in the new consumption context.

Keywords: HEYTEA; cross-border cultural and creative co-branding; IP visual symbols; symbol reconstruction; emotional connection

Online publication: November 26, 2025

1. The Development of the New-Style Tea Beverage Industry in the Context of New Consumption

The advent of the new consumption context signifies that China's consumer market has entered a brand-new stage of development, wherein consumer demand has shifted from "fulfilling basic functions" to "pursuing emotional value and cultural experience." Young consumer groups have become the mainstay of the market, and their expectations of brands

are no longer confined to the product itself but increasingly emphasize the cultural connotations, emotional expression, and identity recognition conveyed by the brand. As a core sector within the new consumption field, the new-style tea beverage industry has transitioned from growth-driven competition to stock competition after years of development. The phenomenon of product homogenization has become increasingly prominent, making price competition and functional differentiation insufficient to establish sustainable brand competitiveness. In this context, cross-border cultural and creative co-branding has gradually emerged as a crucial pathway for brands to break through development bottlenecks and achieve differentiated competition. The cultural value, emotional resonance, and visual appeal embedded in cultural and creative IPs align closely with the needs of new consumer groups. Integrating such IPs with new-style tea beverage brands not only enriches product forms and enhances product added value but also, through the dissemination of IP visual symbols, builds an emotional bridge between the brand and its consumers, thereby elevating brand value and strengthening user loyalty^[1].

As a benchmark brand in the new-style tea beverage industry, HEYTEA has consistently adhered to a core positioning centered on “youthfulness, high quality, and strong innovation” since its inception. Through distinctive product innovation and brand marketing, the company has rapidly secured a leading position in the market. In recent years, HEYTEA has actively pursued cross-border cultural and creative co-branding initiatives, collaborating with renowned cultural and creative IPs such as the Palace Museum Cultural and Creative, the Dunhuang Academy, the Sanxingdui Museum, Chiikawa, and Starry, among others, both domestically and internationally. These collaborations have resulted in a series of co-branded offerings, including specialty beverages, packaging designs, merchandise, and store installations, forming a large-scale and diversified co-branding portfolio. In HEYTEA’s cross-border cultural and creative co-branding practices, IP visual symbols serve as the core communicative medium, permeating every aspect of co-branded products, packaging, scenarios, and marketing efforts. They are key to realizing the integration of brand and IP, and to conveying the brand’s philosophy and emotional value. However, with the increasing frequency of such cross-brand collaborations, certain issues have gradually emerged in HEYTEA’s co-branding practices: some collaborations exhibit a lack of systematicity in the reconstruction of IP visual symbols, manifesting in phenomena such as severe homogenization, shallow symbolic connotations, and a disconnection from the brand’s core values. These shortcomings result in insufficient emotional resonance among consumers, hindering the transition from “traffic attraction” to “emotional retention,” and have thus become constraining factors in the high-quality development of HEYTEA’s cross-border cultural and creative co-branding efforts^[2].

2. Cultural Expression of Brand-IP Collaboration in the Context of New Consumption

A brand’s core competitiveness is no longer confined to product functionality but has shifted toward the conveyance of emotional and cultural value, which in turn provides significant market foundation and demand support for cross-border cultural and creative co-branding.

Cross-border cultural and creative co-branding represents a form of collaboration between brands and cultural and creative IPs, essentially constituting a process of resource integration and value co-creation. Academic research in this area primarily focuses on three aspects: co-branding motivation, co-branding models, and co-branding outcomes. Regarding co-branding motivation, the core objectives for brands engaging in cross-border cultural and creative co-branding are to achieve differentiated competition, enhance brand value, and attract target consumers, while cultural and creative IPs seek to commercialize their cultural value and expand their influence through such collaborations. Concerning co-branding models, existing research classifies them into various types, including product co-branding, brand co-branding, and scenario co-branding, among which product co-branding and visual co-branding are the most commonly adopted forms in the new-style tea beverage industry. With respect to co-branding outcomes, studies primarily focus on brand awareness, brand image, and consumer purchase intention, concluding that successful cross-border cultural and creative co-branding can yield win-win results for both brands and IPs. However, issues such as homogenization of co-branding models and low compatibility between IPs and brands may also lead to suboptimal co-branding performance^[3].

Furthermore, from the perspective of semiotics, a sign is understood as a unity comprising the signifier (visual form)

and the signified (connotative meaning), capable of conveying information, expressing emotion, and constructing meaning. As the core carrier of an IP, IP visual symbols represent the visual manifestation of an IP's connotations and emotions. Their constituent elements include graphics, colors, typography, and layout, through the combination of which the cultural connotations and emotional values of the IP are communicated. The reconstruction of IP visual symbols is crucial to the integration of brand and IP, requiring a balance between the core characteristics of the IP and the core values of the brand to achieve a unity of visual form and connotative meaning. However, existing research predominantly focuses on the visual symbol design of individual IPs, while studies on the reconstruction logic and implementation pathways of IP visual symbols in cross-border co-branding, as well as their correlation with user emotional connection, remain relatively scarce. Such research is particularly lacking in the context of its application within the new-style tea beverage industry.

3. The Practice of IP Visual Symbol Reconstruction in HEYTEA's Cross-Border Cultural and Creative Co-Branding within the New Consumption Context

HEYTEA, grounded in its own brand positioning, has actively engaged in cross-border cultural and creative co-branding practices, establishing a diversified and differentiated co-branding portfolio. As a core element of its co-branding practices, the reconstruction of IP visual symbols permeates the entire co-branding process.

First, IP selection serves as the prerequisite for HEYTEA's IP visual symbol reconstruction, with the core logic being "alignment between the IP and the brand positioning, and compatibility between the IP and the needs of target users." HEYTEA's target users are primarily young consumers aged 18 to 35, a demographic that pursues individuality, fashion, and cultural engagement, and demonstrates a high degree of attention to and identification with cultural and creative IPs as well as trendy IPs. Based on this, HEYTEA's selection of cross-border cultural and creative IPs can be categorized into three main types. The first is traditional cultural IPs, such as the Palace Museum Cultural and Creative, the Dunhuang Academy, and the Sanxingdui Museum. These IPs carry profound traditional cultural connotations and align closely with HEYTEA's "New Chinese-style" brand identity, satisfying young consumers' recognition and pursuit of traditional culture^[4].

The second category comprises trendy IPs, including Clot, Yayoi Kusama, Chiikawa, FENDI, Starry, and Line Friends. These IPs feature adorable and fashionable visual characteristics, are highly popular among young consumers, and can rapidly attract attention while facilitating youthful brand communication. The third category consists of niche cultural and creative IPs, such as independent designer IPs and local cultural IPs. These IPs possess distinctive visual styles and cultural connotations, enabling differentiated co-branding and avoiding homogenized competition. For instance, in 2023, HEYTEA engaged in two in-depth collaborations with CLOT, the brand founded by Edison Chen. The collaboration drew upon CLOT's classic Silk Royale silk motif and the image of the Chinese dragon, integrating them with HEYTEA's "A-Xi" logo and festive elements associated with the Chinese New Year. Using a dominant red color palette accented with gold foil stamping, the collaboration reinforced the festive atmosphere of the Spring Festival while enhancing the brand's sense of sophistication. These elements served as core IP symbols, aligning closely with HEYTEA's positioning as an "Eastern New Tea Shop." In another collaboration with internationally renowned contemporary artist Yayoi Kusama, themed "Adding Boba to the World," the partnership marked Kusama's first cross-border venture into the new-style tea beverage sector and represented a milestone in HEYTEA's art-related co-branding efforts. By incorporating Kusama's signature polka dots and pumpkin motifs, and deeply integrating them with HEYTEA's "boba" pearl product line, the collaboration resonated with the aesthetic preferences of young consumers, achieving both traffic generation and emotional engagement.

HEYTEA's dissemination of IP visual symbols primarily relies on four channels. The first is product channels, where reconstructed visual symbols are applied to product carriers such as co-branded beverage packaging, cup sleeves, and straws. In the process of purchasing and consuming the products, users are directly exposed to these visual symbols, enabling precise symbol dissemination. The second is store channels, where visual symbols are integrated into the store environment through thematic installations and displays, creating immersive dissemination scenarios that enhance users'

visual experience and emotional perception. The third is social media channels, utilizing platforms commonly used by young consumers, such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin (TikTok), and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), to release co-branded visual materials, short videos, and interactive campaigns, attracting user attention, shares, and participation, thereby expanding the reach of the symbols. The fourth is offline event channels, including themed co-branding events and pop-up stores, which allow users to engage directly with co-branded visual symbols and participate in interactive experiences, deepening their cognitive understanding and emotional identification with the symbols^[5].

4. The Intrinsic Relationship between IP Visual Symbol Reconstruction and User Emotional Connection in HEYTEA's Cross-Border Cultural and Creative Co-Branding

In the context of new consumption, user brand loyalty no longer depends on product functionality but rather on the emotional connection established between the brand and its users. Through the reconstruction of IP visual symbols, HEYTEA builds emotional connections with its users, enabling them to develop emotional attachment to the brand over prolonged engagement and thereby achieve emotional retention. The reconstruction of IP visual symbols in HEYTEA's cross-border cultural and creative co-branding is not merely an innovation in visual form but also a process of emotional transmission. The reconstructed IP visual symbols can evoke user emotional resonance through visual stimulation, thereby constructing an emotional connection between the brand and its users.

HEYTEA's co-branded visual symbols with independent designer IPs convey values of "individuality, niche appeal, and high quality," aligning with young consumers' pursuit of personalized and high-quality lifestyles, enabling users to develop emotional identification with the HEYTEA brand. HEYTEA's co-branded visual symbols with local cultural IPs convey respect for and preservation of local culture, allowing users to perceive HEYTEA's sense of social responsibility, thereby enhancing brand identification and trust. Through a progressive process of emotional triggering, emotional resonance, and emotional identification, long-term emotional retention is achieved, which in turn translates into brand loyalty and purchasing behavior. For example, HEYTEA's co-branded visual symbols are applied not only to co-branded products and store environments but also extended to merchandise. The process of users purchasing merchandise also constitutes a process of emotional retention, allowing users to continuously encounter the visual symbols in their daily lives and thereby strengthening emotional connection. Meanwhile, HEYTEA continuously conveys the emotional connotations of its co-branded visual symbols through sustained engagement on social media platforms, deepening users' emotional identification and achieving long-term emotional retention. This emotional retention enables users to transition from "one-time purchases" to "long-term repeat purchases" and from "ordinary users" to "loyal brand advocates," providing sustained support for the brand's long-term development.

5. Existing Problems and Their Causes in IP Visual Symbol Reconstruction and Emotional Connection Construction in HEYTEA's Cross-Border Cultural and Creative Co-Branding

Although HEYTEA has achieved certain successes in IP visual symbol reconstruction and emotional connection building within its cross-border cultural and creative co-branding, establishing a relatively mature practice framework, the increasing frequency of co-branding initiatives and the evolving dynamics of the new consumption market have gradually exposed certain issues. These issues constrain the communication effectiveness of IP visual symbols and the quality of emotional connection construction.

The existing problems in IP visual symbol reconstruction and emotional connection building in HEYTEA's cross-border cultural and creative co-branding are primarily manifested in four aspects. First, there is a pronounced

homogenization in IP visual symbol reconstruction, characterized by a lack of uniqueness and innovation. As HEYTEA's cross-border cultural and creative co-branding initiatives continue to multiply, some co-branded IP visual symbol reconstructions exhibit clear tendencies toward homogenization, primarily reflected in the narrow selection of symbols and rigid reconstruction approaches, coupled with insufficient depth in excavating IP core connotations and achieving innovative expression. For instance, many of HEYTEA's co-branding efforts with traditional cultural IPs adopt a reconstruction approach that combines traditional motifs with the brand logo, resulting in visually similar outputs that struggle to establish distinctive recognition. Co-branding with trendy IPs often employs a simplistic combination of cartoon characters with product packaging, lacking deep integration of the IP's emotional connotations. Consequently, the resulting visual symbols lack memorable qualities, making it difficult to evoke unique emotional experiences among users.

Second, there is a disconnection between IP visual symbols and the brand's core values, leading to weakened emotional transmission. Some co-branded IP visual symbol reconstructions overemphasize the traffic-driving effects of IPs while neglecting the alignment with HEYTEA's core brand values. This results in a disconnect between the emotional connotations conveyed by the visual symbols and HEYTEA's core values of "high quality, New Chinese-style, and warmth," impeding the achievement of deep emotional resonance with users. For example, in certain niche IP co-branding efforts, the visual symbols excessively pursue individuality and niche appeal while overlooking HEYTEA's brand identity, making it difficult for users to associate the visual symbols with the HEYTEA brand, thereby undermining the effectiveness of emotional transmission.

Third, there is a lack of continuity in emotional connection, hindering long-term retention. HEYTEA's cross-border cultural and creative co-branding initiatives are predominantly short-term collaborations, with the dissemination of IP visual symbols and the associated emotional transmission concentrated primarily during the co-branding period. Following the conclusion of the co-branding, the intensity of visual symbol dissemination declines sharply, making it difficult to sustain and deepen the emotional connection. This results in insufficient emotional retention among users, impeding the transition from "traffic attraction" to "emotional retention." For instance, after certain co-branding campaigns end, HEYTEA ceases to disseminate the relevant visual symbols and does not introduce subsequent derivative products, leading to a gradual fading of user memory of the co-branded visual symbols and a progressive weakening of the emotional connection.

Fourth, the channels for visual symbol dissemination are limited, resulting in uneven communication effectiveness. HEYTEA's dissemination of IP visual symbols relies primarily on social media and product channels, while store channels and offline event channels remain underutilized. Moreover, the content disseminated across different channels lacks targeting, contributing to uneven communication outcomes. For example, social media channels predominantly reach younger users, failing to cover middle-aged and older user demographics. Offline event channels have a relatively narrow reach, being conducted only in a limited number of cities, thus failing to achieve broad dissemination. These limitations affect both the communication effectiveness of visual symbols and the scope of emotional connection building.

Furthermore, the rapid changes in the new consumption market and the diversification of user needs impose higher demands on HEYTEA's IP visual symbol reconstruction and emotional connection building. As the aesthetic preferences of young consumer groups continue to evolve, the requirements for innovativeness and emotional resonance in IP visual symbols are increasingly elevated. However, some of HEYTEA's co-branding practices have failed to keep pace with changing user needs, resulting in visual symbols that struggle to meet users' emotional demands, thereby affecting the effectiveness of emotional connection construction. Simultaneously, competition within the new-style tea beverage industry is intensifying, with other brands also actively pursuing cross-border cultural and creative co-branding and launching innovative IP visual symbols. This further intensifies the competitive pressure on HEYTEA and presents greater challenges to its IP visual symbol reconstruction and emotional connection building efforts.

6. Optimization Strategies for IP Visual Symbol Reconstruction and Emotional Connection Building in HEYTEA's Cross-Border Cultural and Creative Co-Branding in the Context of New Consumption

Symbol reconstruction lies at the core of emotional connection. HEYTEA should enhance the innovative capacity of its design team, deeply explore the core connotations of IPs, and innovate symbol reconstruction methods to avoid homogenization. First, it is essential to deepen IP symbol extraction—not merely extracting the surface-level visual elements of the IP, but also uncovering the cultural connotations and emotional appeals embedded within the IP, integrating these into the symbol extraction process to endow visual symbols with rich connotative meaning. Second, innovation in symbol reconstruction methods is necessary, moving beyond the rigid model of combining IP elements with the brand logo. A combination of integrated reconstruction, innovative reconstruction, and scenario-based reconstruction should be adopted to achieve deep integration of IP symbols and brand symbols, thereby creating a visual symbol system with distinctive recognition and emotional resonance. For example, when collaborating with traditional cultural IPs, traditional motifs can be combined with HEYTEA's product characteristics to create innovative designs that embody both traditional cultural charm and contemporary fashion sensibility. When collaborating with trendy IPs, the emotional connotations of the IP can be explored and integrated with HEYTEA's brand philosophy to achieve deep emotional transmission. Third, attention should be paid to the detailed design of visual symbols, optimizing the combination of elements such as graphics, colors, typography, and layout to ensure aesthetic appeal, adaptability, and emotional expressiveness, thereby enhancing users' visual experience and emotional perception. Strengthening Emotional Transmission, Focusing on User Emotional Needs, and Constructing a Differentiated Emotional Connection System

Emotional transmission constitutes the core link in establishing emotional connection. HEYTEA should focus on the emotional needs of new consumer groups, identify points of emotional resonance between IPs and users, and construct a differentiated emotional connection system. First, it is necessary to explore user emotional needs through methods such as user research and interviews to understand the emotional appeals of young consumers—such as healing, companionship, cultural identity, and self-expression—and integrate these into the process of IP visual symbol reconstruction and emotional transmission, thereby achieving precise emotional delivery.

7. Conclusion

This study enriches the interdisciplinary research on brand cross-border co-branding, IP visual symbol reconstruction, and emotional marketing within the context of new consumption, addressing gaps in the existing research pertaining to the new-style tea beverage industry. Nevertheless, certain limitations remain. In terms of research scope, this study adopts HEYTEA as a single case, and thus the generalizability of the findings requires further validation. In terms of research methodology, the sample size for interviews is limited, and the depth of quantitative analysis is insufficient. In terms of research content, the study exhibits a relative weakness in the quantitative evaluation of IP visual symbol reconstruction. Future research may expand the scope of case studies by selecting multiple new-style tea beverage brands for comparative analysis, increase sample sizes, and deepen quantitative analysis. Additionally, future studies could focus on areas such as the development of a quantitative evaluation framework for IP visual symbol reconstruction and the innovation of visual symbol dissemination in the context of digitalization, thereby further enriching relevant research findings and providing more comprehensive theoretical support and practical guidance for the deep integration of the new-style tea beverage industry and the cultural and creative industry.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Li JY, 2025, A Study on the Current Situation of New Tea Drink Brands Based on SWOT Analysis—Taking Heytea as an Example. *Guangdong Tea Industry*, (03): 41-45.
- [2] Lang JQ, 2025, An Analysis of Co-Branding Marketing Strategy Between Heytea and Fendi. Guilin University of Technology.
- [3] Geng YH, 2025, Why Is the Appearance Economy Possible in the Internet Context? Taking the Internet-Famous Brand “Heytea” as an Example. *Journal of Jiangnan University (Social Science Edition)*, 42(02): 47-55.
- [4] Wang YY, 2021, An Analysis of Marketing Strategies for New-Style Tea Drinks from the Perspective of New Media—Taking Heytea as an Example. *Business Newsletter*, (02): 15-16.
- [5] Huang RJ, 2023, A Study on the Influencing Factors of Purchase Intention for New Tea Drinks in the Era of Self-Pleasing Consumption. Shanghai University of Finance and Economics.

Publisher's note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.