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**Cultural Strategy and Identity
Construction in Chinese Emerging
Brands' Global Expansion: The Case of
Pop Mart**
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Abstract

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This thesis takes Pop Mart as a representative to study how emerging Chinese brands participate in the construction of global identity through visual and emotional narratives. Under the guidance of postcolonial theory, this study analyzes how Pop Mart strikes a balance between cultural expression and global appeal by designing hybrid characters that integrate East Asian aesthetics with global visual styles. Through qualitative analysis of brand visuals, digital platform content, and character narratives, this study demonstrates how key ips (intellectual property) - Molly, Skullpanda, Dimoo, and labubu - convey a mixture of emotional ambiguity and symbolism. The research results highlight how small brands from non-Western backgrounds can utilize visual culture and emotional design to gain wide popularity and cultural support from global audiences in the international market. Furthermore, the research contributes to the interdisciplinary discussion of global brands by demonstrating how visual and emotional strategies can serve as tools for soft power and symbolic negotiations.

Keyword: PopMart; Chinese Branding; Cultural Hybridity; Postcolonial Theory; Global Identity; Visual Analysis

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Over the last few years, a growing number of Chinese brands intensified their global push. From apparel and lifestyle to tech and food and beverage, Chinese companies' penetration of global consumer markets has become very prominent. This push has gone beyond manufacturing exports and has increasingly focused on building brands and telling cultural narratives. Chinese brands not only engage in the global economy but also become active actors in framing cultural narratives and identity formations.

The emergence of the "Guochao" (国潮, or "national wave") movement represents a dramatic cultural shift in China's brand approach. The trend encompasses the incorporation of traditional Chinese elements—e.g., calligraphy, Hanfu, dragons, and traditional verse—into contemporary product design, brand marketing, and story-telling. It represents a wider reassertion of cultural nationalism and national identity in the wake of global consumer culture (Zhang, 2024). Guochao brands like Li-Ning and Florasis have used local heritage alongside contemporary style in order to engage both domestic and global markets. The rise of Guochao is not merely a business trend; it represents a cultural renaissance positioning brand as a vehicle for expressing national identity.

At the same time, the global landscape remains dominated by non-Western narratives, values, and standards. Numerous internationally acknowledged brand identities have developed under the Euro-American design codes of communication and aesthetic codes of value, which tend to marginalize or stereotype non-Western identity. Internationally expanding non-Western brands often encounter difficulty in decoding cultures, brand legitimacy, and consumer perceptions. Chinese brands face a

double-edged sword in this situation: they need to conform to global brand conventions for accessibility and competitiveness on a worldwide scale at the same time as they must differentiate themselves through local cultural uniqueness.

In the era of digital globalization, this predicament has become even more complicated. On the one hand, digital platforms such as TIKTOK, Instagram and Facebook have become important channels for small brands to directly reach international audiences without capital support, and they are also the most effective channels for information dissemination. These platforms allow brands to tell stories creatively, interact in real time and go viral with symbolic content. On the other hand, the algorithmic structures and visual preferences of these platforms often tend to be simplified. Some brand content full of emotions and exoticism may potentially enhance the shallow or stereotypical impression of non-Western cultures held by the global public (Lim, 2023).

Furthermore, the symbolic resources utilized by Chinese brands - cultural values, traditional symbols and references to history - are often filtered out by the lens of the West. The meanings of "authenticity", "tradition" and "heritage" vary in the interpretation of cultural boundaries and create a tension between the intended meaning and the accepted meaning. For instance, the dragon is a symbol of strength and prosperity in China, while in the West it can be regarded as a fantasy or an oddity (Zhang, 2019). This highlights the symbolic obstacles that Chinese brands must overcome when establishing a logo that can resonate culturally but be understood worldwide.

Theoretical discourses on identity and representation provide sharp analyses of the challenges at hand. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) theory shows us how the West has historically constructed the East as Oriental and less than themselves, a schema that continues to inform us today. From Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity we learn that identity is not static but rather a negotiation, most notably in postcolonial societies where cultures interact asymmetrically. Chinese brands thus not only exist in economic competition but in a symbolic space regulated by differential cultural forces. Branding in this sense becomes a cultural act rather than a merely

commercial exercise. The stories told through logos and packaging and advertising and influencer endorsements and consumer-generated content shape the global imagination of what "China" is and what it means. Brands can reinforce or subvert existing stereotypes or present alternative narratives based on everyday cultural experience. As Gerth (2012) points out, the shift from "Made in China" and "China Managed" indicates an increasing aspiration for narrative independence in economic as well as symbolic space.

Whereas corporate brands like Huawei or Lenovo can hire global branding consultants and market research firms, smaller brands depend on intuitive, visual, and interactive modes of story-telling—particularly on the web. Grassroots or apparently improvisational modes of branding characterize the practices of smaller brands, but they are important modes of negotiating transnational meaning. Sites like TikTok or Instagram become "third spaces" (Bhabha, 1994) wherein cultural symbols are not simply reproduced but contested and remixed and re-signified.

At the same time, however, Chinese global success also transcends issues of market effectiveness and speaks to cultural politics. The Chinese brands' entry into global markets forces them inevitably into symbolic negotiations regarding nationhood, authenticity, and modernity. These negotiations take on complex and contradictory forms, involving both assertive deployment of cultural identity and accommodation of international standards. This contradiction provides a rich space for critical examination and analysis based on postcolonial thought. Pop Mart is one of the most attractive representatives among the next generation of Chinese brands with cultural aspirations. It is an innovative toy company that is expanding rapidly outside the Chinese market. Its blind box form and emotionally rich characters, such as Molly, Skullpanda and Dimoo, make Pop Mart an intersection of art toy culture, youth subculture and visual global emotions. Traditional consumer brands offer products and items, while Pop Mart provides a symbolic world and emotional space through collectible figurines, blurring the boundaries between products and individuality, commodities and culture.

1.2 Case Context: Pop Mart as a Globalizing Cultural Brand

Established in 2010 and based in Beijing, Pop Mart has quickly developed from a local designer toy shop into a cultural leader in China's global landscape. Focused on collectable art toys primarily distributed via the model of "blind boxes," Pop Mart speaks to a younger generation of urban consumers who not only desire entertainment and novelty but also emotional attachment and aesthetic identity. Each blind box has a randomly filled figurine from a themed set and invites both collection and surprise and affective investment in the expanding line of characters from the brand.

Pop Mart's products are more than toys—they are branded symbolic systems that combine visual design, narrative framing, and consumer emotion. The company collaborates with independent artists to create IP(Intellectual Property)-based characters such as Molly, Skullpanda, Dimoo, and Labubu, each possessing a distinct personality, emotional tone, and visual style. These figures inhabit not only shelves and display cases but also social media feeds, fan-made stories, and branded events, forming a para-textual universe that blurs the boundaries between commodity and culture. Unlike conventional children's toys, Pop Mart's figurines are marketed primarily to young people in their teens and twenties, signaling a shift in the cultural meaning of "play" in the digital age.

In recent years, Pop Mart has accelerated its international expansion and opened stores and pop-up stores in cities such as Seoul, Tokyo, Bangkok, New York, London and Paris. The brand has also established a strong influence on digital platforms including Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, where product unboxing, fan art, emotional responses and aesthetic displays have gained global recognition. It is worth noting that Pop Mart deliberately avoids the public presentation of "Sinicization", and instead adopts a mixed visual language, integrating the cute (Kawaii) of East Asia, the Gothic style of the West, minimalist dreams and ambiguous expressions of emotions. This enables the brand to resonate across national borders while remaining in the evolving cultural context of China.

Precisely because of this, Pop Mart is an excellent case for studying how

emerging Chinese brands construct transnational cultural narratives. Its success does not stem from hard power or traditional symbols of nationalism, but from the influence of soft aesthetics, modular narratives and wise communication of the platform. Furthermore, as a non-tech and non-state-owned brand, Pop Mart provides us with a special window through which we can observe how the creative industries in the Global South gain recognition and legitimacy in the global market dominated by Western brands, identities and styles.

1.3 Chinese Cultural Context and Branding Elements

The understanding of contemporary Chinese brand culture is the basis of this research. Chinese culture boasts a rich visual and symbolic heritage that still influences China's aesthetics and communication practices to this day. The fundamental values of traditional Chinese visual culture are harmony and subtleties, the mutual relationship between human and nature, and symbolism rather than expressiveness. Visual communication often employs themes such as dragons (power and authority), phoenixes (Renaissance and femininity), peonies (honor and wealth), jade (purity), and calligraphy. While enhancing the decorative function, these visual elements also incorporate the profound cultural heritage of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism over several centuries.

In recent years, this intangible cultural heritage has reappeared before the new generation of young people in the form of the "GuoChao" movement. "GuoChao" is a brand, fashion and design movement that emerged at the end of 2010. This movement reinterprets traditional cultural elements from a contemporary perspective. The ips of brands like Li-Ning, Florasis and the Palace Museum all help promote their brands by integrating traditional elements such as Hanfu patterns, Chinese zodiac signs, blue and white porcelain patterns and the aesthetics of ink wash painting into their product designs and brand storylines. This movement has greatly attracted young Chinese consumers, rejuvenated traditional culture, and provided strategic prospects for domestic and international brands in terms of differentiation.

Chinese brands expanding internationally often draw selectively from this cultural palette to craft brand identities that are both recognizable and emotionally resonant. However, the global reception of these symbols can be shaped by different cultural logics and historical associations. As such, understanding the cultural background and symbolic significance of these elements is key to analyzing how Chinese brands like Pop Mart deploy visual and narrative strategies when communicating with transnational audiences.

1.4 Research Problem and Questions

In recent years, more attention has been paid to how Chinese brands enter the global market. However, much of this literature remains concentrated on large corporations, top-down strategies, or policy-driven narratives. What often gets overlooked are the smaller, culturally-driven brands—those that do not rely on state resources or global capital, but instead build their identity through visual storytelling, affective design, and grassroots engagement on digital platforms.

Existing research tends to study brands from the perspectives of management or marketing, focusing on the measurement standards of success, brand positioning and consumer behavior. Although these methods are useful, they tend to believe that culture is something that can be carefully packaged and exported, without considering how culture itself is constructed, translated and perceived in different contexts. In the process of doing so, they overlooked the power dynamics, aesthetic tension and symbolic negotiations involved in brand promotion in a non-Western context.

This article holds that this omission is not only an academic blindness but also a symptom of greater epistemological limitations. Due to the lack of tools to address issues such as identity, representation and cultural significance, many current efforts fail to take into account the deeper power that Chinese brands exert when attempting to make their appearance on the global stage. In this regard, postcolonial theory offers something important: a way to critically examine how brands function in an unbalanced cultural power system.

This article not only explores how brands succeed, but also how they negotiate cultural popularity, construct symbolic identities, and either within or contrary to the aesthetic expectations formed by Western norms. Take Pop Mart as an example. This project explores how a small Chinese brand can create an emotional narrative and a hybrid aesthetic and resonate beyond national boundaries, and this tells us a broader perspective of global brands in the post-colonial era.

Based on this critical framing, the research is guided by the following questions:

RQ1: How do small and emerging Chinese brands construct cultural narratives in the process of going global?

RQ2: How can postcolonial theory help us critically understand the representation of Chinese brands in global markets?

1.5 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine how small Chinese brands construct cultural narratives through visual and emotional storytelling in global contexts. By focusing on Pop Mart as a representative case, the research aims to analyze how the brand creates a transnational identity through its character design and digital communication strategies. Furthermore, this study seeks to identify the cultural challenges and opportunities involved in representing Chinese identity within international markets. These objectives guide the investigation toward a nuanced understanding of how emerging Chinese brands negotiate visibility, aesthetics, and identity across global media platforms.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the growing body of work on international branding by shifting the focus toward emerging-market brands and their cultural strategies. Specifically, it highlights how small Chinese brands engage in identity negotiation through visual culture, symbolic storytelling, and platform-based communication.

From an academic perspective, the study brings together branding studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory to offer an interdisciplinary understanding of branding as a form of cultural production. It also fills a gap in the literature by emphasizing the experiences and strategies of smaller brands rather than multinational giants.

Practically, the findings can inform Chinese entrepreneurs, brand managers, and marketing strategists seeking to navigate international markets. Understanding how to authentically communicate cultural identity without falling into essentialist or stereotypical traps is crucial for long-term global success.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Chinese Brands' Globalization and Cross-Cultural Communication

In the past two decades, the globalization of Chinese brands has undergone a significant transformation, driven by economic reforms, digital innovation, and state-led strategies such as the “Going Global” initiative. As China transitions from being the “world’s factory” to a global branding force, scholars have increasingly examined how Chinese firms—especially emerging and small-to-medium-sized brands—build their identities and communicate across cultural boundaries. However, existing literature remains largely focused on large manufacturing conglomerates, leaving the branding strategies of smaller or digital-first Chinese brands underexplored (Fan, 2006; Balmer & Chen, 2015).

The historical background of Chinese branding is marked by a long-standing dependence on price-based competition and OEM production models. In the early 2000s, Chinese companies were often viewed as imitators rather than innovators, facing consumer skepticism in Western markets (Ille & Chailan, 2011). Bell (2008), in a landmark study on Chinese household appliance and electronics companies, demonstrated how firms such as Haier and TCL attempted to overcome these perceptions through strategic brand positioning and international marketing investments. His research highlighted the challenges Chinese brands faced in penetrating the U.S. and European markets, particularly in gaining legitimacy and building consumer trust. Bell found that most Chinese firms lacked branding experience and often undervalued intangible brand assets such as heritage, narrative coherence, and cultural relevance—elements vital to success in developed markets.

Recent studies suggest that the branding landscape in China has matured significantly. As Ille (2009) notes, several leading firms began to transfer “soft technologies”—marketing know-how, branding systems, and customer insight tools—from established Western firms in order to enhance their brand equity abroad. The concept of “soft technology transfer” represents a pivotal shift from technical manufacturing to symbolic capital, allowing Chinese companies to construct meaningful brand identities in global markets. Haier, for example, adopted a localized product adaptation strategy in the U.S., while Lenovo leveraged the acquisition of IBM’s ThinkPad to instantly access brand equity and customer loyalty in the business computing segment (Ille, 2009; Chailan & Ille, 2015).

In analyzing broader patterns, Liao and Yang (2023) propose two dominant pathways of brand internationalization among Chinese firms: progressive and leapfrog internationalization. The former involves gradual overseas expansion, often through joint ventures, licensing, and slow learning processes; the latter is characterized by rapid digital-based market entry, particularly by brands that are “born global.” Their configurational study of 61 Chinese brands revealed the importance of two key capabilities: brand penetration (the ability to build visibility) and brand acculturation (the ability to adapt to foreign cultural and consumer norms). This reflects a departure from one-size-fits-all strategies, emphasizing customization, narrative, and emotional resonance with local audiences.

Country-of-origin (COO) remains a significant factor in global branding, especially for companies from emerging economies. Aichner (2014) identified eight common tactics companies adopt to emphasize or downplay their COO, depending on the strategic relevance of their COO. For Chinese brands, COO has proved a double-edged sword: whilst “Made in China” might convey affordability and efficiency, it has also become linked to lower quality and a lack of innovation, not least in high-stakes or culturally sensitive industries. However, as Polfuß (2021) describes, the stereotype has started changing, notably amongst young consumers in developing and Western economies who increasingly link Chinese brands with tech savvy-ness, youthfulness, and digital innovation.

Gerth (2012) adds an ideological framework to this shift by taking the view that China's brand drive is not merely economic but also political in nature. In explaining economic nationalism, he presents Chinese-branding as a state-sponsored effort at graduating from “China made” to “China managed.” Instead of supplying goods and consumerables for global consumption on a passive level, China now proactively constructs global consumer culture through brands embodying Chinese heritage, values, and strategic narratives. The ideological turn gives brands like Huawei, Li-Ning, or even virtual entertainment brands like Tencent or miHoYo added symbolic potency. By doing so, Gerth's work frames branding both as a market practice and a cultural statement of national identity in consumer markets dominated by the West.

Another important finding from the literature relates to the dynamic between standardization and localization in global marketing. Some companies standardize global brand identities for consistency and recognition purposes, whereas others tend to localize visual identity, narrative, or product features. The extent of the approaches usually rests on the risk appetites of the firm, the nature of the industry, and cultural sensitivity of the market (Chailan & Ille, 2015; Fan, 2006). Empirical studies reveal Chinese brands increasingly align their regional branding approaches—e.g., heritage and craftsmanship in Europe and innovation and social value in Southeast Asia.

To offer a more analytical framework, Polfuß (2021) constructed the IDCI Matrix (Integration, Differentiation, Cooperation, Imitation), which classifies Chinese brands' reactions toward global rivalry and cultural demands. The model distinguishes between imitators of foreign symbols (e.g., “copycat” brandings), cooperation with foreign parties (co-branding and joint ventures), and brands engaging in independent differentiation through authentic cultural narratives. It also takes account of brands integrating foreign marketing approaches with unique Chinese features. The typology allows scholars and professionals to comprehend various strategic directions of Chinese brands in industries and development stages.

Despite progress having been made, Chinese companies' brand challenges —

especially smaller brands — remain considerable. Strong global identities remain elusive for many brands, and cultural misalignment remains a threat, be it in the West in particular where consumers tend to be highly sensitive to brand genuineness and ethicality. Furthermore, the advent of platforms like TikTok and Instagram has provided brands with added opportunities for engagement and storytelling, but also demands increased agility and cultural dexterity from brand managers. Herein, newer, born-on-internet brands now dominate established players in global reach and cultural relevance by leveraging influencer marketing, UGC (user-generated content), and experiential branding practices to bridge cultural differences.

2.2 Brand Storytelling and Cultural Expression

Brand storytelling has emerged as a prominent tool for companies trying to establish emotional resonance in consumers, particularly in cross-cultural settings. It enables brands to build and convey a narrative identity, integrating cultural values, symbols of history, and visual cues into a unified brand image (Wu, Ma & Xie, 2013). For Chinese brands emerging in the market, brand storytelling is not a marketing tool but a strong vehicle for rebranding the global image of "Made in China" and reasserting cultural self-confidence in the global marketplaces (Geczy, 2019).

Wu et al. (2013) conceived the term "Chinese-styled branding" as a means of combining authenticity, retrospection, and cultural reinvention in the brand development process. This approach focuses on how Chinese brands can find a unique differentiation on a global level by leveraging traditional design elements, philosophical values, and collective memory. Similarly, Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren (2012) pointed out the ways in which heritage-rooted fashion and design can be a story of cultural continuity and has become the core theme of the "Guochao" (national trend) movement.

Guochao as a brand phenomenon exemplifies a cultural shift in China's self-expression. It signals a break from traditional reliance on Western notions of modernity and luxury toward Chinese cultural pride being embedded in a brand. Bian

and Li (2021) noted that Chinese youth increasingly identify with brands integrating national cultural icons like dragons, calligraphy, Dunhuang murals, or traditional poetry into design and copy. The symbols used here do not remain nostalgic or exotic but become reinterpreted as a signifier of Chinese identity in the present.

This recontextualization entails an intentional act of cultural re-coding. Zhang (2019) discussed how the dragon, previously an imperial totem and subsequently an Asian stereotype icon in the West, has now been reimagined in Guochao branding as an energetic and confident marker of Chinese innovation. These semiotic reinventions are a kind of counter-narrative—where Chinese brands counteract the act of being overly exoticized and produce their own narratives about what it means to be Chinese in the 21st century (Geczy, 2019).

Brand narratives perform a mediating function in cross-cultural communication by conveying cultural meaning from linguistic and symbolic contexts. Tsui (2013) explained that visual identity serves as a semiotic bridge between East and West. She indicated that Guochao visual sensibilities actively deconstruct the East/West binary by integrating traditional Chinese symbolism and global pop culture references. The integration of traditional opera mask patterns in street clothing or the remixing of poems from the ancients and interpolation in rap music is a form of a hybridized aesthetic appealing both nationally and internationally.

Chinese researchers also provided useful frameworks for narrative branding. Zhang Jingyun (2024) categorized brand narratives as having several forms including feminist, spatial narratives and cross-media narratives and emphasizing the use of culturally meaningful elements across various platforms. This view aligns well for small Chinese brands who tend to depend on digital narratives through social media, short video clips and interactive content in a bid to appeal to global consumers. The narrative construction involves brand signs, value proposition, and emotional appeal according to the same research and constructs the symbolic identity of the brand altogether.

Zhang also emphasized the importance of "multi-dimensional narrative structures" that align brand voice with audience cultural expectations. In her analysis

of Chinese brands such as Tong Ren Tang and Qianjiang, she illustrates how traditional cultural brands use layered storytelling techniques—such as place-based symbolism, ritual culture, and historical memory—to form a brand image that transcends mere commercial promotion (Zhang, 2024). Furthermore, she identifies that successful brand narratives are often co-created by consumers through digital platforms, making user-generated content (UGC) a key element in narrative branding.

Moreover, Chinese brands are increasingly adopting what Gerth (2012) calls a "China managed" strategy—where they not only manufacture but also manage the meaning of their cultural symbols. In this sense, brand storytelling becomes a mode of cultural governance. It allows brands to reposition themselves from being objects of foreign interpretation to authors of their own cultural stories. This shift has strategic implications in building soft power, as brands become carriers of national discourse.

The implementation of storytelling strategies is particularly evident in industries such as fashion, cosmetics, and food and beverage. Brands like Florasis use poetic imagery and Han dynasty aesthetics to evoke romanticized visions of traditional femininity. Pop Mart constructs collectible toy narratives embedded with youth culture and emotional themes. Li Ziqi, as a personal brand, exemplifies how rural Chinese lifestyle can be aestheticized into a cultural export through slow storytelling and visual lyricism.

Despite its growing influence, there are still challenges in executing effective cross-cultural storytelling. Many Chinese brands lack coherent narrative planning and fail to adapt cultural elements in ways that resonate with local audiences abroad (Zhang Jingyun, 2024). In some cases, storytelling is reduced to superficial symbolism without contextual depth, risking cultural misinterpretation or accusations of inauthenticity. Zhang also notes that cultural narratives are most effective when integrated with contemporary values and expressed through multi-sensory experiences, something many brands still struggle to achieve.

Thus, narrative branding requires not only creativity but also a deep understanding of cultural translation, semiotic strategy, and audience reception. This is especially critical for emerging Chinese brands that seek to expand internationally

while maintaining cultural integrity and relevance.

2.3 The Role of Digital Platforms and Social Media in Cross-Cultural Brand Communication

During the era of digital globalisation, social spaces on the internet have become key sites of cross-cultural communication and brand building. Social spaces on the web offer brands a means of stretching geographic and linguistic boundaries by affording dynamic and engaging and algorithmically driven spaces for telling stories. It has special relevance for small and nascent Chinese brands, which may not have the resources of multinational brands but deploy digital technologies so as to speak to global consumers through culturally engaging narratives.

Digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Xiaohongshu (rednote) act as intermediaries in cross-cultural dissemination of brand identity and meaning. These platforms provide visual-centric, interactive, and algorithm-driven spaces for brands to present immersive and emotionally charged communication. As Wang and Chen (2021) make a case in their exploration of TikTok, the platform's design naturally promotes localized delivery of content and has global scalability. Through the tailoring of content streams based on user behavior and local preferences, TikTok allows brands to present cultural messaging with unmatched accuracy.

User-generated content (UGC) is especially important in cross-cultural brand narratives. Shifman (2016) has suggested a framework for examining UGC in cultures through values, emotions, framing, and communicative stance. Here, cultural narratives are being co-constructed between brands and consumers themselves, frequently obscuring the division between consumer and producer. This encourages Chinese brands by triggering not only engagement but also localized reinterpretations of brand narratives. Florasis (Hua Xizi), for instance, encourages consumers to create and share tutorials for makeup application employing traditional Chinese makeup products, thus expanding brand narrative through participant-centred narratives.

Zhang Jingyun (2024) points out that numerous Chinese brands depend not only on

digital platforms for promoting their products but also on them for building brand identity. By way of social media, the brands apply cross-platform narrative strategies through visual narratives, short video clips, and livestreaming in order to boost cultural resonance. Here, she validates the increasing relevance of "narrative co-creation," where digital consumers become engaged in the act of branding through creating derivative works, sharing interpretation, and affirming symbolic meaning. It works best in the case of small brands trying to create authenticity in a global market. The logical programming of platforms also determines the direction of cross-cultural narratives. As Lim (2023) observes, platform algorithms determine what forms of cultural material are surfaced and amplified or subdued. While this can be used to promote richly detailed brand narratives aligned with the aesthetic or ethos of the moment, it can also suppress intelligent or less immediately grasped material. Accordingly, Chinese brands must then navigate between creativity and platform competency in order to achieve maximum visibility and engagement between cultures.

Also, Kefi et al. (2017) compared Facebook pages of French and Saudi Arabian beauty brands and demonstrated the differences in brand story and consumer responses between cultures. In culturally collectivist cultures, emotionally expressive and symbolically visual posts proved to be better performers, whereas in culturally individualistic cultures, personalized and humorous posts engaged consumers better. This confirms that cross-cultural branding on web platforms has to be sensitive both to visual literacy and cultural codes of emotion.

In terms of the internationalization of Chinese brands, digital platforms are not merely channels but also cultural infrastructure. Both Zhang (2019) and Geczy (2019) emphasized how digital visuals enable Chinese brands to reconstruct traditional symbols (dragons, silk or calligraphy) into shareable, emotile-friendly forms and connect with a variety of publics. This strategy has become part of building a mixed cultural narrative that is rooted in the local context but attracts the world.

Furthermore, researchers such as Yusuf (2022) and Hochreiter & Waldhauser (2014) identified the strategic functions of cultural engagement through social media

analysis and data mining. Chinese brands monitor emotions through real-time feedback loops and modify their content and cultural positioning accordingly. Through data-driven operations, cultural narratives are optimized to better meet the desires and expectations of the expected goals.

Despite these advantages, challenges still exist. Zhang Jingyun (2024) pointed out that some brands rely on superficial cultural elements without deeply integrating them into coherent narratives, which may be misunderstood or accused of cultural appropriation. Furthermore, excessive reliance on platform parameters and trends may lead to homogeneous content that lacks depth or differentiation.

Therefore, successfully narrating a brand across cultures through digital platforms requires a multi-level strategy that combines symbolic wealth, participatory design, algorithmic adaptability, and cultural sensitivity. For small brands in China, mastering these elements can gain global recognition through genuine cultural exchanges.

2.4 Postcolonialism and Brand Representation

Postcolonial theory helps us understand how brands from non-Western countries, especially China, deal with their cultural identity when entering global markets that have long been led by the West. As Chinese brands go abroad, they need to think about how they show their culture, how to stay true to it, and how to handle the power imbalance in branding. This part of the paper uses ideas from postcolonial theory, including Orientalism (Said, 1978), self-Orientalism (Kobayashi et al., 2017), hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), and cultural commodification (Rosenblatt, 2009; Kim & Chung, 2005), to look at how Chinese brands work within and sometimes push back against Western branding norms.

Postcolonial theory gives us a way to study how power and culture are linked in global storytelling. One key work is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which has had a strong influence. Said points out that the West has long created a fixed idea of "the Orient"—usually meaning places like the Middle East, North Africa, and

Asia—as mysterious, old-fashioned, unreasonable, and very different from the West. He explains that this isn't just about how people write or talk; it's part of a system that helped Western powers justify control and show themselves as better. So, Orientalism isn't just a group of stereotypes. It's a way of thinking and talking about the East that has become part of schools, media, and everyday culture.

Said also highlights how knowledge and power go together. Stories the West tells about the East aren't neutral—they shape what people believe is true in ways that support Western goals. He also points out how the media and culture industry keep spreading these simple images. Even though colonial rule has ended, this way of seeing the East hasn't gone away. It still affects how people understand and react to Eastern cultures today.

While Said's original focus was on the Arab-Islamic world, the mechanisms he described—binary framing, symbolic subordination, aesthetic containment—have proven highly adaptable to other non-Western contexts, including East Asia and China. In recent decades, scholars have applied the Orientalism framework to understand how Chinese culture is aestheticized, dehistoricized, and commodified in global consumer culture. From fashion and advertising to film and branding, Chinese symbols are often repackaged as “exotic signifiers,” stripped of political and cultural depth, and redeployed for Western consumption. This process, while not identical to colonial domination, operates through similar discursive and visual strategies of simplification and romanticization.

Therefore, although "Orientalism" originated from the study of Middle Eastern culture, the cultural construction mechanism it reveals also has theoretical explanatory power and practical relevance when Chinese brands face similar contextual and symbolic challenges.

Kim and Chung (2005) extend this critique by showing how Asian women are often portrayed in Western advertising as submissive, decorative, and hyper-feminized. These representations not only reflect gendered forms of Orientalism but also influence how brands from East Asia are expected to present themselves. For Chinese fashion, beauty, and lifestyle brands, this creates a tension

between leveraging cultural aesthetics for recognition and resisting the reduction of their identity to mere exotic spectacle.

To deal with global markets, some Chinese brands have used strategies that match what Kobayashi et al. (2017) call “self-Orientalism.” This means brands use well-known cultural symbols on purpose to meet what Western consumers expect to be “authentic.” For example, Kobayashi and others looked at the Japanese brand Asics and found that, when it worked with Western creative teams, its ads often used images like samurais and bonsai trees. In a similar way, some Chinese brands choose dragons, old-style calligraphy, or traditional clothes to quickly show their cultural background. These symbols do come from Chinese history, but using them in this way can make Chinese culture seem one-sided and easy to consume. Yan and Santos (2009) describe this as a kind of “performance” of nationalism. It might make local consumers feel proud, but it can also fix Chinese identity into limited and simple images for foreign audiences.

While Orientalism looks at how the West creates ideas about the “Other,” postcolonial theory also pays attention to how people from less powerful groups fight back or change these meanings. One key idea here is Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity, from his book *The Location of Culture* (1994). For Bhabha, hybridity is not just mixing two cultures. It is more like a space in between, where different ideas meet, change, and create new meanings. In this space, identities are not stable, and power is not simply given or taken. This helps break the old pattern of “us” versus “them,” or “real” versus “fake.” Instead, hybridity makes space for change and mixed expressions, where culture is always being shaped and reshaped.

The theory of Bhabha hybridity has been used in many studies to explain the formation of new identities in global and post-colonial environments. In terms of brand and media, it helps explain how smaller or less dominant companies can use an overall style while enhancing their own voice. For instance, hybrid brands can adopt international design styles, but they can also use local symbols, stories or values. This mixture creates a brand identity that is not easy to label and does not fully conform to the Western perspective.

In China, hybridity can be clearly seen in the rise of the Guochao (国潮) trend. As Zhang Jingyun (2024) notes, brands like Li-Ning and Florasis mix traditional Chinese elements — like calligraphy, ink-style art, or mythological figures — with modern styles such as minimalist or streetwear-inspired design. This mix is not just about making “tradition” look modern. It is a way for these brands to show who they are—both proud of their roots and open to the world. By doing this, Chinese brands can go beyond simple or fixed ideas of “Chineseness” and instead show flexible and creative identities.

But hybridity doesn’t happen on its own. Stuart Hall (1997) says that cultural identity is not something natural or fixed—it is built through how we represent ourselves. In today’s digital world, this is even more obvious. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram give small brands more chances to share their stories with a global audience. However, Lim (2023) points out that these platforms work through algorithms that often favor clear, emotional, and easy-to-understand content. As a result, complex or layered expressions of hybridity may be simplified or turned into something exotic just to go viral.

In branding, hybridity is not only about looks. It also shows how brands talk about themselves. Moeran (1996) believes that East Asian ads often use hybrid styles to take back control in global media. For Chinese brands, hybridity can push back against both Western power and narrow views from within China. But, as Turner (1994) reminds us, even these mixed styles can still be shaped by old Orientalist ideas—especially when global business goals are involved.

Rosenblatt (2009) and Zukin (1991) warn that turning culture into a product can sometimes take away its deeper meaning. Cultural items like hanfu, calligraphy, or old poetry can show identity, but if they are used only on the surface, they lose their real value. Brands should try to connect these cultural signs with both history and new ideas in a meaningful way.

Examples show how these challenges appear in real life. Florasis, for instance, uses images from the Tang and Song dynasties to bring back traditional Chinese beauty. Many people like this approach, saying it shows pride and elegance. But

others worry it may repeat old stereotypes if the storytelling isn't deep enough. On the other hand, Huawei focuses more on its advanced technology and avoids using cultural symbols, hoping to be seen as a global brand, not just a Chinese one.

To sum up, postcolonial theory shows that branding is never just about selling. It is also about culture and identity. For Chinese brands, dealing with Orientalism, avoiding self-exotic images, using hybridity wisely, and handling digital tools carefully are all important steps. These brands are not just trying to fit into the global market—they are helping to change how culture is shared around the world.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This study adopts a qualitative research design situated within an interpretive epistemological framework. It aims to investigate how a small but culturally significant Chinese brand constructs and negotiates its brand identity through visual storytelling and cross-cultural communication. Given the focus on symbolic meaning-making and context-based analysis, a qualitative case study methodology is particularly well-suited for this research.

In qualitative research, a case study refers to an in-depth examination of a bounded system—the “case” —within its real-life context. The selection of a case is not based on statistical representativeness but on its richness and capacity to illuminate a particular cultural phenomenon. Case studies are especially appropriate when the boundaries between the subject and its environment are fluid and when the research is driven by “how” and “why” questions, as is the case in this project.

Case study methodology emphasizes the use of multiple data sources and theory-driven interpretation to generate thick description and context-sensitive insights. Unlike experimental or survey methods, it does not aim to control variables but instead explores the dynamic interaction between meaning, context, and representation.

The case selected for this study is Pop Mart, a Chinese designer toy company known for its character-driven aesthetic and growing global presence. Pop Mart is understood as a paradigmatic case—a culturally expressive and globally ambitious Chinese brand that embodies the symbolic negotiations at the heart of China’s new wave of “Guochao” branding. It represents not just a market entity, but a site where

cultural hybridity and postcolonial ambivalence are made visible. While the findings of this study are not intended to be statistically generalizable, the case offers analytical value in revealing how emerging Chinese brands engage in processes of cultural articulation and global positioning.

This case study focuses on how Pop Mart showcases its brand to international audiences during the period from 2021 to 2024. It mainly focuses on the brand's visual content on global social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, as well as product packaging and online activities. These data include design visuals, brand messages, promotional videos, interviews and user-generated content, forming a diverse and multi-level material set.

The analysis employed three main steps. First of all, semiotic analysis helps to break down the visual style of a brand. Secondly, through narrative analysis, seek emotional themes and identity information in official content and social media discussions. Thirdly, apply the ideas of postcolonial theory to study these results in order to understand how brands handle their global image, cultural identity and power relations.

The theoretical basis of this study comes from the key ideas in postcolonial theory, including Orientalism (Said, 1978), Hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), and Self-Orientalism (Kobayashi et al., 2017). These ideas are not merely tools for viewing content; they also help to reveal how brands display and understand the deeper power structure behind it in the global space.

3.2 Data Collection and Scope

This study examined how Pop Mart communicated its brand to a global audience during the period from 2021 to 2024. It mainly focuses on how brands showcase themselves on international social media platforms through visual and cultural stories. These data include images, videos, brand information, media reports and user-generated content. These files jointly form a multi-channel and multi-format dataset, supporting the research on how Pop Mart uses visual symbols and builds its

brand identity.

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted rather than statistical sampling. The selection criteria included: (1) content explicitly directed at international audiences; (2) visual or textual materials with clear cultural or narrative significance; (3) posts with high engagement or symbolic richness on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter); and (4) materials related to core character IPs—Molly, Skullpanda, Dimoo, and Labubu—used in constructing brand identity.

The dataset includes the following types of data:

Data Type	Description	Quantity
Visual materials	Product packing, promotion graphics, character design visuals, posters	40 images
Character illustrations	Close-up images of Molly, Skullpanda, Dimoo, Labubu with aesthetic details	16 images
Video materials	TikTok/Instagram Reels, brand trailers, short interviews with designers	10 videos
Brand textual content	Official mission statements, product descriptions, packaging text	8 texts
Social media posts	Global-facing content from Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and X	25 posts

Secondary materials	Media coverage, designer interviews, industry articles	12 articles
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Table 1. Data Collection

3.3 Analytical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive framework that integrates semiotic and narrative analysis, both guided by postcolonial theory. The objective is to uncover how Pop Mart constructs cultural identity through visual symbolism, character-based storytelling, and platform-specific branding strategies across global markets.

Semiotic analysis, rooted in the works of Roland Barthes (1977), serves as the primary method for examining visual materials. Visual signs — such as character expressions, clothing, body posture, and setting—are understood not only in terms of their literal meaning (denotation), but also their connotative associations shaped by cultural and ideological codes. In this research, visual analysis followed a multi-step procedure. First, all collected images were categorized based on character focus and content type (e.g., product packaging, posters, social media visuals). Second, each image was deconstructed into four interpretive dimensions: facial expression and emotional tone, costumes and cultural symbolism, posture and body language, and background or spatial composition. Third, each dimension was coded manually with accompanying analytic memos to record theoretical reflections and emergent themes. These memos allowed for tracking visual consistencies, symbolic shifts, and aesthetic strategies across platforms. For instance, Molly’s wide-open eyes and direct gaze were read as conveying emotional ambiguity and inward-looking resistance. A total of 40 visuals were analyzed, primarily focusing on four core characters: Molly, Skullpanda, Dimoo, and Labubu.

Narrative analysis was applied to textual content, including product descriptions, character profiles, campaign slogans, and social media captions. This approach drew on Labov’s narrative structure and Hall’s (1997) theory of identity representation to

identify patterns of storytelling that reveal affective themes and identity positions. The analytical steps included close reading of all brand-authored texts and captions, followed by thematic coding of recurring emotional motifs such as loneliness, rebellion, imagination, and self-discovery. Key attention was paid to how Pop Mart crafts character personas with emotional backstories and how these are communicated through campaign narratives and promotional writing. The narrative content was then linked to corresponding visual materials to build a multi-modal understanding of how visual and verbal signs reinforce or complicate each other in constructing brand identity.

Postcolonial theory underpins the analytical approach throughout. Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism guided the critique of exoticized or stereotypical portrayals, particularly in the use of East Asian and traditional Chinese motifs. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity was used to examine how Western, Japanese, and Chinese aesthetics are blended in the construction of ambiguous, globally palatable cultural identities. Kobayashi et al.'s (2017) framework of self-Orientalism provided an additional lens to question whether the brand consciously caters to orientalist fantasies or reconfigures them through irony, reinterpretation, or aesthetic resistance. Together, these perspectives enabled a layered, theoretically grounded analysis of how cultural meaning is symbolically encoded, circulated, and contested in Pop Mart's global brand communication.

3.4 Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, since it looks at only one case, the results cannot be applied to all Chinese brands. Second, it focuses on content created by the brand and does not explore how audiences understand or respond to it. Third, the study mainly looks at content in Chinese and English, so it does not include views from other language or cultural backgrounds. Even so, Pop Mart's unique cultural style and global reach still provide useful insights into how branding can be a way to express and shape culture.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Introduction to the Analysis

This chapter mainly focuses on how Pop Mart establishes and presents its brand identity in the global cultural context. By applying the ideas of postcolonial theory and methods such as semiotics and narrative analysis, this paper explores how brands use symbols and stories in international communication. By observing the visual design of its toy characters, the emotions behind its brand story, and its global strategy, this chapter demonstrates how Pop Mart shares cultural significance and expresses identity.

While Pop Mart is growing into a global brand, China's consumer culture is spreading to more countries. Its collection of art toys is not merely products - they are tools for emotional connection, creative design and cultural narrative. Characters like Molly and Labab are not only cute figures, but also carry cultural ideas and emotions. Their ambiguous ethnic identity, artistic style and open-ended stories make them easy to understand and connect in different cultural contexts. This makes them very useful when analyzed from hybridity.

This chapter will explain how Pop Mart's character designs and visual choices mix different cultural signs, how its emotional stories help connect with audiences, and how all of this links to deeper ideas like Orientalism, hybridity, and identity. The discussion is organized into three main parts: (1) visual symbolism and mixed cultural styles; (2) emotional storytelling and identity building; and (3) global strategy and cultural tension.

4.2 Visual Symbolism and Hybrid Aesthetics

4.2.1 Introduction: Visual Strategy in the Context of Globalization

Today, visual culture plays a crucial role in how brands communicate with their global audiences. Creating an image is no longer merely a matter of appearance, but the main way for a brand to showcase itself and tell its story. For brands like Pop Mart that are based on collectible characters, visual effects are not only an advantage but also the main language of the brand. Pop Mart has created a powerful visual world through meticulous character design, eye-catching packaging and flexible design style, which is easy to recognize and grow.

Pop Mart did not use a large amount of text. Instead, it built its brand around the visual power of characters such as Molly and Skullpanda. Their facial expressions, colors and design details are all aimed at creating emotions and work in different cultures. On the most important image and video platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and youtube, pop Mart invites people to enter a world where meaning comes from emotions, styles and symbols.

What's special is that Pop Mart's visuals don't stick to just one cultural style. Instead, the brand mixes ideas from East Asian "kawaii" looks, Western gothic and punk styles, and Chinese design elements. This mix creates a hybrid visual style that works in many markets. It helps the brand feel fresh and flexible—not too tied to one place, and not too bland or generic either. It also shows a bigger goal: Pop Mart wants to be seen clearly on the global stage, without falling into narrow or exotic stereotypes about Chinese culture.



Figure 1. The product image of Pop Mart

4.2.2 Character Design and Visual Symbolism

This section looks at how Pop Mart's character design helps build a brand identity that is both culturally mixed and emotionally engaging. It focuses on four key IPs (intellectual properties)—Molly, Skullpanda, Labubu, and Dimoo. For each character, we look at its visual style, cultural background, and role in the brand's global storytelling. Using ideas from postcolonial theory, visual semiotics, and consumer culture studies, this section shows how design works as a way to connect across cultures and to express deeper meanings. The visual choices made for these characters are not just about looks—they help the brand talk to people from different places and also deal with cultural ideas and power.

4.2.2.1 Molly: Visual Ambiguity, Subversive Cuteness, and Cultural Hybridity

Molly, created in 2006 by Hong Kong designer Kenny Wong, is one of Pop Mart's most well-known and long-lasting characters. With her big green eyes, round face, short blonde hair, and pouty lips, she has a look that is easy to recognize and central to Pop Mart's global image. From a semiotic point of view, Molly combines different styles: her simple face and shape reflect Japanese “kawaii” design, while her body proportions and fashion are more like Western dolls. However, unlike many cute characters, Molly almost never smiles. Her calm, distant look gives her a unique style. This kind of “cold cuteness” has been called “inverted cuteness” (Chang, 2014), and it connects with the taste of many young people in East Asia.

On Pop Mart's global social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, Molly appears in many different visual styles. In the “Space Molly” series, she wears space suits and steampunk goggles. These posts often use slow-motion effects and electronic music to create a dreamy, tech-inspired feeling. In the “Spring Sakura” version, she appears in soft pink colors with cherry blossoms and traditional East Asian garden scenes. In the “Steampunk Motorcycle” line, she wears leather and armor, giving off a futuristic and rebellious vibe. These changes in design let Molly fit into many cultural styles, while still keeping her core look and emotionless expression.

Bhabha's (1994) idea of cultural hybridity helps us understand why Molly's

image feels both familiar and hard to define. She does not belong to just one culture. Her identity changes depending on her outfit, color theme, and how people view her. In China, some see her as a symbol of modern, independent life. In the West, she may seem artistic and a bit strange. On Instagram, fans often place her in handmade scenes, dramatic lighting, or cosplay settings—giving their own meanings and feelings to her. Molly becomes what Bhabha calls a “floating signifier,” a symbol that gains meaning in the space between local and global cultures.

Still, there are some tensions in Molly’s design. As Kobayashi et al. (2017) suggest, a kind of aesthetic self-Orientalism can happen when Asian brands show “Asian-ness” in vague or overly romantic ways to match what Western audiences expect. In some overseas marketing images, Molly is shown with cherry blossoms, lanterns, or misty bamboo forests. Her outfits often mix styles from Chinese hanfu and Japanese kimono, creating a pan-Asian fantasy look. This kind of design may look beautiful and help sell the product, but it removes the deeper cultural meaning behind the symbols. While this “soft exotic” style can work well in global markets, it also risks turning East Asian culture into something simplified and easy to consume.

What sets Molly apart, however, is that she does not serve a fixed storyline or identity. Rather, she acts as an emotional interface—a figure without dialogue or explicit expression, yet highly evocative. She doesn’t tell you who she is; instead, she invites you to decide who she might be for you. Her strength lies in this openness: a visual blank that allows for global resonance without requiring cultural translation. Molly’s image and design precisely confirm what is described under Bhabha’s (1994) “Third Space” theory, a mixed area of negotiation, ambiguity and becoming. She is not a representation of China, nor of any nation; she is a vehicle for affective interpretation in the global visual imagination.



Figure 2. The image of Molly

4.2.2.2 *Skullpanda: Gothic Visuality, Emotional Ambiguity, and Cultural Hybridity*

Skullpanda, created in 2018 by Chinese artist Xiong Miao (known artistically as 熊喵), is one of Pop Mart's most recognizable and critically acclaimed characters. Her visual identity centers on grayscale tones, drooping posture, teardrop-shaped eyes, and skull-themed accessories like hooded hats and headphones. Rather than exuding typical cuteness, Skullpanda projects a mood of stillness, melancholy, and emotional withdrawal. This quiet, non-functional aesthetic aligns with what Allison (2006) calls "melancholy cute"—a visual culture of softness that expresses interiority and self-alienation rather than joy or approachability. She is not meant to entertain or please, but to act as an emotional vessel onto which viewers can project their own inner worlds.

Skullpanda's design changes a lot across different product lines, showing a mix of visual styles. In the "Ancient Castle" series, she wears clothes based on Victorian gothic fashion, including corsets, candle holders, and stained glass patterns. In "Ink Plum Blossom," she appears in outfits inspired by Chinese literati culture, with flower patterns like brush paintings and black hanfu-style clothing. In other series like "Night City" and "Sound Series," she is placed in a cyberpunk world, filled with neon colors, holograms, and soft, robot-like shapes. These different styles show that Skullpanda is

a visual hybrid—mixing East and West, old and new. Bhabha's (1994) idea of the "Third Space" helps explain this. Skullpanda's identity is not fixed. Instead, it is formed through a mix of different cultural elements. She exists in a space where these influences come together and create something new.

Across Pop Mart's official accounts on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, Skullpanda is frequently presented in slow-rotating video shots, moody lighting, and close-ups of costume textures or eye details. The use of ambient or melancholic soundtracks, blurred background filters, and soft-saturated color palettes further reinforce her emotive distance. Consumers often photograph her in elaborate diorama scenes that emphasize her solitude, mystery, or silent resistance. As Jenkins (2006) suggests, this form of affective anchoring allows audiences to relate not through narrative or backstory, but through atmosphere and aesthetic attitude. Skullpanda becomes an anchor for emotional resonance, rather than a tool for entertainment.

Despite the character's complexity, there are moments when Skullpanda risks being drawn into the domain of aesthetic self-Orientalism. In the TikTok advertisement of January 2025, she wore a red cheongsam and stood in front of a traditional Chinese screen. Behind the screen, there seemed to be the shadow of a snake, as if paying tribute to the Chinese New Year. In the Dream seeker collection for February 2024, there is an image where she is wearing a Peking Opera headdress and standing beside a pavilion full of peonies. In these advertisements, her clothing blurs the cuts of Hanfu and kimono, presenting a stylized pan-Asian fantasy. Kobayashi et al. (2017) argue that when Asian brands distill local identity into soft emotional motifs for export, they risk reinforcing the logic of the "gentle Other" in global imagination.

What gives Skullpanda her power, however, is not cultural clarity but emotional openness. She does not speak, smile, or perform. She waits. Her silent ambiguity invites the viewer to project sadness, rebellion, nostalgia, or even peace. She is, at once, a gothic girl, a future warrior, a lonely poet, or a shadowed version of the consumer themselves. As Bhabha (1994) asserts, hybrid subjects resist essentialist framing—they inhabit transitional spaces where identity is neither fixed nor pure.

Skullpanda is not a symbol of any one tradition; she is a medium for contemporary emotion, a composite icon for a generation navigating uncertainty through stylized introspection.



Figure 3. The image of Skullpanda

4.2.2.3 Dimoo: Dreamlike Innocence and the Poetics of Visual Softness

Dimoo, created by Chinese artist Ayan Deng in 2019, is one of Pop Mart's most emotional and story-driven characters. With his cloud-shaped pastel hair, big eyes, and soft color tones, Dimoo gives off a feeling of childhood, imagination, and quiet sadness. Unlike Molly's emotional distance or Skullpanda's dark style, Dimoo shows a gentle and inward-looking emotion. His design feels soft, calm, and full of reflection.

In different series, Dimoo is placed in symbolic scenes, creating a complete emotional world. In the "Space Travel" series, he wore a small spacesuit, looked at the stars, and showed curiosity and loneliness. In the "Date Day" series, he wore oversized sweaters and soft accessories, and his shy poses expressed the awkwardness of a teenager and the unease he showed in social situations. In "The Aquarium" and "Animal Kingdom", he either dresses like an animal or appears in nature, suggesting issues regarding identity, a sense of belonging and emotional growth.

Similarly, in the "Time Travel" series, Dimoo wears old-fashioned clothes and carries things like lanterns, notebooks and pocket watches - a blend of memories and

dreams for the future. In "Holiday at the Seaside", he appeared beside beach chairs and tropical drinks in a swimsuit, with hair like waves. Although the environment seems very cheerful, it still feels quiet and thoughtful. Moreover, in the "Social University" series, Dimoo plays roles such as a student, a Courier, and a small-town youth, using everyday items and exaggerated techniques to reflect the pressure of modern life and the confusion of identity.

In "Garden Dream," Dimoo becomes a forest character surrounded by mushrooms and flowers, showing a wish to escape busy city life and enjoy quiet moments in nature. In "Fairy Tale Forest," he turns into characters like a moon knight or unicorn guardian, taking his story into a more magical direction. In "Wandering Planet," he is placed in cold sci-fi settings like snowy ruins and space worlds, wearing patched-up clothes that show emotional loneliness in a high-tech world.

Dimoo uses a soft "kawaii" style—round features, baby-like body, and gentle expressions—but without being too sweet or loud. His world is filled with soft clouds, books, plants, and see-through props, creating dream-like scenes. This style is similar to the works of Yoshitomo Nara or Studio Ghibli characters. As Jenkins (2006) explains, such designs build an "affective environment," where emotions come more from the mood and feeling of the scene than from any clear story.

On TikTok and Instagram, Dimoo often appears in pastel-colored scenes with soft fabrics, glass balls, and dried flowers. Fans place him in quiet, simple settings that highlight feelings of loneliness, softness, and inner thought. This kind of calm, emotional style connects with Gen Z users around the world, showing how Pop Mart uses feeling and atmosphere to speak to today's consumers.

Dimoo does not emphasize "Chineseness" through direct cultural references. Instead, he connects with global audiences through universal emotional cues—shyness, loneliness, wonder. As Iwabuchi (2002) describes, this reflects a strategy of "cultural odorlessness," allowing for global appeal by removing strong regional markers. In Bhabha's (1994) terms, Dimoo exemplifies the hybrid subject—not bound to any one culture but operating within an open emotional commons that invites identification.

Dimoo serves as an emotional interface for the global viewer. He reflects a softer, quieter resistance to hyper-performative branding—a reminder that ambiguity, vulnerability, and slowness can also be powerfully expressive.



Figure 4. The image of Dimoo

4.2.2.4 Labubu: Mischievous Whimsy and the Subversive Aesthetics of the “Ugly-Cute”

Labubu was created by Kasing Lung, a Belgian artist born in Hong Kong, in 2015. It is one of the most well-known characters in Pop Mart worldwide. Labubudors have sharp teeth, pointed fur, long ears and constant shameless smiles, a mixture of wildness, mischief and childlike strangeness. His appearance lies between that of a Western fairy tale monster and the Japanese style of "kimo-kawaii" (disgusting and cute). Labubu breaks the traditional concept of cuteness and showcases strange, imperfect and unexpected things.

The background inspiration of Labubu comes from Nordic folk tales and classic children's books. Influenced by the creatures in "Where the Beasts Go" and "The Smurfs", Kasing Lung created Labubu as part of a fantasy world called "Monsters", which also includes characters such as Zimomo, Tycoco and Mokoko. Unlike other characters in Pop Mart who focus on gentleness or emotional calmness, Labubu is energetic, mischievous and rebellious, and even refuses to follow the rules like a

punk.

In different series, Labubu showcases a wide range of visual styles. In the "Elf Animal Series", he adopted the features of forest animals such as rabbits, deer and bears, and combined them with tribal style marks. In the "Fruit Series", Labubors are transformed into bright and shiny fruit characters with bold colors and playful shapes, such as pineapples or grapes. The "Constellation Series" dressed him in zodiac clothing with star and moon symbols, adding a sense of magic and mystery.

In holiday-themed versions such as "Christmas" or "Halloween", Labab appears on Santa Claus's hat, the ghost cloak of snowflakes or pumpkins. His classic grin always adds humor to the design. In the "Rhythmic gymnastics" version, he wears a shiny tight-fitting suit and a ribbon baton - transforming his usual chaos into an interesting elegance, demonstrating how he blends wildness and cuteness in a strange and astonishing way.

The design of Labubu conforms to the trend of "ugly - cute". His uneven eyes, distorted smile and awkward posture run counter to the traditional concept of beauty such as balance, smoothness or harmony. He doesn't show cuteness in a gentle way, but stands out in a strange way. People not only loved him from afar, but also interacted with him in an interesting and even somewhat uncomfortable way. He became curious and interesting, not just cute.

This is highly consistent with the visual culture of today's young people, where "imperfection" is regarded as something real and cool. Labab's rough fur, sharp edges and bold expression make him more like an anti-hero rather than an ordinary mascot. On TikTok and Instagram, fans have shown off his messy bedroom, coffee machine, and even protests - treating him as a naughty kid rather than just a toy.

The popularity of Labubu among adults also indicates the role of nostalgia in emotional consumption. He reminds people of childhood fantasies, but adds irony, chaos and humor. Instead of comforting the audience in a sweet way, he challenges them, allowing them to enjoy the fun and imagination in their own way, sometimes in a darker style.



Figure 5. The image of Labubu

To summarize the key visual, cultural, and emotional characteristics of the four core IP (Intellectual Property) characters analyzed above, the following table provides a comparative overview.

Character	Visual Features	Cultural Hybridity	Emotional Function
Molly	Large green eyes, pouty lips, short blonde hair; emotionless and ambiguous expression	Mixes kawaii, Western doll aesthetics, and pan-Asian fantasy; avoids specific national imagery	Affective blankness; invites viewer projection across moods and geographies
Skullpanda	Tearful eyes, skull headwear, gothic/ink-wash elements; melancholic, dark, gender-neutral	Blends Western gothic, East Asian traditional motifs, cyberpunk elements	Emotional depth through sadness, rebellion, introspection

Dimoo	Cloud-shaped pastel hair, babyface features, soft gradients; dreamy and emotionally fragile	No strong cultural markers; relies on universal emotional cues (shyness, curiosity)	Evokes softness, loneliness, introspection; emotionally open-ended
Labubu	Spiky fur, pointy ears, crooked smile; messy, subversive, 'ugly-cute'	References Nordic folklore, Japanese 'kimo-kawaii'; layered global myth and chaos	Triggers playful discomfort, nostalgia, and irreverent humor

Table 2. Summary of the Visual, Cultural, and Emotional Characteristics of Four Pop Mart IPs

4.2.3 Global Visual Strategy Across Platforms: Contextualizing Pop Mart's International Brand Image

4.2.3.1 International Platform Presence and Visual Coherence

On its official English Instagram (@popmart) and TikTok accounts (@popmart), Pop Mart maintains a highly curated aesthetic, characterized by soft tones, clean spatial compositions, and an emphasis on the emotional atmosphere. Character-centered content, such as Molly sitting quietly on the windowsill, Dimoo floating in the clouds, or Skullpanda standing under melancholy lights, usually has no text, narration or promotional slogans. This minimalism helps with contemplation and immersive experiences, inviting the audience to project meaning and influence onto the characters themselves.

It is notable that the visual style of Pop Mart does not change significantly on different platforms. Whether it's a vertical TikTok video or a square Instagram post, the brand retains its signature tones - soft lighting, striking visual effects, neutral background colors and close-up angles - emphasizing texture, material and emotional connection rather than the functionality of the product. For instance, in ambient light, Skullpanda appears in a slow-rotating stop-motion animation on TikTok, or in a still

photo on Instagram with a silent filter and a shallow depth of field. This cross-platform consistency enhances the brand's recognition and intensifies the emotional atmosphere of its collection world.

The YouTube channel (@PopMart) also responded to this strategy by offering short animations, unboxing videos and character trailers. Even in the dynamic, the focus remains on the characters' personalities and visual atmosphere rather than product promotion. Unlike many Western toy brands that focus on lively and youthful displays or telling stories to children, the global communication effect of Pop Mart gives people a quiet and almost poetic feeling, creating an emotional sense rather than a sense of urgency.

All in all, the existence of the Pop Mart global platform reflects a deliberate strategy of visual consistency and emotion-driven identity construction. The brand has not tailored completely different visual effects for each platform. On the contrary, it has chosen a unified aesthetic that is easy to spread across various industries, thereby strengthening its image as an emotionally rich and visually exquisite collection brand.

4.2.3.2 Content Forms and Visual Aesthetic Styles

In addition to maintaining a consistent emotional tone on different platforms, Pop Mart also stands out through its creative visual style and artistic direction. This brand does not merely use product photos or sales-focused images, but has established a rich visual world composed of stop-motion animation videos, high-quality movie shots, minimalist posters and handcrafted three-dimensional scenes. These formats help transform the characters from simple toys into emotional storytellers.

On TikTok and YouTube Shorts, many short videos showcase dynamic scenes with soft music, slow camera movements and repetitive actions. For instance, in the "Dimoo Animal Kingdom" series of videos posted on Instagram in February 2024, Dimoo, dressed in a sailor suit, was floating in the bubbles of a green island with a blue elephant. In another scene, he is wearing a traditional ink-wash robe and a panda hat, practicing Tai Chi with a panda in the bamboo forest. These videos are usually shot at eye level or from below, inviting the audience into the world of the characters

rather than simply presenting them as product displays.

Static photos, especially those on Instagram, focus on color matching, texture and soft lighting. Many pictures use soft backgrounds - such as soft curtains, fluffy pillows, dried flowers or glowing lights - to create a comfortable visual space for the characters. These images usually express a sense of tranquility, fantasy or serenity. Most of the time, there are no signs or words in the framework, so the emotions are clear and need no explanation.

In some activities, Pop Mart also uses CGI posters and concept art. These designs are like movie scenes, with dramatic lighting and 3D Settings, looking like dream houses, ancient ruins or the world of the future. Skullpanda often uses a gloomy grayish blue background to convey a serious mood, while Molly takes pictures under bright and sharp lighting, just like in fashion magazines. These styles enable Pop Mart to navigate between lifestyle products and collectible art.

Pop Mart also collaborates with external artists, such as Yong Qingsheng and Hwang Kun-hee. These collaborations usually have their own unique design styles and packaging, adding a new layer to the brand's visual style. Even with these differences, the core style - emotional tone, fantasy design and focus on characters - remains stable.

Overall, Pop Mart's global visual strategy avoids forced sales or excessive information. On the contrary, it uses soft, emotional and beautiful images to tell quiet stories. This visual style is highly in line with the habits of young audiences who use visual-first platforms, and also conforms to the global trend of slow-paced, emotion-based content and emotional shopping experiences.

4.2.3.3 Cultural Adaptation and Regional Visual Extensions

Although Pop Mart maintains a strong and coherent visual style on its global platform, it has also brought about some minor regional changes in content and style. The brand has not completely changed its character design or visual effects. On the contrary, it employs soft localization - making minor modifications to symbols, emotions and cultural references to make the local public more familiar with the

visual effects while not losing the overall impression of the brand.

For example, during holidays, Pop Mart often releases global versions with slight regional differences. The Skullpanda Halloween Edition is available in both China and the United States, but the visual effects are slightly different: the Chinese version features ink-style patterns and lanterns, while the American version uses Gothic-style pumpkin and cemetery scenes. For Molly's Christmas, the posts on her Japanese account focused on snow and Kawaii accessories, while in Europe, she might appear in soft colors and Scandinavian-style decorations.

Language also appears in regional content in tiny ways. Although most pictures avoid using text, some videos use local phrases or emojis in Thai, Korean or Spanish for explanations. These minor embellishments help create a more intimate feeling with the local audience without changing the core visual style. This method can be called "aesthetic adjustment" - making minor adjustments visually and emotionally to better adapt to different cultural backgrounds.

Pop Mart also collaborates with local Internet celebrities and artists, making the brand feel more closely connected to local fans. For instance, in October 2024, Pop Mart collaborated with the Indonesian beauty influencer Jasmine White to promote a new Skullpanda collection. In the video, she dressed up as a Skullpanda and won the attention and affection of local fans. This type of collaboration does not change the character design, but it places the characters in familiar cultural contexts, making them feel more personalized and emotionally relevant.

In short, Pop Mart's global content strategy avoids both too much uniformity and too much localization. The way it adapts to different cultures is relaxed and symbolic, rather than brutal. By placing its characters in a new cultural context while maintaining their emotional significance and visual style unchanged, the brand has maintained consistency but still established connections with audiences around the world.

4.2.3.4 Emotional Ambience and Aesthetic Atmosphere

One of the most distinctive parts of Pop Mart's overall visual strategy is how it

creates emotions that transcend language or culture. Whether through photos, short videos or animations, the brand often uses soft and emotional visual effects to express emotions such as nostalgia, sadness, calmness or the amazement of childhood. These emotions are expressed through character design and stage performances, becoming a silent symbol of the brand identity.

On all platforms, some visual elements recur repeatedly - soft lighting, faded colors, small detail accessories and a large amount of white. These characters usually appear alone, their gaze slightly away from the audience, and placed together with items such as books, marbles, clouds or dreamy curtains. These scenes create a sense of loneliness or quiet thinking - a feeling that is usually unrelated to toys but crucial to the way Pop Mart tells stories.

This quiet emotional style is particularly evident in the image of Dimoo, who often appears in the dream world or emotional space with soft colors. In contrast, Molly is cool and distant - she doesn't tell a clear story, but still manages to draw emotional attention. The scenes of Skullpanda are darker, using shadows, tears and unclear expressions to convey inner conflicts and doubts about identity. Each character adds a different feeling to the overall emotional "color" of the brand.

What connects them together is not a clear story or speech, but the emotions they have created. This is very different from traditional toy advertisements, which usually focus on fun, actions or how to play. The videos of Pop Mart use soft music, slow rhythms and tiny movements to create a sense of calmness and deep thought. For instance, on TikTok, you might come across a 10- to 15-second clip where nothing happens - only a cloud is drifting, a character is blinking, or light is moving. This slow style aligns with the content that many young people like nowadays, which is emotional, calm and visually soothing.

4.2.4 Cultural Hybridity and Identity Construction in Pop Mart's Global Image

4.2.4.1 Visible Hybridity in Character Design

A key feature of the Pop Mart visual style is the use of cultural blending in character design. This brand does not showcase a single cultural background but

blends different visual styles - from the cuteness of East Asia to the Gothic style of the West - to create familiar but hard-to-define character images. This mixed style is not accidental. It is a clear strategy to help brands connect with people from different cultural backgrounds without using obvious national symbols.

Take Molly as an example. Her calm face and big eyes remind people of Kawaii characters in Japan, but her facial features are also like those of Western porcelain dolls. Her face remained motionless and distant, but not indifferent. She is dressed in fashionable clothes, but has no strong cultural symbols. This makes her easily accepted by the world because she doesn't belong to any tradition.

Skullpanda presented a more complex combination. This character employs some Chinese art, such as embroidery, facial painting and ink-wash painting, but also includes Western Gothic and cyberpunk styles. With a tearful makeup, dark colors and neutral clothing, Skullpanda gives the impression of being both soft and strong. The integration of tradition and the future, emotion and avant-garde invites people to think and feel, without telling them exactly what it means.

In contrast, Dimoo exhibits a milder blend. Dimoo has a baby face, misty hair and a soft dream-like setting. It combines the design of Japanese mascots with the quiet and simple appearance common in Northern Europe. He doesn't represent any place. On the contrary, he became a character that allowed people to project their feelings - such as sadness, surprise or childhood memories - no matter where they came from.

Labubu added another version of hybridization. His wild fur, huge teeth and thick-skinned smile all come from European fairy tales and ancient children's books. Unlike other cute characters in Pop Mart, Labubu is messy, strange, energetic but still cute. His design indicates that cultural integration is not always smooth sailing. Sometimes, the effect is best when one is nervous.

In conclusion, these characters form a group that is not bound by any culture or place. What connects them is not their background or origin, but their shared emotional openness. This reflects Homi Bhabha's (1994) idea about the "third space" - in this space, cultural significance is not fixed but constantly changing and being

recreated. The visual strategy of Pop Mart makes this mixture easy to see and feel, but not too direct. It provides people with many ways to connect with brands and their characters.

4.2.4.2 De-territorialized Cultural Labeling

The reason why the global visual style of Pop Mart is so special is that it does not explicitly label itself as a "Chinese brand". Many brands from emerging markets emphasize that their countries of origin seem more unique or trustworthy, but Pop Mart has chosen a different path. It establishes a visual identity that transcends geography, yet still maintains a sense of quiet cultural differences.

This strategy is not only reflected in the mixed style of Chinese characters, but also in how the brand avoids using clear Chinese symbols. There are no dragons, no lanterns, and no themes of red and gold. However, the lack of such obvious signs creates a sense of presence. People who understand East Asian popular culture often feel that the style of pop Mart "is not Western", but they cannot say exactly where it comes from. It feels not very clear culturally, but very familiar emotionally.

This ambiguous identity conforms to what Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) calls "culture odorless" - a design style that removes strong ethnic characteristics, making it easier to cross national boundaries. But the "odorless" of Pop Mart is not plain or empty. It brings a gentle emotional style - calm, dreamy and thoughtful. Whether in Douyin videos, Instagram posts or product packaging, the brand has established a gentle and emotional visual language that can connect with people more effectively than national brands.

Pop Mart doesn't say "what this brand is", but focuses on the "feeling" it gives people. This transformation from an identity as a statement to an identity as a feeling is an important reason for its global appeal. People will not be associated with the national flag or history. They are associated with an emotion, a tone of voice and a rhythm. The result is a kind of cultural identity, which is not directly expressed but silently felt - symbolic, gentle and emotionally lasting.

In this way, Pop Mart creates a mild form of cultural difference - not as a

contrast to the West, but as something existing in the West. Its visual style expresses emotion and softness, standing out from the bright and fast-paced images often seen in global advertisements. In this way, Pop Mart does not advocate nationalism. Instead, it creates a quiet and global feeling - a feeling of being open to the world, but shaped by subtle visual and emotional details.

4.2.4.3 Cultural Risk and Aesthetic Self-Orientalism

The products of Pop Mart are very popular all over the world and have become part of the new fashion trend. This indicates that the brand's application of cultural integration and visual ambiguity has achieved excellent results in establishing global influence. However, these strategies are not without risks, especially when it comes to how non-Western cultural identities are displayed and consumed in the international market. As the brand attracts more global audiences through its stylized character designs, some questions arise, namely whether certain visual choices will fall into what scholars call aesthetic self-Orientalism.

Skullpanda is a very good example. Many of its designs incorporate elements of Chinese culture, such as ink-wash patterns, embroidered robes or Buddhist symbols. But these words are often taken out of context and are mainly used for decoration. In some collections, these features are mixed with Western Gothic fashion to create an appearance that is both mysterious and visually striking. Although this makes the design unique and easy to market, it also runs the risk of turning "Chinese characteristics" into something exotic and simplified - attractive to outsiders but lacking a deeper meaning.

This reflects the "self-Orientalism" described by Kobayashi et al. (2017) - when a culture presents itself through external fantasies, especially the images shaped by Western fantasies. This approach may contribute to global sales, but it may also confine the identity of Asians to narrow stereotypes. The problem does not lie in the use of traditional styles, but in the use without background and explanation, making it a floating symbol in the global visual market.

To be fair, the characters of Pop Mart still possess strong originality and

emotional depth. However, as the brand develops, the tension between creative freedom and cultural reduction becomes more obvious. To handle this tense relationship well, brands need to find a cautious balance point: maintaining their own artistic style while respecting the depth and significance of the culture.

In the long run, the success of Pop Mart in global storytelling depend not only on its ability to integrate various styles, but also on whether it can integrate more deeply into the complexity of culture. Beyond the superficial confusion, brands have the opportunity to shape characters and stories that are not only visually appealing and emotionally intense, but also culturally thoughtful, morally conscious, and rich in narrative significance.

4.2.5 Summary: From Visual Affect to Global Identity

The previous analysis indicates that the global success of Pop Mart is not merely about the popularity of product design or collectibles. It stems from a carefully constructed visual language that can transcend emotions, cultures and symbols. Through characters such as Molly, Skullpanda, Dimoo and Labubu, the brand has created a wide range of emotions - from distance to sadness, from tenderness to rebellion. These characters have different appearances and feelings, but they follow the same visual style: emotionally open, culturally mixed, and full of possibilities for storytelling.

What we see here is a new brand. It does not regard identity as something fixed, public or associated with a place. On the contrary, Pop Mart has created a soft, flexible and emotion-based concept of identity. It doesn't tell people what to think, but invites them to feel. By doing so, it transforms global brands from promoting culture to sharing emotions.

Pop Mart adopts a style that we can call "emotional minimalism" - concise and to the point. This gives people from different cultural backgrounds the space to connect with the brand in their own way. This brand does not focus on telling ethnic stories or presenting traditional images. On the contrary, it creates what we call an "emotion-based cultural interface", where people not only recognize a culture but also

sense something that matches their emotions. This is not only a brand in terms of design, but also a brand in terms of feeling.

In this way, Pop Mart demonstrates a new kind of cultural soft power - not disseminating explicit messages or traditions, but providing familiar, gentle and resonant visual effects. These characters don't speak, but they are connected to each other. They didn't explain, but they invited. Through this quiet invitation, they offer more than just a product: a feeling that is both private and shareable.

This chapter focuses on how Pop Mart builds its global image through emotional and visual strategies rather than through direct cultural messages. In the next chapter, we will continue to explore how these visual elements support brand narratives, how consumers find meaning from them, and how this shapes personal and cultural identities in different regions.

4.3 Narrative Identity and Emotional Framing

This part will shift the focus from the analysis of visual symbols to the emotional and narrative aspects of the Pop Mart brand identity. Characters like Molly, Skullpanda and Dimoo are not merely collectibles; They can also serve as emotional cues, inviting people to connect through feelings and imagination.

Although Pop Mart did not give a clear story, it left room for explanation. Surprisingly, these characters usually have empty expressions, simple or vague titles, and few plots. It is precisely this open structure that enables consumers to build their own stories around these characters based on their personal experiences and emotions. In this way, brand identity is not shaped by telling stories, but by creating a feeling. Through design choices, mysterious blind box forms and subtle messages on social media, Pop Mart has established emotional connections that transcend cultures.

4.3.1 Emotions as Semiotic Anchors

In Pop Mart's brand system, characters are not emotionally expressive in the conventional sense. They do not smile, speak, or follow linear story arcs. Instead, they

communicate through atmosphere—through silence, ambiguity, and emotional restraint. This makes them powerful semiotic anchors. Rather than conveying fixed meaning, they open emotional spaces that invite projection, interpretation, and identification.

Take Molly, for instance. Her expression never changes: her wide, unblinking eyes and pursed lips remain almost entirely still across all series. But this very stillness becomes a mirror. Some see loneliness in her face, others find serenity, distance, or quiet defiance. The lack of explicit emotion doesn't prevent affect; it invites it. Her silence is not emptiness—it's availability.

Dimoo embodies a softer, more fragile emotional register. His childlike proportions, drooping eyes, and dreamy pastels place him in an undefined emotional state—somewhere between sleep and sadness, wonder and retreat. He often appears alone, surrounded by fog, stars, or tiny objects, always looking like he's just stepped out of a dream or memory. He doesn't tell you what he's feeling, but somehow makes you feel it anyway.

Skullpanda is emotionally louder but no more explicit. Across various series—from punk to Buddhist monk to monochrome surrealist—she is almost always marked by tears, shadow, or physical tension. She blends rebellion with vulnerability, and never quite resolves either. Is she hurt? Angry? Powerful? There's no single answer—and that ambiguity is what makes her so compelling. Her visual codes are charged, but never closed.

Together, these characters offer what might be called “emotional readability without narrative clarity.” Their moods are strong, but their meanings are open. They are not pre-written identities, but emotional placeholders—figures you can temporarily become, or place a feeling inside of.

This strategy is central to Pop Mart's global appeal. These characters don't rely on cultural background, language, or storytelling to be understood. They operate through mood. That makes them not just collectible, but relatable. For many young consumers around the world, they become companions, emotional symbols, or even private avatars—objects that do not speak, but help the user speak more deeply to

themselves.

Pop Mart, in this sense, has built a language of feeling. Its characters don't explain who they are. But they give you space to feel who you are—and in doing so, they quietly reshape the emotional logic of brand communication in global youth culture.

4.3.2 Fragmented Storytelling and Platform Narratives

Pop Mart's brand storytelling does not rely on traditional character development or coherent plotlines. Instead, it constructs what could be called an "open narrative system"—a collage of symbolic cues, emotional suggestions, and loose themes that invite interpretation rather than closure. This strategy is particularly effective in two domains: the design of blind box series and the language used on global social media platforms.

Blind box packaging is more than a sales mechanic—it is a storytelling device. Each series centers around an abstract emotional or aesthetic theme: “Skullpanda – The Warmth of Darkness” (2023), “Dimoo – Secret Forest,” or “Molly – Theatre Fairytale.” These titles gesture toward stories without offering resolution. Consumers encounter characters with names like “Wandering Soul,” “Silent Monk,” or “Lost Scent,” but are given no background. Costumes reference cultural motifs—Buddhist robes, 80s street fashion, marine folklore—but they arrive stripped of exposition.

This absence of story is deliberate. The product becomes a narrative puzzle—fragmentary, atmospheric, and open to emotional filling-in. The joy of the blind box is not only in randomness, but in reconstructing an imagined context: Who is this version of Dimoo? Why is Skullpanda crying in this outfit? What does it mean for Molly to be called “the flower that never speaks”?

In Jenkins's (2006) terms, Pop Mart cultivates a “participatory narrative space,” where the brand provides fragments and the audience supplies coherence. The company never tries to “complete” its characters—it lets users do the emotional work of completion. The characters become what Barthes might call “writerly texts”: open enough to require and reward interpretation.

This participatory storytelling is not confined to products—it extends into the brand’s social media presence. Pop Mart’s global Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube channels rarely offer product specifications. Instead, their content uses emotional cues to frame posts:

“She doesn’t need to smile to be understood.”

“Some souls don’t get lost. They just walk slower.”

“There’s comfort in shadows. Not everything needs to be seen.”

These captions are not explanations—they’re emotional prompts. They turn figurines into characters with inner lives, inviting viewers to feel rather than analyze. On carousel posts, visual sequencing pairs images with poetic lines like:

“Maybe the stars have been listening.”

“Being different isn’t a phase. It’s a space I made for myself.”

Hashtags such as #emotionaltoy, #silentcompanion, #smallmood, #escapism, and #lostnotbroken create symbolic anchors across platforms. These tags frame characters in emotional terrain rather than fictional timelines, reinforcing the logic of fragmented storytelling.

What’s striking is the way users respond. In comments, fans expand on the captions:

“She feels like the silence I needed.”

“I don’t know her story, but I think she understands mine.”

On TikTok, Pop Mart figures appear in UGC videos paired with ambient music, pastel backdrops, and captions such as:

“No words, just a feeling.”

“I didn’t know how to explain it, so I just posted this.”

These examples show that brand and consumer together shape meaning. The brand provides the emotional architecture; users furnish the content. This quiet strategy stands out in a media culture saturated with loud branding and identity assertion. Pop Mart does not instruct its audience—it listens.

This resonates with Appadurai’s (1996) view of imagination as a social practice. In a globally networked media landscape, identity is increasingly formed through

emotional fragments: moods, images, and partial narratives. Pop Mart's storytelling doesn't impose meaning—it curates symbols that consumers use to build meaning themselves.

In this way, Pop Mart constructs a narrative framework that is dispersed, participatory, and emotionally coherent. Blind boxes, minimal captions, poetic prompts, and ambient imagery all work together to create a brand experience that is emotionally legible without being narratively prescriptive. It is storytelling through absence, and identity through suggestion.

4.3.3 Emotional Globalization without Identity Fixation

Pop Mart's success in global markets is rooted not in the promotion of a fixed national identity, but in its ability to communicate emotional atmospheres that transcend borders. Rather than asserting “Chineseness” as a core part of its brand, Pop Mart presents itself as emotionally available—aesthetic, quiet, melancholic, and gentle. This allows the brand to move across cultural contexts without requiring translation, because what it offers is not a cultural statement, but a mood.

This strategy reflects a form of emotional globalization—one where affect, rather than heritage, serves as the connective tissue. Pop Mart's characters are not designed to represent a place or people; they are designed to feel a certain way. As discussed earlier, figures like Dimoo and Skullpanda evoke introspection, longing, or emotional fatigue—experiences that resonate across national and cultural lines. A viewer in Sweden, Indonesia, or Brazil may not know anything about Pop Mart's Chinese origins, but they can still feel what these figures suggest.

This affective mobility is a key strength. As Arjun Appadurai (1996) notes, global cultural flows are increasingly driven by the imagination—how individuals engage with media through desire, memory, and emotional alignment. Pop Mart's brand exists in precisely this space. It does not offer a coherent backstory or a national brand identity. Instead, it curates feelings that users recognize as their own. The result is a product that travels not because of where it is from, but because of how it makes people feel.

By refusing to fix its identity, Pop Mart avoids the trap of over-symbolizing its cultural origin. There are no dragons, pagodas, or explicitly Chinese motifs. But this absence does not equal erasure. It is a strategy of soft cultural opacity—a way of being present without being overdefined. Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” is useful here: identity is not a matter of either/or (Chinese or global), but of in-between-ness. Pop Mart operates in this third space, where emotional availability takes precedence over cultural clarity.

This also explains why the brand does not provoke the cultural anxieties that sometimes accompany the global expansion of Chinese companies. Its emotional message is universally readable, but its identity is softly unreadable—deliberately fuzzy, gently distanced. This gives global consumers room to engage without friction. It is not a “Chinese brand” asking to be accepted. It is a “feeling-forward” brand asking to be felt.

In a world where cultural representation is often politicized or oversimplified, Pop Mart offers a different model: soft, ambiguous, and emotionally anchored. It does not erase its origin, but it does not centralize it either. Instead, it builds a form of global visibility through emotional trust—inviting identification, not assertion.

4.3.4 Summary: Emotional Identity Through Fragmentation

Pop Mart’s approach to identity is not anchored in cultural declarations or narrative linearity, but in emotional fragments—moods, suggestions, and symbolic cues that invite user interpretation. Through the interplay of minimalist design, poetic platform language, and character-based emotional cues, the brand cultivates a form of narrative identity that is participatory, portable, and open-ended.

Rather than asserting where it is from, Pop Mart focuses on how it makes people feel. Its characters become vessels for emotional projection; its captions become quiet invitations to self-recognition. This is not a strategy of storytelling in the traditional sense—it is storytelling through absence, through space, through silence.

By doing so, the brand navigates global markets without relying on cultural specificity, while still offering emotionally resonant meaning. Pop Mart exemplifies

how contemporary Chinese brands can construct soft global identities—rooted in feeling rather than flags, and capable of flowing across borders through subtle narrative atmospheres.

The next section turns to the language of Pop Mart’s international presence: how its packaging, platform aesthetics, and visual codes position the brand in global discourse, and whether its strategy navigates or reinforces postcolonial dynamics.

4.4 Global Positioning and Cultural Framing

4.4.1 Packaging and Visual Neutrality

Pop Mart’s global-facing packaging and visual design demonstrate a deliberate shift toward cultural neutrality. Unlike many heritage-driven Chinese brands that lean into traditional iconography—dragons, red-and-gold color palettes, brushstroke fonts—Pop Mart avoids overt signifiers of its national origin. International versions of its packaging are minimal, sleek, and aesthetically subdued. Typography is modern and often English-only. Color palettes lean toward soft pastels, monochromes, or dreamy gradients, reflecting mood rather than cultural affiliation.

This visual neutrality is especially apparent in the packaging of the Molly and Dimoo blind box series. A typical box may feature the character’s name in a sans-serif font, a simple character outline, and a floating title like “Language of Flowers” or “Secret Forest.” Nowhere on the front is there a national marker, traditional pattern, or reference to Chinese visual culture. In fact, if not for the “Made in China” label on the bottom or small print on the back, the product could easily be mistaken as Scandinavian or Japanese in aesthetic origin.

Pop Mart’s retail stores and pop-up exhibitions abroad follow similar principles. The spatial design is airy and emotionally immersive rather than culturally specific—often featuring curved architecture, soft lighting, soundscapes, and pastel sculptural elements. These spaces aim to evoke feelings, not heritage.

This visual strategy reflects a calculated choice: to make the brand legible, desirable, and emotionally accessible to a global audience. It is not an erasure of

Chineseness, but a reframing of brand identity through universal emotional appeal. The goal is not to “represent China” per se, but to position the product as part of an emerging global design vernacular—what some scholars describe as the rise of “emotionally neutral soft brands” in global youth culture.

This is consistent with what Gerth (2012) identifies as a shift from “China made” to “China managed”—where Chinese companies no longer only manufacture for export but craft globally appealing brand systems under their own names. In Pop Mart’s case, this brand system is not marked by patriotic nationalism or traditionalism, but by a language of design that transcends borders through mood, tone, and subtlety.

By minimizing visual markers of origin, Pop Mart avoids the pitfalls of cultural exoticism and excessive localization. It enables users to approach the product through aesthetic intuition rather than cultural decoding, which is especially effective in highly image-driven retail and digital environments.

4.4.2 Platform Language and Strategic Ambiguity

Pop Mart’s international communication strategy—especially on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube—demonstrates a careful and consistent use of emotionally expressive, culturally neutral language. Unlike many brands that use their national identity as a narrative asset, Pop Mart seldom refers to its Chinese origin in overseas-facing content. Instead, it leans on emotionally abstract, poetic phrasing to establish affective connection.

For example, a TikTok video featuring Dimoo floating in a translucent orb among clouds carries the caption:

“A place where dreams don’t ask questions.”

An Instagram post showing Skullpanda sitting in a meditation pose reads:

“Breathe through the noise.”

Another carousel of Molly figures is titled:

“The flower that doesn’t bloom is still a flower.”

Notably absent from all of these is any mention of the brand’s country of origin, cultural reference point, or heritage narrative. The voice is not descriptive—it is

atmospheric.

Across English-language posts, the recurring tone is minimal and inward-facing. Rather than using product-centric language like “limited edition,” “new launch,” or “designed in China,” Pop Mart prefers statements like:

“For the quiet days.”

“No story, just a feeling.”

“Not lost, just wandering.”

Even the hashtags avoid brand or national signals. Instead, they form an emotional lexicon:

#softrebellion, #escapism, #innerworld, #emotionaltoy, #quietmood, #gentlecore.

This communication style can be described as a strategy of strategic ambiguity—a soft avoidance of fixed meaning or cultural anchoring. It enables the brand to remain emotionally legible while culturally opaque, creating an experience of aesthetic intimacy that transcends geopolitical specificity.

Interestingly, this strategy becomes even more apparent when compared to Pop Mart’s domestic communication in China. On platforms like Weibo or Xiaohongshu, the same product lines are often introduced with detailed artist collaborations, design philosophy, and IP background. A Chinese-language Dimoo post says:

“新系列《秘密森林》由 POP MART 原创团队设计，灵感来源于孩童时代的自然幻想。”

Whereas the English caption for the same figure on Instagram states:

“Remember what the forest smelled like?”

This contrast suggests a conscious dual-mode strategy. Domestically, Pop Mart educates and asserts its design authority; internationally, it steps back and lets mood take the lead. The result is an affective universality that appeals to Gen Z and Millennial audiences across linguistic and cultural lines.

Even when the brand uses imagery rooted in East Asian symbolism—such as Buddhist robes, koi fish motifs, or ink-wash aesthetics—it avoids labeling them. A Skullpanda wearing a Hanfu-inspired outfit is captioned:

“Made for rainy days and quiet exits.”

No mention is made of historical dress, dynastic reference, or national heritage. The meaning is left open—visually suggestive but semantically uncommitted.

This allows Pop Mart to float above cultural essentialism. It does not erase its roots, but it refuses to be reduced to them. It invites participation rather than explanation, and in doing so, lowers the barriers of cultural entry. As Bhabha would argue, the brand occupies a “third space”—neither wholly local nor entirely global, but an interstitial space of meaning-making through ambiguity.

In an era when brand narratives are often hyper-scripted, over-clarified, or nationalistically charged, Pop Mart’s restraint is notable. Its communication strategy trusts the audience to complete the experience—not by decoding facts, but by projecting emotions. This subtle, low-volume approach fosters a form of emotional cosmopolitanism, where cultural identity is not fixed, but fluid, ambient, and mutually constructed.

4.4.3 Between Soft Power and Self-Orientalism

Pop Mart’s expansion into global markets has been widely interpreted as a sign of China’s growing soft power in cultural and creative industries. Unlike earlier generations of Chinese exports that emphasized manufacturing capacity or price competitiveness, Pop Mart represents a new model: emotional branding, design-first aesthetics, and IP-driven storytelling. As such, the brand is often hailed as an example of China’s ability to compete in global cultural capital—not through ideology, but through imagery.

However, the nature of this imagery raises important questions. In particular: Does Pop Mart assert a distinct Chinese aesthetic identity in the global arena, or does it reshape its visual codes to fit into global expectations of East Asian “style”? And in doing so, does it risk participating in a form of strategic self-Orientalism?

Several character series hint at this tension. In Skullpanda’s “Warmth of Darkness” collection, visual elements like prayer beads, flowing robes, ink-wash textures, and lotus symbolism appear frequently. Yet these are not framed within Chinese philosophical, spiritual, or historical contexts. Instead, they are stylized into a

kind of emotional gothic minimalism—closer in tone to Harajuku or K-pop aesthetics than to traditional Chinese culture. The visual codes evoke “Asian mystique,” but with softened edges, curated sadness, and stylized melancholy.

This visual language can be appealing to global audiences precisely because it trades in familiar tropes of East Asian emotional aesthetics: fragility, stillness, spiritual ambiguity. As scholars like Kobayashi et al. (2017) have argued, East Asian brands sometimes participate in the reproduction of Western fantasies about “the aestheticized East”—a place of visual purity, emotional silence, and symbolic exoticism. While not overtly stereotypical, such styles can subtly reinforce what Edward Said termed the “imaginative geography” of Orientalism.

Pop Mart walks a fine line. On one hand, its success represents a soft-power breakthrough: a Chinese brand that does not need to explain itself, but is embraced for its design. On the other hand, its strategy of emotional neutrality and aesthetic vagueness may open it to critique—not for misrepresenting China, but for evading cultural specificity altogether, or reproducing stylized versions of “Asianness” for Western consumption.

Yet it would be simplistic to accuse the brand of passive exoticism. Pop Mart’s design logic is deeply globalized. Its characters blend kawaii influences from Japan, minimal melancholy from Scandinavia, gothic motifs from Korea, and soft dreamscapes common in international fantasy media. Its approach is less about cultural authenticity than about emotional recognition—building IPs that feel globally accessible without being culturally declarative.

This very hybridity may be its power. In Turner’s (2006) view, soft power in the 21st century relies not on exporting culture wholesale, but on shaping cultural flows through style, mood, and media presence. Pop Mart’s imagery is not Chinese in a traditional sense, but it is China-led. It subtly reorients global perceptions of what Chinese creativity can look like—not via monuments or slogans, but via soft silhouettes and shared feelings.

In this sense, Pop Mart does not resolve the tension between soft power and self-Orientalism—it inhabits it. The brand does not simply transmit identity; it

negotiates it. Through selective opacity, aesthetic hybridity, and emotional fluency, it builds a global presence that resists fixed meaning. It may not “represent China” in the nationalistic sense, but it reshapes how a Chinese brand can be felt around the world.

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1 Revisiting the Research Questions

This thesis set out to explore two interrelated research questions: First, how do small and emerging Chinese brands construct cultural narratives in the process of going global? Second, how can postcolonial theory help us critically understand the representation of Chinese brands in global markets?

In addressing the first research question, this study has shown that brands like Pop Mart do not rely on explicit references to national identity or cultural heritage to establish their brand narratives. Instead, they construct what can be described as soft or ambient cultural narratives, built on symbolic imagery, hybrid aesthetics, and emotionally charged atmospheres. This visual and emotional strategy is further reinforced by the brand's use of fragmented storytelling, especially through the blind box format and open-ended captions on global social media platforms. These narratives invite audience participation rather than impose fixed meaning. In this way, Pop Mart fosters a form of cultural visibility that privileges affect and ambiguity over explicit identification.

Meanwhile, the second research question requires a more critical perspective. Postcolonial theory is helpful for understanding the mixed information in the global dissemination of Pop Mart. Using Edward Said's Orientalist theory, this study asked whether the brand's use of quiet, calm and mysterious visual effects - although avoiding traditional Chinese symbols - still reflected the global stereotypes of East Asian culture.

Through Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third space", the identity of Pop Mart is regarded as something in between - not completely China, nor completely global, but formed through visual blending and cultural flexibility. Kobayashi's self-Orientalism

concept helps us see that even "neutral" or "soft" designs may satisfy Westerners' fantasies of East Asia being exotic or mysterious. Although these styles are subtle, they may still reflect the global perception formed by power inequality.

Turner's research on soft power also shows us that Pop Mart is not only a successful brand, but also a cultural figure - spreading ideas about Chinese creativity globally, although there are no clear political or national symbols.

These theories are helpful in revealing the tensions in the global image of Pop Mart. The brand's soft and emotional style helps it transcend national boundaries, but its choice to stay away from clear cultural symbols may also make its identity seem unclear or shallow. It avoids being simply labeled as "China", but at the same time, it also risks understanding it only through the "gentle" global perspective of East Asia. Postcolonial theory helps us understand how brands like Pop Mart manage their popularity in a world where cultural flows are constantly changing but past power differences still matter.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis, through a critical study of how new Chinese brands establish and share cultural identity in the international market, provides a fundamental and critical perspective for the crossroads of global brand, postcolonial theory and soft intellectual property research, thereby increasing the dialogue. This study, taking Pop Mart as an example, challenges the common views in marketing and cultural research on how non-Western brands present themselves in today's global media space.

First of all, this paper broadens our perspective on brand identity. It indicates that emotions, visual openness and fragmented story-telling are now the core tools for brands like Pop Mart to shape cultural meaning. These brands do not tell clear national stories but often use what is called "emotional meaning" - a style that implies rather than directly states meaning. Identity is felt, not declared. This insight goes beyond old models such as the "country of origin effect" or fixed cultural signals, adding new elements to brand theory.

Secondly, this study introduces postcolonial theory more deeply into brand and media research. Although postcolonial ideas are often used to study films or literature, they still have not been widely applied in brand communication. By using the concepts of Said, Baba and Kobayashi, this article demonstrates how the appearance and feel of East Asian brands challenge and reflect the global power disparity. It holds that the shaping of a brand image depends not only on the content presented but also on the unspoken content - such as tone, silence and visual cues.

Thirdly, this article adds new discussions on soft power in the constantly changing media world. Popmart indicates that today's cultural influence does not always come from the direct display of national culture. On the contrary, it can develop from a soft, aesthetic form - through design, emotion and storytelling. This challenges the old notion that soft power is dominated by the government and points out new ways to understand how non-Western creativity spreads across borders.

Overall, these contributions demonstrate why brand research requires a more detailed and hybrid approach - one that combines cultural theory, visual design, sentiment analysis, and postcolonial thinking. Only in this way can we fully understand how brand identities are created, changed and shared in a globalized world.

5.3 Implications for Global Strategic Communication

This article offers some unique insights into the field of global strategic communication, especially in understanding new non-Western brands and dealing with their cultural significance in today's interconnected media world. By focusing on Pop Mart, we can rethink how the new generation of small Chinese brands have established global influence. The brand image of Pop mart avoids using symbols with clear national symbols. Instead, it uses complex emotions, feelings and stories to promote the brand and create a brand atmosphere.

First of all, the research results show that modern Chinese enterprises can succeed globally without emphasizing national identity. Pop Mart has well

demonstrated with its global sales that emotional design, fragmented stories and platform-driven content can have a powerful cultural impact to replace the original cultural elements with national symbols. In today's media environment driven by strong visuals, short videos and algorithms, strategic communication is no longer about explicit national messages, but about creating emotional experiences that transcend cultures. This is particularly useful for young and creative Chinese brands that hope to gain cultural recognition that is not associated with politics or national brands.

Secondly, research shows that managing cultural differences does not always mean changing the subject to cater to the local market. Pop Mart takes ambiguity as a strategy to maintain the openness and flexibility of its identity. This reflects a more significant shift in global communication: from information control to emotional planning. Here, identity is not a definite affirmation but is expressed through emotions, styles and visual cues. This is very useful for Chinese brands operating around the world, as a strong "China" logo may be misunderstood or rejected.

Thirdly, it expounds the value of cultural theories, especially postcolonial ideas, in the research of strategic communication. It reminds us that brand messages have never been neutral - they are influenced by world history, power differences and cultural stereotypes. Understanding how Orientalism influences people's perception of "Asia" and how Chinese brands such as Pop Mart play a role in these concepts can enable us to better understand the distribution of the global market.

In short, this study contributes to global strategic communication by demonstrating how emotional narrative, meticulous design and visual openness can become powerful tools for emerging brands. For Chinese enterprises that hope to expand their global influence, this article offers a different path - one that is not based on telling people who they are, but on demonstrating their feelings.

5.4 Practical Implications

The results of this study provide practical insights for new Chinese brands to

enter the global market, especially in creative fields such as design, fashion and technology. Pop Mart uses examples to illustrate that small brands and brands with ambiguous cultures can also gain international attention and achieve good results. They can also evoke the common emotions of the global target audience not by using obvious national cultural symbols, but through emotional connections.

First of all, this study shows that global audiences, especially young consumers, tend to respond more strongly to emotional brands than to strong national identities. The success of Pop Mart shows that emotions, tones and visual consistency can build brand affinity without the need for cultural explanations.

Secondly, this study demonstrates how cultural blending can serve as a design approach and a way of storytelling. By blending styles such as Kawaii, Gothic and soft minimalism, Pop Mart has created a visual style that is both unique and flexible. Other Chinese brands can draw lessons from this and design for cross-cultural emotional appeals while adhering to their own creative visions.

Thirdly, the concept of "soft branding" - a strategy based on implications, emotions and open meanings - seems to be a powerful way to establish emotional connections across cultures. But this must be done with caution. Brands should strike a balance between openness and clarity. Too much cultural neutrality can make a brand feel vague or disconnected from its roots.

This study also encourages Chinese brands to view global expansion as a way to increase the shared emotional and visual culture of the world, rather than an opportunity to "show" their national identity. Rather than asking how to showcase "Chinese characteristics", brands can ask: What unique feelings, emotions or design experiences can we offer? This transformation from appearance to emotional resonance might be the key to the next generation of Chinese creative brands.

In short, Pop Mart provides us with a powerful example of how soft IP brands can connect globally. It does not offer a fixed path but demonstrates how emotional design, cultural awareness and storytelling can jointly construct a meaningful and non-dominant global presence. For small brands in China, the lesson is not to copy Pop Mart completely, but to find their own balance between clarity and mystery,

identity and feeling, local roots and global vision.

5.5 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with any case study-based research, this thesis comes with certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the study focused exclusively on one brand—Pop Mart—and specifically on a select number of its internationally visible IPs and platforms. While this allowed for in-depth analysis, it inevitably limits the generalizability of the findings. Pop Mart is a unique case in its aesthetic strategy, brand resources, and market positioning; other small Chinese brands may employ entirely different approaches to global communication and identity construction.

Second, the research relied primarily on textual and visual analysis of publicly available brand materials such as product packaging, social media posts, and campaign visuals. While this approach was effective in identifying branding patterns and aesthetic choices, it does not provide insights into how international audiences interpret, consume, or emotionally respond to Pop Mart’s representations. Future research might incorporate user-oriented methods such as interviews, surveys, or ethnographic observation to explore the reception and meaning-making practices of global consumers.

In addition, the theoretical lens of postcolonialism—while effective in unpacking issues of identity and global asymmetry—has its own constraints. It may not fully capture the evolving dynamics of Chinese cultural soft power in the digital era, particularly in relation to younger consumers who may not interpret brand expressions through national or postcolonial frames. Future scholarship might benefit from integrating other frameworks such as media affect theory, transnational design studies, or platform ecologies to supplement and expand the critical toolkit.

Finally, there is room to study the internal creative strategies of Chinese brands themselves. This study viewed the brand from the outside in; interviews with designers, strategists, or marketing teams could offer new insights into how aesthetic and narrative choices are made, and how notions of “global visibility” are understood

from within.

In short, while this thesis has illuminated one trajectory of cultural branding in the Chinese context, the field remains open and vibrant. As more Chinese brands enter the global stage, and as international consumers continue to reshape aesthetic expectations, further research will be necessary to track, critique, and understand how identity is constructed, negotiated, and felt across shifting cultural terrains.

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