

The Role of Visual Communication Design in Constructing Meaning, Value, and Identity in a character-Based Cultural Phenomena: A Case Study of Pop Mart

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the structural role of visual communication design in shaping contemporary character-based pop culture ecosystems. While existing research on popular culture has predominantly emphasized media consumption, fandom behavior, and market dynamics, limited attention has been given to how design functions as a strategic mechanism that constructs symbolic meaning, economic value, and identity mediation. Using a qualitative comparative case study of Pop Mart, this research examines how character design systems, visual branding strategies, and blind box distribution formats operate as interconnected cultural infrastructures. The findings reveal that visual communication design extends beyond aesthetic representation and functions as a cultural engine that sustains collectability, reinforces emotional attachment, and enables identity projection within digital consumer culture. The study argues that character-based pop culture should be understood as a designed ecosystem in which visual communication plays a central role in negotiating cultural capital, participatory engagement, and market value in contemporary creative industries.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, popular culture has emerged as a dominant cultural force within the rapidly evolving landscape of digital society. The expansion of global mass media infrastructures, followed by the acceleration of digital platforms and networked communication technologies, has significantly transformed the ways cultural products are produced, circulated, and consumed. Within this context, popular culture operates not merely as a form of entertainment but as a dynamic system that generates symbolic meaning, shapes social identities, and produces economic value at both local and global scales. As a form of cultural influence and soft power, popular culture contributes to the construction of cultural significance and symbolic capital in contemporary society (Rafique et al, 2022; Kim, 2021).

One of the most prominent manifestations of contemporary popular culture is the proliferation of character-based intellectual properties that originate from media products such as films, comics, animation, and digital storytelling platforms. Over time, these characters frequently transcend their original narrative contexts and evolve into independent cultural and commercial assets. Since the expansion of mass consumption in the late twentieth century, the increasing visibility of character-driven media has contributed to the emergence of what scholars describe as the character economy. Within this framework, characters function not only as narrative elements but also as marketable visual identities and branded commodities. Unlike conventional products, character-based commodities possess both material and symbolic attributes, enabling them to fulfil consumers' emotional, social, and cultural needs while simultaneously generating economic value (TongYao, 2024).

In recent years, character-based merchandise ecosystems have become increasingly complex and strategically designed. Companies operating within the creative industries have developed sophisticated approaches that integrate character design, visual branding, product formats, and distribution strategies to construct long-term consumer engagement. Within the character economy, intellectual property functions as a form of intangible cultural capital that

gains value through emotional attachment, symbolic consumption, and participatory cultural practices (Beydogan et al, 2020). This transformation reflects a broader shift in consumer behavior, in which audiences engage with cultural products not solely for functional purposes but also for the meanings and identities embedded within them.

Despite the growing significance of character-based cultural products, scholarly discussions on popular culture have largely concentrated on media consumption patterns, fandom activities, distribution systems, or market dynamics (Bettig, 2018). While these perspectives provide important insights into the socio-economic dimensions of popular culture, they often overlook the structural role of visual communication design in shaping how such cultural phenomena are constructed, circulated, and experienced. As a result, the function of design is frequently positioned as an aesthetic supplement rather than as a foundational mechanism that organizes cultural meaning and consumer participation.

In practice, visual communication design plays a crucial role in the formation of character-based pop culture ecosystems. Elements such as character visualisation, packaging systems, branding strategies, and product distribution formats operate as integrated visual infrastructures that sustain collectibility, reinforce symbolic value, and facilitate audience engagement. Through these visual systems, design mediates the relationship between cultural production, market structures, and everyday consumption practices. Characters are therefore no longer confined to narrative media contexts but operate as mobile visual identities capable of circulating across platforms, merchandise networks, and digital communities.

A contemporary example that illustrates this transformation can be observed in the global rise of Pop Mart, a company that has successfully developed a character-based collectible culture centred on visual identity and emotional consumption. As a major enterprise within China's trendy toy industry, Pop Mart demonstrates a strong understanding of the importance of character as both a cultural and economic asset. As a result, its character creation process is highly deliberate, involving a structured visual development that defines personality, appearance, and distinctive traits to

strengthen emotional resonance and market value (Seftina, et al., 2024). By producing distinctive collectible figures that respond to the emotional aspirations of young urban consumers, the brand enables individuals to express personal identity, seek emotional comfort, and participate in symbolic consumption practices (Wei, et al, 2025). Characters such as Molly, Skullpanda, and Labubu operate as recognisable visual icons that foster cultural attachment and brand recognition across global markets. A key aspect of Pop Mart's success lies in its blind box distribution model, which introduces uncertainty and anticipation into the collecting process. This system not only encourages repeated consumption but also enhances the experiential and participatory dimensions of character collecting. Supported by social media circulation and community-based engagement, the brand has constructed a distinctive visual ecosystem that integrates design, marketing, and digital culture into a cohesive cultural phenomenon (Chen, 2025; Chiu et a, 2025).

Despite the rapid expansion of character-based popular culture and the commercial success of collectible merchandise ecosystems, existing studies have predominantly examined these phenomena through perspectives such as media consumption, fandom practices, platform distribution, and market dynamics. While these approaches offer important socio-cultural insights, they tend to position visual communication design as a supporting aesthetic layer rather than as a structural mechanism. Character-based cultural products also function as socio-political media that contribute to popular culture, enabling consumers to express their values, identities, and cultural affiliations (Effendi et al, 2024). However, this expressive capacity is not incidental, but is constructed through visual communication design, which organises symbolic meaning, emotional engagement, and value creation within these systems. Consequently, limited scholarly attention has been directed towards understanding how visual design functions as a cultural infrastructure that enables characters to operate simultaneously as symbolic identities, collectible commodities, and mediators of consumer self-expression within contemporary digital culture (Lacasa et al, 2017).

Therefore, this study examines the role of visual communication design as a cultural engine in shaping character-based pop culture ecosystems. Focusing on the case of Pop Mart, the research analyses how character visual systems, product formats, and branding strategies contribute to the construction of symbolic meaning, the reinforcement of collectibility, and the mediation of identity in contemporary consumer culture. By positioning design as a central analytical lens, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how visual communication structures cultural participation and value formation within the creative industries.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing on Pop Mart as a representative example of a contemporary character-based pop culture phenomenon. A qualitative strategy is adopted to explore how visual communication design operates as a structural cultural system that constructs symbolic meaning, economic value, and identity mediation within character-driven consumer culture. By examining Pop Mart's character ecosystem, the research aims to understand how visual elements function not only as aesthetic features but also as strategic mechanisms that shape consumer engagement, collectibility, and cultural interpretation.

Data were collected through multiple complementary techniques to ensure analytical depth. First, a literature review was conducted to establish the theoretical foundation of the study, drawing on discussions in visual culture, popular culture, character economy, and design studies (Barrios, 2025). This review provides the conceptual lens for interpreting how visual communication contributes to the formation of character-based pop culture systems. Second, visual content analysis was applied to selected Pop Mart characters and merchandise. The analysis focuses on key visual attributes including character form, colour composition, stylistic consistency, and visual narratives that contribute to symbolic meaning and emotional resonance (Yılmaz, & Yılmaz, 2022). In addition, observational analysis was undertaken to examine branding strategies, packaging design, retail presentation, and the blind box distribution system as experiential design mechanisms that

structure collectibility and repeated consumption. Digital media analysis was also conducted to investigate how marketing visuals and online platform content support brand identity formation and audience participation.

To guide interpretation, the study adopts a design centred analytical framework consisting of interconnected dimensions that position visual communication as a strategic lens for examining cultural production and consumer engagement. This approach reflects broader developments in design education and research that emphasise the integration of theory, case based analysis, and practice oriented inquiry in understanding evolving design fields (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2025) The first dimension, meaning construction, examines how character visualisation and narrative cues generate symbolic interpretation and affective attachment. The second dimension, value construction, analyses how visual systems such as product design, packaging variation, and distribution formats reinforce collectibility and market desirability. The third dimension, identity mediation, explores how consumers engage with character-based collectibles as symbolic tools for expressing personal identity, taste, and social belonging within contemporary digital culture.

The overall research process, including the stages of data collection and analytical framework employed in this study, is summarised in the research methodology diagram presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Research methodology diagram
Source: author's documentation

Findings from the various data sources were synthesised through interpretative analysis to identify recurring patterns and conceptual relationships between visual design strategies and cultural outcomes (Kuckartz & Radiker, 2023). By comparing insights derived from visual content analysis, observational data, and digital media materials, the study develops a contextual understanding of how visual communication operates within the broader character-based pop culture ecosystem. The use of multiple qualitative sources contributes to analytical depth and strengthens the

credibility of the interpretation by enabling cross contextual examination of design practices and audience engagement.

Through this methodological approach, the research aims to demonstrate that visual communication design functions not merely as an aesthetic component but as a strategic cultural system that structures symbolic meaning, consumer attachment, and value creation in contemporary character driven popular culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Expansion of Pop Culture and Visual Character IP

Literature findings suggest that contemporary popular culture has undergone a significant transformation toward visually oriented modes of cultural production. The proliferation of digital media environments has accelerated the circulation of cultural symbols and visual identities across platforms, reshaping the ways audiences encounter, interpret, and engage with cultural products. Within this context, character based intellectual property has evolved from narrative components embedded in films, animation, and comics into strategic cultural assets operating within integrated merchandising systems, branding infrastructures, and networked digital communities. This shift reflects broader dynamics of symbolic consumption and the accumulation of cultural capital in global consumer culture, where visual representation increasingly mediates both cultural meaning and market value (Bourdieu & Nice, 1980; Claussen & Osborne, 2013).

In visually driven pop culture industries, character design functions as a communicative interface that translates abstract narratives and affective experiences into recognisable symbolic forms. Perspectives from visual culture studies and commodity aesthetics highlight the role of design in materialising cultural meaning through everyday consumption practices, enabling audiences to experience symbolic value through aesthetic interaction with products (Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2022). Consequently, character intellectual property is no longer confined to storytelling media but becomes embedded

within product ecosystems and experiential consumption environments. This development supports the emergence of a character economy in which visual identity, rather than narrative complexity alone, contributes to the sustainability, desirability, and cultural visibility of creative industry products (TongYao, 2024).

Within the Pop Mart collectible ecosystem, this broader transformation is manifested through the strategic deployment of character visualisation as a primary mechanism for constructing symbolic meaning. Character based visual design operates as a narrative engine that communicates emotional tone, personality traits, and cultural associations through formal and stylistic elements rather than through linear storytelling structures (Smith, 2022). As autonomous visual entities, these characters allow audiences to interpret meaning directly from aesthetic appearance, positioning visual communication design as a semiotic system that encodes affective and cultural values.



Figure 2. Labubu thematic atmosphere example
Source: popmart

Each character embodies a distinctive configuration of emotional atmosphere, visual language, and symbolic identity. Key visual attributes such as body proportion, colour composition, facial expression, costume detail, and material surface contribute to the formation of recognisable character

personas. These visual cues guide audience interpretation by suggesting particular moods and cultural associations. Softer tonal compositions and rounded forms often evoke impressions of vulnerability or innocence, while stronger contrasts and stylised visual motifs may signal edginess, playfulness, or alternative identity positioning. Through such differentiation, character design functions as a visual language that translates abstract emotional concepts into tangible cultural representations, reinforcing the role of design as a mediator between symbolic meaning and consumer perception (Ding et al, 2025).

Characters such as Molly, Skullpanda and Labubu illustrate how identity and mood can be effectively communicated without reliance on extensive narrative exposition. Molly's rounded facial structure, subdued colour palette, and contemplative expression convey emotional sensitivity and introspective charm, whereas Skullpanda's darker tonal contrasts, hybrid stylistic references, and experimental visual motifs suggest a more subcultural and expressive aesthetic orientation. These visual strategies enable audiences to form affective connections with the characters and interpret symbolic meanings primarily through aesthetic perception (Cai, 2024). In this sense, character visualisation operates as a form of emotional design that strengthens user attachment and facilitates symbolic engagement with cultural products.



Figure 3. Skullpanda collaboration
Source: popmart

Importantly, the expanding development of Pop Mart’s key character intellectual properties demonstrates how visual identity can evolve into a sustainable cultural and economic asset within contemporary pop culture industries. Characters such as Molly, Skullpanda, and Labubu have gradually transformed from individual design creations into globally recognised collectible icons that circulate across diverse media and consumption contexts (Liu et al, 2021). The continued release of thematic series, artist collaborations, large scale figurines, and experiential retail installations illustrates how these character IPs are strategically extended to maintain audience engagement and market relevance.



Figure 4. Molly different visual reinterpretation
Source: popmart

Molly, as one of the earliest and most established Pop Mart characters, has undergone continuous visual reinterpretation through multiple series that adapt her aesthetic identity to different cultural narratives and lifestyle contexts. This long term visual evolution has strengthened her role as a symbolic brand anchor and a transnational design icon within the collectible toy market (Huang & Zhang, 2026). Similarly, Skullpanda has experienced rapid growth in popularity through the introduction of darker thematic collections, immersive exhibition concepts, and cross platform digital promotion, positioning the character as a representative of hybrid emotional aesthetics in contemporary youth culture.

Labubu, meanwhile, reflects a different trajectory of intellectual property expansion characterised by strong visual experimentation and global subcultural appeal. The character’s “ugly cute” aesthetic and fantasy driven

visual narratives have enabled collaborations with international artists and lifestyle brands, contributing to the diversification of Pop Mart's creative portfolio and strengthening its presence within global collectible communities (Ge, 2024). Through these ongoing developments, the three characters illustrate how character-based IP can function as a dynamic visual system that supports brand continuity, cultural circulation, and experiential consumption in the digital era.

From a design perspective, the evolution of Molly, Skullpanda, and Labubu highlights the role of visual communication design in sustaining the lifecycle of character IP within contemporary creative industries. Rather than remaining fixed representations, these characters operate as adaptive visual identities that respond to shifting cultural trends, consumer expectations, and media environments. This continuous process of visual renewal enables character IP to maintain symbolic relevance while simultaneously generating long term economic value within the global collectible culture associated with Pop Mart.

Comparative Visual Strategies in Collectible Product Design

This section presents comparative visual observations of selected Pop Mart character products in order to examine how design variation contributes to the positioning of collectible figures. The analysis focuses on observable features such as character styling, thematic series development and packaging presentation. Across different releases, visual differentiation appears to function as a key mechanism that enables each figure to be recognised as both part of a coherent brand system and as a distinct collectible object (Maharatha, & Yadav, 2023). Variations in colour palette, costume configuration, and surface treatment can be identified as recurring design strategies across character series. These visual modifications contribute to the perception of novelty by introducing thematic reinterpretations while maintaining recognisable character identities. The comparative visual characteristics observed among selected character IPs are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative Visual Strategies in Constructing Collectible Value among Selected Pop Mart Character IPs

Character	Visual Differentiation	Product Series Variation
Molly	Subtle reinterpretation of core facial form, soft tonal palettes, fashion and fantasy themed costume adjustments	Seasonal editions, lifestyle themed series, narrative inspired styling variations
Skullpanda	Strong stylistic transformation through gothic motifs, monochromatic contrasts, hybrid cultural symbolism, atmospheric detailing	Thematic collections with high visual contrast such as dark fantasy, cyber aesthetic, and traditional inspired series
Labubu	Expressive visual mutation including exaggerated textures, playful deformation, bright colour contrasts, and humorous character styling	Fantasy creature themes, festive editions, and imaginative narrative driven transformations

Source: author's documentation

In the case of Molly, visual value is often constructed through subtle stylistic reinterpretations that maintain the character's core identity while introducing thematic variation. Series based adaptations such as seasonal costumes, fashion inspired accessories, or fantasy narrative settings create differentiation without disrupting recognisability. This controlled visual continuity supports the perception that each new figure represents a distinct collectible variation rather than a repetitive product form.

Skullpanda demonstrates a more pronounced approach to visual differentiation. Observations across multiple product lines show that shifts in tonal palette, costume complexity, and atmospheric design contribute to stronger impressions of exclusivity and artistic uniqueness. Gothic inspired series, monochromatic treatments, and hybrid cultural references create

visual contrast between releases, reinforcing the sense that each figure belongs to a limited thematic environment. This variation contributes to the perception of rarity within the collectible system.

Labubu presents another visual strategy in which value construction emerges from expressive character transformation. Differences in surface texture, exaggerated facial features, and playful costume themes generate visual intensity that distinguishes one series from another. Bright colour contrasts, fantasy inspired styling, and humorous narrative cues contribute to the perception that each figure offers a new experiential encounter. These visual characteristics are frequently accompanied by packaging graphics and series naming conventions that further support the collectible positioning of the product. Overall, the findings demonstrate that value construction within the Pop Mart ecosystem is not incidental but structurally embedded in coordinated visual design strategies that govern how collectible figures are differentiated, experienced, and socially recognised. Systematic variations in character styling, packaging articulation, and series configuration operate as deliberate visual mechanisms that regulate perceptions of novelty, rarity, and desirability.

Thematic Packaging Design and Blind Box Visual Appeal

Observational findings show that packaging design plays a central role in attracting consumer attention and shaping purchasing interest within the Pop Mart collectible ecosystem. One of the most noticeable characteristics is the use of strong thematic visual identities across product series. Each series typically employs distinctive colour palettes, illustrative styles, and graphic compositions that create immediate visual recognition. Bright and contrasting colour schemes are frequently used to increase visibility within retail environments, allowing packaging displays to stand out among surrounding products.



Figure 5. Popmart different packaging for different character
Source: popmart

Packaging graphics often present a unified visual theme that represents the overall narrative or atmosphere of a character series. Through consistent visual storytelling elements such as symbolic motifs, stylised backgrounds, and expressive character illustrations, the packaging communicates that each figure belongs to a larger collection. This visual indication of series identity can encourage consumers to view the product not as a single item but as part of a complete set. As a result, the packaging contributes to the perception that collecting multiple figures from the same series offers a more satisfying visual and experiential outcome.

Another notable feature is the inclusion of visual cues that suggest the existence of special or “secret” character variants. Packaging surfaces frequently display series diagrams, character line-ups, or probability indicators that reveal the range of available figures while simultaneously maintaining uncertainty about the specific item contained inside. The

presence of a rare or hidden character within the visual information adds an element of anticipation that can increase consumer curiosity and motivate repeated purchases.

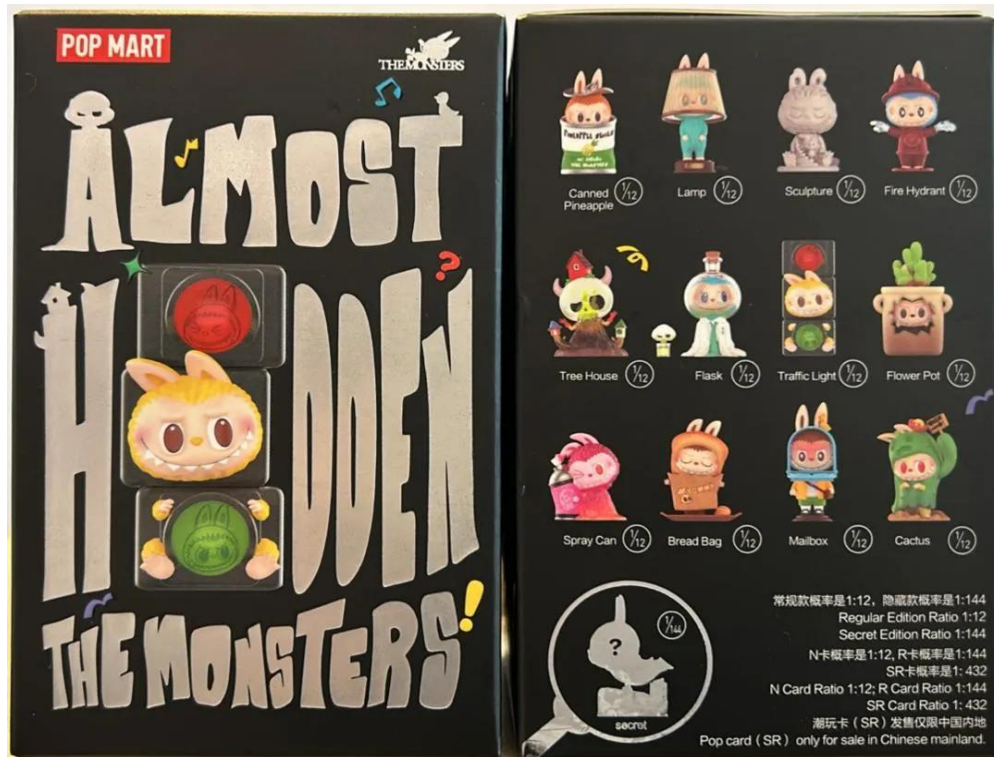


Figure 6. Labubu character packaging with probability
Source: popmart

The blind box packaging system further reinforces this dynamic by concealing product identity until the moment of unboxing. The standardisation of box structure ensures that visual differentiation occurs primarily through surface graphics rather than through direct product visibility. This controlled concealment transforms the act of purchase into an experience shaped by expectation, surprise, and discovery. Probability information printed on the packaging, indicating the percentage likelihood of obtaining particular character variants, visually reinforces perceptions of scarcity and exclusivity within the collectible system (Ge, 2024).

Retail presentation amplifies the visual impact of thematic packaging. Boxes are often arranged in grouped displays according to series identity, creating blocks of colour repetition and graphic rhythm that enhance visual attraction. Such spatial organisation allows consumers to easily recognise the breadth of a collection while simultaneously maintaining the ambiguity associated with blind box distribution. From a broader design perspective, the integration of thematic packaging, probability-based product concealment, and series oriented visual branding demonstrates how collectibility is structured through coordinated visual communication strategies. Rather than emerging spontaneously from consumer behaviour, the desire to collect is supported by packaging design, distribution format, and product presentation that together shape perceptions of rarity, novelty, and emotional engagement (Ruyi, 2020). In this context, blind box systems function not only as commercial mechanisms but also as visually mediated experiences that contribute to the cultural positioning of character-based collectibles.

Digital Media Visual Promotion & Online Circulation

Observational findings indicate that digital media platforms function as key visual channels that extend the circulation of Pop Mart character products beyond physical retail environments. Through curated promotional imagery and platform-specific visual formats, character figures are presented not merely as commercial products, but as aesthetic cultural objects situated within emotionally constructed visual environments. A consistent visual identity enables Pop Mart characters to circulate across multiple platforms, including merchandise systems, exhibitions, and online media spaces. The recognisability of character forms, colour palettes, lighting styles, and compositional approaches supports visual continuity across platforms, allowing audiences to quickly identify and engage with new releases. This consistency contributes to the reproduction of character imagery in promotional campaigns, retail displays, and user-generated visual content, reinforcing the symbolic presence of the brand within everyday media consumption.

Across global social media accounts such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, Pop Mart maintains a highly curated visual aesthetic characterised by soft tonal atmospheres, minimal textual information, and character-centred compositions. Promotional visuals frequently prioritise emotional ambience rather than functional product explanation. Characters are often depicted in contemplative poses, atmospheric lighting conditions, or stylised thematic environments, such as dream-like landscapes, fantasy interiors, or symbolic narrative settings. This minimalist communication strategy encourages audiences to interpret meaning through mood and visual suggestion, positioning character figures as emotionally expressive cultural symbols rather than purely utilitarian commodities.

The brand's global visual strategy also demonstrates strong cross-platform coherence. Whether presented through vertical short-form videos on TikTok, square photographic posts on Instagram, or animated trailers on YouTube, similar visual principles are consistently applied. These include the use of soft lighting, neutral backgrounds, close-up framing, and slow visual pacing that emphasise material texture and emotional atmosphere. Such aesthetic consistency enhances brand recognisability while strengthening the immersive quality of the collectible universe presented to audiences. In addition to maintaining visual coherence, Pop Mart adopts diverse content formats to expand the expressive potential of character promotion. These visual formats contribute to transforming collectible figures into emotional storytellers, allowing audiences to experience the characters as part of broader symbolic worlds rather than isolated product items.

Digital circulation is further reinforced through participatory visual practices within fan communities. Consumers frequently document blind box opening experiences, curated collection displays, and customised character arrangements through photographs and short video content shared online. This practice transforms purchasing into a socially mediated event characterised by anticipation, surprise, and emotional expression. As a result, character collectibles function as social symbols that facilitate interaction, identity performance, and collective meaning construction within fandom networks (Hidayanti et al, 2026). Brand-initiated digital infrastructures also

support this circulation process. Platforms such as the Ba Qu application provide spaces for product announcements, character storytelling, community interaction, and second-hand exchanges of collectible figures. Through these interconnected digital environments, audiences are able to share visual narratives, discuss thematic series, and construct personalised interpretations of character identity. These activities contribute to the expansion of online visibility while reinforcing emotional attachment and sustained engagement with the brand.

Although Pop Mart maintains a coherent global visual language, observations also indicate subtle forms of regional adaptation. Minor adjustments in symbolic references, seasonal themes, or collaborative content with local influencers enable the brand to create cultural proximity without altering core character design or aesthetic direction. This strategy of soft visual localisation allows character imagery to resonate within diverse cultural contexts while preserving overall brand consistency. Overall, the findings suggest that digital media operates as a visual extension of the collectible ecosystem. Through coordinated aesthetic promotion, participatory content circulation, and platform-based community interaction, character figures continuously move across networked media environments. This ongoing circulation strengthens audience engagement, fosters emotional attachment, and activates fandom participation, positioning visual identity systems as central mechanisms supporting the growth of character-based cultural economies in contemporary popular culture.

Visual Communication Design in Character-Based Pop Culture Ecosystems

This study demonstrates that visual communication design operates as a strategic cultural system within contemporary character-based popular culture. By synthesising findings from literature review, visual content analysis, observational study, and digital media analysis, the discussion highlights three interconnected analytical perspectives that explain how character intellectual property functions within the Pop Mart ecosystem. These perspectives include meaning construction, value construction, and

identity mediation. Together, they reveal how visual systems organise symbolic interpretation, experiential consumption, and participatory cultural engagement.

Table 2. Analytical synthesis of visual communication design functions in character-based Pop Culture

Analytical Dimension	Key Visual Mechanisms Observed	Cultural Function	Consumer Experience Outcome	Economic/Market Implication
Meaning Construction	Character visualisation, stylistic differentiation, emotional atmosphere, semiotic visual cues	Construction of symbolic meaning through aesthetic interpretation	Affective attachment, emotional resonance, narrative imagination	Strengthens cultural visibility and long-term character recognition
Value Construction	Thematic product variation, packaging visual identity, probability indicators, blind box concealment system	Structuring collectibility and perceived rarity through visual design systems	Anticipation, experiential consumption, repeated purchasing behaviour	Enhances product desirability and supports collectible market sustainability

Identity Mediation	Digital visual promotion, cross-platform visual consistency, participatory fan content circulation	Facilitation of identity expression and community belonging through symbolic consumption	Social interaction, fandom participation, personalised meaning- making	Expands brand visibility and reinforces networked cultural economies
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Source: author's documentation

The findings indicate that character visualisation functions as a primary mechanism through which symbolic meaning is constructed in visually driven pop culture industries. Consistent with perspectives from visual culture and semiotic theory, character design operates as a communicative interface that translates emotional atmospheres and cultural associations into recognisable aesthetic forms. Rather than relying on linear storytelling, characters such as Molly, Skullpanda, and Labubu communicate identity and mood through formal visual elements including proportion, colour composition, stylistic references, and material articulation.

This suggests that visual communication design performs a narrative role by enabling audiences to interpret cultural meaning directly through aesthetic perception. Characters operate as autonomous visual entities capable of generating affective responses and symbolic engagement. The continuous reinterpretation of character appearance across thematic series further reinforces their function as adaptive visual identities that maintain cultural relevance within changing media environments. In this context, meaning construction in character-based pop culture is structured through visual language that mediates emotional interpretation and supports audience attachment.

Beyond symbolic meaning, the findings reveal that visual communication design also contributes to the construction of experiential and

economic value within collectible product ecosystems. Comparative visual observations indicate that collectibility is structured through coordinated variation in character styling, thematic series development, packaging presentation, and blind box distribution formats. These visual strategies enable products to be perceived as both recognisable brand artefacts and distinct collectible objects.

Thematic packaging design plays a central role in shaping consumer perception of desirability. Strong colour identities, illustrative graphic compositions, and series-based visual storytelling create immediate recognition while simultaneously encouraging consumers to imagine the completeness of a collection. Probability indicators and visual cues suggesting the presence of secret character variants further reinforce perceptions of rarity and exclusivity. The blind box system transforms product acquisition into an experience characterised by anticipation and discovery, demonstrating how visual concealment and structured uncertainty contribute to repeated consumption behaviour.

From a broader design perspective, these findings suggest that value within character-based merchandise systems is materially embedded in visual infrastructures rather than generated solely through marketing communication. Packaging, product variation, and distribution format collectively function as coordinated visual mechanisms that shape how cultural commodities are encountered, desired, and circulated. The study also shows that visual communication design mediates identity formation through digital circulation and participatory fandom practices. Digital media platforms function as visual extensions of the collectible ecosystem, enabling character imagery to move across promotional environments, user-generated content spaces, and community interaction networks. Consistent visual identity across platforms supports rapid recognition and reinforces the symbolic presence of character intellectual property within everyday media consumption.

Observations indicate that promotional content emphasises emotional ambience and aesthetic atmosphere rather than functional product information. Through stylised photographic compositions, short video narratives, and immersive visual settings, characters are positioned as

expressive cultural objects capable of facilitating personal interpretation. Participatory practices such as documenting blind box openings, displaying collections, and sharing customised character arrangements transform consumption into a socially mediated experience in which identity performance and community belonging are negotiated.

Brand-initiated digital infrastructures further support this process by providing platforms for storytelling, exchange, and visual interaction. Subtle regional adaptations in visual content demonstrate how character imagery can resonate across diverse cultural contexts while maintaining global aesthetic consistency. These dynamics suggest that identity mediation in contemporary pop culture operates through visual systems that connect product experience with emotional expression and collective cultural participation.

Taken together, these three analytical perspectives indicate that visual communication design functions as an organising framework that links symbolic meaning, collectible value, and identity performance within character-based popular culture. The Pop Mart case illustrates how character intellectual property can evolve into a dynamic visual ecosystem in which design strategies sustain both cultural circulation and commercial continuity. Rather than serving merely aesthetic or promotional purposes, visual systems structure the ways audiences interpret, experience, and socially negotiate cultural commodities in digitally mediated environments.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that visual communication design operates as a strategic cultural infrastructure within contemporary character based popular culture ecosystems. By examining the case of Pop Mart, the research reveals that visual design does not merely function as an aesthetic layer of media products but as an organising system that structures symbolic interpretation, experiential consumption, and identity negotiation in digitally mediated consumer environments. The findings confirm that character visualisation, product design variation, thematic packaging, blind box distribution, and digital media promotion collectively form an integrated

visual framework through which cultural meaning and market value are continuously produced and circulated.

From the perspective of meaning construction, character design functions as a semiotic and affective interface that enables audiences to interpret emotional atmosphere, personality traits, and cultural associations directly through visual form. Characters operate as adaptive visual identities capable of maintaining symbolic relevance through ongoing stylistic reinterpretation across thematic series and media contexts. This demonstrates that narrative engagement in contemporary pop culture is increasingly mediated through aesthetic perception rather than through conventional storytelling structures.

In terms of value construction, the study highlights how collectible economies are materially embedded in coordinated visual systems. Variations in character styling, packaging identity, probability-based concealment, and blind box distribution transform consumption into an experiential and anticipatory activity. These design mechanism's structure perceptions of novelty, rarity, and desirability, illustrating that economic value in character based merchandise ecosystems is shaped through visual communication strategies that guide how products are encountered and socially recognised.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that visual communication design mediates identity expression through digital circulation and participatory fandom practices. Consistent visual identity across platforms enables character imagery to function as symbolic resources for self-representation, community interaction, and collective meaning making. Through user generated content, social media promotion, and brand initiated digital infrastructures, character collectibles extend beyond commodity status and operate as socially embedded cultural artefacts within networked media environments.

Taken together, the study argues that contemporary pop culture should be understood as a designed ecosystem in which visual communication serves as a central mechanism linking cultural production, consumer experience, and symbolic value formation. The case of Pop Mart illustrates how character

intellectual property evolves into a dynamic visual system that sustains both cultural continuity and commercial sustainability in global creative industries.

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