
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Application of Semiotics in Cross-Boundary Cobranding for the Brand Identity Design of Luckin Coffee

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| ABSTRACT

As a coffee chain brand, Luckin Coffee entered the Chinese market in 2017, positioning itself as a domestic brand offering "affordable and accessible" quality coffee for the general public. With the continuous expansion of the consumer market and increasingly fierce competition among brands, Luckin Coffee has adopted comprehensive strategies to stabilize its market position and strengthen consumer purchasing intent. In addition to leveraging a new retail model enabled by mobile internet and big data, Luckin Coffee has actively pursued cross-boundary cobranding. This emerging marketing strategy disrupts traditional brand design paradigms by integrating cultural and visual elements through collaboration with diverse IPs or artists. Such cobranded initiatives foster innovation in brand design, enhancing both the image and cultural value of the brand while offering a novel approach to redefining brand identity.

| KEYWORDS

Semiotics, Brand Identity Design, Cross-Boundary Cobranding, Luckin Coffee

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of China's coffee market has created a highly competitive industry environment, and local brands need to achieve brand differentiation and positioning through innovative strategies. Founded in 2017, Luckin Coffee rapidly captured the market with its brand position of "good coffee that is accessible and affordable to the public". To consolidate its market position and maintain consumers' sustained attention, Luckin Coffee has adopted a new retail model based on big data and mobile internet while actively carrying out a cross-border cobranding strategy. As an emerging marketing tool, crossover cobranding breaks through the traditional brand design paradigm, redefining brand values and visual symbols through cooperation with artists, famous IPs, or brands from other industries. This cobranding cooperation not only enhances the visual appeal and image perception of a brand but also introduces new connotations and adds value to the brand through cultural narratives and symbol systems.

2. Symbol System and Brand Image

2.1 Research Background

In recent years, the rapid growth of China's coffee market has created a highly competitive industry environment. Domestic brands are increasingly compelled to adopt innovative strategies to achieve differentiation and secure their market position. Founded in 2017, Luckin Coffee positioned itself as a provider of "good coffee that is accessible and affordable for everyone." Through its consumer-centric approach and emphasis on value, the brand quickly captured significant market share. However, as

competition intensified, Luckin Coffee expanded its strategies to include a new retail model powered by big data and mobile internet technologies.

Concurrently, Luckin Coffee has adopted cross-boundary cobranding as a means of cultural and symbolic innovation. As an emerging marketing tool, cross-boundary cobranding transcends traditional brand design frameworks, enabling the integration of diverse visual and cultural elements through collaborations with renowned IPs, artists, and brands from other industries. These partnerships allow brands to redefine their visual identity, creating new symbolic value and emotional resonance with consumers. Through this approach, Luckin Coffee not only enhances its visual appeal and brand recognition but also enriches its brand narrative with deeper cultural and symbolic significance.

2.2 Semiotic Framework and Research Gaps

Semiotics offers a robust theoretical foundation for exploring the role of symbolic systems in brand identity design, providing tools to analyse how brands engage audiences through culturally and visually resonant symbols. Peirce's semiotics, with its triadic relational model of sign, object, and interpretant, highlight the dynamic process of meaning-making. Unlike Saussure's structuralist approach, which focuses on static relationships between signifiers and signifieds, Peirce emphasizes the continuous generation of meaning through interpretation across multidimensional contexts.

While the application of semiotics in advertising, packaging design, and cultural product development has been extensively studied, a significant gap remains in understanding how Peircean semiotics can inform brand identity design in cross-boundary cobranding. This gap is particularly evident in the case of Luckin Coffee, where the brand employs symbolic systems to reshape its identity and communicate its values through collaboration. Current research lacks a comprehensive exploration of how these cobranded initiatives utilize symbolic systems to innovate and redefine brand communication strategies.

2.3 Research questions and objectives

Although cross-boundary cobranding has gained prominence as a strategy for brand marketing, the process by which symbolic systems reinforce brand identity and enable cultural innovation remains an area of active inquiry. This study seeks to address the following questions:

1. How does Luckin Coffee utilize symbolic systems, including icons, indices, and symbols, to construct its brand identity through cross-boundary cobranding?
2. How can symbolic systems foster cultural resonance and enrich the narrative structure of cobranded collaborations?
3. How can designers balance symbolic innovation with the preservation of core brand values in cobranding contexts?

Building upon Peircean semiotics, this research aims to do the following:

1. We construct the symbolic systems underpinning Luckin Coffee's brand identity and analyse their role in visual communication.
2. The cultural symbolism of cross-boundary cobranding and its influence on brand positioning should be investigated.
3. This study provides theoretical insights and practical recommendations for leveraging symbolic systems in cobranded initiatives to achieve innovation and competitiveness.

By integrating semiotic theory with design practice, this study not only enriches the application of semiotics in branding but also equips designers with actionable methodologies for crafting symbolic innovations in cross-boundary collaborations.

3. Research on the Application of Semiotics in Brand Identity Design

3.1 Symbolic Construction of Luckin Coffee Brands

Brand identity extends beyond aesthetic considerations to encompass the creation and transmission of symbolic systems that convey core values and establish emotional connections with audiences. In accordance with Peirce's semiotic framework, brand design can be analysed through three primary types of signs: icons, indices, and symbols.

Luckin Coffee’s brand logo exemplifies iconicity by using a white-lipped deer as its central element. In Chinese culture, deer symbolize auspiciousness, happiness, and longevity, whereas in Western tradition, they are often associated with luck and prosperity. The logo encapsulates these associations, aligning them with the brand’s ethos of “creating moments of luck and inspiring a zest for life.” The visual symbolism of the deer enables Luckin Coffee to communicate its values intuitively, fostering immediate recognition and cultural resonance.

The brand’s primary demographic—students and professionals aged 18–35—has shaped its youthful and sophisticated image. The brand’s distinctive blue palette reinforces this positioning, conveying modernity, quality, and youthful vitality. Beyond its visual identity, Luckin Coffee constructs deeper symbolic meaning by embedding cultural norms and societal expectations into its design, transforming its visual elements into layered symbols that reinforce its narrative and brand identity.

3.2 Role of Visual Narratives in Branding

The symbol system plays a crucial role in shaping brand culture, constituting the core mechanism of communication between the brand and the audience. Brands not only need to design eye-catching visual symbols but also need to construct a symbol system so that their symbol combinations can form a coherent and lasting brand story in long-term communication. Luckin Coffee’s diverse cobranding cooperation not only injects fresh elements into the brand but also creates a new brand experience and market through the fusion of cross-border symbols. Through the design of coffee cups, sleeves, bags and other peripheral products in cobranding activities, Luckin coffee enhances the freshness of the brand, attracts the attention of different consumer groups, raises awareness, and brings new product lines to Luckin coffee.

Semiotics theory provides a unique perspective from which to analyse brand design and communication, revealing how brand symbols convey complex messages through the analysis of object likeness, indicators and symbols. The application of Pierce’s semiotics is particularly notable in Luckin Coffee’s brand image and cross-border cobranding cooperation. Indicators, for example, serve as a bridge in brand communication, leading consumers to the actual product or service. For example, symbols are the deep core of brand design, as they visually communicate product characteristics through visual elements. The logo, colors and graphics used by Luckin Coffee in the cobranding project convey brand values and cultural connotations with the help of symbols. Symbols form stable brand awareness in long-term brand communication, such as in the design of the coffee cup with Moutai, through the joint action of multimodal symbols such as images, colors, and words, and through the common logo and product display in the cobranding publicity, it directly demonstrates the quality correlation and value sharing between the brands behind the cobranding. This design not only points to the material object and demonstrates brand innovation and cross-border diversity but also enhances consumers’ sense of reality and trust in brand cobranding. [2]

Pierce’s triadic relationship model (symbol-object-interpretor) emphasizes the process of interpretation in brand design. When Luckin Coffee is cobranded with other brands, consumers from different backgrounds may decode symbols differently, affecting their perception and engagement with the brand. Therefore, brand designers need to consider the polysemy of symbols and their cultural adaptability when creating cobranded logos to ensure the consistency of brand stories in different markets. [3]

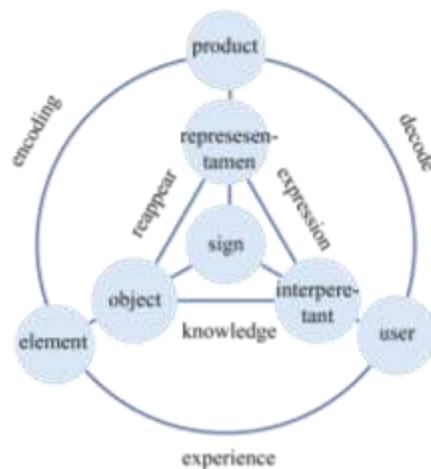


Figure 1 Peirce semiotic readings and transformations (photo by author)

The analysis in Figure 1 shows that semiotic theory not only helps to deconstruct visual symbols in brand design but also provides a framework for understanding how cross-brand collaborations can convey complex messages through symbols, thus enhancing brand communication.

3.3 Value of Luckin Coffee's Co-Branded Symbols

China lacks a deeply entrenched coffee culture to drive consumption; as a result, many consumers perceive coffee primarily as a flavoured beverage rather than a lifestyle staple. This presents challenges for brands such as Luckin Coffee, as taste alone cannot serve as a differentiating factor or core competitive advantage. However, through cross-boundary cobranding, Luckin Coffee has successfully injected fresh symbolic elements into its brand narrative, creating innovative consumer experiences and generating market interest.

Human cognition of products typically begins with visual perception. The initial understanding of a product's attributes is often shaped by its packaging design, which incorporates graphics, colors, and text as communication media. These elements are later reinforced through the interplay of additional sensory modalities, such as auditory, olfactory, and tactile experiences. Therefore, packaging design in cobranded initiatives plays a critical role in conveying symbolic meaning and influencing consumer purchase decisions.

In response to the competitive landscape of China's coffee and new tea beverage markets, Luckin Coffee strategically partners with IPs or brands that align with its product characteristics and cultural aspirations. For example, the cobranding collaboration with Moutai—a partnership that infused Moutai's iconic baijiu into Luckin Coffee's latte—garnered significant consumer attention. The packaging design skillfully integrates symbolic motifs, such as flow lines merged with antler shapes, alongside playful imagery, such as a blushing deer on the back of the cup, to evoke humor and memorability.

Color symbolism also plays a pivotal role in reinforcing the brand narrative. By combining Moutai's traditional red-and-white palette with Luckin Coffee's minimalist design aesthetic, the packaging highlights the synergy between the two brands while preserving their unique identities. Additionally, textual symbols, such as clever slogans and customizable stickers, encourage consumer interaction and facilitate secondary dissemination of the brand message. These design strategies illustrate how semiotics can enhance packaging interactivity and convey brand excellence, paving the way for the future evolution of cobranded product design.

3.4 Cultural Resonance and Narrative Depth in Luckin Coffee's Cobranding

Luckin coffee has also excelled in leveraging nostalgia marketing to deepen its emotional connection with consumers. For instance, its collaboration with the iconic "Tom and Jerry" franchises capitalized on the universal appeal of the cartoon, which resonated across generations. The core values of the IP—joy, warmth, and playfulness—align seamlessly with Luckin Coffee's brand ethos. This partnership resulted in a series of cobranded products, including themed cups, cup sleeves, paper bags such as Figure 2, and even an offline Tom and Jerry-themed café. These designs incorporate recognizable elements from the franchise, evoking nostalgia while injecting creativity and humor into the brand narrative.



Figure 2 Luckin coffee Tom and Jerry Cobranded Peripherals

Beyond classic IP collaborations, Luckin Coffee remains attuned to emerging cultural phenomena and digital trends. A notable example is its partnership with the viral Thai IP Butter Bear. By seizing the opportunity to collaborate on a “3D Butter Bear” design, Luckin Coffee differentiated itself from competitors offering 2D-themed products. The cobranded collection featured innovative packaging, including uniquely designed paper bags, stickers, transparent cards, and bear-shaped badges, as shown in Figure 3. These elements reinforced the persona of the Butter Bear character while blending seamlessly with Luckin Coffee’s brand identity.



Figure 3 Luckin Coffee Butter Bear Cobranded Peripherals

To align the product’s sensory appeal with its symbolic narrative, the collaboration introduced butter-flavoured coffee drinks, such as lattes and Americanos, which were well suited to both the IP’s theme and consumer preferences. By amplifying the Butter Bear IP’s cultural impact, Luckin Coffee successfully expanded its product portfolio while reinforcing its symbolic appeal and creating lasting consumer impressions.

3.5 Symbolic integration in cross-cultural contexts

As of November 2024, Luckin Coffee has engaged in more than 20 cobranding collaborations, consistently integrating cultural symbols to increase its brand identity. While these partnerships introduce new visual elements, they also facilitate deeper cultural dialogue and integration. Through the strategic use of semiotics, brands can reinterpret existing symbols or introduce entirely new symbols, creating novel cultural narratives that resonate with diverse audiences.

For example, in cross-cultural contexts, symbols must be carefully adapted to ensure that they retain relevance while respecting local cultural nuances. Luckin Coffee’s cobranding initiatives emphasize this adaptability by blending universal design principles with culturally specific motifs. By bridging cultural gaps, these designs achieve widespread acceptance and reinforce the brand’s market position. Such symbolic innovation not only enhances brand freshness but also fosters emotional resonance, cultivating greater consumer loyalty and differentiation from competitors. ^[4]

4. Symbolism in Brand Identity Design: Strategic Implications

4.1 *Understanding Core Symbols and Maintaining Brand Consistency*

Effective brand identity design hinges on the strategic integration of symbols that communicate a brand's core values while ensuring consistency across collaborations. Cobranded packaging design exemplifies this process, requiring designers to recompile symbolic systems from multiple brands to create cohesive visual narratives. Achieving a balance between consistency and innovation is critical. While innovation attracts new audiences and diversifies market appeal, it should not undermine the brand's foundational identity.^[5]

Before embarking on cobranding collaborations, brands must identify and preserve their core symbols—such as logos, colors, and slogans—which encapsulate their visual and cultural essence. Designers should ensure that these elements are seamlessly integrated into the collaborative design process. For example, in Luckin Coffee's cobranding projects, stylistic elements of the partnering brands are incorporated into the visual language while ensuring that Luckin Coffee's identity remains prominent. This approach fosters mutual reinforcement rather than the dilution of brand values, enabling both innovation and continuity.

4.2 *Leveraging Icons and Indices for Narrative and Extension*

The fusion of symbolic systems is integral to the success of cross-boundary cobranding. Designers should identify shared symbolic elements to enhance the coherence of the collaboration while emphasizing each brand's distinctive identity. Icons—which visually represent shared attributes—can be incorporated into product design, advertisements, and packaging to intuitively convey the partnership. For example, cobranded logos combining elements from both brands create an immediate visual connection that reinforces their association.

Simultaneously, indices act as bridges that guide consumers to specific products or experiences, whereas symbols express the deeper values underpinning the collaboration. These elements collectively deepen the emotional resonance of cobranded designs, enabling brands to connect with consumers at both the aesthetic and cultural levels.

4.3 *Shaping Co-Branding Narratives and Cultural Connotations through Symbols*

Symbols are vital tools for extending brand identity, as they embed profound cultural values and conceptual frameworks into cobranded designs. By integrating meaningful symbolic systems, cobranded initiatives transcend the mere product level, fostering cultural resonance and emotional connection with consumers.

An effective symbolic system supports multidimensional brand narratives, enriching and diversifying brand positioning. Designers can construct symbolic combinations that integrate text, logos, and dynamic visuals to narrate a cohesive brand story. In cobranded collaborations, these visual narratives often reflect shared principles or philosophies, such as sustainability, innovation, or social responsibility. For example, Luckin Coffee's collaborations emphasize both the individual strengths of its partners and the shared vision between brands. This narrative strategy allows for multilayered storytelling, reinforcing both brand equity and consumer engagement.

Furthermore, this approach helps cobranding partnerships achieve differentiation while increasing the emotional depth of the collaboration. Luckin Coffee's symbolic designs, such as its playful use of Tom and Jerry motifs, resonate emotionally with consumers by tapping into nostalgia and shared cultural memories. Through these strategies, the brand crafts narratives that are not only visually compelling but also culturally meaningful.

4.5 *Adapting Symbolic Systems Across Cultures*

Cross-boundary cobranding often involves bridging cultural differences, necessitating the thoughtful adaptation of symbols to diverse cultural contexts. Designers must ensure that the symbols employed retain their universal appeal while aligning with localized cultural interpretations. This balance allows cobranded products to resonate across markets while preserving the essence of the partnering brands.

Luckin Coffee's approach to symbolic adaptation underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity in design. By incorporating globally recognized symbols alongside regionally tailored elements, the brand ensures that its cobranded products appeal to both domestic and international audiences. For example, its collaboration with Moutai seamlessly blends the traditional Chinese aesthetic of the liquor brand with Luckin's modern, minimalist style, creating a product that bridges traditional and contemporary cultural narratives.

This strategy of symbolic localization not only enhances the market acceptance of cobranded products but also fosters a positive and cohesive brand image. By leveraging semiotic principles, designers can create culturally resonant designs that maximize the impact of cross-boundary collaborations, solidifying the brand's identity in a globalized market.

5. Conclusion

Cross-boundary cobranding offers a compelling avenue for brands to revitalize their identity and foster innovation. By integrating novel symbolic systems and constructing cultural narratives, brands such as Luckin Coffee can remain dynamic and appeal to diverse consumer segments.

The success of cobranding lies in clearly defining the objectives and core values of the collaboration while ensuring that product quality and consumer experience remain central. Visual and symbolic systems play a critical role in this process, enabling brands to craft innovative and engaging experiences.

At the heart of this strategy is the cultural and emotional resonance embedded in symbolic design. By leveraging semiotic frameworks, brands can express their values, evoke emotional connections, and differentiate themselves in competitive markets. Luckin Coffee's extensive cobranding initiatives demonstrate the power of symbols in creating unique brand experiences that balance consistency with creativity. As the global market becomes increasingly interconnected, adopting a symbol-driven design approach will enable brands to navigate cultural complexities, capture consumer loyalty, and establish a lasting impact.

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