



Unmasking Masks! An Analysis of Psychological, Physical, and Virtual Masks as applied to Intellectual Property (IP) Character Design in Branding and Marketing Strategies

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DECLARATION

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the concept of ‘masks’ as a multi-dimensional metaphor comprising psychological, physical, and virtual forms, to explore their enduring cultural relevance and transformative potential in the digital age. Here, "masks" are understood not as literal facial coverings, but as symbolic constructs that mediate identity, representation, and interaction. On a psychological level, the study draws from Carl Jung’s notion of the Persona to examine how masks function as interfaces between the self and social expectations. Physically, it explores how masks serve ceremonial, communicative, and aesthetic roles across cultures. Virtually, the thesis analyzes the evolution of character-based representation in digital environments, exemplified through icons such as Mickey Mouse and Kumamon, to highlight the increasing cultural and commercial impact of IP characters in media and branding, particularly in East Asia.

Positioning IP characters as contemporary "masks," this thesis argues that they not only reflect but also construct symbolic and affective identities in a digital–consumer context. Despite the growing relevance of IP characters in China’s cultural industries, there remains a lack of systematic research beyond isolated design case studies. To address this gap, the thesis proposes and validates a novel method—3MIP (Psychological, Physical, Virtual Masks for Intellectual Property)—that synthesizes mask theory with branding and design methodology. Through design practice and pedagogical experimentation, this research contributes a practical and theoretical framework for guiding the development of brand IP characters. The outcome is intended to support novice designers and students in creating characters that are not only visually coherent but also symbolically and strategically aligned with brand identity.

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Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AR	Augmented Reality
CAD	Computer - Aided Design
CAGR	Compound Annual Growth Rate
CGI	Computer-Generated Imagery
CNKI	China National Knowledge Infrastructure
DCEU	DC Extended Universe
IP	Intellectual Property
NHK	Nippon Hoso Kyokai
MBTI	Myers-Briggs Type Indicator
MCU	Marvel Cinematic Universe
UGC	User-Generated Content
VR	Virtual Reality
2D	2 Dimensional
3D	3 Dimensional
3MIP	psychological Masks, physical Masks, virtual Masks, Intellectual Property

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1 Introduction

Throughout different eras, masks have appeared in various forms in our lives, influencing diverse cultural domains. In the digital age, masks often serve as a means of cultural promotion through traditional forms or are integrated into our daily lives as entertainment figures, such as in masquerade balls and cosplay events. Each era has seen the design of masks with distinct functions and forms. This raises the question: do new forms of masks still exist in the digital age? This question serves as the first research inquiry driving the present study, which seeks answers by exploring psychological, physical, and virtual masks.

A critical turning point in this research is the identification of IP characters as one of the new forms of masks in the digital age. This finding is particularly prominent in the branding domain of marketing, leading to the second research question: how can brand IP characters be designed to align with brand positioning while being compelling and attractive? Before delving into this discussion, it is necessary to clarify the concept of 'IP', as its definition has evolved, especially within the context of China.

1.1 Terminology

IP (Intellectual Property): in recent years, 'IP' has become a popular term in China, encompassing a wide range of fields, particularly gaining prominence in the cultural industry. It includes all original creative content, such as characters, stories, and worldviews (Liu, 2020, Feng, 2018).

Character: a character is any narrative or visual figure designed to convey story, emotion, and symbolic meaning (Tillman, 2012).

IP Character: an IP character is a distinctive figure created within an intellectual property, designed to be recognizable, communicative, and commercially deployable. It often functions as the visual and emotional core of a brand or narrative universe (Liu, 2020, Feng, 2018).

IP Character Design: this is the process of creating and developing characters for IPs such as movies, video games, television shows, and comic books. It is a multidisciplinary process that combines elements of art, narrative, psychology, and branding to create characters that are both visually appealing and emotionally resonant. These characters are vital to the IP they represent,

as they effectively convey brand messages and capture the audience's attention.

Brand IP Character: refers to an IP character specifically applied within the branding domain.

Mascot: mascots are simplified, often anthropomorphized figures used in branding to foster approachability and emotional connection (Wells, 2007).

3MIP (psychological Masks, physical Masks, virtual Masks, Intellectual Property) character design method: this method develops brand identity and resonates with consumers by reflecting brand values, personality, and cultural relevance through the creation of carefully designed IP characters using three dimensions masks: psychological, physical, and virtual.

1.2 Background

Masks, as costume elements and face-concealing devices, have a very rich tradition and heterogeneous development in human history. In primitive tribes, they were worn during hunting, serving as camouflage (Gregor, 2001). The inhabitants of ancient Egypt and Greece would wear masks while performing religious dances, believing that through them, gods or ancestors were speaking to them. During ancient wars, soldiers might wear masks to conceal their identities. Additionally, masks were widely used in ancient theatre and dance performances, representing different characters and emotions. In African tribal cultures, masks play an important role, symbolizing different social statuses, rituals, or representing specific spiritual powers. During the Middle Ages, social events like the Venetian Carnival provided a platform where masked participants could hide their true identities, creating an atmosphere of mystery and intrigue. This allowed participants to escape their daily roles and identities, freely expressing themselves. The forms and functions of masks are diverse, and a comprehensive study of masks will lead us into various disciplines such as art, anthropology, religion, folklore, cultural studies, identity studies, psychology, performing arts, and even architectural and political history (Meaden and Brown, 2023). In various cultural and theatrical performances, whether in traditional rituals or stage portrayals, masks have played a crucial role. However, with societal development, the prevalence of these masks in daily life has changed, leading to a noticeable developmental gap. With technological advancements, the role of masks in theatre has also evolved. For instance, the advent of cameras and television allows actors to convey characters and emotions through facial

expressions, dialogue, and body language, with these nuances effectively captured and presented by the media. Although this shift may have increased communication between actors and audiences, the traditional function of masks has been diminished or replaced. In the digital age, does the weakening of traditional masks imply their disappearance, or do they reappear in a new form? To explore the potential of masks in the new era comprehensively, this study examines masks in three dimensions: psychological, physical, and virtual. Psychological masks delve into the complexity of how individuals display different personalities in various social contexts; physical masks encompass tangible disguises worn for cultural, ritual, or protective purposes, along with the visual forms of physical masks across different eras, while virtual masks manifest in the digital domain. By thoroughly understanding the unique attributes of these masks, this research aims to reveal their transformative potential in the field of brand IP character design. Through a comprehensive exploration, this study integrates the characteristics of these three dimensions of masks and applies them to brand IP character design. The resulting brand IP character design method aims to assist designers, especially novice designers and students, in more accurately and comprehensively positioning and creating IP characters, thereby enhancing brand influence and recognition. This thesis discusses the following aspects:

A. on the psychological mask dimension, the focus is on Carl Jung's concept of the Persona, which represents an individual's compromise with society (Jung, 1966). The function of the Persona is twofold: to provide others with a clear impression while concealing the true nature of the individual (Hudson, 1978). For example, during the Venetian Carnival, people wore masks to hide their daily identities, allowing for freer self-expression. In theatrical performances, the moment an actor dons a mask, they fully embody the character the mask represents, expressing the character's emotions and actions. In IP character design, constructing the identity of a character is also a key element, but it is presented independently to the audience, detached from the mask wearer or performer. Both masks and IP characters can represent different identities, traits, and emotions, helping the audience to better understand and immerse themselves in the character's world. At the same time, IP characters provide a more direct expression of the 'mask' concept, aligning with contemporary characteristics.

B. research on physical masks typically focuses on their uses and functions. On one hand, there is practicality; physical masks are often associated with rituals, ceremonies, and religious

activities, where wearing a mask enables a transformation of roles. On the other hand, there is aesthetic value; many collectors and artists around the world draw inspiration from masks, such as Picasso, whose creations were inspired by African masks. In theatrical performances, masks are used to represent different characters in the play, helping the audience to quickly identify roles and convey information. In modern theatre, masks are still used in performances, serving both practical and aesthetic purposes. Additionally, scholars' studies on physical masks extend beyond the masks themselves to include the culture behind them, related props (such as costumes, headgear, jewelry, handheld items, etc.), and the behavior of the people involved in activities. Each of these elements can be studied individually. However, in this thesis, the section on physical masks primarily explores how they achieve emotional resonance and cultural transmission through visual design elements. This involves a visual analysis of physical masks from aspects such as shape, color, and pattern, to explore their design principles and artistic value.



Figure 1 Character design of Running man

C. thoughts on virtual masks explore the forms of masks in the digital age. It starts with digital identity, considering how to establish identity in the virtual world and how to connect virtual spaces with digital characters. By considering the special abilities, environments, or interactive elements within the virtual world, merchandises of characters can be created to enhance the storytelling of online characters, thereby increasing the possibilities for audience interaction. This is also an important way to enrich brand touchpoints. For example, LINE Friends are a set of original characters created by LINE Corporation, appearing in various products, animations, and promotional materials. These characters were initially developed as stickers for the LINE messaging app. Furthermore, the company created seven different IP characters (Figure 1) based on the variety show *Running Man*, each character modeled after a real-life celebrity from the show. Due to the widespread popularity of the show, these animated characters became

globally popular. Moreover, they developed a mobile game based on these characters.

In exploring the three dimensions of masks, this research considers which is the representation of masks in the digital age—brands or IP characters. In the branding domain, there is the concept of brand personification, such as the 12 brand archetypes, which is an extension of Jung's archetype theory applied to branding and marketing. This approach focuses on positioning brands in the market by associating them with specific personality traits and archetypes, establishing a brand image in consumers' minds. Ultimately, however, IP characters are confirmed as one of the manifestations of masks in the digital age because they better embody the characteristics and functions of masks on psychological, physical, and virtual levels.

First, the identity features of masks are introduced as something very special and different in the frames of popular IP characters. Many of the given examples have complex pre-histories and multilevel personalities; this allows them to wear different masks depending on the situation. The multilevel psychic structure is directly related to the conceptual approach of a psychological mask, which successfully reveals the hidden motivational incentives and intra-psychic processes of a character. Brand design primarily emphasizes a singular and unified representation of the brand, thereby limiting the opportunities for more intricate explorations of identity.

Secondly, physical masks serve as important historical artifacts that embody elements of cultural semiotics and visual performativity. IP characters have the capability to deliberately combine various cultural frameworks and visual styles to create complex representational identities. These methodological strategies not only enhance the aesthetic complexity of character design but also promote cross-cultural interaction and resonance with global audiences. In contrast, conventional brand design primarily emphasizes visual consistency, frequently neglecting the exploration of intricate cultural narratives.

Besides, interactivity and experience especially feature in the virtual mask of IP character design. These characters successfully engage audiences through a variety of platforms—from interactive gaming environments to animated storytelling and social media ecosystems—creating multi-dimensional experiential interactions, and therefore much more dynamic and affective character representation, which binds audience-character relational dynamics much stronger. In sharp opposition, conventional frameworks of brand design primarily employ digital platforms as vital

conduits for marketing communication, which inherently limits the richness and intricacy of audience interaction.

Another key feature of IP characters is their emotional resonance. Audiences develop strong emotional connections with these characters, drawn in by their rich narratives and multi-layered emotions. This richness of emotional expression here is reminiscent of the traditional role of the mask, that conveyed a range of character attributes. IP characters powerfully influence an audience through entertaining stories and emotional journeys. On the other hand, brand design focuses on the features of the products and the spirit of the brand; emotional expression here is often subtle and implicit.

Finally, IP character design allows more innovation and flexibility toward the times, and adaptation to market and audience needs. Masked characteristics support such innovation, enabling these characters to capture audiences in new ways. In contrast, brand design cannot afford to deviate from a pre-set brand image; therefore, there is little room for innovation with lesser chance for much visual and emotional change.

In all, IP characters can play to the full potential of masks on psychological, physical, and virtual levels and are multidimensional in nature. On the other hand, brand design is further bound by consistency and stability, making it more fitting to communicate a unified message for the brand rather than complete identity and emotional self-expression. As such, digital IP characters become more fitting symbolization of masks in the context of the information age, specifically as outward 'masks' in the Asian digital age.

In recent years, the significance of IP characters has become increasingly prominent in Asia, particularly in China, Japan and South Korea, profoundly influencing the entertainment industry, cultural media, and marketing.

The widespread use of IP characters in Asia can be exemplified by the famous character *Kumamon* (Figure 2) from Kumamoto Prefecture in Japan. According to the Nikkei Asian Review, in 2016, revenue from Kumamoto Prefecture-related products reached 128 billion yen, approximately £700 million, representing a 27% increase from the previous year. This revenue mainly came from agricultural products such as tomatoes and meat, which accounted for more

than 50% of the total income. The rest came from processed foods like pickles and sweets, as well as miscellaneous goods such as badges and stationery. Overseas exports contributed 1.7 billion yen, about £9 million, turning Kumamoto from a little-known rural town into one of Japan's most popular tourist destinations.



Figure 2 Kumamon



Figure 3 Kakao Friends

In South Korea, the application of IP characters is extensive, with *Kakao Friends* (Figure 3) being one of the most beloved characters. According to available data, in 2018, Kakao Friends generated nearly 600 million RMB in total sales, creating over 6,500 different emoticons, with a monthly distribution volume reaching 2.2 billion. In China, many well-known domestic brands use IP characters as their primary image in advertising, media, and merchandise. For example, Taobao, China's largest e-commerce platform, introduced the *Taobao Dolls* IP image (Figure 4) to foster emotional connections with its users.



Figure 4 Taobao Dolls

IP characters have not only showcased successful collaborations with regions or brands but have also sparked the blind box craze in China. A 'blind box' is a product packaging concept where buyers are unaware of the specific item they have purchased until they open the box. POP Mart, China's largest blind box retailer, reported a revenue of 4.49 billion RMB (approximately £500

million) for 2021, a 78.7% year-on-year increase. One of their most beloved IP characters is *Molly*.

The rapid increase in the use of IP characters in the commercial and cultural sectors in China has been accompanied by strong governmental support and promotion of cultural creative products. IP characters have become one of the most frequently used methods of cultural expression.

While the concept of IP characters has yet to reach a broad consensus globally, related concepts such as animated characters and mascots have gained widespread acceptance. With the development of comics and animation, influential cartoon characters arose in Western countries, with Disney's Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck being the most notable; these are iconic figures. Mickey Mouse has become an enduring icon of the Disney trademark.



Figure 5 Characters from 'MCU' and 'DC'



Figure 6 The last of Us



Figure 7 Red Dead Redemption II

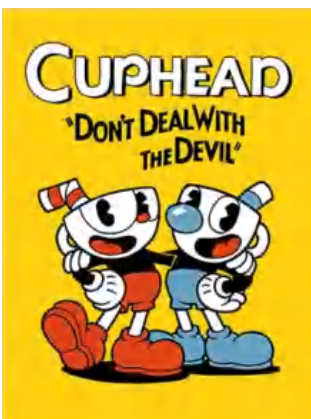


Figure 8 Cuphead



Figure 9 Inside Out

Also, in the domains of video and animated film, there have been significant IP characters. Examples include the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (MCU) and *DC Extended Universe* (DCEU) (Figure 5), as well as videogames that aim for a realistic character style, like *The Last of Us* (Figure 6) and *Red Dead Redemption II* (Figure 7). In addition, there are videogames and

animated movies with very distinct art styles, like *Cuphead* (Figure 8) and *Inside Out* (Figure 9). Each of the characters in these stories can all be understood as IP characters, highlighting their importance and their diversity in modern entertainment industries.

Compared to the IP characters that can be applied in many fields, such as film, animation, and games, this study will focus on the branding area in which IP characters are able to increase brand value. By creating a character, a brand can create a stronger emotional bond with consumers, thus increasing brand recognition and loyalty. Furthermore, with the escalation of market competition, brands are placing greater emphasis on differentiation through distinctive IP characters. These characters serve as essential vehicles for brand culture and narrative, providing a significant marketing benefit. Consequently, comprehensive research in the field of branding possesses considerable practical significance.

This research is situated within the distinct cultural and commercial context of the Chinese branding and consumer market, which has witnessed a rapid proliferation of domestically developed intellectual property (IP) characters over the past decade. The convergence of traditional cultural symbolism with an increasingly digitized consumer environment provides fertile ground for investigating how character design can function not merely as an aesthetic expression, but as a strategic asset within contemporary branding practice.

In contrast to global markets—where established characters such as those of Disney or Sanrio dominate—the Chinese IP landscape is characterized by its dynamism and fragmentation. New IP characters are frequently developed in close interaction with social media platforms, short video content, and integrated e-commerce ecosystems. Digital platforms such as Bilibili, Xiaohongshu, and Tmall serve not only as dissemination channels, but also as engines for participatory content generation and brand co-creation. Given the immense potential of IP characters in China’s cultural and economic spheres, academic inquiry into localized design methodologies is both timely and highly relevant.

This study therefore focuses on developing an IP character design framework specifically tailored to the Chinese market. By analyzing the structural and symbolic functions of psychological, physical, and virtual masks, the research proposes the 3MIP method as a comprehensive model for aligning character design with brand identity. The framework aims to support novice designers

and students in constructing IP characters that are not only culturally resonant but also strategically aligned with the brand's communicative goals.

Structure of Thesis

Following this introduction (Section 1), the thesis is divided into four main sections. The literature review (Section 2), which thoroughly explores the various characteristics of masks from three dimensions: psychological masks, physical masks, and virtual masks. It also analyzes IP characters as a modern form of masks in the digital age, covering their definition, style, design methods, and status in China. Section 3 is the research methodology, which outlines the overall research approach, identifies the methods employed in this study, and explains the rationale behind the selection of these methods. Section 4 focuses on practical application, where the insights gained from theoretical exploration are used to develop a design method. This method is then applied to actual design processes to validate its effectiveness. Additionally, a feedback plan is designed for students in design programs to further verify the method. The final section (Section 5) presents the conclusion of the thesis.

2 Literature review

In this Section, the research on masks is divided into the three directions indicated in the Introduction: psychological masks, physical masks, and virtual masks. The rationale behind analyzing masks across these three dimensions is to comprehensively explore how masks function psychologically, visually, and digitally in contemporary contexts. Integrating insights from these dimensions reveals the evolving forms that masks assume in the digital age and demonstrates how these dimensions can be combined to develop an innovative approach to enhancing IP Character Design.

2.1 Psychological masks

The concept of the psychological mask is relatively abstract. Still, many psychologists use figurative words to reflect the concept, like 'mask', and 'face', which means a surface of our face like an additional layer of wrapping around the inner, as in Figure 10. Depending on the form of

the surface, it can be divided into inner and outer to explore, and then according to different concepts to define the psychological mask.



Figure 10 Masking

The concept of psychological masks permeates various psychological schools of thought. By exploring how these schools understand psychological masks, this study aims to define the concept more precisely. In Carl Jung's analytical psychology, the persona is defined as the mask or role that individuals develop to adapt to society. Jung posits that individuals create a persona to conceal their true selves while meeting the demands of the external world (Jung, 1966). Although Sigmund Freud did not directly introduce the concept of psychological masks in his psychoanalytic theory, he emphasized the relationship between the conscious and unconscious mind, and the role of defense mechanisms in managing internal conflicts (Hudson, 1978). These ideas indirectly contribute to our understanding of psychological masks.

In social psychology, the theory of self-presentation studies the ways in which individuals present themselves in social interaction to achieve certain social results. Such behavior can be understood as a form of psychological disguise (Myers and Twenge, 2022). Also, such concepts as 'ego identity' and 'false self' have some similarities with the notion of persona. The above-named theories give more understanding of psychological masks and how the balance between social norm and personality is maintained. In giving better understanding, these theoretical perspectives give clearer insight in studying the behaviors and psychological dynamics of people in social settings. The section which proceeds will discuss in detail Jung's concept of the persona amongst other theories.

2.1.1 Jung's concept of *Persona*

The idea of Persona was first put forward at the beginning of the 20th century by Jung, developing over time as part of a major strand in psychological studies. For Jung, the 'Persona' was presented with the idea of a mask or social role, which came to represent the compromises one

makes to appear in social life and, therefore functioned as part of a mediator between one's private identity and the burden of social expectations (Jung, 1966). Persona is a complex system of relationships between individual consciousness and society, a mask invented to 'impress and conceal' and meet social needs (Jung et al., 1966, Fawkes, 2015). Persona serves to give a clear impression to others on the one hand, and on the other hand, to hide the individual's true colors (Hudson, 1978). Social interactions, on the other hand, often require individuals to play a variety of roles in different situations, which inevitably require different psychological masks (Persona). These masks help individuals to maintain social harmony, but at the same time may lead to a loss of an individual's inner truth. And how does Persona arise? Jung classified human mental activity into conscious, personal unconscious and collective unconscious (Figure 11).

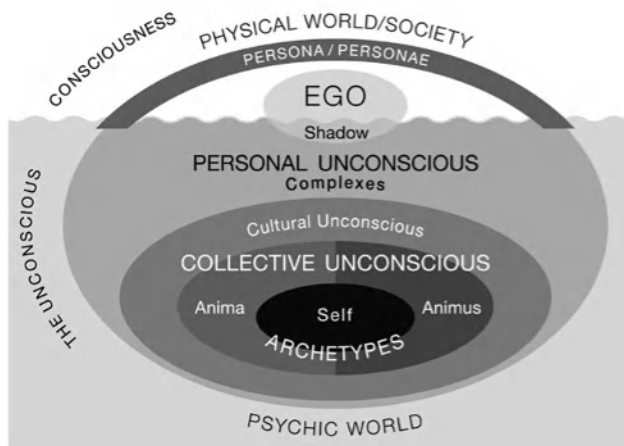


Figure 11 Carl Jung's Collective Unconscious

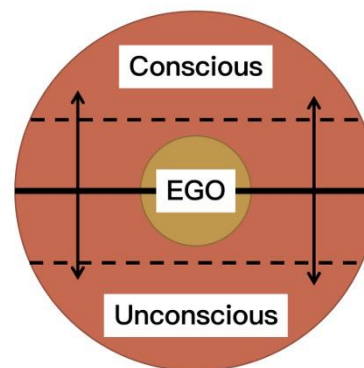


Figure 12 Process of conscious and unconscious

Jung's concepts of 'consciousness' and 'unconsciousness' refer not only to our inner world but also to the processes of inner or psychological change, which include both conscious and unconscious processes. Jung believed that the inner world is merely a 'complex of functions confined within certain limits' (Jacobi, 1946), which can also be understood as the inner persona. In contrast, the psyche is closer to all the elements and processes depicted in Figure 12, consisting of both the conscious and unconscious, which are both opposing and complementary. Our ego is also integrated into this process. The degree of differentiation or over-differentiation of consciousness can significantly influence the persona (Jacobi, 1946).

The unconscious is divided into the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious consists of individual experiences, distinct from the collective unconscious, which is shared among individuals. The collective unconscious is the sum of the psychological

activities of family, race, and even all of humanity, essentially representing the human condition. It is a latent spiritual dimension common to all people, composed of various archetypes, primarily including the 'Self', 'Anima/Animus', 'Persona', and 'Shadow' (Figure 13). The 'Shadow' corresponds to the animalistic aspects of humans, while the 'Persona' relates to the social aspects of humans (Huang, 2016). When the ego is drawn to perspectives 'endorsed' by the public, unconscious activities begin to compensate. The personal unconscious is structured around archetypal images, whose templates reside within the collective unconscious (Fawkes, 2015).



Figure 13 The Four Major Jungian Archetypes

In addition to the primary archetypes (Figure 13), there are other important archetypes in Jungian psychology, including the 'wise old man/woman' representing wisdom and cognition; the 'hero' symbolizing courage and the spirit of adventure; the 'hero' embodying the primal forces of nurturing, caring, protection and procreation; the 'mother'; and the 'father' representing authority, protection and guidance. Jung's concept of archetypes is a study of basic symbols and themes that are pervasive in the unconscious, reflecting patterns or symbols inherent in the human psyche. These archetypes are the basic structures in the collective unconscious that influence an individual's perception of and interaction with the world.

As illustrated in Figure 14, a person engages with the external world through a psychological relational system. This system functions like an 'envelope', encasing the self and creating a separation from the outside world. This 'envelope' represents the 'role', which exerts nearly complete control over the self. The primary function, thinking, as the dominant function, almost entirely governs the 'role', while the two auxiliary functions, intuition and sensation, have a lesser impact, and the fourth function, emotion, exerts minimal influence (Jacobi, 1946). Thus, the existence of the Persona is primarily a result of rational thought, followed by the individual's interpretation of the external world.

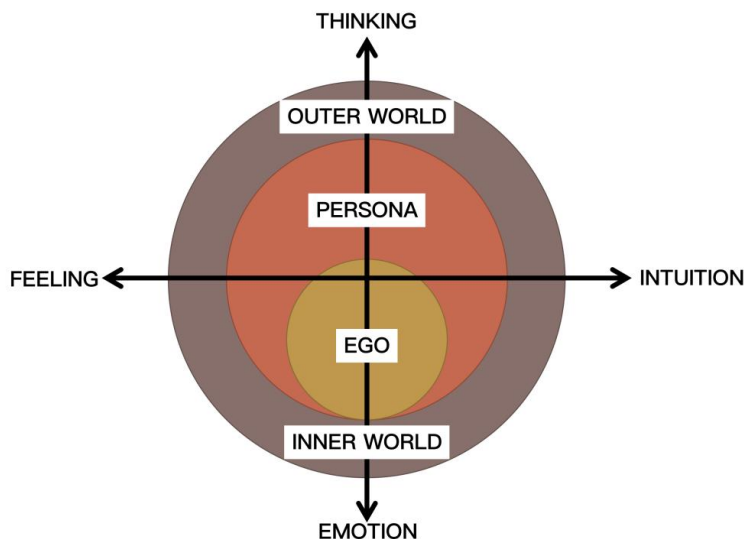


Figure 14 Ego and Persona four types of function

The Persona is described as a functional complex beneath which lies the true self. Jung defined the Persona as a mask designed to leave a distinct impression on others, suggesting that as individuals envelop themselves in specific personality masks, they employ an adaptive system for coping with and interacting with the world (Burton, 2017). The Persona, therefore, represents a compromise between the individual and society (Fawkes, 2015). It also reflects the aspect of a person that emerges as they adapt to their external environment, including social, cultural, educational, and natural contexts; this aspect is dynamic and capable of growth. Due to the role's function of concealing the 'true self', it is often compared to a mask—a social role that mediates between an individual's inner world and the external social world (Hudson, 1978). The use of the term 'mask' symbolically conveys the meaning of 'role', though it does not strictly refer to a literal mask worn on the face. The 'Persona' encompasses not only psychological traits but also all of our mannerisms and gestures, such as the way we move, the subtle furrowing of our brows, and our hairstyle and clothing, all of which fall under the domain of the Persona (Jacobi, 1946). Therefore, from a visual perspective, a more accurate term for understanding 'Persona' would be 'role', which Jung believed exists to facilitate an individual's adaptation to their broader social environment (Jung, 1971, Jacobi, 1946). By adapting to these expectations, roles function as mechanisms through which individuals conform to their social reality, rather than revealing the 'true' essence of the self (Hudson, 1978). For instance, the way you behave at home may differ significantly from how you behave in formal settings, or the way you interact with a close friend may vary from how you interact with your boss. It is as if we wear the Persona, assuming different roles in various contexts.

We are constantly wearing masks, and the Persona is an ongoing activity. Its function is not only to conceal an individual's conscious thoughts and emotions but also to display the external aspect of the Persona through adaptation to the environment. In this context, the Persona possesses a relatively high degree of autonomy and is not entirely under the control of the self.

For role-playing to be truly effective, three factors must be considered:

- a. The ideal self-image each person holds, as well as the ideal behavior they aspire to exhibit in their interactions with the world.
- b. The image designed by various environments for individuals who align with their tastes and ideals.
- c. The psychological and physiological limitations that constrain the realization of both the ideal self and the ideal expectations of the external environment.

If one or two of these factors are overlooked, the Persona's effectiveness is compromised. Instead of facilitating personality development, it may become an obstacle. For instance, when someone assumes the role of 'father' or 'mother' in relation to their child, they must reflect the societal expectations and demands associated with that mask while also shaping the mask according to their own beliefs. The role must simultaneously embody societal expectations and the individual's conceptualization of the mask. After adopting this mask, it must be maintained and refined in response to psychological and physiological changes, finding a balance in the process. If a person's role is entirely shaped by traits collectively endorsed by society, they may end up presenting a generalized identity. This suggests a greater focus on conforming to social norms and meeting others' expectations, potentially at the expense of personal uniqueness. In such a scenario, the individual might feel that they have lost some authenticity, as their behavior and characteristics are primarily molded to fit societal standards. On the other hand, if a person focuses solely on their ideal self-image, disregarding external expectations or social norms, they may appear isolated, discordant, or even nonconformist. In this case, the individual might prioritize self-expression and independence but could risk losing some social connections and support (Jacobi, 1946).

In today's diverse society, a person needs to have enough masks to better adapt to their environment. From the perspective of personality theory, the personality is composed of multiple personas, each of which manifests in specific situations. The diversity and flexibility of these personas are emphasized, allowing individuals to better adapt to different environments and circumstances. The personality is a composite of the various 'roles' (Personas) a person possesses, where each 'role' represents an aspect or 'part' of the personality, also referred to as sub-personalities or secondary personalities (Huang, 2016). The Persona can be viewed as one aspect of the personality or a cross-section of the personality at a particular point in time, representing the psychological expression of an individual in a specific moment. Each Persona is believed to have particularly unique characteristics, including needs, motivations, and interests. More specifically, each role has its own name, personality, age, character, hobbies, mannerisms, dressing habits, and physical traits. These roles play different parts in a person's life, reflecting the individual's multifaceted nature and adaptability. The multiplicity of roles contributes to the richness and complexity of the overall personality. In different social contexts, individuals may exhibit different roles to meet the expectations and demands of their surroundings. Understanding and recognizing this diversity helps individuals better understand themselves and interact with society more flexibly.

In the exploration of psychological masks, people often refer to the concept of the 'false mask', perceiving it as a sign of inauthenticity. However, Persona itself is not a matter of true or false; rather, it differs in terms of being public, private, or solitary (Huang, 2016). The formation of personality is a result of interactions between individuals and their external environment—without this environment, certain personalities and groups would be incompatible. Consequently, the self's needs may be repressed, which forms the shadow, the part of the unconscious where aspects of the self are either accepted or suppressed. The emergence of personality stereotypes reflects the conflicting relationship between the Persona and the shadow. When individuals adopt a mask to conform to societal expectations, their true personality may be suppressed. For example, to make a good impression during an interview, a person may feel compelled to present a positive front. When the Persona is a forced compromise in the face of external social pressures, and particularly when it contrasts with the individual's primary mask, people may subconsciously label it as a 'false mask'.

Moreover, human self-protection mechanisms are consciously activated when exposed to others, especially in unfamiliar or group settings. When someone accuses you of 'wearing a mask', your instinct is to protect the hidden aspects of yourself. The stereotype of the mask also stems from a person's intuition. In today's society, which promotes individualism and the pursuit of uniqueness, particularly among the younger generation, there is a strong emphasis on 'being oneself' in social interactions. This inherent psychological trait makes it difficult for people to fully accept the concept of the Persona. However, the Persona is a product of interpersonal interactions, and we cannot deny its existence or the reality of psychological masks.

Based on the research discussed above, the Persona can be broadly categorized into four key characteristics: sociality, concealment and protection, presentation, and versatility and flexibility.

A. Sociality

The Persona represents a compromise between the individual and society (Broady, 2015, Jung, 1966). This compromise reflects the existential conflict between the true self and the social or external expectations of how a person should present themselves. The Persona functions both as a mask to present an image of oneself to the public and as a means to display aspects of the true self. When a person dons a mask, it is akin to role-playing, where the inner self is adjusted to align with the external social world, forming a new social role (Hudson, 1978). This is why Jung argued that the Persona is shaped by society (Broady, 2015, Jung, 1966).

B. Concealment and protection

At this stage, the mask is worn to hide the true self, leaving a strong impression on others while also protecting the individual from the emotional intimacy or vulnerability that might arise from fully revealing oneself (Hudson, 1978). This allows individuals to present themselves in a manner they find safe and ideal, facilitating better social acceptance (Broady, 2015, Jung et al., 2014)

C. Presentation

When individuals wear masks that align with societal expectations of the self, a natural exchange of information occurs between the wearer and the observer. The wearer develops a sense of self-expectation and recognition from others.

C. Versatility and flexibility

The Persona or mask is dynamic, evolving as individuals construct different masks based on their accumulated social experiences (e.g., within family, work, and various social settings). The creation of these masks depends on how individuals perceive their identity in different social interactions. This can be seen as a compromise between the true self and the varying environments, developing into specific roles and behavioral patterns through interactions and adaptation with the social world (Hudson, 1978).

Jung's theory of the Persona gives a lot of insight into how personal psychology interacts with the functions in society. Through revealing the adaptative mechanisms people use when navigating themselves versus societal expectation, a solid framework through which psychological facades are examined is developed. These insights easily lend themselves to the research of the concretization of these ideals in different practices: arts, design, and social behavior.

Application of Persona

Jung's idea of the 'Persona' has been greatly influential across a wide range of disciplines, from psychology and literature to art and marketing. One example is the journal *Persona Studies*, established by Deakin University, an open-access scholarly publication devoted to the exploration of the creation of public identities. The concept of the 'Persona' has been expanded and redefined in various fields and contexts in an attempt to offer new perspectives. Up until now, the journal has published a great deal of scholarly articles and creative works which engage with the idea of 'Persona' within fields such as online culture, professional practices, political culture, celebrity culture, film, television, popular music, gaming, leisure culture, and everyday life.

Overarching research apart, one of the most frequent uses of Jung's idea of the Persona can be found in the area of literature, used to interpret the way in which characters in literature reveal diversified aspects of the human condition through the presentation of multiple facades.

In the design field, the '12 Brand Archetypes' (Figure 15) design method incorporates Jung's archetype concept into brand design to assist with brand positioning. This theory focuses on positioning brands in the market by associating them with specific personality traits and

archetypes, thereby shaping the brand image in consumers’ minds. The method identifies 12 different archetypes, each representing a distinct brand personality. These archetypes help in brand identification, establish connections with the audience, and communicate the core values of the brand. The Creator archetype, for example, is the brand’s innovative and artistic core, much like the feeling that Apple is able to evoke in its customers. Archetypes like these function as tools in which brands can identify roles that connect to their identity and desired market, informing and improving their brand identity and storytelling. Brands can choose one or many archetypes, then fold the associated brand personalities into their marketing strategies to better connect with their audiences.

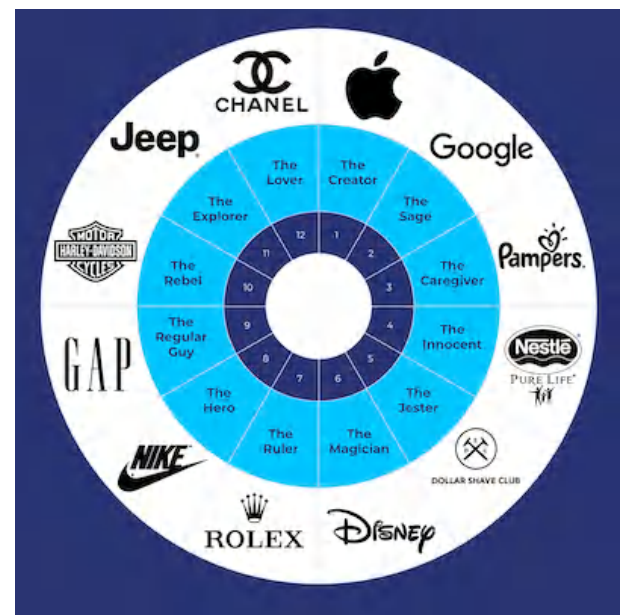


Figure 15 12 Brand Archetypes

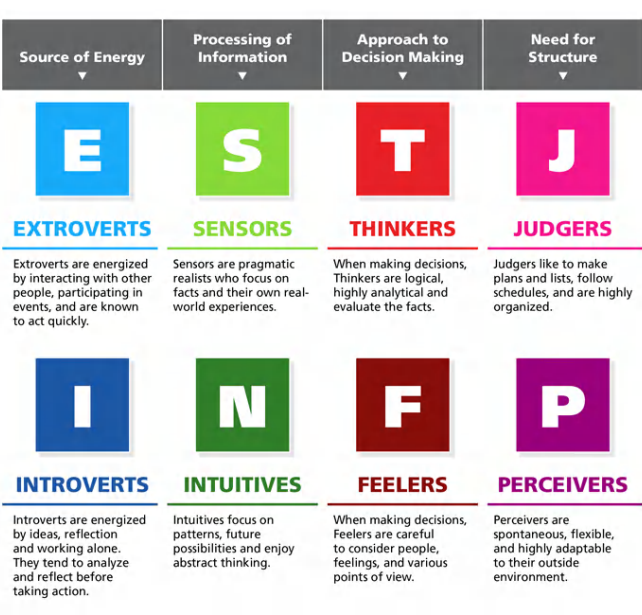


Figure 16 16-Type Model of Personality

Beyond the development of a brand’s personality and values through advertising, these same features help create emotional bonds with the audience, producing resonance and experience. Other psychological theories extrapolated from Jungian theory have also been used here. One example, in the field of psychological testing, has been the adaptation of Jung’s theory of personality type into the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (see Figure 16). The MBTI psychological classification is based on four clear dimensions: Introversion (I) versus Extraversion (E), Sensing (S) versus Intuition (N), Thinking (T) versus Feeling (F), and Judging (J) versus Perceiving (P). Based on preferences exhibited in these four dimensions, the MBTI defines a total of 16 different personality types. For example, a person can be typed as ISTJ—Introverted, Sensing, Thinking, Judging, which describes a tendency to be isolated, practical in details, logical

in reasoning, and systematic and structured in accomplishing tasks. The MBI is an instrument used much in personal development, team building, and recruitment to enable people to understand their preferences better and the differences between themselves and others. This is the tool used to enable a person to have much more self-awareness and improve his interaction with other people in any given setting, either professionally or personally.

The above examples demonstrate the relevance of Jung's psychological theories in understanding human behavior, shaping character development, and making connections between people and society at large, including its use in branding. Jung's psychological theories are, therefore, still widely used.

2.1.2 Other concepts

This section makes a comparative analysis of five other concepts that bear resemblance to the idea of 'Persona'. This is so that such findings can be synthesized into a broad definition of psychological masks relevant to this thesis.

A. Freud's Defense mechanism

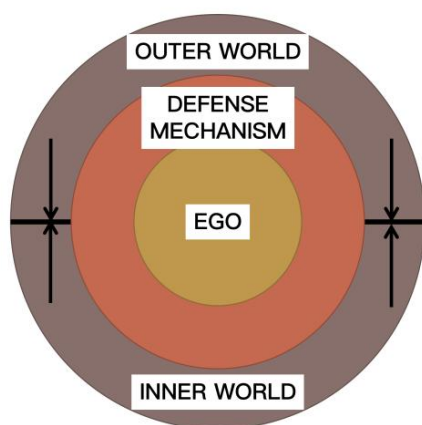


Figure 17 Defense mechanism inspire from Ego and Persona (own design)

Adapting to complex social environments can generate negative emotions, and when these emotions are not effectively managed, defense mechanisms may arise. This may lead to a complete compromise with societal demands in order to satisfy external requirements (Cramer and Porcerelli, 2016). The existence of unconscious processes is a necessary condition for the development of defense mechanisms (Cramer, 2000). The composition of unconscious content in Jungian psychology is quite similar, encompassing a variety of forgotten and repressed

experiences, as well as subliminal cognitions, thoughts, and emotions(Jacobi, 1946). The primary function of defense mechanisms is to protect the individual from excessive anxiety or other negative emotions(Cramer, 2008). While Jung’s concept of the ‘Persona’ emphasizes the compromise between the self and the external world, defense mechanisms focus more on shielding the individual from negative internal content. Therefore, as illustrated in Figure 9 and highlighted in Figure 17, the conflict between the inner and outer worlds fully encases the defense mechanisms.

B. Erikson’s Ego identity

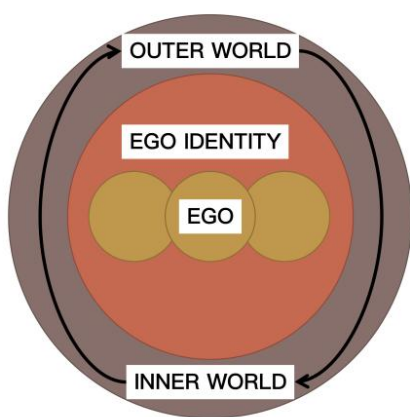


Figure 18 Ego identity inspire from Ego and Persona (own design)

Self-identity refers to a strong sense of self-awareness, where individuals experience a continuous and cohesive sense of who they are, and act based on this understanding. This identity can be influenced by sudden changes in situational factors that protect the individual(Levesque, 2011). The formation of self-identity places greater emphasis on time, as individuals at different stages of life develop their identities through the influence of external (societal) factors. This process also involves interpreting situations and forming an individual’s identity state(Kroger, 2000). Therefore, designing based on an understanding of self-identity, in conjunction with the self and Persona model (Figure 18), places a stronger emphasis on the instability caused by the external environment and the self.

C. Donald Winnicott’s False self

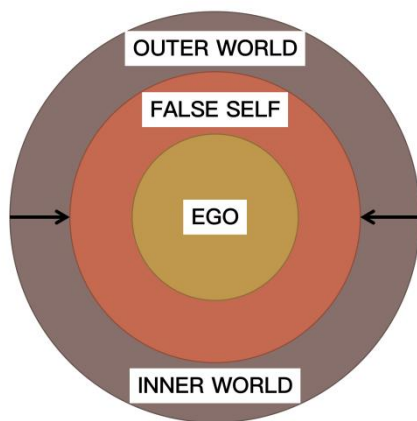


Figure 19 False self-inspire from Ego and Persona (own design)

Donald Winnicott's concept of the 'False Self' refers to a defensive facade that develops when a person's true self is not sufficiently nurtured in early interpersonal relationships, particularly with primary caregivers. The 'False Self' emerges as a protective mechanism, conforming to external expectations at the expense of suppressing the spontaneous emotions and desires of the 'True Self'. Winnicott posits that while this compliant facade may help mitigate early environmental failures, it can lead to feelings of emptiness and a lack of personal fulfillment in adulthood.

Winnicott describes the 'False Self' as follows: 'The False Self comes into being when the mother (or mother substitute) fails to adapt to the infant's omnipotence and fails to meet the infant's gestures, leading to a defensive response to the environmental impingement' (Winnicott, 1965). A similar concept to the Persona in psychoanalysis is the False Self. Jung suggests that the False Self can be defined as the Persona, which is the overall impression individuals create through their experiences of how the world impacts them and how they, in turn, impact the world (Jung, 1971). Therefore, Figure 19 emphasizes the influence of the external world on the self.

D. Erving Goffmann's Face

Erving Goffman's concept of 'face' is primarily discussed in his 1967 book *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, which emphasizes the process by which individuals maintain and manage their social image in interactions. 'Maintaining face' involves managing others' impressions to sustain harmonious social relationships (Goffman, 2005). Goffman's notion of 'face' closely aligns with Jung's concept of the Persona, as both pertain to the individual's public self-image and serve as crucial factors in identity construction (Ihlen et al., 2009, Fawkes, 2015).

E. Social Psychology's Self-presentation



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Figure 20 Self-presentation

Self-presentation refers to the desire to project a positive image to both external audiences (others) and internal audiences (ourselves)(Myers and Twenge, 2022). We strive to shape our image, often engaging in strategies such as excuse-making, justifications, and apologies to enhance self-esteem and validate our self-image (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). For many people, conscious self-expression may be a way of life. They continually adjust their behavior, paying close attention to their social conduct, as if they are being filmed by a camera at all times.

The five concepts discussed above share similarities with Jung's concept of the Persona, but each focus on different aspects. Below is a comparative summary of these six concepts:

Table 1 Comparative summary of six concepts

Conceptual	Emphasis	Formative	Role
Persona			Express social roles and the collective unconscious
Defense mechanism	Self-protection and resolving inner conflicts	Subconscious defense against external demands	Keep psychological balance and fight lethargy
Ego identity	Identity formation influenced by time	Response to sudden changes due to childhood and adolescence	Develop personal identity

False self			Hide true feelings and
Face	Manage impressions in social interaction	Interact with society through specific behaviors	Keep social harmony
Self-presentation	Show outer image	Influence others' impressions in various ways	Shape others' views and adapt socially

These six concepts collectively contribute to the exploration of the complexities of individual psychology and social interaction. Jung's concept of the 'Persona' underscores the intrinsic connection between the individual and their social roles, while Freud's 'Defense Mechanisms' reveal the processes that alleviate internal conflicts. 'Self-Identity' emphasizes the stability of personal identity, whereas the 'False Self' highlights the conflict between societal expectations and the true self. Goffman's concept of 'Face' focuses on the management of social impressions, which closely parallels 'Self-Presentation', offering a perspective on how individuals use external images to present themselves.

2.1.3 Psychological masks in IP character identity construction

Building on the preceding sections' exploration of the psychological dimensions of masks, this discussion synthesizes multiple perspectives and positions Jung's concept of the persona as the theoretical foundation for understanding psychological masks in brand character design. In the context of IP-based branding, the persona offers a compelling metaphor for how characters function as socially adaptive projections of brand identity.

Although Jung's concept provides the symbolic foundation of the psychological mask, this study further integrates insights from contemporary fields such as media performance, identity construction, and brand anthropomorphism to broaden the analytical framework. While Jung's framework provides a symbolic baseline, contemporary research has significantly expanded our

understanding of how emotional attributes embedded in character design influence consumer perception. Studies in consumer psychology suggest that anthropomorphic brand figures—those designed with human-like traits such as facial expression, tone of voice, or posture—can evoke trust, warmth, and perceived social closeness. These characters are not seen merely as conveyors of brand messages, but as emotionally resonant actors capable of forming quasi-social relationships with consumers (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007).

The power of this emotional resonance becomes particularly evident when the IP character's traits align closely with the brand's intended personality. For instance, IP characters like "Mr. Clean" foster deeper and longer-lasting consumer–brand relationships when their perceived personality is congruent with consumer expectations (Wan and Aggarwal, 2015). This insight strengthens the rationale behind the psychological mask dimension in the 3MIP framework, which emphasizes encoding emotional cues into character design to facilitate user identification and symbolic interpretation.

The psychological mask operates not only as a metaphorical projection of brand identity but also as a strategic mechanism for cultivating emotional authenticity and resonance. In a media-saturated and cross-platform branding landscape, the ability to design emotionally intelligent IP characters is becoming increasingly essential to effective brand communication.

IP character in psychological masks thus addresses the importance of encoding emotional cues into character design to foster user identification and symbolic resonance.

Building on this theoretical base, the notion of psychological masks can be understood through four key dimensions that reflect both classical theory and contemporary application:

- A. Comprehensive identity presentation: this involves integrating an individual's internal characteristics, external social roles, and cultural codes to form a coherent, multidimensional identity. It mirrors the balance between inward authenticity and outward impression central to Jung's persona.
- B. Stability and development of identity: derived from the concept of ego identity, this dimension ensures that characters not only reflect consistent personality traits but also accommodate

development, diversity, and long-term narrative evolution.

- C. Adaptability in social interactions: this aspect addresses impression management across various social contexts, highlighting how psychological masks shift to suit role expectations and situational demands—an especially relevant concept in brand storytelling and audience segmentation.
- D. Digital identity construction: within digital platforms, self-presentation becomes performative and adaptive. The psychological mask extends to digital personas, where IP characters must manage consistency and flexibility in real-time social environments.

These four aspects reinforce the idea that the psychological mask is not a static layer but a dynamic interface. It evolves across media, adjusts across social domains, and synthesizes emotional, symbolic, and contextual meaning. The mask thus operates as both a theoretical metaphor and a practical strategy for character development, particularly within brand IP systems that require coherence across emotional, cultural, and digital dimensions.

2.2 Physical masks

From mask-related terminology:

- a. Mask: in English dictionary, the term emphasizes the concept of hiding.
- b. Unmasking: this term describes the exposure of secret agents or individuals with ulterior motives (Pollock, 1995).
- c. Wearing a mask, masquerade: wearing a mask or a masquerade costume signifies disguise and can even imply deception and falsehood (Mack, 2013).
- d. Lifeless associations: the term 'mask' often carries associations with lifelessness (Pollock, 1995), which contrasts sharply with the vibrant and essential life force embodied in the roles played by the Makishi masks from Central Africa (Figure 21) (Jordán and Fowler Museum at, 2006).



Figure 21 Makishi mask

The focus of mask-related vocabulary lies not only in the altered appearance when wearing a mask but also in how that altered appearance represents more than just identity. A physical mask can be understood as a combination of the act of wearing the mask and the process of its creation. However, due to the perishable nature of materials historically used to make masks, many origins of masks remain undocumented, and it is challenging to make precise determinations about their beginnings.

From a historical perspective, the knowledge surrounding physical masks is vast. The earliest known masks date back approximately 18,000 years. As history progressed, many masks made of materials like paper, cloth, and wood have not been well-preserved, making the historical study of masks a significant challenge.

The functions of physical masks have also evolved over time. In Central Africa, the Makishi masks serve to represent the deceased in a resurrected state, referred to as 'ancestral spirits', and they also function as amulets, talismans, and related ritual objects. In China, the Tun Kou (Figure 22) and Kaishan (Figure 23) masks are used for exorcism. Physical masks have transformed alongside human needs, evolving from their roles in exorcism and healing rituals into forms of mythology or popular theatre, where characters perform while wearing masks. Scholars study not only the masks themselves but also the culture behind them, the associated props (such as costumes, headgear, jewelry, handheld objects, etc.), and the human behaviors involved in the broader social activities. Physical masks have gradually become a small but integral part of these cultures.

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Figure 22 Tun Kou Mask



Figure 23 Kai Shan Mask

In recent years, one of the most heavily studied aspects of physical masks has been their use in the context of pandemics. Research on masks now spans the fields of medicine, education, and communication. Thomas S. Hansen and others, in *Face and Mask: A Double History*, assert that the study of faces and masks is inseparable; any discussion of one inherently involves the other (Belting et al., 2017). However, some scholars choose to study them separately. For instance, Richard Weihe explores the contradictory relationship between faces and masks in his work *Mask and Face*. The emergence of masks is fundamentally tied to the evolution and development of the face, indicating that their relationship is deeply intertwined. However, this thesis will not delve extensively into this relationship. Most studies on masks have focused on African mask culture, with Japanese Noh masks also receiving significant attention. The reason Chinese mask culture has not gained prominence on the global stage is largely due to its fragmented nature and lack of promotion.

Discussion of mask materials often includes their methods of production, as the choice of material plays a crucial role in physical masks. However, this thesis will not focus on materials, as existing literature indicates that the selection of materials is highly influenced by regional practices and

craftsmanship. The primary aim of studying physical masks in this research is to explore how they were presented in different historical contexts and how they were used by people at the time. Collecting visual documentation of masks, particularly those with long histories, is challenging due to the poor preservation of materials and local customs, often leaving researchers to rely on written or drawn records, which can introduce some inaccuracies.

Therefore, while discussing the history, materials, functions, and cultural significance of physical masks across various regions is a broad topic, this thesis will not address these aspects directly. Instead, it will analyze and summarize the visual characteristics of masks by integrating design principles and methods from the field of visual design.





2.2.1 Visual analysis of physical masks

Physical masks, as a traditional form of cultural art, have evolved through the millennia, carrying with them a complicated interplay of historical, cultural, and emotional value. Their making is never just decorative artistry but rather a way through which deep symbolic meanings and cultural narratives are revealed—stories told through visual attributes like shape, color, and pattern. Masks from different cultural traditions have some unique stylistic features and characteristics in the visual appearance, which are largely based on exaggeration, abstraction, and symbolism, in communicating human emotions and beliefs of a particular culture. The function, purpose, and meaning in the various cultures are informed through a visual analysis of physical masks. This will ascertain how these masks would elicit emotion and foster cultural conversation in design qualities. Now these masks will be critically analyzed by looking into different aspects of form, color, and theme, and then pursuing an inquiry into the relations of design principles to their broader artistic and cultural meanings.

A. Exaggeration: masks often represent an exaggeration of facial features, such as eyes and mouth, through their enlargement in order to project a certain emotion or identity. Likewise, in character creation within IP, exaggerated expression and dynamic posing mirror emotions while projecting certain characteristics of the character.


Table 2 Examples for exaggerate masks






1 Japanese Noh theatre masks

These masks express complex emotions and character traits through subtle changes in eye and mouth expressions.	
2 Greek theatre masks	
Ancient Greek theatre masks used exaggerated expressions to show emotions, ensuring distant audiences could see and feel them.	
3 Thai Khmer style masks	
Masks convey emotions and character through exaggerated features like wide eyes and big smiles.	
4 Peking opera face masks	
Colors and patterns express the character's personality and emotions: red for loyalty and bravery, white for cunning, with bold contrasts and exaggerated designs conveying inner feelings.	

B. Abstraction: physical masks often mask the complicated aspects of reality, using abstracted geometric shapes to represent and emphasize the essential qualities. Speaking of developing the IP, it is about simplification and abstraction into easily recognizable and visually appealing characters. Regarding this, the designers focus on main factors, discard factors that are not important, hence coming out with an iconic character to express what it is supposed to express and amaze the audience.






Table 3 Examples of abstract masks

1 Japanese Noh theatre	
Masks convey complex emotions through simplified facial features and minimalist lines and shapes.	
2 African tribal masks	

Many African masks use simplified features and abstract patterns, focusing on symbolism over realism.	
3 West African hyena masks	
Animal features are abstracted with simplified shapes and lines to convey their spirit and symbolism, rather than their exact appearance.	
4 Australian Aboriginal Masks	
Although not as widely used as in other cultures, some Australian Aboriginal artworks feature mask elements that use simplified lines and patterns to convey a deep understanding of the natural and spiritual world.	
5 Northwest Coast Native American Masks	
These masks take an abstract form, depicting nature and spirits, like animal totems and ancestors, with straight lines, curves, and symmetrical patterns.	
6 Nuo opera masks	
Nuo opera masks simplify and abstract gods or ghosts with exaggerated expressions and symbolic patterns, reflecting their religious and cultural significance.	

C. Cultural elements: cultural elements Numerous traditional physical masks represent specific cultural symbols and meanings. These symbols and meanings can be incorporated into modern IP character design to give the characters more depth and uniqueness of culture. In adopting certain cultural-specific motifs, patterns, and symbolism, designers might create characters that resonate with specific cultural stories and values, hence adding value and appeal to the characters in specific cultural markets.






Table 4 Examples of masks include cultural elements

1 Mexican Day of the dead masks	
Combines elements of indigenous and Hispanic culture to create a unique visual symbol.	
2 Masks of Indian tribes	
A blend of natural elements and myths and legends, each mask has its own unique story and symbolism.	
3 Caribbean Island masks	
Used in Caribbean carnivals, these masks mix elements of African, European and indigenous cultures, reflecting the rich history and cultural intermingling of the region.	
4 Brazilian Amazon Rainforest Tribal masks	
Combining elements of nature, such as animals, plants and deities, these masks reflect the tribe's deep reverence and understanding of nature and spirituality.	
5 Naxi Dongba masks	
These masks blend plant, animal, and religious symbols, showcasing the Dongba culture of the Naxi people and their respect for nature, emphasizing harmony between humans and nature.	

D. Color: it was for such intentions that color would portray emotion as well as the physiological features of masks; however, at the same time, creators will also put symbols in colors while creating the masks. For instance, red symbolizes good luck in Chinese tradition. Such attention to color may impart feelings and brand story meant by an IP character. The use of bright, muted, or contrasting colors may create different feelings and associations, hence making characters more effective and in line with the prescribed brand identity. Designers can elevate a character in terms of aesthetic appeal and emotional impact by choosing its colors carefully to ensure the story

it is supposed to tell is conveyed to the audience with clarity.







Table 5 Examples of different mask colors

1 Masks from Bali, Indonesia	
Bright colors highlight characters and mythology, serving to beautify masks and differentiate emotions and roles.	
2 Skeleton masks in Mexico	
The Day of the Dead uses vibrant colors and traditions to honor and celebrate life.	
3 Brazilian carnival masks	
These masks are known for vibrant colors and brilliant decorations, showcasing the passion and energy of Brazilian culture.	
4 Barranquilla carnival masks of Colombia	
These masks are renowned for vivid colors and elaborate patterns, using color to decorate and convey the stories and characters they represent.	
5 Sichuan opera face changing masks	
The masks use vivid color changes to reflect characters' emotions and plot development, directly influencing the audience's feelings and enhancing the visual impact.	

E. Symbolism: many physical masks use symbolic shapes and designs in order to convey meanings. Similarly, in character design for IP, the inclusion of symbols will be used to say something about core values of the brand or story behind the character. Embedding these symbols into the character's design gives creators layers of meaning that really resonate with the audience. The character stands for something rather than a visual persona, perhaps a story or a set of values aligned with the brand communication. In this way, this would add much more depth




and weight to the character, making it far more memorable and effective with the audience.

Table 6 Examples of Symbolic masks

1 Bobo masks	
Often combining animal and human features to symbolize the power and spirituality of nature.	
2 African Tribal masks	
Often use animal features and totems to symbolize tribal beliefs and spirituality.	
3 Japanese Ghost masks	
These masks represent mythical demons or ghosts, using patterns and colors to symbolize their role and power.	
4 Nepalese God masks	
Representing the gods and demons of Nepal's diverse traditions, each bull mask has its own symbolism and is used in religious festivals and ceremonies.	
5 Japanese Fox masks	
In Japanese culture, the fox is a symbol of wisdom and cunning. Fox masks are commonly seen in festivals and ceremonies to represent protection and spirituality.	
6 Tibetan masks	
In Tibetan religious festivals and pujas, masks represent various deities and protectors, each embodying deep religious and cultural symbolism that reflects the Tibetan people's understanding of the universe, life, and faith.	

F. Narrative: most of the physical masks have narrative or customary associations, which gives them contextual meaning. In the same vein, modern IP characters are increasingly linked to their narratives, which enhance their appeal and recall while being relatable to the audiences. With this integration of characters into a complex narrative, designers can foster a more profound relationship between the character and the audience, hence increasing the appeal and relatability of the character. Such a storytelling-centric approach not only deepens the character's persona but also creates a loyal audience, in that it gives them a story to which they can attach themselves and invest their emotions.

Table 7 Examples of Narrative masks



1 Indian Kathakali masks	
These masks are used to tell stories from Indian epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, with each mask representing a specific character from the epics.	
2 Alaska Native masks	
These masks tell stories of creation, animal spirits, and tribal lore, with each mask reflecting a deep cultural and spiritual heritage.	
3 Peking opera faces	
Each Peking Opera face represents a historical or mythological character, with design elements and colors revealing the character's personality and fate. The face painting is rooted in Chinese literature and history, with each design linked to a legend or historical figure, adding depth to the storytelling.	

G. Functionality and practicality: when creating the physical masks, one needs to make considerations for both comforts, on the part of the wearer, and functionality. Because, although most of the IP characters appear more in digital media and published materials, there are far too many instances where persons don these characters to get in contact with consumers, so one

needs to determine how valid and flexible a character design would be in multiple mediums and scenarios.

Ensuring that the character can be effectively and comfortably represented in physical form—be it through costumes, mascots, or interactive installations—is important for keeping brand consistency and enhancing consumer engagement across a variety of contexts.

Table 8 Examples of masks’ functionality and practicality

1 Nepalese dance masks	
Nepalese masks, used in religious festivals and dance performances, are designed for comfort and safety, ensuring clear vision and ventilation during long performances.	
2 Sichuan opera face changing masks	
Masks used in rapid face-changing performances are designed for quick changes, allowing performers to switch seamlessly. This design showcases technical skill and enhances the spectacle.	

Construction of masks in this manner creates perfect balance between affect and practicality, reaping myriad design principles to create something both deeply culturally significant and emotive.

Originally, masks tend to use exaggerated facial features and reduced forms to convey the individual emotions and personalities of the characters, which makes them more recognizable and memorable. For example, the painted faces in Peking Opera and the masks used in Japanese Noh theatre convey emotions and symbolic meanings of characters through exaggerated expressions and simplified contours, making a long-lasting impression on viewers. Second, physical masks can be strong representations of culture and bear deep symbolic meaning, as in the examples of animal totems and geometric designs found in some African tribal

masks. Such artistic elements do not only depict spiritual power and beliefs peculiar to specific cultures but also, through their visual presence, carry the history and tradition of those societies, speaking both to the wearer and to the audience—adding layers and depth to the identity attached to the masks. Color is a very meaningful factor in the meaning of physical masks, since different color choices convey a variety of emotions and characteristics. In Peking Opera masks, for instance, red is loyalty and bravery, while white is duplicity and betrayal. The dynamics and blending of colors within these masks enhance both their visual impact and emotional resonance. Furthermore, physical masks are often associated with specific stories or cultural traditions, which makes them more appealing and emotionally charged. For instance, masks used in the traditional art form of India known as Kathakali are designed to represent the stories contained in the Mahabharata, thus, distinguishing a mask from an ornamental piece into a tool for the story. Further, designs for masks consider the performers' comfort and practical wearability. For example, the Nepalese traditional dance masks are designed to provide the performer with unobstructed field vision and air flow, thereby, ensuring comfort and safety during long hours of performance. The Sichuan opera face-changing masks are therefore specially designed to meet the requirements: changing masks quickly to enhance the dramatic effect of the performance. Thus, the physical masks manifest the idea of multi-layered and multi-dimensional design principles that achieve both emotional expression and cultural transmission. These design concepts make the masks not only visually striking but also create a profound emotional resonance on a cultural level.

2.2.2 Visual representation of IP characters through physical masks

The physical mask in IP character design refers to the tangible and visible attributes of a character—such as facial structure, posture, proportions, costume, color, and material style—that convey its brand identity. While the psychological mask reflects internal traits and emotional depth, the physical mask externalizes these qualities through visual form, functioning as the audience's first point of contact with the character.

Visual communication can be understood as a structured system of meaning, in which shape, scale, position, and color are encoded with cultural and symbolic significance (Bang, 2016). These visual signs are interpreted by audiences through a combination of social convention and contextual familiarity (Tran, 2017). For example, rounded forms may convey approachability and

softness, whereas sharp angles or strong symmetry can imply discipline, tension, or authority. In this way, the physical mask acts as a semiotic surface that transforms internal identity traits into readable visual signals.

In graphic storytelling, the formal continuity of a character's appearance plays a crucial role in guiding the viewer's cognitive construction of that character's identity over time. A consistent visual presence supports narrative cohesion and brand recognizability, while allowing for moderate variation in posture or expression to reflect situational nuance (Tseng et al., 2018). This balance is essential in IP design, where characters must remain identifiable across platforms and applications while adapting to evolving storytelling contexts.

The physical mask also serves as a cultural interface. In markets where visual communication must respond to local traditions and expectations, culturally encoded design elements—such as symbolic shapes, color palettes, or traditional motifs—help position the character within a familiar aesthetic logic. Design practice must therefore negotiate between global design trends and regional specificity to achieve relevance and emotional appeal (Yudhanto et al., 2023).

The physical mask represents the formalized, symbolic, and culturally situated layer of a character's identity. It bridges internal design intentions with external audience perception, operating as the key interface through which meaning is projected, received, and remembered. Through the deliberate use of visual grammar, culturally grounded codes, and narrative coherence, the physical mask enables IP characters to achieve both stylistic distinctiveness and communicative effectiveness in multi-platform environments.

In addition to these functional and symbolic roles, physical masks can also be analyzed through a visual framework that emphasizes five characteristic features:

- A. Exaggeration and simplification: facial features are often exaggerated to amplify expression, while simplified forms enhance clarity and recognizability of emotional traits.
- B. Cultural symbols and symbolism: masks carry encoded meanings, often referencing spiritual beliefs, folklore, or societal values. They serve as carriers of heritage and expressions of cultural identity.

- C. Emotional role of color: color schemes are deliberately chosen to evoke specific emotions or psychological states, enhancing both visual impact and symbolic potency.
- D. Narrative connection: masks are frequently embedded within stories, rituals, or cultural events, becoming narrative anchors that enrich character identity and emotional resonance.
- E. Comfort and functionality: practical considerations such as ergonomic design, safety, and wearability ensure that the mask remains functional over time, especially in performative or immersive contexts.

These characteristics further reinforce the idea that the physical mask operates not only as a visual form but as a semiotic and experiential construct—one that encodes emotion, culture, and story into a cohesive design interface.

2.3 Virtual masks

This has brought a sea change in society, more so in the manner in which production and circulation of information have changed at a fast pace. Along with the rapid strides in technologies, the use of virtual masks has also increased. These virtual masks can work both within the realization of cultural and emotional expressions typical of classic physical masks and may extend functions and ways of interacting with digital technologies. These virtual masks are in the process of evolving alongside technological progress because better computer graphics, computer vision, 3D modeling, and rendering allowed the creation of photorealistic and interactive virtual masks. Technological advancements, in particular Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality, have increased the application of virtual masks significantly by allowing users to wear them and manipulate them inside a virtual world with devices like HMDs or even smartphones.

What is more important is the environment where virtual masks work—the virtual world. In the recent years, there was a quite visible tendency in moving human activities and social relations to the digital phase and online. This trend has been particularly evident due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which imposed strict social restrictions globally, necessitating the migration of social activities such as education, work, and healthcare to online platforms(Wong et al., 2021, Lin and Latoschik, 2022). The rapid increase in the use of social media and video conferencing platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams(Bary, 2020, Schultz and Parikh, 2020,

Lin and Latoschik, 2022), has also changed social habits. In the fields of art and design, there has been a significant increase in the number of global online exhibitions. According to the UNESCO report *Museums Around the World in the Face of COVID-19* released in May 2020, nearly 90% of museums were closed during the pandemic. Consequently, many museums turned to digital platforms to engage with their audiences.

Moreover, leading tech companies like Meta, Nvidia, and Microsoft have made substantial investments in the 'metaverse' (Lin and Latoschik, 2022, Kim, 2021). The concept of the 'metaverse', first introduced in Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel *Snow Crash*, refers to a 3D digital universe composed of avatars representing real individuals, and it has become a significant term in the technology sector.

Virtual masks serve as a medium for individuals to interact and experience through avatars. For example, filters used in social media or video conferencing platforms can alter a person's appearance, effectively functioning as virtual masks. These masks are digital overlays applied to a user's avatar or face and body, created and manipulated through software in digital media.

2.3.1 Expressions of virtual masks

The forms of virtual masks are diverse, ranging from simple 2D filters to complex 3D models and animations. Their specific manifestations depend on the application domain, technological implementation, and the imagination of the creators. Below are some of the main forms of virtual masks:

A. Social media filters: this is the most common form of virtual masks, utilizing Augmented Reality (AR) technology to overlay various filters and effects onto the user's face. Platforms like Snapchat and Instagram employ AR technology to offer a wide array of facial filters, allowing users to alter their appearance with playful, creative, or themed effects when sharing photos and videos. Most of these applications use AR technology to accurately map the user's facial movements and move in real-time with the user's expressions, providing a seamless interactive experience, as seen with Snapchat (Figure 24) and Instagram (Figure 25). Users can apply these filters while taking photos or recording videos, enhancing fun and interactivity, and encouraging sharing and communication.



Figure 24 Snapchat

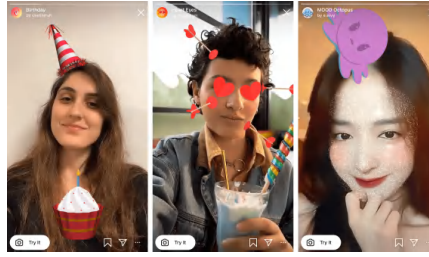


Figure 25 Instagram

B. Virtual Reality (VR) headsets: in VR environments, users can select different virtual masks or avatars to represent themselves. These masks can range from cartoonish styles to realistic 3D models or even entirely fantastical creations. Influenced by the pandemic, people's social behaviors have significantly shifted; many now seek more immersive ways to socialize beyond traditional chat software or video calls. For example, on social platforms such as VRChat (Figure 26), users can choose from a variety of virtual avatars to participate in virtual gatherings, games, and social events. These virtual masks not only alter the user's facial appearance but can also change the entire body image, enhancing the sense of immersion and the social experience.



Figure 26 VRChat

C. Virtual backgrounds and masks in video conferencing applications: some video conferencing software offers virtual backgrounds and mask features, allowing users to select different virtual masks during video calls to either hide their true appearance or add an element of fun. In real-time video interactions, such as video calls or live streaming, these masks can alter or enhance a person's appearance (Figure 27). These can range from simple filters, such as adjusting lighting and skin tone, to more complex overlays that completely transform the appearance to resemble animals, fantasy characters, or other designs. Filters can be applied at any time during the call to modify the image and add entertainment value to the video process, as seen in platforms like Facebook, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. In professional settings, virtual backgrounds can help maintain a polished image, while in informal meetings, they can add an element of fun and interactivity. Additionally, these features provide a layer of privacy protection for users.



Figure 27 Video calls

D. Character skins in games: one of the significant ways that players in an online game can personalize their game and show their identity is through character skins. Character skins in the game are acquired through purchase or unlocking, whereby a player changes the look of their character to represent their style or preference. For example, in Fortnite (Figure 28), not only does the character's appearance change with each skin but so do the special animations. In League of Legends (Figure 29), skins can change the hero's appearance and also change the visual effects of many abilities. Character skins increase the visual diversity of the game and a sense of belonging and interactivity among players.

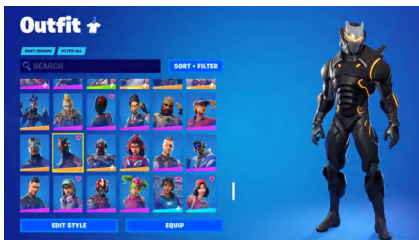


Figure 28 Character skins in Fortnite



Figure 29 Character skins in League of Legends

E. Virtual avatars: beyond online social interactions through communication tools and virtual headsets, virtual avatars have gained widespread use in virtual spaces, particularly with the promotion of the metaverse concept. For instance, Virtual YouTubers (VTubers) employ facial capture technology to map the expressions and movements of the host onto a virtual character in real-time. These virtual characters interact and perform in live streams and videos through 3D animation (Figure 30). VTubers like Kizuna AI (Figure 31) have pioneered this form of entertainment, attracting large audiences. This type of virtual mask not only protects the host's real identity but also offers limitless possibilities for content creation.



Figure 30 live streams 3D animation



Figure 31 Kizuna AI

With the increasing number of 'Avatars' in the virtual world, more and more individuals are becoming active on online platforms, leading to the emergence of virtual influencers (Figure 32). These influencers are primarily active on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat. Although they are not real people, they can express themselves and interact with fans, amassing large followings. This fictional persona has become a new trend in social media marketing. Virtual influencers can collaborate with multiple brands (Figure 33). Unlike real-life celebrities, virtual influencers are not constrained by time and location, and they do not face privacy issues that could potentially harm their brand image. This is a major reason why many brands are interested in virtual influencer marketing.

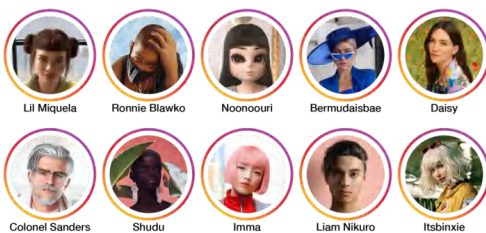


Figure 32 Virtual influencers



Figure 33 Collaborate with virtual influencer



Figure 34 KFC - Colonel Sanders



Figure 35 Binggrae - Binggraeus

In some cases, brands create their own virtual influencers. For example, KFC created a younger version of Colonel Sanders (Figure 34), reminiscent of the company's founder. Similarly, the long-established Korean beverage company Binggrae created a virtual character named 'Binggraeus' (Figure 35). Binggraeus, portrayed as a prince, promotes the Binggrae brand on Instagram,

reflecting niche cultures favored by young people. By generating various culturally relevant content, Binggraeus actively connects with young audiences, naturally promoting the company's products. These virtual influencers clearly target younger generations in brand promotion and serve as prime examples of successful brand campaigns.

F. Augmented Reality (AR) masks in applications: augmented Reality applications use smartphones or AR glasses to overlay virtual masks onto the user's real-world face. For example, AR makeup apps allow users to virtually try on different cosmetics, enabling them to see the actual effect before making a purchase. Similarly, virtual try-on apps allow users to see how they would look in different outfits. These virtual masks not only offer personalized displays but also enhance the shopping experience. For instance, L'Oréal's 'Virtual Try-On' (Figure 36) and Sephora's 'Virtual Artist' use AR technology to let users try on different makeup products or hairstyles on their own faces, providing a near-realistic virtual makeup experience.

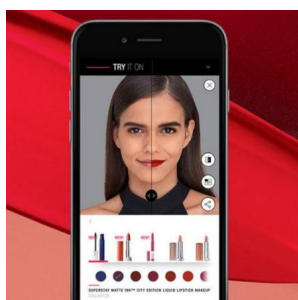


Figure 36 L'Oréal's 'Virtual Try-On'



Figure 37 Na'vi Role in Avatar

G. Film and television effects: in film and television production, virtual masks are created using CGI technology to replace actors' faces with virtual characters or to add special effects. For instance, the Na'vi Role (Figure 37) in *Avatar* were achieved by translating the performances of the actors into believable alien creatures through computer-generated imagery (CGI) techniques. Likewise, Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* was achieved with facial motion capture coupled with CGI, making him a very realistic digital character. The virtual characters enhance the visual effects immensely, which can be engaging for audiences in the fantasy worlds of the films.

Virtual masks come in all shapes, sizes, and forms for various reasons, be it to support entertainment, preserve privacy, enable self-expression, or introduce impossible surreal visuals. The technology behind virtual masks is under continuous development and keeps finding new ways to push the frontiers of what is currently possible with digital interactivity and visual

storytelling. These innovations are changing not only how we interact with digital media but also opening up new avenues toward innovative and personalized manners of engagement in virtual and physical worlds.

2.3.2 Applications of virtual masks

Virtual masks have varying usages across different domains like entertainment, education, health, and interaction with other people. They find an extended application in the field of entertainment in game design and filmmaking, where it enhances the storyline and character development through creative mask designs. In education, virtual masks act as tools for presenting and teaching about historical and cultural artifacts. With virtual museums and interactive platforms, students are allowed to explore mask art through the ages and around the world, thus enhancing their involvement and understanding. Virtual masks might also help in psychological therapy, within healthcare, to help patients overcome anxiety and stress through some virtual experiences. Further, virtual masks today are an instant way of communicating through social media and online meetings to communicate and put one's thoughts across in personalized ways. Virtual masks have transcended their origins in entertainment, becoming essential tools in various fields:

A. Social media and entertainment

In social media and entertainment, virtual masks are most commonly seen in the form of filters and effects, as illustrated in the previous section with platforms like Snapchat and Instagram. The use of virtual masks enhances interactivity and entertainment, encouraging users to take photos, share them, and thereby increase platform engagement and user retention.

Different platforms offer extensive customization options, ranging from facial appearance (makeup, facial hair, and even fantastical elements like animal features) to body shape and clothing, allowing users to create highly personalized designs that cater to the preferences of today's youth. For instance, Zepeto (Figure 38), a mobile chat application from South Korea, allows users to create and interact with 3D avatars in various virtual worlds. Some of these worlds are chat-based, while others are game-based. Since its launch in 2018, Zepeto has attracted 340 million users, with about 15 to 20 million active users each month, primarily in South Korea, Japan, and China. Approximately 70% of its users are female, aged 13 to 21.

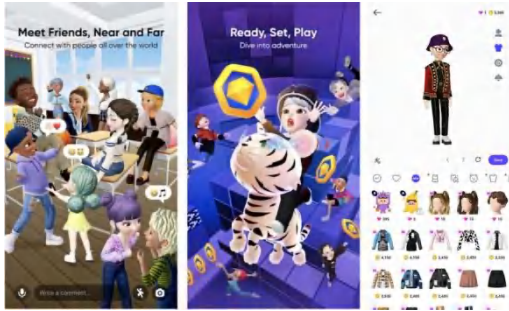


Figure 38 Zepeto



Figure 39 Roblox

In the United States, Roblox (Figure 39) is a major player in the online gaming industry, valued at \$50 billion, with a massive user base of teenagers among its 200 million monthly active users—far surpassing Zepeto in scale. For online social platform functionalities, options like Rec Room and VR Chat are available. In the gaming arena, besides Roblox, the gaming giant Fortnite, developed by Epic Games and released in 2017, stands out as a popular online game and platform. These platforms each offer unique online social and gaming experiences, catering to different user interests and age groups.

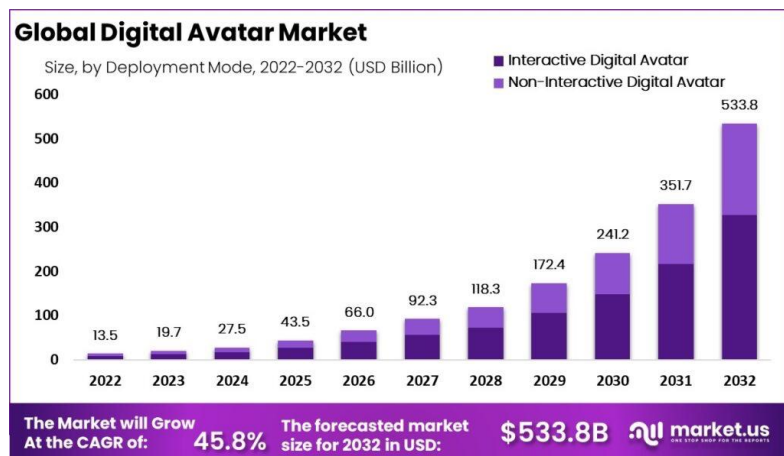


Figure 40 Global Digital Avatar Market

As the virtual world becomes a new dimension of social interaction, the presence and importance of virtual avatars representing individuals in these spaces have also been increasing. Reports indicate that the global digital avatar market is valued at \$19.7 billion (Figure 40). This market is projected to experience significant growth, with expectations that it will reach \$533.8 billion by 2032. The compound annual growth rate (CAGR) for this market is anticipated to be 45.8% during the forecast period.

Innovations in AR, VR, and related technologies are indeed increasing at a rapid pace, so to be sure, the growth is very much driven by such forces. Global events, especially the COVID-19

pandemic, have accelerated this, with the need for maintained social interaction in virtual settings to keep social bonds present. These virtual spaces accord individuals a unique platform on which they can creatively become themselves, perhaps more effectively than one could in the real world. Furthermore, virtual platforms provide a certain degree of anonymity to their users, enabling interactions without revealing one's identity-a facility quite alluring for those concerned with privacy protection.

Avatars let people personally experience virtual worlds created online, which could be highly interactive and engaging. Users can customize their avatars to reflect either their individual style or current mood by selecting appearance, clothes, and accessories. The extreme level of personalization deeply enriches the level of ownership and identity within the virtual world. Media and advertising even foster such virtual influencers and characters, making them a common feature in today's digital world.

In the near future, virtual masks and avatars will look much more real and become personalized. High-resolution display technologies will further enhance the degree of realism in the visuals, while face capture technology will be in a position to track the subtleties of facial expressions for more detailed and realistic animations. Also, artificial intelligence and machine learning will be very instrumental in the personalization of virtual masks by automatically generating designs that consider facial features and individual tastes. Such innovations make virtual experiences even more dynamic and immersive.

B. Education and remote learning

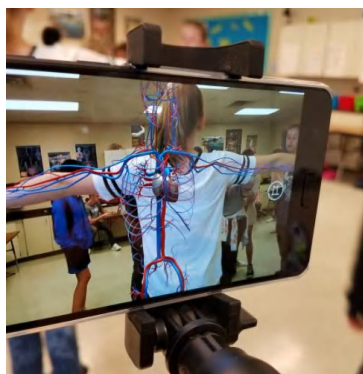


Figure 41 AR educational tool



Figure 42 Digital makeup

Virtual masks have traditionally been used not only in video conferencing services such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams but also afford quite a unique opportunity for students in online education. Educators are able to employ thematic masks that will coincide with the curriculum and, as such, grant a different manner through which learning will become more fun, especially for younger pupils. A pertinent illustration of this phenomenon is the Expeditions AR educational tool developed by Google (Figure 41), which facilitates students' exploration of historical landmarks and scientific principles via augmented reality technology. This innovation significantly augments the interactivity and engagement associated with online education, rendering it more immersive and compelling for learners.

Some scientific museums and science exhibitions also apply this technology in addition to classroom teaching and remote learning for acquiring knowledge with more intuition. For example, Figure 42 shows the technology it uses for mapping with virtual reality traditional Chinese Opera headpieces and makeup on the head of the visitors. In such a way it not only provides them with a richer experience but also transformed the interaction into an interactive experience of cultural or educational content, thus rendering the learning process of it interactive and visually appealing.

C. Retail and fashion

Virtual masks have also made their way into the retail sector, particularly in the fashion and cosmetics industries, where customers can virtually try on products. This application is not only convenient but also offers a safe alternative to physical try-ons, which is especially relevant in the context of public health concerns. For instance, the previously mentioned L'Oréal case demonstrates how virtual try-ons can enhance the shopping experience by allowing customers to see how makeup or other products would look on them without physically applying them.

D. Gaming and VR

In gaming and virtual reality, virtual masks enable players to adopt avatars that closely resemble the characters they wish to embody, thereby enhancing the user experience and adding a layer of immersion to the gaming experience. Additionally, AR games like Pokémon GO (Figure 43) allow users to 'see' and interact with virtual objects in the real world through their screens,

blending the physical and digital worlds in a way that makes the gameplay more engaging and interactive.

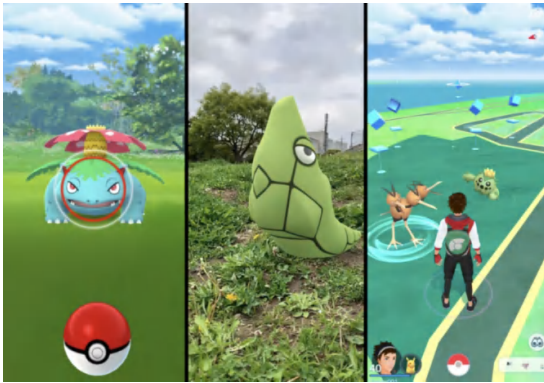


Figure 43 Pokémon GO

The display capabilities of virtual masks can enhance online interaction by adding elements of fun and creativity. Additionally, by using technology to create semi-cover or full-cover virtual masks, or by generating avatars directly within online spaces, users can increase their privacy. The masking function of virtual masks serves as a tool for maintaining online privacy and anonymity, allowing users to conceal their true identities while engaging in digital communication or content creation.

As those few examples have shown, virtual masks merge technological innovation with artistic expression-playfully using almost any online platform to reinforce or change one's digital identity. Beyond the uses touched upon here, further extensions may be found in business worlds, corporate communications, healthcare, and telemedicine. On these points, it enhances privacy protection, the capability to hold a conversation remotely, and new ways of interacting with digital information-all features proving the flexibility and importance of virtual masks.

2.3.3 Functional and experiential dimensions of virtual masks in IP character design

In the context of IP character design, the virtual mask refers to the dynamic and behavioral dimension of a character's identity as performed across digital platforms and mediated environments. Unlike the physical mask, which concerns visual form, and the psychological mask, which encodes emotional cues, the virtual mask captures how a character acts, responds, and evolves across social interfaces, interactive media, and transmedia ecosystems. It reflects a shift from static design to performative identity construction in the era of participatory branding.

The theoretical foundation of the virtual mask draws on Goffman's dramaturgical theory of self-presentation, where identity is seen as a sequence of context-driven role enactments. On digital platforms, IP characters—like human users—manage impressions by modulating tone, gestures, and interactions in response to audience expectations and situational cues. This transforms character identity into a fluid and context-sensitive construct, shaped by platform logic and audience participation.

Moreover, virtual identity is increasingly algorithmically mediated. IP characters deployed in live chatbots, AR filters, metaverse environments, or VTuber systems operate within real-time feedback loops. Their behaviors are influenced by user interaction, scripted logic, and automated response generation, which requires the virtual mask to be not only consistent but also adaptively intelligent.

Within the 3MIP framework, the virtual mask is conceptualized as the interactional interface that manages not only continuity of character behavior but also adaptability across shifting narrative, technical, and social contexts. It allows characters to remain recognizable while flexibly adjusting to different formats—such as adopting playful tones on TikTok, delivering formal messages in branded webinars, or engaging users in gamified settings.

Virtual masks in practice exhibit a wide range of distinctive technical and experiential features that significantly enhance their functional and expressive capabilities. These characteristics make virtual masks highly versatile across numerous applications:

- A. **Real-Time Capability:** virtual masks are capable of responding to user behavior in real time. Advanced face-detection and motion-tracking algorithms adjust visual effects based on facial expressions or movements, enabling dynamic realism in applications such as social media filters, video conferencing, and VR environments.
- B. **Interactivity:** far from being static overlays, virtual masks behave as responsive visual elements. They change in reaction to user expressions, environmental inputs, or touch gestures, enhancing immersion in interactive scenarios such as gaming or AR-driven storytelling.

- C. Personalization: users can select, modify, or generate personalized virtual masks that match their individual preferences or aesthetic identities. From simple color filters to complex 3D animations, virtual masks facilitate self-expression and enable unique digital personas.
- D. Diversity: virtual masks range in complexity, from lightweight 2D filters to fully immersive 3D renderings. This diversity enables broad application in fields like entertainment, education, healthcare, and virtual conferencing.
- E. Immersion: virtual masks enhance realism and presence in VR and AR environments, allowing users to feel psychologically and visually “embodied” in virtual contexts—useful not only in gaming but also in simulations and professional training.
- F. Security and Privacy Protection: through data masking, encryption, or identity obfuscation, virtual masks can provide a protective layer in digital interactions. In contexts such as teleconferencing or livestreaming, they safeguard personal identity and mitigate privacy risks.
- G. Innovation and Versatility: as adaptive tools, virtual masks are increasingly used in mental health therapy, simulation-based education, collaborative design, and remote business environments. Their flexibility makes them effective for both expressive and functional purposes across sectors.

Altogether, the virtual mask transforms the IP character from a designed object into a performative digital entity—one that evolves, responds, and interacts across time, space, and medium. It merges identity expression with system responsiveness, enabling characters to become emotionally resonant, socially responsive, and technically adaptable components of modern brand ecosystems.

2.4 A new form of mask in the digital age: IP character

In today’s digital age, IP characters are the modernized face of ‘mask’, new channels whereby individual identities identify and speak through use of an extended research of psychological, physical, and virtual masks.

Psychological masks tend to take into account people’s adjustment and presentation of self before

society. According to Jung, the Persona is like a mask worn by an individual to navigate their environment; it enables interaction with others while hiding the true self. With the advent of digital media and networking, IP characters represent the personas or masks taken on by people in different circumstances or contexts. These masks could be representations of the ideal self or projections of what others expect from them. The IP character can be transformative across multiple social networks in digital ecologies unto immense parts of a person through varied social relations. It can also dramatize the character's cultural background and emotions, thus making the character more relatable to the community.

Throughout history, physical masks have functioned as significant cultural and artistic symbols, embodying deep meanings and values. Similarly, for IP characters, the design often follows the modern visual design principle—the stronger the exaggeration, the stronger the visual effect and memorability. By simplifying the forms, such characters have become quickly recognizable and highly shareable. With rich cultural implications, an IP character carries certain cultural messages and symbolic meanings, therefore deepening its appeal. Heavy narrations form the basis for much of the IP characters, which makes the narratives more vivid with better audience engagement and emotional bond. While conventional masks are expanding their forms with technical development, virtual masks have acquired a high level of popularity. This development of technology created the next push: the possibility of interaction in real-time became realistic via VR, AR, and other technologies, improving user experiences, feelings of immersion, and attraction. Digital media significantly facilitated the process of distribution of IP characters and expanded their influence more and more.

In contemporary digital culture, IP characters can be understood as dynamic 'masks'—embodiments of identity that operate across psychological, physical, and virtual dimensions. From the internal construction of personality and emotional traits (psychological masks) to the visual expression of form and symbolism (physical masks), and finally to the deployment of characters in digital and interactive environments (virtual masks), IP character design spans multiple levels of human interaction. These characters not only offer new modes of self-representation but also serve as powerful mediators of social communication, brand identity, and emotional engagement. Bryan Tillman's *Creative Character Design* (2012) offers a systematic framework for developing characters with internal consistency and expressive clarity. His emphasis on aligning backstory,

psychological attributes, and visual structure resonates directly with the multi-dimensional approach taken in this thesis. In particular, his framework supports the notion that successful character design requires coherence across narrative, emotional, and visual layers. In view of this, IP characters represent an indispensable part of today's digital age. This section outlines the present position of IP characters.

2.4.1 Character, IP character and Mascot

So far, the cognition of IP characters in China remains quite ambiguous. Most people equate them directly with mascots. While there are connections between IP characters and mascots, there are also essential differences. Besides mascots, some other terms and phrases sound close to the meaning of IP characters. For instance:

Franchise characters: these usually refer to the main characters of a particular media franchise. These characters are often irreplaceable parts of any movie, game, or TV series and are very heavily marketed and merchandised.

Iconic or signature characters: the term refers to the character who is identified with either a brand, studio, or creator. They often act as ambassadors for the brand and may hold immense cultural, symbolic, or commercial value.

Licensed characters: the term describes characters that are owned by one but licensed to another for use in various forms of media, merchandise, or promotional materials.

However, these broader terms will not be in focus in this section but rather the distinctions and relationships among characters, IP characters, and mascots, helping to further explain how and where IP characters differ and stand out from within these broader contexts of branding and media representation.

The concept (Figure 44) of how characters, IP characters, and mascots all interlink with each other provides insight into the respective areas in which they take part within the concepts of storytelling, branding, and media. Characters are the pivotal points in any narration and media content, possessing peculiar personalities, backgrounds, and arcs of development. These elements drive the plot and convey thematic messages, so characters are crucial to literature,

film, television, games, and animation. Mainly, the characters are devised with a certain personality, attachment both between themselves and emotionally to the audience, and depth which should let them pose as different human aspects. Originality and a preconceived history make them fuller and more appealing for the audience to whom they would relate by similar experiences and emotional development. Multidimensional characters showing a wide array of emotions, actions, and histories add depth and reach in telling this story (FoxRenderFarm, 2022).

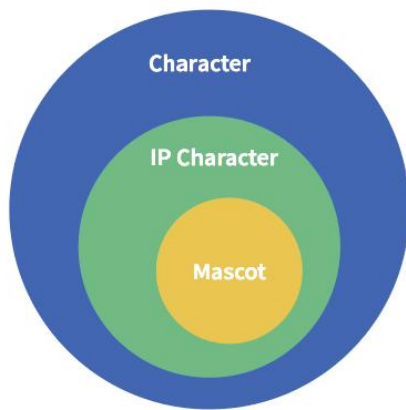


Figure 44 The relationships between characters, IP characters, and mascots

From simple traditional characters, today's digitized world has produced IP characters that are well-accepted cultural and commercial players. This further increases with the ever-increasing importance of brand identity hand in hand with the rights of IP. Whereas the concept of an IP character is to live across many types of platforms and media, unlike classic characters which only exist in a particular story, they live beyond their initial context. A quintessential illustration of this phenomenon is Disney's Mickey Mouse, which, via comprehensive commercial advertising and cultural branding strategies, has surpassed its initial storyline to emerge as a universally acknowledged emblem. IP characters function not solely as narrative instruments; rather, they play a crucial role within a broader cultural and commercial framework, frequently acting as brand representatives to enhance brand recognition and customer loyalty. Owing to their omnipresence, one's possibilities of engaging with those stars then extend beyond a number of contexts, further solidifying their presence within cultural and commercial contexts.

The mascots, on the other hand, are mainly created to be symbolic representatives of a brand or organization, primarily for increasing public awareness and developing some attachment with consumers. Though mascots share some similarities with IP characters in terms of representing

a brand and interactivity, they usually tend to be more about enhancing visual identity and eliciting emotional responses that assure brand loyalty. Design-wise, mascots are normally supposed to be friendly and participatory, which also nurtures an emotional attachment from the brand to the customers. However, whereas most IP characters have found deeper cultural relevance, most mascots remain within the auspices of brand promotion.

Market dynamics and consumer behavior play an important role in the evolution of characters to IP characters or from mascots to IP characters. Creating engaging personas with substantial backstories allows brands to develop much deeper cultural and emotional relationships with consumers, thereby giving them a much stronger competitive advantage in the marketplace. The historical development of characters and mascots is relatively well-documented, but the evolution of IP characters remains less clear mainly because of the vagueness in the definition of IP characters and the concentration on the commercialization and marketing strategies of IP characters.

This section is going to illustrate how IP characters are formed from three aspects: a case from developing a character to an IP character, a case for developing a mascot to an IP character, and a pure case of an IP character. We are going to analyze the process and strategies contributing to its formation and participation in the modern digital and commercial landscape.

A. The case of developing from a character to an IP character

This research will focus on the underpinning mechanism analysis for a few characters' development into major IPs, including James Bond, Harry Potter, Buzz Lightyear, and Mickey Mouse, all of which have generated at least \$8.6 billion in revenue individually.

In literature, James Bond is a British intelligence agent with a codename, 007, and he was first introduced in 1953 through a novel called *Casino Royale* by a British novelist named Ian Fleming. With his minute, calculated accuracy, subtle humor, elegance, and taste for adventure, the character of Bond is marked by a number of distinctive features: he has to wear tailored suits, use advanced gadgets, drive expensive sports cars, and have many girlfriends. Besides being an action hero, Bond is a multidimensional character filled with such fine qualities as loyalty, patriotism, resourcefulness, resilience, and depth that make him far more real and

multidimensional. Ian Fleming wrote 14 James Bond novels, thus giving birth to this great character. The story world was extended for several other authors, such as John Gardner and Raymond Benson. The strategy for the promotion of James Bond character can be analysed in five ways, as shown in Figure 45.

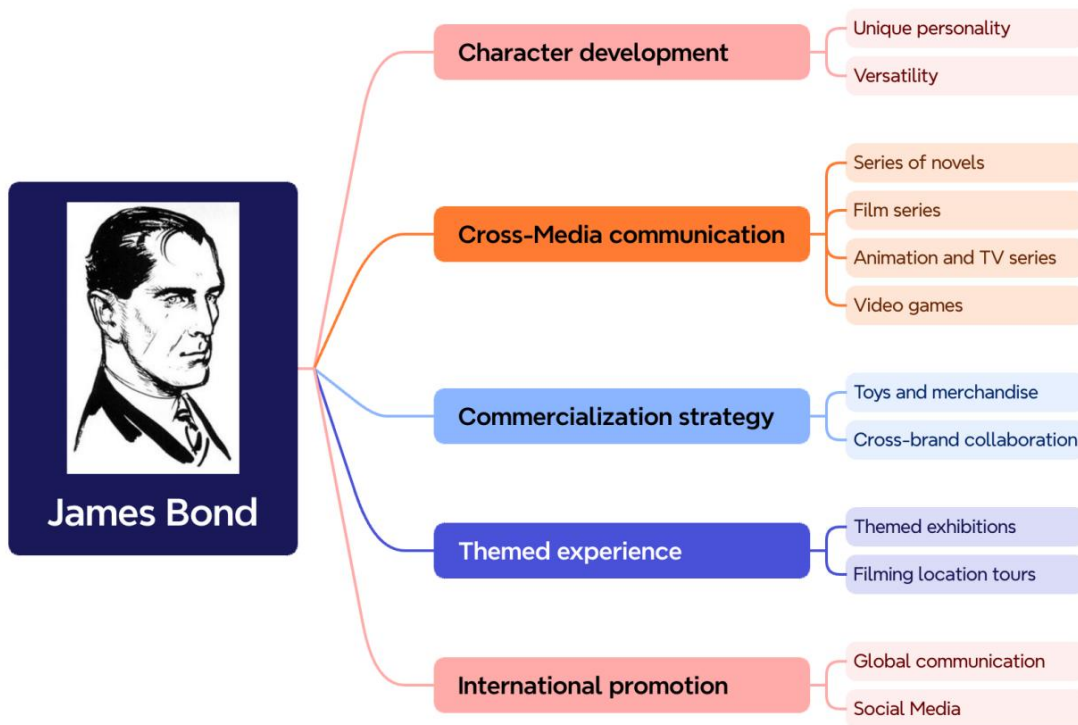


Figure 45 James Bond's promotion strategies

The first Bond movie, entitled *Dr. No*, hit the theatres in 1962, featuring *Sean Connery* as Bond, and marked the beginning of one of the longest film franchises. Over the years, the role of James Bond has been played by Sean Connery, Roger Moore, Pierce Brosnan and Daniel Craig-all adding their own unique personality and spin to the character. Bond has also appeared in animated and television series such as *James Bond Jr.* This Bond-centric video game *GoldenEye 007*(Figure 46) for the Nintendo 64 received worldwide critical acclaim and further helped to reach those beyond the film franchise.



Figure 46 GoledenEye 007



Figure 47 Corgi Toys



Figure 48 Adidas sneaker



Figure 49 Aston Martin

In terms of merchandising, a wide range of Bond toys and models have been launched, including the Aston Martin DB5 with an ejector seat by Corgi Toys (Figure 47), action figures, and high-tech gadget toys. Bond's image has been widely applied to stationery, apparel (such as the Adidas sneaker collaboration, Figure 48), home goods, and more, increasing the brand's everyday visibility. Limited-edition Bond-themed products, like collaborations with Aston Martin (Figure 49), Omega watches, and Heineken beer, have expanded the brand's market influence. Globally held James Bond-themed exhibitions, showcasing costumes, props, and behind-the-scenes production from the films, attract numerous fans. Additionally, tours of filming locations from the 007 series offer fans an immersive experience.

James Bond's appeal extends globally through multiple language versions of novels, films, and merchandise, establishing him as an internationally recognized cultural icon. Utilizing global social media platforms, Bond maintains engagement with international fans, providing updates on the character's latest developments and activities, thus keeping the brand vibrant and relevant.

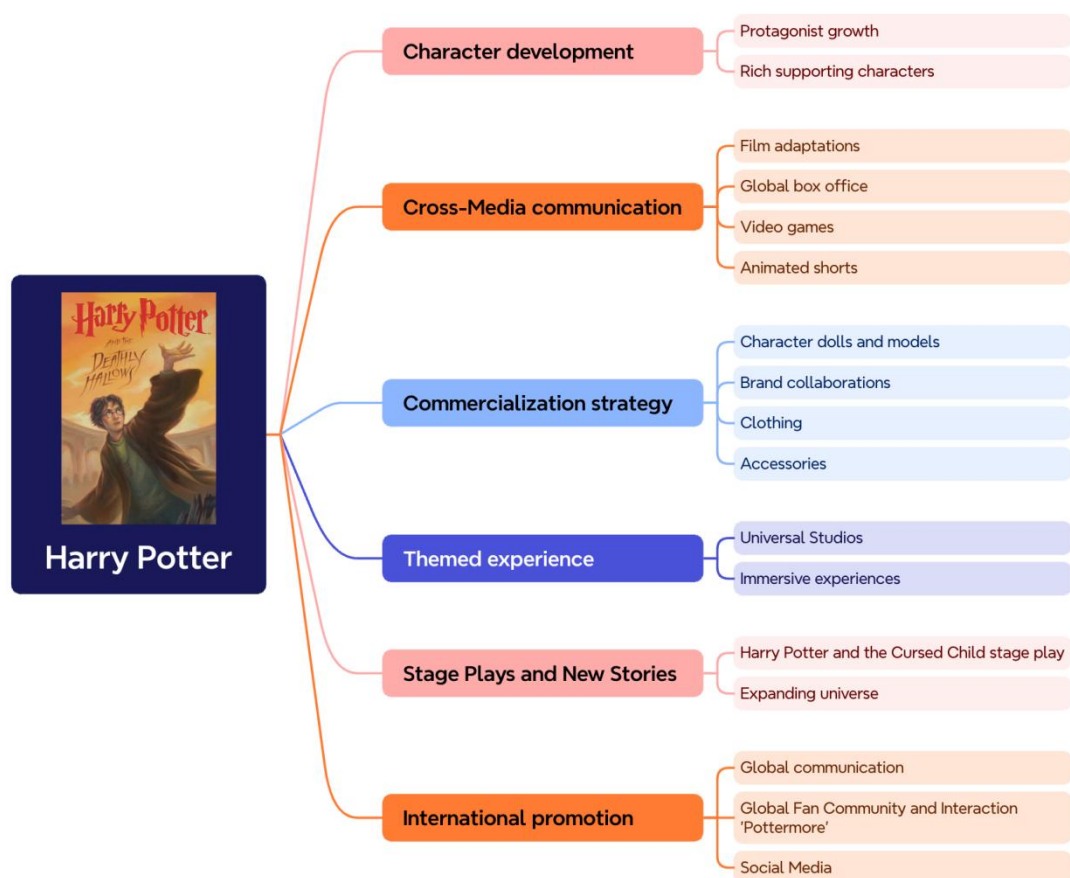


Figure 50 Promotion strategies of Harry Potter

The making of *Harry Potter* into an IP character (Figure 50) is complex, involving intensive

character creation, cross-media distribution, merchandising, and global marketing. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (Figure 51) offers readers richly developed characters with which they become emotionally invested. Harry Potter's journey from an ordinary boy to a hero, along with other richly drawn supporting characters such as Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Albus Dumbledore, and Voldemort, adds layers of depth and appeal to the story. These characters gained further momentum through Warner Bros'. film adaptations, which maintained the core plot and character traits of the novels while enhancing their appeal through advanced visual effects. With a worldwide box office of more than \$7 billion, Harry Potter became an internationally known franchise name.

In addition, the extension of the Harry Potter franchise to video games like *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery* (Figure 52) and *Harry Potter: Wizards Unite* enabled their audiences to interactively immerse themselves in the adventure of its characters. This cross-media approach not only widened Harry Potter's reach but also deepened the connection of his fans to the character by allowing them to live the magical world in a more engaging manner. The merchandising of Harry Potter action figures, themed apparel, and a wide range of collectibles further cemented the character's status as an IP icon. Put together, these efforts transformed Harry Potter from a literary character into an IP character recognized around the world, with enduring cultural and commercial impact.

In terms of merchandising strategies, a wide array of products based on the characters was developed, including toys (Figure 53), models, apparel, and accessories such as Harry's wand (Figure 54) and Hogwarts school uniforms. These products appeal not only to children but also to adult collectors, and collaborations with brands like LEGO further expanded the market reach. The Wizarding World of Harry Potter theme parks at Universal Studios in Orlando, Hollywood, and Osaka have been constructed, meticulously recreating many of the iconic scenes from the films, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the characters' world.



Figure 51 Harry Potter series



Figure 52 Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery (video game)



Figure 53 Lego of Harry Potter's Roles



Figure 54 Wands from Harry Potter

Additionally, the stage plays *Harry Potter, and the Cursed Child* expanded the narrative universe of Harry Potter by exploring the stories of the next generation, drawing large audiences and further deepening the connection with the franchise. Online platforms such as Pottermore, along with various social media accounts, have been instrumental in maintaining the ongoing relevance and influence of the characters by continuously engaging with fans and delivering new content. These multifaceted merchandising strategies have not only reinforced the global presence of Harry Potter as an IP character but have also ensured its lasting cultural and commercial impact.

The two cases mentioned above successfully transformed novel characters into globally recognized IP characters through multifaceted efforts rather than relying on a single promotional approach.

Upon further analysis, it was found that the 007 franchise primarily focuses on collaborations related to movie props or conceptual tie-ins, with less emphasis on the commercialization of the character's image itself. This can be attributed to factors such as the varying ages, appearances, and health conditions of the actors who have portrayed James Bond—six different actors have taken on the role over the course of the series (Figure 55). Additionally, the cross-media spread

of a character tied to a specific actor can be more challenging.



Figure 55 James Bond—six different actors

However, this does not imply that characters portrayed by actors cannot become successful IP characters. The *Harry Potter* franchise exemplifies how a character can achieve significant IP status through diverse cross-media promotion and merchandising strategies. The franchise has successfully utilized a broader and more varied approach in cross-media promotion and commercialization.

In the following discussion, the focus will shift more towards analyzing characters from comics and animation. These types of characters are particularly advantageous in terms of visual and design flexibility, timelessness, continuity, adaptability, and diversity, all of which are beneficial for cross-media dissemination and commercial promotion. This also explains why, when the concept of IP characters emerged in China, most brands and designers gravitated towards creating 2D or 3D cartoon-like characters. The discussion will now proceed with two cases from the film and animated television sectors.

Buzz Lightyear, a central character in the 1995 film *Toy Story*, produced by Pixar Animation Studios in collaboration with Disney, is one of the most iconic figures in modern animation. He is characterized as a confident, brave, and adventurous space ranger toy, who initially believes himself to be a real space ranger rather than a mere toy. His signature line, 'To infinity and beyond!' has become deeply ingrained in popular culture. Throughout the *Toy Story* series, Buzz undergoes significant character development, evolving from an overly self-assured toy to one who understands his true identity, thereby highlighting themes of growth, friendship, and teamwork, which make his character more multidimensional and relatable. Buzz Lightyear's character promotion strategy (Figure 56) emphasizes cross-media communication.

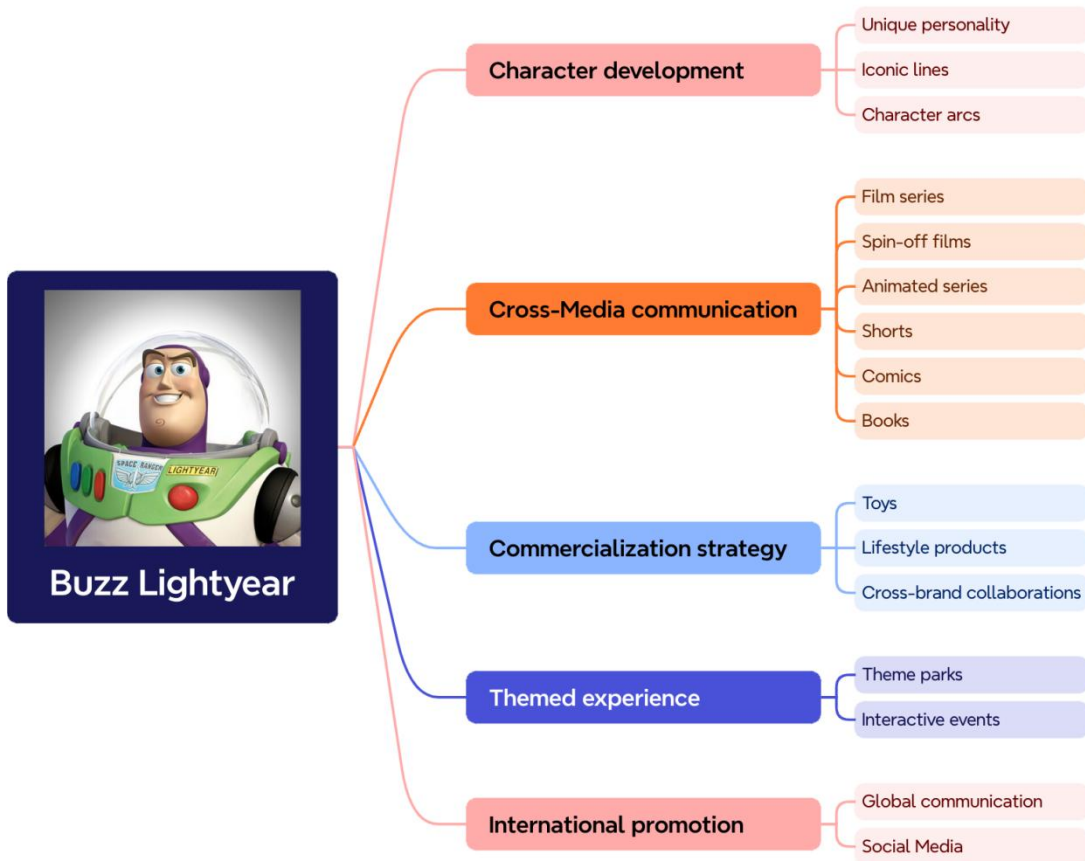


Figure 56 Buzz Lightyear's promotion strategies

Since the release of the first *Toy Story* in 1995 to the release of *Toy Story 4* in 2019, Buzz Lightyear has appeared in all four movies in the Toy Story franchise and has captivated audiences through generations. In 2022 a standalone film titled *Lightyear* (Figure 57) was released that gave a far greater backstory on Buzz Lightyear by following the real space ranger that this toy character is based on. With this film, it was more of the origin tale of the character that added new layers to the story of Buzz.



Figure 57 Lightyear (2022)

With the films, in 1996, came the animated series *Buzz Lightyear of Star Command*, which gave Buzz a spin-off series of his own. A number of animated shorts featuring Buzz have also aired on both TV and the internet, giving great exposure to the character. Besides this, several Buzz Lightyear comics and books were published, which expand his backstory and influence, making Buzz not just a character in a film series but a cultural icon with a far-reaching impact.

Buzz Lightyear's path from a film-specific character to an IP in his own right is testimony to how strategic storytelling combined with cross-media dissemination, continuous character development, can transform any fictional character into a household name. From films, television series, literature to merchandise, all have successfully kept Buzz current and favored, adding to his lot as an enduring and influence-wielding IP character.

As for merchandising strategies, a lot of Buzz Lightyear-themed merchandise has entered the market, such as action figures (Figures 58, 59), models of spacecraft, and collectibles, which have been the craze of both kids and collectors. Applications of Buzz Lightyear images have run extensively into items used every day, from stationery to clothes (Figure 60) and household goods, thus making the brand seem visible in daily life as well. Collaborations with various brands saw the release of limited editions of Buzz Lightyear in fast-food toys, beverage bottles, and lines of clothing, furthering the expansion of the brand's market influence.



Figure 58 Buzz toys



Figure 59 Buzz from Lego



Figure 60 Shoes from Crocs

Moreover, Disney theme parks have attractions such as the 'Buzz Lightyear's Space Ranger Spin', where customers can experience an adventure with Buzz Lightyear. Meanwhile, Buzz Lightyear appears routinely in Disney theme park parades and interactive events such as photo opportunities and activities for visitors, further grounding this character in reality. As an object of these various merchandising endeavors, Buzz Lightyear has not only gained relevance for diverse groups-children and adults alike-but has been cemented through each maneuver as one

of the well-known and perpetual IP figures in both popular culture and everyday culture.

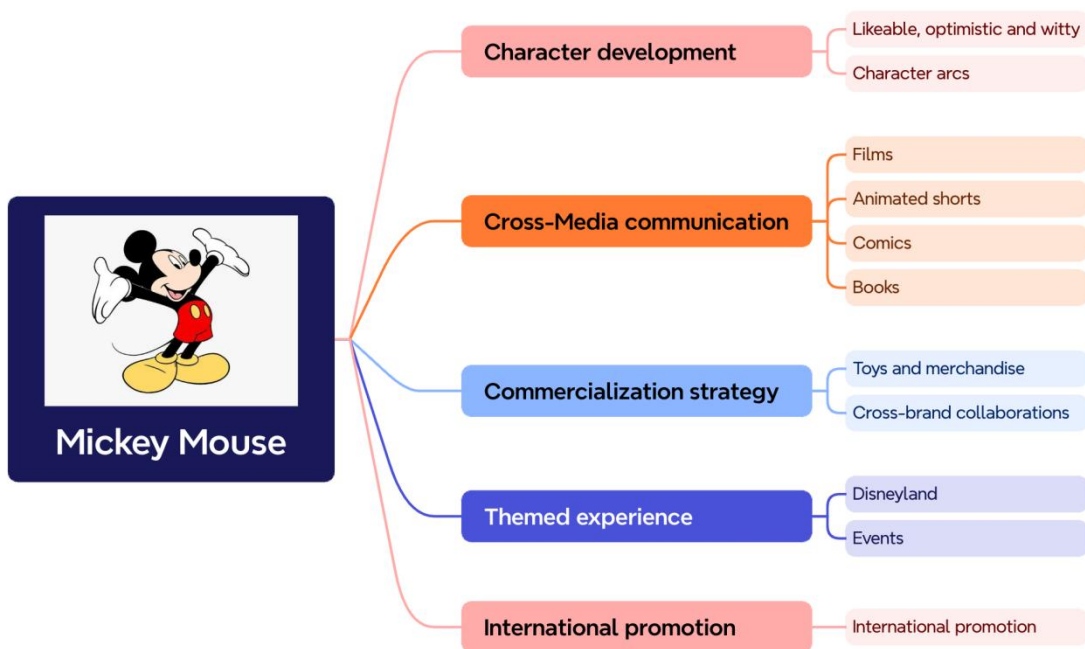


Figure 61 Mickey Mouse's promotion strategies

Mickey Mouse was created in 1928 by Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks. The first appearance of Mickey Mouse was in the short film *Steamboat Willie*. The design of Mickey is cute, optimistic, and clever; thus, it is liked by people of all ages. With time, his personality has developed into one that is much more multi-dimensional, even as it projects bravery, kindness, and intelligence. The details of Mickey's design have been continuously refined (Figure 62), not only to update his copyright but also to enhance his universal appeal and longevity, solidifying his status as an enduring and timeless character.

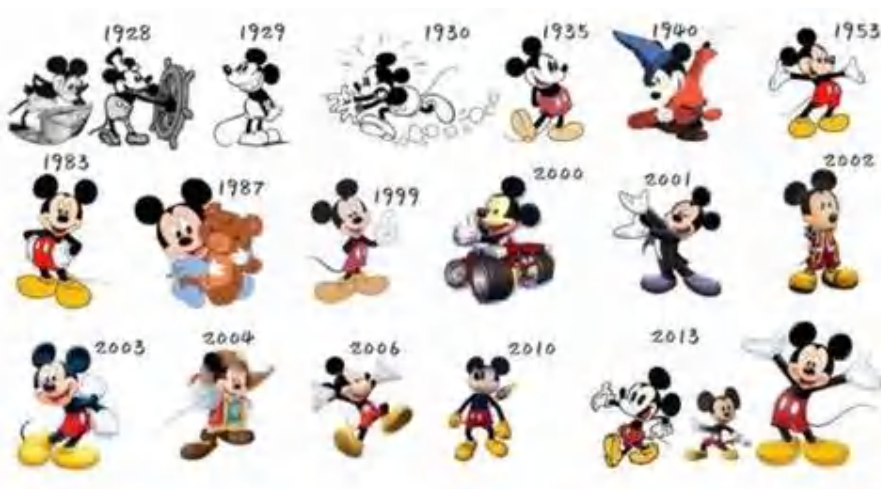


Figure 62 Several design evolutions of Mickey Mouse

Through various animated shorts and films, Mickey Mouse has embarked on countless adventures, further solidifying his image in the minds of audiences. Mickey originally gained popularity through animated shorts, which later expanded into television shows and feature films such as *Fantasia*. Television programs like *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* further broadened Mickey's audience, appealing to new generations of viewers. Mickey's stories were not confined to the screen; they also extended into comic books and literary works, which helped to expand his background and adventures.



Figure 63 Disney and Coach

Disney capitalized on Mickey's popularity by launching a wide range of Mickey-themed merchandise, including toys, clothing, and stationery, making his image deeply ingrained in popular culture. Mickey's likeness was widely applied to everyday items and apparel, increasing the character's visibility in daily life. Disney also collaborated with various brands to produce limited-edition Mickey-themed products (Figure 63), such as watches, home goods, and more, thereby expanding the brand's market influence.

Mickey Mouse plays a central role in Disney theme parks and serves as one of the most recognizable icons of the Disney brand. Visitors to the parks can take pictures with and interact with Mickey, further embodying his physical presence. During parades, shows, and other events held within the theme parks, Mickey always plays the lead role, which makes him even more important to the Disney experience.

Through translation and localization processes, Mickey Mouse jumped the barriers of culture and language to become a common cultural ambassador. Such an animated film, comic strips, and merchandise are in wide distribution throughout the world, guaranteeing that Mickey Mouse is loved by every generation and culture. Examples like Buzz Lightyear and Mickey Mouse just go

to prove that no matter what source materials, film, or television, very often commercialization strategies come out similarly.



Figure 64 Disney collaborated with various brands

This approach is most evident in the business of Disney, which owns one of the largest libraries of IP characters in the world. Disney has licensed its iconic characters to numerous companies and producers alike (Figure 64), engaging in some of the largest co-branding campaigns. These not only expand the reach of Disney's brand but also open the company to broader markets and allow entry into new consumer segments.

Through these partnerships, Disney has multiplied its presence manifold while complementing its brand equity by converting its high-demand intellectual properties or characters into various categories of merchandise such as toys, clothes, home appliances, and electronic gadgets. Disney's characters, therefore, do not just become visible on the screen in forms of entertainment but part of the consumer's life. These co-branding efforts also help Disney maintain a continued and strong brand image across various media and products to keep the character fresh and relevant to people of all ages.

By placing its IP characters in several commercial venues, Disney built a strong business model of truly maximizing the return from its characters while continuously entertaining and growing a worldwide audience. Disney's success has sparked growing interest in IP characters, with more consumers willing to spend money on their favorite characters, much like fans do with celebrities. Beyond the sphere of animation, the gaming industry and online social media have also seen

significant development in the creation and commercialization of IP characters.



Figure 65 Several design evolutions of Pikachu

In the gaming sector, characters like Pikachu (Figure 65) from the Pokémon series exemplify this trend. Pikachu first appeared in the 1996 Game Boy games *Pokémon Red/Green*, developed by Nintendo, GAME FREAK, and Creatures. With its cute appearance, lightning abilities, and loyal, friendly personality, Pikachu quickly became one of the most iconic and beloved characters in the Pokémon franchise. In the Pokémon animated series, Pikachu is the partner of the main character, Ash, and has joined him on countless adventures. The anime portrayal of Pikachu further cemented its image, making it a fan favorite. Since 1997, the Pokémon anime has aired over 1,000 episodes, spanning multiple generations of viewers. Apart from the movies, several Pokémon films, such as the case of *Detective Pikachu*, where Pikachu plays a main character, expanded this character's reach and influences. Pokémon comics, along with children's books about Pikachu, have also spread this fame among children, setting firm grounds for Pikachu being treated as a cultural phenomenon in its own right. Mere merchandising would create lots of toys, garments, and household items branded Pikachu, making it ever-present even in everyday life.



Figure 66 Kakao Friends

Kakao Friends (Figure 66), This group of characters are a set of characters which were originally

designed to be emoticons for the South Korean mobile messaging app *KakaoTalk* when it launched back in 2012. Each one of these characters, such as the goofy Ryan, the sweet Apeach, and the sassy Frodo, was individually designed with unique personalities and stories to which audiences emotionally connect. It has created character storytelling and personality through animation, comics, and short-form video format, making them friendlier and more memorable. Kakao Friends started to increase popularity through emoticons used in conversations on *KakaoTalk*, raising their visibility and increasing their usability. With newly released emoticons and updates about the characters, users' interests are kept high to maintain high activity in using them. The impact this has had for these characters has expanded greatly with the creation and distribution through social media and video-sharing platforms. Appearances through various advertising and promotional efforts serve to further extend brand exposure and complete their connection with the consumer.

The underlying philosophy of Kakao Friends' commercialization strategy is to create a wide merchandising approach: systematic character merchandising within diversified consumer product groups that increases brand presence within everyday consumer environments. Apart from this, it has sought strategic collaborative alliances that translate into special edition product lines covering all touchpoints of consumer engagement: promotional items, special packaging, and even collections of co-branded apparel. Its strategic partnerships with globally recognized retail brands, like MUJI and Uniqlo, have massively beefed up its presence in the market and extend the scope of the consumer base.

It has also developed various immersive experiential environments in the form of theme cafes across different geographies, thus providing multi-sensory engagement platforms for consumers to interface directly with the character ecosystem of the brand. Flagship and theme retail outlets positioned at the heart of cities are necessary brand touchpoints, complemented by a wide fan engagement plan: curated events, interactive exhibitions, activities with community building for deep brand loyalty. While the transformation of characters in comics, animation, and gaming into IP characters is in full swing, the whole evolution or creation of IP characters is emerging in many more industries; some are even transforming existing brand mascots into IP characters or embedding IP character design in brand strategy. In fact, there are companies that have a professional setup for IP character design, fully realizing the value and potentials that come with

them in the modern market.

This is already a very pervasive phenomenon that can be expected to broaden as even more industries enter the world of character intellectual properties with new ways for brands to relate to consumers and even create cultural relevance.

B. The case of a mascot developing into an IP character



Figure 67 Bibendum

The evolution of brand mascots into IP characters is a process that traces its roots back to some of the earliest examples of mascot design. One of the earliest and most iconic brand mascots is Bibendum (Figure 67), the Michelin Man, created in 1894 by the Michelin tire company. At a time when the concept of IP characters did not yet exist, these mascots were considered 'super icons'. Over time, as these cartoon figures were continuously promoted and repeatedly featured, they gradually became infused with brand values and cultural significance. Through ongoing development and adaptation, mascots like Bibendum evolved into symbols that transcended mere marketing tools to become 'super icons'.



Figure 68 Lego relate Michelin Man



Figure 69 Michelin Man: Bibendum Restaurant

Bibendum was mainly promoted through advertising and animated short films; therefore, it gave more exposure and weight to the character. In commercializing further, Michelin promoted Bibendum through the creation of toys and models, including collaborations with LEGO (Figure 68). One of the most meaningful crossovers is that, through the Michelin Guide, which awards stars to restaurants, further cements Bibendum's identification with quality and excellence in a very different field. Besides, Bibendum is a well-known figure at numerous car exhibitions, racing events, and promotional events, which even more strongly fixes the character in the mass consciousness.

While the commercial persona of Bibendum hardly rises to the level of merchandising and multimedia exposure of today's IP characters, such as those created by Disney or Pokémon, the Michelin Man has become an important part of popular culture nonetheless. The development of Bibendum shows that, while not fully qualifying as an IP character by today's standards, it is a thought-provoking starting point for understanding how brand mascots have become IP characters. The evolution from a mascot to an IP character includes the increase of the character's visibility across media and product categories. It also improves the character's relationship with consumers through a more complete connection to the brand's identity and cultural meaning.

The Bibendum case underlines at least one important aspect: even when brand mascots are not visibly reincarnated as regular IP creations, they might act as a source upon which the transformation could be built. That would mean any mascot, in principle, may be developed into a much more sophisticated and commercially valuable character through brand equity, cultural relevance, and marketing strategies.

With the market demands and media channels diversifying, traditional mascots could no longer fit the new need. That is why brand IP characters started flooding public consciousness. In contrast with the simple mascot or even just a symbol, these characters were supposed to have rich stories, distinctive personalities, and detailed backstories that would then enable them to tell stories across various forms of media: animated storytelling, movies, publishing. But unlike traditional mascots, IP characters are so much more relevant to the brand strategy, offering incomparably more appealing commercial opportunities. From being simple promoters of

marketing campaigns, they have grown into meaningful cultural properties. Such properties can serve to develop any kind of derivative products or drive common projects in various industries.

IP characters have come to carry a lot of weight in today's perspectives of digitalization and globalization. The potential for outreach, via digital channels that know no geographical bounds, to international audiences themselves makes them agents of international cultural exchange. One of the more surprising evolutions and changes in this context is the fact that Kumamon, an official mascot for Kumamoto Prefecture in Japan, has gained greater recognition and admiration well beyond his local origins.



Figure 70 Kumamon

Kumamon (Figure 70) Designed by Kumamoto Prefecture in 2010 to promote local tourism and culture, Kumamon is round and cute, with hilarious facial expressions and full of energy in all his movements. His designers also adopted some very special marketing methods. For example, there is a story about the disappearance of Kumamon on a business trip, which drew public attention and encouraged audience participation extensively, showing much more interactivity than commercial advertising.

The appeal of Kumamon lies in how the character's personality reflects very relatable human traits: a love for food, playfulness that leads to mishaps, and a tendency toward laziness and procrastination. Those characteristics, through body language and actions, resonate with audiences on a human level, fostering a deep emotional connection.

In any case, Kumamon's success shows IP characters to be powerful cultural ambassadors. By developing beyond the conventional limitations associated with mascots, Kumamon has become something of a symbol not only of Kumamoto Prefecture but also of Japan's broader cultural echo.

This shows that IP characters, if created with considerable depth and relatability, have the potential to achieve a level of global recognition and cultural significance that is hardly ever achieved by traditional mascots. With the advancement and globalization of digital platforms, the potential and importance of IP characters are expected to grow, hence making them very crucial elements in modern branding strategies.

Much of Kumamon's success has to do with the innovative commercialization strategy of free licensing of its image. The government of Kumamoto Prefecture allows the use of Kumamon's likeness for free by Japanese businesses, upon application through an official website, showing the use of Kumamon's image is going to be of profit in the promotion of Kumamoto Prefecture or includes the use of agricultural products from the region. After being approved, companies are allowed to freely use Kumamon's image on their products. This strategy has resulted in Kumamon's ubiquity on a range of products, from plush toys and models to stationery and clothing (including collaborations such as the Chocolate x Kumamon tie-up, Figure 71) and household items, increasing dramatically the visibility of the character in everyday life.



Figure 71 Chocolate x Kumamon

It has a theme park and an exhibition center in Kumamoto Prefecture, solely for Kumamon, where tourists visit to directly experience the beauty of this character. The case of Kumamon clearly demonstrates that a regional brand can also be highlighted all over the world with special imagery and an effective promotion strategy. By utilizing Kumamon's unique design and a successful marketing approach, Kumamoto Prefecture has been able to lift its brand to international status.

Another significance of the Kumamon case is its economic value of IP characters. Besides enhancing brand visibility, Kumamon earns substantial economic revenues through various merchandises: from plush toys, stationery, and clothing to food packages. Encouraged by the

success of Kumamon, other companies and local governments started creating their own mascots to promote their brands and improve economic benefits.

Its licensing strategy-free, together with Kumamon's cute and engaging character, has made it well transcend the concept of a local mascot and become a symbol of successful global marketing. The widespread use of Kumamon's image in a wide range of product categories shows that IP characters have a lot of potential for brand recognition and economic growth, serving as examples for other regions and brands to emulate.



Figure 72 Partnership with Leica cameras



Figure 73 Partnership with Nalu guitars

Further, collaborating with other brands to launch specially designed, limited-edition products, such as the collaboration with Leica cameras (Figure 72) and Nalu guitars (Figure 73), is another unprecedented model of inter-industry collaboration in brand promotion. These collaborations have extended Kumamon's reach but also exposed the collaborative brands to new markets and consumer groups. Success has also encouraged more brands to cross-industry collaboration for a mutuality of benefits, enlarging market share.

Kumamon succeeded because it could anthropomorphize the brand image through an amicable, cute appearance and with a rich backstory. It is easier for people to relate to such a brand image and to connect with it emotionally, which increases the appeal and recognition of the brand. It is because of Kumamon's experience that more brands would think of anthropomorphized and emotionally touching designs while creating their brand images, as such design would be more effective in communicating with consumers and establishing a strong brand bond.

The fusion of cross-industry collaborations along with highly relatable character design features makes Kumamon a strong tool in brand promotion and market expansion. This strategy has not

only cemented Kumamon's status as a cultural phenomenon but also created a point of reference from which the potential for personification and emotional engagement in developing connectivity with one's target audience can be explored. Success for Kumamon gives a case study that enables brands to work out strategies to better their positions in the market through innovative and emotionally magnetic brand strategies.

Indeed, integration with IP characters has become a big trend in modern marketing and will continue to play a leading role in the future. Such a promotional model enhances brand visibility and customer loyalty, adding richer cultural meaning and emotional resonance to the brand. A successful example of this trend in China is the IP character 'Snow King' from the popular ice cream and tea chain Mixue Bingcheng.

C. The cases of IP character

Brand + IP character: Snow King (2018) from Mixue Bingcheng



Figure 74 Snow King

The Snow King is a cute, friendly snowman that represents powerful affinity and recognizability, representing the values of Mixue Bingcheng: sweet, cool, and friendly. In addition, the character of Snow King has appeared to the public several times through online promotional videos and social media, from engaging to humorous advertising stories that reinforce the brand image and character recognition.

Mixue Bingcheng also produced and published several animated shorts of Snow King, flowing in social media and video-sharing platforms, which greatly amplified the influence of the character. Its theme song, 'You Love Me, I Love You, Mixue Bingcheng Sweet as Honey', reached a tremendous hit. Accompanied by animated videos of Snow King, this song received more than 5

million views on the Chinese video platform Bilibili (Figure 75) which is similar to YouTube. The bilingual (Chinese English) version reached over 20 million views and even attracted more than 10 million views on YouTube.



Figure 75 Views of the brand's theme song in Bilibili

Mixue Bingcheng has already collaborated with various brands in launching several limited-edition products in the theme of Snow King (Figure 76), including an electric scooter, creative online platform, and toys. This massively improved the brand awareness in the market and their consumer base. By associating Snow King with different products and experiences, the brand increased exposure, promoting deeper engagement with consumers.



Figure 76 Mixue Bingcheng collaborated with various brands

Snow King is very active online, reaching out to the public, while directly interacting and collaborating with other brands via social media. This strategic move greatly enhances Snow King's recognition and friendliness, further solidifying its leading position in the ranks of the most famous IP characters in China. During the process of Mixue Bingcheng's expansion into international markets, more importance is attached to the globalization of Snow King's promotion.

It is part of a wider trend in which companies are leveraging such characters to expand well

beyond what had hitherto been regarded as purely local appeal to seize substantial chunks of the international market. Now, for global success, strategies such as social media engagement and cross-brand collaborations will be important in letting Snow King resonate with the diversified audience of the globe.

Success by Snow King underlines the IP character's growing role in branding-not least as a way for Chinese companies to compete worldwide. That specialists in the creation of IP character design are now being set up shows that for the first time, the strategic value of these characters is being appreciated at a deeper level. This is a trend likely to continue into the future, with more brands considering developing their own distinctive, culturally resonant IP characters to embed their brand identities both locally and globally.

Artist/IP Design Company — Wuhuang Mao (My Majesty Moew)



Figure 77 Wuhuang Mao

Wuhuang Mao (Figure 77) is a creation by Chinese illustrator Bai Cha who for the first time showed this character in 2014. Together with colleagues, Bai Cha established an IP character development company and positioned Wuhuang Mao as the first character. This is a white and stuffed cat that is somewhat laid back and arrogant. He often acts in a 'royal' attitude as if he were an emperor. The unique features and comic expressions of Wuhuang Mao soon drew huge attention.

Through the various media platforms, including comics, animations, and literature, Wuhuang Mao has vividly expressed its multifunctional character and appealing life stories that have fostered audience love and identity toward it. Proficient use of social media platforms like Weibo, WeChat, and Chinese TikTok has enhanced the publication of comics, images, and news to ensure direct interaction with fans and increased popularity of the character. They also motivated and

encouraged users to create and publish content about Wuhuang Mao, contributing to increasing community activity in order to make a character better known.



《就喜欢你看不惯我又干不掉我的样子》

Figure 78 | *I Like You, You Can't Get Rid of Me* series

Wuhuang Mao has published several comic books and an illustrated works such as the well-received series *I Like You, You Can't Get Rid of Me* (Figure 78) that has consequently drawn a large following. It has also starred in animated shorts, which are distributed via social media and other video-sharing sites, pushing the character's reach and appeal to several thousand more. These moves underline its strong standing in the current digital and literary worlds, making it an important figure in its genre.



Figure 79 Wuhuang Mao's figurines



Figure 80 Power banks with Wuhuang Mao



Figure 81 An 8-meter tall Wuhuang Mao

As for commercialization, the image of Wuhuang Mao has also become widely used on a range of toys and living goods, from plush toys to figures (Figure 79), stationery, clothes, and household items. The image was reproduced into many exclusive collaborations with various other brands, into uniquely produced products that included power bank designs (Figure 80). Such collaboration not only expanded products related to Wuhuang Mao but also increased the visibility of the character on the market.

Furthermore, Wuhuang Mao frequently appears at major events, which increases its popularity and encourages public engagement. For instance, the appearance of an 8-meter-long Wuhuang

Mao (Figure 81) at a book release event in Beijing attracted over 3,000 attendees, indicating the high appeal and attracting the interest of such a character. These efforts have marked one of the successful transformations of Wuhuang Mao from a digital and textual phenomenon into a significant cultural and commercial icon.

Wuhuang Mao's success demonstrates the innovative way IP characters can become more widely popular through a well-judged combination of exciting content and strategic marketing. He leverages social media and community to develop a loyal fan base, establishing himself as an icon of culture. Its wide appeal in the use of various media and merchandise further justifies how an integrated IP strategy contributes toward creating a sustainable and influential brand.

With these cases, we can clearly identify the role, mascot, and IP character in the context of branding and marketing. A character typically refers to a person or another entity that plays a certain role or function within a particular context or story. Mascots are anthropomorphized symbols used by brands or organizations to represent their image. What makes IP characters special is that they have separate effects and commercial values and have become an independent living being instead of just a component belonging to the brand.

The most important benefit about the IP character is that, when it has gained an influential number of fans, it can feed back into the brand. For instance, through UGC, fans actively create and publish content about the character of the IP, with which brand awareness is increased along with user interaction and loyalty. This has, for example, greatly increased the visibility of Kumamoto Prefecture, its tourism appeal increased due to Kumamon, widely shared on social media and through content created by fans themselves. Similarly, Mixue Bingcheng's Snow King has been highly successful in terms of user-generated content via its social media presence and interaction with fans, thus extending the brand's influence.

The combination of brands with IP characters presents immense potential and growth prospects. First, IP characters infuse brands with emotional and narrative elements, making the brand image more engaging. For example, Disney's Mickey Mouse is not just a cartoon character but a symbol of the Disney brand spirit. Through various movies, animations, and theme parks around Mickey, Disney has successfully conveyed its brand culture to a global audience.

Second, IP characters can extend the marketing channels and business models of a brand. By launching various types of IP character products, cross-industry joint operations, and themed experiences, the brand can increase its sources of income and improve its competitiveness in the market. For example, different limited-edition products from cross-brand collaborations by Mickey Mouse have extended the influence of Disney in the market and attracted consumers of different age groups.



Figure 82 Luce



Figure 83 Announcement of the mascot 'Luce'

Last but not least, the integration of brands with IP characters can effectively enhance a brand's international influence and market penetration. With multilingual media content and global marketing campaigns, brands can introduce their IP characters to international markets and appeal to consumers from diverse cultural backgrounds. For example, Pokémon has become a globally recognized cultural symbol through the worldwide promotion of its animations, games, and merchandise. In addition, at the close of this thesis, the Vatican has just announced the official mascot for the 2025 Jubilee Year—Luce (Figure 82) (Italian for 'light'). In the words of Archbishop Fisichella (Figure 83), the design of this mascot represents 'the Church's desire to find vitality within the popular culture cherished by young people'. Since its release, Luce has gained tremendous attention, and from here, one can easily observe another direction in the development of IP characters.

In summary, by leveraging these strategies, brands can develop IP characters into independently influential and commercially valuable brand images, thereby achieving sustained brand growth and market expansion. This promotional model not only elevates the brand's commercial value but also provides consumers with rich emotional experiences and interactive enjoyment, indicating a promising future for such branding strategies.

2.4.2 Visual representation of IP characters

Currently, IP characters are relatively well-known across Asia, and as a relatively new concept, there are multiple English translations such as ‘IP Character’ and ‘IP Role’. According to CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), the earliest related paper on this topic was published in 2018. On Google Scholar, one of the most relevant studies on IP character design is a 2020 paper discussing the design of tourism IP characters for local regions. Although academic research on IP characters is still in its infancy, there is a noticeable trend of increasing interest and publication in this field.



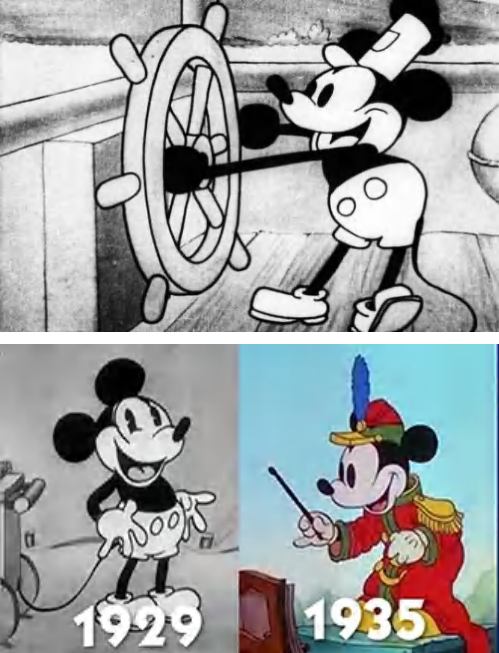
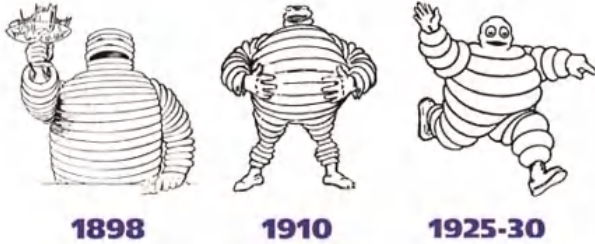

Globally, while the concept of ‘IP Character Design’ has yet to be widely established, the design of characters and mascots has a long-standing history. In China, IP character design is already familiar to many designers, but the distinction between IP characters and mascots is often blurred for both designers and brand owners. This section will attempt to explore the various stylistic expressions of IP character design by examining character and mascot design styles from different eras.

Technology has somewhat revitalized how character design has been produced, from simple digital drawing tools through to the evolution in 3D modeling technologies. Inventions have democratized the creation of characters beyond the art worlds of animation and comic book artists into other different types of designers. Therefore, the stylistic methodologies for character designs have also diverged in their manners to mirror every emerging aesthetic trend, cultural transformation, and technological development with the passing of each period.

The following sections account for the necessary characteristics of character design, going through five critical phases, showing how different contexts of each era influenced principles and methods of design. This study will try to explain how artistic creativity and technological development together formed the visual language and cultural relevance of the characters throughout history.

Table 9 Five key periods – Hand-Drawn Era

The Hand-Drawn Era: Simple, Exaggerated Lines (Late 19th Century - Early 20th Century)	
Cartoon characters	Mascots

<p>Felix the cat (1919/1930/1936)</p> 	<p>Quaker Oats: Quaker Man (1877/1964)</p> 
<p>Mickey Mouse (1928/1929/1935)</p> 	<p>Michelin: Bibendum (1898/1910/1925-30)</p>  <p>1898 1910 1925-30</p> <p>Brown Shoe Company (1904)</p>  <p>AUTHORIZED BUSTER BROWN DEALER</p>


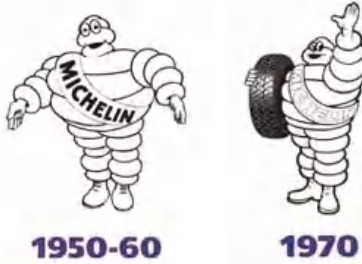



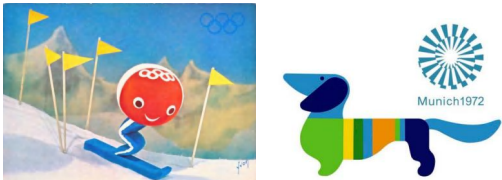
Character design in this period had to be simple, with exaggerated lines to enable emotion and humor in the bold expressions and movements. It was a function of early animation and printing technologies. Designers needed to have characters whose form would be easy to reproduce. Because of this simplicity, all the characters could well be instantly recognizable. Strong outlines and few details were needed. Such design choices balanced practicality with visual appeal. The result was characters that were both expressive and memorable. Characters designed during this period were thus very minimalist, though highly expressive, to facilitate communication using the minimum number of animation frames or even print resolution.

It was during this period that mascots started to become very powerful tools for the promotion of brands through their specific design and story unique to each, which helped the organizations reach critical mass in the marketplace as well as achieved consumer loyalty. A very well-known example is Bibendum from Michelin, considered one of the very first mascots to apply

anthropomorphic features in design. Being a human figure composed of piled tires, the Michelin Man communicated the identity and ideals that the company was for pretty well. The uniqueness and memorability of Bibendum's design greatly helped in laying the foundation of Michelin brand identity despite the primitiveness of design tools at that time.

Technical limitations were probably one of the serious factors that influenced designers to develop the characters with uncomplicated shapes and lines that were easy to reproduce on different media. One of the most serious reasons that made such first characters and mascots popular and, moreover, continue to hold influence through to today, was simplicity.

Table 10 Five key periods – Color Utilization

Color Utilization: Richness and Detail in Design (1940s to 1970s)	
Cartoon characters	Mascots
<p>Felix the cat (1956)</p> 	<p>Michelin: Bibendum (1950-60/1970)</p> 
<p>Mickey Mouse (1940/1953)</p> 	<p>Quaker Oats: Quaker Man (1957/1972)</p> 
<p>Tom and Jerry (1960)</p> 	<p>Olympic: Amik (1969)/ Waldi (1972)</p> 

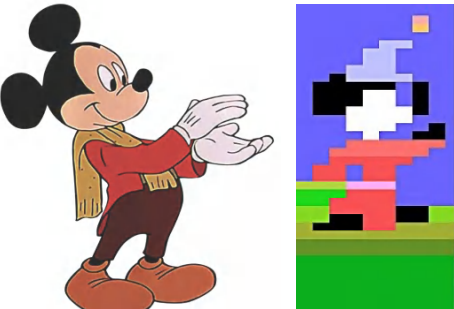



With the advent of film and television, character design in animation further developed during this period. The greater pervasiveness of color television and films allowed for richer colors and far more detail in depictions. Designs became increasingly intricate, reflecting both technological progress and cultural evolution. Individuality and realism were now the main emphases in

character design. Artists started to work with wider color palettes and more complicated shading. These developments invested the characters with more dimensions and aesthetic value.

During this period, the design of mascots continued to evolve, representing them symbolically but with simplicity in order to be easily remembered and reproduced. Color application within mascot design became more complex, which raised their aesthetic appeal and strengthened brand identity. The redesigns that were most noticeable were for the Michelin Man (Bibendum) and the Quaker Oats' Quaker Man, with more distinctive and bright color schemes. It drew an even closer bond between the visual elements of the mascots and the brands they represented.

This was also the era where branding elements got well strategically integrated with the design of the mascot. Bright colors and intricately designed details further stabilized the relation between the mascots and the brands to which they belonged. Consumers could now relate visual identities of the mascots quite well to the brands, further enhancing brand loyalty and recognition. Mascots and characters are tools used to create emotional and cognitive connections with audiences; hence, they are integral to a brand, going beyond mere visual appeal.

Table 11 Five key periods – Transition to Digital

Transition to Digital: Diversification and Anthropomorphism (1980s to 1990s)	
Cartoon characters	Mascots
<p>Mickey Mouse (1983)</p> 	<p>Michelin: Bibendum</p>  <p>1980-90 1998-2000</p>
<p>Dragon Ball Z: Dead Zone (1898)</p> 	<p>Kool-Aid Man (1983)</p> 

Felix the cat (1995)



Olympic: Misha (1980)



Izzy (1996)



The style of the character design has undergone extreme permutations throughout the 1980s and 1990s, roughly concurrently with the emergence of digital technology as it slowly started breaking into the business. During that period, Japanese anime and video games emerged as mainstream sources of entertainment. Each one of them had distinctive features that made their style easily distinguishable: huge eyes, an elaborately detailed background, and exaggeratedly expressed emotions. It thus called for deeper scrutiny with regards to information on emotional expression, attributes that have brought out the anime style to become a global phenomenon in the years that followed.



Advances in the technology within this arena further gave birth to pixel art, which was to become the signature aesthetic element of many early video games. The early technologies of gaming set a set of significant limitations, which catalyzed the development process of pixel art and opened quite new perspectives on character diversity. The designers had to invest a lot of creative effort in working with very restricted color palettes and resolution. During this period, it was possible to create such iconic characters as Mario Bros, featuring minimalist design but full of character and recognizable at once.

Moreover, printing and animation techniques developed much during that time, enabling complicated and detailed designs. CAD started to be used in this production process, and more complex character designs were possible. For instance, the creation of Dragon Ball Z: Dead Zone, made at the end of the 1980s, expressed the successful combination of old-school animation techniques with digital enhancements that led to more dynamic and vivid character designs.

As with everything else at this time, mascots were becoming a lot more anthropomorphized and expressive. Designers began to add more human-like expressions and movements to mascots to make them even more relatable and engaging. The design elements varied from animals to human figures to abstract concepts combined in mascots to make them not only striking but also emotionally appealing. This anthropology and emotive expression so helped mascots establish a link with the audiences that it turned things to the benefit of brand loyalty and brand recognition.

In conclusion, from the 1980s through the 1990s, character and mascot design went through a period of explosive evolution due to both technological progress and the Japanese influence of anime and video gaming. Thus, this was a time when the premises for a digital revolution in character design were laid down in those versions in which the sense of traditional artistry and up-and-coming digital media allowed creators to be even more free-and-easy and to build more complex, emotionally compelling characters.

Table 12 Five key periods – 3D Modeling

The Rise of 3D Modeling: Digital Diversity (2000s)	
Cartoon characters	Mascots
Felix the cat (2003) 	Michelin: Bibendum 
Mickey Mouse (2006)	Kool-Aid: Kool-Aid Man (2001)

	
<p>Ice Age (2002)</p> 	<p>Olympic: Syd, Olly, Millie (2000)</p>  <p>Beibei, Jingjing, Huanhuan, Yingying, Nini (2008)</p> 




Further, 3D modeling reached another milestone in the field of character design; from the development of character-building programs such as Autodesk Maya and Blender, this evolution moved on to creating items that are truly inhabited with well-defined and realistic characters. Realistic shadows and the possibility to render characters using real textures and lighting brought an entirely new dimension and feeling of reality into digital design. Characters developed during this era, like Pixar's Toy Story and DreamWorks' Shrek, had details that were impossible in the previous two decades. They also incorporated 3D modeling technology right from the conceptual framework.








The design trends of that period showed the effect of the active digital revolution, as well as the rise of Internet culture. Now, with more versatile and powerful digital tools, designers could push creative limits much further than before. This, in turn, gave way to all kinds of styles and looks characters could be hyper-realistically textured or stylized in a way that was artistically unique, fitting into the story and targeted audience.

During this same period, the design of mascots has also changed, considering events like the 2000 Sydney and 2008 Beijing Olympics. In each instance, the cultural and traditional touches of the host nation were added together with the most modern approach in design. Thus, they had richer and more vivid colors to make them visually catching and, therefore, not only representative of an event but even of countries and their identity. For example, the Beijing 2008 Olympics mascots, known as the ‘Fuwa’, were a blend of traditional Chinese cultural motifs with vibrant, contemporary aesthetics, designed to capture global attention while celebrating China’s rich history.

With the general rise in 3D modeling and digital painting in the 2000s, the style of character design really began to diversify. Being able to bring together traditional design with modern digital techniques created visually stunning yet culturally resonant characters. This was really the milestone needed to further progress into more innovative and immersive creations for the future in character and mascot design.

Table 13 Five key periods – Digital Innovation

Digital Innovation and Cultural Diversity (2010s to Present)		
Cartoon characters	Mascots	IP characters
<p>Mickey Mouse (2013/2023)</p> 	<p>Kool-Aid: Kool-Aid Man (2013)</p> 	<p>JD.com: Joy (2013-2021)</p> 
Spider-Man: Into the Spider-	Olympic: Vinicius (2016)	Pop Mart: Molly (2016)

<p>Verse (2018)</p>  	 <p>Miraitowa and Someity (2020)</p>  <p>Phryge (2024)</p> 	 <p>Snow King (2018)</p> 
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Globalization and cultural diversity have really influenced today's character design, with many styles ranging from hyper-realistic to minimalist. In modern designing, diversity and inclusivity are portrayed to represent so many more identities and stories than ever before happening around the world today. An era now dominated by just unique fusions of cultural influences might make the character designs vary visually and thematically.

Technological progressions have contributed much to this evolution. For instance, 3D modeling on Autodesk Maya, Blender, and ZBrush allows the character designer to create such heightened details in 3D characters. Although such technologies are at work for film and television animation, they have also become a significant part of video game design, virtual reality, and augmented reality. 3D technology allows designers to observe their characters and work from virtually any angle, not to mention simulate lighting, textures, and physical properties of characters that make them more realistic and interesting. It really opened a whole new dimension for character design, enabling the creation of more elaborate and detailed designs that really appeal to the audiences' feelings.

Furthermore, software such as Adobe After Effects and Toon Boom Harmony has given designers the ability to bring static characters to life with sophisticated animations and visual effects. These tools allow for the creation of characters that are not only visually appealing but also expressive and emotionally compelling. Advanced animation techniques enhance the depth of character expression, making them more relatable and memorable. For instance, the use of mixed media in Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse really shows how 2D and 3D can be married together for a unique and dynamic look that really pushes the boundaries of more traditional character design.

In recent years, the world of mascots has been done with so much innovation and interaction. Mascots designed for modern use are for interaction on various digital platforms, with the incorporation of AR and VR for enhancement in user experience. Further combined with the growth in environmental and sustainability awareness, there's an integration of environmentally friendly and sustainable manners in the design and production of mascots. This satisfies the interests of all international parties and appeases the more youthful demographic currently covetous of environmental policies.

This has also made IP characters very popular in China, which are combined features of both anime character design and traditional mascot design.

Joy's redesign might just be one such example from where inspiration has been sought from both animation and mascot design to come up with a character that resonates culturally and works commercially. It's indicative of a trend where IP will slowly become a key factor in brand strategy since companies are increasingly working to create characters that can move across cultural and geographic frontiers. It was cloud computing integrated with online collaborative tools that brought this practice to a whole new dimension. Today, designers can easily share designing with their peers and clients in different parts of the world. Thus, such global collaboration promotes creative ideas and cultural diversity, which culminates in innovative design style and ideas. The relatively recent arrival of AI-driven tools such as ChatGPT, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion started influencing the realm of character design. It will help in the creation of character sketches, designing, and even finishing complex designing tasks itself, thereby opening an entirely new world of digital creation.

Or, in other words, the point of definition for this period-from the 2010s right up to the present-is

where digital advance meets the diverse cultural articulation in the expression of character. Such a level of technological sophistication, coupled with a far greater awareness of global cultural narratives, has brought about a whole range of character development forms that are expressive and immersive. The period has enlarged not only the possibilities of character design but also the roles that characters now play in storytelling, marketing, and the cross-exchange of global cultural values. The development of character design method throughout the ages can be considered one smooth interaction of the levels of cultural, artistic, and technological developments: from the first epoch of simple, hand-drawn lines to the very complex textures possible with digital 3D modeling. This development in character design not only reflects the imaginative power and technological advancement of the artists but is also a reflection of the changes in the social and cultural atmosphere.

The same situation is with the design of mascots: it has gradually evolved to meet the newly appearing market requirements and customer tendencies. In this respect, the IP character style has already created its specific line of evolution due to the influence of traditional approaches in character creation, hidden concepts of mascot design, and changes demanded by the market. Cross-disciplinary style fusion enhances diversity in character design, promotes cultural value, and increases brand's market appeal.

However, viewed from design styles, it is none and not fixed. In the processes of designing characters, mascots, or IP characters, these depend largely on the character style of the designer or the artist and prevailing market trends and appeal. Thus, design styles are varied per se, emphasizing creativity and appeal in the effectiveness of visual communication.

In the context of IP creation, the character has to align with the core values of the brand, target audience, and market trends. This is where the design should align with the identity of the brand through specific colors, shapes, and design elements that reinforce the overall visual style of the brand. For example, the palette and visual motifs of a brand need to be represented on the character for brand continuity. The style also depends on the target audience for which one is designing. For instance, characters for young children are normally simple and more cartoonish, while those meant for teenagers may be complex and stylish in design. It is important to know the cultural background of the audience so that sensitive designs may be created without an

incomplete cultural interpretation.

Current market trends also greatly influence character design. The trend may change every year, and at times it's retro, while other times it's futuristic. This can then be integrated into the design of characters in order to give them a contemporary feeling. Also, to identify points of differentiation or market gaps, competitor character design analysis is important for making a brand stand out in the market.

The design of characters, whether they are traditional characters, mascots, or IP characters, has to balance artistic creativity with strategic thinking about branding, engaging with one's audience, and overall positioning within the market. This approach allows creating characters which not only look nice but will also serve in popular communication and storytelling of the brand in an ever-growing competitive marketplace.

2.4.3 IP character design method

In the section on character design styles, we discussed how character designs can be quite varied through time and cultures. Each of these styles not only shows the trend of art and technologies adopted by their times but also reflects how designers use visual elements to deliver the personality and narrative of IP characters. But to implement those styles, it's important to look at the method behind designing IP characters.

Character design for IP spans a number of fields and industries, including film, animation, video games, advertising, and branding. Although these fields share some basic principles, such as appeal and memorability, the specific demands and applications of character design vary significantly between them.

Characters in films usually need to have deeper layers of emotions and other traits that can be complex for longer story development and audience interest. The design needs to be visual in detail and realistic, allowing it also to merge with the film's general structure of narrative and theme. Character development pertains to the storyline and always requires a balance between aesthetics and coherence.

In character design, animation applies wider bounds of style and expression from the surreal to

the fantastically minimalist and abstract. It typically includes cultural elements in animation character design and the symbolism that will be appealing to the targeted audience. Characters for teenagers may be designed to accentuate individuality and ease of recognition, features which would appeal to teenagers.

Character design in video games needs to take into consideration the medium's interactive aspect. The movements, abilities, and responses of characters have to match the gameplay. While the visual appeal of a character is important, so is their playability and versatility in fitting within various game strategies and player choices.

Character design in advertising should correspond to the image and principles of the brand to increase brand awareness and loyalty. The main purpose of an advertising character is to communicate very specific marketing messages. It should be simple yet striking to easily get the attention of the audience. Many times, an advertising character has to be applied across various media, such as print, television, and digital, which requires great flexibility and scalability in design.

Character design in the field of IP plays a significant role, though the needs and uses are different from those of film, animation, video games, and advertising. Character design in branding not only communicates the key values and messages of the brand but also builds up a unique identity in competitive markets. Similar to advertising, branding character design should be aligned with the overall visual identity and communication strategy of the brand. Its character, visual style, and color scheme should reflect all brand essential attributes and help to enforce better brand recall and sharp market segmentation.

The role of IP characters is often to tell stories and reinforce brand narratives. A successful brand character can serve as a vehicle for the brand's story, adding layers of depth in terms of both narrative and emotion. Moreover, brand characters should create positive feelings for consumers, such as closeness, trust, and happiness. The emotional connections developed by brand characters lead to higher brand loyalty and consumer engagement.

Given the different demands of each field, character design practices exhibit a high degree of diversity and customization. While this diversity fosters creative development, it also complicates the establishment of systematic design processes. Therefore, this research focuses on the

application of IP character design in the branding field, aiming to provide innovative and systematic design methodologies for brand building and marketing. Current literature largely emphasizes case studies and the exploration of design principles, yet it lacks a comprehensive theoretical framework.

Research indicates that while the volume of literature on IP character design has grown steadily since 2018 in China, it remains concentrated on traditional cultural design and communication. For instance, studies like the case of Tongling's white ginger product (Haiyan, 2021) demonstrate how IP character design can deepen consumer impressions of a product. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further expanded the exploration of IP characters in traditional museums. Through historical exploration of character design, it is evident that regions such as the United States and Japan have long engaged in character research. The ongoing research and practice of IP character design outside China also reflect a global demand for strong brand storytelling and character-driven marketing strategies.

In the United States, research on character design in branding and entertainment industries focuses on brand identification, marketing, and cross-platform storytelling. American studies emphasize innovative storytelling techniques and global market strategies for characters, exemplified by Disney's global storytelling approach and the worldwide impact of Mickey Mouse.



Figure 84 BT21

In South Korea, character design research emphasizes market effectiveness and fan culture. Studies explore how character design and marketing promote cultural export and brand internationalization, along with strategies for character-fan interaction. For example, the BT21 (Figure 84) project, a collaboration between the South Korean supergroup BTS and Line Friends, highlights the integration of online character design with fan engagement, boasting over 30 million

followers on its official social media accounts and generating significant global sales (Wang, 2020b, Wang, 2020a).

Japan's deep-rooted history and global influence in anime and video games are complemented by its unique approach to brand building through 'Yuru-chara' (ゆるキャラ), or 'relaxed characters'. This concept, which is distinctly Japanese, refers to mascots that are designed to be cute, simple, and often a bit clumsy. These characters are widely popular for their charming and approachable appearances, and they serve primarily to promote local governments, tourist attractions, special customs, or local businesses. A prime example of this is Kumamon, the mascot of Kumamoto Prefecture (Figure 85). In 2015, products related to Kumamon generated a total sales revenue of 100 billion yen (approximately 990 million USD), with overseas markets, particularly in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand, accounting for 2.1 billion yen in sales (Suzuki and Kurata, 2017).

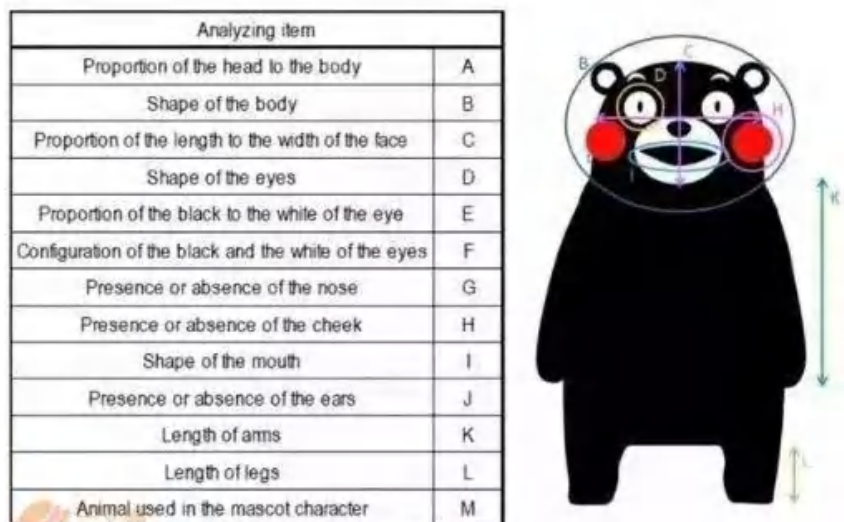


Figure 85 Analyzing of Kumamon

The term 'Yuru-chara' was coined in 2009 by Japanese artist Jun Miura, who outlined three basic components that define these mascots: a. they must convey a strong affection for their home region, b. their movements should be unique, irregular, or clumsy, and c. they should be simple or leisurely cute (Dato, 2020).

The distinguishing feature of the Yuru-chara concept is that these mascots are typically designed based on local characteristics or cultural elements, which fosters a strong sense of identity and evokes public interest and affection. This approach allows Yuru-chara to act as effective tools in regional promotion, creating an emotional connection with the audience while promoting local

culture and products. The success of Yuru-chara like Kumamon demonstrates the potential of these mascots to significantly impact both local and international markets, reinforcing the cultural and economic influence of Japanese character branding.

Despite the fact that many might not realize it, 'Yuru-chara' enjoys significant popularity on the international stage. A notable example is Domo (Figure 86), the mascot of Japan's national broadcaster NHK, which is a fuzzy, monster-like character with jagged edges. Since 2001, Domo has gained substantial popularity in emerging online mascot communities like Newgrounds and YTMND. As one of the earliest widely recognized internet mascots, Domo saw its merchandise quickly flood into Western markets, with many consumers unaware of its origins (Dator, 2020). The success of Yuru-chara in Japan and worldwide has popularized the concept of mascots and demonstrated the value of certain mascots. However, it has also led to the homogenization of mascot design.

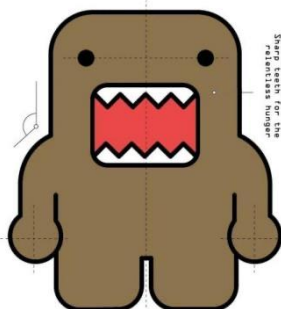


Figure 86 Domo

When considering IP character design methods or processes, it is essential to account for cultural differences and the diversity of market demands, requiring flexible adjustments according to different cultural contexts and audience preferences. These factors contribute to the challenges in forming widely applicable design methodologies. Additionally, with the rapid development of technologies such as AR, VR, and 3D modeling, the tools and expressions of IP character design are continually evolving. Technological advancements not only drive innovation in design practices but also challenge the development of long-lasting design methods. Consequently, IP character design often requires the integration of multiple disciplines, including art, psychology, marketing, and technology. This interdisciplinary nature makes the design process more complex.

In summary, while there is currently no unified method for IP character design within the branding

field, this lack also highlights the significant potential for research and innovation in this area. The continuous evolution of design methodologies and the incorporation of emerging technologies and cultural considerations will likely shape the future of IP character design, offering new opportunities for brands to create distinctive, culturally resonant, and technologically advanced characters that can engage global audiences.

2.4.4 IP character in China

The earliest brand mascots in China can be traced back to the early 20th century, when industrialization and the market economy prompted businesses to focus on brand image development.



Figure 87 White Rabbit Creamy Candy

One of the earliest examples is the White Rabbit Creamy Candy brand (Figure 87), established in 1959, which is among China's earliest candy brands. Its mascot, a white rabbit symbolizing purity and goodness, has been used consistently and remains a household name. The White Rabbit mascot has also been involved in cross-brand collaborations, further enhancing its market presence.

Another iconic Chinese mascot is the Haier Brothers (Figure 88), introduced by Haier Group in 1995. Initially created to promote the brand through an animated series titled 'Haier Brothers (Figure 89)', the show told the story of two brothers who embark on global adventures, with a focus on educating children about science and environmental protection. The success of the animation helped closely associate the Haier Brothers with the Haier brand. Not only did the character targets appear in the animation, but they were also widely used on the product packaging, advertising, and other promotional activities, hence making the brand more approachable and well-known. From then on, the Haier Brothers were integrated into many products: stationery, toys, clothes, and into a series of brand activities and cross-industry

collaborations, such as educational science kits and environmental campaigns.



Figure 88 Haier Brothers (1995)



Figure 89 Animation of Haier Brothers



Figure 90 Haier Brothers (2014)

As the brand mascots for the Haier Group, the success of their animated series and a series of marketing campaigns greatly elevated the recognition and reputation of the brand. Their image represents not only the spirit of innovation and technological advancement of the company but also a classic symbol across generations.

In 2014, in line with the rapidly developing digital age and to further consolidate brand engagement, Haier renewed the image of the Haier Brothers (Figure 90). The rebranding of the mascots aims to increase their relevance to better connect with users in today's increasingly connected world. The updated design targeted contemporary audiences, thus increasing their appeal by ensuring that they would remain relevant to both longstanding and new generations. This is part of the broader strategy from Haier to ensure brand loyalty by deepening customer interaction through the use of a modernized, engaging mascot in line with current trends and digital landscapes.



Figure 91 Want Want Milk

Another very early and extremely successful brand mascot is Want Want Milk's Wangzai (Figure 91). Coming from Taiwan's Want Want Group, which entered the mainland Chinese market in 1996, Wangzai is now synonymous with a wide array of branded products, ranging from Wangzai

QQ Candy to Wangzai Snow Cakes. This character is supposed to extend the brand's reach because it has been replicated across stationery, toys, and apparel merchandise, appealing primarily to the younger generation. Want Want has also collaborated in a cross-industry manner within fashion and art verticals by launching limited-edition products targeted at the youth segments. For instance, the firm collaborates with famous designers and artists on limited-edition packaging and merchandise that drive many young consumers crazy.

The success of Want Want Milk lies not only in the quality of their respective products and marketing strategies but also in the effective creation and dissemination of the mascots themselves. These mascots have established strong brand recognition and loyalty in the Chinese market, becoming classic IP characters through their charming and approachable designs, extensive market promotion, and innovative brand activities. These early examples of Chinese brand mascots send valuable lessons and insights to other brands in the development of their mascots. These mascots have not only enhanced the approachability and recognition of brands but have also become enduring symbols for multiple generations.

According to a report published by the China Economic Information Service (2022), IP is defined as the unification of cultural and industrial value, capable of being validated by the market and time, fostering long-term consumer behavior and expectations. It encapsulates and distills users' emotions and cultural values, continuously innovating and developing through the successive creations by various entities, forming a series of cultural products with a shared core and symbiotic relationships. The growing emphasis on cultural IP in China has further propelled IP development across various industries.

The development of IP in China can be better understood through the evolution of the blind box culture. The concept of the Gashapon machine (a capsule toy vending machine), which first appeared in Japan's model market in the 1980s, was used to sell anime figurines, toy models, and accessory items. Building on this marketing strategy, Pop Mart (Figure 92), a toy collection store, introduced the concept to the Chinese trendy toy market in 2017, despite facing losses initially. The blind box concept, with its inherent element of surprise and the combination of fixed and hidden items, created an allure beyond its value, capturing the psychological appeal of the post-95 generation by offering low-priced entry options. According to the '2019 Post-95 Consumer

Spending Power Report' released by Tmall, 200,000 consumers spend more than 20,000 RMB annually on blind boxes, with some even spending half of their annual income on these collectibles. The blind box culture has further stimulated the trendy toy consumption market. According to the '2021 Q1 China Trendy Toy Industry Development Status and Market Research Analysis Report', the trendy toy industry's market share in China increased from 11.18% in 2017 to 19.17% in 2020. Trendy toy consumers are predominantly post-95 individuals, who account for 45% of the market. As young people become the main consumer force in the market, various industries have begun to recognize the value of IP, with its influence gradually emerging in different consumer behaviors, such as film, entertainment, and dining. Besides brands specifically dedicated to IP creation, other brands are also committed to developing their own IP characters or collaborating with well-known IP characters.



Figure 92 Storefront of Pop Mart



Figure 93 Tmall

In the e-commerce sector, Tmall unveiled its mascot, Tmall (Figure 93), in 2012, upgrading its image in 2017 and again in 2019. Visually, the anthropomorphism of the IP character has become increasingly pronounced, with greater malleability in design. Starting in 2019, Tmall introduced the concept of outfit changes for its IP character, showing the influence of the then-popular blind box culture.

Another case is JD.com, another e-commerce platform, where the IP character JOY (Figure 94) was first introduced in 2013. The brand initially aimed to convey loyalty to its customers through a dog-like image, emphasizing trustworthiness in providing reliable products and services. In 2017, JD.com underwent a brand upgrade, transforming JOY from a metallic dog into a more approachable white dog. Compared to Tmall, JD.com has focused more on developing JOY, from collaborating with popular films to partnering with other brands, like with Transformers (Figure 95) to create exclusive commemorative products for the JD platform (Figure 96). JD.com even produced a four-minute New Year short film, 'Joy Story (Figure 97)', created by an Oscar-winning team, showcasing how the brand leverages its IP character to evoke emotional resonance with consumers. In 2021, JD.com further optimized the IP character, making the white dog more anthropomorphic and approachable.



Figure 94 JOY

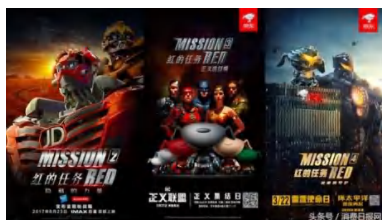


Figure 95 Mission Red series

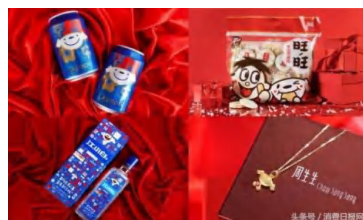


Figure 96 Collaboration Products



Figure 97 Joy story

The final e-commerce platform case study involves Suning.com, which introduced its IP character, SuRoaring (Figure 98), in 2015. SuRoaring is an abstract yellow lion designed to foster engaging and playful interactions with younger audiences, thereby refreshing the brand's image to appeal more to a younger demographic. The brand leveraged SuRoaring by creating a comic series (Figure 99) that narrates SuRoaring's adventurous journey after arriving on Earth. This approach allowed consumers to better understand the character's worldview and values, thereby bridging the gap between the brand and its audience. In 2020, Suning.com further upgraded the

SuRoaring (Figure 100) character, giving it a more rounded and fuller appearance, enhancing its appeal and relatability.



Figure 98 SuRoaring



Figure 99 Comic series



Figure 100 SuRoaring (2020)

By comparing the IP characters of these three brands, it becomes clear that brands establish IP characters not only to attract young consumers but also to forge connections between the brand and consumers through cross-brand collaborations and the creation of pan-cultural associations. Influenced by blind box culture around 2020, brands have optimized their IP characters, making them more anthropomorphic and friendly—primary considerations in the optimization process.

Beyond brand-driven IP character development, brands utilizing IP images in their products also keep pace with blind box culture. A notable example is the 56 ethnic blind boxes by Want Want Milk. In 2019, Want Want Milk designed these blind boxes (Figure 101) to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of China.



Figure 101 Blind boxes of Want Want Milk

In the Chinese market, it is evident that establishing and applying IP characters is a prevailing trend. Many brands, in addition to creating their own IP characters, also collaborate with well-known IP characters. Since its introduction in 1959, the White Rabbit brand has become deeply ingrained in Chinese culture, with a broad audience. However, due to globalization and the limited variety of products, the brand once fell into obscurity. With the rise of IP culture, other brands saw opportunities to capitalize on the White Rabbit image through cross-brand collaborations. For

instance, in 2018, Maxam collaborated with White Rabbit to launch White Rabbit-flavored lip balm (Figure 102). In 2019, a Los Angeles-based store named Wanderlust Creamery sold White Rabbit-flavored ice cream (Figure 103), selling 1,000 ice cream scoops in a single day. Online, the product garnered 480 million views and 42,000 discussions within 72 hours. In anticipation of the 2023 Chinese Year of the Rabbit, Coach also collaborated with White Rabbit (Figure 104).



Figure 102 White Rabbit-flavored lip Balm



Figure 103 White Rabbit-flavored ice cream



Figure 104 Coach x White Rabbit

It is clear that IP characters have an increasing influence on Chinese consumers, particularly among the younger demographic. As an example, the IP character based on Gail Anderson's cat (Figure 105), launched by the British Museum in China, has been notably successful in the region. However, related products are uncommon in the British Museum's gift shop in London, reflecting the popularity of IP characters in China.



Figure 105 British Museum IP character based on Gail Anderson's cat

In China, while most brands are aware of the popularity of IP characters, there remains a significant ambiguity regarding their precise definition. This is particularly evident when clients request the design of an IP character; often, their understanding of the brand's vision, values, target audience, and positioning background is vague or even nonexistent. Many brands continue to equate IP characters with mascots, viewing them primarily as super symbols designed to enhance brand recognition. These characters are seen as brand ambassadors, serving to

increase affinity and bridge the gap between the brand and its users. They are employed to shape brand identity and to communicate brand values and content through various forms such as comics, animations, and mascots, engaging users in a lively and interactive manner to strengthen brand association and emotional connection (Yuan, 2022).

Despite the significant development and impactful role of IP characters in the Chinese market in recent years, there are several issues and challenges that have emerged during their development. These challenges not only affect the depth and appeal of the characters but may also limit the long-term growth and international influence of the IP. The following are some of the main issues currently faced in the design of IP characters in China:

A. Severe homogenization

The root of IP character homogenization in China lies in a lack of originality. A large number of brand IPs are similar in design style and marketing strategy, over-relying on the trends and hot spots of the times, which often leads to a lack of distinctive brand culture and long-term strategic development. This kind of marketing operation in a short-term perspective prevents the deepening of brand recognition and emotional connection. For instance, as observed in the recent IP character updates by three major e-commerce platforms, there is a noticeable similarity in design strategy—enhancing brand affinity and cuteness through 3D styling influenced by the trendy Lifestyle Toys culture.

Moreover, in the pursuit of commercial success, some IP characters excessively focus on market trends and popular elements, neglecting the depth of character personality and narrative background. This over-commercialization leads to characters that lack depth and long-term appeal. Clients often resist taking risks and insist that designers extract elements from already successful IP characters, which results in an over-reliance on specific popular visual styles such as ‘moe’ (萌) or ‘cute’ and ‘cool’ aesthetics. This conformity in visual style stifles diversity and innovation in character design. For instance, ‘Qunar.com’, a Chinese online travel agency, launched the ‘Qunar Family’ (Figure 106) in 2021, whose character design and color choices bear a notable resemblance to the well-known Korean ‘Line Friends (Figure 107)’ visual design, exemplifying this issue of homogenization.



Figure 106 Qunar Family



Figure 107 Line Friends

B. Consumer aesthetic fatigue

Overly frequent and intensive marketing campaigns can lead to consumer aesthetic fatigue. The rapid rise in popularity of certain IP characters in China, coupled with the influence of the Lifestyle Toys culture, has drawn considerable attention from young consumers toward IP characters. This trend has driven many businesses to design IP characters for the sake of following the trend, often without considering their own brand culture and identity. For example, the tea brand Shuyi Tealicious (Figure108), a beverage store like Mixue BingCheng, faced criticism rather than praise after its visual rebranding, including a new logo and IP character. Consumers felt that the brand had lost its original design essence by overly chasing trends.



Figure 108 Shuyi Tealicious

Over-commercialization and excessive focus on IP character-based marketing can lead to consumer fatigue and a sense of oversaturation, reducing the brand's appeal. For example, Alibaba developed the 'Alibaba Zoo (Figure 109)', which today hosts 26 IP characters for the group's ecosystem. In a bid to improve brand visibility, such quantity could be too much for the consumers and therefore defeat the very purpose of building brand equity. In the race to cash in on the trend of IP characters, some brands focus too much on temporary market responses and sales data, sacrificing a long-term brand strategy and consistent planning. This kind of strategy runs the risk of weakening their brand identity and could ultimately alienate consumers.



Figure 109 Alibaba Zoo

C. Insufficient cultural distinctiveness

This often means that a lot of China Time IP character design has either minimally or inappropriately integrated Chinese culture into their work. Many of the characters, then, do not bear any notable resemblance in representing specifically Chinese cultural traits that, internationally, are still associated exclusively with Chinese culture. And none suffers this defect so blatantly as those brands positioning themselves predominantly in explicit Chinese culturalist discursivity. For example, the local tea brand Cha Panda's IP Character Cha Cha Figure 110 shows the local characteristics of Chengdu in China, but in the design of this IP, apart from the ubiquitous panda, other Chinese cultural elements are noticeably missing.

In addition, although the majority of Chinese museums have been developing digital exhibitions and carefully working on the development of IP characters, they often fail to make the designs incorporate Chinese elements properly. For example, the China Fire Museum details the historical development of firefighting, from ancient times to now, in the form of the development of firefighting concepts, organizations, laws, technologies, and culture. The IP character design of the museum in Figure 111 as shown tries to use the ancient Chinese firefighting officials and some elements of Chinese swords used for firefighting equipment. It is a bit clumsy, though, in carrying through these cultural references, which makes it hard for today's consumer to recognize or feel the connection with these. The important question will then be how far or near 'traditional' Chinese

elements in an IP character design need to go in striking a balance for appeal today. It involves not just a few deliberations or improvements, so the depth and presence of those Chinese elements become effective.



Figure 110 Cha Cha



Figure 111 IP Character of China Fire Museum

D. Lack of emotional connection

The establishing of a deeper emotional connection with the audience or fan is an indispensable factor to obtain success in character design. However, it has been seen in most Chinese IP characters that there is a lack of deep character development and decent growth narratives. This deficiency makes audiences somewhat fail to resonate with these characters on a personal or emotional level. In my teaching experience, I have observed that students often start their character design process by focusing on the visual appearance rather than developing the character's background and story first. This approach is likely influenced by the overly commercialized market in China, where clients often prioritize quick turnaround times over thoughtful character development.

To solve this problem, design teams need to make it very important to connect the development of the IP character with the core values and narrative of the brand for each application. Instead of following trends or superficial design cues, character designs should emerge from a well-framed story that adds meaning to the brand and deepens its emotional connection with consumers. This is very well explained in the previous example of the Shuyi Tealicious; its IP character was designed attractively but was unable to give any feel to the customers as it sounded too trendy, unrelated to the traditional entity. This case confirms that the need for more considerate and narrative thinking regarding IP character design has just started to receive proper development in the Chinese market.

The current trend in popular IP character design in China mainly originated with the style pioneered by POP Mart. Within this trend, brand IP has evolved from traditional mascot imagery into more diversified and innovative character designs. Furthermore, brand IP characters can be increasingly developed through joint operations among brands, artists, and designers for co-branding product development to help expand recognition of both the brand's influence and its character IP.

Emerging in the development of IP characters is a direction that focuses on emotional design. In developing a rich character story and visual identity, brands establish a set of values and a way of life for their IP character, thereby establishing long-term emotional connections with consumers. For example, JD.com's JOY character is described through animations, drawing up an emotional relationship with consumers. In the digital age, social media platforms in combination with VR, AR, and AI enable IP characters to expose themselves and interact with users in a very short period of time, which enhances user engagement. The emotional connection often results in UGC, which is an essential tool for brand promotion. As users share content related to the brand's IP characters, the brand's reach expands, and user loyalty increases.

The internet and social media of the digital age have transformed brand IP character promotion and influence. In the Chinese market, brand IP characters have developed significantly by means of diversified and innovative IP character design, cross-brand collaboration, a strong focus on cultural and emotional connection, along with widespread dissemination, UGC, and digital technologies. This approach not only strengthened brand affinity and recognition but also built deep emotional connections and loyalty among consumers.

2.4.5 Theoretical and strategic perspectives on IP characters

To further clarify the significance of IP characters in the information age for brand development and communication, this section adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing from psychology, media theory, design research, and branding practice. These lenses help elucidate how IP characters, as 'mask', function across emotional, cultural, and commercial dimensions in contemporary media environments.

Research in consumer psychology indicates that anthropomorphic characters serve not only as

visual identifiers but also as emotional actors that foster symbolic engagement. Characters perceived as human-like evoke trust, warmth, and familiarity, encouraging consumers to project personality traits and intentions onto them (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007). These emotional associations are particularly effective when character design aligns with brand personality, as seen in the case of Mr. Clean (Wan and Aggarwal, 2015). The 3MIP model's psychological mask reflects this dimension by embedding affective cues into character behavior and expression.

From a media theory perspective, IP characters exemplify the concept of mediatization—where identity is constructed through and within media systems. They function as behavioral and symbolic extensions of the brand across dynamic platforms (Nick Couldry, 2016). The virtual mask in 3MIP mirrors this by enabling platform-specific behavior and interaction. On the design side, Kimbell (2011) critiques the linear view of design and suggests that meaning is co-produced in context. This is especially relevant to IP characters whose development is shaped by community feedback, user-generated content (UGC), and cross-platform adaptation.

Recent cultural design research, such as that by Yu (2025), provides a philosophically grounded perspective on Chinese IP characters, arguing that cultural symbols embedded in IP design contribute significantly to national identity construction. Their work reinforces the idea that IP characters are not merely aesthetic outputs but carry broader symbolic and cultural weight.

Industry evidence reinforces the strategic importance of IP characters. Empirical research in Southeast Asia, such as the case of “Nhong Mhee Noey” in Thailand, shows that well-developed mascots can influence brand favorability and consumer decision-making (Tanjaya, 2025). Campaign reports that mascot-led campaigns outperform others by 37% in profit growth (Nelson, 2021). Branding agencies such as Dream Farm Agency highlight five core functions of IP characters: emotional bonding, recognizability, differentiation, humanization, and narrative continuity (Nikan, 2025). StudioID further supports this model by identifying consistency, clarity, and emotional relatability as essential traits of successful IP character design (Dyakovskaya, 2025).

These academic and strategic frameworks confirm that IP characters are not merely decorative or promotional devices but are embedded within complex systems of communication, psychology, and identity. The 3MIP framework builds on this interdisciplinary foundation to provide a

symbolically informed, media-aware, and design-practical methodology for creating culturally resonant, emotionally compelling, and commercially effective IP characters. This also provides a theoretical foundation for the development of future IP character design methods.

2.5 Summary

This chapter discusses IP characters from the three dimensions of psychological masks, physical masks, and virtual masks, assuming that IP characters are one of the modern representations of masks in the digital age through a critical related literature review. Through analyses of the current status of IP characters, it can be found that they have big problems in homogenization, lacking in creativity and cultural depth. Extensive research on the psychological and physical feature and characteristic of masks, including even virtual types, effectively supplements these deficiencies and hence strengthens the nature of IP characters. Also, this research opens avenues toward presenting multi-faceted design methodologies that allow the creation of such characters which can touch the heart of audiences at large through many different forms of media.

The current study will examine the complexity of personality and identity in a psychological context of masks.

Building the aspect of psychological masks into the design of IP characters enables the creation of characters that can visually entice and simultaneously portray various faces of identity. The faces of identity vary through their behaviors in different social contexts; all these complexities and relatability make it multidimensional. This makes the character more layered, thus increasing audience engagement by resonating with their diverse experiences. On the other hand, physical masks bear rich cultural heritage, emblematic meanings, and artistic presentation. Character design can use conventional design features and symbolic motifs of a physical mask for re-interpretation into transformational elements of the narration. Such treatment will help a designer reach at character creation bearing singular visual identity with deep cultural connotation.

Therefore, it respects traditional kinds of art and enriches the storytelling with the quintessence of diverse standpoints of culture represented in the garment for better storytelling and aesthetic value.

But considering virtual masks, it is true that digital space allows for incredible interaction of

characters and portrayal of personality. In describing a virtual mask, it lets the creator think of characters designed by digital use within which one can change appearance and function according to different interactive situations or narratives. Thus, it gives the ability to the character of flexible, ever-changing identities to be morphed into interactions or developments of an end user in digital and augmented reality environments.

It also points out that while IP characters are increasingly important in marketing and brand building, there is still a lack of systematic methodologies in their design. This calls for further research and practice in developing and refining frameworks of IP character creation methodologies. In this respect, when the method is standardized, it will ensure that the process makes the character not only commercially viable but also creatively and culturally enriched.

The research will apply theoretical and practical approaches while trying to overcome all the shortages that are caused by the peculiarities of the Chinese market. Merging the recent concepts of design of brand and character design with the aspects of psychological, physical, and virtual masks and creating a certain strategy for IP character design will help both new and experienced designers alike be in a position to respond to the needs of design efficiently.

3 Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework-through which this study was undertaken-describing in detail the paradigm, research design, data collection and analysis, and the ethical concerns. It is through these components that the chapter intends to explain how the study was scientifically conducted, step by step, so that any researcher following this will be assured of reliability and validity.

3.1 Research paradigm

In this thesis, the participatory paradigm is used as the framework that guides the author's design practice. The participatory paradigm is chosen from among various research paradigms through the analysis of different paradigms and their applicability to the objectives of the research.

Table 14 Basic beliefs of alternative inquiry paradigms-updated

Issue	Positivism	Postpositivism	Critical Theory et al.	Constructivism	Participatory ^a
Ontology	Naïve realism—"real" reality but apprehensible	Critical realism—"real" reality but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehensible	Historical realism—virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallized over time	Relativism—local and specific co-constructed realities	Participative reality—subjective-objective reality, co-created by mind and given cosmos
Epistemology	Dualist/objectivist; findings true	Modified dualist/objectivist; critical tradition/community; findings probably true	Transactional/subjectivist; value-mediated findings	Transactional/subjectivist; co-created findings	Critical subjectivity in participatory transaction with cosmos; extended epistemology of experiential, propositional, and practical knowing; co-created findings
Methodology	Experimental/manipulative; verification of hypotheses; chiefly quantitative methods	Modified experimental/manipulative; critical multipism; falsification of hypotheses; may include qualitative methods	Dialogic/dialectical	Hermeneutical/dialectical	Political participation in collaborative action inquiry; primacy of the practical; use of language grounded in shared experiential context

^a Entries in this column are based on Heron and Reason (1997).

As introduced in Table 14, five different research paradigms are considered: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism, and the participatory paradigm. Positivism focuses on verifiable knowledge through observation and measurement, with scientific rigor and objectivity. However, such a perspective tends to reduce complex human behaviors and social interactions into oversimplified and limited forms of understanding. While post-positivism is more flexible than positivism, it still maintains experimental and quantitative methods that are inherently incapable of capturing the intricacy and creativity in design practice. Critical theory is mainly about unmasking power structures, inequalities, and social change, and hence is not as apt to explore particular design practices. Constructivism, with its knowledge construction through social interaction and emphasis on subjective experience and social construction, also does not fully capture the collaborative and co-creative aspects of design practice (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). The participatory paradigm presents, in this respect, a very specific methodological framework for contemporary design practice. It emphasizes the socially constructed nature of knowledge, democratization of the research process, and collaboration and co-creation between researchers and participants. This framework views research as a collective effort toward social change, enhancing individual capacities, and solving practical problems through reflection and critical thinking (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This paradigm is particularly suited to fields that require deep knowledge of human behavior, social interaction, and creative processes (Fuchs and De Jaegher, 2009).

Based on this, the thesis develops a self-participatory paradigm, centered on the design practice of the researcher him-/herself as the subject to be investigated. This is informed by several factors:

personal experiences and professional competencies uniquely position me to understand the richness of the tacit knowledge and subtle dynamics that arise in the design process. Being a design educator and practitioner, I am very aware of the problems and pain points of students in brand design education and directly experienced the challenges, methodologies, and creative thinking processes in design practice, which often is not thoroughly explored by external researchers. Lastly, locating the self in the center of the research enables reflective learning, a process that furthers not only my personal and professional growth but also enriches the discipline of design with valuable insights.

Through the self-participatory paradigm, this study deeply explores brand IP character design, particularly how the integration of the characteristics of psychological masks, physical masks, and virtual masks can provide a systematic optimization of IP character design methodologies. By adopting this unique research perspective, the study aims to contribute to the expansion of design knowledge, particularly in the field of brand IP character design. This research not only enhances the understanding of the complexity of the design process but also explores how participatory practice can facilitate innovation and optimization in design methodologies.

3.2 Research design

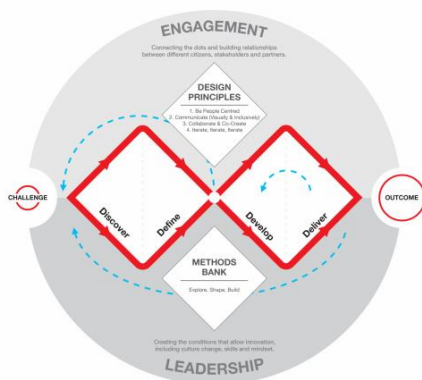


Figure 112 Double Diamond

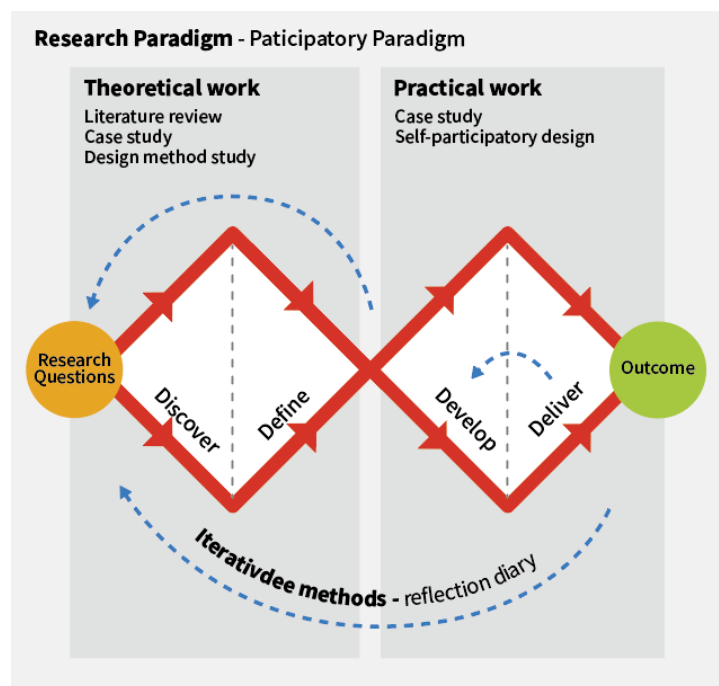


Figure 113 Methodological diagram (own design)

The methodological framework of this study is grounded in The Design Council's 'Double Diamond' model (Figure 112), which delineates the divergent and convergent processes within the design cycle. This model is centered on identifying the right problem and finding the right solution, making it highly compatible with the participatory paradigm employed in this research (Figure 113). Both emphasize iterative cycles of inquiry, reflection, and refinement—an approach that reflects the inherently complex and non-linear nature of design research, particularly when self-participation and reflective practice are employed.

This research is structured as a dynamic cycle in which theoretical investigation and design practice reciprocally inform and refine one another.

The left side of the Double Diamond represents the theoretical exploration. The study began with an in-depth literature review across analytical psychology, media theory, brand communication, and digital culture. This review revealed a gap in symbolic modeling approaches to IP characters. Drawing from the metaphor of the mask—particularly Jung's notion of the Persona—this study reconceptualized IP characters as symbolic roles that mediate identity across personal, cultural, and digital domains.

Through reflective theorization and abstraction grounded in design practice, this metaphor was formalized into the 3MIP framework (Three-Mask Identity Positioning). The framework differentiates three interrelated symbolic-functional layers:

Psychological Mask: emotional projection, brand persona, and user identification

Physical Mask: visual exaggeration, stylistic form, and cultural symbolism

Virtual Mask: digital interactivity, real-time adaptability, and mediated identity performance

Together, these dimensions form an integrated model for analyzing and constructing brand IP characters with symbolic coherence, emotional resonance, and cross-platform adaptability.

The right side of the Double Diamond represents the practical development and validation of the model. The 3MIP framework was applied and refined through a series of design-based inquiries, including the creation of original IP characters, redesign experiments, and design education

workshops. These practices were supported by embedded case study analysis—for example, Kumamon and Snow King—which served not only as exemplars but also as comparative material for evaluating each mask layer.

The core focus of this research is the unique role of IP character design within brand design, particularly its application in the Asian market. In this context, IP characters are not only an essential component of artistic creation but also a central element of commercial strategy. They play a critical role in attracting target audiences, establishing brand identity, and fostering emotional connections between consumers and brands.

In addressing the research topic, the research design for the study is personal, in which case studies and a self-reflection diary are used to gain deeper insight into IP character design from the perspective of a designer. The researcher uses his own design projects as case studies, analyzing in depth the decisions, strategies, and design processes involved in the creation and application of an IP character. By documenting every step, the rationale for decisions taken, the hurdles, and solutions, a researcher learns about the complexity and dynamism of the design process. A self-case study, as an analysis method, focuses on detailed descriptions and analyses of specific events or experiences with an emphasis on self-improvement, professional growth, and the capability to solve particular problems in practice.

Moreover, as a self-participant, the researcher continuously engages in self-reflection throughout the design process, recording thoughts on specific design choices, sources of creative inspiration, and the outcomes of design works. This reflective practice allows the researcher to identify and analyze the issues and challenges encountered during the design process, as well as the effectiveness of the strategies employed to address them. The possibility of this continuous self-assessment and critical thinking will not only improve problem-solving abilities but also deepen the understanding of the application of IP character design in brand design.

This approach to method encompasses both theoretical and practical aspects of the work in order to create a comprehensive and systematic method of furthering IP character design within brand design, particularly in the Chinese market. The reflective practice woven into this method ensures the research is dynamic and can respond to the complex nuances of the design process to develop truly effective and powerful IP character design strategies.

This methodology thus integrates both theoretical construction and empirical application in a recursive process, producing a comprehensive, context-sensitive, and adaptable strategy for IP character design. The emphasis on reflection and iteration ensures that the research not only addresses real-world challenges but also evolves with them, particularly in the context of China's rapidly developing branding landscape.

3.3 Data collection

This research has its core in personal experiences, and design practice through data collection. As a researcher and a designer, my accumulated personal experience serves not only as a most important source of data but also influences the direction and emphases of the study. This research method will be used because of the inclination created in one's mind for deep analysis and understanding of design practice, considering subjective experience and reflective processes as important in attaining a deep-seated understanding of design thinking and creativity. For complete uncovering and comprehension of the design practices and theoretical frameworks that would be involved in the present study, I used multi-design diaries, case study analysis, design practice, and feedback collection as methods of data collection. These methods will be combined to ensure that the data collected is rich and diverse, hence providing a firm foundation for comprehensive analysis and derivation of conclusions from the research study.

A. Case study analysis

To ensure the relevance and diversity of case materials, this study adopted a purposeful sampling approach in selecting four representative IP characters: Mickey Mouse, Kumamon, Duo (Duolingo), and Snow King. The selection was guided by three key criteria: (1) cultural and geographic origin, (2) brand function and role evolution, and (3) dissemination platform and engagement style. Mickey Mouse represents a globally recognized legacy IP, rooted in narrative media and symbolic of transgenerational cultural branding. Kumamon, as a regionally grounded mascot, demonstrates the transformation of local cultural symbols into commercially successful national icons. Duo, the mascot of the Duolingo language-learning platform, exemplifies an app-native, educational IP character that motivates learning through gamification and emotional reinforcement. Snow King, a viral domestic IP figure in China, illustrates the power of social media virality, user-generated content, and cross-brand collaboration within the evolving digital branding

landscape. Together, these cases allow for a comprehensive validation of the 3MIP model across distinct brand communication strategies and socio-cultural contexts.

By conducting in-depth analysis of selected design cases, this research explores key issues and success factors encountered in design practice. The cases were chosen based on their theoretical and practical representativeness to ensure the generalizability of the research findings. Case study analysis involves a systematic review of project documentation and a comprehensive evaluation of design outcomes to collect data across multiple dimensions.

B. Project design analysis

To further refine and validate the applicability of the 3MIP method, four design projects were selected as experimental applications—three involving redesigns of existing brand mascots (Cha Cha from Cha Panda, Shanzai from SEE Conservation, and PP Panda from PanPan Foods), and one involving the creation of a new IP character (Owy from Outside Coffee). These brands were purposefully chosen for their contrasting industry contexts, communication objectives, and existing character maturity levels.

The redesign cases allow for critical evaluation of how the 3MIP method can enhance emotional coherence, symbolic clarity, and digital adaptability in underdeveloped or misaligned IPs. For example, Cha Panda's Cha Cha lacked clear cultural specificity and visual distinction, while SEE Conservation's Shanzai presented narrative ambiguities in representing ecological values. The redesign of PP Panda, on the other hand, tackled the issue of aesthetic homogenization and brand-identity mismatch prevalent in fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG).

The fourth project, Outside Coffee's Owy, serves as a blank-slate design challenge. With no pre-existing IP character, it offers a controlled opportunity to test how the 3MIP framework can be used from the ground up—integrating psychological, physical, and virtual mask dimensions into the construction of a fully aligned brand identity. Collectively, these four cases span multiple branding scenarios and provide robust ground for evaluating and optimizing the practical efficacy of the proposed design method.

C. Feedback collection

This study focused on validating the 3MIP method's applicability, usability, and practical effectiveness within a real-world teaching context. Feedback was collected through a structured pedagogical implementation process. Approximately 20 undergraduate students majoring in Visual Communication Design were introduced to the 3MIP character design method and applied it in their individual design projects.

The goal of this feedback collection was to assess whether the method was easy to understand, instructive in guiding the design process, and supportive of creative outcomes. Consistent with the participatory and exploratory nature of the research, emphasis was placed on student experience, practice-based reflection, and user-centered insights as key indicators of the method's effectiveness. The detailed teaching framework and session structure are provided in Appendix 2.

D. Design diaries

I have been able to document my research from concept development all the way to the final design outcome (for example, design process in Appendix 3). The diaries give information on design thinking, creative inspirations, technical challenges, solutions, and emotional reflection of each project. Another critical source of data is personal experience, which supports the notion of reflection in design. The reflection reviews the design process and analyses the relationship between decisions, sources of creativity, and project goals. Personal experience is a rich source of information, where important lessons learned from practice can be combined with theory and previous research. Diary entries, thinking process, and project reflections allow for the examination of each, and every small decision made during the design process. Such a view helps researchers harvest the theoretical value of practices for contributing to a system of knowledge. Deep self-reflection is an inquiry that helps understand the complexity, diversity, and dynamism in design practices that challenge prevailing theories and methodologies.

The combination of these data collection methods not only provides multi-dimensional data support for the research but also enhances the credibility and validity of the findings. The detailed records in the design diaries offer immediate reflections on the design process, while the case studies and redesign analyses, through the integration of theory and practice, further validate and expand the research findings. Finally, the feedback collected from participants offers practical

insights, ensuring the applicability and operational value of the research outcomes.

3.4 Data analysis

To ensure the methodological rigor and contextual depth of this study, a qualitative research strategy was employed, incorporating multiple modes of interpretive analysis consistent with the participatory and design-led nature of the inquiry. In particular, this research applied three complementary methods: subject analysis, comparative analysis, and feedback analysis, each of which corresponds to a key validation dimension of the proposed 3MIP framework.

Subject Analysis

This component draws on data from the literature review and selected IP character case studies. A qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019) was used to identify recurring themes, design rationales, and symbolic motifs in both academic and industry publications. This analysis built the theoretical foundation for the development of the 3MIP model, particularly in relation to the dimensions of psychological masks, physical masks, and virtual masks.

To supplement this, semiotic analysis (Chandler, 2022) was employed to examine how visual features, forms, and cultural references within IP character designs convey identity, emotion, and brand meaning. Key characters—such as Mickey Mouse, Kumamon, Duo, and Snow King—were evaluated in terms of their symbolic clarity, emotional resonance, and representational adaptability. These analyses provided empirical grounding for how each of the three mask dimensions functions in real-world branding contexts.

Comparative Analysis

To assess the practical validity of the 3MIP design method, a comparative case study analysis (Yin, 2018) was conducted across four redesign and creation projects. Each IP character produced through the 3MIP framework was systematically compared to its original or baseline form, focusing on effectiveness across dimensions such as narrative alignment, cultural specificity, aesthetic coherence, and digital adaptability. This process involved both within-case and cross-case comparison, enabling an assessment of how well the model adapts to different industry sectors.

Feedback Analysis

As part of the pedagogical validation of the method, qualitative content analysis was also applied to student feedback gathered during design teaching sessions. Responses were coded and analyzed to extract recurring evaluations—such as whether the method helped clarify design direction, inspired conceptual depth, or improved storytelling. In alignment with user-centered evaluation practices (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), both positive and critical reflections were used to refine the structure and clarity of the 3MIP framework.

By integrating these qualitative techniques—content analysis, semiotic interpretation, narrative comparison, and user reflection—the study constructed a robust triangulated analysis of IP character design across symbolic, functional, and applied dimensions. This multi-method framework strengthens both the credibility and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of the findings and positions the 3MIP method as both theoretically grounded and pedagogically actionable.

3.5 Ethical considerations

This study was designed and conducted in strict adherence to ethical guidelines to ensure the credibility and impartiality of both the research process and its outcomes. When the researcher themselves is the subject of study, ethical challenges become particularly complex due to the blurred boundaries between the researcher and the research subject. Therefore, this research places particular emphasis on the following three ethical considerations: subjectivity and self-criticism, maintaining objectivity, and participant feedback.

A. **Subjectivity and Self-Criticism:** Engaging in self-study inevitably involves subjectivity, which means that the researcher's personal experiences, preferences, and emotions could influence the research process and outcomes. To address this challenge, the study used a method of self-criticism, involving continuous self-reflection and critical thinking to examine and question personal biases. Extensive documentation and analyses of the decision-making process were performed in order to reveal unconscious bias and preconceived opinions, which enhance the transparency and credibility of the research.

B. **Objectivity:** The study made efforts towards objectivity by obtaining third-party viewpoints from

peers and supervisors during the review process, in order to point out one's self-treatment bias or mistakes that could have biased personal design decisions. Therefore, all analyzed observations will be objective and valid for fair analysis with minimal impact from the subjectivity of the researcher on the findings.

C. Post-Use Feedback: First and foremost, all participants were thoroughly informed of the study's purpose, methods, potential risks, and benefits before their involvement, and they provided voluntary consent to participate. The informed consent form provided detailed explanations of all aspects of the study, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without fear of negative consequences. The research also ensured that all personal information and data from respondents were strictly confidential, known only to the research team members. Anonymizing procedures were used to ensure that the identity of any participant could not be identified from this research study for privacy reasons. In collecting and analyzing data, fairness and transparency principles were adhered to, ensuring that the data was accurate and complete. Moreover, the results of this research were considered with the thought that no harm would come to the participants in its dissemination. Finally, ongoing ethical review and oversight were implemented throughout the study to ensure continuous compliance with ethical standards, providing a safe, respectful, and equitable research environment for all participants.

The implication is that, with the described strategies in place, we assure only the highest ethics within the self-study process and guarantee fairness, transparency, and credibility of the research. Identifying and resolving the challenges of ethical implications within self-research studies forms an essential basis of this study toward responsibly exploring design practices.

3.6 Limitations of the methodology

This research used a self-research method in which the only participant was the researcher himself. Though this approach gives access to personal design practices and creative processes, it is concurrently subject to serious limitations-primarily, singularity of the research perspective and inherent subjectivity of personal experiences because such research is based largely on the experiences and considerations of the researcher. This might make the design practice and theory suffer from a lack of diversity of understanding, as this unique view could narrow it, and the generalization or transferability of findings will also be hampered. The high level of subjectivity in

self-research is another major limiting factor, with interpretations and analyses liable to be deeply influenced by the researcher's background, values, and emotional state, increasing the chances of research bias. Such could undermine the generalization and objectivity of the research. In light of such limitations, the strategies used in the present study include the following:

A. Extensive literature review: contextualizing personal experiences and findings in a wide range of literature covering related fields helps validate personal experiences against already established knowledge by highlighting consistencies and discrepancies that could represent blind spots or biases.

B. Theoretical comparison: the research itself makes an active comparison between various theoretical frameworks relevant to personal design practice through a comparative analysis in the strengths and weaknesses of the theories explaining personal experiences. The comparative approach not only deepens the research but also enhances the objectivity and credibility of the findings.

C. Rigorous self-reflection: the study attempts to account for and reduce the impact of subjective biases through continuous questioning of personal preferences, assumptions, and interpretations. Deep self-reflection enhances the transparency and reflexivity of the research, thus strengthening its credibility.

With such a design, this study attempts to reduce the limiting effects that may result from having one participant while enhancing the quality and generalizability of findings. Though these strategies cannot be totally compensating for the problems associated with the singularity of perspective and subjective nature of the experience, they enable enhancing objectivity and comprehensiveness by external data validation, theoretical comparison, and serious self-reflection.

3.7 Summary

Data triangulation can be achieved in this study by using different methods for data collection, such as a literature review, case studies, and student feedback. A reflective diary during the research process enhances further transparency and reliability with a systematic record of thoughts and responses by the researcher. A self-participatory research methodology on IP

character design in branding affords a new avenue to explore such issues. The personal experience and point of view of the researcher's designs become the source of rich data, thereby affording detailed and in-depth understanding of design practice.

This approach underlines, through introspective examination supported by strict analysis of personal cognitive processes, the principles leading to decisions and creative problems found in character design IP; these are usually subtle aspects of design practice that mostly escape capture. The insights thus derived offer a peculiar view of design thinking and creative strategy that is important for the fulfillment of the research objectives. All the correct records of everything within the design process not only further the understanding of individual design methodologies but also strength both the theoretical framework and practical implementation of IP character design in branding.

The self-participatory research approach allows the researcher to delve into the first-person perspective, which gives a better understanding of the complexities encountered in designing IP characters. These have included ambiguity in creation; rigorous investigation of the reasoning that underlies the making of a design decision, including the influence of client needs and market forces on design methods. It is from such in-depth analyses that efficient design methods could be formulated, and the quality of designs improved. By closely reflecting on and recording such events, one comes to understand individual design methodologies and can gauge, challenge, and test how such methods agree with or differ from established design theories. Such a method reinforces the link between theory and practice in providing better theory and improving practical guidelines in a design context.

In a word, the self-participatory research method provides one of the important perspectives and toolkit systems for investigating the complicate IP character design in developing brand identity. It also opens new avenues for the interaction between design theory and practice for theoretical exploration and practical guidance of IP character design in a branding context.

4 Practical works

This chapter is based on the characteristic analysis of the psychological, physical, and virtual masks and tries to develop a design method for creating brand IP character prototypes, analyzing

the existing IP characters, proposing improvements needed, and bringing forth an apparent direction for subsequent design works.

The practical part of this research focuses on the establishment of a systematic IP design method that can provide all-rounded design analysis and guide in the early stage of brand IP character design and hence establish an IP character prototype. This method is designed to be especially helpful to guide designers, especially novice designers and students, to establish a clear design direction. This design method will integrate the characteristic of the psychological mask, physical mask, and virtual mask, aiming to enhance the scientific and systematic nature of the design process.

Establishing the design method, the preliminary setting of the design process is the first part of this practice. The second part involves using the developed method to analyze IP characters in actual brand cases. The third part includes applying the proposed design method to create IP characters for existing brands and conducting a comparative analysis with existing IP characters to assess the effectiveness and feasibility of the method. The final part is a phased summary of the actual implementation process.

4.1 3MIP character design method

In the context of the digital age, exploring the three dimensions of masks—psychological, physical, and virtual—reveals their potential application value in the development of brand IP characters. By integrating these dimensions into the design process, a novel method for creating brand IP characters can be developed. As discussed in previous chapters, the concept of IP characters is not confined to the branding domain. However, analyzing the current era and brand landscape, particularly in China, reveals a growing trend among brands to use mascots for promotion, which has led to the emergence of certain trends and challenges.

The focus of brand promotion has shifted from emphasizing product features and brand-added value to highlighting values, viewing consumers as complete individuals with independent thoughts, emotions, and spirits. This shift moves from traditional exchange and transaction to interaction and resonance, from advocating functional and emotional differentiation to aligning with spiritual and value-based congruence (Kotler et al., 2019). In this context, IP characters align

with the needs of modern brand building. Today's brands are no longer just cold product labels or striking logos and names; they are 'human' with warmth, personality, and expressiveness. Brands are viewed as personified concepts, possessing their own roles, personalities, emotions, values, and unique symbols and visual identity systems.

Therefore, a comprehensive consideration has been given to the application of a new IP character prototype design method within the branding domain. This approach aims to enhance brand identity and resonance with consumers by embodying the brand's values, personality, and cultural relevance through meticulously designed IP characters that leverage the three dimensions of masks concept. This new design method not only addresses the need for differentiation and emotional connection but also aligns with the broader cultural and technological shifts in brand communication and consumer engagement.

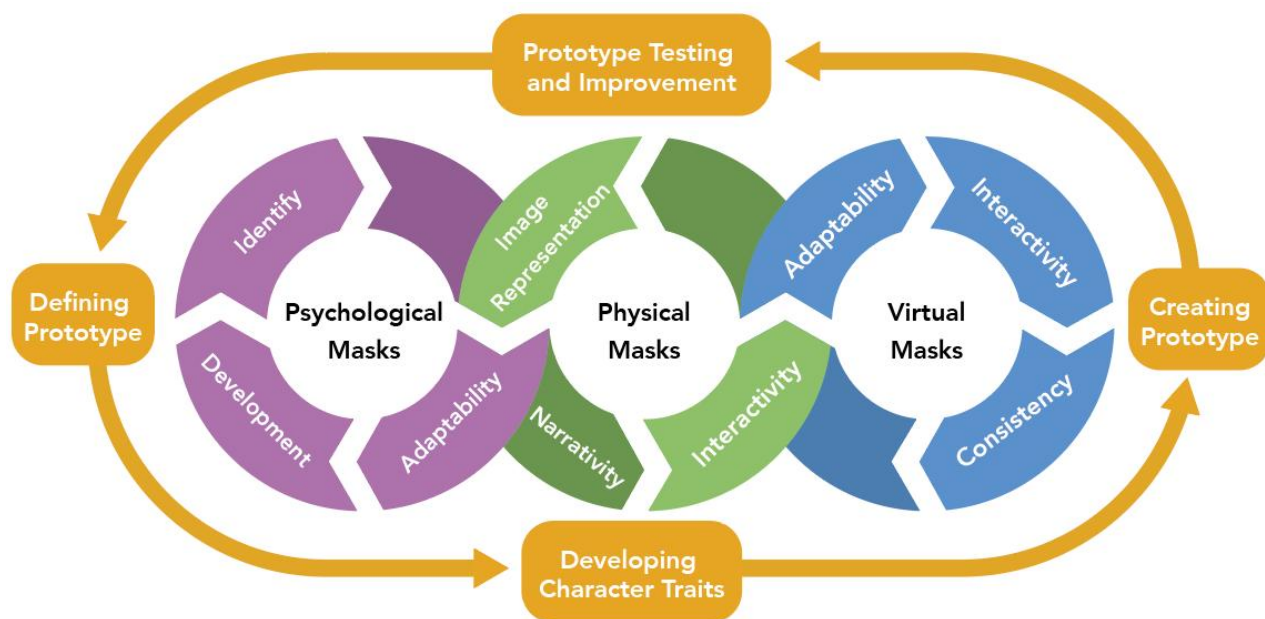


Figure 114 3MIP character design method

The design method has been named the '3MIP character design method' (Figure 114), which encompasses two iterative cycles: IP character positioning and development. As the character evolves over time, the conclusions derived from this design method will also adapt accordingly. This method is divided into two main components: the inner cycle and the outer cycle.

The inner cycle focuses on the positioning of the character through three dimensions: psychological masks, physical masks, and virtual masks. This involves the determination of the

psychological positioning of the character, the visual and physical representation, and the interaction design. These aspects all together shape how the character will connect with its intended audience and align with the brand's narrative.

The outer cycle adds to the inner cycle of insight. Extracting key information to establish the prototype, the development of traits, creating the prototype, testing the same, and iterating over to the final is what's desired to fine-tune into an effective brand IP resonating with audiences and backlinks to branding.

During the designing process, the IP character needs to fit with the brand's core values and image. It should bring out the brand's mission, vision, and unique market positioning. Second, customization based on the target audience is an important concern. Understanding the audience's age, gender, cultural background, and interests helps to design a character that best resonates with them on a deeper level.

This method is intended to integrate features from different dimensions and comprehensively present the IP character design framework. It is also instrumental in analyzing and improving existing characters. Each of these components of the method will be detailed in subsequent sections, which explain how they contribute to the overall design and development of effective brand IP characters.

4.1.1 Inner cycle: psychological masks



Figure 115 Inner cycle: psychological masks

Psychological Masks focus on the intrinsic features and psychological expressions that a character possesses through an integration of individual authenticity, societal expectations, and

cultural elements to develop a holistic, multidimensional portrayal. This approach is essential in creating IP characters with which audiences truly identify and can be easily adapted into a variety of media and platforms.

Table 15 Inner cycle: psychological masks

Comprehensive identity representation	
Core personality	This would contain the general characteristics, mannerisms, and emotive reactions that show how this character would cause responses from and interact with others and with certain situations. The must-haves provide a backbone which makes such a character highly individualized and perhaps even relatable.
Backstory	The character's backstory will delve into his current psychological makeup. This would include trauma from the past, incidents in life that have marked him, and relationships that have molded him. This background not only adds depth to the character but also brings outgrowth and changes influenced by personal factors, society, and culture.
Drivers and motivations	This involves what internally drives the character through his actions, what is his objective. The motivations are there to give a reason for acting in certain ways, and this provides coherence to decisions and developments in character.
Development	
Inner conflict	Emphasize the character's inner conflicts that highlight how they balance between their natural selves and what society expects of them. This therefore adds tension and depth to the story and makes the character's journey more appealing.
Growth trajectory	Growth trajectory is a curve showing how the character, through internal and external conflicts, comes to a gradual revelation of change within himself. Greater insight into the story since it also engages the viewer on an emotional level when following the character in his change.
Digital persona construction	In the digital world, the character should represent themselves in a consistent and profound manner to maintain their identity in that world. This may be achieved by appropriate use of social media, virtual interactions, and

	online presence to ensure that the character's psychological depth is maintained.
Adaptability	
Flexibility	It should be adaptable to any era and social setting; it should express behaviors appropriate for different situations. In this way, the character will always be up-to-date and will never lose his charm.
Multilayered personality traits	Employ psychological masks in designing the character's multilayered nature, showing how he or she is with different social circles and how he or she is when alone. This can be portrayed through his actions, speech, and interaction with other characters, which the audience can see the complexity of the character's identity.

The psychological dimension in character design allows creators to come up with IP characters who have depth and appeal, thus engaging an audience across different media and platforms. Characters that really resonate with the inner life of their audience and provide rich emotional experiences are better positioned to achieve cultural and commercial success.

4.1.2 Inner cycle: physical masks



Figure 116 Inner cycle: physical masks

The concept of the physical masks involves character design based on the emphasis of outward features a character possesses through visual arts, which, in turn, would be further used to emphasize identity and personality. This kind of design often employs exaggeration and simplification to increase the character's recognizability and memorability. Exaggerated design

techniques, such as amplifying a character’s distinctive features—whether through oversized facial features, unique shapes, or sharp color contrasts—can quickly capture the audience’s attention, directly communicating the character’s personality or emotional state. On the other hand, simplified designs focus on refining lines and shapes, removing unnecessary details to present the core attributes of a character with minimal visual information. This not only makes the character more visible from a distance but also engraves the character in the audience’s minds. By putting into practice, the concept of physical masks, a character becomes more visually expressive and thereby easier on the audience’s eyes to comprehend and remember; thus, the more effective and narratively powerful it will be.

Table 16 Inner cycle: physical masks

Visual expression	
Physical traits and posture	Describe the physical characteristics of the character, including body shape, height, weight, and other distinctive features. This includes the signature postures of the character that can reveal the character’s default emotional state or personality. For example, one can exaggerate the facial features and simplify the forms to depict certain emotions and personality traits for the ease of recognition of the character.
Emotional impact of colors	Different colors can be used to convey different emotions and traits, making the character much more visually appealing. Warm tones could possibly denote passion and energy, while cool tones might evoke calmness and mystery.
Costume and props	It includes designing costumes and props that reflect the character’s status, historical background, and personality. Also included here is how these are associated with the character’s movements and actions. Designers may add symbolic elements to the character’s attire or appearance to carry meaning in a cultural sense.
Voice	Personality development and the conveyance of emotions through specific special effects and speech characteristics are majorly aided by the voice of the character. The deep voice might symbolize or stand for power and strength, while the high-pitched voice might stand for energy and vivacity.
Narrativity	

Cultural elements	Merge character design with predefined cultural features, to come up with a character which, while pleasing to the eye, will have much to say about culture. For example, a character's costume may well be a traditional one; decoration would then include symbolic motifs indicative of heritage.
Symbolic significance	Employ symbology to support background and personality traits of the character. In design, this can allow the character to carry more meaning in relationship to narrative content and cultural understanding through specific colors, patterns, or other items that may be symbolic of the character traits or major story elements.
Interactivity	
Comfort and ergonomics	If designing an IP character for physical interaction, make sure the masks or costume are comfortable and safe to wear for a period of time. This will enhance the wearer's experience and ensure the character can interact with the audience for a longer period.
Actions and behaviors	Create specific moves or locomotion representative of the character's physical attributes and traits of personality. This includes how they move within an environment and express emotions through gestures. For example, different facial expressions or mannerisms used when saying something can indicate the change in emotion or the development of the character - just like how emoticons are used in social networking sites.

By recombining the visual expression, the narrative, and the interaction, designers can make a creation full of aesthetic and culturally loaded emotion. This will improve the presence of the character and enlarge its appeal, further enhancing the interactive relationship between the character and the viewer.

4.1.3 Inner cycle: virtual masks

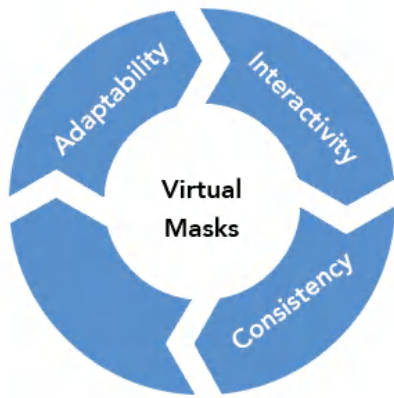


Figure 117 Inner cycle: virtual masks

The study of virtual masks in the context of the digital age holds great potential for application in the design of IP characters, especially under the context of multimedia and interactive media. Virtual masks have flexibility; the huge opportunity lies in how easily they can fit into different digital contexts without losing their coherence and consistency. Three basic elements of virtual masks relating to the design of IP characters are identified as follows:

Table 17 Inner cycle: virtual masks

Adaptability	
Multimedia representation	Create your characters for 2D and 3D animations, video games, and virtual reality, considering their performances in those manners. Each of them requires a different approach to design so that the effect may look continuous and coherent. For example, in 3D, the characters require much detail in texture and lighting, while in 2D animation, the outline should be clear and sharp, with fluidity in motion.
Dynamic adjustment	It allows the design method to dynamically adapt the character to different situations or to different needs for interaction. In other words, this should be optimized to provide a coherent visual user experience on various display devices such as smartphones, computers, and VR headsets.
Interactivity	
User interaction design	Adapt character interactions in accord with the functionalities provided by the range of different platforms. This can range from simple story telling complex interactions associated with the game world. Characters,

	<p>for instance, should, in computer games, act, express emotions, and respond to stimuli similar to what a user would provide as input.</p> <p>Conversely, in virtual reality, the character may be called upon to provide an enhanced immersive and interactive experience by responding immediately to immediate changes or commands provided by the user.</p>
Multilayered interaction	Design characters with multilayered mechanisms of interaction, so that they show complicated responses in different contexts. This approach will better create an emotional bond between the character and the user experience. Characters might select different response paths according to the user's behavior or interact in a more natural way with users, using voice and expressions.
Cross-Media Consistency	
Unified brand Identity	Have the core attributes of character voice, color schemes, forms of movement, and other singularly identifiable features be unified for this character across media and platform types. This is really important for branding and marketing functions because it creates a cohesive, strong brand image. For example, the voice and movement style of a character should be consistent in animation, advertising, video games, and social media so that the audience can identify and connect with the character easily on any medium.
Visual and behavioral uniformity	A character should look and act consistent across all types of media so that brand awareness is ensured and users become more immersed in it. Designers have to deal with the challenge of cross-platform consistency-ensuring the core traits in every kind of representation.

By applying these principles to virtual mask design, designers are able to create more adaptable, interactive, and consistent IP characters across different media environments. In this respect, it is evident that such a design will enhance the performance of the character on multiple platforms and foster a closer relationship between the character and the audience or user, thus ensuring the continuity of the character's impact within the digital multimedia environment.

4.1.4 Outer cycle

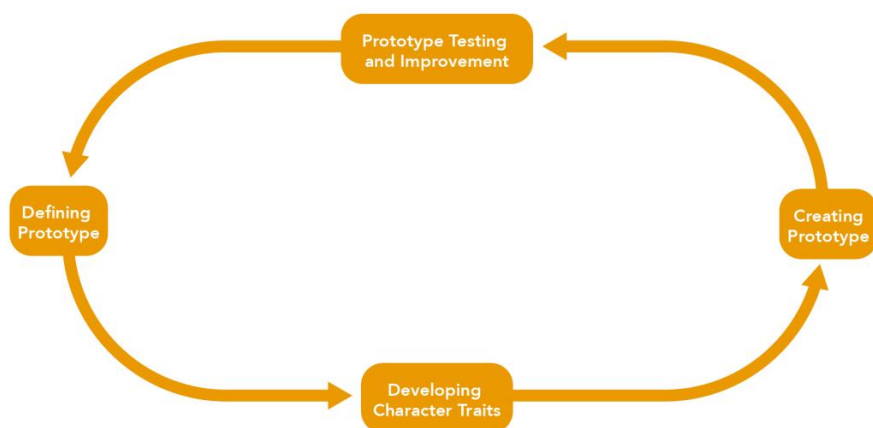


Figure 118 Outer cycle

A. Prototype definition:

Psychological masks: analyze the inner characteristics and psychological expressions of the character. Establish the presentation of the character's identity, stability, and mental trajectory. Design the character to be adaptable to different social settings; development should show consistency in behavior but at the same time be able to grow and evolve.

Physical masks: describe the character's physical structure and all other distinctive features; mark all clothes and accessories worn by a character, including cultural symbolisms and their meanings. Choose the color scheme most representative of your character's personality and his culture.

Virtual masks: now, decide on a plan for how this character will be represented virtually. Designs in 2D and 3D animation, video games, and virtual reality must all be taken into consideration to make sure that consistency and functionality of the character in these various media formats exist.

B. Developing character traits: the elaboration of the special features of character facial expressions, peculiarities in costumes, elements of interaction to make it as realistic and attractive as possible. It is at this stage that the most vivid visualization-emotional characteristics of the character are underlined for sure to appeal to the specific target group.

C. Character prototype creation: create rough drafts of illustrations that characterize most of the key characteristics derived from the written descriptions of the character. The visual research included in the development balances the character's visual against the conceptual in a

framework developed in the previous stages.

D. Prototype testing and refinement: usability testing shall be conducted to inform further iterations in character design. In this respect, iteration at refinement can be made in the features and presentation of the character based on the actual feedback received; hence, it will be able to convey sophistication in effective design.

This same design method can be used to analyze existing characters. In analyzing the character on psychological, physical, and virtual planes, the designer identifies points that can be improved and creates a plan for the optimization of those elements.

This holistic approach in character design for IP ensures the realization of an appealing, not only from the visual and emotional point of view but also capable of adjusting to the most diverse media environment and cultural contexts. It advances interaction and contact between the character and audience, opening a way to new IP character designs. This approach gives new directives within IP character creation and opens greater opportunities for innovation to both brands and designers.

Integrating the psychological, physical, and virtual masks dimensions of character design is one way to help designers make the characters engaging. Such characters find resonance on various levels in an audience for the continuous development and creation of IP characters, cultivating an attachment to their audience and motivating innovative practices.

4.2 Case study

This chapter has conducted a detailed analysis of existing well-known brand IP characters using the 3MIP character design method. The method is systematic, designed to analyze and improve IP character design. In the following way, we try to explore whether this method applies to the development of brand IP characters or not. Concretely, our work aims to contribute to the judgment of whether the 3MIP character design method can meet the needs for a scientific and systematic structure in character creation and IP character development. The objective is to confirm if this method effectively leads the strategic development of IP characters and maximizes the effect of brand communication and publicity.

To ensure diversity, depth, and cross-cultural applicability in the validation of the 3MIP method, four representative IP characters were purposefully selected for case study: Mickey Mouse, Kumamon, Duo, and Snow King. Mickey Mouse serves as a globally recognized legacy IP with a rich history in narrative media and transgenerational brand communication. Kumamon was chosen for its exceptional success as a regional mascot that evolved into a national and international symbol of cultural branding. Duo, the green owl from Duolingo, represents a digitally native character that exemplifies interactive learning, gamification, and emotional engagement in educational technology platforms. Lastly, Snow King, as a viral IP character originating in the Chinese beverage industry, demonstrates the power of social media virality, meme culture, and local brand identity in China's fast-paced digital consumer market. These four examples span diverse industries, media platforms, and cultural geographies, thereby providing a comprehensive and comparative foundation to evaluate the robustness and adaptability of the 3MIP character design framework.

4.2.1 Mickey Mouse



Figure 119 Mickey Mouse

Brand background: Mickey Mouse was created by Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks in 1928 and first appeared in the animated short film *Steamboat Willie*. Mickey soon became the most iconic character of Disney and has gained huge success worldwide; he has become an icon for the Disney brand.

Psychological masks: inner characteristics and psychological representation

A. Comprehensive identity presentation

Core personality: Mickey Mouse is seen to possess an optimistic, friendly, and adventurous personality. His core characteristic traits include a positive attitude that is humorous and resilient, even when circumstances become challenging. In developing these traits, he consistently expresses positive emotions not only toward other characters but also toward the audience, forming a strong emotional connection that underpins his enduring popularity (Wiki).

These traits are clearly embodied in various classic animations. His optimism is evident in *Mickey's Garden* (1935) and *Brave Little Tailor* (1938), where he remains cheerful in the face of adversity, using wit and humor to resolve challenges. His friendliness is apparent in his interactions with characters such as Minnie, Donald, and Goofy—for example, in *Mickey's Birthday Party* (1942), where he is shown genuinely appreciating his friends' efforts, thereby fostering a sense of empathy and inclusiveness. His adventurous spirit is central to episodes like *The Sorcerer's Apprentice in Fantasia* (1940), where he dares to explore the unknown and take bold risks, even when it leads to chaos.

Drivers and motivations: a key aspect of Mickey Mouse's psychological mask is his internal motivation, which consistently centers around curiosity, a desire to explore, and an innate willingness to help others. These motivational traits are not only central to his character construction but also serve as the narrative engine for many of his adventures. As a character, Mickey's sense of purpose is driven by the pursuit of the unknown and the instinct to protect or assist his friends, reflecting both intelligence and courage.

For instance, in *The Brave Little Tailor* (1938), Mickey volunteers to face a giant based on a misunderstanding but ultimately uses cleverness and quick thinking to succeed—illustrating how his adventurous drive is matched with resourcefulness. In *Mickey and the Beanstalk* (1947), he sets out on a dangerous quest to restore prosperity to his starving town, showing both altruism and moral resolve. Similarly, in the more recent *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* series (2006–2016), he consistently takes the lead in solving puzzles and helping friends using creativity and leadership, reinforcing his motivation to assist and engage.

Backstory: Mickey Mouse's backstory is emblematic not for its complexity, but for its symbolic accessibility and cultural continuity. First introduced in *Steamboat Willie* (1928), Mickey quickly evolved from a mischievous cartoon figure into the enduring symbol of Disney's optimistic and

family-oriented identity. His character was deliberately crafted without a convoluted personal history—allowing viewers across generations to project their own values and experiences onto him. While Mickey lacks an explicit biography, the scenarios he inhabits—such as solving problems with friends, engaging in romantic moments with Minnie, or confronting challenges—function as episodic reflections of human development and emotional growth. These narrative fragments serve as proxies for backstory, revealing Mickey’s consistent ability to manage relationships, adversity, and moral decisions.

In this way, Mickey’s psychological mask embodies social adaptability and emotional resilience. His background—or the lack thereof—is not a narrative absence but a strategic simplification, designed to maintain universality. By avoiding specificity, his character remains timeless, adaptable across cultures, and aligned with shifting social ideals. This reinforces his role as a projection surface for evolving cultural expectations around optimism, kindness, and perseverance.

B. Development

Inner conflict: although Mickey is typically cheerful and optimistic, he occasionally exhibits signs of unease—especially when facing antagonists or moral dilemmas. For example, in the short film *Runaway Brain* (1995), Mickey faces a terrifying transformation and must confront a darker version of himself. His initial fear and confusion reveal emotional vulnerability beneath his light-hearted persona. Another example appears in *The Brave Little Tailor* (1938), where Mickey is mistakenly thought to be a giant slayer. Initially overwhelmed by fear, he nevertheless decides to protect the village, showing his struggle between fear and responsibility. These moments of internal tension reveal his human complexity and reinforce his core values of justice, loyalty, and bravery.

Such depictions deepen audience empathy and contribute to the psychological mask of Mickey Mouse—presenting a character who, while idealistic, is not devoid of self-doubt, and who grows through conflict.

Growth trajectory: over nearly a century, Mickey Mouse has undergone significant character development, evolving from a mischievous trickster to a more emotionally complex and morally

grounded figure. In early animations such as *Steamboat Willie* (1928), Mickey was a playful troublemaker, reflecting the comedic, slapstick sensibilities of the time. However, as Disney's audience expanded and cultural expectations shifted, Mickey's persona was refined. By the 1950s and 60s, in series like *The Mickey Mouse Club*, he appeared as a responsible, kind-hearted leader figure—emphasizing values such as friendship, courage, and optimism. In more recent works such as the *Mickey Mouse* (2013–2019) reboot series, his character showcases greater emotional range and situational adaptability. He expresses frustration, embarrassment, and moral contemplation, making him more relatable to contemporary audiences.

This gradual transformation highlights his adaptability and relevance across generations. Mickey's psychological mask is thus not static, but one that reflects evolving ideals of heroism, empathy, and social responsibility.

Digital social platform representation: Mickey Mouse continues to maintain cultural relevance in the digital era through his presence on social media and interactive platforms. Disney has strategically utilized platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Disney+ to reinvent Mickey's presence in formats that appeal to younger, digitally native audiences. In particular, short-form animated videos and GIFs are widely circulated on these platforms, allowing users to share Mickey's expressive gestures and nostalgic charm in contemporary digital conversations. Moreover, Mickey has been incorporated into AR filters, virtual stickers, and children's apps, making him not only a broadcast figure but an interactive one. For example, Mickey-themed AR face filters on Instagram allow users to virtually "wear" his iconic ears or mimic his expressions—transforming him into a playful bridge between legacy media and real-time digital identity play. This interactive presence reinforces Mickey's emotional accessibility while enhancing the sense of personal connection for users across generations.

C. Adaptability

Flexibility: Mickey Mouse exemplifies high cultural flexibility, allowing him to remain relevant across multiple generations and geographic regions. His minimalist yet expressive design enables reinterpretation in diverse artistic and cultural styles without losing core identity. For example, in Japan, Mickey has been adapted into kawaii aesthetics; in China, localized festival editions portray him in traditional costumes to celebrate Lunar New Year. On digital platforms,

user-generated content—including memes, fan art, and remixes—further demonstrates how audiences continuously reframe Mickey to suit evolving cultural narratives.

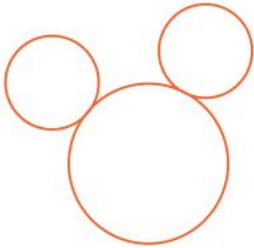
Multifaceted personality traits: Mickey Mouse exhibits a wide spectrum of personality traits across different media forms, contributing to a multi-dimensional character image. In public settings—such as stage appearances, theme park interactions, or promotional videos—he consistently maintains a fearless and optimistic attitude, embodying confidence and enthusiasm. Conversely, in more emotionally driven narratives—such as in Mickey’s Christmas Carol or Runaway Brain—he demonstrates deep affection, loyalty, and emotional sensitivity.

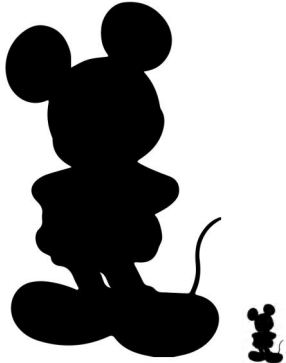

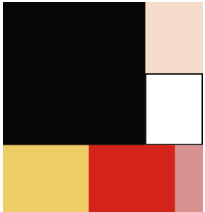

This balance between external courage and internal warmth enables Mickey to transcend one-dimensional characterization. His representations across television, comic strips, films, and games collectively construct a persona that is adventurous, empathetic, and emotionally accessible. This multifaceted portrayal resonates with audiences of all ages, making him a universally relatable figure.

This analysis of Mickey Mouse under the ‘psychological masks’ dimension indicates how deeply his character traits are integrated into his identity, development, and adaptability, turning him into a timeless and beloved figure across generations and cultures.

Physical masks

Table 18 External features and visual representation of Mickey Mouse

Visual expression	
Physical traits and posture Shape: Mickey’s iconic round head and ears utilize the gestalt principle of simplicity and unity, reinforcing perceptions of harmony and approachability. In visual semiotics, circular shapes are commonly associated with softness, inclusivity, and emotional warmth (Chandler, 2022), thus rendering Mickey a psychologically comforting figure, especially for younger audiences. The repetition of circular elements also contributes to formal rhythm and visual cohesion in his overall silhouette.	

<p>Silhouette: the graphic distinctiveness of Mickey's silhouette exemplifies effective shape branding (Landa, 2016), which ensures visual retention and recall even under reduced-size conditions such as mobile screens or theme park signage. His design embodies iconicity, whereby form becomes signifier—his outline alone evokes the full character concept, independent of detail.</p>	
<p>Facial features: Mickey's large eyes, pronounced pupils, and elevated eyebrows follow the baby schema principle (Lorenz, 1942), heightening affective resonance by exaggerating juvenile traits. These features are not only emotionally expressive but also facilitate facial mirroring in audience engagement, making Mickey a template for emotional projection and recognition.</p>	
<p>Emotional impact and colors: the triadic palette of black, red, and yellow is both psychologically strategic and culturally robust. Black lends graphic clarity and conveys sophistication, red stimulates energy and dynamism, while yellow introduces warmth and optimism. This color schema creates a high-contrast visual anchor that supports dynamic motion graphics and print reproduction equally well (Morton, 1997).</p>	
<p>Costume and props: Mickey's red shorts, yellow oversized shoes, and white gloves became codified as his standard outfit. Introduced in early animations such as <i>Steamboat Willie</i> (1928) and <i>The Opry House</i> (1929), these features were not merely stylistic, but functional:</p> <p>White gloves were adopted to distinguish the character's hands from his dark body in black-and-white animations, improving visibility and anthropomorphizing his gestures.</p> <p>Yellow shoes added a sense of playfulness and graphic clarity, contributing to silhouette recognition.</p> <p>Red shorts provided a bold visual anchor, supporting color continuity and emotional vibrancy.</p>	

Voice: Mickey's high-pitched, lively voice reinforces his energetic and joyful personality, ensuring that his character is consistent across different media formats.

B. Narrativity

Cultural elements: Mickey Mouse is more than an animated character; his design and persona operate as vessels of cultural narrative. From the early 20th century onwards, Mickey has served as a symbolic protagonist who internalizes and projects core American values such as optimism, fairness, and self-determination. His frequent portrayal in plotlines that emphasize teamwork, moral courage, and emotional sincerity reflects an intentional alignment with democratic ideals and cultural pluralism. For example, in Mickey's Good Deed (1932), he sacrifices his possessions to help a poor family during Christmas, reinforcing the moral ideal of altruism. This aligns with Campbell's (1949) notion of the "hero with a thousand faces"—Mickey is cast as a moral everyman whose simplicity makes him accessible, yet whose actions imbue him with mythic qualities.

Symbolism: the visual construction of Mickey Mouse reflects a deliberate synthesis of symbolic resonance. Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks selected a mouse as the character archetype following the loss of rights to Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. The decision was both symbolic and personal: Disney reportedly had a pet mouse during his early days at the Laugh-O-Gram Studio in Kansas City. As an animal commonly associated with agility, cleverness, and survival, the mouse archetype signified a humble but intelligent protagonist—aligning with the "everyman" figure who triumphs through wit rather than force. This choice positioned Mickey as a relatable and enduring cultural figure.

C. Interactivity

Actions and behavior: Mickey Mouse's animation is characterized by meticulously designed gestures, expressions, and movement rhythms that function not merely as narrative tools but as a semiotic system of interactivity. Every wave, nod, or exaggerated reaction is not only tailored for emotional legibility but also choreographed to establish para-social interaction (Horton and Wohl, 1956) between the character and the viewer. For instance, in the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse

series, Mickey routinely breaks the fourth wall by addressing the audience directly—asking questions, pausing for responses, or celebrating shared achievements. This strategy reflects principles of interactive character design, where gesture and timing are calibrated to invite user feedback and emotional co-presence (Mateas and Stern, 2005). Mickey’s animated behaviors are constructed as part of a performance loop that supports narrative continuity across diverse media forms—shorts, games, theme parks, and virtual platforms. His movements are modular yet emotionally flexible, meaning they can be recombined depending on platform-specific requirements without losing character coherence. Such consistency enhances transmedia interactivity (Jenkins, 2006), allowing Mickey to adapt naturally to touchscreen apps, AR interfaces, and social media avatars while maintaining affective authenticity.

Virtual masks: digital and virtual representation

A. Adaptability

Cross-media representation: Mickey Mouse has been successfully migrated across 2D animation, 3D animation, video games, and virtual reality in different media. In all of these media, a cautious design adjustment was made while paying attention to the visual coherence and integrity of functionality, so that the character will be as effective and easily recognizable in every platform. Mickey Mouse has demonstrated remarkable adaptability in transitioning across 2D animation, 3D modeling, interactive games, and immersive VR environments. This success is not merely a result of stylistic transposition, but of a deliberate design modularity (Paiva et al., 2005) strategy that preserves key character features—such as facial geometry, proportion system, and gesture vocabulary—across media types. This modularity ensures that Mickey remains recognizable and emotionally coherent, reinforcing transmedia storytelling continuity (Jenkins, 2006).

B. Interactivity

Digital interaction: he uses all kinds of digital platforms that can create different interactive experiences for his audience, from simple games to elaborated narrative content, each showing the validity of the character in remaining charming in the current digital environment.

C. Cross-media consistency

Brand consistency: the speech and look of Mickey, further delineated by his personality and the way he conducts himself around the world, are consistent and mirrored on every digital platform without loss. Consistency in this effort has helped in establishing one global Mickey Mouse brand and reinforcing his character throughout the world by every means possible.

Analyzing Mickey Mouse through the lenses of the physical masks, Narrative Potential, and virtual masks shows that his long-lasting success is based on a well-rounded design approach. Mickey's character is crafted with due attention to his visual distinction, emotional engagingness, and adaptability across media. A holistic approach toward character design guarantees that Mickey Mouse would be resonant with diversified audiences and ensure a strong brand presence globally.

4.2.2 Kumamon



Figure 120 Kumamon

Kumamon (Figure 120), introduced by the Kumamoto Prefectural Government in 2010, was designed to promote local tourism and economic development. The character's design, led by Kundo Koyama, emphasizes simplicity, friendliness, and memorability.

Psychological masks: internal characteristics and psychological expression

A. Comprehensive identity presentation

Core personality: Kumamon is characterized by a lively, mischievous, and friendly persona, expressed through exaggerated body movements, playful gestures, and humorous situational performance (Steinberg, 2016). These qualities allow him to transcend language barriers and emotionally connect with a broad demographic, including children, adults, and international audiences. A notable example is his promotional video titled *Kumamon Surprise Dance* (2013), in which he performs an impromptu dance in a supermarket. The spontaneous nature of his movements—stumbling, spinning, and waving—enhances the perception of him as approachable

and unthreatening. Moreover, his antics, such as deliberately tripping over or sneaking up on unsuspecting passersby, add a layer of light-hearted mischief that evokes both laughter and affection.

Drivers and motivation: Kumamon's primary motivation lies in the cultural and economic promotion of Kumamoto Prefecture. Created in 2010 by the Kumamoto Prefectural Government as part of the 'Kumamoto Surprise' campaign, his role extends beyond that of a regional mascot to function as an active place branding agent. His character narrative is not driven by personal goals but by institutional purpose—to raise public awareness, foster emotional affinity for Kumamoto, and stimulate regional tourism and product sales. Kumamon frequently appears in transport-themed promotions, including the launch of Kumamon-decorated Shinkansen trains, where he interacts with passengers at stations, enhancing the appeal of traveling to Kumamoto. His animated expressions and playful behavior become tools for affective marketing, where entertainment is seamlessly integrated with regional advocacy.

Backstory: Kumamon was created in 2010 as part of the "Kumamoto Surprise" campaign by the Kumamoto Prefectural Government. Unlike fictional characters with complex personal histories, Kumamon's backstory is rooted in real-world economic needs: after the Kyushu Shinkansen line opened, the local government sought to draw attention to the prefecture. His design thus became a narrative tool for promoting tourism and civic identity. For instance, after the 2016 Kumamoto earthquake, Kumamon's appearance in fundraising campaigns and children's healing events helped reestablish local morale and solidarity, further reinforcing his emotional role in collective memory. Unlike fictional backstories often found in entertainment IPs, Kumamon's narrative is directly aligned with geographical, cultural, and infrastructural realities. His backstory draws from the natural richness of Kumamoto—its volcanic landscapes such as Mount Aso, its famous hot springs, and traditional arts like Higo Zogan (metal inlay craft). These elements are implicitly referenced through Kumamon's function as an affective interface that connects external audiences to internal local values.

B. Development

Internal conflict: While Kumamon is not explicitly constructed with psychological tension or narrative dilemma, his exaggerated enthusiasm and tireless promotional presence can be

interpreted as a performative compensation for his silent identity—he cannot speak yet conveys everything through action. This silent constraint becomes a paradoxical strength: it amplifies his expressiveness and makes his affective labor visible and engaging. His relentless commitment to visibility can thus be read as a character-driven metaphor for regional perseverance and optimism.

Growth trajectory: since his creation in 2010, Kumamon has evolved from a simple, playful mascot into a culturally significant character with emotional and social depth. While his early personality focused on cuteness and humor, he has gradually taken on roles that reflect care, responsibility, and resilience. For example, after the 2016 Kumamoto earthquake, Kumamon appeared in disaster areas, comforting residents and promoting recovery. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he encouraged safety practices like mask-wearing through social media. These public actions helped enrich his persona, showing growth beyond entertainment into civic engagement. Through such efforts, Kumamon has developed a more complex identity that aligns with changing public values. This growth illustrates how an IP character's psychological mask can adapt over time, gaining deeper emotional resonance and symbolic meaning.

Digital social platform representation: Kumamon maintains a strong digital presence through active engagement on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. These platforms are not only channels for promotional content but serve as spaces for character-driven communication that enhances emotional resonance with the public. Kumamon's posts often include humorous daily updates, interactive games, and reactions to seasonal events or social issues, all written in a light-hearted and approachable tone. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Kumamon appeared in videos encouraging mask-wearing and handwashing, conveying public health messages in an accessible and culturally familiar way. Moreover, Kumamon's official Twitter account—run in a first-person, playful voice—frequently replies to user comments and shares fan-generated content. This approach fosters a sense of intimacy and dialogue with followers, turning passive audiences into engaged participants. These interactions contribute to the character's continued popularity, both domestically and internationally, by maintaining relevance and approachability in digital culture. The integration of user engagement strategies across platforms illustrates how digital media can sustain and even expand a regional mascot's influence.


C. Adaptability


Flexibility: Kumamon has demonstrated remarkable adaptability in bridging diverse cultural, geographic, and functional contexts. His design and behavioral style are inherently versatile—simple, non-verbal, and emotionally expressive—making him easily translatable across different audiences. Whether appearing at local agricultural festivals in Kumamoto, representing the region in overseas tourism expos, or participating in national campaigns on health and environmental awareness, Kumamon consistently adapts his presence to match the tone, purpose, and expectations of the given event.


Multilayered character traits: although Kumamon is widely recognized for his cheerful, humorous, and colorful demeanor, his character has evolved to encompass deeper emotional layers that extend beyond surface-level appeal. Through his engagement in post-disaster support (e.g., Kumamoto earthquake recovery efforts), environmental campaigns, and public health advocacy, Kumamon demonstrates qualities such as empathy, social responsibility, and resilience. These layered traits allow audiences to emotionally connect with him not only as an entertaining mascot but as a figure of symbolic comfort and community support. This transition from a purely promotional tool to a culturally embedded figure reflects his transformation into a carrier of regional pride and collective identity.

Physical masks

Table 19 External characteristics and visual representation of Kumamon

Visual expression	
Physical traits and posture Shape: Kumamon’s visual design exemplifies the strategic use of simplicity and symbolic geometry to enhance emotional appeal and communicative clarity. His overall form—a rounded square head integrated with a soft, semicircular body—employs biomorphic shapes that evoke comfort, approachability, and innocence. Such curvature aligns with visual communication principles that associate roundness with non-threatening friendliness, making him appealing across age groups and cultural boundaries (Bang, 2016). Moreover, the bear,	

<p>when stylized, combines symbolic strength with emotional warmth—qualities ideal for public engagement.</p>	
<p>Silhouette: Kumamon’s ears, limbs, and facial proportions are arranged to form a simplified yet cohesive silhouette that remains highly legible and recognizable even in low-resolution or small-scale applications. This quality enhances his adaptability across print, broadcast, and digital platforms. As noted in character design theory, a strong silhouette is foundational for recognizability and visual impact (Tillman, 2012). Moreover, rounded shapes such as those used in Kumamon’s design evoke feelings of friendliness, safety, and approachability, in line with the visual emotional grammar described in semiotic theory (Bang, 2016).</p>	
<p>Facial features: his wide, circular eyes and simple, crescent-shaped mouth convey emotions ranging from curiosity to joy. This expressive neutrality gives designers room to subtly manipulate emotion while maintaining character consistency. The red cheeks, a focal design element, reinforce his energetic and cheerful demeanor, acting as symbolic accents that contrast vividly with his black fur.</p>	
<p>Emotional impact of colors: the color palette of Kumamon is both emotionally resonant and functionally strategic. The dominant black body not only creates a bold visual contrast with the character’s white eyes and red cheeks—ensuring high recognizability across physical media and digital screens—but also carries symbolic and cultural significance.</p> <p>In color psychology, black is often associated with sophistication, mystery, and stability. In the context of Kumamon’s character, it projects a dependable and grounded presence, aligning with the symbolic image of the “bear” and reflecting Kumamoto’s volcanic landscapes and fertile black soil. Red, used in the circular cheek patches, evokes emotional warmth and enthusiasm—qualities central to Kumamon’s playful and extroverted persona. The red accents draw</p>	

<p>attention and humanize the character, fostering engagement and emotional bonding with diverse audiences. White, used in the eye sclera, enhances the brightness of the facial region and sharpens the character’s expressiveness. It further adds clarity to eye contact and emphasizes Kumamon’s innocence and curiosity.</p>	
<p>Costume and props: Kumamon’s costuming strategy also reflects thoughtful visual planning. While his default unclothed appearance increases universality and neutrality, his use of situational costumes—for example, wearing traditional yukata during summer festivals or medical attire during health campaigns—adds playful variability and strengthens situational resonance. These elements enable Kumamon to communicate across events, seasons, and themes without altering his core identity.</p>	

B. Narrative elements

Cultural elements: Kumamon’s narrative identity is deeply rooted in the regional culture of Kumamoto Prefecture. His visual and behavioral cues are consistently aligned with the local customs, food, festivals, and dialects of the area. For example, his official campaigns often feature him visiting Kumamoto landmarks, eating regional specialties like “basashi” (horse meat sashimi), or participating in traditional events such as the Hinokuni Festival. These cultural incorporations enable Kumamon not only to represent the region, but also to embody it—strengthening emotional ties between the character and local residents while enhancing regional branding for tourists and external audiences.

Symbolic significance: beyond cultural representation, Kumamon functions as a symbolic projection of Kumamoto’s identity and aspirations. His black color suggests dignity and endurance, while his red cheeks evoke enthusiasm and optimism. The bear form carries connotations of approachability and strength in Japanese semiotics. Over time, Kumamon has become a symbolic ambassador—not just of the region’s tourism—but of resilience (e.g., post-2016 earthquake recovery), civic pride, and Japan’s soft power diplomacy. His image is now used to

foster national unity and international engagement, transforming him into a living metaphor for the region's emotional narrative and Japan's broader branding strategy.

C. Interactivity

Actions and behaviors: Kumamon's dynamic interactivity is a cornerstone of his public appeal. Rather than being a passive figure, he actively performs in a wide range of settings—from local festivals to international exhibitions. Notably, his viral dance performance, known as the "Kumamon Dance," showcases exaggerated body movements and playful timing that invite audience participation and emotional connection. This dance, often performed with children and citizens, not only boosts visibility but also strengthens the character's role as a facilitator of joyful communal experience. In addition, Kumamon's unscripted comic improvisations during live events—such as mimicking participants or feigning clumsy behavior—introduce an element of unpredictability and humor. These intentional exaggerations align with design principles that prioritize emotional resonance and narrative extension through movement, effectively reinforcing his relatability.

Virtual masks: digital and virtual representation

A. Adaptability

Form across different media: Kumamon's design features—such as a minimalistic silhouette, bold monochromatic palette, and biomorphic roundness—enable high adaptability across visual platforms. His form translates consistently in 2D animation, 3D modeling, augmented reality filters, and promotional videos without loss of recognizability or character integrity. This visual consistency across media ensures the stable transmission of Kumamon's symbolic and brand attributes.

Cross-platform consistency: the consistency in Kumamon's visual identity and behavior across diverse platforms—such as YouTube, Twitter, LINE stickers, and mobile games—ensures seamless brand recognition. Regardless of the medium, his actions, expressions, and voice (when used) remain aligned with his established persona. This strengthens brand memorability and builds trust with audiences.

B. Interactivity

Kumamon's interactive communication style—ranging from humorous video content to personalized emoji reactions and livestreaming events—invites participatory engagement. These interactive moments go beyond passive viewing, enabling audiences to emotionally connect with the character through likes, comments, retweets, and even virtual collaboration. For example, his live performances on Bilibili and updates on Twitter regularly garner thousands of real-time interactions, demonstrating his continued relevance in digital culture.

C. Cross-media consistency

Consistent image and behavior: Kumamon's consistent behavior—playful, cheerful, and socially engaged—is maintained whether he appears in print ads, animated shorts, or interactive games. This design discipline ensures that his character integrity is not diluted in translation across media, maintaining coherence in how the public understands and emotionally responds to him.

Unified brand identity: through cross-media orchestration, Kumamon not only supports the branding of Kumamoto Prefecture, but has also become a symbolic extension of regional identity. His unified representation across platforms builds a cohesive cultural narrative that resonates with local pride and is accessible to a global audience.

4.2.3 Duo



Figure 121 Duo

Duo (Figure 121) is the IP character of Duolingo, a language learning platform, and has been the iconic image of the Duolingo brand since its launch in 2012. Duolingo hopes that Duo will entice users to continue to use its platform for language learning by conveying a brand image that is friendly, approachable, and encourages learning and progress.

Psychological masks

A. Comprehensive identity presentation

Core personality: Duo, the green owl mascot of Duolingo, is intentionally designed with a personality that balances friendliness, encouragement, and accountability. The character embodies core traits such as optimism, persistence, and a light-hearted sense of humor, which make it emotionally appealing and pedagogically supportive for learners. Duo is often portrayed offering reminders and celebrating achievements, but also using gentle nudges (sometimes humorous or exaggerated) when users miss practice (Estefani, 2025). This approach leverages psychological concepts like positive reinforcement and gamified accountability to foster user engagement and emotional bonding (Wilhelm, 2025). For example, Duo might appear with an encouraging message such as “You’re on fire!” after a streak, or deliver a comically exaggerated notification like “Duo is watching...” if a user forgets their lesson—both strategies that turn a utility function into a personalized, emotional experience.

Drivers and motivations: Duo’s core motivation is strategically aligned with Duolingo’s pedagogical goals—to foster consistent learning behavior and minimize user dropout. As a learning companion embedded throughout the user interface, Duo’s behavioral design encourages daily engagement through gamified prompts, reminders, and emotionally charged feedback mechanisms (e.g., celebratory animations upon task completion or guilt-inducing notifications when a user misses practice). From a character design perspective, Duo serves not just as a static mascot but as an active motivational agent—a role supported by persuasive design principles. Its repeated appearances at critical decision points in the app (e.g., when choosing to continue or quit a lesson) reinforce its identity as a reliable source of emotional nudges. For example, the now-iconic “passive-aggressive” push notifications (“I’m not angry. Just disappointed.”) have become part of Duo’s brand voice and online persona, demonstrating how character motivation is encoded in interactive design choices, not just narrative exposition.

Backstory: unlike traditional IP characters rooted in narrative worlds, Duo’s origin is tightly bound to Duolingo’s brand mission: making education accessible, gamified, and emotionally engaging. While Duo does not possess a fictional backstory with biographical details, its role as the

embodied interface of the learning experience gives it narrative significance. The mascot is ever-present in daily interactions—celebrating user achievements, sending notifications, encouraging consistency—and thus becomes a symbol of habit-building and emotional support in the language-learning process. The character’s lack of a fixed storyline actually enhances its adaptability: Duo can be seamlessly embedded into new course modules, seasonal campaigns, or cultural references without disrupting continuity. For example, in Duolingo’s Halloween and holiday challenges, Duo is often costumed (e.g., as a vampire or elf), reinforcing engagement through playful narrative layering without the need for rigid fictional logic.

B. Development

Internal conflict: although Duo lacks a complex emotional arc, it demonstrates a form of character tension through its humorous and often exaggerated responses to user inactivity. For instance, messages like “These reminders don’t seem to be working...” or meme-inspired social media posts convey a mock desperation that playfully pressures users to return to learning. This behavioral script simulates an emotional response—transforming system feedback into character-driven urgency—thereby introducing an anthropomorphic layer to an otherwise functional reminder. It reflects a cleverly designed emotional hook that fosters accountability without genuine conflict, blurring the line between interface function and character psychology.

Growth trajectory: Duo’s evolution from a static visual mascot to a multi-functional in-app agent reflects a deliberate expansion in character utility and narrative presence. Originally serving as a decorative figure, Duo now performs a hybrid role: as mentor, motivator, and emotional companion. This transformation is visible in the app’s increasingly personalized interactions—like Duo’s reactions varying based on user performance—and in special learning challenges where Duo appears in narrative contexts (e.g., story mode or themed events). These role extensions mark a progression toward a more nuanced, relational character identity within the user interface ecosystem.

Shaping on digital social platforms: Duo’s personality has been further amplified through its strategic engagement on digital platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram. The character is now widely known for its meme-savvy, sassy, and emotionally reactive online persona. For example, Duo’s TikTok account (@duolingo) became viral for breaking the fourth wall—posting

self-referential content, reacting to user comments in character, and participating in trending audio memes. These platforms offer Duo a meta-layer of expression, where character identity evolves through user-generated discourse and participatory humor. Such digital presence transforms Duo into a transmedia character, extending its emotional resonance far beyond its original educational function.

C. Adaptability


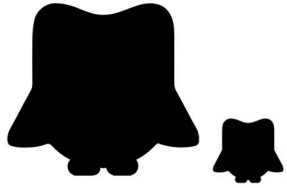


Flexibility: Duo’s cross-cultural and platform-specific flexibility is a key factor in its global appeal. The character’s core personality—supportive, energetic, and humorous—remains consistent, but is strategically modulated based on the communicative environment. Within the app, Duo behaves as a helpful guide who celebrates milestones and encourages persistence. On external platforms such as TikTok or X (formerly Twitter), Duo adopts a sassier, more self-aware tone to align with internet culture. This adaptive performativity allows Duo to maintain brand consistency while remaining contextually relevant to diverse user communities, enhancing its resonance from educational settings to entertainment-driven spaces.

Multilayered character traits: Duo’s identity is constructed through multiple expressive layers, each fulfilling a different narrative and emotional role depending on medium and audience. In-app, Duo’s actions focus on educational motivation—offering praise, reminders, and game-like encouragement. On social media, however, Duo demonstrates a playful, even mischievous side: it posts memes, reacts to user content, and references pop culture trends. This contrast forms a complementary identity architecture, where the character bridges emotional support and cultural engagement. Such multi-contextual adaptability transforms Duo from a static mascot into a flexible IP character capable of dynamic user interaction across platforms.

Physical masks

Table 20 External characteristics and visual representation of Duo

Visual Expression

<p>Physical traits and posture</p> <p>Shape: Duo's body and head are merged into a single curvilinear form, defined by smooth, rounded geometry. This biomorphic design is intentionally employed to evoke approachability, friendliness, and softness—qualities particularly effective in reducing psychological barriers for new learners. As noted in visual design literature, rounded shapes are associated with safety and emotional warmth (Lidwell et al., 2010), thus reinforcing Duo's role as a non-threatening and encouraging companion in a learning environment. The choice of an owl as Duo's base animal form is highly symbolic. Traditionally, owls are associated with wisdom, knowledge, and learning across various cultures, particularly within Western educational iconography. This association strengthens Duo's credibility and relevance as an educational IP character.</p>	
<p>Silhouette: the silhouette is unmistakable. This makes it instantly recognizable even at low resolutions or in thumbnail form. According to semiotic analysis principles (Chandler, 2022), high recognizability is critical for IP characters operating across platforms, especially those with app-based interfaces and digital branding needs.</p>	
<p>Face: Duo's large, circular eyes and minimalistic mouth communicate clarity of emotion and visual empathy. The simplicity of these features allows for scalable emotional cues—enabling Duo to appear cheerful, concerned, or playful with only slight alterations. This minimalism facilitates adaptability in both static and animated contexts, ensuring clarity without overloading the visual field.</p>	
<p>Emotional impact of colors: green, as Duo's primary color, is deeply symbolic. In color theory, green is tied to growth, renewal, and knowledge acquisition—core tenets of Duolingo's educational mission. Its brightness also provides high visual salience on digital screens, enhancing engagement and recall. The use of green also positions Duo distinctively within the crowded landscape of</p>	

educational apps, reinforcing both brand differentiation and conceptual alignment.	
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B. Narrativity

Cultural elements: although Duo’s character design appears simple and universally friendly, it intentionally reflects a broader cultural positioning rooted in globalization and educational inclusivity. Duo is not embedded in any single national or regional culture; instead, it is designed to operate across linguistic and cultural boundaries through multilingual content, neutral visual expression, and cross-platform accessibility.

Symbolic significance: the owl figure in Duo’s design holds deep symbolic meaning in both Western and global contexts. Historically, owls have symbolized wisdom, learning, and scholarly pursuit—from ancient Greek mythology (e.g., the owl of Athena) to modern education emblems. Duo inherits this symbolism, positioning itself as a wise and ever-present mentor figure.

C. Interactivity

Actions and behaviors: Duo’s interactivity is primarily realized through its animated responses, notifications, and gamified feedback mechanisms embedded within the app and across social media. These behaviors—such as celebratory dances when a user completes a lesson, sad expressions when a session is skipped, or the now-famous "passive-aggressive" reminders ("I’m watching you ")—build a character that actively responds to user performance. These designed behaviors are not random; they are built on affective interaction design principles that use visual and behavioral cues to build emotional bonds. For example, Duo’s exaggerated eye movements, posture shifts, and reactive sound effects allow users to interpret emotional feedback quickly. This enhances parasocial interaction—users feel that Duo “cares” about their learning progress.

Virtual masks

Duolingo uses the web to create a social media presence with a personality that accurately attracts targeted users and completes conversions. According to a Duolingo report (Research, 2024), daily active users grew by 65% and monthly active users grew by 46% in 2023.

A. Adaptability

Cross-platform design: Duo was designed to be adaptable across various digital media and interactive platforms, including mobile apps, websites, social media, and video content. Its clean and highly recognizable design ensures consistency and visual appeal across all platforms.

Flexibility: Duo's design is highly flexible and can be adapted to different usage scenarios. For instance, in mobile applications, Duo interacts with users through animations, while its static image remains equally engaging on social media.

B. Interactivity

User interaction: Duo communicates with users through a variety of interactive methods, including encouraging users to complete learning tasks, celebrating their achievements, and reminding them to learn. These interactive methods enhance users' sense of reliance and engagement with the platform, and an emotional connection is established with Duo.

Social media activities: Duo often appears on social media and maintains interaction with users by posting interesting content that keeps up with current events, participating in discussions, and organizing competitions to increase brand affinity.

Duolingo is an example of how effective digital/online marketing was done. By establishing a strong foothold on multiple key social media platforms, including TikTok, Twitter, Weibo, and Rednote, it created user interactions with IP character Duo, affectionately referred to as 'relentless study reminders'. These catchy reminders, at times even humorous, coming out from Duo have gone super viral across users and have played a big role in the process of user acquisition of the platform, thereby extending the popularity of the character.

The brand's marketing strategy can be categorized into two primary approaches:

1. Social media: first strategy

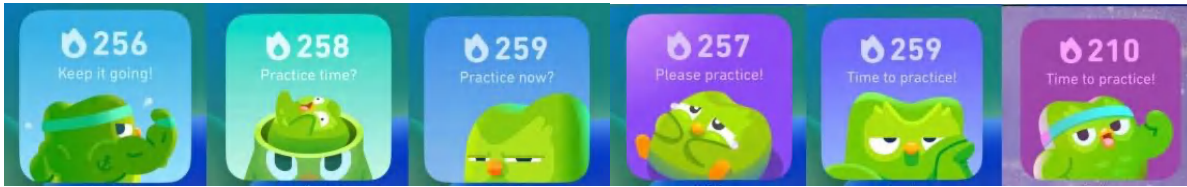


Figure 122 Different emojis

Duolingo has prioritized social media engagement as a key component of its marketing strategy. This involves leveraging a wide array of emotional expressions to motivate users to continue their studies. Duo boasts a collection of 36 different emojis (Figure 122), each conveying a unique emotion and often functioning like a ‘mystery box’ to spark user curiosity and anticipation. Users are further incentivized by features like the ‘legendary golden owl’ unlocked after 800 consecutive days of learning. Additionally, persistent notifications, including push messages, text messages, and emails, reinforce the learning habit, even earning Duo the nickname of ‘evil Duolingo owl’ (Figure 123)’ among some users. Despite the mixed reactions, many users continue to engage with these features, indicating a strong desire to be reminded to study. Some users even treat Duo as a digital pet, logging in daily to ‘care’ for it. By transforming a learning app into a multifaceted entity, Duolingo has expanded its reach across various media, from emojis to cyber personas and digital pets. Moreover, Duo engages in creative marketing by ‘cosplaying (Figure124)’ celebrities, further broadening its appeal.

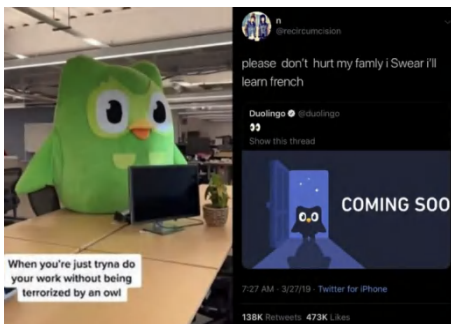


Figure 123 ‘Evil Duolingo owl’



Figure 124 Cosplaying of Duo



Figure 125 Rolls paper with words

2. Expansion into branded merchandise

Beyond digital engagement, Duolingo has extended its IP character Duo into the sphere of merchandise, exploring new revenue streams and strengthening brand loyalty through the creation of physical products that resonate with its user base, for example, roll paper with words (Figure 125). This multi-faceted approach not only solidifies Duo’s role as a central figure in

Duolingo's branding but also ensures that the character remains relevant and engaging across a variety of platforms and media, ultimately driving both user retention and brand expansion.

C. Cross-platform consistency

Consistency in visual identity: Duo's design remains consistent across all platforms, including colors, shapes, expressions, and actions. This consistency ensures that users can easily identify Duo across different platforms, reinforcing brand unity and coherence.

Behavioral patterns consistency: Duo's behavioral patterns are also consistent across interactions, such as encouragement, celebration, and reminders. This consistency adds stability and familiarity to the user experience, enhancing user satisfaction and brand loyalty.

4.2.4 Snow King



Figure 126 Snow King

Snow King is the IP character of Mixue Bingcheng, a beverage shops and has been the iconic image since the brand was established. It is expected that, through Snow King, Mixue Bingcheng can attract consumers to its ice cream products by conveying the brand image of coolness, sweetness, friendliness, and high quality.

Psychological masks

A. Comprehensive identity presentation

Core personality: As the ambassador of Mixue Bingcheng, Snow King truly embodies affability, humor, and approachability. His demeanor is warm and upbeat, successfully transmitting the brand's ideals of relaxation and joy (Qing, 2023). These personality traits are not abstract—they

are manifested through specific visual and behavioral choices. For example, Snow King's ever-present smile and waving posture in promotional materials convey a sense of constant welcome. His round body, soft outlines, and childlike expression visually support a non-threatening, friendly disposition, in line with Molly Bang's theory that rounded forms elicit feelings of safety and affection (Bang, 2000). Furthermore, his exaggerated animated gestures in advertisements—such as joyful dancing, giving thumbs up, or presenting ice cream—reinforce a humorous, playful tone that resonates with younger audiences and evokes emotional closeness.

Drivers and motivation: the main role of Snow King is to advocate the products of Mixue Bingcheng, considering it a call for customers to enjoy the delight and satisfaction brought by every sip. He represents a lively, vibrant personality that drives the message for the brand-to deliver happiness and a worry-free experience.

Background story: although Snow King does not possess a fully developed narrative backstory, his symbolic origins are closely tied to Mixue Bingcheng's brand heritage and cultural positioning. Introduced as the emblematic figure of the brand, Snow King draws inspiration from the imagery of a winter wonderland—invoking notions of coolness, freshness, and delight. His snowman-like appearance metaphorically conveys the product's qualities of icy refreshment and youthful appeal.

B. Development

Internal conflict: while Snow King is officially portrayed as consistently cheerful and light-hearted, his exaggerated gestures and sometimes theatrical behavior suggest a deeper psychological motivation beneath the surface. The character's persistent efforts to capture customer attention—through humorous, dynamic, and occasionally over-the-top performances—may be read as a symbolic drive to overcome the emotional distance between brand and audience. This implicit tension between maintaining an upbeat persona and the underlying need for audience connection creates a subtle internal conflict: the pressure to constantly perform joy, even in contexts that demand commercial persuasion. Although not explicitly acknowledged in official brand narratives, this duality adds emotional complexity to Snow King's character design and supports a richer interpretation of his psychological mask.

Growth trajectory: Snow King has evolved alongside the Mixue Bingcheng brand. From a simple

mascot, he has become a more active and engaging figure through appearances in advertisements, social media, and events. His personality has grown from being just cute and friendly to also humorous and expressive, aligning with the brand’s youthful and creative image. This development shows how IP characters can grow with the brand and stay relevant in changing media environments.

Digital social platform representation: Snow King engages audiences through various digital platforms, including short videos, animations, and branded games. These appearances present him as a humorous and modern character, enhancing his relatability among younger consumers. By adapting his personality and behavior to suit digital media trends, Snow King maintains cultural relevance and deepens the brand’s emotional connection with online audiences.

C. Adaptability




Flexibility: Snow King exhibits high contextual flexibility, appearing seamlessly across diverse marketing scenarios and public-facing events. His cheerful and approachable demeanor allows him to integrate into seasonal campaigns, product promotions, and cultural celebrations, ensuring his ongoing relevance and communicative effectiveness within various commercial and social settings.

Multilayered Personality Traits: Snow King’s character adapts to different communication needs. In-store or street appearances emphasize his warmth and approachability, fostering immediate emotional connections. In contrast, animated advertisements present him as playful and creatively expressive, showcasing a humorous dimension. This dynamic range enhances his appeal across age groups and media formats.

Physical masks

Table 21 External characteristics and visual representation of Snow King

A. Visual expression

<p>Physical traits and posture</p> <p>Shape: Snow King's design is based on rounded shapes—its spherical head and body, soft limbs, and absence of sharp angles make it look friendly, warm, and approachable. This aligns with visual communication principles, where rounded forms evoke softness and emotional safety (Bang, 2016). The slightly forward-leaning posture suggests engagement and openness, which fits well with user-friendly mascot design principles. Choosing a snowman as the core image connects directly to Mixue Bingcheng's product identity: snow symbolizes coldness and refreshment, echoing its ice cream and beverage offerings. Culturally, snowmen also suggest innocence, celebration, and emotional warmth.</p>	
<p>Silhouette: the silhouette is uniquely defined by two iconic features (the crown and the ice cream cone). These elements form a simplified but powerful outline, which remains legible across sizes and platforms, supporting the principle that clear silhouettes enhance brand recognition and media adaptability (Tillman, 2012).</p>	
<p>Facial features: Snow King is always depicted with a smile, conveying friendly and pleasant emotions. The fixed, wide smile ensures emotional consistency and fosters positive emotional transfer in visual communication, particularly in food retail contexts where emotional immediacy is critical.</p>	
<p>Emotional impact of colors: the primary color of Snow King is white, representing purity and cleanliness—qualities aligned with cold, fresh food products. Blue, used in the eyes, evokes coolness and clarity; red, used in the cape, signifies celebration, energy, and heroism; yellow in the scepter suggests warmth and delight; orange in the carrot-shaped nose brings playfulness. The emotional resonance of these color choices follows</p>	

psychological theories of color perception (Kobayashi and Matsunaga, 1991).	
Costume and props: the golden crown, while whimsical, connotes royalty, leadership, and excellence, elevating the character to a brand ambassadorial level. The handheld ice cream cone is a functional prop that bridges the mascot's identity with the brand's core product. It acts as a visual synecdoche—where the part (ice cream) represents the whole (Mixue's dessert empire).	
Voice: Snow King is often accompanied by cheerful and lively music or sound effects in advertisements and videos, reinforcing his playful and friendly character.	

B. Narrative elements

Cultural elements: Snow King integrates visual codes that resonate with Chinese mascot culture—namely joyfulness, cuteness, and approachability. The character's permanent smile, friendly posture, and whimsical accessories reflect traditional East Asian visual tropes often seen in festival mascots and public service figures. This cultural embeddedness enhances audience identification, making Snow King highly relatable to local consumers. Moreover, the snowman imagery evokes childhood memories and seasonal celebration, tapping into emotional familiarity that strengthens brand attachment in the Chinese context.

Symbolism: as the symbolic representative of Mixue Bingcheng, Snow King embodies the brand's core values: affordability, joy, and inclusiveness. His crown implies leadership and accessibility to all social groups, challenging the notion that high quality must be high cost. The ice cream scepter visually connects the character to the brand's main product line, while also symbolizing a whimsical take on authority—one rooted in delight rather than power. These symbolic cues elevate Snow King from a mere mascot to a culturally resonant and emotionally effective brand ambassador.

C. Interactivity

Actions and behaviors: Snow King's public behavior is characterized by exaggerated body language, playful gestures, and comic movement—especially evident in promotional videos, livestreams, and animated clips circulated on platforms like Douyin and WeChat. These dynamic and performative traits are designed to increase emotional engagement, enabling the character to transcend static representation and actively “perform” the brand's joyful personality. For instance, in viral short videos, Snow King is often shown dancing, waving, or bowing dramatically to viewers, creating a humorous, approachable brand tone. This kinetic expressiveness aligns with contemporary mascot strategies that prioritize performativity and multisensory interaction. By converting marketing content into interactive entertainment, Snow King enhances viewer retention and emotional resonance.

Virtual masks

A. Adaptability

Cross-platform design: Snow King's visual design demonstrates high adaptability across a wide range of digital and interactive platforms—including mobile applications, brand websites, short-form videos, and social media environments. The character's simplified rounded silhouette, consistent color blocking, and signature elements (such as the carrot nose and ice cream cane) allow it to maintain clarity and recognizability even under varying screen sizes and resolutions. This visual clarity is critical for cross-device brand coherence.

Flexibility: Snow King can be animated for interactive use in ordering apps or brand promotions (e.g., dancing animations during limited-time sales), while also remaining visually effective in static formats such as profile icons, stickers, and promotional posters. Such flexibility in application confirms the design's resilience across both high-engagement and passive-viewing contexts.

B. Interactivity

User interaction: Snow King's interactive strategy is central to its function as a digital brand ambassador. On various platforms—including WeChat, Douyin (TikTok China), and Weibo—the character regularly engages users through personalized greetings, promotional countdowns, and

user-generated content (UGC) initiatives. These interactions are designed to create a participatory brand culture, wherein consumers are not merely passive viewers but active contributors to the brand narrative.

Social media activities: the character is also widely employed in branded challenges and seasonal campaigns (e.g., “Snow King Dance” on Chinese TikTok), which invite users to replicate signature gestures or submit themed content for prizes. Such campaigns not only deepen emotional connection but also strengthen brand visibility through viral diffusion. This participatory interaction transforms Snow King from a static mascot into an emotionally intelligent digital entity capable of sustaining long-term engagement.

C. Cross-media consistency

Visual identity consistency: Snow King maintains a high level of visual and behavioral consistency across diverse media formats—including packaging, mobile apps, social media, physical storefronts, and animations. The use of fixed visual elements—such as the white spherical body, red cape, golden ice cream scepter, and cheerful smile—ensures immediate recognizability and brand coherence across all consumer touchpoints.

Behavioral patterns consistency: Snow King’s behavioral expressions—such as his warm hand waves, celebratory gestures, and joyful demeanor—are deliberately repeated across both static and dynamic formats. This cross-channel repetition reinforces a stable and emotionally dependable character identity, allowing consumers to associate familiar emotional cues with the brand regardless of context. Such consistency is critical in strengthening trust, enhancing memorability, and sustaining long-term brand equity.

4.2.5 Summary

By analyzing the IP character design cases of Mickey Mouse, Kumamon, Duo, and Snow King, the feasibility and effectiveness of the 3MIP character design method have been validated.

At the psychological mask level, the identity, personality, emotions, and background stories of these characters have shaped more enriched and appealing character images that effectively convey the core values of their respective brands. Speaking about the physical mask, all the four

cases have a high level of recognizability and are defined by curves that outline them, which adds to their approachability. Speaking about the virtual mask dimension, the character in these cases has visual and personality coherence through different media; hence, reinforcing brand image and extending influence are easily done. They all could maintain consistency in visual and interactive experiences among animations, advertisements, social media, and other digital platforms.

However, each character emphasizes different aspects. For example, Mickey Mouse is the symbol of Disney, with a long history and the highest brand recognition in the world. The design of the character has established deep cultural influence through emotional connections with multiple generations of audiences and classic storylines. The growth and complexity of Mickey Mouse's character have been continually enriched through films, television, and theme parks. Among them, Duo, Kumamon, and Snow King are more outstanding in the physical and virtual mask dimension. The character design of Kumamon emphasizes regional characteristics and economic development. Through humorous performances and extensive social interactions, Kumamon has enhanced the attractiveness of the local economy, becoming a model for regional brand promotion. Duo, not just a mascot, serves as a learning companion in language education. Its design excels in motivation and education, helping users maintain positivity during the learning process. Duo's high interactivity and engagement on the app and social media platforms have fostered continuous user engagement and brand loyalty.

Snow King attracts customers through a humorous and relaxed image, conveying the brand's ethos of joy and stress-free consumption. Snow King increases diversity and appeal by changing costumes and props across various events and advertisements, successfully merging brand promotion with product marketing. The latter three characters focus more on online and offline interactions with consumers. Additionally, this analysis does not address the comfort of character costumes, primarily because this study emphasizes the early stages of character image development, and the actual production process would require more specialized and in-depth research.

The analysis of these cases demonstrates that the 3MIP character design method is both feasible and effective in brand building. Utilizing the psychological mask, physical mask, and virtual mask

dimensions ensures that each brand character possesses unique charm and high recognizability, thereby enhancing brand market competitiveness and consumer loyalty. The subsequent chapters will further validate the practicality of this method through its application in real-world cases.

4.3 Project practice

This section evaluates the effectiveness of the brand IP character design method through four practical projects. Three of these projects involve redesigns—Cha Cha from Cha Panda, Shanzai from SEE Conservation Ecological Association, and PP Panda from PanPan Foods—allowing for comparative analysis of the IP characters before and after applying the 3MIP design method. These brands were specifically selected to reflect distinct industrial domains and character maturity stages: Cha Cha, originally designed as a cartoon panda for a tea beverage chain, lacked emotional resonance and narrative richness; Shanzai required symbolic refinement and stronger public engagement; and PP Panda suffered from visual cliché and lacked brand distinctiveness in the competitive FMCG market. The final project focuses on the creation of an entirely new IP character—Owy for Outside Coffee—chosen to test the method's capacity from a blank slate. The brand itself is newly established and had no prior mascot, offering a unique opportunity to evaluate the method's generative and strategic potential at the conceptual level. This research aims to develop an integrated brand IP character design method that will give complete and accurate support for the creation of a character by a novice designer or design student. The research is of the self-participatory type, in that the design method is created and optimized primarily from the researcher's point of view, without third-party testing and feedback. This choice is justified because the first part of the research was designed to be exploratory in methodological terms and to construct a theoretical framework.

In order to lessen the degree of subjectivity, self-reflective journaling was added in the research phase and to the testing model development regarding brand IP character design. The model assesses the IP characters' aesthetic appeal, emotional resonance, distinctiveness, and conformance to brand identity in order to ascertain that the developed design method truly is applicable and effective. Visual appeal refers to the aesthetic qualities of the character, including color, shape, and proportions. Emotional connection refers to how much the character relates to the target audience, in order to evoke feelings of sympathy or affection. Uniqueness refers to how

much the character stands out from the rest, defined by its specific traits and stylistic elements. Brand alignment will consider how well this character speaks for the brand values and contributes to its image. A four-quadrant analysis can be done to evaluate and optimize the design of IP characters to achieve a more precise positioning and refinement strategy.

The focus on these four aspects—visual appeal, emotional connection, uniqueness, and brand alignment—is due to their encompassing the core elements of a brand IP character. While there is no direct research explicitly highlighting the importance of visual appeal in brand building, visual appeal is a crucial factor in brand packaging design, as it influences consumer behavior. Studies have found that packaging presented in low-complexity environments is more likely to attract consumer attention, thereby increasing its appeal (Orth and Crouch, 2014). Regarding emotional connection, Don Norman discusses the role of emotion in user experience in ‘Emotional Design’, emphasizing the need for products (or characters) to establish an emotional bond with users. Modern visual communication design goes beyond textual communication to incorporate emotional concepts, shortening the distance between consumers and products, and enhancing product appeal and interactivity (Guo, 2023). The selection of uniqueness as a criterion aligns with David Aaker’s concept of differentiation in ‘Brand Leadership’, where he notes that brands need to achieve market differentiation through unique selling points and innovative design. Finally, brand alignment is emphasized by Kevin Lane Keller in ‘Strategic Brand Management’, where he underscores the importance of brand consistency in building and maintaining brand equity. Research indicates that consumer evaluations of brand extensions are significantly influenced by their perceived fit with the parent brand, especially when consumers consider the brand at a higher level of abstract attributes (Kim and John, 2008). By integrating visual appeal, emotional connection, uniqueness, and brand alignment, brands can distinguish themselves in a highly competitive market.

This approach ensures that the method is robust and adaptable, capable of guiding the creation of characters that are not only visually compelling but also resonate emotionally with audiences, stand out in the marketplace, and align closely with the brand’s identity and values.

4.3.1 Redesign project: Cha Panda



Figure 127 Logo of Cha Panda

Brand name: Cha Panda

Brand positioning: good tea as the base, fresh production

Brand Vision: Let the world fall in love with Chinese tea

Brand goal: Create a new tea drinking experience full of freshness and quality for consumers



Figure 128 Cha Cha

Name: Cha Cha

Birthplace: Chengdu

Character: Innocent and cute, optimistic and open-minded, picky and naughty

Dream: Let the world fall in love with Chinese tea

Specialties: looking for tea, talking about tea, researching tea, and promoting Chinese tea in a fancy way

As Cha Panda's brand IP and Cha Panda's global image ambassador/spokesperson, it is the expression of Cha Panda's brand personality.

The brand's positioning, vision and goals and the brand's description of the IP persona were used to analyze the design and strategy of the IP persona in conjunction with the 3MIP character design method.

Table 22 3MIP design method analysis for Cha Panda

Analysis Dimensions	Current design	Optimization suggestions
3MIP - Psychological masks		
Identify	Public Image: cheerful and optimistic brand spokesperson. Motivation and objective: the love of tea and the mission of spreading Chinese tea culture.	Inner world: add Cha Cha's inner monologue or reflective episodes to show the confusion and challenges she encounters in the process of spreading tea culture. This will allow the audience to have a deeper understanding of Cha Cha's inner world.
Character personality and emotions	Innocent and nerdy, optimistic and open-minded, picky and mischievous character traits interact with others and handle various situations.	Cha Cha sometimes hides her true self to fulfil social expectations, and this inner conflict can be shown through the plot to increase emotional tension and audience empathy.
Character story	Like all pandas, Cha Cha is both discerning and conscientious in its choice of ingredients and raw materials. With the original idea of a new style of tea and the mission to spread this concept, Cha Cha and Cha Ba Dao have always been committed to making the world fall in	Backstory: add more details to Cha Cha's backstory, such as his upbringing in Chengdu, the story of learning the art of tea, as well as his interactions and relationships with other characters, to increase the three-dimensionality of the character. Combine these elements with the

	love with Chinese tea with high quality good tea. It breaks the sub-dimensional wall with its serious and naughty image, approaching young people who also love tea, enjoying the new tea experience with them and experiencing a different style of Chinese tea.	history and tradition of Chinese tea culture and incorporate them into Cha Cha's backstory to make his story more educational and culturally valuable. Character growth: Cha Cha overcomes internal and external challenges during her journey, showing the growth over time and reflecting the influence of society and culture on her development. By gradually revealing or changing Cha Cha's character, it makes the story more compelling and provides the audience with a profound emotional experience.
3MIP - Physical masks		
Vision	Cha Cha has an attractive appearance with a cute and innocent expression. Cha Cha's classic poses, such as holding a teacup, convey its enthusiasm for sharing tea culture and its readiness to interact with the world.	Tea elements can be added to the character's appearance to make it more closely associated with tea culture.
Culture and symbols	The panda symbolizes the place of origin from Chengdu. The drinking cup symbolizes the appearance of the product.	
3MIP - Virtual masks		
Adaptability	Appears as 2D and 3D animation on multimedia platforms	According to the characteristics of different platforms, the design of Cha

		Cha was adjusted accordingly to ensure that it was perfectly presented on all kinds of tasting tables. For example, ensure simplicity and cuteness in 2D animation, and add details and interactivity in 3D display.
Interactivity	Basic interaction with users through social media	Enrichment of interactive forms: develop interactive applications, such as virtual tea teachers, to increase user engagement. User feedback: Regular feedback and suggestions from mobile users to optimize and improve the design and interactive forms of Cha Cha to ensure it continues to attract users.
Cross-media consistency	Ensuring that Cha Cha maintains a consistent look, sound, color scheme and movement style across all media helps to create a unified brand image.	

Based on the analysis and optimization in the previous sub-section, the IP characters of the brand Cha Panda were further redesigned in terms of characterization, visual design and interaction design.

A. Characterization

Character name: Cha Cha

Personality traits: Innocent and nerdy, optimistic and open-minded, fussy and mischievous.

Unique characteristics: Cha Cha has a special love for tea and a keen sense of smell.

Backstory: Cha Cha was born in Chengdu, one of the birthplaces of Chinese tea culture. Growing up in a tea plantation, Cha Cha has a special love for tea and a keen sense of smell. She is fascinated by the aroma of every tea leaf and every way of brewing tea. With the dream of 'making the world fall in love with Chinese tea', Cha Cha decided to promote Chinese tea culture to the world.

In order to realize this dream, Cha Cha visited countless tea master's and learnt all kinds of tea techniques. Through continuous efforts and research, Cha Cha has not only mastered the traditional Chinese tea ceremony but also developed a new style of tea drink by combining modern creativity. It brings this fresh and quality tea drink concept to Tea Panda, and together with Tea Panda, we are committed to creating a brand-new tea drink experience for consumers with high quality good tea.

Cha Cha is innocent and cute, always exploring the world with curiosity. No matter what challenges she encounters, she always stays positive and has strict standards for tea and tea art but also likes to joke and create joy. Cha Cha loves to interact with young people and share the beauty of tea culture, and as a result, she has become a tea ambassador in everyone's mind.

Through a series of activities and interactions, Cha Cha not only spreads tea culture, but also builds a deep emotional connection with her fans. Cha Cha hopes to make everyone feel the unique charm of Chinese tea and fall in love with this ancient and fresh culture when they taste tea drinks from Cha Panda.


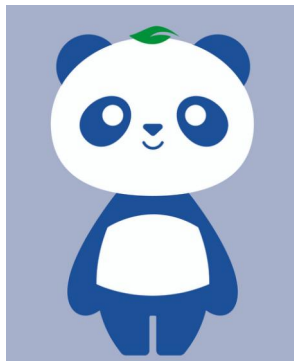
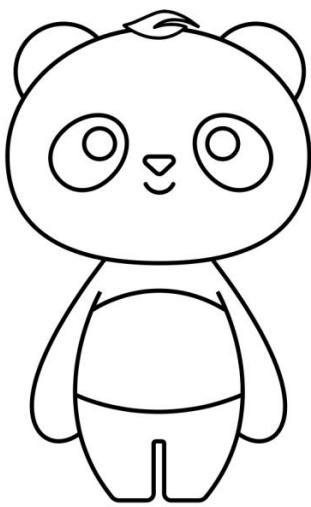
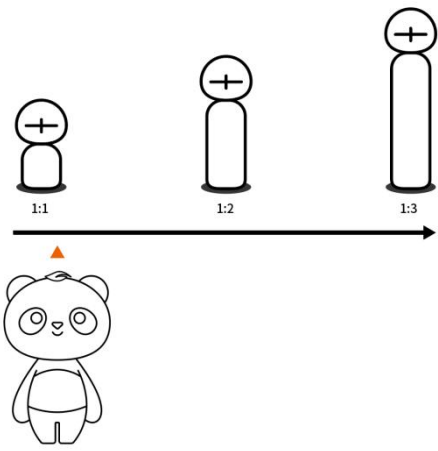
Mission: To make consumers around the world fall in love with Chinese tea by spreading the brand concept of Tea Panda. Cha Cha is committed to bringing the high-quality Chinese tea drinking culture to everyone, through its own stories and interactions, so that more people can understand and love this ancient and fresh drink. At the same time, Cha Cha is constantly innovating to create new tea drink experiences full of freshness and quality for consumers, and to promote the spread and development of tea culture around the world.


Target audience: According to the summary of data from various sources, the milk tea market accounts for about 70% of female consumption and only 30% of male consumers. Cha Panda itself has positioned its target customer group as young people aged 18-35 years old. Combining

the data from both sides, the user profile of Cha Panda is basically women aged 18-35.

B. Visual design

Table 23 Visual design for redesigned Cha Cha

Key point	<p>Natural elements: tea leave</p> <p>Animal: Cute panda as a symbol of Chengdu</p>	
Color	<p>Blue and white: to maintain unity with the brand and enhance recognition</p> <p>Green: represents tea, conveying the concept of nature and health</p> 	
Shape	<p>Head: big and round, highlighting the cute and adorable features.</p> <p>Body: rounded, in line with the panda's image, giving people a sense of warmth and security.</p> <p>Eyes: big and bright, adding to the character's affinity and emotional expression.</p> <p>Ears: round and slightly curved to enhance the cuteness.</p>	
Proportion	<p>Big head and small body: in line with the characteristics of cartoon characters, appear more affinity and recognition.</p> <p>Limbs: short and rounded, adding to the character's dorkiness.</p>	

Detail	Tea: directly related to the tea culture, highlighting the mission of the character.	
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C. Interactive design

Interact with the target group through videos, pictures and stories to enhance users' emotional connection through a sense of participation and empathy. The goal is to increase brand attention, stimulate the target group's love for Chinese tea culture, enhance their identification with the brand and increase their interest in a healthy lifestyle. Through interesting tea culture short stories and interactive games, it establishes an emotional connection with users and enhances their stickiness to the brand through interaction and sharing.

Table 24 Interactive scenarios of Cha Cha

Interactive scenarios	
Social media: Weibo (like Twitter), WeChat (like WhatsApp), Rednote (a social media and e-commerce platform)	<p>Picture: photos of Cha Cha in different tea gardens, accompanied by tea culture trivia and how to make tea drinks.</p> <p>Video: Short videos of Cha Cha teaching people how to make healthy tea drinks, or short stories of environmental actions.</p>
Advertising: BiliBili (like YouTube), TikTok, Weibo	<p>Animated advert: Cha Cha explores tea culture with users, showcasing Cha Panda's product features and health concepts.</p> <p>Live-action advert: Combining live-action and Cha Cha's interaction, the advert showcases Cha Panda 's tea art and environmental protection concept.</p>
Activities: offline Tea Ceremony, online Live Streaming	<p>Online live broadcast: Cha Panda invites tea master's to perform tea ceremony with Cha Cha, teaching users how to make healthy tea drinks and conducting interactive Q&A.</p> <p>Offline experience activities: Cha Panda organizes tea experience activities, where Cha Panda leads users to visit tea gardens, experience the process of tea picking and tea making, and learn about tea culture.</p>

Cross-culture promotion	
Storyline	<p>Cha Cha's tea culture discovery Tour: Cha Cha visits tea gardens around the world, learns different tea techniques, and shares these experiences with users.</p> <p>Cha Cha's environmental action: Cha Cha leads environmental activities to spread the concept of healthy living and environmental protection.</p>
Form of content	<p>Short videos: Cha Cha 's sharing of tea culture knowledge, how to make healthy tea drinks, and environmental protection stories.</p> <p>Pictures: Photos of Cha Cha's daily life, visits to tea gardens, and interactions with users.</p> <p>Interactive games: Online games, such as 'Tea garden adventure', 'Tea leaf matching', and 'Environmental protection expert', allow users to learn about tea culture and environmental protection in an entertaining way.</p>

By analyzing the design and strategy of Cha Cha using the 3MIP character design method, it's clear that while the current design effectively conveys the brand's core values, there are opportunities for enhancement. These are deepening Cha Cha's psychological profile to establish an emotional bond with the audience, refining Cha Cha's physical design to more accurately manifest tea culture, and enhancing its virtual presence to improve the levels of interactivity and continuity across all platforms. These recommendations would allow Cha Cha to more fully fulfill its potential as a powerful and successful brand ambassador.

Self-visual design assessment

The design was reviewed in detail, considering four major criteria: aesthetics, emotional engagement, distinctiveness, and consistency with the brand identity. The original design had more balanced head-to-body proportions, which made the character more anthropomorphic. In the revised design, the proportions were changed to a larger head-to-body ratio, which enhanced the cuteness of the character and made it more approachable. The enlarged head allows for a

wider range of facial expressions that can better convey emotions and establish a stronger emotional connection with the audience.

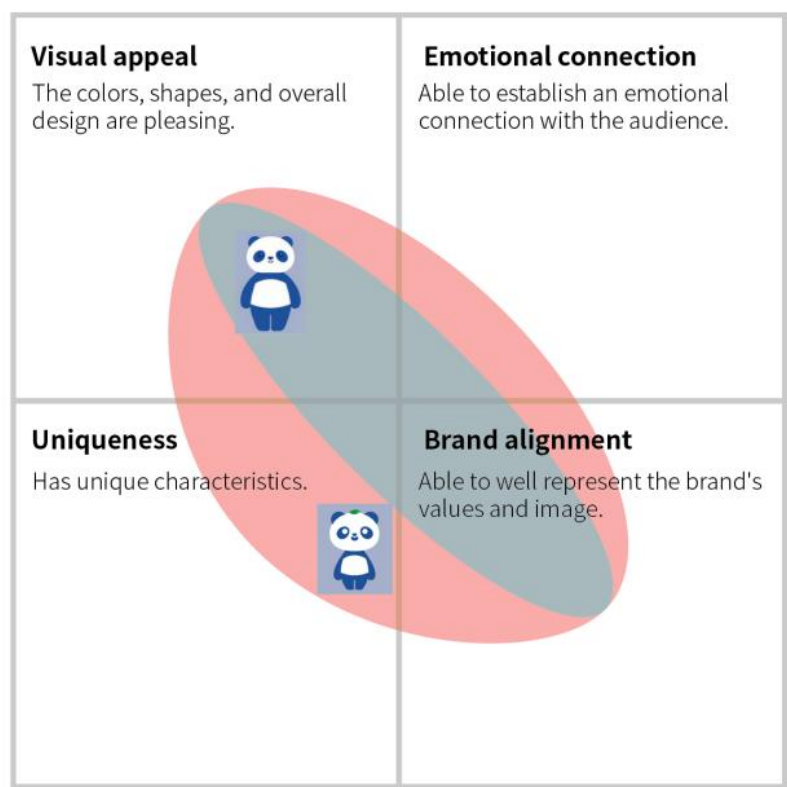


Figure 129 Self-visual design assessment

This modification of the head size makes the character more unique, highlighting its cartoonish style, while incorporating elements of tea leaves to make it more recognizable. While the classic colors of a panda are black and white, the new design in blue and white increases both distinctiveness and brand consistency. The addition of elements related to tea makes the character more consistent with the brand’s vision.

By adjusting the head-body ratio and adding tea elements, the design of Cha Cha came out more balanced and lovely to a degree, while strengthening the correlation with tea culture, hence enhancing the consistency and uniqueness of the brand. Therefore, this revision is considered a successful optimization. It maintains the character’s charm and appeal while reinforcing the cultural identity of the brand.

Table 25 Documentation and reflection on the design process

Design process documentation	Analysis and optimization of original IP characters using the 3MIP method: 4 days
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	Sketching and color selection: 5 days, using Adobe Illustrator
Challenges in the design process	<p>Question 1: How do I translate from the analyzed text part to the corresponding design?</p> <p>Question 2: Choice of body proportions?</p>
Solutions and improvements	<p>Solution 1: Extract keywords and combine designs through base shapes such as square, round, rectangle and trapezoid.</p> <p>Solution 2: Find the most suitable ratio by adjusting the head-to-body ratio in different degrees from 1:1 to 1:3.</p>

Reflection on the design method

This was the first redesign project for which a reflection not only on the design process but also on the efficiency of the design method itself was really accomplished. This reflection resulted in many points that showed where the method still needed amelioration, particularly within the psychological and physical dimensions.

Among others, one of the most interesting findings to realize was the relatively weak progress the character development made in the dimension of the psychological mask. From the case study of Mickey Mouse, it was clear that the development of a character usually progresses from simple to complex and from single to multilevel. In the design method of the psychological mask, therefore, the developmental features of the character should be emphasized. This will guide the designers to start with simple characteristics and progress the diversity and depth of the character as the design unfolds. It lets the growth of the character become much more organic in nature, fitting to the story and emotional evolution of a character.

With regards to the physical mask aspect of the method, challenges arose on translating the characteristics of the character well into a physical form. The current method relied quite strongly on the use of color and proportion-static visual elements which are but not adequate to bring the character's identity across. Some of the personality characteristics cannot be described in static elements and thus require dynamic representations such as movement, stance, and how the character adjusts to various situations and poses. Some of the aspects about a personality can be strictly acquired through a character's gait or stance. It should thus expand the physical mask

of the character to include dynamic aspects that static visualization cannot provide. Additionally, the method should incorporate behavioral and action-based elements in both the physical and virtual masks, emphasizing how the character's movements and actions convey its personality and traits.

Another significant insight from the design process is the realization that character design can manifest in multiple stylistic expressions, with no single standard dominating. As discussed in the chapter on design styles, the design process itself is very much dependent on design knowledge—the designer's application of composition and color theory, for example—and creative talent. The design method should, then, consider the fact that the visual development of an IP character will be more akin to the building of a prototype or sketch. This view offers greater flexibility and room for creativity, reducing the limitations of the designer and opening it up to a more exploratory and iterative process of visual design.

In conclusion, the reflection on the design method reveals areas for refinement, particularly in enhancing character development within the psychological mask and expanding the scope of the physical mask to include dynamic elements. Additionally, the recognition of diverse design styles highlights the need for flexibility in the method, allowing designers to explore and iterate freely in the early stages of character development. These insights will inform further refinement of the design method, ensuring it provides comprehensive support for both novice and experienced designers in creating compelling and effective IP characters.

Table 26 Adjustments to the design method (inner cycle)

Psychological masks	
Before revision	After revision
1 Character identity Role in the story and society Driving forces and motivations Multi-layered personality traits	1 Comprehensive identity presentation Core personality Backstory Drivers and motivations
2 Personality and emotions Detailed personality development Inner struggles	2 Development Inner conflicts Growth trajectory

	Digital social platform representation
3 Backstory Comprehensive backstory Search for identity Growth trajectory	3 Adaptability Flexibility Multilayered personality traits
Physical masks	
1 Visual Physical traits and posture Clothing and props Action and behaviors	1 Visual Expression Physical traits and posture Emotional Impact of colors Costume and props Voice
2 Culture and symbolism Cultural elements Symbolic elements	2 Narrativity Cultural elements Symbolic significance
	3 Interactivity Comfort and ergonomics Actions and behaviors
Virtual masks	
1 Adaptability	1 Adaptability
2 Interactivity	2 Interactivity
3 Cross-media consistency	3 Cross-media consistency

4.3.2 Redesign project: SEE Conservation Ecological Association

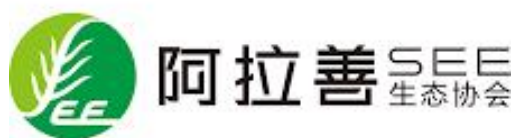


Figure 130 SEE Conservation Ecological Association's Logo

Brand name: SEE Conservation Ecological Association

Brand positioning: SEE Conservation Ecological Association is the most important environmental organization in China for combating sand and dust storms. The Association is committed to improving the ecological environment, especially the sandstorm problem, through the joint efforts of entrepreneurs, in order to be recognized by the Chinese society and the world.

Brand Vision: To promote the sustainable development of China's economy and the prosperity of its people. Promote friendship and goodwill among people. Protecting and restoring the ecological environment of the Chinese land, making it beautiful and vibrant. To realize the harmonious coexistence of human beings all over the world in a beautiful global village. To create a harmonious world where everyone has the opportunity to realize his or her wishes.

Brand goal: In the process of China's modernization, to balance economic development and environmental protection, to explore a new path of modernization, and to make practical contributions to the improvement of environmental quality.



Figure 131 Shanzai

Name: Shanzai (Figure 131)

Profile: Born in nature, grew up in nature, is a symbiosis of love and nature, the name originates from the abbreviation of SEE Conservation Ecological Association, but also from 'goodness is like water', which implies the goodness between man and man, man and nature.

Character traits: good nature, dedication, willing to care for and protect the ecological environment, cute and adorable character, under the soft and lovely appearance, hides a resilient and courageous heart.

Core Value: Spiritual expression of empathy, continuous accumulation of awareness, establishment of co-creation mechanism, public purchase and fundraising.


Purpose: To disseminate and express the history, stories, characters, projects, knowledge, achievements, activities, etc. of SEE, and to precipitate the cognition by focusing on specific brand IP images, to communicate the public welfare proposition in a more emotional way.

Table 27 3MIP design method analysis for Shanzai

Analysis Dimensions	Current design	Optimization suggestions
3MIP - Psychological masks		
Comprehensive identity presentation	Core Personality: good natured, dedicated, positive and concerned about the environment.	Enhance the complexity of Shanzai so that he is more than just an 'environmental hero'. For example, showing his sense of humor and unique way of thinking when dealing with environmental issues makes him more engaging.
	Backstory: Shanzai comes from a region affected by environmental problems and is committed to restoring the ecology of his hometown through environmental actions.	Detail the personal story of Sunny, including how he developed his passion and commitment to the environment, and how he dealt with the difficulties and challenges he encountered growing up.
	Drivers and motivations: environmental protection and the mission to combat sandstorms. Protect the natural environment and spread the concept of	Emphasize Shanzai's personal motivations, such as his emotional attachment to specific natural landscapes in his hometown, which makes it easier for the audience to empathies with his goals.

	environmental protection.	
Development	Inner conflict: no description	Demonstrating Shanzai's psychological struggle when faced with choices, such as balancing the need to maintain personal relationships with his professional mission, adds depth and realism to the character.
	Growth trajectory: growing through challenges.	Define clear points of growth, such as how key events contributed to Shanzai's change and growth, and how he deepened his environmental beliefs through these experiences. This is a good time to incorporate the brand's development experience.
	Digital social platform representation: demonstrating environmental action on a digital platform on a daily basis.	Create a series of blogs or videos based on real-life stories to share his environmental journey and learnings, making him a core member of the online environmental community.
Adaptability	Flexibility: Shaizai needs to adapt to different environments and situations.	Demonstrate Shanzai's flexible coping strategies in different situations, e.g. how he uses humor and wit to defuse awkward situations, showing the multi-layered personality.
	Multilayered personality traits: none	Demonstrate more personality dimensions in different social situations, e.g. how Shanzai behaves in dealing with different people, showing patience in analyzing environmental protection knowledge for children, and demonstrating professionalism in his

		work in environmental protection activities.
3MIP - Physical masks		
Visual Expression	Appearance: Shanzai has a green appearance and cute image with a branch-like decoration on the top of its head and the SEE logo on its chest.	Add more visual elements related to nature and the environment to the character's appearance to enhance its connection to its ecological mission. For example, gloves could be added to represent details of action. Commonly used gestures take on the appearance of being always ready to work.
	Emotional impact of color: Green symbolizes nature.	Emotional impact of color: add yellow to highlight enthusiasm and also props.
	Costume and props: None	Add props, such as gloves, which will be used in carrying out the environmental action, to enhance its practicality and symbolic meaning.
	Voice: None	Voice: Choose a soft but firm voice.
Narrativity	Cultural elements: The element of the pike tree reflects the territory and the brand's initial successful environmental project.	Increase the presence of the pike tree, e.g. the pike tree that changes according to the seasons.
	Symbolic Significance: Shanzai's green look symbolizes nature and environmental protection. The SEE logo on the chest represents the SEE Conservation Ecological Association.	Retain the original symbolism and again describe the glove prop.

Interactivity	Comfort and ergonomics: not investigated	Provide customization options to suit different user experience scenarios, e.g. portable versions for use at events.
	Actions and behaviors: no description	Develop a set of iconic actions to be presented at live events, such as the 'planting of a sapling' action to increase interactivity.
3MIP - Virtual masks		
Adaptability	With 3D digital and physical objects and 2D static images and 2D designs. Has exclusive emoticons to increase the user's interactive experience and desire to share.	Adjust the design according to the characteristics of different product platforms to ensure perfect presentation on various platforms, e.g. keep the profile cute in 2D animation summary and add details and interactivity in 3D display.
Interactivity	Basic interaction with users through social media.	Develop more interactive applications, such as virtual environmental classroom, to increase user engagement. Collect user feedback and suggestions on a regular basis to optimize and improve Shanzai's design and interactive formats to ensure continued user engagement.
Cross-media consistency	 <p>Appearance of different visual designs of Shanzai.</p>	Ensure Shanzai has a consistent look, sound, color scheme and movement style across all media to help create a unified brand image. Maintain strict consistency across media, adapting design elements where needed to ensure they fit the platform without losing the core identity.

Define the archetype

Textual overview: while portraying Shanzai as a player of social roles, details of the psychological landscape, driving forces, and character traits have to be specified.

Initial sketches: preliminary drawings of Shanzai shall be drawn in order to sum up general characteristics and personality.

Digital development: devise an all-inclusive digital strategy for Shanzai, taking into consideration a wide array of digital engagement.

Prototype testing and improvement

Testing in controlled environments: the prototype of Shanzai needs to be evaluated in controlled environments so as to understand audience perceptions on its attractiveness and operational effectiveness.

Feedback collection and analysis: observe feedback on Shanzai's psychological depth, physical appearance, and ease of virtual adaptation. Consider this feedback while testing for both strengths and weaknesses.

Design optimization: make necessary adjustments based on feedback to enhance Shanzai's emotional resonance, visual appeal, and interactive elements.

A. Character positioning

Character name: 善仔 (Shanzai)

Personality traits:

Innately kind: Shanzai is innately kind and helps others, loves, and protects the environment.

Dedicated: sacrifice time and effort to protect the ecological environment.

Adorably cute: soft and endearing in appearance, Shanzai is cute with his clumsiness, thus moving many people's hearts.

Resilient: in the face of difficulties, Shanzai shows great perseverance and a spirit of courage and progress.

Unique features: a deep love for nature.

Background story: Shanzai was born and brought up in nature, symbolizing the harmonious coexistence of nature and love. The name is derived from the acronym 'SEE' of SEE Conservation Ecological Association combined with the concept of '上善若水' (The highest virtue is like water), symbolizing harmonious coexistence between people and nature. He grew up in an oasis in Desert, created by himself and other natural spirits. Centuries of sandstorms and environmental degradation had turned this once beautiful oasis into mere dust-a sight that deeply saddens Shanzai.

He started the environmental journey to save his homeland. Along this journey, Shanzai met several like-minded friends, such as passionate environmental volunteers, professional ecologists, and creative entrepreneurs. Every time something big needed to be done, Shanzai would organize everyone to sit together and find the most effective solution.

On one occasion, Shanzai and friends planted trees in a desert; after several years, with much effort, it turned into a thriving forest. In the process, Shanzai learned much about the growth of plants and ecosystems, and the importance of teamwork. This forest not only provided a new living environment for local residents but also became an educational base, raising awareness about the importance of ecological protection.



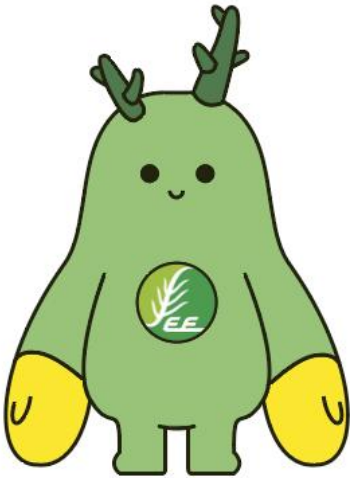
During his environmental awareness spread and battling sandstorms, Shanzai encountered numerous challenges such as resource scarcity, technical difficulties, and public apathy. Nevertheless, Shanzai never backed down from a problem; instead, he would always be positive to solve the problems through continuous learning and innovation. The inner struggles of Shanzai are brought to the fore when his character speaks to himself, reflecting upon his feelings at these instances, thus adding great depth to his character and also creating a rapport with the audience.

Mission: Shanzai works for the protection and restoration of the ecological environment by the efforts of the SEE Conservation Ecological Association for common coexistence between human

beings and nature. Shanzai will be committed to disseminating environmental awareness, advocating extensive social participation in ecological protection, and striving to solve such environmental problems as sandstorms together. The ultimate goal is to achieve global harmony, where all humans coexist on a beautiful planet.

Target Audience: The target audience is the general public. Shanzai’s adorable appearance and resilient personality appeal to people of all ages, particularly those concerned with environmental and ecological protection.

Table 28 Visual design of redesigned Shanzai

B. Visual design		
Key extraction	<p>Nature: cactus shape, inspired by the organization’s desert project.</p> <p>Gloves: start small and protect a plant.</p>	
Color	<p>Green: natural and environmentally friendly</p> <p>Yellow: highlighting effect</p> <div>  <p>#80BE69 #3A7044 #FFE200</p> </div>	
Shape	<p>Extracted from the shape of a cactus</p>	

Proportions	<p>Head-to-body ratio: the head is large, about one-third of total height. This design makes Shanzai cuter and more approachable.</p> <p>Limbs: short and rounded. The short, rounded arms and legs only add to the cartoon effect, making it look droll.</p>	
Detail	<p>The branch above the head: symbolizing a strong connection with nature.</p> <p>Glove: symbolizes the impact of environmental action from individual to global.</p> <p>Brand Logo: defines the identity and mission.</p>	

Table 29 Interaction design of Shaizai

Interaction design: interactive scenarios	
Social media	<p>Environmental tips: daily or weekly release of environmental tips, such as how to reduce the use of plastics, how to save water, etc.</p> <p>Life tips: share some easy-to-follow tips on environmental protection, such as homemade eco-bags, plant care tips, and so on.</p> <p>Fan interaction: regular ‘Q&A time’ is held to answer fans’ questions about environmental protection and encourage them to share their own environmental stories and photos.</p> <p>Short videos: Shanzai personally demonstrates environmental tips with vivid explanations to attract more attention and interaction.</p>
Advertising	Video advert: showing the environmental protection daily life of Shanzai in

	<p>animation form, it urges everyone to join the environmental protection. For example, how Shanzai does small things to protect the environment, such as planting trees and cleaning up rubbish.</p> <p>Picture Ads: design a series of thematic picture ads with simple and powerful slogans and the cute image of Shanzai to attract attention.</p> <p>Interactive ads: place interactive ads on social media platforms, allowing users to participate in environmental protection activities by clicking, dragging and dropping, such as 'online tree planting' and 'rubbish sorting game'.</p>
Event	<p>Offline activities include: 'Clean environment day' in which all volunteers can take part in collecting garbage from communities, parks, rivers, and so forth. During the event, posters and interacting displays of Shanzai were prepared for increasing the joy of the audience and for better engagement.</p> <p>Digital initiatives: design an 'Environmental challenge' to get people to share their environmental practices via social networking websites. The practices shared can be related to managing waste and conserving energy, among others, to reducing emissions. Provide significant prizes to increase participants' interest and excitement.</p> <p>Public lecture: invite some environmental experts to join Shanzai in a real-time online lecture, to advocate for environmental knowledge by answering questions from the audience.</p>
Cross-culture promotion	
<p>Storyline: the story of Shanzai is told through comics and animation, conveying the concept of environmental protection and brand values.</p>	<p>Comics: make an album with all the environmentally based comic strips depicting the adventures of Goody and his friends in their fight against environmental deterioration by solving problems that create ecological harm. Each is a small story that, in itself, was both amusing and instructive.</p> <p>One of the forthcoming animated environmental shorts will cast Shanzai as the leading role. The plot is humorous yet touching; it attracts viewers to many ecological problems and at the same time gives them an optimistic message.</p> <p>It could start as interactive storytelling through social networks or</p>

	official sites, whereby, based on choices, users may later have the option to go on an adventure with Shanzai and learn about environmental conservation.
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Self-visual design assessment for IP character of SEE

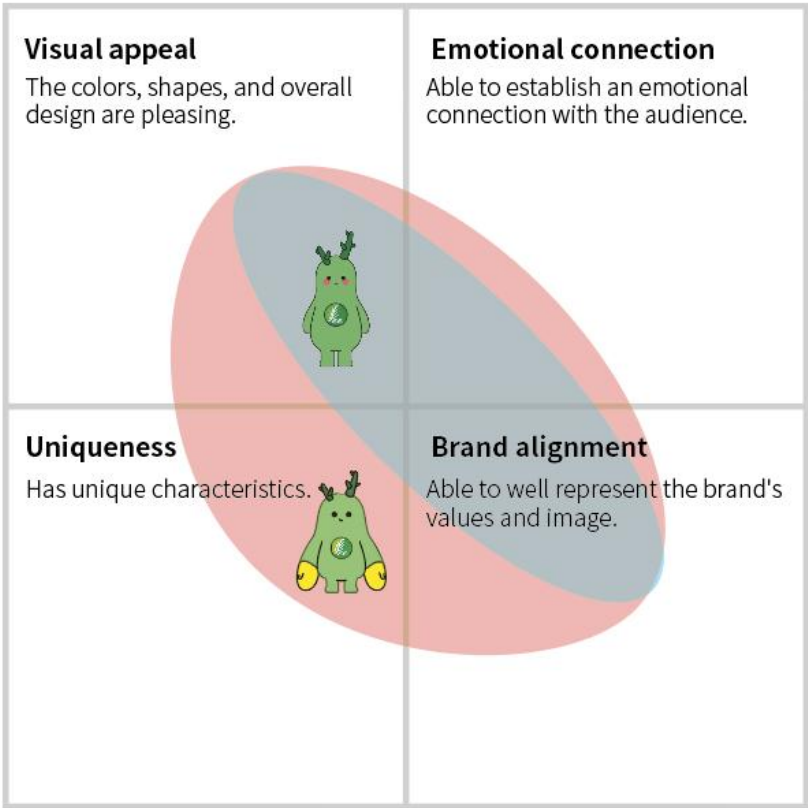


Figure 132 Self-visual design assessment

A comprehensive evaluation was conducted from four key aspects: visual appeal, emotional connection, uniqueness, and brand consistency. This design optimization primarily focused on enhancing the uniqueness of the character. The original design aimed to evoke a sense of protection for nature through a slightly chubby physique, emphasizing pink cheeks to convey a sense of vitality and inherent cuteness. In the optimized version, the head-to-body ratio was adjusted, transforming the character from slightly chubby to more robust. This change, from the perspective of brand personification, highlights the brand’s commitment to contributing to the protection and care of the ecological environment. The addition of the gloves further underscores this brand vision. The removal of the robust cheeks allows the audience to focus more on the

character's head, particularly on the saxaul tree, a vital plant in desertification control projects, and the gloves, both of which are key elements representing the brand's mission.

Table 30 Documentation and reflection on the design process

Design process documentation	Analysis and optimization of original IP characters using the 3MIP method: 2 days Sketching and color selection: 3 days, using Adobe Illustrator
Challenges in the design process	Question 1: Is the IP character characterized by a change from employee to actor? Question 2: Selection of key elements.
Solutions and improvements	Solution 1: Further analysis of the brand's vision and goals is needed to establish the brand's pursuit of conservation. Solution 2: By observing the people involved in the brand's specific implementation projects, it was concluded that gloves are involved in every conservation action, which symbolizes that conservation actions can only be carried out with the help of everyone's hands.

4.3.3 Redesign project: PANPAN Foods



Figure 133 Logo of PanPan Foods

Brand name: PanPan Foods

Brand positioning: Integrity, Continuous Innovation, Gratitude and Analysis, Customer Trust, Commitment and Dedication.

Brand Vision: To provide healthy and tasty products for every family forever.

Brand goal: Aspire to be a leader in the food industry! Create greater value for customers, employees and shareholders, and achieve quality of life. Focus on green and healthy water management and sustainable agricultural development for the benefit of future generations!



Figure 134 PP Panda

Name: PP Panda (Figure 134)

Profile: born in Pan Pan base, which makes healthy and delicious food, sitting on an endless supply of food and drinks, bouncing happily in the pile of food every day, he is a child who grows up healthily surrounded by happiness.

Personality: soft, lively and full of energy.

Day-to-day: in order to earn more delicious food for myself, I work happily at Pan Pan Foods on weekdays, developing and sampling new products with my buddies to make sure everyone can keep tasting new flavors. On weekends, like everyone else, I either sleep at home or eat and drink at home, enjoying the simple pleasures of rest.

Hobbies: indulging in food, running and playing volleyball in summer, playing ice hockey and skiing in winter.

Table 31 3MIP Design Method Analysis for PP Panda

Analysis	Current design	Optimization suggestions
Dimensions		

3MIP - Psychological masks		
Comprehensive identity presentation	Core personality: soft, lively and energetic, likes healthy food and exercise	Demonstrate PP Panda's dedication and intelligence in dealing with complex food safety issues and increase his resilience and innovative thinking in the face of challenges.
	Backstory: born in the base of Pan Pan Foods Company, which makes healthy and delicious food, sitting on an endless supply of food and drinks, and bouncing happily on a pile of food every day, Backstory is a child who grows up healthy and surrounded by happiness.	A detailed description of PP Panda's understanding and practice of food safety and health while growing up, including the important principles he learnt from his parents and his strong belief in food safety.
	Drivers and motivations: developing and sampling new products with a small group of friends to make sure everyone keeps trying new flavors.	Emphasis is placed on PP Panda's sense of responsibility for food safety and how he is driving wider social change through education and demonstration.
Development	Inner Conflict: unspecified	Demonstrate the ethical and professional challenges PP Panda faces in his work, such as when food safety conflicts with business interests, and how he deals with that conflict.
	Growth Trajectory: unspecified	Depicts how PP Panda grew to become industry leaders through continuous learning and practice to enhance their expertise and

		progressively influence the wider food industry.
	Digital Social Platform Representation: unspecified	Became a public figure and educator by sharing his food safety knowledge and stories on digital platforms through videos, blogs and social media.
Adaptability	Flexibility: unspecified	Demonstrate the ability of PP Panda to adapt in different environments, how they can switch freely between the field and the high-tech laboratory and spread the concept of food safety in a multicultural context.
	Multilayered personality traits: unspecified	Demonstrating PP Panda's rigor at work and friendliness and approachability in social situations makes the character more multi-dimensional and engaging.
3MIP - Physical masks		
Visual expressions	Physical traits and posture: two letters 'P' as a symbol of the panda's black eye, with unique recognition.	The choice of the panda image needs to be thought about, followed by the more symbolic colors of green and orange if it is promoting health and good taste. Food element props can be added, such as a chef's hat.
	Emotional impact of colors: black and white panda, classic panda color scheme.	Add the red color for emphasis which is in line with the brand logo.

	Costume and props: unspecified	Equipped with professional inspection tools, e.g. PP glasses, exclusively belonging to the brand, to enhance the image of its identity as a food inspector.
	Voice: unspecified	Energetic and firm voice that conveys expertise and friendliness, especially contagious when educating and interacting.
Narrativity	Cultural elements: panda represents Chinese culture.	Incorporate the corporate culture and combine with the characters, which can be reflected in the backstory.
	Symbolic significance: PP is the first letter of PP Panda's name which represents the brand.	Incorporate the corporate culture and combine with the characters, which can be reflected in the backstory.
Interactivity	Comfort and ergonomics: unspecified	Ensure that they are comfortable to wear at events and design easy-to-maneuver costumes suitable for a variety of interactive activities.
	Actions and behaviors: unspecified	Design a series of representative actions, such as careful testing and smiling demonstration, to help portray its professional and approachable image.
3MIP - Virtual masks		
Adaptability	Appearance in 2D and 3D on	Adapting PP Panda's design to

	multimedia platforms.	different platforms to ensure that its food safety experts are well represented across all mediums.
Interactivity	Basic interaction with users through social media.	Develop interactive educational games and apps, such as virtual food labs, where users can learn and experience food safety.
Cross-media consistency	Maintaining a consistent look, color scheme and gesture style for PP Panda across all media helps to create a unified brand image.	Regularly update and maintain the character design manual to ensure consistency across all digital and physical presentations and continuously optimize the user experience through feedback.

Outer cycle

Define the archetype:

A. Character positioning

Character name: PP Panda

Personality traits: soft and cute, lively and positive, a food enthusiast, and always eager to help others.

Unique characteristics: not only does PP Panda love to enjoy healthy and delicious foods, but he is also passionate about promoting them to others.

Background story: PP Panda was born in a beautiful place, the Panpan Food Base, as his cradle for healthy and delicious food. The base is on the valley, where its surroundings are verdant forests with crystal-clear rivers. This became a great interest to PP Panda about the various ingredients and tasty foods while he was growing up.

The ancestors of PP Panda were experts in food sciences, devoted to learning various methods of food preparation that were healthy and appetizing. PP Panda was born and brought up in an environment filled with questions concerning food safety and its quality. Since his childhood, he always tagged along with his parents to learn how to check the quality of ingredients and the safety of food.

One day, PP Panda chose to become a food health inspector so that he could help people eat more healthily and safely. After intensive training and passing various exams, he finally got the professional inspector's license. PP Panda was very proud because he knew he was bearing an important responsibility.

Every day, with his white coat on, PP Panda takes his inspection tools and prepares to start work. The working scope is quite extensive, starting with the ingredients, including the quality of residual pesticides or chemical impurities, onwards with follow-up at the processing stages to make sure that the hygienic measures are considered.

One fine morning, the job of PP Panda was to check a fresh consignment of fruits allocated for the new healthy juice drink. He began checking every fruit to make sure that no fruit was damaged or infected in any way. He utilized certain appliances for checking pesticide residues so that the fruits were absolutely safe.

Here, PP Panda became suspicious because several fruits had minute spots. Later, he tested them with a microscope and found that it was due to the growth of microorganisms. Thus, PP Panda decided to sanitize the whole stock properly and retest those fruits.

After a whole day of hard work, PP Panda finished all the inspections, making sure that every piece of fruit was safe for processing before sending them to the plant. His attention to detail and commitment were widely praised, with colleagues at the base giving him a thumb-up.

PP Panda does not just stop at the work of food examination; he often visits the farms and factories, teaching farmers and workers the concept of food safety. He teaches them the use of pesticides, hygiene, and ingredient storage. PP Panda firmly believes that ensuring food safety at its source is the key to allowing everyone to eat with peace of mind.



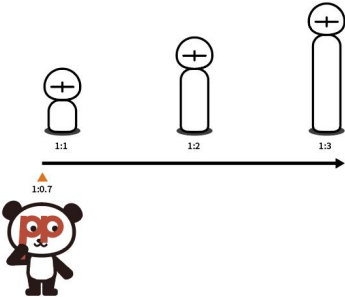
With time, PP Panda gained the reputation of being the most popular health inspector at the Panpan Food Base. His efforts not only ensured the safety of food but also brought food safety issues into the consciousness of more people. PP Panda’s story spread far and wide, earning him the title of ‘Guardian of Food Safety’.

Despite the challenges, PP Panda never feels fatigued in his work. He understands that ensuring food safety and health is essential to allowing more people to enjoy delicious and joyful meals. PP Panda’s mission extends beyond inspection; through his dedication, he aims to ensure that every family can safely enjoy healthy and delicious food.

Mission: to promote healthy and delicious food, spread joy, and lead innovation.

Target audience: the general public, aiming to build a national brand. Whether children, teenagers, adults, or the elderly, everyone can find resonance and enjoyment in PP Panda’s story and initiatives.

Table 32 Visual design of redesigned PP Panda

Visual design		
Key extraction	By combining the two letters of PP Panda to design props that fit the IP character’s position, for example, an eye tester.	
Color	Classic Panda color scheme  #231816 #BF382C #FFFFFF	
Shape	Follows the shape of a panda	
Proportions	Head to body ratio: large head, head to body ratio 1:0.7 Limb’s ratio: short and rounded Emphasize the head area of PP Panda.	


Details	PP Panda lettering element is an acronym for the brand name	
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Table 33 interaction design of PP Panda

C. interaction design: Interactive scenarios	
Social media	<p>Healthy food tips: publish daily or weekly healthy eating tips, such as how to choose healthy food and eat a balanced diet. Create infographics or short video format of the tips to increase the visibility and sharing rate of the information.</p> <p>Life tips: share some easy-to-follow tips for a healthy life, such as healthy recipes and exercise tips.</p> <p>Fan interaction: set up thematic interactions, such as ‘This Week’s Health Challenge’, and invite fans to participate and share their challenge experiences to enhance the sense of community and participation.</p> <p>Short videos: PP Panda personally demonstrate healthy recipes with vivid explanations to attract more attention and interaction.</p> <p>Regularly update the video content and include viewers’ feedback or questions in the video to promote two-way communication with fans.</p>
Advertising	<p>Video adverts: produce a series of adverts about the daily work and life of PP Panda, keeping the viewers fresh by continuously updating the storyline.</p> <p>Photo ads: design ads using seasonal themes and holiday elements to add interest and timeliness.</p> <p>Interactive ads: place interactive ads on social media platforms, allowing users to participate in the production of healthy food by clicking, dragging and dropping, such as the ‘Healthy Food</p>

	Matching Game’.
Events: healthy food promotion activities organized online and offline to promote public participation and awareness of healthy eating.	<p>Offline activities: a ‘Healthy Food Tasting’ was organized to invite the public to taste the new healthy products of Pan Pan Food. The event site was decorated with display boards and interactive devices to enhance the sense of fun and participation.</p> <p>Online activity: a ‘Healthy Recipe Contest’ was organized to encourage the public to share their healthy recipes and the process of making them on social media. Rich prizes will be offered to increase participation.</p> <p>Public lecture: nutrition experts were invited to give live online lectures with PP Panda to popularize healthy eating knowledge and answer viewers’ questions.</p>
Cross-culture promotion	
Storyline: the story of PP Panda is told through comics and animation, conveying the concept of healthy and delicious food and brand value.	<p>Comics: produce a series of healthy eating themed comics about the adventures of PP Bear and his pals in promoting healthy and tasty food and solving eating problems. Each episode is a short story, which is both interesting and educational.</p> <p>Animated short film: launch a healthy eating animated short film, with PP Bear as the main character, to guide viewers to focus on healthy eating issues and convey positive energy through humorous and touching storylines.</p> <p>Interactive stories: launch interactive stories on social media or official websites, allowing users to participate in PP Bear’s healthy eating journey and learn about healthy eating by choosing the direction of the plot.</p>

Reflection

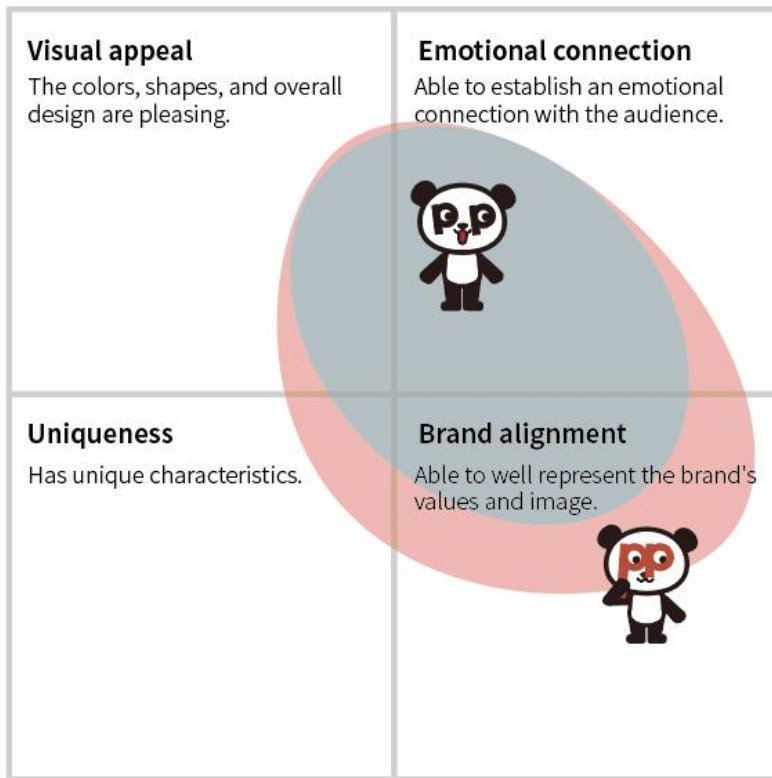


Figure 135 Self-visual design assessment of PP Panda

Pan Pan Food is committed to evolving into a national brand, as evidenced by its red logo and the use of a giant panda as its IP character. This branding choice reflects the association with 'Panpan', the mascot of the 11th Asian Games held in Beijing in 1990. In 2021, Pan Pan Food introduced a new brand image with the character PP Panda. In 2022, Pan Pan Food became a sponsor of the Beijing Winter Olympics, further connecting PP Panda with the highly popular Winter Olympics mascot, Bing Dwen Dwen (Figure 136), as well as the other mascot, Shuey Rhon Rhon (Figure 137). During the redesign process, there was ongoing deliberation about whether to continue using the panda as the character's design, largely due to the potential issue of brand fatigue. This concern arises from the fact that there is another company with the same name, Panpan (Figure 138), which specializes in the production of security doors and smart home security systems. This company, which also ranks among China's most valuable brands in 2022, uses the giant panda as its mascot, drawing inspiration from the 1990 Beijing Asian Games mascot (Figure 139).



Figure 136 Pan Pan's Products with Bing Dwen Dwen



Figure 137 PP Panda and Shuey Rhon Rhon



Figure 138 Pan Pan



Figure 139 1990 Beijing Asian Games mascot

Ultimately, the decision was made to retain the original panda design for PP Panda, with adjustments made to the character's details. The redesign was evaluated across four key dimensions: visual appeal, emotional connection, uniqueness, and brand consistency. The original PP Panda design effectively fostered an emotional connection but was found lacking in terms of uniqueness and visual appeal. The optimization process involved integrating the brand's background and the character's story, establishing PP Panda as a food health inspector IP character. This approach allows the audience to associate the panda mascot not just with the Pan Pan brand but with a panda character working within the Pan Pan Food brand, thereby strengthening the connection between the character and the brand. This also helps consumers better understand Pan Pan Food's longstanding commitment to providing healthy and delicious products to every household.

Table 34 Documentation and reflection on the design process for PP Panda

Design process documentation	Analysis and optimization of original IP characters using the 3MIP method: 2 days Sketching and color selection: 2 days, using Adobe Illustrator
Challenges in the design process	Question 1: Thinking about whether to maintain the panda as an IP character for Pan Pan Foods? Question 2: How to differentiate from other uses of the panda image?

	Question 3: How to highlight the letters PP?
Solutions and improvements	<p>Solution 1: Start by analyzing information about the brand's background, vision and goals.</p> <p>Solution 2: Enhance other attributes of the IP character, e.g., become a food inspector.</p> <p>Solution 3: By analyzing the backstory, the two letters of PP can be designed as props, e.g., inspection glasses.</p>

Through two practical projects, it became evident that a deep understanding of the brand's background, vision, and objectives is crucial in the IP character design process. Only by thoroughly grasping these aspects can designers ensure that the created IP character accurately reflects the core values and positioning of the brand, thereby maintaining consistency with the brand's overall image. This consistency not only enhances brand recognition but also strengthens the emotional connection between the brand and its audience.

According to Alina Wheeler's branding process (Figure 140) (Wheeler, 2018), the application of the IP character design method should take place after the second step, 'Clarify Strategy'. At this stage, the brand has already clearly defined its core values, market positioning, and development goals, providing a clear direction and foundation for IP character design. Following this, in the third step, 'Design Identity', designers can leverage this strategic information to ensure that the IP character's appearance, personality, and storyline align with the brand strategy. This process helps ensure that the visual and emotional attributes of the character remain consistent with the brand, effectively supporting the brand's long-term strategic development in the market.

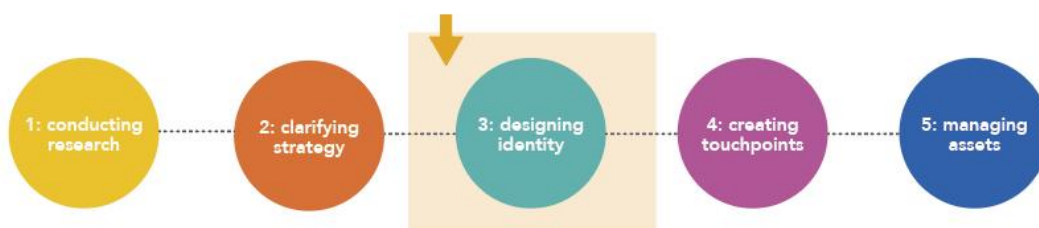


Figure 140 Alina Wheeler's branding process

Therefore, IP character design is not merely a process of visual creativity but an integral part of

brand strategy. Designers must consistently use the brand's vision and objectives as guiding principles during the creative process to ensure that the character effectively communicates the brand's story and values. This strategic approach not only enhances the quality of character design but also bolsters the brand's competitiveness and influence in the market.

4.3.4 New project: Outside coffee



Figure 141 Logo of Outside coffee

Table 35 3MIP Design Method Analysis for Outside coffee

3MIP - Psychological masks	
Comprehensive identity presentation	Core personality: laid-back and easy-going, in love with nature, adventurous, showing a great sense of humor and wit, having fun while working with customers in their own special way.
	Backstory: Owy was born in a very quiet forest far from the hustle and bustle of city life. As a child, he grew up fascinated with the beauty of nature and the balance in the food chain of the forest. He decided during adulthood to open a peculiar cafe named 'Outside Coffee', which had to be placed in a small town on the edges of the forest. This could let people enjoy the coffee so much away from the hustle and bustle of the city, but at the same time with nature.
	Drivers and motivations: it is through the café that we seek to raise public awareness of the beauty of nature, build up more concern for the importance of environmental protection, and express the concept of human beings coexisting with nature in

	harmony.
Development	Inner conflicts: occasionally I miss the city life, but I love the tranquility and freedom of nature.
	Growth trajectory: from the curious little owl of the wild, which has remodeled to a well-nosed coffee expert, one learns a lot about nature, growing coffee.
	Digital social platform representation: share outdoor nature knowledge from Owy and stories of coffee on digital platforms. Represent the rich outdoor experience and the culture of coffee through blogs, videos, and social media.
Adaptability	Flexibility: this manifests the ability of Owy to adapt to different customer needs and changes in the natural environment, their capability of adaptive responses for a wide array of challenges.
	Multilayered personality traits: employ the use of Owy's myriad personalities in different situations, like concentrating at work and being humorous at leisure, to add more depth to the character.
3MIP - Physical masks	
Visual Expressions	Physical traits and posture: a round picture of an owl drinking or talking to customers. The stretching of the legs is drawn because he likes to walk, and also because it shows his usual pose.
	Emotional impact of colors: the color used is, by all means, green to be able to portray the warmth and serenity of nature. The subsidiary color will be blue to keep the openness and liberty of the minds. Props, however, must be colored in bright colors for them to look more attractive.
	Costume and props: small boots, as the characters are shown, expand more props, e.g., camping hats, scarves, small coffee pots and cups.
	Voice: the use of a relaxed and pleasant voice conveys a

	friendly and professional quality, especially when explaining and interacting.
Narrativity	Cultural elements: the combination of forest, coffee and camping culture conveys a relaxed and natural attitude towards life.
	Symbolic significance: the owl symbolizes wisdom and serenity, while coffee is to show the passion of sharing. Further, these symbolisms build Owy's image as a sharer: it shows how much Owy loves sharing and how he can always attract people with similar ideas.
Interactivity	Comfort and ergonomics: ensure that Owy's costumes and props are realistically actionable and appropriate for live events and interactions.
	Actions and behaviors: designed a series of iconic actions, such as coffee tasting, camping guides, etc., to express their uniqueness in events and animations.
3MIP - Virtual masks	
Adaptability	Suitable for 2D animations, 3D models, social media emojis, and storylines. Also, assure Owy that on whatever platform he is on, maintain the quality from dynamic animations to static emoji packs.
Interactivity	Interact with customers via social media to share camping and coffee tips and organize online camping coffee experiences. Develop interactive apps, such as a virtual camping simulator, that allow users to experience the Owy lifestyle through gaming, enhancing user engagement.
Cross-media consistency	Ensure that Owy's image, voice and style are consistent across all platforms to create a unified brand identity. Develop detailed brand design guidelines that are regularly updated and maintained to ensure consistency and high-quality performance across all media and platforms.

Outer cycle

Define the archetype:

A. Characterization

Character name: Owy

Personality: casual and easygoing, nature-loving, helpful, adventurous. Distinctive Features: enjoys camping at night, leading customers to appreciate the quiet beauty of nature, is full of outdoor knowledge and abilities, shares the knowledge of coffee and some stories.

Backstory: Owy was born in a very quiet forest, far from the city's hustle and bustle. Ever since childhood, Owy had been fascinated with the beauty of nature and the harmony of the forest ecosystem. Brought up by wise and nurturing parents, Owy learned the importance of balance, serenity, and respect for the environment.

As time passed, Owy learned how people in the cities were depriving themselves of their moments of peace and being rejuvenated amidst nature. He knew something had to be done to give them a chance at living this life which he lived every single day in the woods. Thus, he promised himself a certain endeavor. Owy finds a picturesque little town located on the outskirts of the woods and opens a cafe under the name 'Outside Coffee'.

The institution was conceptualized to be an oasis where people, amidst all the hustles of the city, could seek their refuge; it would offer a plush, nature-inspired setting where customers could relax and reconnect with nature. Owy made sure each piece of furniture and ornamentation was chosen with care to bring in organic elements: wood, stone, and plants to create an inviting yet tranquil atmosphere. Outside Coffee sourced its coffee through a very sustainable practice that ensured quality and ethics in farming were regarded; thus, Owy truly cares about the environment.

Before too long, Outside Coffee became the go-to place for many locals and travelers alike; calm, yet full of serenity with the amiable attitude of Owy. This owlet used to tell stories related to the forest and the calm benefits, living in harmony with nature. Opening a coffee bar taught him lessons not only in having time to relax but also the protection of mother nature.



Throughout the seasons, Owy began to orchestrate events such as stargazing, nature walks, and outdoor yoga at Outside Coffee. Events like these would make people feel closer to others and appreciate the natural beauty of their surroundings even more.

Owy’s ultimate dream is to inspire more people to embrace a lifestyle that values simplicity, peace, and a deep connection to nature. By doing so, he hopes to create a ripple effect that will lead to a greater collective effort in protecting the environment for future generations.

Mission: To provide a coffee experience that escapes the hustle and bustle of the city and is close to nature, to spread the culture of nature and coffee, and to allow customers to enjoy high-quality coffee in a relaxing atmosphere.

Target audience: Young and middle-aged people who love outdoor activities and nature, urban white-collar workers who pursue quality of life and relaxing experience.

Table 36 Visual design of redesigned Owy

B. Visual design		
Key extraction	Image extraction of owls	
Color	Primary color: forest green (symbolizing nature and tranquility) Secondary color: sky blue (symbol of openness and freedom)  #00A0E9 #92C420 #EC6714	
Shape	Rounded corners are designed to reflect ease and friendliness.	

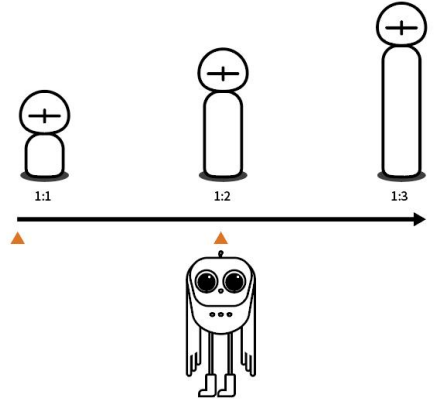
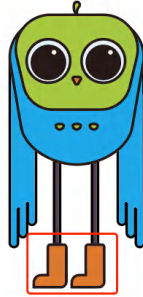
Proportions	Close to a 1:2 ratio, the long hands and feet emphasize hands-on skills and a love of the outdoors and walking.	
Details	Small boots for outdoor activities. Other elements that fit the outdoors and coffee can also be added.	

Table 37 Interaction design of Owy

C. Interaction design: interactive scenario	
Social media	<p>Post fun tips on camping and coffee: a weekly series of posts on camping tips and coffee making. For example, 'How to make the perfect coffee on a camping trip' or 'A list of essential camping gadgets. Use illustrated cards, short videos and interactive quizzes to engage and share with your fans. Have regular 'Knowledge Sharing Days' where fans submit questions that Owy answers online and gives them a small prize.</p> <p>Share Owy's stories and pictures of nature: Post stories of Owy's daily adventures in the forest and pictures of nature's beauty, showcasing his intimate relationship with nature. Use social media to post and create an exclusive collection of stories. Host a 'Nature Discovery Challenge' to encourage fans to share photos of their nature adventures and increase interactivity.</p> <p>Host online campaigns such as the 'Best Campsite Photo Contest': invite fans to share their favorite campsites and nature photos. Entries were collected via a hashtag and dedicated campaign page,</p>

	with the winner receiving an exclusive coffee pack or camping supplies from Owy.	
Advertising	Showcasing Owy’s camping coffee life through short video adverts to appeal to urban white-collar workers and outdoor enthusiasts. Add a user-generated content (UGC) element, inviting fans to film their own camping coffee experience and share it.	
Events	<p>Organize offline camping events and invite customers to experience outdoor coffee making together. Organize weekend camping events in forests or nature parks, providing camping equipment and coffee-making workshops. Arrange for Owy to personally guide coffee making and organize night campfire and nature exploration activities. Provide participants with souvenirs such as customized coffee mugs or camping gadgets to enhance the appeal of the event.</p> <p>Set up a camping theme corner in the shop so that customers can feel the camping atmosphere even in the city. Change the theme regularly and introduce different nature experiences in conjunction with the seasons.</p>	
Cross-culture promotion		
Storyline: regularly updated stories of Owy’s adventures, presented in comic, animation or vlog format. The story is about Owy’s adventures in the forest, such as discovering new coffee beans, solving nature challenges, and spending time with his animal friends. Launch a monthly series of comics or animated shorts on social media and video sites. Increase audience engagement by introducing interactive stories that allow fans to choose Owy’s adventure path or help him solve a challenge.		Tells how Owy discovers new coffee beans in the forest and shares interesting stories about camping with friends. Demonstrates Owy’s expertise and interaction with nature, conveying a love of nature and the spirit of discovery. Create detailed storyline maps that incorporate illustrations and videos to enhance visual appeal.

Reflection

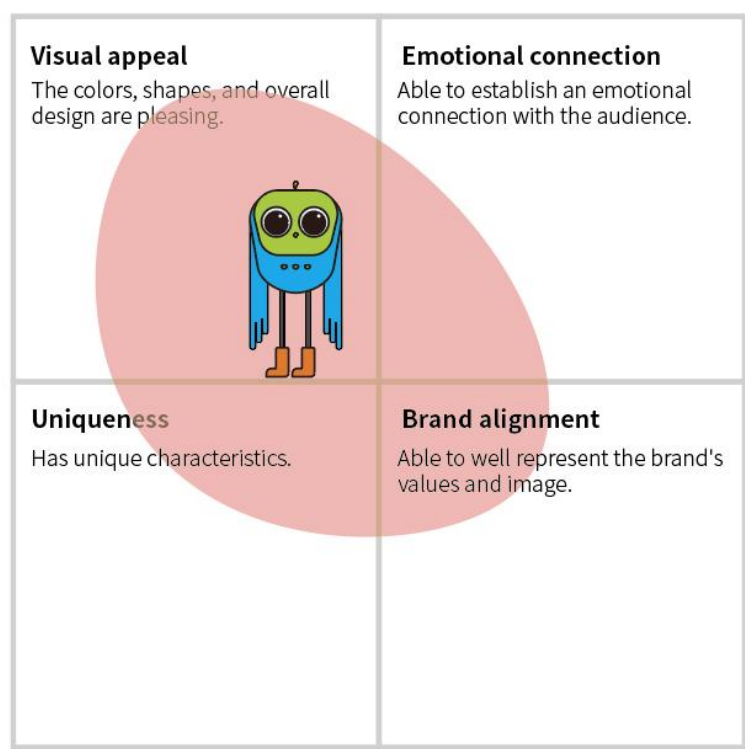


Figure 142 Self-visual design assessment of Owy

The fourth attempt differs significantly from the previous three, as it involves the design of an entirely new IP character for a brand, making comparative analysis unfeasible. In this case, the design emphasizes visual appeal, a critical aspect for a new coffee shop to attract consumers in the initial stages. By prioritizing visual attraction, the design aims to lay a foundation for subsequent development in emotional connection, uniqueness, and brand consistency.

The most significant challenge in this project was determining the appropriate IP character that could effectively relate to the coffee brand. The question was whether the chosen character could establish a meaningful connection with the coffee theme. The psychological mask, through the 3MIP method, was essential in aligning the character’s identity with the brand. More precisely, the owl character was chosen because of the brand values of freedom and nature, together with the target audience of coffee lovers who want to relax. The owl, symbolizing alertness and wakefulness, naturally aligns with the brand’s coffee offerings.

In the later stages, the connection between the character and coffee is further reinforced through brand activities and promotional materials that integrate coffee elements with the character. This

strategic approach ensures that the character not only appeals visually but also fosters a deeper connection with the brand, contributing to its overall uniqueness and consistency.

Table 38 Documentation and reflection on the design process for Owy

Design process documentation	Using the 3MIP method: 4 days Sketching and color selection: 7 days using Adobe Illustrator
Challenges in the design process	Question 1: How to select the owl as the IP character for OUTSIDE COFFEE? Question 2: How to highlight the characteristics of the coffee shop?
Solutions and improvements	Solution 1: By analyzing the characteristics of the brand and target consumers. Solution 2: By expanding the promotional materials at a later stage.

4.3.5 Summary

The application of the 3MIP character design method across three redesigns and one brand new design demonstrates its efficacy in systematically developing IP characters. Whether optimizing an existing character or creating a new one, the method allows for a structured approach to character creation. The most significant impact, particularly in optimization, lies in the psychological mask aspect, where aligning the brand's attributes with the IP character's design is crucial. In creating a new design, the physical mask requires considerable thought and careful selection. However, neither the psychological nor physical masks can be presented in isolation; their development must be integrated across various touchpoints, including social media, consumer platforms, advertising, and packaging. This integration enhances the character's appeal, interaction with consumers, and emotional connection, which is further planned and designed in the virtual mask aspect. Importantly, these three aspects—psychological, physical, and virtual masks—are not entirely separate but rather influence each other.

By using the psychological masks, designers can correctly define a character's personality and create a backstory that follows the brand. In the case of the physical mask, the process of visual design involves considerations of color, shape, proportion, and details to facilitate initial sketching and rapid identification of design direction. However, feedback after visual design and revision

requires additional emphasis. Additionally, when designing for offline interactions, integrating psychological masks content into behavioral design is crucial to accurately convey the character's personality and message. The virtual mask stage involves creating interactive scenarios, applying the character's initial positioning to foster emotional connections with the audience. A limitation of this method is the inability to gather immediate feedback, necessitating long-term observation.

Overall, this design method proves effective in creating IP characters that align with brand positioning and possess strong appeal, making it particularly suitable for the initial strategic planning phase of brand IP character development. However, the current design method remains at the conceptual and prototype development stage and requires further testing and feedback collection for more comprehensive evaluation. In the next section, we plan to test and apply this method with students who have a foundational understanding of visual design.

4.4 Verification plan for the application of 3MIP character design method

To thoroughly evaluate the effectiveness of the 3MIP character design method and assess its potential in enhancing students' or novice designers' abilities in brand IP character design, a systematic feedback and validation plan was established. The plan consists of 20 students within one month of the course and includes five online training sessions. Training will focus on the main notions of the 3MIP method and its practical tools, enabling students to design a new brand IP character or redesign an existing one in order to enhance understanding and practical application of the method.

4.4.1 Validation objectives

The following are the aims of this verification plan:

1. Understanding and Application of Method: To understand the core concepts of the 3MIP character design method and apply it in real-life projects.
2. Improvement of Design Creativity: The 3MIP character design method allowed the students to explain the internal features and multi-dimensionality of the characters for creation in design.
3. Improvement Suggestion and Feedback Collection: Students will be interviewed and surveyed for their thoughts and feelings regarding perceived strengths and weaknesses in the content and

teaching effectiveness of the method.

4.4.2 Content and methods of verification

Design of Training Content: The course covers ways of character design in 3MIP, including psychological, physical, and virtual masks that will be explained in practical detail. A psychological mask, for instance, covers the analysis of intrinsic personality, motives, historic background, and inner conflicts in the course of development to build an inner world and make a multidimensional representation. The physical mask covers features such as appearance, color, attire, props, voice, which gives the character strong visual identity and emotional expressiveness. This will also put an emphasis on cultural elements and symbolic meaning. In the section of virtual mask, it gives students a chance to research the digital presence of the character and the cross-media consistency, study the adaptation of the character design across media for brand coherence.

Projects with Self-Selected Theme Design: The students shall develop either a new brand IP character or redevelop an already existing character using the 3MIP method as the main tool. The projects are divided into three different stages: character positioning or psychological mask, visual design or physical mask, and digital platform application or virtual mask to ensure deep understanding and implementation of each design element.

Approaches to Feedback and Data Acquisition:

Questionnaires (Appendix 2): Students will be given feedback questionnaires regarding the course material, clarity of the 3MIP method, user experience, and challenges faced. The students will rate and comment on several elements: usability, stimulation of design thinking, and coherence of character.

Interviews (Appendix 3): Individual interviews regarding experiences, challenges faced, strategies employed, and suggestions for improvement with respect to the method after the completion of the project will help capture the real feedback.

4.4.3 Data analysis and improvement directions

This feedback plan systematically collects user insights on the 3MIP character design method through questionnaires (Detailed questionnaire content and questionnaire analyses are in

Appendix 2), interviews (Interview questions in Appendix 3), and IP prototypes designed by the students (Appendix 4) to deeply investigate the practical effectiveness of the method in brand IP character design. The following are key data analysis results and suggested improvement directions.

High User Satisfaction with the 3MIP Method:

Survey and interview results reveal high user satisfaction, with 87.6% of users finding the method easy to use in character design. In terms of satisfaction (Figure 143), 68.8% were satisfied, and 31.2% were highly satisfied. Users highlighted that the 3MIP method provides a structured process and a wealth of tools, adding coherence and depth to character design. To address comprehension challenges and complex terminology, the plan includes testing simplified terms and streamlined processes. If significant operational difficulties are observed, further simplification of tables and additional examples will be provided to enhance the user experience.

Positive Feedback on Applicability to Brand IP Character Design:

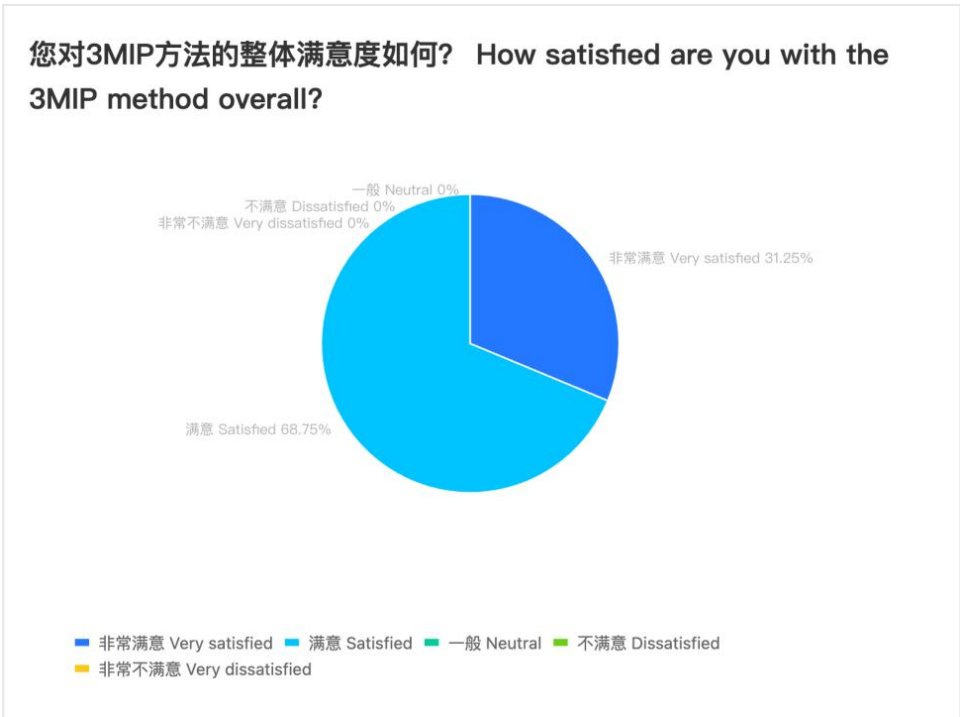


Figure 143 User satisfaction chart

Positive Feedback on Applicability to Brand IP Character Design:

Users generally agree on the method’s applicability to brand IP character design (Figure 144), with 100% indicating the method helped them understand core design elements better. Moreover, 81.2% felt creatively stimulated while using the method (Figure 145). Interview feedback supports these findings, with users noting its clarity and comprehensiveness, which allow deeper exploration of characters’ emotions and backgrounds. Analysis of student performance in each mask design, particularly the psychological mask, will assess whether character depth and multidimensionality are effectively enriched.

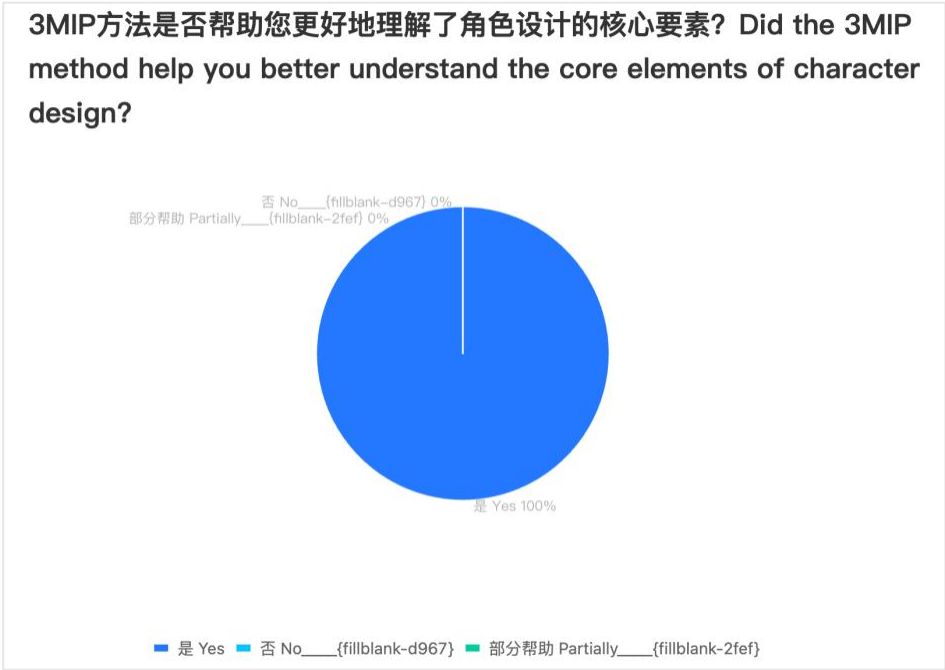


Figure 144 understand the core elements chart

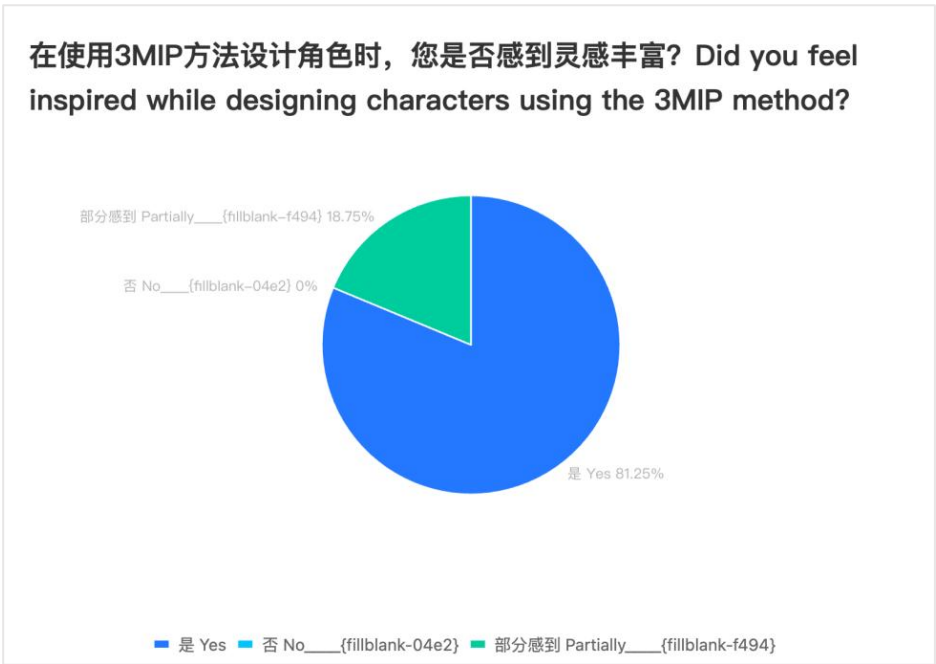


Figure 145 Feel inspired chart

Core Preferences and Challenges in Design Process: Surveys reveal a preference for the psychological mask, with users finding it adds depth and interest, making the design process more creative. However, challenges arose, especially during initial use, with difficulties in understanding the method, integrating psychological and physical masks, maintaining creative inspiration, and constructing character backstories. These issues posed barriers to smooth application.

Advantages in Time Efficiency and Structural Clarity:

Most users agree that the 3MIP method is time-efficient (Figure 146), with 93.7% rating the required time as reasonable. Additionally, the method's clear structure and steps facilitate a smooth and organized design process, improving user experience. Interview feedback highlights the structured and iterative nature of the method, making the design process more systematic and adaptable.

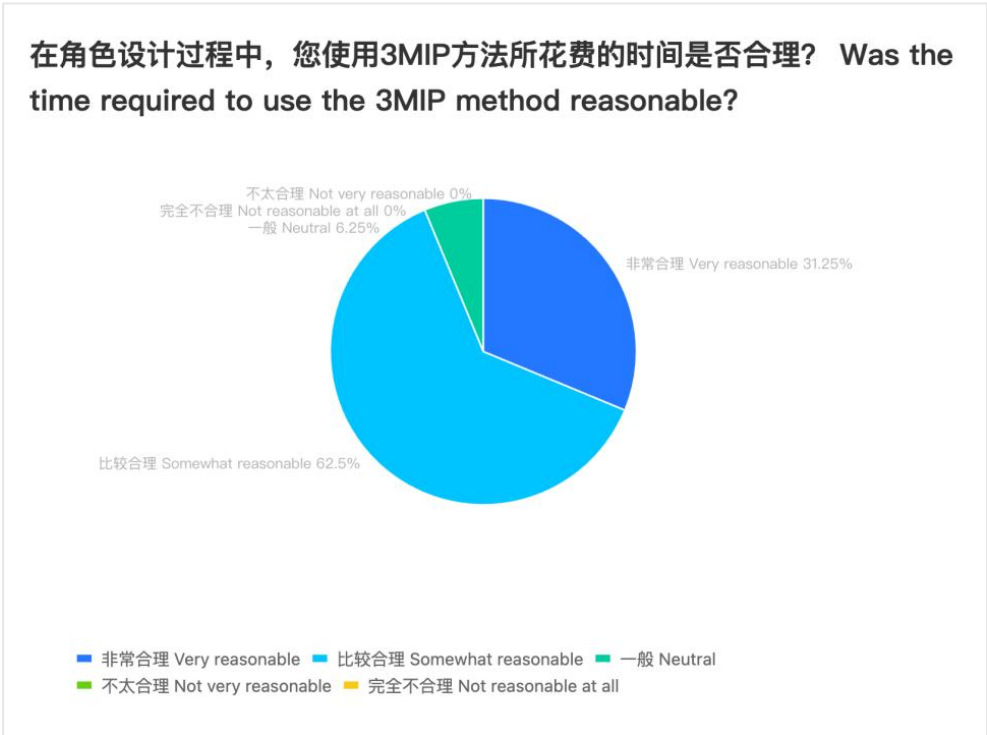


Figure 146 Use the method reasonable chart

Support Needs for Novices: Some users, especially beginners, reported initial comprehension difficulties, particularly with specialized terminology. Simplified guidance and terminology explanations are recommended to facilitate easier adoption for new users.

Based on questionnaire and interview feedback, users provided a series of improvement suggestions, including:

Increasing Visual Storytelling Elements: Users suggested incorporating visual storytelling elements (e.g., storyboarding or animation) to enhance character memorability.

Process smoothing: Users want an easier workflow, which will reduce the learning curve for new users.

Expanding Application Scenarios: Users recommend extending character design applications to more media (e.g., animation, games) to increase IP commercial value.

Feature Flexibility: The development should allow users to have more flexibility when tweaking the face structure to make the character more diverse.

4.4.4 Limitations and influencing factors on feedback plan

This feedback plan is a very useful tool to understand the effectiveness and usefulness of the 3MIP character design method; still, several factors may have affected the validity and reliability of the information provided through surveys and interviews. A very major threat to it is the response bias related to the teacher-student relationship. Because the project was instructor-led, there was most likely great resistance to provide constructive criticism or name significant challenges, perhaps out of respect and not wanting to disappoint the instructor or even the fear of a possible grade ramification.

Moreover, the students could feel challenged to prove themselves capable of using the 3MIP method; thus, giving very positive answers or even feeling hesitant to disclose most of the difficulties faced. This is because in educational settings, respondents sometimes unconsciously fit their responses to what they perceive is expected, rather than providing unprejudiced reviews. Limitations such as these often lead to higher satisfaction scores or in selecting the barriers that influence the levels and depth of insight.

To reduce these biases, anonymous feedback methods were used for the questionnaire portion. However, interviews were conducted directly between the instructor and students, which may still

have influenced responses. In the future, it would be preferable to engage a third-party facilitator for interviews or to conduct follow-up evaluations later to minimize the direct influence of the instructor's presence. These adjustments could encourage students to offer more candid reflections, providing a richer and more balanced understanding of the 3MIP method's effectiveness in practice.

4.4.5 Verification summary

This validation plan showcases high recognition and applicability of the 3MIP character design method, with students affirming its structure and flexibility. The feedback plan identified the method's strengths and user preferences, and some practical challenges and areas for improvement. In the future, optimization will be directed toward simplifying the initial steps for novices, enhancing visual representation, extending application scenarios, and increasing the flexibility of the method to further improve user experience and application outcomes. Further validations in the future may also reduce variable interference and involve more visual data collection, such as testing the method on a complete project and gathering final brand IP character design results for an in-depth review of the 3MIP method's effectiveness.

4.5 Summary

This chapter will introduce a systematic process for brand IP character design by creating and applying the 3MIP character design method, which integrates three dimensions: psychological, physical, and virtual masks. It should be useful for both novice and experienced designers in establishing a clear framework that not only increases the appeal and complexity of the IP character but also creates harmony with brand identity and audience expectations.

The practical work in this section is divided into several sections:

1. Establishing the 3MIP Design Method: The following work aims at developing the 3MIP design method by drawing on the analysis made in the earlier chapters, to guide the design of the brand IP prototype and then systematically analyze existing IP characters, putting forward suggestions for improvement. It will improve the scientific nature and systematizations of the IP character design process. Based on three masks:

- **Psychological Mask:** This mask provides an insight into the inner details of the character, his motivation, background, and emotional depth. It aims to achieve strong emotional resonance with the audience by building multi-dimensional characters.
- **Physical Mask:** This mask focuses on visual identity, emphasizing such elements as appearance, colors, attire, and symbolism; using exaggerated yet simplified visual cues to ensure distinctiveness and memorability.
- **Virtual Mask:** This mask prepares the character for different digital and interactive formats, ensuring coherence across media and allowing cross-platform interaction.

2. **Case Studies:** The applicability and effectiveness of the method are tested through detailed analyses of established brand IP characters including Mickey Mouse, Kumamon, Duo (Duolingo), and Snow King. In each case study, the strength of the character and potential improvements are assessed within the 3MIP framework. Mickey Mouse shows a good example of psychological depth and historical growth; therefore, this character is so emotive and iconic. Kumamon is highly noted for its strong local appeal and interaction with regional cultural elements, which supports regional tourism. Duo epitomizes functional motivation and friendly, supportive companionship that most definitely enhances the user experience on a language-learning platform. Snow King uses humor and cultural signs to build brand awareness and engage consumers.

3. **Practical Projects:** This chapter confirms the 3MIP method by four design projects that range from redesigning existing IP characters to creating a new brand IP character. In this process, each of these projects has been evaluated based on four important criteria: aesthetic pleasure, emotional attachment, distinctiveness, and fit with the brand. By practically applying the method, refinements were iteratively performed, and adaptations were done to develop the personality of the characters, their narrative depth, and interactive capabilities.

4. **Reflection and Adjustments of the Method:** By self-reflection and documentation, knowledge was collected about the strengths and weaknesses of the 3MIP method. The results indicated that further development would be needed, for example, regarding personality development inside the psychological mask, adaptation of physical features to different media, and fluent cross-

media representation. In addition, the modifications were presented to allow for flexibility and ease of use when designing characters, especially for inexperienced designers.

5. Validation Plan: A feedback and validation program were established to test the effectiveness of the 3MIP character design method. Its effectiveness in helping students or novice designers improve their skills in brand IP character design was validated through its application by design students in their practice.

The chapter concludes that the 3MIP character design method can provide a robust, comprehensive framework for brand IP character creation, balancing creative expression with systematic structure. The method not only enhances character appeal and memorability but also strengthens audience connection and brand coherence. This approach offers valuable insights for future applications in brand-focused IP character design, fostering innovation and strategic depth in the field of visual communication.

5 Conclusion

This thesis offers a unique contribution to the fields of branding, design, and cultural studies through the development of the 3MIP character design method. By conceptualizing IP characters as hybrid identity constructs composed of psychological, physical, and virtual masks, the framework bridges theoretical models of identity and representation with practical design methodologies. It repositions IP character creation from a purely stylistic endeavor to a strategic, culturally situated design process.

In doing so, the study not only provides a systematic approach for aligning character design with brand values and audience engagement strategies but also introduces a novel vocabulary for analyzing and constructing symbolic interfaces between brands and society. The proposed framework addresses a significant gap in both academic literature and professional practice, particularly in the context of the rapidly evolving Chinese branding landscape.

Moreover, the 3MIP model contributes to design education by offering a pedagogically accessible tool that aids novice designers in understanding how identity theory, visual communication, and

digital behavior intersect in character-based branding. Its adaptability to practice, theory, and teaching contexts marks it as a generative and transferable contribution to interdisciplinary knowledge.

First, in the analysis of psychological masks, the thesis introduces Jung's concept of 'personality masks' into IP character design to explain how characters resonate with audiences through emotional and narrative dimensions. The mental mask is used not only for concealing one's identity but also as a method whereby characters can adjust to the complicated social expectations. This is very important in building up the character of an IP and enriching the multi-layered development of the character so that they may last long in appeal in the complicated social environment. The use of psychological masks in 3MIP can actualize these inner character traits and narrative history in such a way that it does indeed increase the emotional impact and multi-dimensionality of the character.

From the point of view of the physical mask, this thesis discusses the conventional and inherited functions of physical masks from the perspectives of culture, ritual, and aesthetic points of view, using visual images in shaping character. The thesis underlines that physical masks are a significant inspiration for the visual appearance of the IP characters and, at the same time, for enhancement of the cultural background and narrative meaning of those characters, with subsequent enhancement of the emotional connection with their audience. Within the frames of the 3MIP character design method, physical masks build visual identity and make the character more versatile and recognizable in an intercultural environment.

The findings on virtual masks show how characters have moved away from their physical masks to the digital masks, more so in the present world, considering their possibility of occurrence across various media. Virtual masks let IP characters depict multiple personas and characters on multiple digital platforms, therefore expanding their interaction with audiences. While it is particularly the case with the help of virtual and augmented reality technologies, the digital representations of IP characters enhance the coherence and flexibility of brands across different platforms, therefore being one of the indispensable elements of modern brand communication. The proposed 3MIP framework in this thesis illustrates that the very substance of personas lies

in real-time interaction and inter-platform communication enabled by virtual masks, providing great support for brands in creating dynamic assets.

The thesis therefore investigates the cultural and economic importance of IP characters within the Asian market, using Kumamoto Bears and Kakao Friends as prime case studies of such characters, as cultural ambassadors and their value within an economic perspective in terms of commodification and media communication. While this success has encouraged the investigation of IP character design in the Chinese market, it has also underlined how the development of IP characters in China still lags in uniqueness and deepens the relationship with the audience. In so doing, this analysis gives evidence of the utility of the 3MIP approach in building the depth of culture in the formulation of IP characters.

In addition, through structured training and user testing for visual communication design students, this study confirms that the 3MIP method is effective in enhancing the creativity and functionality of brand IP characters. However, it also shows that during the process of transforming psychological features into visual elements, users, especially beginners, faced some challenges, which indicates that the 3MIP method still needs further optimization in the future. This could be achieved by creating more intuitive tools and visual aids that would help in the translation of complex character traits into easily recognizable visual forms.

This thesis thus offers a systematic framework and an innovative approach toward the theory and practice of IP character design, which has great value for brand designers, educators, and academics alike. The 3MIP character design method constructed in this dissertation perfectly integrates theory with practice, bridges the gap between traditional design methods and modern digital media, and advances the academic development of IP character design. It is expected, finally, that this study will collect and analyze data from designers, clients, and consumers in relation to real-life cases for the further investigation of the 3MIP character design method in practical application, which has been proven effective for branding thus far. Meanwhile, future research could also explore how to utilize AI tools to enhance the automation of the design process, as well as new modes of IP character interaction in virtual reality environments.

6 Future work and practitioner guide

6.1 Future research directions

While this thesis has focused on the conceptualization and application of the 3MIP framework within the Chinese branding context, several avenues exist for future exploration.

First, further research could investigate how the 3MIP method performs in cross-cultural brand environments. Comparative studies between Eastern and Western branding approaches—particularly the adaptation of psychological, physical, and virtual mask dimensions in differing sociocultural contexts—would help assess the model's international adaptability.

Second, deeper empirical studies involving longitudinal brand performance and user engagement metrics could validate the long-term effectiveness of 3MIP-designed characters. Collaborations with commercial brands would enhance real-world impact and contribute to both industry insight and academic refinement.

Third, future research may examine the integration of generative AI tools (e.g., Midjourney, Stable Diffusion) into the 3MIP workflow, expanding its potential in prototyping and personalization stages. The intersection between AI-generated content and human-centered mask theory presents an exciting frontier for design research.

6.2 Practitioner-oriented design guide

To support practical implementation, the following step-by-step guide outlines how designers and brand strategists can apply the 3MIP framework in real-world IP character development:

1. Clarify brand core values

Define the brand's mission, personality, and audience expectations. Use interviews, brand audits, or existing identity models (e.g., Aaker's brand personality) to ground the process.

2. Map to 3 mask dimensions

Psychological masks: Identify emotional traits, internal motivations, and archetypal alignment (e.g., the Hero, the Trickster).

Physical masks: Translate these traits into visual language—facial forms, colors, attire, and materials rooted in cultural symbolism.

Virtual masks: Consider digital personas, platform behavior, interactivity, and how the character evolves in dynamic media spaces.

3. Design and prototype

Create iterations of the character in both static and motion formats. Apply the “inner–outer cycle” loop to ensure alignment between internal meaning and external form.

4. Test and iterate

Use low-fidelity prototypes for internal critique and audience feedback. Adapt the character based on emotional engagement and semantic coherence.

5. Deploy across brand touchpoints

Integrate the IP character into packaging, digital media, retail environments, and storytelling assets. Prioritize consistency and emotional resonance.

6.3 Global relevance

In order to enhance generalisability, the 3MIP method can be positioned within the broader discourse of international branding. Its emphasis on identity construction, emotional connection, and platform adaptation aligns with global trends in experiential branding, transmedia storytelling, and culturally adaptive design.

By framing IP characters not only as marketing assets but as symbolic interfaces between brands and society, the 3MIP framework offers a culturally sensitive and conceptually flexible tool for brand identity development worldwide.

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Appendix 1 Summary of the thesis

Abstract

This thesis explores the concept of masks across psychological, physical, and virtual dimensions to investigate their evolving significance in human culture and their applications in digital society, particularly within the context of IP character design in branding. Psychological masks are rooted in Carl Jung's concept of the 'Persona', serving as intermediaries between individual identity and societal expectations. Physical masks, rich in cultural symbolism, express unique artistic and design characteristics from diverse global traditions. Virtual masks, enabled by digital tools, reflect modern expressions of identity in virtual spaces. Recognizing IP characters as contemporary masks, this thesis introduces a novel method for designing brand IP characters, offering a multidimensional approach to create engaging, relatable, and culturally relevant brand identities.

1 Introduction

Throughout human history, masks have taken on various forms and functions, influencing a wide range of cultural domains. Historically, masks were used as tools for ritual, expression, and identity concealment, manifesting in cultural symbols or entertainment figures. In the modern digital media age, masks continue to evolve, integrating into everyday life through online avatars, video game characters, and virtual influencers. This raises the central research question: Do new forms of masks exist in the digital age, and if so, how do they impact brand communication and identity?

The study aims to answer these questions by exploring psychological, physical, and virtual masks as frameworks for understanding the IP character phenomenon within the branding sector. A critical turning point in this research is recognizing IP characters as new 'masks' in the digital age. This finding leads to the secondary research question: How can brand IP characters be designed to align with brand identity, while remaining appealing and engaging? To address these questions, this thesis clarifies the concept of IP, especially in the context of its evolving definition within the Chinese cultural industry.

2 Literature review

Through an extensive literature review, this research analyzes IP characters within the framework of psychological, physical, and virtual masks, positing that these characters function as modern masks in the digital age. The analysis highlights current challenges in IP character design, such as issues of homogenization and a lack of creativity and cultural depth. However, by deeply investigating the characteristics of these masks, the research suggests that these shortcomings can be addressed, enriching the content of IP characters and providing a multidimensional design approach that fosters deeper audience engagement across various media platforms.

2.1 Psychological masks

In the psychological dimension, the study explores the complexities of personality and identity. By incorporating the concept of psychological masks into IP character design, designers can create visually appealing characters that also exhibit multifaceted identities through their behavior in different social contexts. This approach enhances the characters' appeal and depth, increasing audience engagement.

2.2 Physical masks

In the physical dimension, masks carry rich cultural histories, symbolic meanings, and artistic expressions. Within IP character design, physical masks inspire the application of traditional design elements and symbolic patterns, serving as transformative elements in storytelling. Designers can create visually distinctive characters imbued with cultural significance, thus enhancing their narrative function and aesthetic appeal. This method not only honors traditional art forms but also enriches character narratives by incorporating diverse cultural perspectives.

2.3 Virtual masks

The virtual dimension introduces new avenues for character interaction and identity expression in the digital age. Virtual masks enable designers to create characters adaptable to various digital platforms, allowing for flexible adjustments in appearance and function based on different interactive environments or narrative needs. Virtual masks endow characters with dynamic and fluid identities, capable of evolving in real-time in response to user interactions or developments within digital and augmented reality narratives.

Furthermore, while the role of IP characters in marketing and brand building is increasingly significant, there is currently a lack of systematic IP character design methodologies. This gap in research and practice presents an opportunity to develop and refine IP character design strategies.

This thesis employs a combined theoretical and practical approach, focusing on specific issues within the Chinese market. By synthesizing existing design concepts in brand and character design and integrating the characteristics of psychological, physical, and virtual masks, a unique IP character design strategy is developed. This strategy aims to provide robust support for both novice and professional designers, addressing their design needs comprehensively.

3 Methodology

This study employs a self-participatory research approach, utilizing a mixed-methods framework that integrates literature review, visual analysis, case studies, and feedback from users who applied the methods in student settings. The research methodology encompasses the collection of literature on IP character design, a comparative analysis of physical, psychological, and virtual masks, and the validation of findings through practical applications in brand IP character design. Ethical considerations, study limitations, and data integrity are also thoroughly addressed to ensure comprehensive and balanced analysis. Additionally, throughout the research process, the researcher maintained a reflective journal to document personal insights and reactions, thereby enhancing the transparency and reliability of the research process.

4 Application of IP character design

4.1 The 3MIP character design method

This research provides novel insights into IP character design by conducting a comprehensive analysis of masks across three dimensions—psychological, physical, and virtual—and establishing a method specifically tailored for brand IP character design. The originality of this work lies in the integration of the theoretical framework of masks with practical applications, revealing the dynamic interaction between modern IP character design and the characteristics of masks.

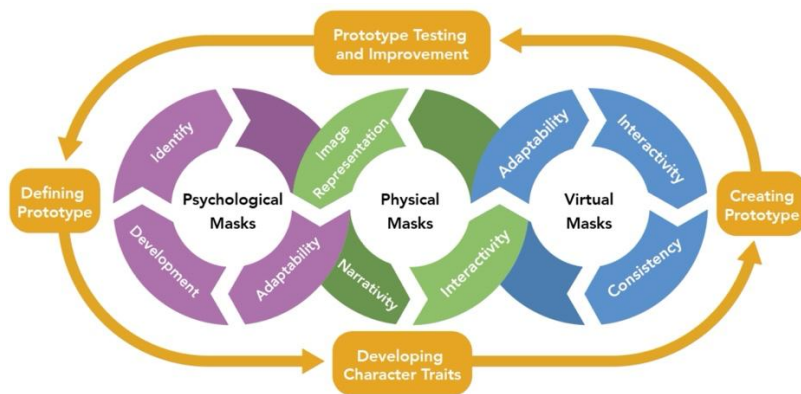


Figure 1. 3MIP character design method

The design method, termed the ‘3MIP character design method’ (Figure 1), incorporates two iterative cycles: IP Character Positioning and Iteration. As characters evolve over time, the conclusions derived from this method may also shift accordingly. The method is divided into two parts: an inner cycle and an outer cycle. The inner cycle focuses on character positioning through the three dimensions of psychological, physical, and virtual masks—addressing the character’s psychological traits, visual identity, and interactional dynamics. The outer cycle extracts information from the inner cycle to define the prototype, develop character features, create a prototype, test it, and make necessary improvements. This process ultimately results in a cohesive brand IP character. It is crucial that the character’s design remains aligned with the brand’s core values and identity, effectively communicating the brand’s mission, vision, and unique market positioning. Customizing the character according to the target audience’s age, gender, cultural background, and interests is vital in creating a character that resonates with them.

This method integrates different dimensional features, providing a comprehensive framework for IP character design. It also facilitates the analysis and refinement of existing characters. Through the application of the 3MIP method in three redesigns and one brand-new design, whether in optimization or new creation, this approach has proven effective in systematically establishing IP characters. In optimization, the most significant focus is on the psychological mask, where it is crucial to align the brand and IP character’s characteristics. For new designs, more considerations and decisions are required for the physical mask. However, both psychological and physical masks cannot be developed in isolation; they require a multi-faceted approach involving social media, consumer platforms, advertising, packaging, and other touchpoints. This integrated

strategy enhances the character's appeal, interaction with consumers, and emotional connection, which is particularly addressed through the virtual mask dimension.

Overall, the 3MIP character design method has proven to be effective in creating IP characters that are aligned with brand positioning and are attractive to audiences, making it particularly suitable for IP character design during the initial strategic planning phase of branding. However, this design method is still in the conceptual design and prototype development stage, requiring further testing and feedback collection for deeper evaluation. The next section will involve testing and application of this method by students with a foundational understanding of visual design.

4.2 Case study

Through the analysis of the IP character designs of four prominent brands—Mickey Mouse, Kumamon, Duo, and Snow King—the feasibility and effectiveness of the 3MIP character design method have been validated.

In the psychological mask dimension, the identities, personalities, emotions, and backstories of these characters create engaging profiles that convey each brand's core values. In the physical mask dimension, all four characters are highly recognizable, with rounded shapes enhancing their approachability. The virtual mask dimension shows that consistent visual and personality traits across various media help reinforce brand image and extend reach, with coherence across animation, advertising, social media, and other platforms supporting brand identity.

Each character emphasizes different dimensions: Mickey Mouse's design, especially strong in the psychological mask dimension, serves as Disney's emblem, with a rich backstory and global recognition. Through films, TV, and theme parks, Mickey's character development and emotional connections span generations. Conversely, Kumamon, Duo, and Snow King excel in the physical and virtual mask dimensions. Kumamon promotes local culture and economy through humor and interactive appeal, serving as a model for regional branding. Duo, as both a mascot and educational tool, uses high interactivity to engage and retain language learners. Snow King presents a fun, carefree brand image with varied costumes and props, enhancing appeal in advertising and product marketing. These three characters focus on online and offline consumer

engagement. This analysis did not address character wearability, as this study centers on initial character design stages, which would require further specialized research for practical application.

In summary, the 3MIP character design method is practical and effective for brand building. By integrating psychological, physical, and virtual masks, brands can create distinctive, recognizable characters that strengthen market competitiveness and consumer loyalty. Subsequent chapters will further validate this method through real case applications.

5 Conclusion

This research presents IP characters as modern manifestations of ‘masks’ within branding, synthesizing the attributes of psychological, physical, and virtual masks to construct compelling brand identities. The 3MIP method enables designers to create IP characters that possess depth and relatability, fostering cultural and emotional connections with audiences. By merging psychological depth, cultural symbolism, and digital interactivity, IP characters offer brands a way to differentiate themselves while building strong, immersive relationships with consumers.

The findings indicate that as market competition intensifies, IP characters offer a valuable way to reinforce brand identity by combining storytelling, visual appeal, and interactive technology. This thesis adds to brand design by introducing a fresh framework for developing IP characters, meeting the growing need for brands to create characters that are both impactful and memorable. By connecting with audiences on various levels, IP characters crafted using the 3MIP method can boost brand loyalty and visibility, serving as a flexible asset for digital-era brand communication. It also provides novice designers and design students with a structured, comprehensive approach for creating brand IP characters.

Expanded discussion on method and applications

To further validate the effectiveness of the 3MIP method, this research includes a detailed feedback plan implemented in design education settings. By introducing the 3MIP framework to design students, the study collects insights on how novice designers interpret and apply the method to create IP characters aligned with brand values and audience expectations. This

feedback informs potential refinements to the 3MIP model, ensuring its practical applicability across diverse design contexts and cultural settings.

Further research could explore the evolving role of IP characters in global branding, examining how psychological, physical, and virtual masks adapt to emerging digital platforms and audience preferences. As virtual reality, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence continue to evolve, the 3MIP framework could be expanded to include advanced interactive elements, ensuring brand IP characters remain relevant in an increasingly digital world. Future applications of this model may consider integrating AI-driven personalization, allowing characters to adapt more dynamically to user interactions and preferences, thus offering new avenues for immersive, tailored brand experiences.

In conclusion, the 3MIP framework stands as a comprehensive method for IP character design, bridging traditional and modern elements to address the complex demands of branding in the digital age. This thesis emphasizes the significance of IP characters as ‘masks’ that allow brands to project multi-layered identities, resonating with audiences across cultural and technological divides. By combining psychological, physical, and virtual masks, designers can create IP characters that are not only visually appealing but also emotionally engaging and culturally significant, ultimately strengthening brand identity and consumer loyalty.

3MIP character design method		
Psychological Masks	Physical Masks	Virtual Masks
1 Comprehensive Identity Presentation: Core Personality Drivers and Motivations Backstory	1 Visual Expressions: Physical traits and Posture Emotional Impact of Colors Costume and Props Voice	1 Adaptability: Ensure the character’s design adapts across various digital media platforms (2D/3D animation, video games, VR).
2 Development Inner Conflict Growth Trajectory	2 Narrativity Cultural Elements Symbolic Significance	2 Interactivity

Digital Social Platform Representation		
3 Adaptability Flexibility Multilayered Personality Traits	3 Interactivity Comfort and Ergonomics Actions and Behaviors	3 Cross-Media Consistency Ensure consistency in character design across all media forms (voice, color schemes, action styles).

Appendix 2 Teaching content

教学内容 Teaching content

1. 培训目标 Training Objectives

- 使学生理解 3MIP 角色设计方法的理论基础。
- 提升学生在品牌 IP 角色设计中的应用能力。
- 帮助学生通过实战案例掌握 IP 角色设计的技巧和策略。
- Enable students to understand the theoretical foundations of the 3MIP Character Design Method.
- Enhance students' ability to apply the 3MIP method in brand IP character design.
- Equip students with the skills and strategies necessary to master IP character design through practical case studies.

2. 培训日程 Training Schedule

模块 1：介绍 3MIP 角色设计方法

- 理论讲解

介绍数字时代品牌 IP 角色的重要性，方法的理论基础及其在现代品牌推广中的应用。

讲解为何 IP 角色对于品牌战略至关重要

案例：米老鼠如何成为迪士尼品牌的代表性角色。

- 案例分享

案例分析讨论，分析不同品牌角色的成功要素。

案例：熊本熊、Friend Link

Module 1: Introduction to the 3MIP Character Design Method

- Theoretical Lecture:

Introduce the significance of brand IP characters in the digital age, the theoretical basis of the method, and its application in modern brand promotion.

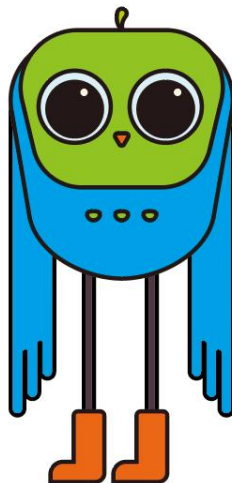
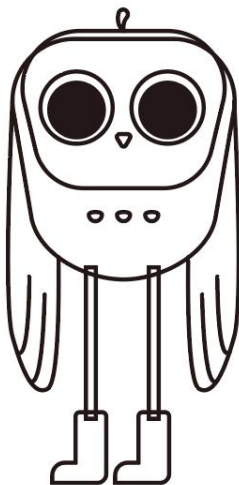
Explain why IP characters are crucial for brand strategy.

- Case Sharing:

Discuss and analyze the success factors of different brand characters.

Examples: Kumamon, Friend Link.

Appendix 3 Design process



Appendix 4 Questionnaire and Analysis

Questionnaire:

3MIP角色设计方法反馈计划调查问卷3MIP Character Design
Method Feedback Survey

感谢您参与本次研究！为了帮助我们更好地理解3MIP角色设计方法的效果，请您根据实际体验回答以下问题。您的反馈对于我们改进该方法至关重要。
Thank you for participating in this study! To help us better understand the effectiveness of the 3MIP Character Design Method, please answer the following questions based on your experience. Your feedback is crucial for improving the method.

* 01 您参与研究的日期 Date of Participation

请输入题目说明（选填）

请选择日期

* 02 在使用3MIP方法设计角色时，您感到过程顺利吗？ How smoothly did the character design process go while using the 3MIP method?

请输入题目说明（选填）

☐ 非常顺利 Very smoothly

☐ 比较顺利 Quite smoothly

☐ 一般 Neutral

☐ 较为困难 Somewhat difficult

☐ 非常困难 Very difficult

* 03 您对3MIP方法的整体满意度如何？ How satisfied are you with the 3MIP method overall?

请输入题目说明（选填）

☐ 非常满意 Very satisfied

☐ 满意 Satisfied

☐ 一般 Neutral

☐ 不满意 Dissatisfied

☐ 非常不满意 Very dissatisfied

* 04 您认为3MIP方法在品牌IP角色设计中的适用性如何？ How would you rate the applicability of the 3MIP method to brand IP character design?

请输入题目说明（选填）

☐ 非常适用 Highly applicable

☐ 比较适用 Somewhat applicable

☐ 一般 Neutral

☐ 不太适用 Not very applicable

☐ 完全不适用 Not applicable at all

* 05 在使用3MIP方法的过程中，您最喜欢的部分是什么？为什么？ What was your favorite part of using the 3MIP method, and why?

请输入题目说明（选填）

请输入

多行文本

* 06 在使用3MIP方法的过程中，您遇到的最大挑战是什么？ What was the biggest challenge you faced while using the 3MIP method?

请输入题目说明（选填）

请输入

* 07 3MIP方法中是否有任何部分让您感到困惑或不清楚？请具体说明。 Were there any parts of the 3MIP method that you found confusing or unclear? Please specify.

请输入题目说明（选填）

请输入

- * 08 您认为3MIP方法可以在哪些方面进行改进? In what ways do you think the 3MIP method could be improved?

请输入题目说明 (选填)

请输入

- * 09 3MIP方法是否帮助您更好地理解角色设计的核心要素? Did the 3MIP method help you better understand the core elements of character design?

如果选择“否”或“部分帮助”，请说明原因:

If you chose "No" or "Partially," please explain why:

☐ 是 Yes

☐ 否 No _____

☐ 部分帮助 Partially _____

- * 10 在使用3MIP方法设计角色时，您是否感到灵感丰富? Did you feel inspired while designing characters using the 3MIP method?

如果选择“否”或“部分帮助”，请说明原因:

If you chose "No" or "Partially," please explain why:

☐ 是 Yes

☐ 否 No _____

☐ 部分感到 Partially _____

- * 11 您认为3MIP方法与其他角色设计方法相比有何独特之处或优势? What unique aspects or advantages do you think the 3MIP method has compared to other character design methods?

请输入题目说明 (选填)

请输入

- * 12 在角色设计过程中，您使用3MIP方法所花费的时间是否合理？ Was the time required to use the 3MIP method reasonable?

请输入题目说明（选填）

- ☐ 非常合理 Very reasonable
- ☐ 比较合理 Somewhat reasonable
- ☐ 一般 Neutral
- ☐ 不太合理 Not very reasonable
- ☐ 完全不合理 Not reasonable at all

- * 13 请分享您在使用3MIP方法过程中未涵盖的其他任何反馈或建议。 Please share any additional feedback or suggestions you have about your experience with the 3MIP method that have not been covered.

请输入题目说明（选填）

请输入

Analysis:

3MIP Character Design Method Feedback Survey Report

1. Introduction

This survey aims to gather user feedback on the 3MIP Character Design Method to evaluate its effectiveness, user satisfaction, and suggestions for improvement, thereby optimizing its application in brand IP character design.

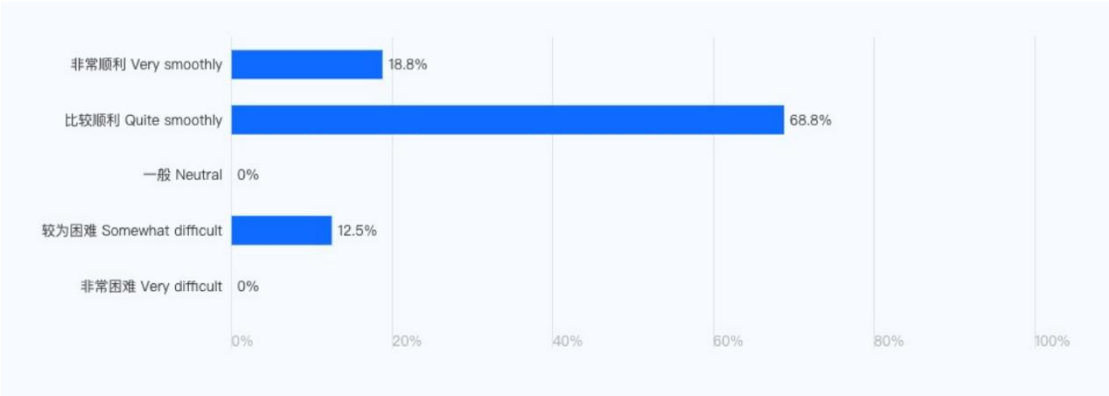
2. Research Description

The survey focuses on key aspects such as user experience, satisfaction, applicability, and improvement suggestions regarding the 3MIP method. It employs a combination of single-choice, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions to comprehensively understand user needs and feedback.

3. Core Insights

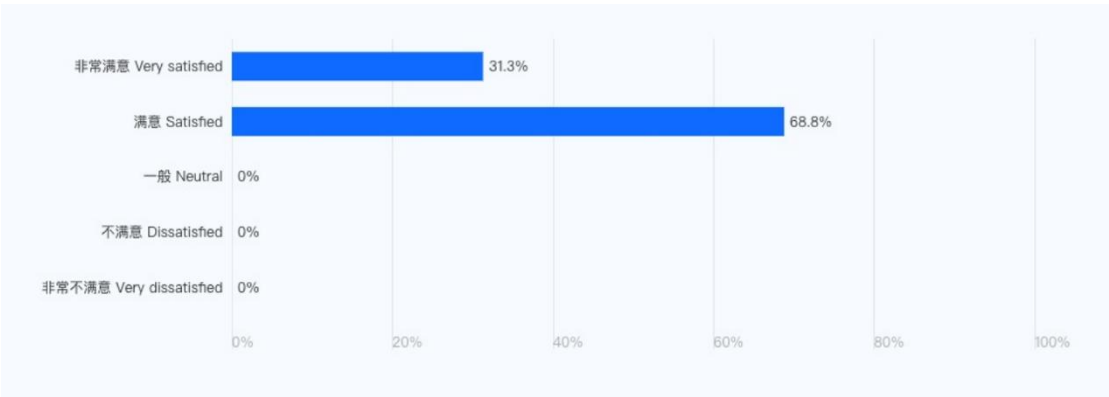
3.1 Most users found the 3MIP method smooth to use in character design.

According to survey results, 87.6% of users reported feeling relatively or very comfortable when using the 3MIP method for character design, indicating broad acceptance and approval.



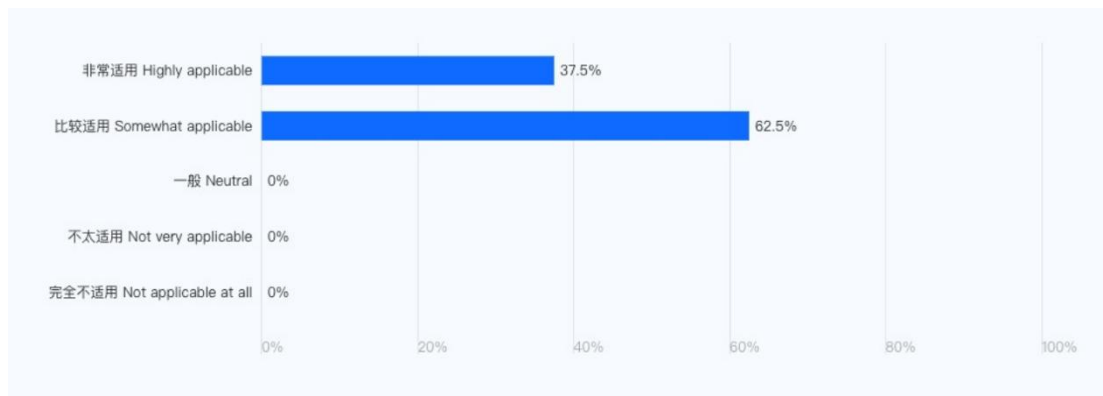
3.2 Overall user satisfaction with the 3MIP method is high.

Survey results show 68.8% of users are satisfied, while 31.2% are very satisfied, with no unsatisfactory feedback reported.



3.3 The 3MIP character design method is widely considered suitable for brand IP character design.

62.5% found it relatively suitable, 37.5% found it very suitable, with no negative responses.



3.4 Users primarily enjoy the psychological mask aspect, followed by the physical mask and character background.

- Depth and appeal of the psychological mask (about 60%): Many users stated that the psychological mask provided a rich perspective for understanding and shaping IP characters, making the design process more interesting and layered.
- Specific expressiveness of the physical mask (about 20%): Some users preferred the physical mask as it visually defines the character's traits, helping to materialize ideas.
- Attraction of character background (about 10%): A few users highlighted the character background for adding depth and storytelling.
- Others or no clear preference (about 10%): Some users expressed no clear preference, indicating balanced acceptance of various aspects.

3.5 Major challenges users face involve understanding and applying the method, combining psychological and physical masks, creativity, and background story development.

- Difficulty in understanding and applying the method (about 30%): Some users found the terminology and framework challenging initially.
- Challenges in integrating psychological and physical masks (about 25%): Users noted uncertainty about blending these aspects to create a cohesive character.
- Lack of creativity and inspiration (about 20%): Some users encountered creative blocks in developing unique character backgrounds and narratives.

- Complexity of building background stories (about 25%): Constructing a layered background, especially accounting for character versatility, was challenging for users.

3.6 User feedback on the 3MIP method highlighted issues in understanding the psychological mask, external loop, practical process, and prototype testing and improvement.

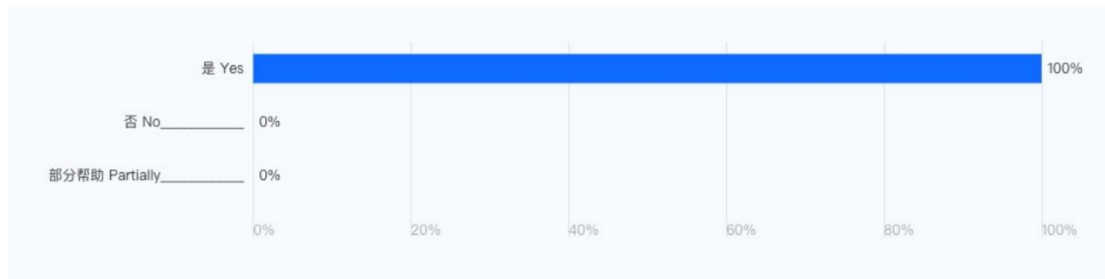
- Challenges in understanding the psychological mask (about 30%): Some users found it difficult to apply the psychological mask in character design, particularly in representing it facially.
- Questions about the external loop and practical steps (about 10%): Some users found parts of these steps unclear, especially concerning deepening psychological mask content.
- Uncertainty in prototype testing and refinement (about 10%): Users sought more clarity on testing and refining character prototypes.
- Clear understanding without confusion (about 50%): Most users found the method comprehensible and reported no significant issues.

3.7 User suggestions for improvement focus on adding visual storytelling elements, simplifying processes, expanding application scenarios, and increasing design flexibility.

- Adding visual storytelling elements (about 30%): Users suggested adding storyboarding or animation to bring characters to life.
- Streamlining processes (about 20%): Some users expressed interest in a more straightforward workflow.
- Expanding application scenarios for character design (about 20%): Users proposed using characters in animations, games, etc., with market potential evaluations.
- Flexibility in character elements (about 10%): Allowing greater customization of facial features for varied and innovative designs.

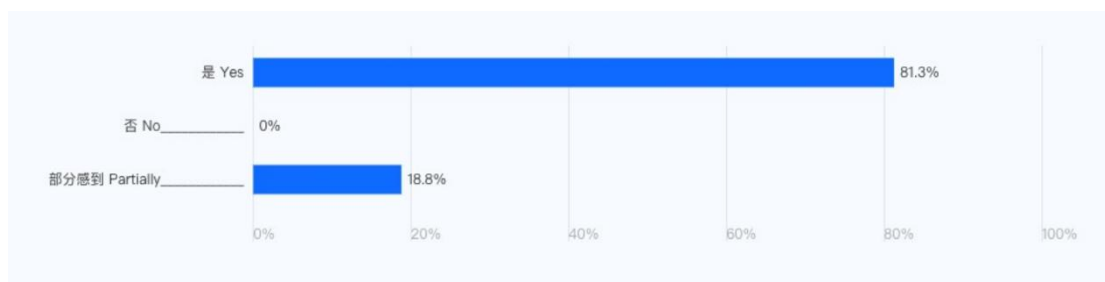
3.8 The 3MIP character design method effectively helps users understand core elements of character design.

100% of users felt the method enhanced their understanding of character design fundamentals, indicating its value in design education.



3.9 Most users felt creatively inspired when using the 3MIP method.

Survey results show that 81.2% of users felt inspired, indicating that the method effectively fosters creativity.



Users choosing 'somewhat inspired' highlighted three core factors:

- Limitations from existing designs (about 33%): Innovating within established designs was challenging.
- Role of narrative in inspiration (about 33%): Some users felt the narrative's depth impacted inspiration.
- Occasional creative blocks (about 33%): Users occasionally experienced creative fatigue, suggesting inspiration may vary.

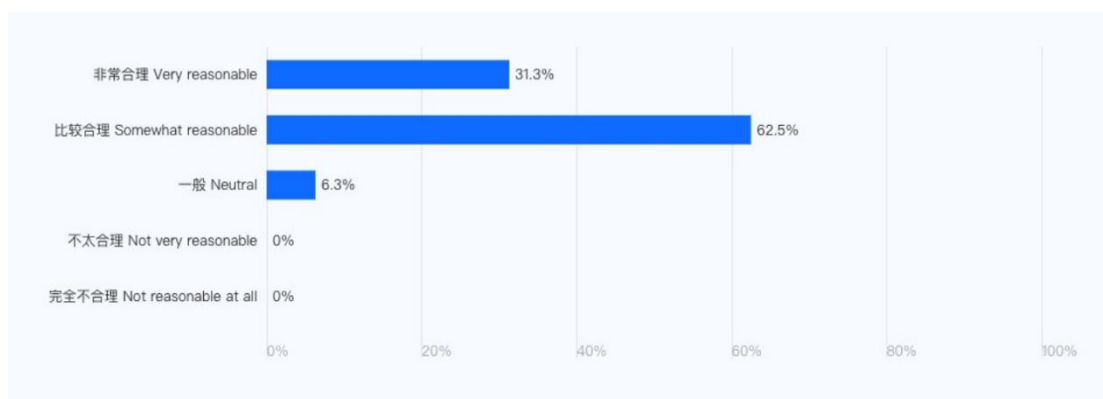
3.10 The 3MIP character design method is widely recognized for its structure,

comprehensiveness, and depth.

- Structured and clear process (about 30%): The method provides a clear, trackable workflow.
- Thorough and detailed design (about 25%): The method's multi-layered approach enables full character development.
- Iterative and improvable design (about 20%): Users valued the method's flexibility.
- Character depth and emotional involvement (about 25%): Emphasizing character empathy, the method supports creating deep character personas.

3.11 Most users consider the time required for the 3MIP method reasonable.

Survey results show 62.5% of users found the time 'reasonable', while 31.2% found it 'very reasonable', totaling 93.7% satisfaction with time allocation.



3.12 Feedback on the 3MIP method mainly involves ease of use, difficulty with terminology, and overall satisfaction.

- Ease-of-use improvements (about 10%): Some users felt initially overwhelmed and suggested a simplified guide for beginners.
- Terminology difficulty (about 10%): Some users found certain terms complex and suggested clearer language.

- Overall satisfaction (about 20%): Users found the method efficient and useful.
- No additional feedback (about 60%): Most users provided no additional suggestions, indicating satisfaction or no further input.

Conclusion

This survey demonstrates that the 3MIP Character Design Method is well-received, with high user satisfaction and perceived effectiveness within a reasonable timeframe. Recommendations include providing a simplified guide for beginners, clarifying terminology, adding visual storytelling elements, streamlining workflows, expanding application scenarios, and enhancing design flexibility.

Appendix 5 Interview Content Design

1. Introduction and Background

- Could you briefly introduce your role and main tasks in this project?
- Prior to participating in this project, have you used any similar character design methods? If so, could you briefly describe them?

2. Initial Impressions of the 3MIP Character Design Method

- What are your overall impressions of the 3MIP Character Design Method? Which aspects did you find particularly valuable?
- What were your expectations of this method before using it? Were these expectations met?

3. Experience with the Method

- During the actual usage, which parts of the 3MIP method did you find easiest to understand and apply? Which parts were more challenging or unclear?
- Do you think the 3MIP method effectively helped you generate innovative character design ideas? Could you provide specific examples?
- Did you encounter any issues or challenges while using the 3MIP method? How did you address these challenges?

4. Perceptions of the Character Design Outcome

- Are you satisfied with the character design results produced using the 3MIP method? Why or why not?
- In your opinion, what unique contributions did the 3MIP method make to the creativity and functionality of the character design?

- If possible, please describe what you believe is the unique value that the 3MIP method provided during the character design process.

5. Comparison with Other Methods

- Compared to other character design methods or approaches you've used before, what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the 3MIP method?
- In your future brand IP character design work, would you be inclined to continue using the 3MIP method? Why or why not?

6. Suggestions and Improvements

- In your opinion, what aspects of the 3MIP method could be improved? Are there any features you would like to see added or modified?
- Do you think having additional resources (such as training, tools, etc.) would enhance the effectiveness of the 3MIP method?
- What suggestions or ideas do you have for potential new features or modules in the future?

7. Conclusion

- Overall, how effective do you think the 3MIP Character Design Method was in helping you complete your character design tasks?
- If you could summarize your evaluation of the 3MIP method in one sentence, what would it be?
- Lastly, do you have any other feedback or comments you would like to share with us?

Appendix 6 IP prototypes design by students

The students shall develop either a new brand intellectual property character or redevelop an already existing character using the 3MIP character design method as the main tool. The projects are divided into three different stages: character positioning or psychological mask, visual design or physical mask, and digital platform application or virtual mask to ensure deep understanding and implementation of each design element.

