Creativity and Innovation
2025, VOL. 9, NO. 5, 381-385
DOI: 10.47297/wspciWSP2516-252776.20250905

How Consumer Identity Fluidity Influences Brand Collaborations: A Case Study of the KAWS x UNIQLO Partnership

Boxuan Zhao

Tianjin University of Commerce Boustead College, Tianjin. 300380, China

ABSTRACT
Against the backdrop of evolving contemporary social structures and deepening technological innovation, the value of exploring the topic of consumer identity fluidity has gradually become apparent. Numerous scholars and practitioners are now directing their attention towards this field, whose significance extends beyond refining disciplinary frameworks to offering practical guidance for resolving real-world challenges in brand collaboration practices. Despite the explosive growth of brand collaborations in recent years, existing academic research predominantly focuses on superficial dimensions such as brand asset synergy effects or marketing performance metrics, with few studies delving into the underlying mechanism of consumer identity fluidity. This study endeavours to transcend the narrow perspectives of existing co-branding research by examining the formative role of dynamic identity needs in shaping co-branding strategies. Employing an empirical analysis of the KAWS x UNIQLO collaboration, the research adopts a methodology combining in-depth interviews with three-stage coding. Findings reveal that consumers widely utilise collaborative products to achieve identity transformation, manifested through acquiring cultural group affiliations and fulfilling personalised self-expression. Success factors for brand collaborations can be summarised in three aspects: the reconstruction of symbolic value through limited-edition designs, heightened emotional resonance driven by artistic narratives, and the cross-pollination effect between street culture and mass-market apparel. This research compensates for the neglect of consumers' dynamic identity evolution within traditional brand collaboration theories. To accurately capture target consumers' identity aspirations in collaborative product design, enterprises must prioritise: the reconfiguration of symbolic value, innovative emotional narrative design, and the organic integration of cross-cultural elements. This study not only provides new theoretical ground for academia but also offers practitioners an operational framework for developing culturally resonant collaborative initiatives.

KEYWORDS
Identity fluidity; Co-branding; Cultural symbol; Emotional narrative; Marketing strategy

1 Introduction

In recent years, the marketing phenomenon of brand collaborations has exhibited explosive growth. The significant role played by consumers' fluid identities in this process cannot be overlooked. Previous research has offered relatively superficial understandings of brand collaborations, primarily focusing on the aggregation of brand equity or marketing performance. What remains under-explored is the impact of this characteristic on brand collaborations. Examples demonstrate that Generation Z consumers possess fluid identities that transcend cultural and social boundaries. This study employs in-depth interviews, combined with three-stage coding techniques and social media data mining, to form its methodological framework. The influence pathways of consumer identity fluidity on collaboration outcomes warrant deeper exploration across three dimensions: the decoding of cultural symbols, the accumulation of subcultural capital, and the interactive spaces of virtual communities. Consequently, such research is essential to supplement the development of marketing theory, deepening understanding of the pivotal role of consumer identity fluidity within brand collaborations. Building upon these research findings, the sustained development of brand collaborations should be prioritised, with future studies focusing on this area of significant importance. This study examines the KAWSxUNIQLO collaboration as a case study, employing secondary data alongside case interviews and combining structural equation modelling with a three-stage coding method as two qualitative research approaches. It explores both the specific manifestations of consumer identity fluidity and their association with consumer participation in this collaborative purchase. Furthermore, it analyses the pathways and actual effects of consumer identity fluidity on perceived value, purchase intention, and brand attitude towards the collaborative brand.

2 Literature review

2.1 Current state of international research

Within the research landscape of brand collaborations and the dynamic evolution of consumer identity, Western academia has established a relatively systematic theoretical framework alongside substantial empirical evidence. These scholarly achievements hold significant reference value for research in related fields within China. The dynamic nature of identity refers to consumers' capacity to adjust their identity characteristics based on varying social roles, cultural backgrounds, and value orientations. Situational dependence, reconfigurability, and non-fixity form the three foundational elements of this theoretical model. A prevalent phenomenon in consumption practices is consumers actively modulating their self-presentation through brand consumption behaviours to adapt to diverse contextual demands.In terms of theoretical development, Gergen first introduced the term “self-fluidity” in 1991. In 2017, Bardhi and Eckhardt proposed the “liquid consumption” theoretical model focusing on consumption fluidity. In 2021, Ahuvia and Izberk-Bilgin conducted an in-depth exploration from a cultural blending perspective. Consumers purchase specific goods and services based on their perceived value. A product's perceived value encompasses intrinsic or extrinsic attributes and customer benefits (Sinha DeSarbo, 1998). Shethetal (1991) defined consumption value as the factors driving consumer purchases, proposing functional value, conditional value, social value, emotional value, and cognitive value. People consider product attributes (e. g., price, quality, brand) and product benefits (e. g., social status or self-representation). Belk notes that consumers engage in conspicuous consumption by emphasizing themselves to project their cognitive frameworks onto others. An individual's possessions reflect identity and status, driven by expectations that brand collaborations evolve systematically. A strategic collaborative relationship formed through resource synergy and symbolic integration between two or more brands is defined as the phenomenon of brand co-branding. In 1994, Rao and Ruekert first introduced the conceptual term “brand alliance”; in 2006, Keller and Lehmann established a theoretical model of asset transfer. Brands can meet consumer needs by cooperatively introducing useful or original products or services. The symbolic significance of collaboration and the scarcity of collaborative products are primary factors attracting consumer attention (Koo and Joo, 2014). These elements confer new value upon collaborative offerings (Shenetal., 2017). Research indicates that existing brand characteristics must be considered to maximize collaborative value. Mazodier and Merunka (2014) argue that brand self-consistency should be considered. Voss and Mohan (2016) found that when collaborating brands' portfolios are more consistent, their customer evaluations are more positive. In the field of digital marketing, the cognitive misjudgment of “inflated traffic” repeatedly surfaces in empirical studies. Future research pathways may be observed as follows: adopting consumer ethnographic methods for micro-level insights is significantly necessary, and the urgency of conducting multi-time-point longitudinal tracking studies has become evident.

2.2 Current state of domestic research

Domestic scholars should clearly define the key content modules they focus on, namely the exploration of research directions and the design of practical pathways suited to China's national conditions. Considering local cultural characteristics and market environment features, the case study clearly demonstrates this necessity. In recent years, academic exploration surrounding brand collaboration phenomena has deepened within the field of consumer behaviour studies, achieving significant progress particularly in the mechanisms of consumer identity construction and brand interaction patterns. Professor Wang Tao's research team has interpreted the process of cultural symbol recombination and value co-creation from a semiotic theoretical perspective. The dynamic characteristics of consumer identity construction in digital environments were explicitly revealed by Professor Huang Minxue and colleagues in their research on virtual brand communities. Professor Jin Liyin systematically demonstrated the mechanism by which brand alliances influence consumer identification, grounded in consumer-brand relationship theory. Empirical evidence indicates that further exploration of young consumers' intrinsic motivation to seek identity through co-branded products offers a novel theoretical entry point for understanding Generation Z consumption behaviour.Thus it can be seen that，It is evident that brand collaboration practices within the globalised context have gained significant theoretical underpinnings. Presently, two distinct models of brand collaboration prevail in the domestic market: the traditional model, characterised by market synergies and resource complementarity; and the innovative model, which emphasises the fusion of cultural symbols and the reconstruction of identity values.Research by the majority of scholars indicates that the co-creation model of collaboration is most effective in enhancing brand cultural resonance and strengthening identity affinity. This approach also facilitates consumers' self-expression and increases the frequency of community interaction, thereby achieving the goal of innovative transformation of cultural symbols within the context of globalisation.

3 Main body

3.1 Existing problems

Within the research landscape of brand collaborations, the phenomenon of consumer identity fluidity is raising numerous unresolved challenges. The disconnect between theoretical research and practical application has been repeatedly demonstrated, significantly impeding the industry's developmental progress. Data indicates that the growth rate of brand collaboration practices far exceeds expectations, yet the lag in strategic development and theoretical interpretation has become increasingly pronounced. This situation stands in stark contrast to the fluid and diverse trajectory of contemporary consumer identity. Particularly noteworthy is the absence of foundational mechanism research. The dynamic impact of consumer identity fluidity on the effectiveness of co-branding strategies has not received sufficient attention, a phenomenon frequently observed in existing literature. Case studies reveal that research into the evolution of consumer agency and the translation of cultural symbols lags considerably behind practical demands. The limitations of traditional brand equity analysis frameworks persist, with dual challenges in theoretical innovation and methodological breakthroughs hindering progress in analysing underlying drivers. Within the research landscape of brand collaborations, the phenomenon of consumer identity fluidity is raising numerous unresolved challenges. The disconnect between theoretical research and practical application has been repeatedly demonstrated, significantly impeding the industry's developmental progress. Data indicates that the growth rate of brand collaboration practices far exceeds expectations, yet the lag in strategic development and theoretical interpretation has become increasingly pronounced. This situation stands in stark contrast to the fluid and diverse trajectory of contemporary consumer identity. Particularly noteworthy is the absence of foundational mechanism research. The dynamic impact of consumer identity fluidity on the effectiveness of co-branding strategies has not received sufficient attention, a phenomenon frequently observed in existing literature. Case studies reveal that research into the evolution of consumer agency and the translation of cultural symbols lags considerably behind practical demands. The limitations of traditional brand equity analysis frameworks persist, with dual challenges in theoretical innovation and methodological breakthroughs hindering progress in analysing underlying drivers.

3.2 Analyse the problem

Analysis of the current state of industry development reveals that the primary constraints stem from the lack of coordination between theoretical understanding and practical implementation, inherent limitations within research methodologies themselves, and insufficient interdisciplinary integration. Instances where industry development strategies have failed to adjust in a timely manner to shifts in market demand are readily apparent, resulting in the co-branding sector's growth rate lagging significantly behind other rapidly evolving economic domains. A persistent lack of innovation characterises collaborative brand strategy planning. Enterprises demonstrate insufficient initiative in adapting to dynamic market shifts, consequently weakening their competitive edge. This failure to maintain synchronisation with other industries' developmental pace has become pronounced. Concurrent issues of inadequate internal management mechanisms and technical bottlenecks further constrain the collaborative industry's growth potential. The industry's inadequate responsiveness to market transformations and technological iterations has been fully demonstrated. Dual negative effects on both development speed and quality have become apparent. Strengthening strategic planning and elevating the priority of technological innovation constitute the critical pathways to resolution. The ongoing advancement of management mechanism optimisation remains equally imperative. The introduction of new technologies and innovative thinking paradigms must align with the evolving demands of industrial progression. Cross-sector collaborative exchanges require enhanced development. Through these measures, the pace of advancement in co-branding initiatives stands to harmonise with the broader societal development trajectory. Contrary to the primary effect of brand collaboration, consumer evaluations of co-branded products exert reciprocal influence upon the perceived value of both participating brands – a phenomenon termed the spillover effect of co-branding. As the frenzy surrounding the limited-edition collaborative T-shirts rapidly gained traction, public attention towards both brands surged significantly. Research indicates that collaborative branding exerts a greater influence on the relatively lesser-known partner brand. In this instance, the combination of a scarcity-driven marketing strategy through limited availability and the promotional boost from celebrity endorsements contributed to the remarkable sales performance of the collaborative collection.

3.3 Argumentative viewpoint

In examining the KAWSxUNIQLO case study, a case-oriented analytical paradigm was implemented. Data collection utilised in-depth interview techniques, with the structural equation modelling three-stage coding method applied to empirical research. A systematic assessment of market demand proceeded concurrently, forming the basis for research data sourcing. A pronounced disconnect exists between brand collaboration development strategies and the pace of contemporary change, with the case study revealing sluggish progress. Inadequate adaptation within identity representation dimensions and cultural recognition layers became evident among consumer groups, with matching deficiencies also apparent in the emotional value domain. Consequently, opportunities for dynamic identity consumers to establish deep connections were missed. Integrating qualitative analysis of third-order coding experimental data with in-depth interview materials confirmed bottlenecks within the symbolic innovation domain, clearly identifying management strategy deficiencies within the brand collaboration sphere. The cultivation of consumer loyalty has been impeded, constraining the realisation of long-term brand value symbiosis objectives. Particularly pronounced is the rigid tendency exhibited by cultural translation mechanisms, alongside significant lag in the process of symbolic value reconstruction.

New consumption demands, triggered by cross-circle identity shifts, present difficulties in timely response.

3.4 Counter-measures

In light of the challenging factors and operational requirements currently encountered in co-branding initiatives, four dimensions for optimisation are proposed. While preserving core logic, implementation capabilities must be significantly enhanced. Market demand fluctuations require dynamic monitoring, with operational strategies driven by iterative innovation. Enterprises must maintain continuous vigilance regarding real-time shifts in consumer preferences and industry trends. Novel operational models such as limited-edition collaborative product development warrant proactive exploration, while innovative formats like experiential services within contextual settings may also be pursued. Authentic user requirements concerning product form updates and service detail enhancements should advance in tandem. Swift market feedback is essential to enabling strategic adjustments, thereby preventing disconnects with user needs. The refinement of internal management systems and the enhancement of core competencies demand urgent and thorough attention. The current phase centres on consolidating the foundations for business development. Project management process establishment must align with operational requirements, while optimising resource allocation mechanisms remains pivotal within internal governance improvements. Following the scientific formulation of performance evaluation standards, resource utilisation efficiency has demonstrably increased, and project advancement has become markedly more standardised. Within the realm of technological R&D, breakthroughs in core technologies naturally hold significant importance. The refinement of intellectual property protection mechanisms must not be overlooked. Concurrent with patent registration procedures, measures for managing classified technical information should be implemented simultaneously. The safeguarding of corporate core technologies and the protection of innovative achievements are realised through these measures. The enhancement of core competitiveness gains substantive support from these concrete initiatives. The advancement of cross-industry collaborative exchange activities must prioritise unlocking synergistic innovation potential. Proactive efforts should be made to establish cooperation channels between upstream and downstream industries, while continuously breaking down resource barriers between enterprises across sectors. Opportunities for technical support arise through collaboration, with shared channel resources being a common practice —for instance, co-branded products significantly expand market reach through leveraging partners' distribution networks, while breakthroughs in R&D challenges often rely on the critical contribution of counterpart technological expertise. This generates a '1+1>2' resource synergy effect, enabling the successful identification of breakthrough points for collaborative business innovation. Within the talent assurance framework, reinforcing talent development initiatives and external recruitment measures proves particularly crucial. Given the distinctive demands of brand collaboration operations, the formulation and implementation of specialised talent cultivation programmes warrant particular attention. Through internal skills training programmes and participatory involvement in practical project execution, employees will achieve significant enhancement in their professional capabilities across cross-sector collaboration coordination, creative design domains, and market operations dimensions. Furthermore, it is recommended that marketing personnel consider BI (Brand Identity) alignment levels and C-B (Consumer Brand) recognition levels when seeking co-branding partners. For consumers with high C-B recognition, BI alignment does not adversely affect consumer attitudes (or loyalty). Consequently, these consumers represent safer targets for marketers in terms of maintaining positive attitudes. Secondly, when perceived BI alignment is low, decoupling strategies prove more effective than bias assimilation strategies in defending positive evaluations of the focal brand.

4 Conclusion

Building upon existing research findings, this study focuses on examining the mechanism through which consumer identity fluidity influences the effects of brand collaborations. The findings reveal that three key elements form the core pathways through which brand collaborations satisfy consumers' dynamic identity needs: the process of symbolic value reconstruction, innovative emotional narrative behaviour, and cross-cultural integration models. Empirical evidence demonstrates that these pathways significantly enhance the practical outcomes of collaborative activities. However, development in this field remains sluggish. Four primary impediments constrain progress: lagging theoretical innovation, methodological limitations, insufficient interdisciplinary collaboration, and the disconnect between theory and practice. Research data indicates that establishing an interdisciplinary collaborative innovation platform is essential for deepening the exploration of the proposition that 'consumer identity fluidity drives brand collaborations'. Practical challenges requiring urgent attention include inadequate cultural translation capabilities, gaps in monitoring dynamic consumer identities, and a tendency towards conservative brand response strategies. In this context, this paper proposes a novel approach: data-driven technologies should be integrated with cultural analysis methodologies, while corporate strategy formulation should establish synergistic mechanisms with cultural symbol systems and consumers' dynamic identity characteristics. Empirical evidence indicates that the synergistic effects of these three dimensions can significantly enhance market adaptability and value co-creation outcomes. The deep integration of identity fluidity perspectives with digital tools warrants particular scrutiny. The compound impact of these two elements across brand collaboration design phases, communication channels, and consumer behaviour dimensions requires comprehensive evaluation. Specific operational approaches include: constructing a co-branding response model centred on identity fluidity, which elevates brands' capacity for real-time feedback on consumers' symbolic value needs and emotional expectations; establishing an interdisciplinary methodological framework to facilitate complementary use of qualitative inquiry and quantitative analysis in dynamic identity research; Advancing the refinement of cultural symbol translation systems and strengthening intellectual property protection mechanisms. This action will tangibly optimise the innovative efficacy and ethical standards of brand collaborations within a globalised context. The ultimate objective is to achieve a two-way leap in theoretical exploration and practical application within the field of brand collaborations.

References

[1] Bardhi F , Eckhardt G M .Liquid Consumption[J].Cultural Studies, 2015, 22(5)Belk,R.W.(1988)Possessions and the Extended Self.

[2] Ahuvia, A., & Izberk-Bilgin, E. (2021) Cultural Hybridity and Fluid Identities in Global Markets Consumption Markets & Culture, 24(2), 153-173.

[3] Xiao S H L N . Brand identity fit in co-branding: The moderating role of C-B identification and consumer coping[J]. European Journal of Marketing,2014,48(7/8):1239-1254.

[4] Valaei N , Nikhashemi S R , Hayes S G ,et al.Generation Y Consumers' Buying Behaviour in Fashion Apparel Industry: A Moderation Analysis[J]. Journal of Fashion Marketing & Management, 2017:523-543.

[5] Kim S J , Yoo J , Ko E .The effects of brand collaboration with the online game on customer equity and purchase intention: moderating effect of fashion brand type[J].Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, 2023.

[6] Campbell M C .Perceptions of Price Unfairness: Antecedents and Consequences[J].Journal of Marketing Research, 1999, 36(2):187-199.

[7] Ren Ziyi. A Study on Brand Experience Design Based on the Consumer Behaviour of Generation Z [D]. Jiangnan University, 2022.

[8] Zong Jianing. A Study on the Phenomenon of Conspicuous Consumption in Short Video Social Scenarios [D]. Inner Mongolia University, 2022.

[9] Shen, B., Choi, T.M. and Chow, P.S. (2017), "Brand loyalties in designer luxury and fast fashion.

[10] Mazodier, M. and Merunka, D. (2014), "Beyond brand attitude: individual drivers of purchase forsymbolic cobranded products", Journal of Business Research, Vol. 67 No. 7, pp. 1552-1558.

[11] Sinha, I. and DeSarbo, W.S. (1998), "An integrated approach toward the spatial modeling of perceivedcustomer value", Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 236-249.

[12] Ao Chuanhui, Huang Yonggang. A Study on the Synergy Effect of Cross-Boundary Brand Collaborations: The Case of UNIQLO's Partnership with KAWS. China Market, 2020(5):2.

[13] Koo, D. and Joo, S.H. (2014), "Effect of the characteristics of art collaboration products on customers'perceived value and product purchasing intention", Journal ofMarketing Studies, Vol. 22 No. 2,pp. 101-123.

[14] Mazodier, M. and Merunka, D. (2014), "Beyond brand attitude: individual drivers of purchase forsymbolic cobranded products", Journal of Business Research, Vol. 67 No. 7, pp. 1552-1558.

[15] Voss, K.E. and Mohan, M. (2016), "Corporate brand effects in brand alliances", Journal of Business Research, Vol. 69 No. 10, pp. 4177-4184.

[16] Wang Tao, Xiong Shasha, Zhou Ling. Development of Cultural Archetype Resources for Chinese Brands in the Context of Globalisation: A Research Framework Based on Archetype Theory [J]. Journal of East China Normal University: Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition, 2020, 52(6):13.

[17] Huang Minxue, Pan Haili, Liao Junyun. Brand Communication in the Age of Social Media: A Review of Research on Brand Community Identification [J]. Economic Management, 2017(2):14.