

Visual Taste: The Role of Illustration in Driving Consumerism Among Malaysian Food & Beverage Brands

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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines the expanding role of illustration in Malaysian food and beverage (F&B) branding, highlighting its impact on consumer engagement, cultural identity, and brand loyalty. Moving beyond aesthetic appeal, illustrations now function as emotional anchors, cultural storytellers, and economic opportunities for local artists. The review synthesizes emotional design, semiotics, and experience economy perspectives to show how illustrated branding influences consumer perceptions, supports sustainable practices, and transforms packaging and merchandise into collectible lifestyle artifacts. Case examples from Malaysian brands such as ZUS Coffee, Tealive, and Sometimesbyme illustrate how visual storytelling strengthens brand-consumer relationships across diverse demographics. Looking forward, the paper emphasizes the need for empirical research, evolving thematic exploration beyond current kawaii and cultural trends, and the integration of interactive technologies to ensure illustrated branding remains relevant, inclusive, and future-ready.

Keywords: illustration, Malaysian F&B branding, consumer engagement, cultural identity, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Illustration as an Emerging Branding Tool

The rise of visual-centric digital platforms has significantly reshaped branding strategies, particularly within the food and beverage (F&B) sector. Illustration has gained traction as a dynamic medium for brand differentiation, emotional engagement, and cultural storytelling. Compared to other visual elements, illustration offers greater creative flexibility and symbolic richness, making it an effective tool for establishing brand identity and resonating with diverse consumer groups (Celhay & Trinqucoste, 2015; Pi et al., 2023).

Localized Illustration in Malaysian F&B Branding

In Malaysia, where cultural diversity is central to market success, F&B companies increasingly integrate illustrated motifs, characters, and narratives across packaging, merchandising, and digital content to connect with consumers on a more personal and emotional level (Lee, 2021; Zaifa et al., 2023). Brands such as ZUS Coffee, Tealive, and Sometimesbyme exemplify this trend by utilizing illustration to evoke nostalgia, represent cultural identity, and appeal to lifestyle-driven consumption habits (Sulaiman & Rosli, 2020).

Illustration Through Emotional and Semiotic Lenses

Emotional design theory emphasizes how visual elements shape consumer perceptions by triggering visceral responses (Norman, 2004; Wang & Gani, 2022). Through the lens of semiotics, illustrations in Malaysian F&B branding also function as cultural signifiers, communicating values, authenticity, and shared identity (Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006; Chandler, 2017). This review synthesizes recent literature to explore

how illustrative strategies contribute to consumerism by transforming ordinary products into emotionally charged brand experiences, aligning visual storytelling with the evolving expectations of Malaysian consumers in an experience-driven economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2011; Casales Garcia et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Illustration as a Strategy in Visual Branding

Illustration provides brands with narrative flexibility, humor, and cultural cues that differentiate them from competitors. In the F&B industry, illustrations often appear on packaging, menus, digital campaigns, and in-store visuals. Studies have shown that illustration strengthens consumer impressions through visual differentiation and symbolic association (Celhay & Trinqucoste, 2015; Pi et al., 2023).

Illustration and Emotional Design Theory

According to emotional design theory, visual stimuli play a vital role in consumer perception (Norman, 2004). More recent findings show that illustrated packaging can trigger comfort, nostalgia, and excitement, particularly among younger demographics who connect illustrated visuals with lifestyle values and identity expression (Wang & Gani, 2022; Feng & Zhao, 2024). Neuromarketing studies also reveal how color palettes and packaging shapes stimulate emotional responses that influence purchasing behavior (Shagyrov & Shamoi, 2024).

Illustration as a Semiotic Device in Cultural Identity

In multicultural Malaysia, illustrations often incorporate local cultural elements such as festive motifs, traditional foods, or community stories. These serve as semiotic markers of authenticity and belonging (Lee, 2021; Sulaiman & Rosli, 2020). Digital illustration in local marketing campaigns further enhances brand identification by embedding Malaysian cultural signifiers in motion graphics and social media visuals (Zaifa et al., 2023).

Illustration, Experience Economy, and Sustainability

Illustration contributes to what Pine and Gilmore (2011) describe as the “experience economy,” where consumption is fueled by meaning and lifestyle resonance rather than product function. Illustrated branding transforms everyday food products into expressive cultural and lifestyle items. Recent studies also highlight how illustration intersects with sustainability, with emotionally designed packaging enhancing consumer trust in eco-friendly branding (Casales Garcia et al., 2024; Feng & Zhao, 2024).

DISCUSSION

Illustrations function as more than decorative features; they serve as emotional anchors that build brand loyalty by triggering visceral and affective responses among consumers (Wang & Gani, 2022; Lee, 2021). Malaysian brands often blend traditional symbols with contemporary illustration styles, creating a hybrid visual identity that resonates with multicultural audiences while fostering nostalgia and cultural belonging. Neuromarketing insights further confirm that color palettes, character-driven illustrations, and playful motifs enhance emotional bonding and consumer recall (Shagyrov & Shamoi, 2024).

Moreover, illustrated branding initiatives have also expanded opportunities for local artists and illustrators to gain professional visibility within Malaysia’s creative economy. By collaborating with F&B brands, artists bring unique cultural aesthetics into commercial spaces, enabling their work to reach wider audiences and promoting the creative industry at large (Zaifa et al., 2023).

However, the growing reliance on illustration in branding presents several potential challenges that merit closer scrutiny. First, cultural sensitivity risks may arise when illustrated motifs misinterpret or oversimplify cultural identities, potentially alienating certain ethnic or religious groups (Sulaiman & Rosli, 2020). Second, the high costs associated with commissioning custom illustrations that particularly for immersive media such

as AR packaging or interactive campaigns may also limit accessibility for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Malaysian F&B sector. Third, the risk of visual oversaturation in digital marketing ecosystems could diminish illustration's novelty and weaken its emotional impact over time.

By acknowledging these practical limitations, the study offers a more balanced perspective, suggesting that while illustrations significantly enhance consumer engagement, their strategic integration must consider cultural appropriateness, financial sustainability, and evolving consumer attention spans.

Illustration and Sustainable Branding

Recent studies emphasize that consumers increasingly expect brands to align with environmental sustainability principles (Casales Garcia et al., 2024; Feng & Zhao, 2024). Illustrated packaging can play a dual role in this transition: it not only enhances visual appeal but also serves as an educational tool, guiding consumers toward eco-friendly practices through symbols, narratives, and interactive graphics. For instance, illustrated recycling icons or storytelling elements on packaging can make sustainability messages more engaging and memorable (Feng & Zhao, 2024).

Additionally, illustrated packaging and merchandise often acquire collectible value, with consumers viewing limited-edition cups, posters, or tote bags as lifestyle artifacts rather than disposable materials. This tendency for illustrated F&B merchandise to become collector's items not only strengthens brand loyalty but also supports sustainability when products are repurposed or retained rather than discarded (Casales Garcia et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, the Malaysian F&B sector faces structural barriers to adopting environmentally friendly illustrated packaging. High production costs, limited access to sustainable printing technologies, and varying consumer awareness levels remain key obstacles (Lee, 2021). Future collaborations between designers, manufacturers, and policymakers could help develop cost-effective, culturally sensitive illustration practices that reinforce both environmental and emotional branding goals.

Future Research Directions

While this review synthesizes current perspectives on illustration in Malaysian F&B branding, empirical research is needed to validate its theoretical propositions. Future studies could incorporate surveys, interviews, or experimental designs to measure how consumers from different ethnic groups, age categories, and urban-rural settings respond to illustrated branding campaigns. For example, quantitative techniques could assess the relationship between illustrated packaging and brand recall, purchase intention, or social media engagement metrics (Pi et al., 2023).

Moreover, exploring the cost-benefit dynamics of illustrated branding including campaign budgets, return on investment (ROI), and diminishing emotional impact over time that would provide marketers with actionable insights. Future research could also investigate strategies for illustrators to continuously evolve their themes, techniques, and cultural narratives, ensuring that branding visuals remain fresh, relevant, and emotionally resonant. Beyond the current focus on kawaii and cultural styles, illustrators could study emerging aesthetic preferences, lifestyle trends, or technological influences to anticipate future demands in F&B branding. This could include studies on cross-cultural storytelling, new aesthetic trends, or the integration of interactive and digital illustration tools to keep pace with shifting consumer expectations.

CONCLUSION

This review highlights the transformative role of illustration in Malaysian F&B branding, demonstrating how visual storytelling extends far beyond decoration to shape emotional connections, cultural representation, and consumer loyalty. By integrating perspectives from emotional design, semiotics, and consumer psychology, the study shows how illustration enables brands to express identity, evoke nostalgia, and cultivate trust across Malaysia's multicultural market.

Beyond marketing impact, illustrated branding also creates opportunities for local artists, allowing their work to reach wider audiences while strengthening the creative economy. The rise of collectible illustrated merchandise further deepens consumer-brand relationships, turning everyday products into lifestyle artifacts with cultural and sentimental value.

Looking ahead, the potential of illustration lies in adapting to evolving consumer preferences, sustainability goals, and immersive technologies. As aesthetic trends shift beyond current kawaii and cultural styles, illustrators and designers must continuously explore new visual languages, cross-cultural narratives, and interactive media to maintain relevance in competitive markets. Future studies should therefore combine empirical research and design innovation to ensure illustrated branding remains impactful, inclusive, and future-ready within Malaysia's dynamic consumer ecosystem.

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