

POP MART'S GENDER-FLUID IP: ANDROGYNOUS CHARACTERS SHAPING CROSS-CULTURAL BRANDING ACROSS DOUYIN AND TIKTOK

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Abstract. Amid accelerating brand globalization and the rise of visual consumption culture among Generation Z, questions about how gender identity is encoded into intellectual property (IP) character design have gained renewed theoretical urgency. This study examines how Pop Mart, a leading Chinese designer toy brand, deploys gender-fluid and androgynous IP character design as a strategic mechanism for cross-cultural branding on Douyin (China) and TikTok (United States). Drawing on 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews with active consumers from both markets and a narrative analysis of six brand advertisements published between 2023 and 2025, this paper investigates how non-binary aesthetic choices embedded in characters such as Molly, Dimoo, Skullpanda, and Labubu shape brand recognition, emotional resonance, and consumer identity across culturally distinct audiences. Guided by post-gender brand theory, glocalization theory, and visual narrative analysis, findings reveal that Pop Mart's androgynous design strategy transcends traditional binary gender marketing by positioning characters as identity-neutral projective surfaces that consumers personalise through emotional engagement. Results further demonstrate that gender fluidity in IP design operates differently across cultural contexts: Chinese consumers emphasise cultural belonging and aesthetic tradition alongside gender ambiguity, while American consumers foreground individual identity expression and stylistic diversity. The study contributes an empirically grounded framework linking gender-fluid visual design, cross-cultural consumer engagement, and digital brand storytelling, offering both theoretical insights and practical implications for global lifestyle brands operating in a post-gender media landscape.

Keywords: *gender-fluid design, IP character branding, cross-cultural brand communication, Pop Mart, visual narrative, TikTok*

Introduction

Contemporary brand communication has entered a phase defined by the entanglement of visual culture, identity politics, and platform-mediated interaction. As global consumer markets become increasingly saturated with experience-driven products, brands can no longer rely solely on functional differentiation; they must negotiate symbolic meaning across cultural and demographic divides. Within this context, the designer toy industry, exemplified by Pop Mart, has emerged as a compelling site for examining how gender aesthetics, character-based intellectual property (IP) design, and cross-cultural brand storytelling converge. Pop Mart, founded in Beijing in 2010 by Wang Ning, has rapidly evolved from a domestic blind box toy retailer into a globally recognized lifestyle brand with significant traction in Asia, North America, and Europe. Central to this expansion is the brand's portfolio of IP characters, including Molly, Dimoo, Skullpanda, Labubu, and Crybaby, whose visual identities intentionally resist binary gender classification. Unlike conventional toy marketing, which historically assigns products to either a masculine or feminine market segment

through color coding, role assignments, and body proportions (Grau and Zotos, 2016; Knoll et al., 2011), Pop Mart's characters occupy an aesthetic middle ground characterized by softness and edge, vulnerability and resilience, domesticity and strangeness. This deliberate ambiguity constitutes what scholars increasingly term a post-gender branding strategy (Yin et al., 2025; Holt, 2004), and it raises important questions about how gendered visual meaning is produced, received, and repurposed in cross-cultural digital environments.

The rise of short-video platforms, specifically Douyin in China and TikTok in the United States, has transformed the conditions of brand storytelling. These platforms function not merely as distribution channels but as cultural systems that shape the very grammar of visual and emotional communication. Brands operating across Douyin and TikTok must contend with markedly different algorithmic logics, user participation cultures, and aesthetic conventions (Zhou, 2024; Zhou and Belk, 2004). For a brand like Pop Mart, whose core communicative strategy depends on emotionally resonant character narratives, these platform differences create both challenge and opportunity: the same IP character must speak to a user in Chengdu who values collective cultural memory and to a user in New York who is drawn to stylistic nonconformity. Despite growing scholarly interest in brand communication, gender studies, and cross-cultural marketing, few empirical studies have examined how gender-fluid IP design functions as a specific strategic mechanism within cross-cultural branding. Existing literature tends to treat gendered design and cross-cultural communication as parallel, non-intersecting concerns. This gap is particularly acute in the study of emerging Asian lifestyle brands whose global ascent challenges the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in much brand communication theory (De Mooij, 2019). This paper addresses the gap by examining how Pop Mart encodes gender fluidity into its IP characters and how this encoding generates differential resonance across Chinese and American consumer audiences on two culturally distinct social media platforms.

The study is guided by three research questions: (1) How is gender fluidity encoded in Pop Mart's IP character design across Douyin and TikTok content? (2) How do Chinese and American consumers perceive and engage with Pop Mart's androgynous IP characters? (3) How does gender-fluid IP design contribute to cross-cultural brand recognition and identity construction? By answering these questions through qualitative interview data and narrative analysis, this paper contributes to theoretical discourse at the intersection of gender studies, brand communication, and platform media, while offering actionable insights for practitioners engaged in global lifestyle brand management.

Literature review

Gendered design in consumer products and brand communication

Gendered design has long shaped the relationship between consumer products and identity. Toy marketing has been particularly implicated in the construction and reproduction of gender norms: research consistently demonstrates that products color-coded pink reinforce feminine associations while those in blue or neutrals reinforce masculine ones (Davis and Hines, 2020; Kollmayer et al., 2018). Knoll et al. (2011), examining gender role portrayals in German television advertising, found that female characters were systematically associated with aesthetic and domestic roles while male characters were coded for authority and professional competence. Grau and Zotos

(2016) corroborated these findings in a comprehensive review, noting that despite growing awareness of gender stereotyping, binary-coded content remains dominant in mainstream advertising. However, a counter-movement is observable in contemporary brand practice. Prompted by shifting consumer demographics, the mainstreaming of queer aesthetics, and the rise of Generation Z audiences who actively resist identity categorisation, a growing number of brands have adopted gender-neutral or gender-fluid design philosophies (Yin et al., 2025). Holt (2004) theorized that brands increasingly function as cultural intermediaries capable of redistributing symbolic resources; post-gender branding leverages this capacity by dissolving conventional aesthetic binaries. Truong (2025) noted, however, that the academic study of gender-neutral design across non-Western cultural contexts remains underdeveloped, a gap that the present study addresses through its focus on a Chinese brand operating in both Eastern and Western markets.

IP characters, visual narrative, and emotional brand identity

Intellectual property (IP) characters are increasingly recognized as potent vehicles of brand identity construction. Unlike product logos or slogans, IP characters can carry multi-layered emotional and narrative meaning, enabling what Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) termed brand association richness. Holt (2002) proposed that brands become cultural icons through co-construction of meaning with audiences; IP characters operationalize this dynamic by providing consumers with projective surfaces onto which personal narratives, aspirations, and identities can be mapped. In the context of designer toy culture, Zhou (2025) emphasized that characters must possess emotional resonance and derivative narrative potential to sustain consumer attachment beyond the initial purchase. Ryan (2004) multi-dimensional narrative model offers a robust analytical frame for understanding how IP characters generate meaning across media. Ryan identifies six constitutive dimensions: narrativity, tellability, temporality, worldmaking, agency, and moral evaluation. Applied to brand communication, this framework reveals how a single character can sustain coherent identity across disparate platforms, genres, and cultural contexts. Van Laer et al. (2019) extended this line of thinking through the concept of immersive digital narrative experience, demonstrating that consumers who achieve narrative transportation, whereby they become absorbed in brand story worlds, exhibit stronger brand attitudes and greater loyalty. Escalas (2004) provided empirical grounding for this claim, showing that narrative self-referencing mediates the relationship between brand storytelling and consumer identification. Recent scholarship has begun to examine the specific intersection of gender ambiguity and emotional resonance in visual narrative. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), revisiting hegemonic masculinity theory, noted the emergence of alternative masculinities that privilege emotional expressiveness; characters such as Pop Mart's Dimoo, whose design features soft contours, large melancholic eyes, and nurturing symbolic associations, can be read as instantiating this shift. Bravo Velázquez et al. (2023) demonstrated that androgynous visual stimuli elicit broader audience identification than gender-coded stimuli across East Asian consumer samples, providing empirical support for the commercial logic underlying gender-fluid design.

Cross-cultural brand communication and glocalization

Cross-cultural brand communication theory has evolved considerably since De Mooij (2010) foundational articulation of the paradoxes of global marketing. De Mooij argued that cultural value dimensions fundamentally shape consumer reception of brand messages, such that strategies effective in individualistic, low-context communication cultures may fail in collectivist, high-context ones. Hollensen (2019) extended this insight by theorizing the tension between global brand consistency and local cultural adaptation, proposing that successful global brands achieve dynamic calibration rather than static compromise. Robertson (1995) concept of glocalization, the mutual constitution of global and local forces in brand practice, has been widely applied to platform media brand strategies. Vo et al. (2026) demonstrated that KOL-mediated narratives on Chinese social media can accelerate cultural bridging by embedding global brand values within locally resonant contexts. Kizgin et al. (2018) further showed that social media platforms enable brands to establish cross-cultural influence precisely by facilitating consumer co-creation of cultural identity. In the context of short-video platforms, Rejeb et al. (2024) documented how Douyin and TikTok create algorithmically differentiated visual cultures that require brands to pursue platform-specific aesthetic localisation while preserving overarching narrative coherence. What remains underexplored in this literature is the specific role of gender-fluid design as a glocalization mechanism. If gender ambiguity in IP characters functions as a kind of visual lingua franca, legible across cultural boundaries precisely because it does not demand culturally specific gender decoding, then it may constitute a distinctive resource for cross-cultural brand communication. This paper contributes to filling this gap.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a dual qualitative research design integrating thematic analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews with narrative analysis of brand advertising content. This methodological pairing enables simultaneous access to audience-level meaning-making processes and brand-level communication strategies, providing a more complete account of how gender-fluid IP design functions in cross-cultural branding than either approach could yield alone. A total of 17 purposively sampled participants were recruited from China ($n = 10$) and the United States ($n = 7$). Inclusion criteria required participants to be between 18 and 35 years of age, to be active users of Douyin or TikTok, and to have regular purchasing or engagement experience with Pop Mart products. This demographic range was selected because it corresponds to Pop Mart's core consumer base and because Generation Z and young millennial consumers exhibit the highest self-reported sensitivity to gender representation in brand communication (Yin et al., 2025). Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted online. Interview topics addressed IP character preference, gender perception, brand awareness, and cultural belonging. Data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase reflexive approach. For the narrative analysis component, six brand advertisements were systematically selected from Pop Mart's official Douyin and TikTok accounts for the period 2023–2025: three advertisements from each platform. Selection prioritised advertisements featuring core IP characters (Molly, Dimoo, Skullpanda) and ensured temporal distribution across the study period. Advertisements were analysed using Ryan (2004) six-dimensional narrative model: narrativity, tellability, temporality, worldmaking, agency, and moral evaluation. Gender coding dimensions, including

character design, color palette, body morphology, narrative role, and relational positioning, were examined as secondary analytical categories. Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, anonymisation of participant data, and reliance on publicly accessible advertising content. Analytical validity was maintained through iterative coding cycles, peer review of thematic categories, and audit trail documentation.

Results and Discussion

Gender fluidity in IP character design: Narrative analysis findings

Results are organized around three intersecting analytical axes: (1) the encoding of gender fluidity in IP character design, examined through narrative analysis of six advertisements; (2) audience reception of androgynous characters across Chinese and American consumer samples, derived from thematic interview analysis; and (3) the contribution of gender-fluid design to cross-cultural brand recognition. Across all six advertisements analysed, Pop Mart's IP characters consistently exhibit visual design choices that destabilize binary gender codes. Molly, the brand's inaugural character, combines a rounded childlike silhouette with wardrobe and contextual elements drawn from Chinese cultural tradition, Hanfu costume, rabbit ears, lantern motifs, that carry neither masculine nor feminine connotation in their own right. The 2023 Douyin advertisement "Molly Lantern Show" places her within a collectivized festival space, positioning her as a cultural everyman figure whose gender is rendered irrelevant by ritual participation. On TikTok, the 2023 "Molly Imaginary Wandering" advertisement instead emphasizes imaginative autonomy and aesthetic free play, qualities whose cultural valence is similarly gender-neutral within a North American visual register. Dimoo presents a more nuanced case of androgynous design. The character's elongated proportions, oversized melancholic eyes, and consistent positioning as an emotionally attuned, quietly heroic figure draw simultaneously on conventions of soft masculinity and expressive femininity without fully inhabiting either. The 2024 TikTok advertisement "Dimoo Weaving Wonders" is particularly instructive: Dimoo is depicted as collecting star-wishes and confronting cloud-monsters through quiet, non-aggressive action, evoking what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) termed an alternative masculinity while also resonating with broader post-gender identity frameworks. The absence of verbal dialogue in this advertisement delegates meaning entirely to visual character cues, maximizing cross-cultural legibility. Skullpanda occupies the most radical position within Pop Mart's gender-fluid design spectrum. Both Douyin advertisements analysed ("Skullpanda The Mirage," 2025) and TikTok advertisements ("Skullpanda Impressionism," 2025) deliberately move the character away from the cute aesthetic conventions typical of the designer toy genre, a strategy the data supports reading as "de-cutification", toward a philosophical-aesthetic register in which gender becomes an irrelevant interpretive category. The character's cold color palette, angular silhouette, and symbolic associations with mirrors, fragments, and temporal dislocation construct a visual world in which identity is fluid, historical, and metaphysically open. This strategy corresponds to Yin et al. (2025) formulation of post-gender brand communication, in which the dissolution of gender markers amplifies rather than reduces consumer identification (Table 1).

Table 1. Gender coding dimensions across Pop Mart IP characters (narrative analysis).

Character	Body morphology	Color palette	Narrative role	Gender coding	Audience platform
Molly	Rounded, compact, childlike	Warm, pastel, soft golds	Cultural observer; festival participant	Androgynous-feminine lean; no explicit gender cue	Douyin / TikTok
Dimoo	Slender, large expressive eyes, soft features	Cool blues, smoky purples, warm golds	Quiet cultural traveler; dream adventurer; emotional protector	Strongly androgynous; blends soft masculinity and emotional femininity	Douyin / TikTok
Skullpanda	Angular, punk-inflected, ambiguous silhouette	Cold gray, dark purple, muted gold	Philosophical wanderer; impressionist perceiver	Post-gender; deliberately de-cutified; aesthetic rather than gendered	Douyin / TikTok

Audience reception: Thematic analysis of consumer interviews

Thematic analysis of interview data identified gender fluidity as the single most consistently salient feature of Pop Mart's brand identity across both samples, although its meaning and function differ considerably across markets. Among Chinese consumers, gender ambiguity in character design is frequently interpreted through the lens of aesthetic freedom, a liberation from the constraining visual logic of traditional gender-coded toys rather than an explicit political claim about gender identity. Participant CN-09's description of Dimoo as "like a little boy and a little girl, which feels very free" exemplifies this interpretive register. For Chinese consumers, this aesthetic freedom is importantly tethered to cultural symbolism: characters that embed traditional Chinese visual elements (Hanfu, seasonal motifs, ink-wash aesthetics) within a gender-neutral design framework enable consumers to experience cultural belonging and contemporary identity fluidity simultaneously. American consumers articulate gender-fluid design in more explicitly anti-binary terms. Participant US-09's assessment of Skullpanda as "genderless" reflects an interpretive framework shaped by the visibility of non-binary and queer identity discourses within North American popular culture. For this consumer group, the absence of explicit gender coding functions as an invitation to project individual identity without negotiating cultural specificity. Participant US-04's observation that "these dolls don't have the traditional 'male' or 'female' look" positions gender ambiguity as the key value differentiator in a marketplace otherwise dominated by gender-targeted collector figures. Taken together, these findings support Bravo Velázquez et al. (2023) demonstration that androgynous visual stimuli generate broader audience identification than gender-coded stimuli, while extending their analysis by showing that the mechanisms of identification differ systematically across cultural contexts. For Chinese consumers, identification is mediated by cultural symbolism; for American consumers, it is mediated by stylistic nonconformity. This distinction has significant implications for cross-cultural brand strategy (Table 2).

Table 2. Consumer reception of gender-fluid IP design: thematic patterns by market.

Theme	Chinese consumers (n=10)	American consumers (n=7)
Gender perception	Emphasise aesthetic freedom and cultural neutrality alongside gender ambiguity (e.g., "He is like a little boy and a little girl, very free" — CN-09)	Foreground stylistic non-conformity and anti-binary positioning (e.g., "Skullpanda looks edgy and genderless, which I love" — US-09)
Identity projection	Characters as culturally inflected identity carriers; cultural symbolism amplifies gender ambiguity	Characters as personal identity projections divorced from cultural context; gender ambiguity enables broad identification
Emotional resonance	Emotional stories linked to collective experience and cultural belonging (e.g.,	Emotional resonance linked to individual psychological experience (e.g., urban anxiety,

	loneliness, festival nostalgia)	identity wandering)
Design preference	Appreciation for characters that blend gender ambiguity with traditional cultural aesthetics	Preference for characters with a global aesthetic footprint; cultural specificity appreciated but not required

Gender-fluid design and cross-cultural brand recognition

The findings collectively support a reading of Pop Mart's gender-fluid IP design as a glocalization mechanism in the sense theorised by Robertson (1995): a design language that achieves local cultural embedding and global aesthetic coherence simultaneously by refusing to specify the very identity coordinates, gender, cultural alignment, age, that typically constrain brand meaning. This refusal functions differently across markets, as *Table 3* demonstrates, but its underlying logic is consistent: by designing characters whose visual grammar is open rather than closed, Pop Mart creates IP that consumers in markedly different cultural contexts can use to construct personally meaningful brand relationships. This finding resonates with Escalas (2004) narrative transportation theory: the gender ambiguity of Pop Mart characters lowers the threshold for narrative self-insertion by removing the identity screening that gender-coded characters impose. A consumer who does not identify with conventional feminine or masculine aesthetics can nonetheless fully inhabit the emotional world of Skullpanda precisely because Skullpanda makes no such demand. This mechanism is magnified in digital short-video environments where, as Van Laer et al. (2019) demonstrated, immersive narrative conditions maximise the brand attitude effects of transportation. The differential functioning of gender-fluid design across Chinese and American markets also enriches our understanding of cultural branding theory. De Mooij (2019) cautioned that overemphasis on cultural adaptability risks fragmenting global brand identity; the present findings suggest that gender-fluid design resolves this tension by operating as a culturally translatable visual constant whose interpretation, rather than whose meaning, varies by market. The characters themselves do not change; what changes is the cultural framework consumers use to decode and inhabit them. This constitutes a distinctive contribution to glocalization theory, particularly in the context of Asian lifestyle brands entering Western markets. Finally, the findings speak to the risk of cultural essentialization noted by Iwabuchi (2010). Pop Mart's deployment of Chinese traditional symbols (Hanfu, cranes, lanterns) within a gender-neutral design frame creates opportunities for cultural connection, but the data also suggest that overreliance on fixed cultural totems may constrain the brand's capacity for ongoing symbolic innovation. Brands pursuing gender-fluid cross-cultural strategies must balance the specificity of cultural reference with the openness that makes androgynous design strategically valuable.

Table 3. Summary of gender-fluid IP design as cross-cultural branding mechanism.

Design dimension	Chinese market function	US market function
Androgynous morphology (soft edges, neutral silhouette)	Enables aesthetic appreciation free from gender constraint; aligns with youth ideals of freedom	Signals post-binary identity inclusivity; resonates with Gen Z queer aesthetic literacy
Cultural symbolism embedded in gender-neutral frame	Strengthens cultural belonging while signalling modernity	Creates exotic appeal without demanding cultural decoding
Non-verbal narrative (no dialogue, emotion via expression and animation)	Produces immersive emotional resonance without cultural-linguistic gatekeeping	Enables cross-language emotional access; maximizes cross-cultural narrative translation
Platform-adapted aesthetic register	Douyin: cultural poetics, collectivist emotion, ritual aesthetics	TikTok: individual wandering, humorous play, identity experimentation

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that gender-fluid IP character design functions as a distinctive and strategically consequential mechanism in Pop Mart's cross-cultural branding. By embedding androgynous visual aesthetics within emotionally resonant character narratives, Pop Mart constructs IP that simultaneously satisfies the cultural specificity demands of Chinese consumers and the identity openness demands of American consumers. The mechanism operates through four interdependent design dimensions: androgynous morphology, culturally embedded gender neutrality, non-verbal emotional narrative, and platform-adapted aesthetic register. Theoretically, the study advances glocalization theory by demonstrating that gender-fluid design can function as a culturally translatable visual constant—a design strategy whose interpretation, rather than whose meaning, varies by market. It extends post-gender brand theory by showing that gender ambiguity in IP characters does not merely avoid exclusion but actively generates broader consumer identification by functioning as a projective surface for diverse identity claims. It contributes to narrative transportation theory by demonstrating that the absence of gendered identity cues lowers the threshold for narrative self-insertion in digital brand storytelling environments.

Practically, the findings offer guidance for global lifestyle brands seeking to develop cross-cultural IP portfolios. Designers and brand managers should resist the temptation to gender-code characters as a targeting mechanism: for Generation Z audiences operating in platform media environments, androgynous aesthetics function more effectively than binary gender coding as a driver of emotional engagement and brand loyalty. Platform localisation should adjust the contextual and cultural frame of character narratives without altering their fundamental visual identity. Future research should expand the geographic scope of this inquiry to include Southeast Asian and European markets, where gender norms and platform media cultures differ significantly from the Chinese and American contexts studied here. Longitudinal analysis of how consumer perceptions of Pop Mart's IP characters evolve as the brand's global footprint expands would further illuminate the dynamics of gender-fluid brand identity over time. Multimodal discourse analysis approaches that incorporate audio and movement alongside visual design would offer additional depth of insight into the affective mechanisms through which androgynous characters generate cross-cultural resonance.

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Conflict of interest

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