

Sustaining Heritage Trough Modern Visual Practices: Strategic Insights from Wuhan's Traditional Snack Industry

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Abstract

Modern visual practices significantly influence heritage brands' sustainability, yet empirical research specifically addressing Wuhan's traditional snack industry remains scarce. This study aims to explore how visual branding strategies contribute to the sustainability and rejuvenation of heritage snack brands, focusing on expert and consumer perspectives regarding visual identity preservation, contemporary aesthetics integration, emotional resonance, and strategic use of visual culture. Employing a qualitative, interpretivist methodology, this research utilised thematic analysis of in-depth interview data collected from 11 participants comprising brand experts and diverse consumers associated with Wuhan's traditional snack industry. The results indicate substantial alignment and divergence between experts and consumers. Experts primarily emphasised contemporary visual innovation, coherent visual storytelling and market-driven strategic branding, whereas consumers highlighted visual authenticity, emotional nostalgia, and cultural symbolism as paramount in shaping their brand engagement and loyalty. Notably, younger consumers showed greater receptivity towards modern visual strategies and multimedia storytelling, while older consumers expressed a clear preference for traditional visual continuity and culturally authentic elements. The findings underscore the critical need for balanced visual branding strategies that strategically integrate modern aesthetic trends with cultural authenticity to ensure sustained consumer engagement and long-term brand relevance. This research offers valuable empirical insights and practical guidance for brand practitioners aiming to successfully navigate heritage branding complexities within evolving markets.

Keywords: Visual Branding, Cultural Heritage, Wuhan Snacks, Brand Management, Qualitative Research

Introduction

In an increasingly globalised and visually oriented marketplace, traditional heritage brands encounter profound challenges in maintaining their authenticity while adapting to contemporary consumer expectations (Chatzopoulou & Navazhylava, 2022). This dual pressure is particularly pronounced within heritage industries, where the essence of brands lies in their historical identity and cultural uniqueness (Mohyeddin, 2024). Among such sectors, Wuhan's traditional snack industry stands out prominently due to its extensive culinary heritage, deeply rooted historical narratives, and significant cultural symbolism. As global consumer tastes rapidly evolve, Wuhan's heritage snack brands face critical challenges that threaten their continued relevance and survival, thereby necessitating strategic visual branding practices to ensure their enduring success and market viability (Mohamed Buheji & Jaffar Hamza, 2021).

The necessity for this study emerges from the critical observation that visual practices represent more than mere aesthetics; they constitute strategic tools for sustaining cultural heritage, fostering emotional connections, and significantly enhancing consumer engagement (Cui, 2024; Liu & Zhao, 2024). Although scholarly attention towards visual branding strategies has increased, there remains a noticeable paucity of empirical studies explicitly addressing these strategies within culturally specific and heritage-intensive contexts, such as Wuhan's traditional snack industry (Ping, 2021; Cheng et al., 2025; Wang, Shang & Zhang, 2025). Given the economic and cultural implications of heritage brands in regional and even national contexts, the absence of targeted research creates a pressing imperative to explore visual branding practices in such nuanced settings.

The significance of this study extends to both academic researchers and industry practitioners. For scholars, the investigation contributes empirical insights into how visual culture effectively shapes brand perceptions, sustains cultural authenticity, and enhances consumer loyalty, thereby deepening existing theoretical understandings of brand heritage management (Vasta & Manzella, 2024; Sorato, 2024). Practically, the study offers tangible guidance to brand strategists, designers, marketers, and policymakers in cultural heritage sectors, enabling them to devise visually compelling strategies that resonate with contemporary audiences without sacrificing cultural authenticity (Mohamed Amer, 2023; Perry, 2023). Therefore, understanding how Wuhan's traditional snack brands strategically integrate visual practices has broad implications, directly benefiting stakeholders involved in heritage brand development and cultural management.

This study specifically aims to empirically explore how modern visual branding practices contribute to sustaining and revitalizing heritage snack brands in Wuhan. Employing a qualitative methodological approach, this research incorporates in-depth interviews with industry experts—including brand managers, professional designers, and academic researchers—as well as consumer perspectives. This dual perspective ensures a rich, comprehensive understanding of the strategic rationales behind visual branding practices, their emotional impacts, and their effectiveness in bridging historical authenticity with modern relevance (Khaneja et al., 2022).

Ultimately, this research seeks to elucidate practical pathways for heritage enterprises to strategically deploy visual branding, balancing the preservation of cultural identity with

innovative aesthetic practices. Through this exploration, the study aims to provide robust, actionable insights that can inform the strategic decision-making processes of heritage brands, thereby enhancing their long-term competitiveness, consumer loyalty, and cultural sustainability in an increasingly dynamic global marketplace (Wen & Mohd Fauzi Harun, 2025; Diyar Karim Majid et al., 2025; Xiang, 2023).

Literature Review

In an era marked by accelerated globalisation and digital transformation, traditional brands encounter increasing pressure to innovate without sacrificing their historical and cultural essence. The question of how heritage brands can maintain cultural authenticity while remaining attractive and relevant to contemporary consumers has become central to branding scholarship (Chen & Lee, 2021; Han et al., 2021). Visual branding, as a potent and versatile tool, offers strategic pathways for balancing these competing imperatives. Recent studies reveal that visual practices including logos, colour palettes, packaging design, and multimedia storytelling play critical roles in mediating the tension between preservation and reinvention, thereby enabling heritage brands to rejuvenate their market presence and cultural resonance (Vasta & Manzella, 2024; Wu et al., 2025). This literature review critically synthesises recent theoretical and empirical work on the interplay between visual culture, brand heritage, and strategic brand management, with a particular focus on the dynamics relevant to China's traditional snack industry.

Preservation of Brand Identity and Heritage

The concept of brand heritage encompasses an organisation's cultural roots, historical continuity, and narrative legacy (Cooper et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2023). For traditional brands, such as those in Wuhan's renowned snack sector, the preservation of brand identity is both a symbolic and practical concern. Li et al. (2025) argue that heritage is not static; it is continually constructed through both tangible visual assets such as iconic logos, typography, and product imagery and intangible narratives that reinforce authenticity. Research consistently finds that consumers attach greater value and loyalty to brands perceived as authentic, especially when brands visibly uphold their cultural origins (Asif Ali Safeer & Liu, 2023).

However, the preservation of heritage identity presents a paradox in a rapidly changing marketplace. As market evolve, heritage brands risk obsolescence if they fail to update their image or adapt their narrative to contemporary sensibilities (Ammar Alzaydi, 2024). The literature highlights the necessity of "heritage balancing", the strategic maintenance of core visual and narrative elements alongside selective innovation (Pulpetch & Li, 2024). For instance, luxury and food brands have been shown to successfully retain consumer trust and emotional resonance by anchoring new products or campaigns within recognisable visual frameworks, even as they experiment with modern formats or channels (Urooj Ahmed, 2024).

Integration of Contemporary Visual Aesthetics

The integration of modern aesthetics into traditional branding is increasingly vital for reaching younger, style-conscious audiences. Contemporary branding scholarship notes a shift from static visual identities to dynamic, platform-adaptable expressions (Paramasivam et al., 2025). Elements such minimalist design, digital-friendly colour palettes, and interactive packaging

are now frequently deployed to signal innovation and freshness while avoiding the dilution of brand authenticity (Irfan Ali Awan, 2025).

In the context of Chinese heritage brands, “*GuoChao*” (national tide) aesthetics marked by a blend of traditional motifs and modern graphic sensibilities have gained prominence (Zheng et al., 2024). These approaches not only appeal to nationalist sentiment but also leverage nostalgia in visually compelling, youth-oriented formats. Empirical research in the automotive and luxury sectors demonstrates that such hybrid visual strategies strengthen both brand equity and consumer identification (Xu, 2024). The literature further emphasises that effective visual rejuvenation often depends on careful market research and consumer feedback, ensuring new aesthetics align with evolving tastes without erasing foundational brand meaning (Riswanto et al., 2024).

Emotional Resonance and the Power of Nostalgia

Emotional branding particularly through the deliberate evocation of nostalgia emerges as a key lever for sustaining consumer loyalty to heritage brands. According to Fu, Liu and Li (2024), the strongest brands are those that foster deep emotional connections with consumers, and visual cues serve as powerful triggers for memory, sentiment, and belonging. Chen (2022) found that nostalgic appeals in visual branding, such as the use of retro packaging or historic imagery, evoke positive affect and reinforce consumer trust and preference.

Nostalgia’s effectiveness is amplified when visual elements reference shared cultural touchstones, such as local landmarks, traditional festivals, or iconic foods (Acilar, 2024). Research by Bibudis Vicente & Mårtensson (2024) demonstrates that vicarious nostalgia when advertising evokes collective or intergenerational memories can significantly increase perceived brand heritage and willingness to purchase. In China’s rapidly modernising consumer landscape, the ability to trigger nostalgic emotions through carefully curated visual branding is increasingly recognised as a competitive advantage (Zhao, 2025).

Strategic Use of Visual and Storytelling

Beyond static imagery, visual culture is increasingly mobilised through narrative strategies that integrate brand history, cultural values, and consumer participation (Lelis & de A. Kreutz, 2024). Storytelling in branding, as Baakli (2023) explains, allows consumers to situate themselves within the brand’s narrative universe, deepening identification and emotional engagement. Contemporary research identifies a move toward multimedia and digital storytelling platforms including social media, interactive packaging, QR codes, and AR experiences which enable heritage brands to animate their history and values in engaging, shareable formats (López & Cruz, 2021).

For example, successful Chinese snack brands have integrated local folklore, historical anecdotes, and behind-the-scenes craft narratives into visual campaigns that blend tradition and modernity. Such practices do not merely convey information; they invite consumers to co-create meaning, fostering community, advocacy, and long-term loyalty (Rosin, 2024).

Visual Branding and Market Adaptation

An important dimension of the literature concerns the market adaptation of visual branding strategies, particularly in response to globalisation and shifting generational values. Research

by Zahid Jamal et al. (2024) and Rashkova et al. (2024) underscores the need for brands to tailor their visual communication to different consumer segments and international contexts. This includes not only linguistic translation but also the sensitive adaptation of colour, symbolism, and imagery to resonate with local preferences and avoid cultural missteps.

Market-responsive visual branding also encompasses sustainability and ethical signalling. As noted by Theocharis et al. (2025) and Adiga (2024), contemporary consumers, especially younger cohorts, increasingly expect brands to visually communicate commitments to environmental responsibility and social values whether through eco-friendly packaging, clear sustainability icons, or partnerships with charitable initiatives. These visual cues are not peripheral but central to brand perception and consumer decision-making.

Gaps and Future Directions

While the literature provides robust theoretical frameworks and empirical insights, research specifically focused on traditional snack industries in China and Wuhan in particular remains limited. Much of the existing scholarship draws on case studies from luxury, fashion, and global FMCG brands, with less attention to regional or artisanal food sectors. Further empirical studies are needed to understand how heritage snack brands strategically balance visual heritage with contemporary adaptation and how these practices influence consumer attitudes and market performance in local Chinese context.

In summary, the literature reveals that the visual rejuvenation of heritage brands is a multidimensional endeavour. It involves not only the preservation of historical authenticity through stable visual markers but also the careful integration of modern aesthetics, emotionally resonant nostalgia, and strategic storytelling. Market adaptability and social responsibility have become increasingly important in shaping consumer perceptions and sustaining brand relevance. As Wuhan's traditional snack industry seeks to sustain its heritage through modern visual practices, insights from global and Chinese branding scholarship offer valuable strategic frameworks yet also highlight the need for more localised, empirically grounded research in this vibrant and culturally significant sector.

Research Methodology

Understanding how modern visual practices contribute to sustaining heritage in Wuhan's traditional snack industry requires a methodological approach that captures the complexity of human experience, cultural meaning, and brand evolution (Lim, 2025; Zha et al., 2022). This study therefore adopts a qualitative paradigm rooted in interpretivist epistemology, emphasising the importance of participant perspectives, in-depth contextual analysis, and thematic interpretation (Qaissi, 2024). By leveraging in-depth interviews and robust thematic analysis, the research uncovers the nuanced interplay between visual strategy, cultural identity, and consumer engagement domains that resist reduction to numerical indicators and are best explored through rich, qualitative inquiry (Qaissi, 2024).

Research Design

This research is framed as a qualitative multiple case study, focusing on selected heritage snack brands in Wuhan as well as the consumers and professionals associated with these brands. The rationale for adopting a case study approach lies in its strength in elucidating complex, context-dependent processes such as the adaptation of visual culture within

heritage branding that cannot be meaningfully isolated from their cultural and market settings (Annamalah, 2024). The case study design enables the integration of multiple perspectives, drawing insights from brand managers, designers, academics, and consumers to develop a holistic understanding of branding dynamics in this sector (Wu et al., 2022).

The research is guided by the following objectives: (i) to identify and describe the visual branding strategies employed by Wuhan's traditional snack brands to sustain their heritage, (ii) to explore the role of contemporary aesthetics and innovative visual storytelling in brand rejuvenation, and (iii) to analyse the emotional, cultural, and strategic impacts of these practices from both expert and consumer perspectives.

Participant Selection and Sampling

A. Purposive and Maximum Variation Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, complemented by maximum variation principles to ensure diversity of expertise and perspective (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The expert cohort consisted of individuals with recognised experience in branding, design, and cultural studies, including brand managers of established Wuhan snack enterprises, professional designers responsible for visual communication strategies, and academic researchers specialising in cultural heritage and marketing. Consumer participants were recruited to represent a range of ages, backgrounds, and consumption experiences, with particular emphasis on both older loyal customers and younger, trend-sensitive consumers. This sampling approach not only maximises data richness but also ensures the study's findings reflect both institutional and grassroots understandings of visual heritage branding (Alordiah & Oji, 2024).

This study involved a total of 11 participants, comprising both expert stakeholders and consumers associated with Wuhan's traditional snack industry. Among the experts, participants included brand designers, managers, brand owners, lecturers, and professors, each possessing extensive experience in brand development, visual identity, and heritage branding. The consumer group encompassed individuals of varied ages and backgrounds, all of whom have significant engagement with Wuhan's time-honoured snack brands either as long-term residents, food enthusiasts, or loyal customers. This diverse sample provided a robust foundation for analysing cross-case insights into the intersection of tradition, modern visual practices, and consumer engagement within the local snack industry (Plugge & Nikou, 2024).

Table 1

Demographic Table of Respondents

Participant Code	Role/ Group	Gender	Age Range	Occupation	Relevant Experience
E01	Expert	Female	30-39	Brand Designer	10+ years in design/ branding
E02	Expert	Male	30-39	Brand Designer	10+ years in design/ branding
E03	Expert	Male	40-49	Brand Manager	15+ years in F&B management
E04	Expert	Female	40-49	Brand Owner	15+ years, family business
E05	Expert	Male	40-49	Lecturer	10+ years, higher education
E06	Expert	Male	50-59	Professor	20+ years in branding research
C01	Consumer	Male	20-29	Student	Local resident, food enthusiast
C02	Consumer	Female	20-29	Office Worker	Frequent brand consumer
C03	Consumer	Female	30-39	Freelancer	Wuhan native, brand loyalist
C04	Consumer	Male	30-39	Small Business Owner	Loyal customer
C05	Consumer	Female	40-49	Homemaker	Long-term brand patron

B. Recruitment and Ethical Considerations

Potential participants were identified through professional networks, brand affiliations, academic institutions, and consumer associations (McDonald et al., 2022). All participants received detailed information sheets outlining the research objectives, confidentiality measures, and voluntary participation rights. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and ethical approval was secured in accordance with the guidelines of the host institution (Stommel & Rijk, 2021).

*Data Collection***A. In-depth Interviews**

The primary data collection method was the in-depth, semi-structured interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Interview protocols were developed based on a comprehensive review of literature and preliminary expert consultation (Signorell et al., 2021). Questions were open-ended and thematically organised around key areas including brand heritage, visual identity, integration of contemporary design, consumer emotional response, and perceptions of branding success.

Each interview was scheduled for 45 to 60 minutes, conducted either in person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on logistical feasibility and participant preference (). All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit participant consent to ensure accurate data capture and subsequent transcription. Transcripts were anonymised to preserve

confidentiality, and interview data were stored securely in encrypted digital file (Rowlands, 2021).

B. Supplementary Data

To enhance contextual understanding and triangulate interview findings, the supplementary data were collected, including visual materials such as brand packaging, advertisements, social media posts, and retail environments (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023). These visual artifacts were systematically documented and coded as part of the thematic analysis, enabling richer interpretation of how visual culture is operationalised in branding practice (Christou, 2022).

Data Analysis

A. Thematic Analysis and NVivo Application

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, analyse, and interpret patterns within the qualitative data (). This analytic process unfolded in several key stages:

- Familiarisation: All interview transcripts and supplementary materials were read repeatedly to develop an in-depth understanding of the data corpus and to note preliminary ideas and significant features (Deterding & Waters, 2021).
- Open Coding: Initial coding was performed inductively using NVivo 14, capturing emergent concepts, recurring themes, and salient quotations from both experts and consumers (Elliott-Mainwaring, 2021).
- Axial Coding: The initial codes were then reviewed, refined, and organised into broader thematic categories that reflected the research objectives such as preservation of heritage, contemporary aesthetic integration, emotional engagement, and strategic storytelling (Ayre & McCaffery, 2022).
- Selective Coding and Synthesis: Higher-order themes were identified, and connections across data sources (expert vs. consumer) were explored. This synthesis facilitated a cross-case analysis that illuminated both convergences and divergences in stakeholder perspectives (Caskurlu et al., 2021).

NVivo's capabilities enabled systematic coding visual mapping of theme interrelationships, and efficient retrieval of coded text for further analysis and reporting (Limna, 2023).

B. Ensuring Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was enhanced through a combination of methodological strategies:

- Triangulation: Integration of multiple data sources (interviews and visual artifacts) and participant groups (experts and consumers) provided a multifaceted perspective (Meydan & Akkas, 2024).
- Member Checking: Select participants were invited to review preliminary analytic themes and offer feedback to ensure accurate representation and interpretation (Sahakyan, 2023).
- Audit Trail: Detailed records of analytic decisions and coding iterations were maintained, enabling transparency and reproducibility (O'Sullivan et al., 2025).

Limitations

While the qualitative, case-study methodology offers depth and contextual richness, certain limitations must be acknowledged (Buchnea, 2023). The findings are context-specific and not statistically generalisable to all heritage brands. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, though these are mitigated through data triangulation and

reflexive analytic practices (Quinio & Lam, 2021). The diversity of the sample, while intentional, means that some individual perspectives may remain underrepresented.

The research methodology adopted for this study is expressly designed to capture the complexity and dynamism of visual branding within Wuhan's traditional snack industry. By leveraging in-depth interviews, purposive and diverse sampling, and systematic thematic analysis via NVivo, the study generates nuanced, empirically grounded insights into how modern visual practices are strategically mobilised to sustain cultural heritage (Muthuswamy & Esakki, 2024). This methodological approach ensures that the voices and experiences of both branding professionals and consumers are centred, providing a holistic and contextually sensitive foundation for the interpretation and discussion of findings (Annamalah, 2024).

Results and Findings

This chapter systematically presents the empirical findings derived from the thematic analysis conducted using NVivo. Data collected through extensive in-depth interviews with branding experts, designers, academics, and consumers associated with Wuhan's traditional snack industry generated rich, multidimensional insights. The findings address four primary thematic areas: (i) Preservation and Evolution of Brand Identity; (ii) Integration of Contemporary Aesthetics; (iii) Emotional Resonance and Nostalgia; and (iv) Strategic Use of Visual Culture. Each theme is further expanded into sub-themes, thoroughly illustrating the complex ways in which modern visual practices sustain the heritage value and market appeal of traditional snack brands.

Theme 1: Preservation and Evolution of Brand Identity

A. Historical Significance

Participants repeatedly emphasised the central role historical significance plays in brand authenticity and consumer trust. Participant E01 specifically described incorporating traditional motifs and historic narratives into brand visuals as essential to evoke a strong cultural presence. For instance, the deliberate use of vintage-style calligraphy, historical photographs, and images from local folklore in packaging and promotional materials was frequently cited as effectively reinforcing brand legitimacy. According to participant C03, "seeing traditional images and historical themes in *Cai Lin Kee's* branding reminds me of our cultural roots, making me feel proud and connected" (C03R102).

Further elaboration by expert E04 revealed the strategic use of visual storytelling techniques that communicate brand heritage (E04R109). By placing historical timelines, authentic photographs, and culturally resonant symbols within retail spaces, traditional snack brands successfully anchor their identities within a broader cultural narrative. Consumers expressed strong preference for brands visibly linked to historical authenticity, indicating that such visual strategies significantly contribute to brand loyalty and identity reinforcement.

B. Traditional Elements

Participants consistently underscored the importance of retaining traditional visual elements as key to brand continuity. The intentional preservation of iconic colours, such as red and gold, along with classic calligraphic scripts, was universally noted as crucial for sustaining heritage brand recognition. Brand manager participant E06 explicitly articulated the strategic

value of these visual identifiers: “the familiar colour schemes and traditional fonts not only provide brand continuity but also enhance our consumers’ emotional attachment and sense of familiarity” (E06RI03).

Consumer participants particularly highlighted their appreciation for consistent traditional elements across various brand interactions, including store design and product packaging. Participant C02 described the visual consistency of traditional snack brands as comforting and reassuring, emphasising that visually recognisable traditional elements significantly enhanced their consumer experience and brand loyalty (C02RI01). This alignment of traditional aesthetics across multiple touchpoints thus emerges as integral to effective brand identity management.

C. Evolution of Visual Identity

The necessity for brands to evolve visually while respecting traditional heritage was clearly articulated by participants. Expert participant E02 provided detailed insights into how heritage brands carefully adapt traditional visuals using contemporary graphic elements (E02RII02). By streamlining complex logos and adopting minimalist design features, brands successfully maintain historical resonance while simultaneously projecting modernity. Consumers also indicated approval of these modernised visual strategies, noting that subtle visual evolution helps brands remain appealing and relevant, especially among younger generations.

Participants also acknowledged potential risks associated with overly radical visual changes. Brand manager E04 underscored the importance of incremental visual evolution, stating, “visual branding must evolve carefully to prevent alienating loyal consumers who deeply value tradition” (E04RII05). Consumers similarly emphasised the need for balance, expressing discomfort with abrupt visual transformations, thus reinforcing the importance of strategic gradualism in visual brand evolution.

Theme 2: Integration of Contemporary Aesthetics

A. Modern Adaptation

Modern adaptation through contemporary aesthetic emerged as critical in engaging diverse and younger consumer demographics. Expert participant E01 described deliberate strategies incorporating minimalist and streamlined visuals into branding materials (E01AI09). By employing sleek fonts, modern graphic designs, and simplified layouts, traditional snack brands strategically refresh their visual appeal. Consumer participant C05 acknowledged that modern visual interpretations, while contemporary and appealing, effectively preserved underlying cultural authenticity, thus balancing innovation and tradition.

Participants additionally highlighted effective use of “national wave” (*GuoChao*) aesthetics as a distinctive approach to modernisation. By blending contemporary graphic styles with traditional Chinese imagery, brands achieve heightened relevance with younger consumers who value national cultural pride and modern visual tastes. Consumers widely expressed positive reactions to this visually compelling aesthetics, confirming their attractiveness and market appeal.

B. Market Alignment

Market alignment emerged as a central strategic consideration in visual branding efforts. Participants indicated that alignment involves deliberate adaptation to current consumer preferences and market expectations. For instance, brand designer E04 explicitly addressed the adoption of environmentally conscious visual cues, such as eco-friendly packaging and sustainability messaging (E04AII01), aligning brand visuals with prevalent consumer values and enhancing market attractiveness.

Furthermore, brands strategically leverage digital innovations and visual interactivity to enhance consumer alignment. Participant C06 described the effectiveness of QR codes and interactive packaging (C06AI04), enabling dynamic consumer interactions and immediate access to brand storytelling and product information. Such market-aligned visual innovations were consistently praised by consumers, who viewed them as essential for contemporary brand relevance.

C. Innovative Visual Strategies

Innovative visual strategies were consistently highlighted as essential for market differentiation and consumer engagement. Experts described integrating multimedia storytelling, virtual reality experiences, and interactive digital elements into branding practices. Designer participant C06 specifically detailed incorporating QR-code-enabled packaging, providing immersive and interactive consumer experiences online, effectively increasing brand appeal and customer engagement (C06AIII03).

Participants acknowledged that visually innovative approaches significantly influence consumer perception and brand distinctiveness. Consumers, particularly younger audiences, expressed enthusiasm for interactive, immersive visual experiences, asserting these practices greatly enhanced their emotional connection and willingness to engage further with the brand. Therefore, innovation through visual media emerges as a compelling strategy for sustaining traditional snack brands' market relevance.

Theme 3: Emotional Resonance and Nostalgia

A. Emotional Connection

Participants uniformly highlighted emotional resonance as fundamental to consumer loyalty and brand sustainability. Expert E06 emphasised leveraging emotionally evocative visuals, such as historical scenes and culturally significant symbols, to trigger consumer memories and sentiments (E06NII10). These visuals, according to consumers like participant C04, substantially influence their emotional connection to brands, reinforcing brand loyalty and advocacy (C04NII01).

Furthermore, participants explained how visual strategies targeting emotional connections can significantly enhance long-term relationships. Expert participant E01 noted the intentional inclusion of visually nostalgic elements in brand communications to deepen emotional connections, particularly among older consumers (E01NI06). Consumers confirmed that visuals evoking emotional warmth and familiarity directly influenced their purchasing decisions and sustained attachment to heritage brands.

B. Cultural Significance

Visual strategies embedding cultural significance emerged strongly in participant responses. Experts repeatedly emphasised strategic use of culturally symbolic imagery, such as local landmarks and traditional iconography, to establish deeper cultural resonance and consumer engagement. Participant E03 stated clearly that visual strategies highlighting local cultural elements significantly reinforce brand authenticity and deepen consumer pride and affiliation (E03NII01).

Consumer perspectives reinforced this approach, noting brands visually aligned with local culture significantly increased their sense of identity and pride. Consumers like participant C04 explicitly highlighted visual cultural authenticity as decisive in brand selection (C04NII01), strongly associating visible cultural symbolism with greater perceived brand legitimacy and emotional attachment.

C. Personal Memories

Participants also highlighted the strategic role of visual elements in triggering personal memories, thus enhancing emotional brand attachment. Participant E01 described retro-style packaging as strongly evoking personal nostalgia and childhood memories (E01NIII01), directly influencing their emotional brand connections and loyalty. Expert E02 explicitly confirmed strategic intentions behind using visually nostalgic elements to foster deeper consumer-brand relationships (E02NIII03).

Moreover, participants suggested personal memory triggers represent a powerful branding strategy. Consumers consistently cited personalised visual associations such as familiar motifs or historically resonant packaging as significantly enhancing their emotional experience and brand affinity. This strategic leveraging of personal memory through visual branding thus emerges as highly effective for heritage brand sustainability.

Theme 4: Strategic Use of Visual Culture

A. Visual Culture Integration

Integration of visual culture into strategic branding efforts was universally regarded as critical by participants. Experts outlined clear strategies for embedding cultural visuals into branding narratives to enhance consumer engagement. For instance, participant E04 emphasised the deliberate inclusion of local cultural symbols across visual communications (E04SI03), significantly enhancing brand coherence and cultural authenticity.

Consumer participants strongly affirmed this approach, identifying visible cultural integration as enhancing brand credibility and emotional resonance. Visual culture integration consistently strengthened consumer perceptions of authenticity and reinforced brand loyalty, validating its strategic effectiveness.

B. Visual Communication

Clarity and consistency in visual communication were recognised as essential across branding platforms. Experts strongly advocated consistent visual standards, asserting these enhance brand recognition, trust, and consumer comfort. Designer E03 stated explicitly that unified

visuals significantly reinforce consumer perception of brand professionalism and reliability (E03SIII05).

Consumers corroborated these insights, acknowledging visual consistency across packaging, retail environments, and digital media significantly increased their brand confidence and purchase intention. Such strategic coherence emerges as indispensable in successful visual branding.

C. Brand Storytelling

Visual storytelling emerged strongly as an influential branding strategy. Experts highlighted narrative visual strategies employing interactive multimedia and packaging designs to deepen consumer engagement. Participant E06 specifically underscored that visual storytelling significantly enriches consumer interactions (E06SIII03), creating memorable brand experiences.

Consumer enthusiasm for visually engaging brand narratives affirmed storytelling's effectiveness. Consumers noted immersive visual stories significantly enriched their brand interactions, fostering deeper emotional connections and sustained brand engagement.

This comprehensive analysis demonstrates that effectively sustaining Wuhan's traditional snack heritage involves intricately balancing historical authenticity, contemporary aesthetics, emotional resonance, and strategic visual storytelling. Through nuanced visual strategies, traditional snack brands not only preserve their cultural legacy but actively enhance market relevance and consumer loyalty, underscoring the transformative power of modern visual branding practices.

Cross-Case Insights: Multifaceted Perspectives from Experts and Consumers

This section synthesises cross-case insights gathered from expert and consumer participants concerning the role of visual practices in sustaining heritage within Wuhan's traditional snack industry. Analysing the NVivo-coded data reveals complementary and divergent perspectives between these two groups, providing nuanced understandings of the strategic use of visual branding. Specifically, cross-case analysis addresses four thematic dimensions: (i) Preservation and Evolution of Brand Identity, (ii) Integration of Contemporary Aesthetics, (iii) Emotional Resonance and Nostalgia, and (iv) Strategic Use of Visual Culture.

A. Preservation and Evolution of Brand Identity

Both experts and consumers underscored the paramount importance of historical authenticity in preserving the brand identity of traditional snack enterprises. Experts, including participants E02 and E04, emphasised leveraging visual elements such as vintage fonts, traditional signage, and packaging with historical narratives (E04RIII01, E02SIII01). For instance, participant E01 explicitly stated, "integrating traditional patterns and cultural storytelling into packaging reinforces a sense of historical depth and authenticity" (E01RI05), thereby solidifying consumer trust and brand legitimacy.

Consumers consistently corroborated these expert viewpoints, highlighting their personal affinity with brands that visibly retain historical authenticity. Consumer participant C01 remarked on *Cai Lin Kee's* strategic use of "nostalgic elements", noting that these visual

strategies evoke meaningful connections to Wuhan's cultural roots (C01RI04). Similarly, participant C05 appreciated the retention of traditional store layouts and historical décor (C05RI04), affirming these visual cues effectively sustained brand identity continuity. Notably, while experts emphasised strategic visual innovation to remain competitive, consumers stressed caution, favouring incremental visual evolution that respects deeply held historical perceptions.

B. Integration of Contemporary Aesthetics

The integration of contemporary aesthetics emerged distinctly across participant groups, though with subtle differences in perspective. Experts strongly advocated for the strategic modernisation of visual identities to enhance market relevance and appeal to younger demographics. Participant E03 explained, "incorporating contemporary styles such as minimalism and trendy visual elements maintains traditional charm while capturing modern aesthetic sensibilities" (E03AI07). Such practices, as described by expert participants, included minimalist packaging designs, digital interactivity, and eco-friendly materials (C04AII05), reflecting broader market alignment trends.

Consumers, in contrast, exhibited more nuanced and varied reactions to contemporary visual updates. While younger consumers such as C05 expressed enthusiasm for sleek, modernised aesthetics that align with current design trends (C05AII02), others like participant C02 highlighted the necessity for visual moderation (C02AII04). This group of consumers advocated that contemporary aesthetics should not overshadow traditional visual elements, reflecting a delicate balance between heritage authenticity and market modernisation that brands must carefully manage to retain loyalty across diverse consumer segments.

C. Emotional Resonance and Nostalgia

Emotional resonance and nostalgia were consistently highlighted by both experts and consumers as critical to effective visual branding strategies. Experts such as participant E06 specifically noted that visual branding strategically leverages nostalgia to strengthen consumer attachment (E06AII05), highlighting the effectiveness of incorporating vintage photographs and traditional motifs that emotionally anchor brands within consumers' lived experiences.

From a consumer standpoint, emotional resonance significantly impacted their brand preferences and purchasing decisions. Consumer participant C01 described strong emotional response to visually nostalgic packaging, associating it with personal childhood memories (C01NI05), thereby enhancing brand attachment. Likewise, participant C03 emphasised how the emotional connection fostered through nostalgic visuals deepens their loyalty and willingness to repeatedly engage with traditional snack brands (C03NII04), indicating the profound effectiveness of emotionally evocative visual strategies.

D. Strategic Use of Visual Culture

Experts and consumers broadly agreed on the strategic value of integrating visual culture into branding strategies, though perspectives on implementation varied slightly. Experts consistently highlighted that embedding culturally significant imagery and narratives within visual branding significantly enhances market differentiation and consumer engagement. Participant E03 articulated clearly, "utilising local cultural symbols and integrating traditional

patterns within branding strategies significantly increases consumer recognition and emotional attachment” (E03NII03).

Consumers supported this expert perspective by affirming the positive impact of cultural visuals on their perceptions of brand credibility and authenticity. Consumer participants, such as C04, specifically valued brands that visually showcase regional cultural elements like Wuhan’s landmarks and traditional architecture (C04AIII07), indicating that culturally integrated visual substantially enrich their consumer experience and affinity toward the brands. However, consumers also emphasised the importance of clear and coherent visual communication across platforms (C06SII05, C01SIII03) to maintain a unified brand narrative and prevent visual confusion or dilution of cultural authenticity.

E. Multifaced Perspective between Experts and Consumers

The NVivo analysis highlighted both congruent and divergent viewpoints across experts and consumers. While experts frequently discussed strategic visual practices through frameworks of market differentiation, competitive advantage, and branding effectiveness, consumers tended to interpret visual strategies primarily through personal emotional connections, cultural authenticity, and experiential nostalgia. This intersection of professional strategic considerations and deeply personal consumer perceptions suggests successful visual branding strategies must comprehensively accommodate both market-driven goals and emotionally resonant consumer expectations.

Notably, the younger consumer demographic demonstrated heightened responsiveness to visual innovation, particularly multimedia interactions, eco-friendly practices, and contemporary aesthetic elements, which experts actively advocated. Conversely, older consumer segments appeared significantly more sensitive to visual strategies that preserve cultural authenticity and historical consistency, emphasising the critical need for carefully calibrated visual innovations that do not alienate this group. The implications of this cross-case analysis are clear: strategic visual branding must consciously balance progressive market adaptation with conservative cultural preservation to achieve sustained heritage relevance and comprehensive market appeal.

In conclusion, this cross-case analysis illuminates critical insights regarding strategic visual practices necessary for sustaining heritage brands within Wuhan’s traditional snack industry. Integrating multifaceted perspectives from both expert strategists and diverse consumer groups, the findings underscore a complex yet coherent strategic requirement, successful visual branding strategies must harmonise historical authenticity with modern aesthetic adaptations, emotional resonance with strategic differentiation, and individual consumer experiences with broader cultural narratives. Ultimately, achieving this intricate balance can significantly enhance brand sustainability, ensuring enduring relevance and resonance within dynamic market contexts.

Discussion

This section discusses the strategic implications of sustaining heritage through modern visual practices in Wuhan’s traditional snack industry, drawing from the detailed results derived from thematic analyses. The integration of insights from branding experts, designers, academics, and consumers offers a multifaceted understanding of how visual culture

contributes to brand rejuvenation. This discussion is organised according to the four principal thematic areas identified in the analysis: (i) Preservation and Evolution of Brand Identity, (ii) Integration of Contemporary Aesthetics, (iii) Emotional Resonance and Nostalgia, and (iv) Strategic Use of Visual Culture. Each theme is critically evaluated in relation to existing literature, highlighting practical implications, theoretical contributions, and areas for further inquiry.

Preservation and Evolution of Brand Identity

The findings underscore the indispensable role of historical significance and traditional elements in maintaining the authenticity of Wuhan's heritage snack brands. Experts and consumers alike emphasised traditional visual markers such as iconic typography, culturally resonant imagery, and colour schemes deeply rooted in regional symbolism as vital for reinforcing brand identity and authenticity. These insights align closely with prior research emphasising that authentic visual symbolism significantly enhances consumer trust and emotional connectivity (Travere, 2023).

However, the study's findings also reveal that visual identities must evolve incrementally to maintain relevance without eroding traditional authenticity. Participant narratives consistently suggested careful balancing between visual innovation and heritage conservation to avoid alienating existing customers. This careful balance aligns with Amer (2023) notion of "heritage balancing", advocating deliberate, incremental updates rather than abrupt transformations. Consequently, brands must strategically adapt their visual identities by incorporating subtle, modern graphic elements that complement rather than disrupt traditional aesthetics.

Integration of Contemporary Aesthetics

A significant strategic insight emerging from the analysis is the critical importance of integrating contemporary aesthetics into visual branding strategies. Experts proposed minimalist and modern design elements as essential tools for appealing to younger consumer segments. This modern visual adaptation, effectively implemented through streamlined graphics and contemporary design sensibilities, was supported enthusiastically by younger consumers, echoing findings from prior studies that contemporary aesthetics significantly influence brand attractiveness among modern consumers (Marmat, 2023).

However, the consumer responses indicated the need for cautious application of contemporary design principles. Older consumer segments expressed reservations about excessive modernisation that could overshadow traditional elements. Therefore, this suggests that while contemporary visual trends like "GuoChao" provide valuable pathways to rejuvenation, brand managers must meticulously calibrate modern aesthetics to preserve brand heritage without alienating core consumers, resonating with Buschgens et al.'s (2025) insights on market-sensitive heritage rejuvenation.

Emotional Resonance and Nostalgia

Findings strongly confirm emotional resonance, particularly nostalgia, as pivotal in fostering deep consumer loyalty. Expert participants highlighted strategic use of visually evocative symbols, traditional imagery, and historical narratives to stimulate emotional memory and

brand affinity. This aligns with previous literature identifying emotional resonance as a core driver of consumer-brand relationships (Saputra et al., 2021).

Consumer narratives similarly reflected substantial emotional impacts from nostalgic visual cues. Personal memories triggered by traditional packaging and culturally specific visuals significantly strengthened brand attachment and consumer loyalty, reinforcing the theoretical propositions that nostalgia can create profound consumer-brand bonds (Youn & Doodoo, 2021). The critical implication here is that visual branding strategies must consciously integrate emotionally evocative elements to create lasting relationships, validating emotional branding as a potent marketing approach within heritage brand management.

Strategic Use of Visual Culture

Participants articulated the strategic value of visual culture as essential to brand differentiation and consumer engagement. The strategic integration of culturally resonant visuals, including local landmarks and traditional motifs, was consistently highlighted as significantly enhancing consumer perceptions of authenticity and reinforcing cultural identity. Such strategies resonate with Lister's (2023) emphasis on visual culture's power in branding, demonstrating how cultural symbolism strategically embedded in visual branding narratives significantly enriches consumer engagement.

Moreover, the findings affirm the strategic effectiveness of coherent and consistent visual communication across multiple brand platforms. Unified visual standards and narrative consistency across packaging, retail environments, and digital media substantially improved brand recognition and consumer trust, echoing the strategic necessity of visual coherence discussed by Haidar (2024). Additionally, visual storytelling, notably through multimedia engagement and interactive technologies, emerged as a powerful method for deepening consumer-brand relationships. Participants confirmed that immersive visual narratives significantly enriched their brand interaction, highlighting visual storytelling as a contemporary strategic imperative.

Multifaceted Perspectives and Strategic Implications

The cross-case insights elucidate notable differences and complementarities between expert and consumer perspectives, revealing essential strategic considerations. While experts consistently framed visual branding within competitive and market-driven contexts, consumers primarily viewed these strategies through emotional, experiential, and cultural lenses. This intersectionality between strategic market orientations and emotional-cultural consumer responses implies that successful visual branding must carefully reconcile professional strategic frameworks with authentic consumer experiences.

Younger consumer segments notably showed greater responsiveness to visually innovative strategies, interactive multimedia elements, and sustainability cues. Conversely, older consumers prioritised historical authenticity and gradual visual evolution, suggesting a generational divide in visual strategy preferences. Thus, brands face the complex strategic challenge of simultaneously appealing to diverse consumer demographics through visually balanced approaches.

This discussion comprehensively integrates the empirical findings, highlighting critical theoretical implications and practical insights into sustaining heritage through modern visual practices in Wuhan's traditional snack industry. The detailed exploration underscores the necessity for strategic visual practices that thoughtfully balance heritage authenticity with contemporary aesthetics, emotional resonance with strategic differentiation, and expert-driven market orientation with consumer-centric cultural narratives. By achieving this delicate balance, traditional snack brands can effectively sustain their heritage, enhance market appeal, and foster enduring consumer loyalty, thereby contributing substantially to the long-term vitality and cultural significance of Wuhan's heritage snack industry.

Conclusion

As societies progress amid globalisation and digital transformation, the tension between cultural preservation and modernisation has become increasingly pronounced particularly within industries deeply rooted in local heritage. This study aimed to examine how traditional snack brands in Wuhan strategically sustain their cultural legacies through modern visual practices. By employing a qualitative methodology grounded in in-depth interviews with both branding experts and consumers, this research navigated the nuanced interplay between heritage identity and visual rejuvenation. The findings have illuminated not only the functional role of visual culture in branding but also its symbolic and emotional significance in preserving regional identity in a rapidly evolving consumer landscape.

The exploration was anchored four core thematic domains: the Preservation and Evolution of Brand Identity, the Integration of Contemporary Aesthetics, Emotional Resonance and Nostalgia, and the Strategic Use of Visual Culture. These dimensions emerged through comprehensive thematic analysis, offering a multidimensional perspective that bridges theoretical constructs with practical branding strategies. The integration of expert perspectives and consumer insights added critical depth to the study, fostering a more holistic understanding of the mechanisms by which traditional snack brands in Wuhan navigate the complex process of visual reinvention without forsaking authenticity.

From the analysis, it is evident that traditional snack brands in Wuhan face the dual imperative of maintaining their historical essence while responding to the aesthetic expectations of contemporary markets. Visual elements such as traditional motifs, packaging styles, colour palettes, and typography were shown to serve as powerful conduits of brand heritage. At the same time, the incorporation of minimalist design trends, interactive storytelling, and multi-platform consistency has enabled these brands to remain relevant to younger, more design-savvy audiences.

The study revealed that visual strategies must be culturally sensitive and emotionally evocative to achieve long-term resonance. For many consumers, brand loyalty was intricately tied to visual cues that triggered memories, pride, and a sense of belonging. This suggests that emotional branding particularly nostalgia marketing plays a critical role in maintaining consumer engagement in the heritage food sector. On the other hand, expert participants highlighted the importance of maintaining competitive differentiation through innovation in visual communication and design coherence.

One of the most compelling findings was the nuanced divergence between expert and consumer perspectives. While professionals emphasised strategy, market adaptability, and brand storytelling from a commercial standpoint, consumers grounded their preferences in emotional and cultural connections. This dynamic tension underscores the importance of aligning strategic objectives with cultural authenticity, ensuring that modernisation efforts do not dilute the very elements that confer uniqueness and heritage value upon these brands.

This research contributes to a growing body of scholarship that underscores the strategic importance of visual culture in heritage brand management. It provides a conceptual and practical framework for understanding how traditional enterprises can leverage modern visual practices to sustain relevance while preserving cultural identity. For brand managers, designers, and cultural policymakers, the insights from this study offer a roadmap for crafting visual branding strategies that honour tradition while embracing the evolving expectations of a new generation of consumers.

In sum, sustaining heritage in the modern era is not merely an act of preservation, it is an act of creative negotiation. By harnessing the power of visual storytelling, cultural symbolism, and emotional engagement, heritage brands like those in Wuhan's snack industry can evolve without erasure. They can modernise without losing meaning. And in doing so, they ensure that cultural memory remains not only intact but vividly alive in the visual imagination of future consumers.

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