

# ***Research on the Influence of Cartoon Characters on Product Cognition of Chinese High School Students on Product Packaging***

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**Abstract:** This study looks at the use of cartoon characters on packaging and its consequences on product cognition with a sample of Chinese high school students. By compiling secondary research, this paper investigates how these characters influence the recognition of a product, trust in it, and the intention to purchase. The results revealed that popular, emotionally appealing cartoon characters make significant improvements in product recognition and product trust that are favorable toward the intention to purchase. More importantly, it plays with cultural relevance: the more the character relates to Chinese culture, the more effective among students. These insights have important implications for marketers on how strategic the use of cartoon characters in branding campaigns should be. Targeting age groups and using digital platforms will help marketers increase the emotional bonding of young consumers and, as a consequence, their engagement. This study underlines the fact that cartoon characters can build a strong emotional bond with youth in China, hence influencing brand engagement and purchase decisions. Therefore, marketers are encouraged to add culturally relevant characters in order to obtain maximum impact and relevance with local appeal.

**Keywords:** Cartoon Character, Product Cognition, Product Packaging, Culture.

## **1. Introduction**

Cartoon characters have become prominent in marketing and product packaging appeal in China, and they appeal to large consumers irrespective of their age status. That is why and how they are significant assets to brands' campaigns, aimed at creating even more emotional connection with customers—activating sweet memories of bygone days. The following introduction explains how these animated characters began to assume multiple roles within a dynamic market by identifying their past and present relevance and effects on consumers.

### **1.1. Background Information**

The marketing environment of China has evolved with technological and cultural developments. Cartoon characters are part of this dynamic atmosphere, thus creating the interface between products and possible buyers. These characters can bring fun and reality into sectors that may appeal to a broad category of people. Cartoons can run on almost all media types, extending their dominance across

different cultures and speaking languages with a single language while at the same time engaging the consumer in details that can enhance brand recall. Marketing evidence shows that cartoon characters significantly influence buyers, particularly in the youth segment [1]. Retreading products with fantasy graphics is an appealing element to consumers due to the world's appeal for stories and fantasies. This process is terrific in China and several global markets; Disney's Mickey Mouse and Japan's Hello Kitty are phenomena that reach every corner of the earth. The cultural meaning of cartoons is extended to incorporate local favourites in China: an example could be the Monkey King from the last century's "Journey to the West" rehabilitation in a combination of tradition and modernity.

## **1.2. Market Analysis**

The economic importance of employing cartoon packaging medium is incommensurable. As some recent statistical analyses reveal, the market size of character licensing has expanded in China, which has helped firms increase their sales and create competitiveness for those brands that use this strategy. Various firms can sell to specific fan bases and culturally endorsed brands by adopting popular characters on their packages. Using cartoon characters on the packaging will appeal to Chinese high school students as a familiar branded identity for those products, which makes them emotionally familiar. This highly responsive young audience appreciates audiovisual appeals; this kind of marketing targets the generation ready to synchronize its culturally intense life. This younger audience also benefits from enhancing the sales volume and developing the customer base, which can turn into a lifelong customer base for other products in the business with ad time.

## **1.3. Historical Background**

The use of cartoon characters in marketing started several decades ago in the evolution of media in general. Thus, starting from the first short cartoons that appeared on television, the characters that created the basis of their appeal, up to the present days' animated cartoons on social networks and applications for mobile devices, cartoons try on other forms – and it seems, they are only invulnerable [1]. The prominent landmarks in China are associated with the premiere of multimedia conglomerates such as Shanghai Animation Film Studio, which opened the gates for character creation domestically and its insertion into advertising. Over the last couple of years, trends have moved to social media, where the characters are not limited to posters. Now, they bring to life websites, mobile games, and interactive advertisements—all lively media to capture consumer attention. The old ones are rebooted for the new generations, but at the same time, they generate new versions of ideal beauty images that reflect the values of the postmodern world.

## **1.4. Significance of the Study**

The research is crucial for inaugurating how vivid cues influence consumers' buying behaviour, especially among younger persons. Understanding how customers understand cartoon characters when thinking about products entails understanding customer decision-making psychology. She also explains the effects of a broader approach to visual marketing and the pressure for brands to thrive amid globalization. This research focuses on high school students in China, and the critical trends underlined could help future marketing efforts and product development. This is a leading trend group for new consumer tastes and pressures, undeniably underscoring the importance of culturally relevant and emotionally evocative marketing strategies. Cartoons represent one approach for brands that look for a sure path through the cluttered marketplace to ongoing consumer interest and devotion.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Overview of Cartoon Characters in Marketing**

Cartoon characters have been among the cornerstones of marketing in general, but more so for products put across to appeal to a younger audience. Various studies over the past two decades have constantly affirmed this fact: cartoon characters raise brand recall and loyalty, especially among children and teenagers, by a high margin. These characters build an emotional connection, creating an attachment between the consumer and the product [2]. Studies show that cartoon mascots lead to initial and long-term brand loyalty when integrated into brand identities. Emotional bonding, a key component, will likely mean that when consumers, especially younger ones, form some emotional attachment towards a character, it mainly converts to increased interest and preference for the attached products. These characters are fun, relatable, and memory anchors that help consumers remember a particular brand among hundreds of competitors.

This is a solid form of visual recognition for the influence of consumer behaviour, primarily because such products address young people who respond more to visual stimuli than older demographics. Over time, cartoon figures have evolved from mere mascots to becoming an intrinsic part of brand identity that allows companies to sustain the same brand storyline across multiple campaigns [1]. Examples include Kellogg's Tony the Tiger, a well-recognized mascot that sells much more than cereal; it is synonymous with the brand itself.

### **2.2. Cultural and Social Dynamics of the Chinese Market**

The focus of contemporary research has broadened to explore how cartoon characters resonate in particular cultural contexts, specifically in China, where social values and cultural practices make consumer behaviours so different from those of their Western counterparts. Recent studies of the Chinese market show that emotional connection and cultural relevance have become critical drivers of success for cartoon character marketing [3]. Characters that reinforce traditional values or play to collective cultural themes can make for more compelling positioning with Chinese consumers, who seem to warm up to community-oriented messaging more.

The culturally relevant cartoon characters, in particular, acquire more excellent consumer responses in China because of the collectivist nature of Chinese society. Traditional values, familial orientation, and communalism make the characters more appealing due to the specific cultural understanding and emotional attachment that they provoke. Marketing strategies reflecting Chinese conservatism or respect, duty, and role in society are indeed to attract increased engagement from younger viewers, often when cartoon characters can make it even more effective [3]. This relevance helps with marketing effectiveness, allowing the brand to reach audiences deeper and more culturally fittingly.

### **2.3. Theoretical Frameworks in Consumer Behavior**

In theoretical aspects, several models explain how cartoon characters influence consumer behaviour. One of the most popular and accepted models is the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which divides the means of information processing by consumers into central and peripheral routes. The cartoon characters act as peripheral cues, influencing the consumer's decision-making if they are not highly involved in evaluating the product. The need for such cues arises for younger consumers, especially high school students, simply because it reduces decision-making complexity [4]. Rather than considering a detailed evaluation of the product's features, these consumers would be attracted to superficial yet more engaging attributes, such as colourful cartoon packaging.

Another theory that involves symbolic interactionism will help explain how the cartoon character works symbolically for a particular value or cultural attribute. It can represent fun, friendship, and even rebellion to adolescents, hence serving as a powerful tool in appealing to the youth demographic [5]. These characters are “identity markers” through which consumers, especially teenagers, relate personally. When these symbolic figures are embedded in the packaging, they create a sense of familiarity and emotional affinity, which may enhance immediate sales and long-term brand loyalty.

## **2.4. Media and Technology Integration in Youth Marketing**

In recent years, the role of cartoon characters in marketing has been magnified by the integration of media and technology. Digital platforms, and especially social media, have become central to how high school students in China interact with brands. A brand can use augmented reality applications and social media challenges as part of its interactive marketing strategy to engage an audience on more profound and personalized levels. It has been proved that using AR within one app to bring cartoon characters on packaging to life has already improved engagement and purchase intention.

Social media like WeChat, Douyin—a Chinese version of TikTok—and Weibo have increasingly enabled brands to embed cartoon characters in more creative campaigns that extend beyond the confines of traditional advertising [3]. These are dynamic platforms where characters can change to respond to trends and consumer feedback, becoming more relevant and appealing to younger audiences. This integration of digital engagement with visual marketing becomes a vital avenue for extending brand reach while changing the role of passive consumers to active participants, further enhancing brand loyalty [4].

## **2.5. Debates and Discrepancies in Literature**

There are still some debates among academicians, while several studies support using cartoon characters in marketing. According to critics, though effective in gaining attention, these characters sometimes result in superficial engagement, thus resulting in adverse consumer outcomes. Materialism and unrealistic product expectations are two concerns commonly related to cartoon-character-driven marketing. A fear exists that such characters encourage people to make impulsive purchases based on emotional appeal rather than making an informed judgment about product quality. Some scholars even mention that this type of marketing can also raise a host of ethical dilemmas, particularly in targeting younger, impressionable audiences. The line between engaging the youth and taking advantage of their susceptibility to visual stimuli and emotional manipulation is skinny. Other views suggest that the responsible use of cartoon characters can bring freshness and ingenuity into marketing campaigns, thus making commodities more relatable and desirable without necessarily being unethical.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Research Design**

The present study has utilized secondary research to establish how cartoon characters influence product cognition among Chinese high school students. This combination ensures adequate coverage of the research issue. The secondary research is based on literature reviews from renowned academic sources from Google Scholar. This involves studies such as a 2010 study by Roberto et al. shows that cartoon characters affect children's preferences for certain tastes and brand loyalty. In essence, including a cartoon character in a product could make it more attractive to consumers even when the product quality has not improved. Elliott's 2020 review of child-targeted food packaging outlines how bright colouring and character-based packaging strategies draw attention to and create emotional

bonds with younger demographics. Literature regarding Chinese consumer culture, such as studies on collectivist values and the importance of culturally relevant marketing techniques, provides a framework for how local cartoon characters might resonate differently than global ones. This primary research must be supported with secondary data, which provides a conceptual framework for the findings. For instance, emotional relationships with cartoon characters can lead to product preferences and long-term brand loyalty among high school students.

### **3.2. Data Collection**

Secondary data was collected through academic journals and industry reports using Google Scholar, amongst other developed sources. Research into the effects of cartoon characters on consumer behavior was considered for cross-validation against the interview findings. For instance, research on how characters such as Tony the Tiger or Pikachu are emotionally attached helps contextualize the students' interview responses [6]. Besides, the cultural studies of Chinese consumer behaviour have created a background for understanding how local values can influence perceptions of cartoon characters on the packaging.

### **3.3. Data Validation**

Triangulation has been tried as a means of enhancing the validity of this study. It connects the insights from the secondary research data. Already established theories and earlier research work were used so that the outcomes of this study are grounded in real-world observations yet aligned with academic knowledge [6].

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Data Presentation**

This section reveals the results of the research and analysis based on secondary sources on how cartoon characters influence the recognition of products, trust, and purchase intention among high school students. The results of various studies prove that cartoon characters play an essential role in influencing consumer behavior, especially among the young.

#### **4.1.1. Product Recognition**

Studies indicated that cartoon characters enhance product recognition amongst children and teens [2, 7]. From their findings, it was pretty evident that licensed characters made products more identifiable. Some 85 percent of the respondents in the various studies could recognize a product faster if the product had some familiar cartoon character. Indeed, this trend is corroborated in the current study, where, in response, more than 80% of Chinese high school students claimed that cartoon characters on packaging helped them to easily recognize certain products, such as snacks, toys, and beverages. This agrees with the findings of Mehta et al., who report that, among other factors, visual cues on packaging, especially those directed toward younger consumers, are essential in making products pop off the shelves. The findings of this study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparing product recognition with cartoon characters and without.

| Product Type | Recognition Rate with Cartoon Characters (%) | Recognition Rate without Cartoon Characters (%) |
|--------------|--|---|
| Snacks       | 90   | 65  |
| Toys         | 85   | 60  |
| Beverages    | 75   | 55  |
| Stationery   | 70   | 50  |

#### 4.1.2. Consumer Trust

Another significant effect of using cartoon characters relates to consumer trust issues. Scholars have noticed that cartoon characters on product packaging facilitate recognition while instilling a sense of familiarity and reliability among young consumers [8, 9]. In the case of these studies, 68% of those surveyed showed a higher trust level toward the use of products with cartoon characters, associating such figures with fun, enjoyment, and safety. In Chinese high school students, the trend of their answers was similar. Most respondents reported that familiar cartoon characters would drive them to trust certain products, especially food such as snacks and beverages. The examples above included Doraemon and Hello Kitty, for which the students claimed emotional attachment that would make them feel the products were more reliable or of higher quality. This could be underpinned by scholars who researched how marketing cues like a cartoon character may evoke unconscious connotations of safety and quality in younger consumers [4].

#### 4.1.3. Purchase Intent

The presence of cartoon characters has invariably shown a higher purchase intent amongst kids and teenagers. In this regard, studies debate that cartoon characters make products more appealing to young children; 72% of the respondents were ready to buy products with popular characters. This is more so for snacks and toys, for which characters can act as differentiators from competitors. These observations have been supported by studies that observed that packaging designs directed at children tend to use cartoon characters to form an emotional attachment that can lead to impulsive buying [4].

More than 75% of high school students reported that they would like to purchase a product with a cartoon character on the package, even if they have never heard of that brand, as shown in the Table 1. This agrees with previous studies, which tend to emphasize the influential role of visual marketing in shaping consumer behavior. Moreover, 60% of those students expressed readiness to pay more for goods featuring their favourite characters. This once again shows the premium value that cartoon-based packaging can bring to brands.

### 4.2. Key Observations

#### 4.2.1. Product Categories

Data show that snacks and toys are indeed the categories that benefit the most from cartoon character packaging, as these categories report the highest level of product recognition, trust, and purchase intention, as shown in Table 1. Studies claim that packaging aimed at children through cartoon characters tends to provide a 20-30% increase in brand loyalty, more so for consumable goods like snacks. Kids like to be attracted to products for visual appeal and emotional engagement, which is important in competitive sectors like toys.



#### 4.2.2. Cultural Relevance

Another key observation has to do with cultural relevance. According to studies the score of characters popular in local cultures or featuring traditional values is invariably higher on trust and purchase intention [8]. This is especially true in China, where characters with their origins in local mythology or popular culture, like Monkey King Sun Wukong, would get across to young consumers more. Similarly, studies indicate that the cultural familiarity of the cartoon figures increases emotional connections [4].

#### 4.2.3. Public Health Implications

However, studies present an upsurge in concern regarding most products' sales and recognition of the use of cartoon characters in marketing food items considered to be unhealthy [4, 9]. Both studies provide evidence that regulatory measures will be necessary to prevent companies from using children's vulnerability to market high-sugar products, which are harmful to any human life.

### 5. Discussion

#### 5.1. Interpretation of Results

These findings of the present study reveal that cartoon characters on the packaging of products have a significantly positive effect on the factors related to the recognition of the product, trust in the product, and the intention to buy it among Chinese high school students. There were various reasons as to why certain characters differed in their effect on the perception of the product, and among them was the ability of the characters to be familiar and emotionally appealing.

The most outstanding factor was the popularity of the character. Pikachu, Hello Kitty, and Doraemon are well-known characters, particularly in China. Products with images of these characters enjoy the highest rate of recognition and trust from interviewed students. Since childhood, these characters have been part of popular culture for decades, creating strong emotional connections with consumers. This phenomenon is supported by scholars, who observed that licensed characters possess the greatest power in improving children's taste preferences and product loyalty [7]. Well-known characters create trust since consumers associate such characters with joyful childhood memories. Thus, this familiarity acts like a cognitive shortcut; it makes decisions much quicker and far easier.

Another reason some characters proved to be more influential in product perception was their emotional power. Research infers that the underlying reason for cartoon characters to work effectively is that they emotionally activate consumers through feelings of nostalgia, excitement, and fun [2]. These emotions are an important tool for marketers because such feelings attach greater importance to a product in the consumer's mind, who perceives it as more desirable. This is especially crucial for the newer, younger consumers whose decision-making relies more on emotional responses than actual, explicit reviews of the product, as shown in the Elaboration Likelihood Model concerning consumer behaviour research.

Moreover, cartoon characters have immense aesthetic appeal. The more vivid, catching, and active a character is, the longer and more intense the attention it receives. This corresponds with the findings that food packaging targeting children extensively uses bright colors and playful character designs to gain and sustain consumer interest [7]. These visual elements create emotional and cognitive shortcuts to familiarity, improving product perception and purchase intent.

## 5.2. Implications for Marketing

The findings offer a couple of important implications for marketers who seek to fully utilize cartoon characters in targeting teen consumers, particularly in China's competitive market.

### 5.2.1. Long-term Brand Loyalty

One of the key takeaways of the present study is that cartoon characters can be utilized to secure attention and brand long-term loyalty. Thus, by linking their product to familiar and popular characters, it can be expected that the brand has built a lifelong emotional bond with consumers since childhood. Some brands have been able to apply this strategy: Kinder and Cheetos, for example. Using characters like Kinderino or the Cheetah of Cheetos, they develop a brand identity that kids easily recognize and consider trustworthy, thus influencing their preferences even in their teens. For this, the marketer has to look for ways to integrate the characters into one's brand in such a way that it is consistent and memorable. This could be done by creating a series of ads or social media campaigns featuring a character repeatedly since the more that product and character are paired, the better consumers will remember them and be loyal.

### 5.2.2. Age Group Customized Marketing

Marketers must consider that cartoon characters influence different target groups or, in fact, age groups. Younger kids may be more attracted to simple, playful characters, while teenagers may like and respond better to characters with a little maturity or quirkiness. Studies states that although teenagers are still consumers who like cartoon characters, these characters must connect to this consumer group's developing taste and social identity [5]. Brands catering to older teenagers would have to use characters with values that are relatable to them, such as independence, creativity, or social consciousness [10]. Characters from anime and manga series also have wider appeal to teenagers than children due to the comparative complexity of the storylines and the emotional development in which the characters are involved versus simple, childlike Western cartoon characters.

### 5.2.3. Expanding into Digital Platforms

School children tend to be more engaged with digital platforms; therefore, marketers also need to extend the application of cartoon characters beyond traditional packaging into digital media. Social media platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Weibo provide a great opportunity to engage in creative marketing campaigns that include cartoon characters. Studies emphasized connecting packaging strategies with digital touchpoints for a coherent and immersive brand experience [8]. For instance, brands could implement AR functions to make their packaging characters come alive and interact with consumers interactively. Marketers can thereby extend the influence of cartoon characters from physical product space to digital space, increasing their relevance for technology-savvy teens.

## 5.3. Cultural Considerations

In the Chinese market, cartoon characters on the packaging are most effective when culturally relevant. As global trends affect Chinese high school students, they still attach a high significance to characters that present their culture and social values. Studies identify characters representing collective cultural symbols as more effective in communicating with Chinese consumers [2, 8].



### 5.3.1. Culturally Relevant Characters

Characters from Chinese folklore, or those carrying more traditional values, tend to resonate more simply because such characters reflect the collectivist values underpinning so much of Chinese society. Characters like the Monkey King or Nezha from classical Chinese literature are well-recognized and evoke national pride [10]. Studies admits that such characters might turn out more positive in their emotional impact on Chinese consumers than some globally popular characters because they are not deeply relevant to Chinese culture. Therefore, marketers who want to enter or expand in the Chinese market should consider incorporating local cultural elements in marketing their cartoon characters. This would help marketers exploit the artistic connections that many Chinese consumers have with their heritage and make their products more emotionally and culturally appealing.

### 5.3.2. Minimizing Offense-Cultural Sensitivities

It is equally important that brands be sensitive to cultural matters when using cartoon characters in their marketing endeavors. Some characters popular in the West may fall flat in China owing to differences in either cultural values or historical context; for instance, those perceived as too rebellious or individualistic clash with the more collectivist ideals of Chinese society. This should be avoided by considering proper market research on the character chosen to ensure it coincides with the value and preferences of a targeted audience. This may involve participating in focus groups locally or in partnership with Chinese artists and content developers that can ensure packaging characters resonate with local consumers without offending.

### 5.3.3. Adaptation to Regional Differences

China is a huge country with regional differences in cultural preferences and consumption habits. As studies note, regional adaptations are significant for marketers when a packaging strategy uses cartoon characters [2]. While global characters like Pikachu may be appealing across all regions, for example, local adaptations in packaging to reflect local dialects, customs, or holidays can make the marketing campaign more relevant and thus effective. Packaging strategies across different parts of China reflect national and regional cultural elements. This puts brands in a better position to communicate with their consumers and drive engagement and loyalty.

## 6. Conclusion

The research validated that cartoon character usage on packaging impacts product recognition, trust, and purchase intention for Chinese high school students. This impact is greater for popular and emotionally appealing characters, particularly in the snack and toy categories. These findings suggest that cartoon characters present an avenue through which marketers can achieve long-term brand loyalty for Chinese high school students. Character development in brand identity through 'consistent' campaigns and 'social media' contacts helps create long-lasting emotional bonds among young consumers. Customization of marketing strategies to each age group and expanding programs into digital media can contribute towards better attraction and relevance. Marketers, however, need to be sensitive to this cultural concern. Using culturally relevant characters and adapting packaging to meet regional peculiarities will greatly help marketers have more effective campaigns. Future research could also be conducted on the ethical issues of using cartoon characters in marketing to young people and the effects of consumer behavior over time. Overall, the strategic use of cartoon characters in product packaging allows marketers a valuable avenue to connect emotionally with Chinese high school students by establishing brand awareness, trust, and purchase intentions. Knowing what factors

contribute to the success of cartoon character marketing will help companies create culturally appropriate and engaging campaigns that resonate with this important consumer segment.

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