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The influence of crossover co-branding on consumer purchase intention：A case study of KFC

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Abstract: *In recent years, the influence of cultural intellectual property (IP) has been continuously expanding, accumulating a large number of fans and achieving a certain level of popularity. Related derivative products have become increasingly popular, such as the co-branded toys launched by KFC and Pokémon, which have received unanimous praise from consumers. To expand consumer markets and attract younger audiences, collaborating with cultural IP has become a key strategy for enterprises to enhance brand influence and expand market share. Taking the KFC co-branding as an example, based on the theory of symbolic consumption, this paper divides co-branding marketing into three dimensions: co-branding fit, co-branding scarcity, and co-branding sociality. Using case analysis and empirical methods, the study examines the influence of these dimensions on consumers purchase intentions. The results reveal that co-branding fit, co-branding scarcity, and co-branding sociality have a significant positive impact on consumer purchase intention. Based on these findings, the study provides targeted co-branding strategies for enterprises.*

Keywords: *crossover co-branding; purchase intention; KFC.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, brand collaborations have become one of the most popular marketing strategies for enterprises. This form of collaboration aims to increase brand visibility, enhance market competitiveness, and attract new consumer groups (Kumar et al., 2016). The concept of brand collaboration was first proposed by scholar Boone, originating from the 1980 partnership between Red Lobster and Holiday Inn to open a restaurant. Brand collaboration refers to the cooperation between two or more brands, releasing a joint product with characteristics of both parties, and conducting marketing through this unique cooperation method to attract more consumer attention and affection (Mitchell & Balabanis, 2021). Through co-branding partnerships, brands achieve innovative combinations to create distinctive products that capture consumer attention and interest (Kang & Feng, 2024). Co-branding not only helps boost both parties' brand awareness but also enables each to expand beyond its existing customer base, attracting more potential consumers. This, in turn, broadens market influence and further captures market share (Kalafatis, et al, 2012).

The purpose of brand collaborations is to attract consumers to pay a higher premium by combining the market influence, popularity, positive associations, and reputations of multiple brands (Mou, 2025). As the influence of IP continues to grow, cross-industry collaboration in IP has gradually become a key strategy in corporate marketing (Zou et al., 2025). By partnering with well-known IP, brands can rapidly boost brand awareness and expand market share, thereby capturing consumer attention and stimulating their desire to purchase (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2024). In particular, collaborations between entertainment IP and brands across various industries can

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generate powerful synergies, thereby enhancing customer brand recall and favorability (Knoll & Matthes, 2017). For instance, Disney has successfully expanded its market influence and gained the support of a large fan base by engaging in cross-industry collaborations with various well-known intellectual properties, such as “The Avengers” and “Star Wars”.

According to existing research, brand collaborations not only enhance brand awareness and expand market influence, but also spark consumer interest and boost brand loyalty through innovative forms of partnership (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). However, the success of a collaboration is not merely the simple addition of two brands; it requires a precise understanding of the compatibility between the brands, actual market demand, and consumer psychology. Although IP collaboration can generate high attention in the short term, the disparity between the brand image and consumer expectations may lead to disappointment and undermining the brand’s long-term value (Kumar et al., 2016). Therefore, brands should assess potential risks before engaging in collaboration partnerships.

Therefore, this paper takes KFC’s co-branding initiatives as a case study to analyze its marketing strategies, influencing factors, and effects. The main content covers the following four aspects. First, analyze the motivations and trends of cross-industry co-branding. This paper explores the key drivers for enterprises engaging in co-branding and, in close alignment with current market trends, examines how the fast-food industry can enhance its brand competitiveness through cross-industry partnerships. Second, this paper analyzes KFC’s cross-industry co-branding model and conducts a case study. This paper provides a comprehensive review of KFC’s collaboration models with various brands and IP rights, selects representative co-branding cases to analyze the strategies employed, communication channels used, and market feedback received during the co-branding process. Third, conduct an empirical analysis of the effect of crossover co-branding on consumer purchase intention. It divides co-branding marketing into three dimensions—co-branding fit, co-branding scarcity, and co-branding sociality—and analyzes their influence on consumer purchase intention. Fourth, this paper discusses the challenges and optimization strategies associated with crossover co-branding. It analyzes potential issues such as intense market competition, consumer aesthetic fatigue, and difficulties in accurately assessing brand fit, and proposes targeted recommendations for optimizing crossover cobranding strategies, thereby providing feasible reference solutions for brand partnerships in the fast-food industry.

II. CASE STUDY OF KFC

1. Overview

In 2025, in the Chinese market, there were over 80 marketing collaborations among 8 major fast food brands (KFC, Pizza Hut, Wallace, McDonald’s, Tastien, Burger King, Papa John’s, and Dicos). In terms of the frequency of collaborations, KFC led the pack with 34 collaborations, far outpacing other brands. This indicates that KFC has accumulated extensive experience and developed unique strategies in collaborative marketing, making it an ideal case study that can serve as a reference for other companies in the industry.

Taking the cross-industry collaboration between KFC and “Identity V” as an example, the two parties achieved a deep integration of marketing scenarios and a comprehensive upgrade of the user experience by building an integrated online-offline ecosystem. On the digital communication level, KFC established a multi-dimensional digital communication matrix: leveraging social media platforms such as Weibo and Douyin to generate trending topics, and utilizing its official website and APP to release co-branded campaigns, visual materials, and dynamic videos, thereby creating a multi-channel communication campaign. At the same time, KFC actively encouraged user participation, through interactive initiatives such as topic challenges and user-generated content contests, effectively boosting brand visibility and community interaction while achieving exponential growth in traffic.

In terms of offline scenarios, KFC has completed immersive theme renovations at numerous locations nationwide, incorporating the gothic aesthetics and game elements of “Identity V” into the spatial design to create a highly immersive dining environment for customers. In addition, the brand has organized a series of offline theme activities, including professional cosplay performances and limited-edition themed parties, allowing players to step beyond the screen and interact with game characters in the real world. Through these highly immersive activities, KFC has strengthened the emotional connections with its customers and effectively conveys its brand values in a tangible way.

2.Co-branding Fit

KFC successfully attracted the attention of its target consumer group and stimulated their purchasing desire by collaborating with the popular IP Pokémon to launch a meal deal. KFC and Pokémon have jointly launched a children’s meal set, leveraging the immense popularity of Pokémon to boost sales through the combination of “IP toys + meal”. The Pokémon fan base spans all age groups, particularly children and young adults, which overlaps significantly with KFC’s target consumer group. The adorable designs of the Pokémon toy series also align with the festive spirit of Children’s Day, creating a joyful and celebratory atmosphere that meets consumers’ psychological needs during the holiday season. The KFC-Pokémon collaboration is not merely a commercial partnership but a precise targeting of the consumer base, demonstrating a high degree of compatibility between the collaborative IP and the target audience.

3.Co-branding Scarcity

KFC collaborated with the popular otome game “Love & Deep Space” to launch two limited-edition meal sets priced at 45 yuan and 52 yuan, with 900,000 and 200,000 sets available, respectively. As soon as the news was announced, fans were overjoyed. On the first day of the promotion, the KFC app crashed due to excessive traffic, and physical stores were packed with customers. Fans lined up in long queues just to purchase the limited-edition meal sets and obtain exclusive merchandise, and these limited-edition sets sold out in a short period of time. On second-hand trading platforms, the prices of the peripheral products included with the meal sets have significantly increased. At the same time, the phenomenon of “daigou” and “scalpers” have been growing increasingly rampant, and the topic “KFC Collaboration Merchandise Scalpers Earning Four-Figure Daily Profits” has sparked widespread discussion online.

This collaboration marketing campaign cleverly employed a limited-supply strategy to create a strong sense of scarcity, which greatly stimulated consumers’ desire to purchase. This not only propelled the campaign to viral success but also led to a significant increase in sales, making it a classic example of how scarcity can be leveraged to attract consumers in co-branding initiatives.

4.Co-branding Sociality

The promotional copy for KFC’s “Crazy Thursday” event has gone viral on social media platforms, demonstrating that KFC places great importance on the social aspect in its event planning and excels at stimulating consumers’ desire to share on social media. Additionally, KFC has collaborated with the game “Genshin Impact”, encouraging players to purchase corresponding meal deals at the store and use a secret code to receive exclusive gifts. This collaboration provided a physical meeting place for Genshin Impact players, and subsequently, many players created user-generated content. The related topics quickly gained traction on social media, generating significant buzz for KFC. The collaboration between KFC and “Genshin Impact” not only fulfilled the social needs of Genshin Impact players, allowing them to find like-minded companions in real life, but also injected new vitality into the KFC brand, enabling it to stand out in the highly competitive market. This demonstrates that collaborations emphasizing social attributes can create substantial commercial and social value, providing development opportunities for brands.

III. Research Hypotheses

1. The Effect of Co-branding Fit on Purchase Intention

According to the theory of symbolic consumption, the most distinctive feature of symbolic consumption is its representational and symbolic nature, meaning that consumers express their personal traits and aesthetic tastes through consumption behavior (Solomon,1983). Based on this theory, co-branding fit influences the meaning, aesthetics, mood, and atmosphere that a product symbolizes and represents to consumers. When the co-branding fit is high, it indicates that the brands are highly consistent in terms of brand attributes, values, or market positioning. This makes consumers perceive the collaboration between brands as more natural and harmonious, thereby reducing internal cognitive dissonance and effectively enhancing consumers' purchase intention (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). Additionally, the co-branding fit reflects the value consistency and value-added effect of co-brands, which can enhance consumers' purchase intention (Xiao & Hwan, 2014). Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Co-branding fit is positively related to purchase intention.

2. The Effect of Co-branding Scarcity on Purchase Intention

Symbolic consumption theory holds that consumption is not merely an economic activity but a process through which social distinctions, identity, and cultural belonging are constructed via the symbols embodied in goods (Belk, 1988). According to symbolic consumption theory, co-branding scarcity prompts consumers to convey their values or social roles through the meanings represented by the selected goods. Co-branding scarcity refers to the limited supply of co-branded products, resulting in restrictions on both the quantity of products and the number of owners (Hamilton & Shaheen, 2023). The quantity limit determines the level of competitive purchasing pressure. The fewer the quantity provided, the greater the competitive purchasing pressure consumers feel, thereby stimulating their strong purchasing motivation. When product inventory is low, consumers perceive the product as having greater value and significance, which in turn increases their willingness to purchase (Barton & Oppewal, 2022). This "hunger marketing" approach can prompt consumers to make impulsive purchases, making them feel that the goods they buy are worth the price. Therefore, co-branding scarcity helps to stimulate consumers' purchase intention. Based on the above viewpoints, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Co-branding scarcity is positively related to purchase intention.

3. The Effect of Co-branding Sociality on Purchase Intention

Symbolic consumption theory posits that consumers express social identity through the consumption of products (Belk, 1988). According to this theory, co-branded products enhance consumers' social identity by constructing symbolic scenarios in the consumption environment, thereby increasing purchase intention. The launch of co-branded products often triggers online discussions and offline check-in activities among consumers, or triggers interactions between consumers and their friends and family. Such social interactions satisfy consumers' social identity, thereby enhancing their purchase intention (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Additionally, word-of-mouth among friends and family can increase consumers' trust in the product, while promotional check-ins by strangers can reach a broader consumer base (Lu et al.,2025). Based on these viewpoints, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Co-branding sociality is positively related to purchase intention.

The theoretical model is shown below in Figure 1.

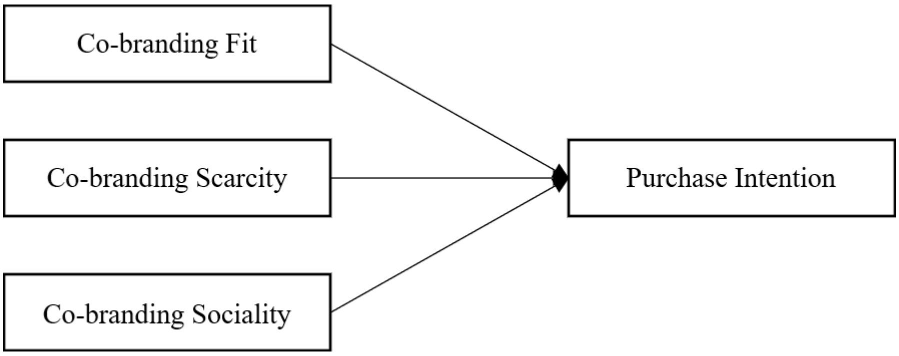

Figure1. Theoretical Model

IV. Hypothesis Testing

1. Data Collection

This questionnaire focuses on the collaboration between KFC and IPs, aiming to explore the effect of co-branding fit, scarcity, and sociality on consumers' purchase intention. Besides demographic variables, all questions in the questionnaire are measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 to 5 represent "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The questionnaire was distributed through the Wenjuanxing platform, and a total of 214 questionnaires were collected.

2. Sample Characteristics

The survey results show that, in terms of gender, 51.87% of the participants were female and 48.13% were male; in terms of age, 65.89% were aged 18-25 and 23.36% were aged 26-35, indicating that young people have a higher level of interest in KFC's collaboration activities.

Among all respondents, the majority were aware of KFC's collaboration activities, accounting for 81.78% of the total. Social media platforms were the main source of information for respondents to learn about KFC's collaborations, accounting for 72.43% of the total. A relatively large number of respondents held a neutral attitude towards the collaborations, accounting for 48.13% of the total, while a considerable number of respondents showed a favorable attitude, accounting for 42.99% of the total. Popular animated or comic characters and game IPs were the types that attracted the most respondents, accounting for 68.22% and 61.68% of the total, respectively.

3. Reliability Analysis

The factor loadings of all scale items were greater than 0.65, indicating a good correlation among the items in the scale. The Cronbach's α coefficients of all scales were greater than 0.69, suggesting a high internal consistency of the scales.

4. Correlation Analysis

The results of the correlation analysis are shown in Table 1. According to Table 1, co-branding fit ($r = 0.752$, $p < 0.01$), co-branding scarcity ($r = 0.764$, $p < 0.01$), and co-branding sociality ($r = 0.811$, $p < 0.01$) were significantly positively correlated with purchase intention.

Table 1 Correlation Analysis

Variable	1	2	3

1	Co-branding fit			
2	Co-branding scarcity	0.673**		
3	Co-branding sociality	0.701**	0.717**	
4	Purchase intention	0.752**	0.764**	0.811**

Note: $N = 214$. $^{**}p < 0.01$.

5. Hypothesis Testing

The results of the regression analysis for hypothesis testing are shown in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, co-branding fit had a significant positive effect on purchase intention ($B = 0.238$, $p < 0.001$), co-branding scarcity had a significant positive effect on purchase intention ($B = 0.239$, $p < 0.001$), and co-branding sociality had a significant positive effect on purchase intention ($B = 0.368$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypotheses H1 – 3. The model's R^2 is 0.767, indicating that co-branding fit, co-branding scarcity, and co-branding sociality could explain 76.7% of the variance in purchase intention, demonstrating strong explanatory power.

Table 2 Regression Results

Variables	*B*	SE	*t*	Sig.
Co-branding fit	0.238	0.059	4.057	0.000
Co-branding scarcity	0.239	0.052	4.606	0.000
Co-branding sociality	0.368	0.058	6.378	0.000

V. Discussion

Taking KFC as a case study, this paper explores the effect of crossover co-branding on consumer purchase intention based on the theory of symbolic consumption, employing a combination of case analysis and questionnaire surveys. The findings reveal that co-branding fit, co-branding scarcity, and co-branding sociality all have positive effects on purchase intention.

1. Theoretical Significance

This study takes KFC's crossover collaborations as an example to verify the impact of crossover collaboration in the fast food industry on consumers' purchase intentions. In the field of co-branding marketing research, scholars have primarily focused on industries such as tea beverages and apparel, with limited research on the fast-food sector. This is particularly prominent for representative fast-food brands like KFC. Therefore, this study chooses KFC as the research subject to conduct an in-depth analysis of its co-branding marketing metrics and effects, thereby filling this research gap. This study further deepens and expands the discussion on the cooperation models between brands in various industries, especially for the fast food industry, filling the gap in the research on its common characteristics, and thus laying the foundation for the construction of a long-term development mechanism for brand co-branding.

Based on symbolic consumption theory, this study verifies the influence of co-branding fit, co-branding scarcity, and co-branding sociality on purchase intention. Existing research has largely focused on operational strategies, communication mechanisms, and innovative development models in co-branding marketing (Grębosz-Krawczyk & Pointet, 2017; Kumar et al., 2016; Grębosz-Krawczyk & Pointet, 2017), with few studies examining the impact of cross-border co-branding on consumer purchase intention. Accordingly, this study, grounded in symbolic consumption theory, categorizes co-branding marketing into three dimensions—co-branding fit, co-branding scarcity, and co-branding sociality—to examine their effect on purchase intention. The study verifies the mechanism through which symbolic consumption theory operates in brand co-branding marketing, offering a new theoretical perspective for understanding consumer purchase intention in brand collaborations.

2. Practical Significance

In terms of the selection of collaboration partners, enterprises should attach great importance to the fit between the brand and the IP. Enterprises should deeply analyze the characteristics of the target consumer group and seek IPs that are highly compatible with their own brand in terms of style, function, and grade for collaboration, such as KFC’s collaboration with Pokémon, accurately targeting the overlapping consumer group and achieving mutual benefit and win-win results. The fit between the brand and the IP in terms of style, function, and grade will enhance the attractiveness of the product (Völckner & Sattler, 2006).

In terms of the application of marketing strategies, enterprises should make full use of multiple channels for collaboration marketing promotion. By leveraging the communication advantages of social media platforms, create topic-based marketing content to increase brand exposure and consumer participation. At the same time, skillfully use scarcity marketing strategies, launch limited edition and time-limited collaboration products to stimulate consumers’ purchase desires, but it is necessary to reasonably control the marketing rhythm and quantity to avoid excessive marketing that may cause consumer aversion.

From the perspective of enhancing the brand’s long-term value, enterprises should focus on building the sociality of collaboration activities. Plan interactive offline activities or online topic discussions to provide consumers with a platform for communication and sharing, enhancing consumers’ recognition and loyalty to the brand. More importantly, enterprises should not merely pursue the short-term traffic brought by collaborations but closely integrate collaboration activities with the brand’s core values, continuously provide consumers with high-quality products and services, maintain the brand image, and achieve sustainable development.

3. Research Limitations and Prospects

This study uses KFC as a single case study, with the sample focusing on the youth demographic (65.89% aged 18–25); the generalizability of the conclusions requires further validation. Future research could consider other sample groups, such as the middle-aged population. In addition, future research could expand to other industries (such as apparel and cosmetics) to compare the differentiated effects of co-branding strategies across various consumption scenarios. Furthermore, issues such as the long-term effect of collaborations on brand loyalty and the threshold for consumer aesthetic fatigue warrant in-depth exploration to provide more comprehensive theoretical support for cross-industry collaborations (Fuchs et al., 2010; Reimann et al., 2012).

VI. Conclusion

This paper takes KFC as an example and, based on the theory of symbolic consumption, explores the effect of co-branding marketing on purchase intention. The research finds that co-branding fit, co-branding scarcity, and co-branding sociality have a significant positive effect on purchase intention. KFC deepens the emotional connection between the brand and consumers by precisely selecting IPs, strengthening brand story-telling, and enhancing consumer interaction, thereby increasing consumer identification and purchase tendency. This paper not only provides strong support for cross-industry co-branding strategies in the fast food industry but also offers references for brand co-branding strategies in other industries, aiming to promote innovative practices in cross-industry co-branding marketing.

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