

Narrative versus Non-Narrative IP: Their Divergent Impacts on Purchase Intentions

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Abstract. With the rise of co-branded, how to select the right IP has become a key issue for businesses; however, existing research has yet to adequately explore the differentiation between “narrative IP” and “non-narrative IP.” Therefore, this study compared narrative and non-narrative dimensions, introduced emotional response as a mediating variable, and employed a one-factor, two-level (narrative IP vs. non-narrative IP) between-groups experimental design. Using blind box collectibles as the experimental carrier, a questionnaire was posted on the Credamo platform and randomly divided into narrative and non-narrative groups for data collection, followed by analysis of the questionnaire data. Thus conducting research on the impact of “narrative” and “non-narrative” IP on consumers’ consumption behavior. The results show that “narrative” IPs significantly increase consumers’ willingness to purchase co-branded products compared to “non-narrative” IPs. In addition, emotional responses are full mediation of consumers’ purchase intention how the two types of IP influence. This study shows that emotional resonance from narrative transportation is the key mechanism that encourages consumers to buy co-branded products. It enriches current research on IP co-branded and consumer behavior, and provided clear theoretical and practical suggestions for brands which want to choose IP partners and make marketing decisions.

1 Introduction

With the rise of co-branded, how to select the right IP has become a key issue for businesses [1]; Numerous existing studies suggest that narrative IP strategies resonate with consumers by drawing on an IP’s story background, character images and values, thereby stimulating purchase intention [2]. For instance, the collaboration between CHAGEE and Daomu Biji attracted large numbers of novel and drama fans through its compelling storyline. In contrast, non-narrative IP gains consumer recognition through its “visual persona”. A case in point is the collaboration between Pop Mart and Star People; without any narrative content, the products still appealed to a large consumer base solely through their cute and simple image. However, existing research has yet to adequately explore the differentiation between “narrative IP” and “non-narrative IP.” Therefore, this study compared narrative and non-narrative dimensions, introduced emotional response as a

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mediating variable, and employed a one-factor, two-level (narrative IP vs. non-narrative IP) between-groups experimental design. This study is of great significance for enterprises' co-branding IP selection. It enriches the research system in the fields of IP co-branding and consumer behaviour, and the research results can provide reference for brands in selecting IP for co-branding. This study recruited participants through the Credamo platform and randomly assigned them to two experimental groups. Drawing on the scenario priming method proposed by Escalas, Glaser and Reisinger, experimental stimuli were presented in the form of "text + picture": the narrative IP group was shown materials including story background, character relationships and the integration of products and stories, while the non-narrative IP group was only presented with IP visual images and product appearance without any narrative content [2, 3]. After reading the guidelines, participants filled out the questionnaire and reported demographic information such as gender and age. The questionnaire included two attention check questions to screen valid subjects. Finally, samples with substandard attention, misunderstanding of items and excessive missing values were excluded, and valid experimental data were obtained. The advantage of this method is that it can well sort out the existing research context, define core concepts, consolidate the theoretical foundation, provide sufficient theoretical support for the proposal of research hypotheses, and facilitate the systematic conduct of the research. The ultimate research goal of this study is to clarify the difference in the impact of narrative and non-narrative IP co-branding on consumers' purchase intention, reveal the mediating mechanism of emotional response in the impact process of the two, and explore the core logic of narrative transportation driving consumers to purchase co-branded products; to achieve this goal, a series of research steps were carried out, including theoretical combing and research hypothesis proposal, experimental design and data collection, empirical analysis and result verification, and finally a research conclusion with both theoretical value and practical guiding significance was formed.

2 Literature review

2.1 Co-branding

Co-branded products refer to a kind of products which combining two or more brands in various ways [4]. Cross-industry brand collaboration is a specific type of brand cooperation, in which two brands from different and non-competing industries are integrated into one new product [5]. Meanwhile, IP (Intellectual Property) merchandise refers to products created based on intellectual property. The IP derivatives industry includes all production activities that present the value of intellectual property. Often, exploring IP value requires expansion into other fields for re-creation, to achieve the commercial transformation of intellectual property [6]. As one important form of co-branding cooperation, IP collaboration is a cross-industry partnership derived from co-branding and the demand for IP value realization.

2.2 Positioning

Narrative transmission is a unique psychological process that combines attention, emotion and imagery. It turns abstract and intangible content into specific fictional plots and builds an immersive experience for the audience by storytelling. Meanwhile, it reduces negative cognitive responses, generates a sense of authenticity and causes strong emotional resonance, which can gently change the audience's attitudes, beliefs and self-concept [3, 8]. It also effectively avoids the negative impressions created by marketing, decreases users'

resistance to promotional messages, and achieves natural and effective communication and marketing results [8]. This strategy is widely used in advertising. The “narrative presentation of information” in advertisements is a key factor that evokes narrative transmission. Compared with descriptive or informational advertisements, narrative ads can better immerse consumers. This transmission effect can be further strengthened by narrative elements such as product placement and character [9]. Meanwhile, research shows that narrative advertising performs better in establishing audience trust while conveying core information [10]. A narrative IP strategy is a practical application of narrative advertising. It uses the IP’s story background, character profiles, or values to build an advertising narrative, and can adopt differentiated methods based on different IP categories. The key to this strategy is to naturally integrate the “soul” of the IP with the product, so that the IP will not be solely to a simple “symbol” [2]. In contrast, non-narrative IP strategies rely on “symbols”. A “Storyless IP” is a type of IP without a complete story background, only includes basic character setting and short descriptions, and expresses character persona through abstract symbols or image. Some IP has become an important tool for corporate marketing. For example, as one of Disney’s “Seven Wonders”, Lingna Belle has no supporting animated series or film story. Her character features have been enriched through audience interaction, short video and re-created content by her fans gradually, making her an independent “vessel for symbolic characterization” [3, 11].

3 Theoretical analysis and research hypotheses

3.1 Types of IP Co-branding and consumer purchase intention

As a wide form of co-branding, IP licensing helps realize the commercial value of IP through co-branded products. This study argues that narrative IP and non-narrative IP have different influences on consumers’ purchase intentions. The reason is that the communication method of IP cooperation can evoke consumers’ emotional responses [6]. Specifically, narrative transportation strategies can significantly improve advertising effects and purchase intention [7]. Liang Xinyue points that an attractive and interesting story can gently capture consumers’ attention during reading and further stimulate their purchase intention [8]. Moreover, Escalas finds that when consumers imagine positive results from using a product, they align with the emotional state of narrative transportation, which lowers their critical or negative feelings [3, 4]. Thomas et al. state that narrative transportation helps consumers quickly connect with the scenes, characters and plots in a story, making them easier to be persuaded with a long-lasting persuasive effect [9]. When used IP co-branding, such a narrative method is more likely to arouse strong emotional responses of consumers and further strengthen their purchase intention. On the other hand, non-narrative IP has no story plots to support it, so it is hard to trigger immediately emotional responses when consumers look at the products. Therefore, compared with non-narrative IP, narrative IP increases consumers’ purchase intention by offering richer emotional experiences through its story background. Based on this, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Compared to co-branding with non-narrative IP, narrative IP products have a more significant effect in improving consumers’ purchase intention.

3.2 Emotional response

An emotion is a transient state that combines physiological responses, personal feelings, and outward expressions; it refers to the psychological state a person experiences when

responding to various situations in life [12]. It manifests through a variety of means, including facial expressions, voice, and body language. Emotional responses can be categorized into three types: positive, negative, and complex. In this paper, “narrative-based” IP often evokes positive emotional responses in consumers, thereby driving consumer behavior [13]. Research indicates that pleasant advertising content is more appealing. In "narrative" IP, narrative delivery typically generates a unique persuasive effect that stimulates consumers' imagination and immerses them in a pleasurable experience [14]. In contrast, non-narrative forms of expression perform poorly in terms of emotional response, hedonic value, credibility, and perceived goal promotion, making it difficult for them to influence consumer decisions through emotional pathways [15]. Li Qiyi et al. point out that “narrative” IP influences people’s perceptions by evoking strong emotional responses; emotion is the ultimate outcome of storytelling, and only when consumers acknowledge these emotional responses will they develop a genuine willingness to consume. In summary, this study posits that strong emotional responses can enhance consumers’ purchase intent [7]. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses, with the specific theoretical framework illustrated in Figure 1:

An emotion is a temporary state that includes physical reactions, feelings, and external expressions. It describes the psychological state people have when facing different situations in life [12]. Emotion can be shown through facial expressions, tone of voice, body language and other forms. Emotional responses can be categorized into three categories: positive, negative and mixed. In this study, “narrative-based” IP often brings positive emotion to consumers and further promotes their consumption behavior [13]. Studies have shown that enjoyable advertising is more attractive. In “narrative” IP, narrative communication usually creates a special persuasive effect, which inspires consumers’ imagination and makes them immersed in a pleasant experience [14]. In comparison, non-narrative expressions are weaker in emotional response, enjoyment value, credibility and perceived goal progress, so it is hard for them to affect consumer decisions through emotion [15]. Li Qiyi et al. suggest that “narrative” IP influences people’s perceptions by arousing strong emotional responses. Emotion is the result of storytelling, and only when consumers accept such emotional responses will they form real consumption willingness. In conclusion, this study holds that strong emotional responses can improve consumers’ willingness [7]. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses, and the specific theoretical framework is shown in Figure 1:

H2: Emotional responses mediate the relationship between "narrative" and "non-narrative" IP types and consumer purchase intention.

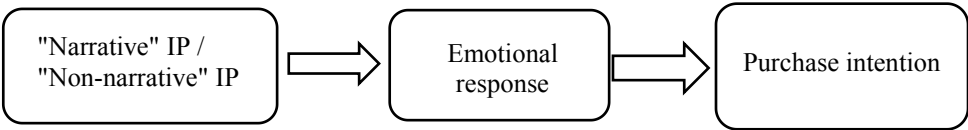


Fig. 1. Theoretical Framework.

4 Research methods

4.1 Questionnaire design

Experiment 1 employed a between-groups experimental design with a single factor and two levels (“narrative” IP vs. “non-narrative” IP). The major goal was to test the effect of “narrative” and “non-narrative” IP on consumer purchase intention (Hypothesis H1).

Further, the experiment tries to verify the psychological mechanisms underlying the effects of “narrative” and “non-narrative” IP on consumer purchase intention (Hypothesis H2).

4.2 Questionnaire survey

Participants were recruited via the Credamo platform and randomly assigned to two experimental groups. Following the scenario priming method used by Escalas, Glaser, and Reisinger [2, 3], this study presented experimental stimuli in the form of combined text and image descriptions. The narrative IP group received materials including IP story background, character relationships, and displays of co-branded products integrated with story scenes. The non-narrative IP group only received materials showing IP visual features and the appearance of co-branded products, without any story elements. After reading the instructions, participants completed a standardized questionnaire and reported demographic information such as gender, age, education level, and monthly disposable income. Two attention-check questions were included in the questionnaire to identify attentive participants. After excluding respondents who failed attention checks, misunderstood items, or had excessive missing values, 50 valid samples were obtained, with an effective response rate of 83.3%.

All variables were adopted from established scales in previous studies and modified to fit the research context of IP co-branded products, to ensure the reliability and validity of the measurements. All items were combined into a single questionnaire and presented randomly: purchase intention, emotional response, control variables, and demographic information. A 7-point Likert scale was used (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) to reduce the central tendency effect among participants. The independent variable (IP type) was manipulated through experimental groups, including narrative IP (coded 1) and non-narrative IP (coded 0). The dependent variable (purchase intention) was designed based on the scale developed by Kim et al. to measure the level of purchase intention. The mediating variable (emotional response) referred to the emotional measurement dimensions proposed by Hoeken and den Ouden, focusing on positive emotions (pleasure, affection, identification), negative emotions (indifference, resistance) and complex emotions (curiosity–hesitation), aiming to test participants’ emotional reactions after reading the materials [14, 15].

5 Research results

5.1 Descriptive data

The 50 valid samples in this survey show a balanced demographic distribution. The sample structures of the narrative IP group and the non-narrative IP group have no significant differences, which effectively ensures the reliability and comparability of the experimental results. In terms of gender, both groups are dominated by female respondents, with males accounting for about 20%, showing highly consistent gender composition. The age groups are mainly concentrated in 21–30 and 31–40 years old, and these two age groups account for more than 70% in both IP groups, which matches the characteristics of the target consumers of art toys and blind boxes. In terms of education, both groups are mainly composed of respondents with a bachelor’s degree or above, accounting for 80%. Such samples possess adequate consumer cognition, making the survey results more practically valuable. Overall, the two groups are highly similar in demographic characteristics without systematic bias, providing a solid sample foundation for the validity of the research conclusions. This analysis is based on 50 valid questionnaires (26 from the narrative IP

group and 24 from the non-narrative IP group). Research hypotheses H1 and H2 are tested using descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-test, correlation analysis, and stepwise regression analysis. Consumers' purchase intention (measured on a 1–7 Likert scale) differs significantly between the two types of IP.

Table 1. Consumer Purchase Intention of Two Types of IP.

IP Type	Sample Size	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Narrative IP	26	5.808	0.849	4	7
Non-narrative IP	24	4.833	1.659	1	6

Table 1 shows that the mean purchase intention for narrative IP is significantly higher than that for non-narrative IP, and the data exhibits lower dispersion (smaller standard deviation), indicating that narrative IP has a more consistent effect on boosting purchase intention.

Emotional responses were classified into three categories: negative emotion (score 1, no obvious emotional fluctuation), complex emotion (score 2, curiosity and hesitation), and positive emotion (score 3, emotional resonance, style recognition, or pleasure). After coding, statistical results show that the mean emotional response score of the narrative IP group (2.885) is much higher than that of the non-narrative IP group (2.458). Meanwhile, the narrative IP group has a smaller standard deviation (0.326), indicating that narrative IP is more likely to arouse positive emotions among consumers and leads to more consistent emotional feedback.

5.2 Independent samples t-test

To test Hypothesis H1 that "narrative IP can better improve consumers' purchase intention compared with non narrative IP", this study conducted an independent samples t test on purchase intention data between the two groups. The results show a t value of 2.581, a degree of freedom of 33.660, and a p value of 0.014 ($p < 0.05$). At the 95% confidence level, there is a significant statistical difference in the influence of the two IP types on consumers' purchase intention. The mean purchase intention of the narrative IP group is significantly higher than that of the non narrative IP group, so Hypothesis H1 is supported. To further explore the relationship between emotional response and purchase intention and lay a foundation for the subsequent mediation effect test, this study performed a Pearson correlation analysis between coded emotional responses and purchase intention levels. The correlation coefficient r is 0.826 and the p value is 0.000 ($p < 0.001$), indicating an extremely significant strong positive correlation between emotional response and purchase intention. In other words, the more positive the emotional response consumers have toward IP co branded products, the stronger their purchase intention will be.

To test the mediating role of emotional responses, this study employed stepwise regression analysis. We sequentially constructed a model of the direct effect of IP type on purchase intention, a model of the causal effect of IP type on emotional responses, and a model of the combined total effect of IP type and emotional responses on purchase intention. The regression results are as follows.

Model 1 tests the direct effect of IP type on purchase intention. The model is significant overall ($F = 6.989, p = 0.011 < 0.05$), with an R^2 of 0.127. The regression coefficient for IP type coding is 0.974 ($p = 0.011 < 0.05$), indicating that IP type has a significant direct positive effect on consumers' purchase intention, and narrative IP can directly improve

consumers' purchase intention. Model 2 examines the antecedent effect of IP type on emotional response. This model is also significant overall ($F = 5.849$, $p = 0.019 < 0.05$), with an R^2 of 0.109. The regression coefficient for IP type coding is 0.426 ($p = 0.019 < 0.05$), showing that IP type has a significant direct positive effect on consumers' emotional responses. Compared with non-narrative IP, narrative IP is more likely to trigger positive emotional reactions in consumers. Model 3 tests the total and mediating effects of IP type and emotional response on purchase intention together. The model is highly significant ($F = 52.351$, $p = 0.000 < 0.001$), and its explanatory power is greatly improved with an R^2 of 0.690. The regression coefficient for coded emotional response is 1.679 ($p = 0.000 < 0.001$), showing an extremely significant positive effect on purchase intention. Meanwhile, the regression coefficient for IP type coding drops to 0.258 and becomes insignificant ($p = 0.277 > 0.05$). These results show that after including emotional response as a mediating variable, the direct effect of IP type on purchase intention changes from significant to insignificant. Combined with the significant results of the first two models, it can be concluded that emotional response plays a full mediating role in the influence of the two IP types on consumers' purchase intention. Therefore, Hypothesis H2 of this study is supported.

Experiment 1 demonstrated that narrative IP significantly increases consumers' purchase intentions compared to non-narrative IP and preliminarily confirmed the emotional responses play a mediating role. This study provides empirical evidence for theoretical research on IP co-branding and offers guidance for brands selecting IP partners for collaborations.

6 Discussion

Using a one-factor, two-level between-group experiment with toy blind boxes as the stimulus, this study explored the effects of narrative IP and non-narrative IP on consumers' purchase intention and tested the mediating role of emotional response. The results indicate that narrative IP significantly improves consumers' purchase intention toward co-branded products compared with non-narrative IP, which supports Hypothesis H1. Emotional response plays a full mediating role in the process through which the two types of IP influence purchase intention, verifying Hypothesis H2. These findings show that emotional resonance generated by narrative transportation is the key mechanism driving consumer purchase behavior. They enrich theoretical research in the field of IP co-branding marketing and offer practical guidance for brands when selecting cooperative IP. Specifically, brands should give priority to narrative IP which have complete storylines, as it can more effectively improve consumers' purchase intentions.

7 Conclusion

This study uses a one-factor, two-level between-subjects experiment with toy blind boxes as the research stimulus. The empirical results confirm that compared with non-narrative IP, narrative IP significantly improves consumers' purchase intention toward co-branded products. Additionally, emotional response plays a full mediating role in the influence of the purchase intention. Both Hypothesis H1 and Hypothesis H2 are supported. The study further concludes that emotional resonance caused by narrative transportation is the core psychological mechanism for narrative IP co-branded to promote consumer purchase behavior. Narrative IP with complete storylines and emotional value can better stimulate purchase intention by arousing positive emotion in consumers. In contrast, non-narrative IP

lacks story plots, so it is difficult to build strong emotional connections, so its effect on improving purchase intention is weaker.

This study offers valuable insights for research on IP co-branding and consumer behavior. It fills the research gap about the different impacts of narrative and non-narrative IP on consumer behavior and confirms the full mediating role of emotional response. Meanwhile, it provides clear guidance for brands in making IP co-branding decisions and conducting marketing. When selecting IP, brands may prioritize narrative IP with complete story backgrounds and emotional value. By enhancing the integration of IP stories and products, brands can evoke emotional resonance among consumers and improve marketing effectiveness.

Future research should explore more diverse in depth. It may examine the different effects of different IP co-branding across various product categories, to improve the widely adopt of the research findings. Meanwhile, longitudinal studies can be taken to observe the long-term changes of emotional influence and purchase intention caused by narrative IP co-branding. It can also explore how non-narrative IP influences consumer behavior after being turned into narrative content through re-creation, thus revealing the long-term mechanism of IP co-branding marketing.

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