

CONSUMER PERCEPTION AND BRAND MEANING IN CHARACTER-BASED BRANDING: A STUDY OF ANU



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Abstract

The current development of character-based branding is encouraging more companies to utilize characters not only as visual elements but also as strategic assets that can be leveraged to build brand identity, create emotional engagement, and provide meaningful experiences for consumers. However, previous research examining how consumers perceive character-based branding and how these perceptions contribute to the meaning formation for character-based brands remains relatively limited, particularly in the context of local brands in their early stages of development. Therefore, this study aims to explore consumer perceptions of character-based branding and understand how these perceptions contribute to the formation of brand meaning and to formulate branding strategy recommendations for Anu, a Jakarta-based lifestyle brand featuring character-based merchandise. The research used an exploratory qualitative approach, supported by semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool. This research involved ten interview participants selected to represent Anu's primary target market: young adults who live in Jakarta and have experience interacting with character-based brands. The results of the thematic analysis were then interpreted using Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework. Five main themes emerged from the thematic findings. The findings suggest that consumers not only evaluate character-based brands based on their visual appeal, but also actively interpret the character's identity through various elements, such as visuals, narrative, context, personality, emotional relevance, and symbolic associations, before ultimately forming a meaningful attachment to the brand. Interpretation through the CBBE framework indicates that most of the research findings are at the Brand Meaning level, especially in the Brand Imagery dimension. However, evidence with lower intensity were found related to the other three levels: Branding Identity, Brand Response and Brand Resonance. The study contributes a consumer-based foundation for developing branding strategies for emerging character-based brands.

Keywords: Brand Equity; Brand Meaning; Character-Based Branding; Consumer Perception; Creative Industry; Thematic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry in Indonesia is growing significantly, as the country welcomed as many as 13.90 million foreign tourists in 2024, rising 19.05% from the previous year (Indonesian Ministry of Tourism, 2025). The domestic sector is even larger, with 1.02 billion trips in 2024, a 21.61% increase from 2023 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025). Additionally, data collected by Badan Pusat Statistik (2024) showed that souvenirs ranked fourth among expenditure categories, with domestic tourists' average spending at IDR 229,240 in 2024. The data above shows that branding in the souvenir and lifestyle goods market is not merely about the “cute” factor, but is also a part of a major business sector, where branding can influence consumer perception. Amid the vast souvenir and lifestyle goods market, brands need to differentiate themselves through unique design and storytelling to remain competitive in the market.

One branding approach currently emerging in the creative industry is character-based branding, where fictional characters serve not only as decorative elements but also as carriers of a brand's identity, personality, and symbolic representation. Globally, there are many character-based brands that have become world-renowned, such as Sanrio, LINE Friends, and Studio Ghibli. These brands demonstrate that characters that stick in consumers' minds can foster emotional connections, communicate narratives with cultural context, and strengthen long-term relationships with consumers. These brands create value through the meanings that consumers associate with their characters.

Wang W., et al. (2024) conducted a study on the impact of value perceptions on tourist souvenir purchase decisions. The findings revealed that functional and social value significantly affect tourists' decisions to purchase souvenirs. However, regarding branding, particularly character-based branding, there is little research that has looked at how these strategies would influence consumers' perceptions to lead to their willingness to purchase souvenir products. Indonesia's market is saturated with goods and services, and the diversification of consumer tastes makes it difficult for products to stand out. The situation requires a brand to have a strong branding strategy to stand out (Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2025). However, many local souvenir businesses still rely on conventional marketing and generic designs that do not represent a unique trademark or intellectual property, and thus do not create a point of difference (Fathmaningrum, 2024). This indicates the incongruity between the market demand for unique branding and the local souvenir enterprises' existing branding capabilities.

Although character-based branding has proven its presence in the global creative industry, studies and research examining how consumers construct brand meaning from character-based brands are still very limited, especially in the context of merchandise and souvenir products in Indonesia. Yet, understanding how consumers perceive and construct brand meaning within character-based brands is crucial for developing branding strategies, in order to create value that is more than just visual appeal, at the same time establish strong symbolic and emotional associations. This gap is particularly relevant for Anu, a developing Jakarta-based creative brand established in 2025, that represents Jakarta through character-based merchandise and lifestyle goods. As an emerging brand, Anu is currently developing its visual identity, branding strategy, and product portfolio curation before entering the market.

To address this issue, the study is guided by three research questions: (RQ1) How do consumers perceive and interpret character-based branding? (RQ2) How do consumers' perceptions contribute to the formation of brand meaning in character-based branding? and (RQ3) How can insights from consumer perception and brand meaning be translated into branding recommendations for Anu? Accordingly, this study aims to investigate consumers' perception and interpretation of character-based branding, understand how these perceptions contribute to brand meaning, and develop brand recommendations for Anu based on insights of consumer perception and brand meaning. The study adopts Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework as an interpretive lens to connect empirical findings with the process of consumer-based brand equity formation (Keller, 1993, 2001), providing both theoretical insight into meaning-making and practical guidance for emerging character-based brands in Indonesia.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Character-based branding is a branding method that employs anthropomorphised fictional characters as the primary symbol of identity. This type is a blend of visual design, personality and story-telling. Garretson and Niedrich (2004) argue that brand mascots can enhance consumer trust, as they can act as a believable and relevant source of brand meaning and improve brand attitude. Anthropomorphism refers to consumers' natural tendency to attribute humanlike qualities to non-human entities, enabling characters to elicit emotional attachment and create meaning (Epley et al., 2007), and consumers develop interpersonal relationship norms with anthropomorphised brands, which leads to greater emotional attachment and engagement with the brand (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). Visual elements that mimic human features or appearance, such as facial expressions and body gestures, also amplify this effect by eliciting intuitive social responses and enabling symbolic interpretation (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011). Aaker's (1997) brand personality framework clarifies how characters can represent distinct traits, drawing on five dimensions, consists of sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. These dimensions provide a classification scheme, which can be used by researchers and practitioners, to identify the psychological characteristics that consumers attach to a brand. Narrative branding frameworks add that consumers build brand meaning by linking brand-related information with personal or culturally shared stories, thereby incorporating the brand into their identity and life story (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Woodside, 2010). Across these theories, character-based branding is a strategic way of adding meaning, personality, and emotional appeal, particularly in creative markets where symbolic value and storytelling are essential.

This study uses Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework as its central analytical lens (Keller, 1993, 2001). The framework holds that brand equity is built when consumers develop a strong, favourable and unique relationship with the brand through a series of hierarchical levels. These levels are: Brand Identity (salience and recognition), Brand Meaning (associations comprising Brand Performance and Brand Imagery), Brand Response (judgements and feelings), and Brand Resonance (the strongest psychological attachment, loyalty, and community). Brand meaning is a central element in Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model. This concept is vital to understanding how

consumers process, retain and react to brand information. meaning is built through culturally shared symbols and consumer interpretation (McCracken, 1986; Levy, 1959). If the cues are ambiguous, ambiguous, or poorly communicated, consumers are likely to make superficial interpretations, as they will evaluate the brand based on surface-level attributes. In character-based branding, Brand Imagery is especially relevant because consumers evaluate characters through symbolic and emotional associations, not by the functional aspects of a product. The symbolic, abstract, and intangible aspects of the brand (Keller, 2001) including: user imagery, personality and values, history, and visual symbolism. For emerging brands, building clear and unique symbolic cues, consistent storytelling, and a coherent character personality is therefore essential to move consumers beyond surface-level perception. While the Customer-Based Brand Equity framework of Keller will be discussed in a hierarchical order, the main purpose of this study is not to confirm the progression of each level. Instead, the framework is an interpretative tool to understand how the themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis relate to the different dimensions of consumer-based brand equity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative exploratory research design, which is appropriate for investigating a poorly defined phenomenon and gaining deep insight into meanings and experiences rather than measuring variables (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The subjects were ten participants representing Anu's primary target market: urban young adults aged 18–35 who live, work, or study in Jakarta and are familiar with character-based lifestyle products, each assigned an identification code (P1–P10). Purposive sampling was used because, in qualitative research, sample size is determined by depth of insight and thematic saturation rather than statistical generalisability, and saturation in a homogeneous sample typically occurs within twelve interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2006; Malterud et al., 2016). Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they offer flexibility for participants to express their thoughts, feelings and understandings and also allow the researcher to probe for relevant branding features like character personality, narrative cues and visual symbolism (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015); observational notes on non-verbal expressions supplemented the verbal data.

Procedurally, individual Interviews were conducted online or offline based on participant's willingness and consent and took about 20 to 40 minutes. At the start of each interview session participants were informed of the aim of the study and assured that the interview session would be recorded with their consent and later transcribed verbatim as data for thematic analysis. In addition to the external interviews with the target consumers, an internal interview was conducted with one of Anu's founders to collect organisational context. However, unlike the consumer interviews, the founder interviews were not the main analytical material for answering the research questions. Instead, the results of the interviews were used as managerial information to support and justify the development of recommendations and implementation plans for branding strategy. Qualitative data are analysed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis starts with a stage of familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and ends with producing the report. The themes from the thematic

analysis were then interpreted through Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework. The process of interpretation involved all four hierarchical levels of the framework, with different depth and emphasis at each level depending on the empirical themes identified from the thematic analysis. Finally, the insights obtained from the interpretation will inform the development of recommendations for Anu's branding strategy.

Research Questions

Because this study is exploratory and qualitative, it does not test statistical hypotheses but is guided by questions and objectives derived from the background and business situations, which the thematic analysis explores and refines:

RQ1: How are the consumers' perceptions and interpretations of character-based branding?

RQ2: How do consumers' perceptions contribute to the formation of brand meaning in character-based branding?

RQ3: How can insights from consumer perception and brand meaning be translated into branding recommendations for Anu?

Research Objectives

1. To investigate consumers' perception and interpretation of character-based branding, ultimately in relation to personality, narrative and visual identity.
2. To investigate the extent to which consumers' perceptions may influence brand meaning and symbolic associations for the character-based brand.
3. To develop brand recommendations for Anu based on insights of consumer perception and brand meaning.

RESEARCH MODEL

The conceptual model positions branding elements (character personality, narrative, anthropomorphism, and visual and symbolic design) as inputs that shape consumer perception, which in turn contributes to brand meaning and is interpreted through Keller's CBBE framework to generate branding-strategy recommendations for Anu. The model is illustrated below.

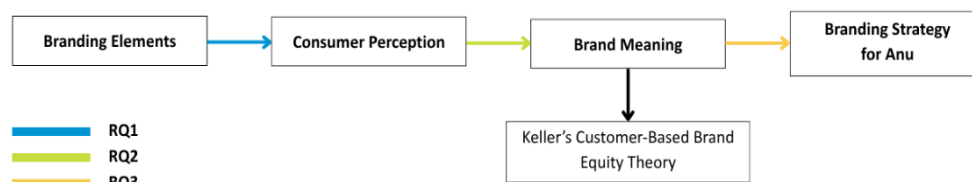


Figure 1.
Conceptual Framework

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of interviews with ten participants produced five main themes explaining how consumers perceive and evaluate character-based branding: (1) Purchase Drivers and Motivations; (2) Visual and Aesthetic Preferences; (3) Character Deciphering and Meaning Construction; (4) Emotional Connection and Identity; and (5) Brand Evaluation

and Brand-Building Elements. The participant profile and the theme-development process are summarised in the tables below, followed by discussion of each theme and its interpretation through Keller's CBBE framework.

Table 1.
Interview Participant List

Participant	Gender	Age	Domicile	Experience Purchasing Character Merchandise
P1	Female	24	Jakarta	Yes
P2	Male	26	Jakarta	Yes
P3	Male	25	Tangerang – Jakarta	Yes
P4	Male	26	Jakarta	Yes
P5	Female	25	Bandung – Jakarta	Yes
P6	Female	25	Jakarta	Yes
P7	Female	24	Jakarta	Yes
P8	Female	23	Jakarta	Yes
P9	Female	23	Jakarta	Yes
P10	Male	24	Jakarta	Yes

Source: Data processed (2026)

Table 2.
Thematic Development Process

Sample Code	Category	Theme
Nostalgia, childhood memories	Emotional motivations	Purchase Drivers and Motivations
Art style, visual attractiveness	Visual preferences	Visual and Aesthetic Preferences
Backstory, context, personality	Meaning construction	Character Deciphering and Meaning Construction
Relatability, self-representation	Identity connection	Emotional Connection and Identity
Narrative, originality, memorability	Brand evaluation	Brand Evaluation and Brand-Building Elements

Source: Data processed (2026)

Theme 1: Purchase Drivers and Motivations

The first theme captured the factors influencing consumer interest and purchase decisions, which participants described as a mix of emotional, functional, and experiential considerations rather than purely aesthetic ones. Several participants associated character-based products with childhood memories and nostalgia, which provided comfort and heightened interest, as P2 noted that certain characters can “evoke nostalgia” and P10 referred to fulfilling unmet childhood satisfaction. In addition, participants stated that functionality remained a purchase requirement: P8 and P9 emphasized that products must be

useful in everyday life, showing that visual appeal alone does not enough to justify buying. Cuteness frequently served as an initial attraction, P3 was drawn to products because the character was “cute and unique”, yet participants agreed that cuteness alone is insufficient to sustain long-term interest without personality, storytelling, or meaning.

Desirability can be shaped through scarcity and exclusivity, related to P4 mentioning that limited or event-only products felt more meaningful and P3 describing a “FOMO” impulse around blind box characters, consistent with prior research showing that exclusivity and perceived scarcity enhance perceived value and urgency. Lastly, experiential value emerged as an interesting motivation: P8 and P2 explained that products purchased while travelling become memory markers that help recall meaningful experiences. Overall, the theme shows that purchase motivation is holistic, integrating practical value, personal relevance, scarcity, and the experiences consumers associate with acquisition.

Theme 2: Visual and Aesthetic Preferences

It is known that visual and aesthetic elements are important factors that can influence the consumers initial response to character based branding. This means that consumer engagement starts with the visual appearance of a character before any emotional connection or meaning can be formed. A number of respondents stated that they were attracted to characters who had a very distinctive or non-traditional visual identity. They were not looking for traditionally attractive characters, but quirkier, arguably imperfect ones with a “ugly-cute” aesthetic: P6 stated the stranger and uglier (in a quirky way) a character is, the more appealing, while P9 prioritised a unique-looking character as a differentiator in a market filled with conventionally cute characters. Art style is a huge factor. Most participants preferred a doodlish, hand-drawn look that seems more casual, playful, and authentic (P7, P8), whereas P10 preferred realistic proportions for collectible display character. Participants discussed how the illustration design style can influence how they perceive the character’s persona and the brand overall.

Participants not only discussed character design, but also highlighted the significance of applying character design to products. Some preferred subtle application for everyday wearability and mix-and-match flexibility (P6, P7), while others favoured bold application for stronger identity and visual impact (P3). There was a consistent pattern in that participants did not specifically prefer either the subtle or the bold design application method. Instead they adapted their tolerances and preferences to product and context (P8, P4). Colour and texture were believed to influence the visual appeal and add character personality, with P1 noting that bright colours create a happy, energising mood. Collectively, the theme indicated that consumers evaluate character-based products on several levels, not just from the visual appeal of the character, but also from the visual communication of the character through the design choices of the brand. In general, visual design is a starting point for engagement, capturing the attention of consumers and inviting them to learn more about the character.

Theme 3: Character Deciphering and Meaning Construction

This theme showed that participants did not just see characters as visual designs, but also took into account a number of other factors that helped them understand their personality, identity, and purpose of creation. Participants often relied on visual cues as their primary source of information to try to make sense of a character. P1 explained that facial expression, eyes, and visual style convey personality, and P2 inferred a “cheerful” personality from expression. Participants used the drawing style not only to express the character but

also a symbolic cue to interpret the character (P7). Besides visual appearance, participants also tried to imagine scenarios in which the character would appear; P9 noted that characters are easier to understand when explored across many contexts rather than a single still image, and P4 read meaning from expressions and poses. In this way, consumers transform static visual designs into more complex and meaningful identities.

The interviews revealed another pattern of meaning construction. The participants thought it important that narrative aspects helped them to understand a character. P10 even sought story validation through a brand's social media or website, showing that backstories reduce ambiguity and enrich meaning, while P8 described how written narrative cues such as "Halo" or expressive visual effects aid understanding. This personification aligns with anthropomorphism theory, which holds that people attribute human characteristics to non-human entities to make them relatable and interpretable (Epley et al., 2007). The findings explain the third theme, in which consumers are active in the construction of meaning, rather than passively accepting the character's appearance. This confirms that the process of meaning construction is a slow interpretative process which can transform a character into a memorable and meaningful brand entity.

Theme 4: Emotional Connection and Identity

In addition to understanding the characters' appearance, traits, and story, participants also discussed many situations when they felt emotionally connected to a character. These results show that emotional attachment is not built purely by visual appeal or storytelling alone. Consumers feel a stronger connection when they see parts of themselves in the characters they meet, whether through experiences or social identities: P6 saw a character as an expression of self shown through product use, and P3 described an emotional connection referring to a "mirror" when seeing a character. Emotional attachment was often described by participants as a form of relatability rather than mere admiration, as P9 found characters relevant when narratives connected to everyday life, and P7 sought cheerful "vibe" characters as mood boosters. These accounts indicate that if consumers can see their own personal experiences reflected in a character, they are able to develop an emotional connection with that character.

Beyond individual identity, characters also generated a sense of belonging and social connection. P1 described owning animal-character products as having a version of pets she could not keep in real life situation, while P6 recalled matching keychains with friends that feels meaningful. The findings suggest that emotional connections can be influenced by social and community identity, not only individual experiences. Characters that create a sense of belonging will likely foster greater consumer engagement. Overall, these findings demonstrate that emotional engagement is more than simply admiring the character's appearance. Rather, it comes from personal relevance and self-reflection. That's why it can be beneficial for character-based brands to give consumers opportunities to see aspects of themselves reflected in the characters being portrayed, enabling stronger emotional bonding.

Theme 5: Brand Evaluation and Brand-Building Elements

The final theme identified was how consumers evaluate character-based brands outside of visual attraction and emotional connection, which is considered to be important for creating a strong and sustainable brand. Narrative and backstory came up multiple times: P2 highlighted that a strong narrative leads to a character become a "conversation starter," and P10 first noticed a character's backstory, indicating that storytelling increases

memorability, differentiation, and long-term attachment. Another key factor is originality. P3 observed that overly generic characters that imitate others lack a clear identity. These results suggest that originality provides a competitive advantage by helping consumers to identify and remember a character-based brand. It serves as a key driver of brand distinctiveness and perceived worth.

Participants also stressed the importance of a clear and consistent brand personality; P8 noted that products with minimal brand or character identity make future repurchase difficult, positioning identity as a bridge between consumers and products. An interesting pattern that emerged in the interviews was that the interviewees acknowledged the importance of marketing activities and brand collaborations as a means to attract and retain consumers' attention, as P9 attributed Tahilalats' recognition to large exposure, content, and collaboration, and P7 mentioned the influence of product use by influencers. The findings explain that brand meaning can also be created by interactions between brands and consumers to develop a long-term perception. Combined, the results of the final theme show that consumers evaluate character-based brands holistically, rather than by individual character design quality.

Interpretation through Keller's CBBE Framework

The application of Keller's framework offers a more structured approach to understanding how the findings can contribute to the development of a strong character-based brand. Thematic findings show that evidence and relevance are present in all four levels of Keller's framework. However, the greatest empirical evidence and support comes at the second level, Brand Meaning, particularly the Brand Imagery dimension. At the Brand Identity level, the results indicate that visual uniqueness is an important factor in attracting initial attention and can make it easier to remember; ugly-cute aesthetics, doodlish styles, and recognisable traits. Visual appearance may be a factor for initial interest but participants provided another valuable insight—recognition is often not enough to continue long term engagement. At the Brand Meaning level, consumers construct meaning from a character through visual interpretation, contextual understanding and narrative exploration. For character-based branding, brand meaning is mainly built through brand imagery. The narrative depth, personality traits and emotional relevance can be visually contributed to the meaning and significance for consumers. Therefore, character brands should put more effort into building meaningful symbol associations to help consumers understand and engage with their characters, not just their look.

At the Brand Response level, consumers reacted positively when characters felt relatable, authentic, and emotionally meaningful. Results indicate that emotional responses to character-based brands may be influenced by both visual appearance and consumers' perceptions of personal relevance to the character. Hence, character-based brands that wish to be considered successful need to communicate relatable experiences and emotions. The top of Keller's pyramid is brand resonance, which is the building of a close relationship between consumers and a brand. While the resonance cannot be fully assessed by this study because of the exploratory nature of the research and the fact that Anu is not yet fully implemented as an active brand, some findings indicate factors that can contribute to future resonance. Participants emphasised the need for community engagement, collaboration with others, and consistent storytelling to sustain long-term interest in character-based brands. The mapping of themes, categories, and CBBE levels is summarised in Table 3, confirming that

the findings appear to most strongly support brand meaning level for character-based branding and that consumers build meaning through visual symbolism, narrative depth, character traits, and emotional relevance.

Table 3.
Mapping of Themes to Keller's CBBE Levels

Theme	Dominant CBBE Level	Key Branding Insight
Purchase Drivers and Motivations	Brand Response	Emotional, functional, and experiential value drive interest
Visual and Aesthetic Preferences	Brand Identity	Distinctive visual identity attracts attention and aids recall
Character Deciphering and Meaning Construction	Brand Meaning (Imagery)	Narrative and context turn visuals into symbolic meaning
Emotional Connection and Identity	Brand Meaning / Response	Self-representation and relatability build attachment
Brand Evaluation and Brand-Building Elements	Brand Meaning / Resonance	Originality, identity, storytelling, and collaboration sustain equity

Source: Data processed (2026)

Consumer Perception of Character-Based Branding

Consistent with Proposition 1, the findings show that consumer perception of character-based branding is shaped by an interplay of emotional, functional, and aesthetic factors rather than visual appeal alone. Participants in the analysis showed that purchase decisions are not only sparked by visual appeal but also gradually formed by feelings of nostalgia, practicality, exclusivity, and experiential value. This holistic evaluation aligns with Wang et al. (2024) statement that functional and social value significantly influence souvenir purchase decisions, even extending it by suggesting that emotional and experiential dimensions are equally salient for character-based products.

Furthermore, visual and aesthetic factors greatly influence consumers' first impressions of character-based products or brands, echoing Keller's (2001) argument that recognisable and distinctive cues drive brand salience. Participants' preference for unique visual identities and aesthetics, hand-drawn and rather doodlish illustration styles shows sign that originality and recognisability outweigh conventional attractiveness in this category, which reinforces the differentiation imperative facing local souvenir brands (Fathmaningrum, 2024). One thing to remember, participants treated visual appeal as a starting point rather than an endpoint, which indicates a deeper interpretive process.

Brand Meaning Construction in Character-Based Branding

Supporting the research questions and objectives, this study reveals that brand meaning is generated by a gradual process which is not limited to visual appeal. Consumers are active participants in the procedure of interpreting characters; observations of a character are not passive. Participants often mention the presence of visual cues, contextual exploration and narrative information provided by the brand to understand and identify a character and learn its meaning. This is consistent with narrative branding theory, which holds that consumers derive symbolic value by linking brand information to personal or culturally shared stories (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Woodside, 2010), and with anthropomorphism theory, which explains the tendency to attribute human traits to characters to make them relatable (Epley et al., 2007; Aggarwal & McGill, 2007).

Emotional connection proved central to meaning-making, with participants forming stronger attachments to characters that reflected their identity, experiences, values, or social relationships. This supports Aaker's (1997) view that brand personality enables symbolic and emotional connection and reflects the symbolic-consumption perspective that meaning is co-created through culturally shared symbols and consumer interpretation (McCracken, 1986; Levy, 1959). Interpreted through Keller's framework, these findings locate most evidence at the Brand Meaning level, particularly Brand Imagery, where narrative depth, personality traits, and emotional relevance generate significance for consumers (Keller, 1993, 2001).

Participants are holistically judging character-based brands. In this context, character design, brand communications, interactions, collaborations and community engagement all contribute to the shaping of brand perception and meaning. Thus, brands creating character-based products need to implement an integrated branding strategy that combines visual identity, story development, emotional connection, and strategic engagement activities both in the physical and digital worlds.

Implications for Anu's Branding Strategy

Because the findings concentrate at the Brand Meaning level, the recommended strategy for Anu prioritises a cohesive visual identity followed by meaning-building activities. At branding identity level, Anu should work towards creating a unique visual identity that is a combination of charm and innovativeness across products and content to strengthen recognition. Following the next level, brand meaning, Anu should build a clear backstory and continuous storytelling, also incorporating brand personality with the following traits: relatable, curious, urban, and humorous. These personality reflects the everyday experiences of Jakarta's young adults, in line with Aaker's (1997) findings regarding the emotional-relatability and brand personality theory.

For brand response and resonance levels, Anu's character and whole brand should be able to continuously express everyday urban situations that are relatable, encourage user participation and community storytelling, and foster strategic collaboration with relevant third parties, such as local artists and creative communities as a way to expand reach and strengthen cultural relevance. These recommendations are transformed into practical strategies through a phased implementation plan. The plan is divided into three phases, focusing on strengthening the brand's foundation before finally moving onto promotional activities and community engagement: brand-identity translation (Months 1–3), brand communication (Months 4–6), and brand expansion (Month 7 onwards). The implementation plan is tailored to match Anu's organizational readiness and resources. This phased approach

reflects both consumer expectations and the founder's current priority of translating a clear vision into a finalised character identity before scaling communication and distribution (Founder Interview, 2026).

CONCLUSION

This study explored consumer perceptions of character-based branding and how these perceptions form brand meaning, using a qualitative exploratory approach and interpreting the thematic findings through Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity framework. The findings show that integrated factors like aesthetic, emotional, and functional can encourage consumers engagement with character-based products. Rather than passively receiving visual designs, consumers actively construct meaning through the decoding of visual cues, situational context, and narrative. Emotional connection, specifically related to self-representation, relatability, and a sense of belonging, is a crucial driver of meaningful attachment. While in addition, originality, coherent identity, storytelling, and engagement determine how consumers evaluate a brand holistically. Following the interpretation through the CBBE framework, the greatest empirical evidence and support comes at the second level, Brand Meaning, particularly the Brand Imagery dimension, with Brand Identity, Brand Response, and Brand Resonance appearing at lower intensity. Thus, Anu is given a branding strategy recommendation emphasizing a distinctive visual identity, consistent character narrative, relatable brand personality, and community and collaboration initiatives. The strategies was structured in a phased approach, adjusting to the brand's early-stage readiness; future research could test these findings quantitatively and evaluate the strategy's effectiveness once the brand is fully implemented.

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