

ART TOYS AS CULTURAL TRANSLATION SYSTEMS: A PARTICIPATORY DESIGN FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM AND PRODUCT BRANDING

Soraj Pruettikomon* and Chaianan Sakhajun

Faculty of Architecture and Design, Rajamangala University of Technology Rattanakosin,
Thailand

ABSTRACT

***Corresponding author:**
Soraj Pruettikomon
soraj.pru@rmutr.ac.th

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Art toys have become highly influential across Asia, particularly in China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, where culturally inspired character design has been used to strengthen tourism branding and enhance community product value, generating economic impact worth billions of baht. In Thailand, however, the application of art toys for community development and tourism promotion remains limited and lacks systematic design guidelines. This study aims to develop design guidelines for art toys based on regional cultural capital in Thailand to support tourism promotion and enhance community products. A mixed-methods research design was employed, including field observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups, expert evaluation, and questionnaires. The study involved 510 participants across three regions of Thailand: Central, Northeastern, and Southern. Cultural identity and regional symbolic animals were used as key inspirations for art toy character development and packaging prototypes for community products. Qualitative findings reveal that art toys derived from local identity effectively communicate cultural narratives and strengthen place recognition. Quantitative results indicate high levels of tourist satisfaction, emotional engagement, and purchase intention. The study demonstrates that art toys function as contemporary mediators that translate local identity into marketable forms, thereby enhancing community product value and supporting the creative economy. The findings contribute to a practical design framework for art toy development in tourism and community product contexts in Thailand. The framework emphasizes community participation, cultural capital integration, and intellectual property management to ensure sustainable implementation and scalability across regions.

Keywords: Art toy; creative economy; cultural identity; tourism design; community branding

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, art toys have emerged as influential cultural artifacts within the global creative economy, particularly across Asia, where character-based design has been integrated into tourism branding, urban identity, and community product development. Countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea have successfully utilized character design and collectible toy culture to enhance place identity, stimulate local economies, and strengthen destination branding (Howkins, 2001; Morgan et al., 2011). These developments reflect the growing role of symbolic products and visual storytelling in shaping tourism experiences and consumer engagement within the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Art toys function as contemporary cultural mediators that translate local narratives into tangible and marketable forms. As collectible objects, they often embody place-based identity, memory, and cultural symbolism, aligning with theories of cultural capital and the creative economy that emphasize the transformation of cultural knowledge into economic value (Howkins, 2001; Mankong, 2017; Wongchaum, 2010). When applied within community contexts, character-based design can strengthen emotional connections between visitors and destinations, contributing to destination branding and place identity formation (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Pike, 2009). Moreover, souvenirs and character merchandise have long been recognized as symbolic carriers of cultural meaning that reinforce tourists' memories and experiences (Gordon, 1986; Swanson & Timothy, 2012).

Within the field of design, visual identity and product symbolism play critical roles in brand perception and value creation. Strong brand identities are built through consistent visual narratives and symbolic representations that communicate meaning and authenticity (Keller, 2013). Packaging and product design further support this process by translating cultural values into tangible forms that enhance market competitiveness and consumer recognition (Klimchuk & Krasovec, 2013; Rundh, 2016). In community-based contexts, such visual systems can help differentiate local products in increasingly competitive tourism markets.

Thailand possesses rich cultural diversity, traditional crafts, and strong community-based production systems, particularly within the One Tambon One Product (OTOP)¹ framework. However, many community products still face challenges related to branding, storytelling, and visual differentiation. While cultural capital exists in abundance, the translation of local identity into contemporary visual language remains limited (Louhapensang, 2015; Mankong, 2017). As a result, community products often struggle to compete in tourism and souvenir markets where visual identity and emotional engagement are key factors influencing consumer behavior (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Recent research in community development and design innovation highlights the importance of participatory design and social innovation approaches in strengthening local economies and cultural sustainability (Manzini, 2015; Sanoff, 2000). Participatory processes enable communities to identify and express their own identities through collaborative design, ensuring authenticity and long-term adoption. Such approaches align with national strategies emphasizing creative economy development and culture-based tourism as key drivers of sustainable growth in Thailand (Office of the Secretary of the National Strategy Committee, 2018).

Despite these developments, the use of art toys as tools for tourism promotion and community product enhancement remains underexplored in Thailand. Existing studies have examined cultural product development and packaging design from creative economy perspectives (Louhapensang, 2015; Pruettikommon, 2022), yet few have proposed systematic design guidelines for art toy development grounded in regional cultural identity. Therefore, research is needed to integrate cultural capital, participatory design, and creative economy principles into a structured framework for art toy design applicable to community contexts.

This study aims to develop design guidelines for art toys that can promote tourism and enhance community products across different regions of Thailand. By examining case studies from the central, northeastern, and southern regions, the research explores how local identity, cultural narratives, and symbolic elements can be translated into character-based design and community product packaging. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative field research, participatory design workshops, and quantitative evaluation to assess the effectiveness of art toy design in strengthening tourism identity and product value.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to both design scholarship and community development practice. From a theoretical perspective, the study expands the role of art toys beyond commercial collectibles, positioning them as tools for cultural communication, place branding, and creative

¹ OTOP (One Tambon One Product) is a Thai government initiative that promotes the development of local products and services based on community resources, local wisdom, and cultural identity to generate income and strengthen local economies.

economy development. From a practical perspective, the research provides a framework that communities, designers, and policymakers can use to sustainably develop culturally grounded art toys that enhance tourism experiences and community product value.

2. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

This study aims to develop design guidelines for art toys as cultural translation tools that promote tourism and enhance community products by integrating cultural identity, participatory design, and creative economy principles. Specifically, the research examines the translation of regional identity into character-based design, evaluates its impact on tourism perception and product value, and proposes a transferable framework applicable in broader design contexts.

3. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

3.1 Art toys and character-based design

Art toys represent a contemporary form of character-based design that merges artistic expression, consumer culture, and collectible object design. Unlike traditional toys, art toys function as symbolic artifacts that communicate identity, narrative, and cultural meaning through stylized visual forms. Their development is closely linked to the rise of the creative economy, in which ideas, creativity, and symbolic value become key drivers of economic production (Howkins, 2001). Within this context, character-based design plays a crucial role in constructing visual identities that resonate emotionally with audiences and consumers.

Character design has long been used in branding and visual communication to create recognizable identities and emotional connections. Strong brand symbols and characters contribute to brand equity by establishing familiarity, trust, and narrative continuity (Keller, 2013). In tourism and place branding contexts, character-based visual systems can strengthen the memorability of destinations and products by translating local identity into accessible and engaging forms (Morgan et al., 2011; Pike, 2009).

Art toys extend these principles by functioning as collectible representations of identity. They operate at the intersection of design, culture, and consumer behavior, where symbolic meaning and visual storytelling enhance perceived value and desirability. As souvenirs and collectible objects, they serve as tangible reminders of experiences and places, reinforcing the emotional relationship between visitors and destinations (Gordon, 1986; Swanson & Timothy, 2012).

Recent studies have further highlighted the role of art toys as cultural communication media that extend beyond entertainment and collectible functions. Tan and Wei (2026) argued that contemporary art toy intellectual property (IP) increasingly relies on cultural symbolism and narrative design to establish emotional connections with consumers. Similarly, Zhou (2025), through a case study of Pop Mart, demonstrated how data-driven design refinement, scarcity strategies, and cross-media storytelling can transform art toys into influential cultural symbols and community-building platforms. These findings suggest that art toys possess significant potential as design tools for translating local cultural identity into meaningful and marketable products.

3.2 Cultural identity and design translation

The translation of cultural identity into design is a key concern in contemporary design research. Cultural capital theory suggests that traditions, symbols, and local knowledge can be transformed into creative products that generate both economic and social value (Mankong, 2017; Wongchaum, 2010). In design practice, this translation process involves interpreting cultural narratives and visual elements into forms that are understandable within contemporary visual culture.

Place identity and place branding theories highlight the importance of visual representation in communicating the uniqueness of locations. According to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013), place brands emerge through dynamic interactions between cultural meaning, visual symbols, and stakeholder participation. Character-based design can act as a mediator within this process, translating local narratives into visual forms that can be widely recognized and shared.

Recent research has emphasized the importance of cultural storytelling in the interpretation and communication of place identity. Rahmanto and Fariza (2025) found that storytelling serves as a mechanism for transforming cultural heritage and collective memory into recognizable place identities, thereby strengthening community engagement and destination branding. In the context of design, storytelling enables cultural symbols, traditions, and local narratives to be translated into visual forms that are accessible to contemporary audiences while preserving cultural authenticity.

Packaging and product design further support this translation by embedding cultural meaning into physical objects. Visual elements such as form, color, and material can communicate authenticity and local identity, thereby enhancing product value and market differentiation (Klimchuk & Krasovec, 2013; Rundh, 2016). In community-based contexts, such design translation is essential for enabling local products to compete in broader markets while maintaining cultural authenticity.

3.3 Art toys in tourism and creative economy

The integration of character design and creative products into tourism reflects broader shifts toward experience-based consumption. The experience economy framework emphasizes the role of symbolic and emotional engagement in shaping consumer behavior and tourism experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Art toys, as collectible and narrative-driven objects, can enhance tourism experiences by providing tangible symbols of place identity.

Creative economy theory further explains how design and cultural production can generate economic value by transforming cultural resources into marketable products (Howkins, 2001). In this context, art toys can function as creative economy tools that support local entrepreneurship, product differentiation, and tourism branding. When grounded in local cultural identity, such products can strengthen community-based economies and foster cultural sustainability.

Character-based branding has increasingly been recognized as an effective strategy for enhancing destination visibility and cultural communication. Wu and Yang (2025) argued that mascot and character design function as symbolic ambassadors that communicate local values, strengthen brand recognition, and foster emotional engagement among audiences. Such findings reinforce the potential of art toys to operate not only as souvenir products but also as strategic branding tools capable of supporting tourism promotion and place differentiation.

Participatory cultural design has also emerged as an important approach for developing culturally meaningful creative products. Gao (2024) emphasized that participatory design processes encourage collaboration between designers and stakeholders, resulting in products that better reflect local values, cultural relevance, and user experiences. This perspective supports the integration of community participation into art toy development, ensuring that character designs remain culturally grounded and socially sustainable.

However, the development of art toys within community contexts requires careful consideration of authenticity, participation, and intellectual property rights. Participatory design approaches emphasize collaboration between designers and communities to ensure that cultural representations remain meaningful and locally grounded (Manzini, 2015; Sanoff, 2000). Such approaches are particularly important when translating local identity into character-based forms that will be used for tourism and commercial purposes.

3.4 Research gap

Although art toys have gained global popularity as cultural and commercial artifacts, research on their role in community-based tourism and local product development remains limited. Existing studies have examined cultural product development, packaging design, and creative economy strategies in community contexts (Louhapensang, 2015; Pruettikomon, 2022), yet few have focused specifically on art toys as design tools for translating local identity into tourism and product branding systems.

Moreover, there is a lack of systematic design guidelines that integrate cultural capital, character design, and participatory processes for art toy development within regional contexts. This gap highlights the need for research that establishes structured approaches to designing art toys rooted in local identity and cultural narratives.

3.5 Conceptual direction of the study

This study builds upon theories of character-based design, cultural capital, and creative economy to develop design guidelines for art toys that promote tourism and enhance community products. By integrating participatory design processes with regional cultural analysis, the research seeks to establish a framework for translating local identity into contemporary character design applicable across different regions of Thailand.

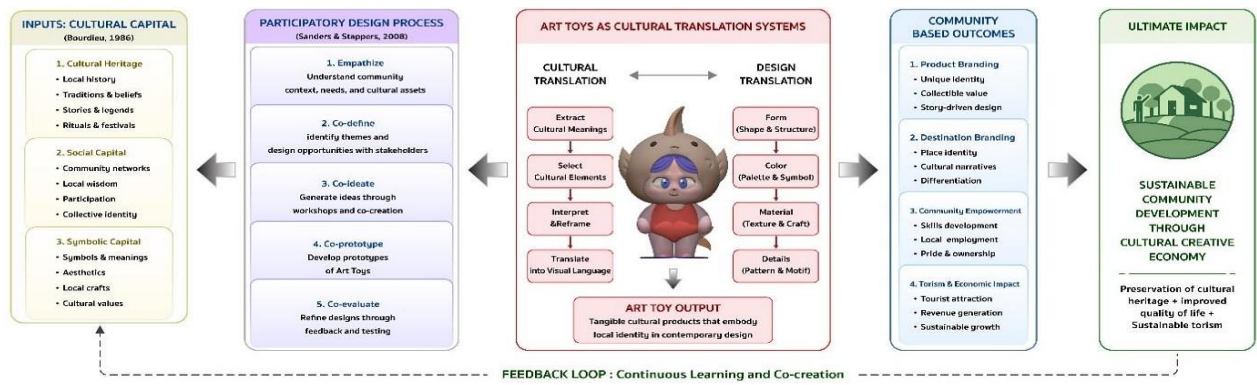


Figure 1: Conceptual framework: Art toys as cultural translation systems

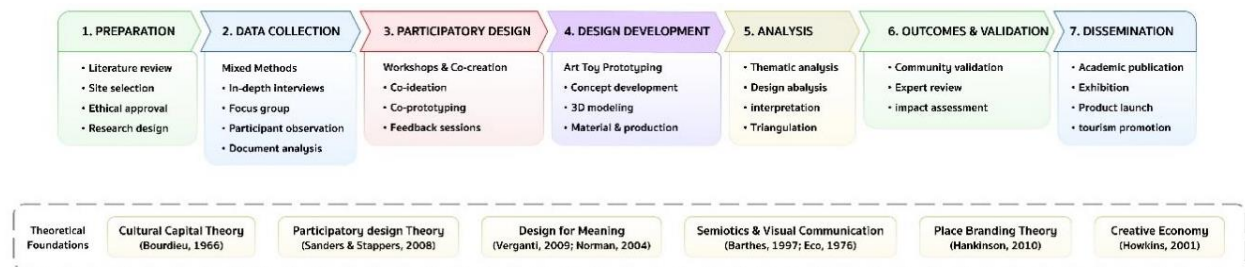


Figure 2: Research process

The research's conceptual framework (Figure 1) and the research process (Figure 2) integrate cultural capital, participatory design, character-based translation, visual identity development, and community brands for tourism promotion and product enhancement.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design integrating qualitative cultural analysis, participatory design processes, and quantitative evaluation. The methodology was structured to develop design guidelines for art toys that reflect regional cultural identity while supporting community-based tourism and product development in Thailand.

4.1 Research design

The research adopted a multi-regional case study approach to examine how local cultural identity can be translated into art toy design for tourism and community product enhancement. The study combined qualitative methods—including field observation, in-depth interviews, and participatory workshops—with quantitative survey methods to evaluate audience perception and design effectiveness.

This approach aligns with participatory design frameworks that emphasize collaboration between designers and communities in translating cultural identity into visual forms (Manzini, 2015; Sanoff, 2000). It also reflects creative economy perspectives that position design as a mediator between cultural capital and economic value (Howkins, 2001).

4.2 Study areas

The research was conducted across three regions of Thailand to capture diverse cultural contexts:

Central region: Nakhon Pathom, Ratchaburi, Bangkok

Northeastern region: Surin, Khon Kaen

Southern region: Trang, Narathiwat, and Prachuap Khiri Khan. Ko Sukon in Trang Province represents a community context characterized by local livelihoods and occupational development (Inyart & Ponpichai, 2023).

Each region was selected based on the presence of strong cultural identity, distinctive local products, and tourism potential.

4.3 Participants

The study involved a total of 510 participants, selected through purposive sampling. Participants included:

- Community artisans and product producers = 15 (2.94%)
- Local entrepreneurs = 15 (2.94%)
- Designers = 15 (2.94%)
- Tourists = 450 (88.24%)
- Cultural experts = 15 (2.94%)

The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling table to ensure adequate representation.

4.4 Data collection

Data were collected through four main methods:

1. Field observation of community products, cultural symbols, and tourism environments.
2. In-depth interviews with community leaders, designers, and cultural experts.
3. Participatory design workshops for developing art toy prototypes.
4. Questionnaire surveys assessing tourist perception, emotional engagement, and purchase intention.

The participatory workshops enabled communities to identify symbolic elements—such as animals, materials, and local narratives—that informed character design and packaging concepts.

The research instruments, including the questionnaire and interview guidelines, were developed based on the research objectives and a review of relevant literature. To ensure content validity, the instruments were evaluated by three experts using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) method. All items met the acceptable criterion ($\text{IOC} \geq 0.50$) and were subsequently revised according to the experts' recommendations before data collection, ensuring the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the research instruments.

4.5 Design development process

The design process followed a co-design framework consisting of:

- Cultural identity exploration
- Character concept development
- Prototype creation
- Evaluation and refinement

Art toy characters were developed based on regional symbolic elements, including animals, agricultural products, and local materials. Prototypes were then applied to community product packaging and souvenir design.

4.6 Data analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring cultural themes, local narratives, symbolic elements, and design characteristics that informed the development of art toy characters and packaging concepts. The analysis involved coding, categorization, and interpretation of qualitative data obtained from field observations, in-depth interviews, and participatory design workshops.

Quantitative data collected through questionnaire surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. These statistical techniques were employed to examine participants' perceptions of cultural representation, design quality, emotional engagement, destination recognition, product value, and purchase intention associated with the developed art toy characters and packaging designs.

In addition, expert evaluation was conducted to assess the design outcomes in terms of cultural authenticity, aesthetic quality, design appropriateness, communication effectiveness, and market potential. The evaluation results were used to refine the design concepts and validate the applicability of the proposed framework for community-based tourism promotion and product branding. The resulting art toy prototypes and packaging applications were subsequently assessed for their effectiveness in communicating local cultural identity, enhancing community branding, and supporting creative economy development.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Art toy as cultural translation tool

The findings revealed that art toys function effectively as cultural translation tools that transform local identity into contemporary visual forms. Across the three regions studied, community participants consistently identified symbolic elements—such as animals, materials, and local narratives—as key sources of identity.

These elements were translated into stylized characters that reflected regional uniqueness while remaining accessible to contemporary audiences.

In the central region, character design was inspired by agricultural products and animals associated with local identity. In the northeastern region, symbolic animals and rice culture were central to the design process, while in the southern region, marine life and coastal identity informed character development. This process demonstrates how art toys can mediate between traditional cultural symbols and modern consumer aesthetics.

The participatory workshops revealed that communities were able to recognize and articulate their own cultural identity more clearly when engaged in character design processes. Art toys thus served not only as products but also as tools for identity exploration and expression.



Figure 3: Initial concept sketches of art toys

Initial concept sketches (Figure 3) illustrate the translation of regional cultural identities into preliminary art toy character designs. The sketches served as the basis for subsequent character refinement, digital modeling, and packaging development through the participatory design process.

The translation of regional cultural identity into stylized character design resulted in a series of art toy prototypes representing local narratives across Thailand (Figure 4). The characters integrate symbolic elements such as animals, agricultural products, and local storytelling to translate cultural identity into contemporary character-based design for tourism and community branding.



Figure 4: Art toy character prototypes representing regional cultural identity in Thailand



Figure 5: Design development process for translating cultural identity into art toy characters

The figure presents the design development process adopted in this research, demonstrating how local cultural identity was systematically transformed into art toy characters through a participatory design approach. The process integrates field investigation, cultural interpretation, community participation, concept generation, preliminary sketch development, character refinement, and prototype visualization. The iterative design process was further validated through expert evaluation and stakeholder feedback to enhance cultural authenticity, design quality, and the effectiveness of the resulting characters as tools for community branding and creative tourism promotion. The whole process is illustrated in Figure 5.

5.2 Impact on tourism perception

Quantitative results indicated that tourists responded positively to the art toys developed from local cultural identities. Survey results from the 450 tourists showed high levels of satisfaction and recognition, particularly in terms of emotional appeal and memorability.

Participants reported that character-based design increased their interest in local products and enhanced their perception of the destination. Art toys were perceived as effective souvenirs that communicated cultural meaning while providing aesthetic and emotional value. These findings support the idea that character-based design can strengthen destination identity and improve visitor engagement.

Furthermore, the presence of art toy characters within product packaging and tourism contexts contributed to stronger place recognition. Respondents indicated that such visual systems made community products more distinctive and easier to remember, reinforcing the role of design in tourism branding.

5.3 Enhancement of community product value

Quantitative findings from the evaluation of the developed cultural mascot and packaging designs revealed a positive overall perception among participants, with a mean score of 3.78 (SD = 0.64), indicating a high level of satisfaction. The results suggest that the integration of local cultural identity into character-based design effectively enhanced participants' recognition of community products and strengthened destination identity.

Participants agreed that the developed mascot and packaging designs successfully reflected the cultural identity of the community ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.36$) and communicated local stories and distinctive cultural characteristics ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.52$). Furthermore, respondents indicated that the visual identity system improved product recognition and facilitated communication with consumers ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.42$). The designs were also considered well suited to online marketing and tourism promotion activities ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.32$).

These findings demonstrate that character-based cultural representation can enhance emotional engagement, destination memorability, and tourism-related product recognition. The results support previous studies suggesting that visual identity systems contribute significantly to destination branding and visitor experience enhancement.



Figure 6: Packaging design applications

Packaging design applications (Figure 6) were derived from regional characters for community products. The designs demonstrate how character-based visual identity can support storytelling, branding, and tourism-oriented product presentation across different regions. The visual identity system was further extended to structural packaging for community food products, demonstrating the scalability of the art toy design framework.

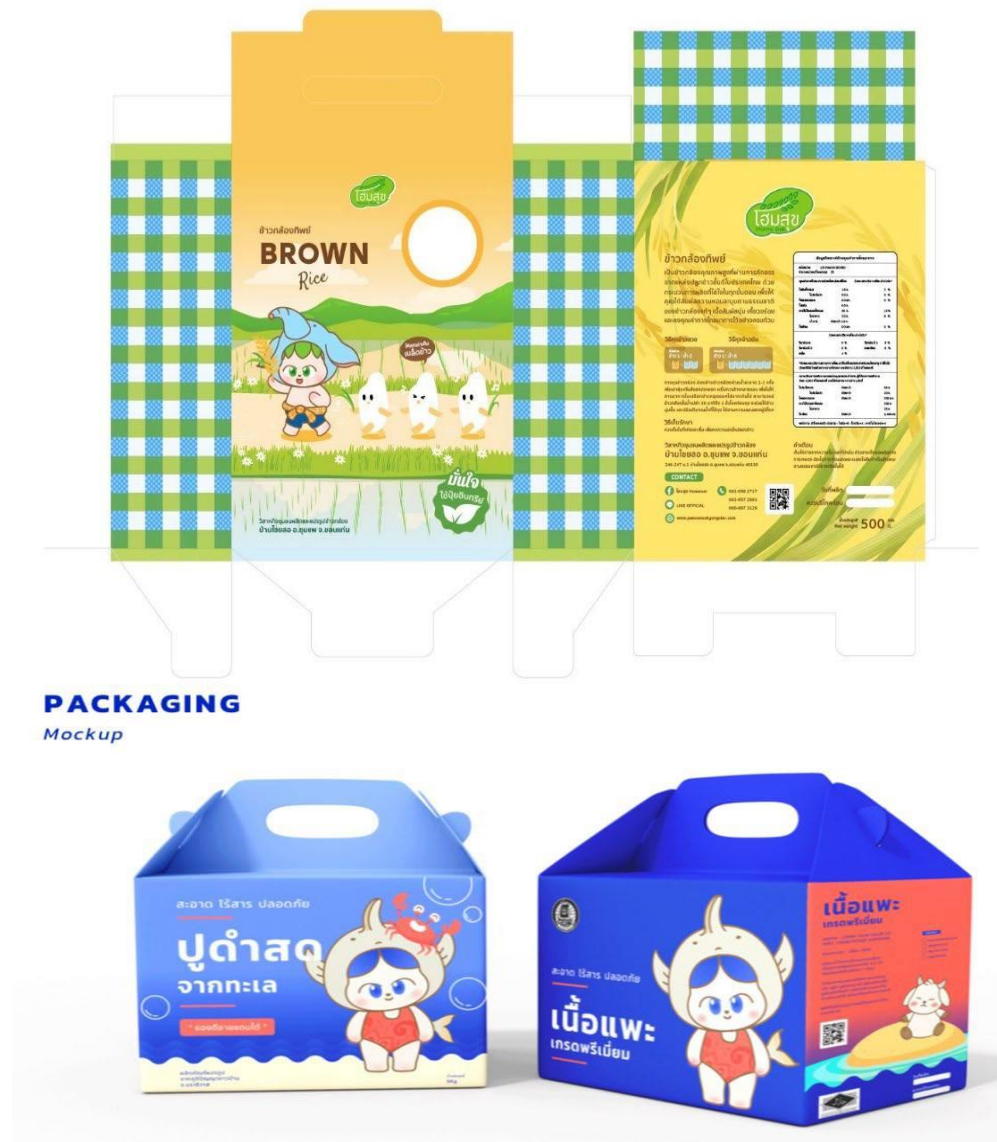


Figure 7: Structural packaging prototypes

Structural packaging prototypes integrate art toy characters into community food product branding. The design (Figure 7) illustrates how character-based cultural identity can be applied across packaging systems to create cohesive branding and enhance market value.

5.4 Participatory design and community engagement

The findings indicate that the integration of art toy character design into community products enhanced their perceived value and marketability. Participants evaluated the ability of the mascot and packaging designs to improve product quality and value at a very high level ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.32$), representing the highest-rated dimension in the evaluation.

Respondents also expressed positive perceptions regarding the aesthetic quality of the developed designs ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.32$) and their practical applicability to community products ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.28$). The flexibility of the visual identity system for adaptation across different product categories was evaluated positively ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.35$), indicating its potential for broader implementation within community enterprises.

In addition, participants reported that the training process improved their understanding of branding development through the application of cultural capital ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.45$). These findings suggest that the project contributed not only to product development but also to capacity building among community producers.

Overall, the results indicate that art toy-based visual identity systems can enhance product differentiation, strengthen community branding, and increase the competitiveness of local products within tourism and creative economy markets.

5.5 Design guideline development

Based on the findings, the study proposes a set of design guidelines for art toys intended to support tourism and community product development:

1. Cultural identity should serve as the primary design foundation.
2. Character design should balance authenticity and contemporary aesthetics.
3. Participatory processes should be integrated into design development.
4. Visual systems should extend beyond characters to packaging and branding.
5. Intellectual property considerations should be incorporated early in the design process.

These guidelines provide a structured framework for translating cultural identity into character-based design applicable across different regions.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that art toys can be conceptualized as cultural translation systems through which local cultural resources are transformed into contemporary visual representations for community branding and tourism development. The design process involved the interpretation of cultural symbols, local narratives, traditional occupations, and regional identities into character-based forms that could be communicated to broader audiences. This process enabled intangible cultural resources to be materialized as tangible design artifacts while maintaining their symbolic associations with place and community identity.

From a semiotic perspective, the developed art toy characters function as a system of signs through which cultural meanings are encoded and communicated. The characters incorporate symbolic references to local resources, agricultural products, community practices, and regional narratives, allowing cultural meanings to be represented through visual forms. Consequently, the art toys extend beyond their material function as products and operate as cultural communication media through which local identity can be interpreted and recognized by consumers and tourists.

The findings further suggest that character design performs a mediating role between local communities and external audiences. Through the transformation of complex cultural meanings into accessible visual representations, the characters facilitate communication between community knowledge and contemporary consumer culture. In this regard, character-based design may be understood as a form of cultural mediation that supports the interpretation, dissemination, and preservation of local identity within tourism and branding contexts.

These findings are consistent with creative economy perspectives, which emphasize the capacity of symbolic products and cultural narratives to generate economic and social value (Howkins, 2001). The positive evaluations reported by participants indicate that character-based visual identity systems contribute to product recognition, perceived value, and marketing communication. The integration of cultural storytelling within character and packaging design therefore provides a mechanism through which local cultural resources may be transformed into market-oriented creative products.

The participatory design process was a key component of the research framework. Consistent with participatory design theory (Manzini, 2015; Sanoff, 2000), community members were involved in the identification of cultural symbols, the interpretation of local narratives, and the development of design concepts. Such involvement contributed to the cultural relevance of the resulting designs and strengthened community engagement throughout the development process. These findings support recent studies that emphasize the importance of participatory cultural design in facilitating culturally grounded innovation and community-based creative development (Gao, 2024).

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the integration of cultural capital, participatory design, cultural storytelling, and character-based branding within a unified framework for art toy development. Previous studies have examined these dimensions independently; however, limited attention has been given to the role of art toys as mechanisms for translating cultural identity into branding and tourism applications. The proposed framework contributes to design research by demonstrating how character-based design can facilitate the transformation of cultural resources into visual identity systems that support community branding, tourism promotion, and creative economy development.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within selected community contexts in Thailand, and the findings may therefore reflect the characteristics of those specific cultural environments. In addition, issues relating to intellectual property management, ownership, and long-term

governance remain important considerations for the implementation of community-based character design systems. Future studies may further investigate governance models, licensing frameworks, and digital branding strategies that support the sustainable management of community-owned cultural assets.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that art toys may serve as cultural translation systems through which local identity is communicated, interpreted, and represented within contemporary tourism and consumer contexts. Through the integration of cultural storytelling, participatory design, and character-based branding, art toys provide a design mechanism that supports the preservation, communication, and economic utilization of local cultural resources.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined the development of art toy design guidelines for tourism promotion and community product development through the translation of local cultural identity into contemporary visual forms. Drawing upon participatory design processes and multi-regional case studies in Thailand, the findings indicate that art toys can function as cultural translation systems through which cultural resources, local narratives, and community identities are transformed into character-based visual representations for branding and tourism applications.

The findings suggest that art toys extend beyond their conventional role as collectible or entertainment-oriented products. Rather, they may be understood as design artifacts through which cultural meanings are represented, communicated, and interpreted. By incorporating local symbols, cultural narratives, and visual storytelling strategies, art toys facilitate the transformation of intangible cultural resources into tangible forms that can be recognized and engaged with by contemporary audiences. In this regard, art toys operate as mechanisms for translating cultural identity into accessible and market-oriented design outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature by integrating cultural capital theory, participatory design, cultural storytelling, and character-based branding within a unified conceptual framework. The findings indicate that character design performs a mediating function between local communities and external audiences by transforming culturally embedded meanings into visual representations that support communication, interpretation, and engagement. This perspective extends existing discussions of character-based design beyond aesthetic and commercial considerations by emphasizing its role in cultural mediation and identity representation.

A further contribution of the study lies in the development of a Cultural Translation Framework consisting of five interrelated stages: (1) identification of cultural capital, (2) participatory cultural interpretation, (3) character-based translation, (4) visual identity and packaging development, and (5) tourism and community branding application. The framework provides a structured explanation of how cultural resources may be transformed into branding and tourism assets through design processes while maintaining cultural relevance and community participation.

The findings also contribute to creative economy scholarship by illustrating how cultural value can be converted into social and economic value through design. Rather than relying solely on the production of physical goods, the proposed framework emphasizes the role of symbolic meaning, cultural narratives, and identity-based branding in generating value for community products and tourism destinations. Consequently, the study provides an applied model through which local cultural resources may be mobilized as creative economy assets while supporting cultural sustainability and community development.

From a practical perspective, the proposed framework offers guidance for designers, community organizations, and tourism stakeholders seeking to develop culturally grounded branding systems. The integration of participatory processes throughout the design process further highlights the importance of community engagement in ensuring cultural authenticity, local ownership, and long-term sustainability.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within selected community contexts in Thailand and may therefore reflect the characteristics of those particular cultural environments. In addition, issues relating to intellectual property management, governance structures, and benefit-sharing mechanisms require further investigation. Future research may examine the application of the proposed framework in different cultural contexts and explore models for the sustainable management of community-owned cultural assets.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that art toys may serve as cultural translation systems that connect cultural identity, community branding, tourism promotion, and creative economy development. By integrating participatory design, cultural storytelling, and character-based branding within a coherent framework, the research contributes to a broader understanding of how local cultural resources can be transformed into sustainable cultural and economic value through contemporary design practice.

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DECLARATION

1. Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

2. Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language refinement, grammar checking, and improving the readability of the manuscript. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited the AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

3. Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

4. Ethics statement

This research was reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Certification Unit, Yanasangwon Research Institute, Mahamakut Buddhist University. The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for human research, ensuring respect for participants' rights, dignity, privacy, and well-being. Ethical approval was granted on June 25, 2024, and remained valid until June 26, 2025.

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6. Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT)

Soraj Pruettikomon: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Project administration.

Chaianan Sakhajun: Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing.

ORCID

Soraj Pruettikomon: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8922-5550>

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