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Brand Communication and Identity Construction as Strategic Differentiation in Fusion Restaurants: Evidence from Thailand's Southern Border Provinces

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ABSTRACT

Fusion restaurants in Thailand's southern border provinces operate within a multicultural context in which sociocultural sensitivity and localized identity play crucial roles in shaping brand communication. Despite the growing popularity of fusion gastronomy, limited empirical research has examined how brand communication contributes to identity construction and strategic differentiation within this culturally diverse regional setting. This study explores how fusion restaurants communicate their brands in multicultural environments, with particular attention to the roles of cultural identity, product and service quality, and personal preferences in shaping brand narratives and strategic positioning. A qualitative research approach was employed, using in-depth interviews with fusion restaurant entrepreneurs and staff across the three southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify dominant communication themes and cross-provincial variations. The findings reveal notable differences in brand communication across the provinces. Fusion restaurants in Pattani and Yala emphasize cultural identity as a central element of brand positioning, whereas those in Narathiwat place greater emphasis on product and service quality, along with narratives shaped by personal preferences. These variations demonstrate how localized sociocultural and market dynamics influence brand identity construction and contribute to strategic differentiation, rather than resulting in a standardized regional communication pattern. The findings provide valuable managerial insights for brand managers and foodservice entrepreneurs operating in multicultural markets, highlighting the importance of aligning brand communication strategies with local cultural identities and consumer expectations to enhance authenticity, differentiation, and competitive positioning.

Keywords: *Brand communication, brand identity construction, strategic differentiation, fusion restaurants, Thailand's southern border provinces.*

INTRODUCTION

Fusion restaurants combine culinary techniques and ingredients from different cultural traditions and have gained global recognition for their creativity and hybrid cultural identities (Qiu, 2024). In multicultural societies, food extends beyond its nutritional function to become a cultural symbol that reflects identity, preserves heritage, and fosters a sense of belonging. Through the selection of ingredients, cooking techniques, and culinary practices, food represents an ongoing process of cultural negotiation between local traditions and global influences (Reddy & van Dam, 2020; Veen et al., 2025).

Within this context, restaurants function not only as providers of food but also as communicative spaces where cultural meanings are constructed and conveyed. Brand communication enables restaurants to express cultural identity through tangible and intangible elements, including brand names, visual identities, storytelling, menu design, and customer experiences. These communicative elements shape consumer perceptions and

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strengthen the symbolic value of brands, consistent with cultural branding theory, which argues that brands acquire meaning through cultural narratives and symbols (Aaker, 1996; Holt, 2004; Kapferer, 2012; Rashid et al., 2018).

The growing use of digital communication has further transformed how restaurants communicate cultural identity. Social media platforms allow restaurants to integrate storytelling, community engagement, and visual branding with customers' online interactions, thereby extending brand meaning beyond the physical dining experience (Brodie et al., 2011; Şahin, 2020; Sarkis et al., 2025). In addition, brand identity can be communicated through multiple symbolic and narrative elements. Jirawiwatwanich et al. (2025) demonstrated that food and beverage brands communicate their identities through elements such as brand positioning, brand personality, visual identity, sonic identity, and behavioural identity, while storytelling elements and visual techniques are used to convey brand meanings. These findings suggest that communication media provide brands with multiple symbolic resources through which distinctive brand identities can be expressed.

Despite increasing research on fusion cuisine, cultural branding, and restaurant marketing, limited attention has been paid to how communication strategies construct and negotiate cultural identity in multicultural fusion restaurants, particularly within culturally diverse peripheral regions. Existing studies have examined various aspects of fusion cuisine and restaurant branding, including consumer behaviour (Brodie et al., 2011; Cheng et al., 2025; Hollebeek et al., 2014), branding outcomes (Fang, 2025; Hartono et al., 2025), or culinary innovation (Evliyaoğlu & Keskin, 2023), while comparatively less attention has been paid to the communication processes through which cultural meanings are translated into brand identity and strategic differentiation. Moreover, cultural identity, brand identity, and communication have often been examined as relatively separate dimensions, leaving limited understanding of how they interact in shaping restaurant brands. This limitation is particularly relevant to fusion restaurants, where owners must simultaneously negotiate local cultural meanings, personal preferences, product and service attributes, and external culinary influences. Consequently, the integration of these elements through brand communication in constructing distinctive brand identities across different local contexts remains relatively underexplored in the existing literature.

To address this gap, this study utilizes the concept of brand communication to examine how fusion restaurants communicate local food culture and construct cultural identity. The study contributes conceptually by extending the understanding of brand communication beyond the transmission of brand messages to explain how culturally embedded communication content contributes to identity construction and strategic differentiation among restaurants in a multicultural context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Communication and Brand Identity Context

During the period from 1950 to 1970, the term "brand communication" was not yet recognized. Instead, scholarly discussions primarily focused on "advertising" and "marketing communication," which later served as the conceptual foundation for the brand communication construct. A brand represents a set of meanings created and communicated through names, symbols, and marketing communication that differentiate products and services in consumers' minds (Aaker, 1991). Accordingly, communication plays a central role

in shaping and conveying brand identity, with the brand identity prism conceptualized as a core mechanism for communicating brand identity to consumers (Kapferer, 1992).

After 2000, the concept of brand communication became increasingly established in academic literature. Subsequent studies have examined brand communication from various perspectives, including the communication of brand associations (Keller, 2003), the use of cultural symbols and narratives (Holt, 2004), and its role in integrated marketing communications (Madhavaram et al., 2005). By the 2010s, brand communication had expanded beyond message transmission to encompass interactive brand dialogue, co-creation of meaning, and consumer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014). In recent years, brand communication has evolved to encompass social media brand communication (Fissi et al., 2022), digital storytelling (Kaur et al., 2024), co-created brand meaning (Hollebeek et al., 2014), and consumer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011). Contemporary brand communication can be understood as a multidimensional communication process through which organizations create, negotiate, and reinforce symbolic meanings with consumers, especially those associated with local traditions, culinary practices, and culturally diverse consumer groups (Holt, 2004; Richards, 2020). Rather than merely transmitting promotional messages, brand communication incorporates storytelling, visual identity, digital interaction, and consumer engagement to construct shared meanings around brands (Fissi et al., 2022; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Holt, 2004; Keller, 2003).

The concept of brand communication has received considerable scholarly attention in the restaurant and foodservice industry. Social media-driven brand communication is effective in engaging consumers and increasing customer lifetime value (Krowinska & Dineva, 2025). Additionally, co-branding is part of brand strategy in the food industry. Evidence suggests it enhances brand identity, increases the willingness to pay more, and opens a new approach to innovation (Fang, 2025). Branding is also crucial to making traditional food businesses more attractive to consumers and differentiating their products from competitors (Hartono et al., 2025).

Based on these perspectives, cultural branding is an appropriate framework to investigate how brands capture cultural significance and articulate their identity through cultural symbols and stories. Given the cultural contexts of different regions and social environments, brands are interpreted very differently in each environment. As such, cultural branding is essential to understanding how restaurants shape their brand identity by incorporating cultural values, local practices, and symbolic elements into their branding strategies. Cultural branding involves the use of symbols, narratives, rituals, and aesthetic cues to express cultural value and generate resonant brand meanings (Holt, 2004).

In the context of food, food identity reflects culture, where people are perceived through a variety of food styles. Many studies have explored how food identity serves as a foundation for building strong and meaningful brands. A gastronomic brand is constructed around food identity, culinary culture, and sensory taste experiences. Moreover, gastronomic identity and local food identity contribute to the formation of tourism brands (Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2024). Likewise, visual brand identity plays a significant role in shaping consumers' perceptions of healthiness, especially among young adult consumers when purchasing fast food. However, specific visual elements, including colour scheme, product shape and structure, graphics and imagery, and packaging materials, have negative associations with the perceptions of young people (Salisu & Waziri, 2024). That is, these

elements may lead consumers to perceive food as less healthy. Their study recommended that brand managers should leverage visual cues of products to promote consumers' perception.

Across these studies, a common argument is that brand communication is no longer one-way persuasion but an interactive process through which brands acquire symbolic and cultural meanings. However, existing research has focused primarily on consumer engagement and marketing performance, while giving less attention to how brand communication constructs cultural identity in multicultural foodservice settings.

Previous studies consistently suggest that brand identity is developed through multiple communication cues, including names, logos, visual design, storytelling, and service encounters (Aaker, 1991; Kapferer, 2012). In restaurant settings, these cues communicate not only product quality but also cultural heritage, authenticity, and local values. Nevertheless, existing studies have mainly examined brand identity from marketing and consumer perception perspectives, with limited attention to its role in expressing multicultural identities.

Building on this broader gap, the specific ways in which fusion restaurants communicate and construct cultural identity remain underexplored, particularly in religious and non-metropolitan contexts. Existing studies have primarily examined culinary tourism (Kamble & Kashikar, 2025), traditional gastronomy (Moreno Quispe & Hernandez-Rojas, 2025), and heritage cuisine (Cheng et al., 2025), rather than how small-scale fusion restaurants use brand communication to construct cultural identity in culturally complex local settings. This issue remains particularly underexplored in Thailand's southern border provinces.

This study integrates three complementary perspectives. First, cultural branding theory (Holt, 2004) explains where cultural meaning originates, namely through cultural symbols, narratives, and shared values embedded in local food culture. Second, brand identity theory (Kapferer, 2012) explains how these meanings are translated into tangible and intangible brand elements, including logos, menus, visual identity, and communication messages. Third, identity performance (Goffman, 1959) explains how brand identity is enacted, reinforced, and negotiated through everyday interactions between restaurant owners, employees, and customers. Conceptually, these perspectives form a sequential but interconnected process in which cultural meanings provide the symbolic foundation (Holt, 2004), are translated into brand identity (Kapferer, 2012), and are subsequently enacted and negotiated through communication and interaction (Goffman, 1959). Together, these perspectives conceptualize brand communication as a dynamic process in which cultural meanings are created, expressed, and continuously negotiated in multicultural restaurant settings. Therefore, this study aims to address the following questions:

1. How do fusion restaurants in Thailand's southern border provinces communicate their brand identities through patterns of identity construction?
2. What are the key content components that shape brand identity in the context of fusion restaurants in Thailand's southern border provinces?

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study utilized a qualitative multiple-case study methodology to investigate how fusion restaurants in the three southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat establish and present their brand identities. A qualitative research approach was employed to explore symbolic meanings, expressions of cultural identity, and communication strategies in

foodservice branding in the region. Such phenomena require an interpretive approach instead of numerical generalizations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Using a set of case study methods, this study identified 15 fusion restaurants in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, and selected five restaurants in each province. The selection of five restaurants per province was intended to ensure balanced representation across the three provinces while enabling meaningful cross-case comparison. Previous multiple-case study research suggests that four to ten carefully selected cases are generally sufficient to identify recurring patterns while maintaining analytical depth (Yin, 2018). Each restaurant was an analytical unit for the study of its brand communication, cultural relevance, and identity formation. This method enabled a systematic comparison across cases and highlighted the cultural diversity underlying fusion cuisine.

To ensure relevance and depth in case selection, fusion restaurants were required to have been operating for at least six months and to engage with their target audiences through various communication channels. These included social media (Facebook, Instagram, and LINE) and traditional media (billboards and brochures). All of them had to be listed on Wongnai, a popular restaurant review platform in Thailand run by Wongnai Media Co., Ltd. This website offers information about restaurants, photos, and customer reviews, and is available on the website and mobile applications for iOS and Android phones. It offers location-based services to suggest nearby dining options.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were carried out with restaurant owners or entrepreneurs and their staff as part of 15 distinct case studies, involving a total of 31 participants. Generally, each of the 13 restaurants had one entrepreneur and one employee interviewed. In one situation, two entrepreneurs were interviewed since they also took on staff roles, while another case featured two entrepreneurs alongside one employee. The final participants consisted of 17 entrepreneurs and 14 employees. Among these participants, 20 hailed from Pattani and Yala, with an equal representation of entrepreneurs and employees. Narathiwat contributed 11 individuals, consisting of seven entrepreneurs and four employees. This balanced distribution among roles and regions enabled the study to capture insights from both those who develop brand strategies and identities, as well as those who represent brand identity through their day-to-day activities. This approach then contributed to the analysis of communication processes associated with brand identity in fusion restaurants in Thailand's three southern border provinces.

Each interview lasted approximately 60–120 minutes and was conducted at the participants' restaurants or another mutually agreed location. The interview protocol included open-ended questions aligned with the two research questions. For the first research question, which focused on patterns of brand identity construction and communication, the sample questions included: "How would you describe your restaurant's brand identity?"; "How do you communicate your restaurant's brand identity to customers?", and "What communication channels do you use?". For the second research question, which focused on the key content components shaping brand identity, the sample questions included: "What do you communicate to customers to represent your restaurant's brand identity?; "How does local culture influence your branding?", and "What aspects of your restaurant do you emphasize when communicating your brand identity?". Interviews were conducted in Thai, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data collection

continued until thematic saturation was achieved, as no new themes emerged from successive interviews.

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. All participants provided informed consent before data collection, and their confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

Interview data were assessed based on the research objectives, and the strategies, channels, and patterns of brand communication that contribute to brand identity in fusion restaurants were analysed. Logos, colour schemes, branding visuals, and content from Facebook, Instagram, and LINE of each restaurant were examined to understand how restaurants communicate their brand identity. The findings are detailed in a descriptive form. A six-phase thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed for data analysis, as follows:

1. Familiarization: iterative reading of transcripts, field notes, and online content.
2. Generating initial codes: the interview data were coded by the researchers based on meaningful units related to cultural identity, communication cues, symbolism, brand narratives, and owner-driven preferences. The initial codes and interpretations were subsequently cross-checked among the researchers to enhance consistency and accuracy in the coding process. Any differences in coding or interpretation were discussed and resolved through consensus before proceeding to theme development.
3. Searching for themes: clustering codes into broader themes representing identity construction processes.
4. Reviewing themes: refining categories to ensure internal coherence and distinguishability.
5. Defining and naming themes: identifying three overarching thematic domains:
   (a) the southern border provinces' cultural identity
   (b) product and service quality
   (c) personal preferences
6. Producing the report: integrating themes with theoretical frameworks (Goffman, 1959; Holt, 2004; Kapferer, 2012) and cross-case comparisons across provinces.

Data Rigor

Trustworthiness is determined by four factors: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Credibility was achieved by data triangulation that leveraged information from diverse groups of participants (e.g., restaurant owners, staff, and observing consumer behaviour during dining). Dependability was ensured through expert review of the data at each stage of the research process. Transferability was achieved by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences, perspectives, and the multicultural context in which the findings were generated, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts, while confirmability was ensured through maintaining an audit trail and grounding interpretations in the participants' accounts to minimize researcher bias.

RESULTS

The results revealed that brand communication among the fusion restaurants demonstrated diverse approaches to identity construction, which are shaped by each restaurant's unique

concept. The content used to communicate brand identity through both online and offline media can be categorized into three essential themes for identity construction: cultural identity, product and service quality, and personal preferences.

Brand communication aimed at constructing identity includes content related to the cultural characteristics of the southern border provinces, such as traditional Muslim attire, Halal food practices, and local culinary traditions. Another category of content focuses on product and service quality, including homemade dishes, healthy menus, and MSG-free food. The final category reflects personal preferences encompassing the owner's individual interests and memorable experiences.

The results reveal the brand communication patterns used to construct the identities of fusion restaurants in the three provinces. Each restaurant integrates these dimensions in different ways, resulting in unique and memorable brand identities in consumers' perception (See Table 1). From a postmodern perspective, identity refers to an individual's attempt to define and express who they are and how they differ from others (Sangphantanond, 2009).

In this study, the identities of the restaurants were reflected through both one-way and two-way communication, which manifested in differentiated expressions consistent with the three themes above. Furthermore, in line with Erving Goffman's concept of identity (Goffman, 1959), identity can be divided into personal identity and social identity. Here, personal identity refers to how restaurant owners define themselves by socially shared symbols. Based on the thematic analysis, personal preferences represent personal identity, while the culture of the southern border provinces and product and service quality reflect social identity.

To clarify the analytical boundaries among the three themes, cultural identity refers to communication content that reflects shared meanings related to cultural identity, practices, and values embedded in the local sociocultural context, such as Halal practices and food names in the local Malay language. Product and service quality refers to communication content emphasizing the functional and experiential attributes of restaurant offerings, including food quality, freshness, health-conscious attributes, homemade preparation, and service considerations. Personal preferences refer to owner-driven interests, experiences, values, and creative choices reflected in restaurant concepts and offerings, including personal passion, novelty, and adaptation to food trends. Although these themes may intersect in practice, they are analytically distinguished by the primary source of meaning: the shared sociocultural context, attributes of the restaurant offering, or individual owner-driven choices, respectively.

Table 1: Brand communication patterns for identity construction of fusion restaurants in the provinces of Pattani (P), Yala (Y), and Narathiwat (N)

Case	Brand Communication Patterns	Essential Contents
R-1P	Positioned as a specialty coffee café emphasizing craftsmanship, diverse coffee selections, and health-oriented homemade dishes.	● Product and service quality (homemade dishes designed with overall nutrition in mind, emphasizing consumers' health and well-being) ● Personal preferences (coffee enthusiasts who are passionate about coffee flavors)
R-2P	Halal fusion restaurant with strong symbolic branding reflecting Muslim identity, local language, and Halal assurance.	● Southern border provinces' culture (Muslim attire, local Malay language, and Halal cuisine)

R-3P	Halal café communicating health-conscious positioning through MSG-free menus and pesticide-free ingredients via online and offline media.	● Southern border provinces' culture (local Malay language and Halal cuisine) ● Product and service quality (MSG-free food)
R-4P	Differentiated as the only homemade Halal pizzeria in Pattani, emphasizing freshness and daily preparation.	● Southern border provinces' culture (Halal cuisine)
R-5P	Home-style restaurants promote health-conscious, minimally processed food and environmentally sustainable practices.	● Product and service quality (homemade and health-conscious food) ● Personal preferences (providing good and thoughtful offerings to customers as if they were family)
R-1Y	Halal café offering dim sum throughout the day and locally inspired spicy dishes made from fresh regional ingredients.	● Southern border provinces' culture (Halal cuisine and local dishes)
R-2Y	Café elevating southern Malay breakfast cuisine with creative roti variations under a distinctive concept.	● Southern border provinces' culture (Halal cuisine and local dishes) ● Personal preferences (introducing novelty and uniqueness within the southern border provinces' context)
R-3Y	Modern Halal dining emphasizes visual-product consistency and exclusive regional desserts.	● Southern border provinces' culture (Halal cuisine and local dishes) ● Product and service quality (homemade food)
R-4Y	Halal-certified café introducing novel menu concepts within the local context of Yala Province.	● Southern border provinces' culture (Halal cuisine) ● Personal preferences (introducing novelty within the southern border provinces context)
R-5Y	Alternative café targets health-conscious consumers through balanced taste and nutrition.	● Product and service quality (health-conscious food)
R-1N	Gallery café and bistro offering Halal cuisine alongside an artistic dining ambience curated by a Muslim chef.	● Southern border provinces' culture (Halal cuisine) ● Personal preferences (creating novelty within the southern border provinces context)
R-2N	The only pizzeria in Narathiwat emphasizes originality, traditional recipes, and carefully selected local ingredients.	● Product and service quality (homemade food) ● Personal preferences (creating novelty by following marketing trends)
R-3N	Halal Korean restaurant differentiated by a cheese-centered menu concept, creating a distinctive dining experience.	● Personal preferences (creating novelty by following marketing trends)
R-4N	Health-focused café specializing in 100% cold-pressed juices with no sugar, additives, or artificial ingredients.	● Product and service quality (health-conscious food)
R-5N	Halal restaurants emphasize MSG-free menus and strong visual aesthetic consistency between dishes and promotions.	● Southern border provinces' culture (Halal cuisine) ● Product and service quality (MSG-free food)

The accumulating essential theme of the brand communication pattern showed dominance of the themes across different areas of restaurant residence (See Table 2).

Table 2: Patterns of brand communication themes by province

Theme	Restaurants		
	Pattani (P)	Yala (Y)	Narathiwat (N)
Cultural Identity	R-2P R-3P R-4P	R-1Y R-2Y R-3Y R-4Y	R-1N R-5N
Product and Service Quality	R-1P R-3P R-5P	R-3Y R-5Y	R-2N R-4N R-5N
Personal Preferences	R-1P R-5P	R-2Y R-4Y	R-1N R-2N R-3N

Based on the themes of brand communication patterns, the analysis finds several important aspects, which are discussed as follows:

First, the results indicate that the cultural identity of Thailand's southern border provinces, particularly in Yala, plays a central role in brand communication. This theme emerged prominently among the participants (R-1Y to R-4Y), suggesting that cultural symbols and narratives are important elements in shaping brand positioning in the area. Interestingly, the findings further reveal that fusion restaurants in Yala primarily employ storytelling centered on food preparation processes and culinary practices, as illustrated below:

> We try to take photos of Budu (Budu is a traditional fermented fish sauce commonly consumed with Khao Yam, a traditional Thai rice dish) that we ferment ourselves and tell its story, like what kind of fish it is made from and how it is fermented with salt. We have many types of Budu, including medium-bodied and thick varieties. Our Budu is dark but has a fairly clear texture. We try to communicate with customers about what type of Budu we use. We also emphasize the fresh limes we use and tell them that our restaurant only uses fresh limes and never artificial lime juice, although we do have a lot of limes (R-1Y, restaurant owner).

In Pattani, multiple restaurants (R-2P, R-3P, R-4P) highlight cultural narratives rooted in local heritage, religious values, and regional food traditions, which are supported by insights from interviewees:

> During Eid, I establish a culture here by closing the restaurant for two days. On the third day, we reopen, and this has been our practice every year. I also give part of the proceeds to my employees so they can participate in the Qurban ritual during Eid al-Adha. Then, we visit them all and share; this year we support one person, then another (R-2P, restaurant owner).

The results from the interviews reveal that fusion restaurants in Pattani intentionally leverage cultural identity as a branding strategy to improve perceptions of authenticity and cultivate a sense of local connection. In contrast, Narathiwat shows a more restrained engagement with cultural identity (R-1N, R-5N), indicating a cautious or selective stance

towards incorporating cultural elements in their branding efforts. The results underscore notable cultural aspects, such as the incorporation of Halal dishes on their menus.

Across the cases, cultural identity emerges as an important foundation for brand communication rather than merely as a set of restaurant characteristics. For example, Halal practices and the use of local Malay food names communicate shared cultural meanings that position restaurants within the sociocultural context of Thailand's southern border provinces. These elements therefore function as cultural communication cues that enable restaurants to establish connections with the local context and reinforce brand identities that consumers can recognize and associate with the culture of the region.

Second, the focus on product and service quality is particularly pronounced in both Pattani and Narathiwat. Restaurants in Pattani (R-1P, R-3P, R-5P) consistently highlight food quality, service excellence, and customer satisfaction as part of their strategy to build credibility and enhance competitiveness beyond mere cultural attraction. For instance, the owner of restaurant R-5P conveyed:

> The restaurant's brand communication started on a small scale when the owner started a home-delivery bakery business before opening a physical storefront. The brand adopted the slogan "Made with heart, sold with love" to communicate to customers that each homemade product was prepared with care at every step of the baking process with health considerations in mind. This commitment was reflected in the careful selection of safe ingredients, such as avoiding synthetic food coloring and using only natural color sources (R-5P, restaurant owner).

In the same vein, Narathiwat has a very strong focus on this theme (R-2N, R-4N, R-5N), which indicates that fusion restaurants in the area are very focused on functional and performance-oriented brand characteristics. In this sense, it is clear that the focus is on quality and service as the main driver of differentiation, likely in response to changing customer needs or competitive forces in the market as well. At R-4N fusion restaurant in Narathiwat, the discussion of food ordering methods has been a very effective way to increase sales and also update the company with the latest product and service quality information. For example, they use Halal Ufu for the distribution of their food. In contrast to other food delivery apps, this app clearly calls itself "Halal." Thus, customers using this app can confidently expect that the food they order will adhere to Halal standards without question.

Overall, these findings suggest that product and service quality serves not merely as a set of restaurant attributes but as an important basis for brand differentiation in both functional and experiential terms. Across the cases, attributes such as freshness, homemade preparation, health-conscious offerings, and MSG-free food function as signals of the value that restaurants seek to deliver to consumers. This perceived customer value can, in turn, contribute to strengthening brand loyalty.

Third, personal preferences constitute a supporting theme that varies across contexts in all three provinces. Pattani (R-1P, R-5P) and Yala (R-2Y) particularly reflect the integration of personal taste, lifestyle alignment, and individual dining experiences into brand narratives. However, these dimensions remain less dominant than cultural and quality-oriented themes.

Notably, Narathiwat demonstrates a relatively stronger emphasis on personal preferences (R-1N, R-2N, R-3N), indicating a consumer-centric orientation that foregrounds individual choice and subjective experience over collective cultural symbolism. For example, the R-3N fusion restaurant reveals how personal preferences, particularly the owner's taste and exposure to Korean popular culture, shape the restaurant's brand identity. The restaurant owner stated that:

> I have always enjoyed watching Korean movies, and I also really like eating Tteokbokki. Since Tteokbokki is made from rice cake dough, and for those who enjoy Korean films or dramas, the term "Tteokbokki" often appears in those shows. Korean staple foods are closely associated with dishes like Tteokbokki, which is essentially a type of dough-based rice cake.....
>
> At that time, there happened to be a newly opened restaurant following the Korean food trend, although it was not yet very popular. The restaurant served food in a pan-style format, so we went to try it. After that, we decided to experiment with opening something similar ourselves. However, we felt that selling only Korean instant noodles and Tteokbokki, just three or four menu items, would not be sufficient. Most importantly, we decided to adapt our Korean food menu by adding cheese to the dishes (R-3N, restaurant owner).

The interview data demonstrate that the construction of fusion restaurant identities is closely shaped by the owners' personal interests, cultural exposure, and creative adaptation of popular food trends. Personal preferences and experiences, therefore, play a significant role in shaping distinctive brand identities and menu innovations within the local restaurant context. As a result, brand identities can shape how a restaurant wishes to be perceived by consumers and the public (Yunus et al., 2024).

Beyond shaping restaurant concepts and menu innovations, personal preferences function as an owner-driven source of brand differentiation. The findings indicate that personal interests, culinary passion, novelty seeking, and adaptation to food trends are translated into restaurant concepts and offerings. Rather than merely reflecting individual tastes, these preferences become a source of communication content that enables restaurant owners to create distinctive and unique brand identities.

DISCUSSION

The results reveal that brand communication patterns used by fusion restaurants in the three southern border provinces are shaped through an interplay of three key content themes, namely cultural identity, product and service quality, and personal preferences. The prominence of each theme varies by province, reflecting contextual and sociocultural dynamics embedded in the region. Restaurants in Pattani primarily foreground the cultural identity of the southern border provinces through Halal cuisine, local dishes, and the use of the Malay language. In contrast, restaurants in Narathiwat place greater emphasis on product and service quality, particularly MSG-free food, freshness, and locally sourced ingredients, while consumers' personal preferences also play a more prominent role in shaping restaurant choice. Restaurants in Yala, meanwhile, position themselves as cultural spaces where communication strongly reflects Islamic values and local Malay Muslim traditions.

These findings extend the branding literature by demonstrating that brand communication in fusion restaurants is not driven by a single dominant brand identity but rather by a dynamic configuration of multiple identity dimensions that are selectively emphasized according to local sociocultural contexts. Previous branding studies have generally conceptualized brand identity as a relatively coherent and consistent construct communicated through integrated marketing communication (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003). In contrast, the present findings suggest that, within culturally diverse regions, effective brand communication is inherently contextual and adaptive. Instead of communicating identical brand meanings across locations, restaurants strategically adjust the relative emphasis placed on cultural identity, functional value, and personal relevance to align with local expectations. This finding broadens existing branding literature by illustrating how contextual cultural conditions shape the construction and communication of brand identity in local food businesses.

The findings also reinforce the dynamic nature of identity. Rather than being fixed, identity is continuously constructed through interactions within changing social and cultural environments (Sangphantanond, 2009). This perspective is consistent with Goffman's dramaturgical theory, which conceptualizes identity as emerging through social performances within particular contexts (Goffman, 1959). Likewise, Agus and Iswandi (2025) argue that language and communication practices continuously shape identity across different social situations. In the present study, personal preferences represent expressions of individual identity reflected through restaurant owners' creativity, innovative menu development, and distinctive brand storytelling. Conversely, cultural identity together with product and service quality reflects social identity because they embody collectively shared cultural expectations and community standards within the Halal and local food ecosystem.

The proposed communication model (Figure 1) synthesizes these findings by illustrating the relationships among the three communication themes and their contribution to contextual brand identity. Rather than functioning as independent communication elements, cultural identity, product and service quality, and personal preferences operate interactively to construct brand meaning. The model further demonstrates that the relative importance of each dimension varies across provinces, explaining why fusion restaurants employ different branding strategies despite operating within the same geographical region. Therefore, Figure 1 should be understood not merely as a summary of empirical findings but as a conceptual representation of context-dependent brand communication, showing how localized cultural conditions influence the formation of brand identity through communication processes.

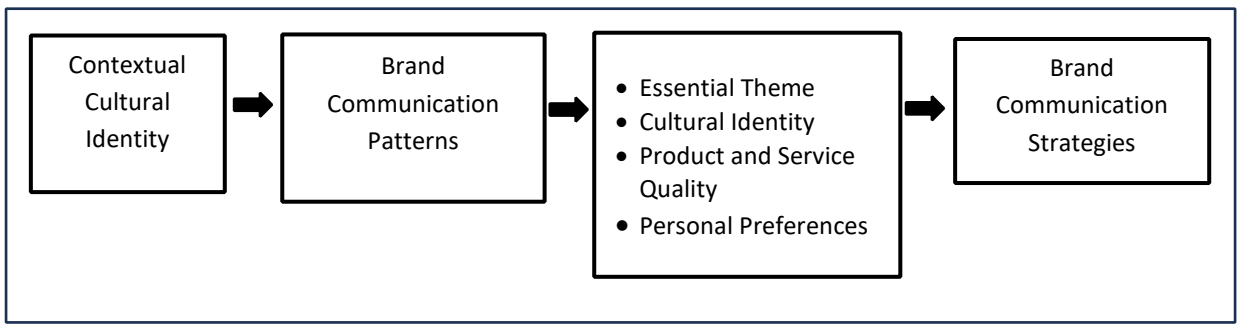


Figure 1: Transmission of contextual cultural identity through brand communication strategies

Compared with previous empirical studies, the findings also provide a broader understanding of brand communication in the foodservice sector. Earlier studies have shown that storytelling, cultural symbolism, restaurant atmosphere, and visual identity contribute to consumers' perceptions of authenticity and emotional attachment (Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2024; Salisu & Waziri, 2024). Similarly, Purworini et al. (2026) argue that social media communication should evolve from one-way promotional messages into interactive conversations that facilitate customer engagement. The present study supports these findings but extends them by demonstrating that communication effectiveness depends not only on storytelling or interaction itself but also on the alignment between communication themes and localized cultural contexts. In other words, the same communication strategy may produce different branding outcomes depending on which identity dimension is most salient within a particular province.

Moreover, the findings emphasize the increasing importance of bidirectional communication in reinforcing contextual brand identity. Restaurants that actively interact with customers through local Malay dialect conversations, real-time engagement on Facebook or LINE, and chatbot-assisted communication tend to strengthen credibility, trust, and customer participation. These interactive communication practices allow restaurants to collect customer feedback, respond promptly to service issues, and personalize customer experiences, thereby improving service quality and customer satisfaction (Setoutah et al., 2024). Rather than functioning solely as customer service tools, these communication channels become mechanisms through which contextual brand identity is continuously negotiated and reinforced between restaurants and consumers.

Collectively, the cross-provincial comparison demonstrates that brand communication among fusion restaurants is shaped by localized sociocultural and market dynamics rather than by a standardized regional branding strategy. Pattani and Yala primarily position cultural identity as the central branding anchor, whereas Narathiwat places greater emphasis on product quality and personal preferences. Consequently, the results of this study illustrate how these contextual differences shape the relative emphasis placed on the three communication dimensions, ultimately producing distinctive brand identities across provinces. This study therefore contributes to branding literature by proposing that contextual brand communication is an adaptive process in which cultural meanings, functional and experiential value, and owner-driven preferences are strategically integrated according to local sociocultural conditions, thereby extending existing models of brand identity beyond the assumption of uniform communication across markets.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study is limited to fusion restaurants located in Thailand's southern border provinces and thus cannot be generalized to other parts of the country (or the foodservice industry). Secondly, the data were qualitative and based on restaurant owners and staff, and not consumers' opinions on brand communication and identity formation. In future studies, similar research can be conducted by examining fusion restaurants in different regions in Thailand or multicultural contexts with greater diversity so that the analysis is more thorough. Quantitative and mixed methods could also be used to corroborate and enhance the results. Further research may look at consumers' attitudes towards brand communication, cultural identity, and authenticity in order to better understand how brand messaging influences consumer attitudes and behaviours.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that the brand communication strategies utilized by fusion restaurants in Thailand's southern border provinces are primarily influenced by local sociocultural elements rather than a wider regional framework. There are significant differences in brand messaging among the provinces: Narathiwat focuses on conveying product and service quality through storytelling, whereas Pattani and Yala prioritize cultural identity in their brand communications. Fusion cuisine is viewed not only as a culinary approach but also as a strategic tool for personalizing brand messaging. This approach integrates cultural diversity, product and service excellence, and specific consumer preferences to effectively engage target markets. The insights gained from this study assist brands in adapting their communication strategies to align with local contexts and consumer expectations, ultimately improving customer satisfaction.

Managerial Implications

The results indicate that fusion restaurant entrepreneurs ought to intentionally integrate cultural identity into their branding approaches to create a distinct presence. Brand stories that draw from local cultural traditions, historical context, and narratives rooted in the community are crucial for sustaining brand significance in both digital and physical communication platforms. It is important for managers to continually convey the quality characteristics of their offerings as fundamental brand principles, which will reinforce consumer trust. Additionally, gaining a more profound insight into consumers' lifestyles and purchasing behaviours can improve customer satisfaction and engagement.

Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, restaurant owners can create unique and authentic brand identities that meet customers' needs. However, such efforts should be undertaken with sensitivity to local cultures, traditions, customs, and religious beliefs to avoid confusion and misunderstanding of brand identity within multicultural environments. Clear and consistent communication is essential for building trust and confidence between brands and customers in multicultural settings. The results illustrate that brands should maintain ongoing engagement with customers across diverse cultural contexts through both online and offline communication channels. In particular, social media platforms and messaging applications play a significant role in fostering and strengthening relationships between brands and consumers.

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