

**Mermaids as Symbols of Desire and Illusion in Marketing: Impact on Consumer Behavior
and Decision-Making**

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Research Methods

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Introduction and Problem Statement

In contemporary marketing, the use of symbolic and fantasy-based imagery has become one of the most widely studied phenomena in consumer research. Companies across industries increasingly turn to mythological and fantastical symbols not simply for aesthetic appeal but as deliberate strategic tools designed to evoke desire, create emotional connection, and shape consumer perception of value. Among these symbols, the mermaid occupies a particularly prominent and commercially significant position. Perhaps the most recognizable example is Starbucks, whose iconic twin-tailed siren logo — a variation of the mermaid figure — has become one of the most valuable and emotionally resonant brand symbols in the world, consistently associated by consumers with aspiration, indulgence, and a sense of the extraordinary. Beyond Starbucks, mermaid imagery appears across a range of marketing contexts: major cosmetics brands such as Urban Decay and NYX have released dedicated mermaid-themed collections; seafood, beverage, and lifestyle brands regularly employ mermaid iconography in packaging and campaigns; and the broader mermaid aesthetic has become a recurring motif in fashion and beauty advertising, particularly in summer and seasonal campaigns.

The commercial presence of mermaid imagery in advertising is therefore well established. What is far less understood, however, is why it works — that is, through what psychological mechanisms mermaid symbolism influences consumer emotion, brand perception, and purchasing behavior. This is the central problem that motivates the present research. Mermaid figures, rooted in centuries of mythology, carry layered symbolic meanings: beauty, mystery, desire, and the allure of the unattainable. These are qualities that advertisers deliberately invoke, but the specific ways in which consumers internalize and respond to these meanings have not been systematically examined in an empirical research setting.

This study treats the mermaid not as an isolated curiosity but as a highly visible and culturally grounded case study in fantasy-based symbolic marketing — a broader phenomenon that encompasses the use of mythological, fantastical, and idealized imagery to shape consumer behavior. By focusing on the mermaid specifically, the research benefits from a clearly defined, commercially real, and culturally rich symbol that allows for precise operationalization and controlled investigation. The findings will therefore speak not only to mermaid advertising but to the wider question of how fantasy and desire function as marketing tools.

A significant gap remains in the literature: while cultural and semiotic analyses of mermaid symbolism exist (Kolosova, 2018; Kozinets et al., 2021), no study has empirically tested the direct behavioral and attitudinal effects of mermaid imagery in advertising using a controlled research design. This study addresses that gap, contributing new empirical knowledge to the intersecting fields of semiotics, consumer psychology, and brand communication.

Research Questions

The central research question guiding this study is: How do mermaids as symbols of desire and illusion in marketing influence consumer behavior and decision-making? This question is grounded in the real commercial presence of mermaid imagery in advertising and is specific enough to be investigated within the scope of a single research project while broad enough to generate findings relevant to symbolic marketing more generally.

Three supporting sub-questions further structure the inquiry. First, how do consumers emotionally respond to mermaid imagery in advertising, and what specific feelings does such imagery evoke? Second, to what extent does exposure to mermaid symbolism influence consumer brand attitude and purchase intention compared to advertising without such imagery? Third, what role do perceived desire and illusion play in mediating the relationship between mermaid imagery and consumer decision-making? Together, these questions guide both the quantitative and qualitative strands of the mixed-methods design described below.

Literature Review

The academic literature relevant to this study spans three intersecting domains: the semiotics of marketing symbols, the psychology of fantasy and desire in consumer behavior, and the strategic role of cultural imagery in branding. Reviewing these areas reveals both a strong theoretical foundation and a clear empirical gap that the present study addresses.

Kozinets et al. (2021) provide a foundational contribution by demonstrating how mythical figures are actively commodified in contemporary marketing. Through qualitative case studies of professional mermaids and the niche commercial ecosystems surrounding them, the authors show that fantasy figures are transformed into marketable cultural identities capable of generating genuine economic value from consumer imagination. Crucially, their work establishes that the commercial use of mermaid imagery is not peripheral but constitutes a deliberate and increasingly

mainstream marketing strategy. However, as their focus is confined to niche markets and subcultures, the generalizability of their findings to mainstream brand advertising — the context most relevant to the present study — remains limited.

Kolosova (2018) approaches mermaid symbolism from a semiotic perspective, analyzing the layered cultural meanings encoded in mermaid imagery across contemporary media and branding environments. Her analysis identifies the core symbolic registers of the mermaid — beauty, seduction, mystery, and the boundary between the human and the fantastical — and demonstrates how advertisers strategically invoke these associations to shape audience interpretation and emotional response to brand messages. This work provides the theoretical vocabulary essential to the present research, establishing what mermaid imagery means and why those meanings matter in a commercial context. Its limitation is that it remains interpretive and does not provide empirical evidence of the behavioral effects these symbolic meanings produce.

Zhang and Li (2022) supply the empirical grounding that the above studies lack. Their quantitative, survey-based study offers statistically significant evidence that cultural symbols generate emotional value in consumers and that this emotional value functions as a significant mediator of the relationship between symbolic perception and purchase intention. This mediation model is directly applicable to the present study: it suggests a clear and testable psychological mechanism through which mermaid imagery — by activating feelings of desire, fantasy, and mystery — may translate into measurable changes in brand attitude and purchasing behavior.

Schroeder (2005) situates these findings within a broader theory of branding, arguing that visual and mythological symbols in advertising serve as carriers of brand meaning rather than mere aesthetic decoration. He demonstrates that symbols communicate values — aspiration, luxury, femininity, the extraordinary — that resonate with consumer identity and lifestyle aspirations, shaping brand attitude at a level deeper than rational product evaluation. Applied to the present study, Schroeder's framework helps explain why mermaid imagery, as employed by brands such as Starbucks, may produce effects on brand perception that extend beyond immediate emotional reactions.

Collectively, the literature confirms that mermaid symbolism is theoretically meaningful and commercially real in marketing contexts. It establishes the symbolic, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of the phenomenon while leaving unanswered the question of how these dimensions interact in a controlled empirical setting. The present study fills that gap.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining a quantitative survey experiment with a qualitative interview component. This approach is selected because it allows the research to both measure the statistical effects of mermaid imagery on consumer behavior and explore the deeper symbolic interpretations and emotional experiences that quantitative methods alone cannot fully capture.

The conceptual framework proposes the following chain of relationships. Mermaid imagery in advertising (independent variable) is hypothesized to activate emotional responses in consumers — including feelings of desire, fantasy, excitement, and mystery — which in turn positively influence brand attitude and purchase intention (dependent variables). Emotional response is therefore positioned as the key mediating variable that explains how symbolic imagery translates into behavioral outcomes. This framework integrates symbolic consumption theory (Kozinets et al., 2021; Schroeder, 2005), which holds that consumers respond to the symbolic meanings embedded in advertising rather than to product features alone, with Zhang and Li's (2022) empirically supported mediation model linking cultural symbols to purchase intention through emotional value.

Key concepts are operationalized as follows. Mermaid imagery is operationalized as a binary experimental manipulation: participants in the experimental condition view a real advertisement from a brand that uses mermaid imagery — specifically a Starbucks promotional image featuring its siren logo prominently — while participants in the control condition view an equivalent Starbucks advertisement in which the siren logo has been replaced with a neutral, non-symbolic design element. All other features of the advertisement remain identical across conditions. This design ensures that any observed differences between conditions can be attributed specifically to the presence of the mermaid symbol. Emotional response is measured using a four-item self-report scale rated on a seven-point Likert scale, assessing feelings of excitement, fantasy, desire, and mystery. Brand attitude is measured using a three-item Likert scale capturing overall brand evaluation, perceived appeal, and perceived quality. Purchase intention is measured using a three-item Likert scale assessing likelihood of purchase, intention to buy in the near future, and willingness to recommend the brand.

The quantitative strand involves an online survey experiment with approximately 200 adult participants recruited through an online panel, ensuring diversity in age and gender. Participants will be randomly assigned to experimental or control conditions and will complete all measures immediately after viewing the stimulus advertisement. Data will be analyzed using independent samples t-tests to assess differences between conditions, and mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) to test whether emotional response mediates the effect of mermaid imagery on brand attitude and purchase intention.

The qualitative strand consists of six to eight semi-structured interviews with adult consumers who regularly purchase from Starbucks and are therefore familiar with its siren imagery in an authentic, real-world context. Interview questions will explore how participants interpret the Starbucks siren, what emotions and associations it evokes, and how it shapes their perception of the brand. Interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis.

All participants will provide informed consent before taking part, will be fully debriefed after the study, and will retain the right to withdraw without penalty. All data will be anonymized and stored securely in accordance with institutional data protection policies. The study presents no more than minimal risk.

Expected Findings

Based on the theoretical framework and the patterns established in the existing literature, several specific findings are anticipated. First, participants exposed to the Starbucks advertisement featuring mermaid imagery are expected to report significantly higher levels of emotional response — including greater feelings of desire, fantasy, excitement, and mystery — compared to participants in the control condition. This prediction is grounded in Kolosova's (2018) analysis of the symbolic associations encoded in mermaid iconography and in the widely documented emotional resonance of the Starbucks siren as a brand symbol.

Second, the experimental group is expected to demonstrate more favorable brand attitudes and stronger purchase intentions than the control group. This reflects the anticipated downstream behavioral impact of heightened emotional response triggered by mermaid imagery, consistent with Zhang and Li's (2022) finding that emotionally evocative cultural symbols positively influence purchase intention.

Third, and most theoretically significant, emotional response is expected to function as a statistically significant mediator of the relationship between mermaid imagery and both brand attitude and purchase intention. Confirming this mediation effect would validate the proposed conceptual framework and support the broader theoretical claim that fantasy-based symbols influence consumer behavior through emotional activation rather than through direct rational persuasion.

The qualitative interviews are expected to reveal that consumers associate the Starbucks siren with qualities such as luxury, aspiration, mystery, and the sense of an elevated everyday experience — associations that align with the brand's premium positioning. These findings would collectively confirm that mermaid symbolism, as a real and commercially established marketing tool, operates as a psychologically meaningful mechanism for shaping consumer emotion, perception, and decision-making — with implications extending beyond Starbucks to the wider use of fantasy-based imagery in brand communication.

References

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Appendix: Survey Questionnaire

The following instrument will be administered to participants in the quantitative strand of the study immediately after exposure to the stimulus advertisement.

Section A: Demographics

1. What is your age? ____
2. What is your gender? ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Non-binary / Other ☐ Prefer not to say
3. What is your highest level of education? ☐ Secondary ☐ Undergraduate ☐ Postgraduate ☐ Other

Section B: Emotional Response (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

4. This advertisement makes me feel excited.
5. This advertisement evokes a sense of fantasy or magic.
6. This advertisement makes me feel a sense of desire.
7. This advertisement creates a feeling of mystery.

Section C: Brand Attitude (1 = Very Negative / Strongly Disagree, 7 = Very Positive / Strongly Agree)

8. My overall attitude toward this brand is: [Very Negative – Very Positive]
9. I think this brand is appealing.
10. I consider this brand to be high quality.

Section D: Purchase Intention (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

11. I would consider purchasing a product from this brand.
12. I am likely to buy from this brand in the near future.
13. I would recommend this brand to others.