

Research on Cultural Symbol Reconstruction and Brand Design of Brown Sugar Brands in the Context of Generation Z

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Abstract: This thesis focuses on the design of brown sugar brands under the context of Generation Z. Based on the unique consumption characteristics and behavioral patterns of Generation Z, and integrating brand positioning theory, cultural semiotics, and integrated marketing communication theory, it systematically proposes a three-dimensional strategy for upgrading brown sugar brands for Generation Z, and explores its implications for the traditional food industry. Through theoretical analysis and case studies, this paper reveals youthful strategies in brand positioning, image shaping, and channel expansion, providing theoretical and practical references for the development of brown sugar brands and the traditional food industry in the new consumer era. The study shows that by reasonably reconstructing cultural symbols and innovating brand design, the competitiveness of brown sugar brands in the Generation Z market can be effectively enhanced.

Keywords: Generation Z; brown sugar brand; reconstruction of cultural symbols; brand design; innovative practice.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In the era of continuous social and economic development and accelerating iteration of consumer groups, Generation Z has strongly emerged and gradually become the mainstay of the consumer market. According to relevant data, Generation Z accounts for more than 20% of China's population, and its consumption power is not to be underestimated, contributing nearly 40% of the consumption share and leveraging a huge consumption market of over 5 trillion. This group was born and grew up in the digital era with the vigorous development of the Internet, and the diverse and rich growth environment has enabled them to form extremely unique consumption concepts and behavioral characteristics.

Generation Z is keen to pursue personalized expression. In consumption choices, they refuse uniformity and prefer products that can highlight their unique taste and style as a way to show themselves. The 2024 China Consumer Brand Growth White Paper shows that as high as 49.3% of consumers are willing to pay for emotional value, and this trend is particularly significant among Generation Z. They pay attention to the emotional experience in the consumption process and expect products to not only meet material needs but also trigger emotional resonance at the emotional level, bringing positive emotions such as pleasure and satisfaction. At the same time, as "natives" of the Internet, Generation Z is highly dependent on social media. Social communication has become a key way for them to obtain information, share experiences, and influence consumption decisions. They are willing to share their consumption experiences on social platforms, forming a word-of-mouth communication effect^[1].

This wave of consumption reform is violently impacting various traditional industries, and the brown sugar industry is also deeply involved. For a long time, traditional brown sugar brands have mostly taken traditional craft inheritance and health-preserving effects as their core selling points. From the technical level, it emphasizes following ancient sugar-making methods, such as using traditional sugarcane juicing, slow

cooking over a low fire and other processes to highlight the purity and quality of the product. In terms of health-preserving effects, it focuses on the publicity of common effects such as "nourishing blood and qi" and "warming the palace and dispelling cold". However, in terms of brand design style, it appears relatively conservative. In packaging design, traditional colors and patterns are mostly used, lacking innovation and a sense of fashion, making it difficult to attract the attention of Generation Z on the dazzling commodity shelves; the communication channels are also relatively traditional, overly relying on offline channels and traditional advertising methods, and insufficiently using emerging communication channels such as social media and short video platforms, unable to establish effective communication and interaction with Generation Z.

In the current context of consumption upgrading and cultural rejuvenation, the consumer market has increasingly higher requirements for product quality, cultural connotations, and personalized experiences. Consumers are no longer just satisfied with the basic functions of products but pursue products and services with higher quality, more cultural heritage, and more able to highlight personality. At the same time, with the continuous improvement of national cultural confidence, traditional cultural elements have gradually warmed up in the consumer market, and the national trend culture has flourished. In this situation, if brown sugar brands want to stand out in the increasingly competitive market, attract Generation Z consumers, and achieve sustainable development, it is imminent to reconstruct cultural symbols and innovate brand design. Only by deeply excavating the cultural connotations behind brown sugar, innovating the presentation forms of cultural symbols, creating brand images that meet the aesthetics and needs of Generation Z, and expanding diversified communication channels can we occupy a place in the consumer market of the new era.

1.2. Research Purpose and Significance

This study aims to explore the effective strategies and methods for the reconstruction of cultural symbols and brand

design of brown sugar brands in the context of Generation Z, and provide guidance for brown sugar brands to adapt to new consumption trends and enhance market competitiveness. Theoretically, this study will enrich the applied research of cultural semiotics in the field of brand design and improve the theoretical system of brand design in the consumption background of Generation Z; in practice, the research results can provide actionable design solutions for brown sugar enterprises, help enterprises achieve brand upgrading, and promote the innovative development of the brown sugar industry.

1.3. Research Methods and Innovation Points

This study uses the literature research method to sort out the relevant theories of Generation Z consumption characteristics, cultural semiotics, brand design, etc., to lay a theoretical foundation for the research; uses the case analysis method to select successful domestic and foreign brown sugar brand cases to analyze their experience in the use of cultural symbols and brand design; through the user research method, collects the cognition, needs, and preferences of Generation Z for brown sugar brands to provide data support for the design strategy. The innovation point of this study is to combine the context of Generation Z with the perspective of cultural symbol reconstruction, deeply analyze the brand design problems of brown sugar, and propose targeted and innovative design strategies, providing new ideas and methods for the brand design research of brown sugar^[2].

2. Theoretical Basis and Literature Review

2.1. Consumption Characteristics and Cultural Demands of Generation Z

As native residents of the digital age, Generation Z grew up in an environment of rapid global economic development and information explosion, and their consumption characteristics and cultural demands show significant era imprints and uniqueness. According to the China Generation Z Consumption Trend Report, the influence of Generation Z

in China's consumer market is increasing year by year, and it has occupied nearly 40% of the overall consumer market share, becoming the core force driving consumption upgrading.

From the perspective of consumption behavior characteristics, Generation Z attaches great importance to personalized expression. Erikson's self-identity theory points out that individuals explore their self-identity in various ways during their youth, and consumption is an important way for Generation Z to construct and display their unique self-identity. They reject homogeneous products and prefer customized and limited-edition goods, highlighting personality labels through consumption choices. Market research data shows that about 68% of Generation Z is willing to pay a higher premium for personalized products. In terms of emotional consumption, Generation Z pays attention to emotional resonance and experience value in the consumption process. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, after meeting basic material needs, they pursue higher-level spiritual needs such as belonging and love, respect, and self-actualization, and tend to choose brands with storytelling and consistent values.

In terms of information communication and consumption decision-making, Generation Z is deeply dependent on social media. The use and satisfaction theory in communication studies points out that individuals use media to meet their specific needs. Generation Z uses social platforms as important tools for obtaining information, social interaction, and self-expression. Data shows that Generation Z spends more than 4 hours a day using social media on average, and 83% of consumption decisions are affected by social platform content. At the same time, with the improvement of cultural confidence and the rise of the "national trend" culture, Generation Z has shown a strong interest in traditional cultural elements. The cultural identity theory believes that individuals' identification with their own national culture will affect their consumption preferences. Generation Z is keen to buy products that combine traditional patterns, intangible cultural heritage crafts, and modern design. The annual sales of the Palace Museum cultural and creative products exceeding 1.5 billion yuan fully confirm this trend^[3].

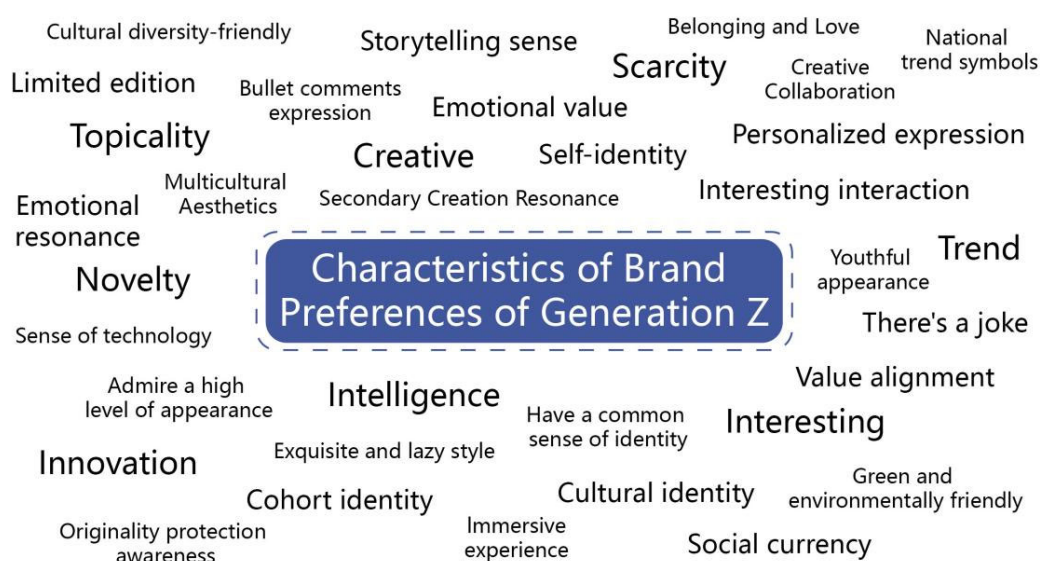


Figure 1. Analysis of Brand Consumption Characteristics of Generation Z Self-drawn by the Author

2.2. Theories Related to Cultural Symbols

As an interdisciplinary research field, cultural semiotics provides important theoretical support for brand communication and design. Saussure's symbolic binary theory points out that symbols consist of the signifier (form) and the signified (concept), and cultural symbols precisely through specific forms to convey deep cultural meanings. In brand communication, cultural symbols can transform abstract brand concepts into concrete and perceptible visual or linguistic symbols, enhancing the cultural recognition and memory points of the brand. For example, Coca-Cola's red wavy ribbon is not only a visual identification symbol but also carries the brand cultural connotations of happiness and vitality.

Cultural symbols have the characteristics of symbolism, convention, and historicity. Roland Barthes proposed in *Mythologies* that the meaning of cultural symbols is formed through collective convention in the social and historical development and is constantly endowed with new connotations. Taking the Chinese traditional pattern "Ruyi pattern" as an example, its original symbol meaning of good luck is reinterpreted as a symbol of high-end and quality in modern brand design. In brand practice, the reasonable use of cultural symbols can establish an emotional bond between the brand and consumers and enhance brand loyalty.

2.3. Brand Design Theories

Brand design is a systematic construction project based on the strategic level, covering core modules such as brand positioning, visual image design, and communication strategy formulation. The positioning theory proposed by American marketing experts Al Ries and Jack Trout emphasizes that a brand needs to occupy a unique position in the minds of target consumers and establish a competitive advantage through differentiated positioning. For example, Jiang Xiaobai breaks the traditional marketing model of white wine with the positioning of "youthful liquor", accurately cutting into the young consumer market.

Visual image design, as the "visual language" of the brand, constructs the brand identification system through elements such as logos, packaging, and colors. Gestalt psychology

theory points out that humans have the tendency to perceive visual elements as a whole, and excellent visual design needs to pay attention to the unity and coordination of elements. Japan's MUJI (MUJI) conveys the concept of "no-brand high-quality life" with a minimalist visual style, forming a unique brand recognition. In terms of brand communication, the integrated marketing communication theory (IMC) advocates delivering consistent brand information through multiple channels and establishing long-term relationships with consumers. For example, Perfect Diary has built a global marketing ecosystem through social platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin, combined with KOL planting and user-generated content, achieving rapid brand rise.

2.4. Research Status at Home and Abroad

Scholars at home and abroad have conducted a lot of research on the consumption behavior of Generation Z, cultural semiotics, and brand design. In the study of Generation Z consumption, foreign scholars have deeply analyzed the consumption psychology and behavior patterns of Generation Z and discussed its impact on the market; domestic scholars have studied the consumption preferences and marketing strategies of Generation Z in combination with local culture and market characteristics. In the field of cultural semiotics research, foreign scholars have systematically studied the essence, function, and communication mechanism of cultural symbols; domestic scholars have applied cultural semiotics to multiple fields and explored its applications in brand construction, cultural communication, and other aspects. In the research of brand design, scholars at home and abroad have discussed the principles, methods, and strategies of brand design from different angles^[4]. However, there is relatively little research on the reconstruction of cultural symbols and brand design of brown sugar brands in the context of Generation Z, and this study will fill the gap in this field.

3. Three-Dimensional Strategy for Upgrading Brown Sugar Brands in the Context of Generation Z

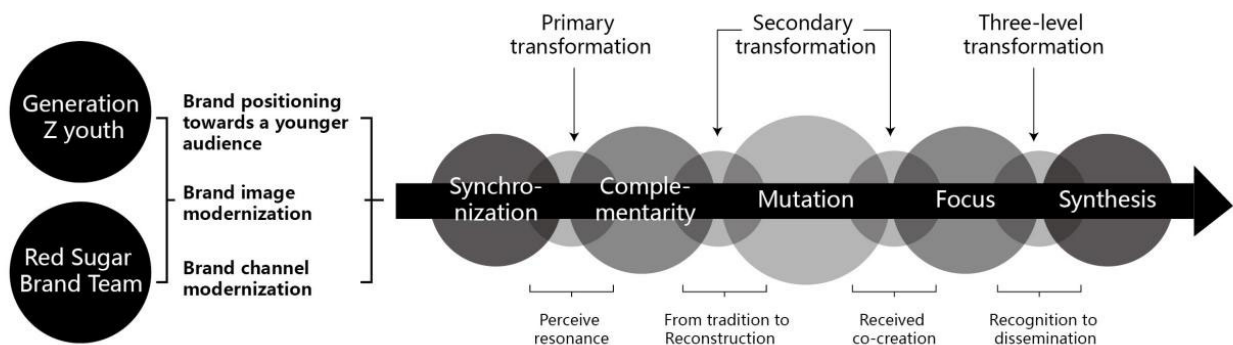


Figure 2. Reconstruction Strategies of Cultural Symbols for Red Sugar Brands in the Context of Generation Z Self-drawn by the author

3.1. Youth-Oriented Brand Positioning: From Function to Emotion

According to the brand positioning theory, brand positioning is to occupy a unique position in the minds of target consumers and establish a differentiated competitive advantage. In the context of Generation Z, traditional brown sugar brands simply emphasizing functional attributes such as "nourishing blood and qi" and "warming the palace and dispelling cold" can no longer meet the consumption needs of Generation Z, who pursue personality and pay attention to emotional experience. Brown sugar brands need to shift from function-oriented to emotion-oriented. Generation Z pays more attention to the emotional value and self-expression behind products. Brands can use emotional positioning strategies to connect brown sugar with emotions such as warmth, care, and healing. For example, by telling the warm stories of brown sugar in family life, it evokes the beautiful memories of Generation Z about family and friendship and triggers emotional resonance. At the same time, combined with the characteristics of Generation Z's enthusiasm for social sharing, position the brand as a "social currency", endow brown sugar with unique social attributes, and make it a carrier for Generation Z to convey emotions in social scenarios. For example, launch brown sugar gift boxes with creative copywriting and high-value packaging, and encourage consumers to share their usage experience on social platforms, thereby enhancing the social communication power and emotional added value of the brand.

3.2. Youth-Oriented Brand Image: Reconstruction of Cultural Symbols

Cultural semiotics theory points out that cultural symbols are important carriers for carrying cultural connotations and conveying brand values. In the process of brand image rejuvenation, brown sugar brands need to reconstruct cultural symbols to fit the aesthetic preferences and cultural cognition of Generation Z. The cultural symbols such as old craftsmen and ancient utensils commonly used by traditional brown sugar brands, although containing deep cultural heritage, may appear old-fashioned and lack vitality in the eyes of Generation Z. Brands should deeply excavate the elements in brown sugar culture that are consistent with the interests of Generation Z, such as refining the key steps in traditional sugar-making techniques into modern graphic symbols^[5]; or combining national trend culture to innovatively integrate traditional auspicious patterns and mythological stories with brown sugar products. In terms of color application, break through the traditional brown and tan tones commonly used in brown sugar packaging, introduce more aesthetic colors for Generation Z such as macaron colors and Morandi colors, and create a fresh and fashionable visual image. Through the deconstruction, reorganization, and innovative expression of cultural symbols, new cultural connotations and visual vitality are given to brown sugar brands, enhancing the brand's attractiveness to Generation Z.

3.3. Youth-Oriented Brand Channels: Socialized Communication

Traditional brown sugar brands have long relied on single sales channels such as offline supermarkets and convenience stores in sinking markets, and are facing urgent needs for transformation and upgrading in the "Internet +" era. To

achieve brand rejuvenation, it is necessary to build an omni-channel marketing system with socialized communication as the core. Studies have shown that 90% of Generation Z consumers discover new brands through social platforms, among which short video platforms (Douyin, Kuaishou), graphic communities (Xiaohongshu, Weibo), and interest communities (Bilibili, Douban) constitute key communication positions.

In terms of digital marketing strategies, brands need to implement differentiated operations for the characteristics of different platforms: short video platforms are suitable for carrying out plot-based content marketing; graphic communities are more suitable for displaying lifestyle and other contents; interest communities can deepen vertical contents such as cultural science. At the same time, it is crucial to establish a user co-creation mechanism. By launching activities such as the "Brown Sugar Creative Challenge", it stimulates the participation enthusiasm of Generation Z and meets their psychological needs for social currency and scarcity.

The rejuvenation transformation of offline channels cannot be ignored. Create brand experience stores with internet celebrity characteristics, and create consumption scenarios with spontaneous communication value through young space design, interactive installations, and limited products. This online and offline integrated channel strategy can not only meet Generation Z's needs for experiential consumption but also achieve the rejuvenation and reconstruction of brand images through social sharing.

4. Enlightenment of Brown Sugar Brand Upgrading to Traditional Food Industry

4.1. Demand Insight: From Generational Differences to Circle Penetration

The traditional food industry has long relied on middle-aged and elderly groups, and its product design and marketing communication mostly focus on "health" and "wellness", which is difficult to resonate with young groups. Compared with function orientation, Generation Z pays more attention to whether products can bring emotional value and whether they can express personality. Brands need to extend from functional demands to emotional values and build a more warm user relationship. Therefore, in the process of brand upgrading, brown sugar brands have broken the original generational barriers by insight into the consumption psychology of young people and grasping their needs in social interaction, emotion, and personality expression.

At the same time, traditional food brands should recognize that Generation Z is not a homogeneous whole but is composed of multiple interest circles, such as health girls, delicate lazy people, national trend youth, etc. Brands can carry out differentiated product planning and communication content formulation around segmented circles, so as to achieve precise marketing and efficient transformation.

4.2. Cultural Empowerment: Modern Expression of Traditional Symbols

In the process of image upgrading, brown sugar brands have broken the stereotype that "tradition equals conservatism" and achieved the integration of tradition and

fashion through the reconstruction of cultural symbols. This provides important inspiration for other traditional food brands - culture should not be a heavy burden but a source of brand innovation. In practice, brown sugar brands extract cultural symbols from traditional crafts and folk customs and re-interpret them through modern design languages to make them have visual impact and a sense of the times. Traditional food brands can also deeply excavate the cultural roots of their products, transform intangible cultural heritage techniques, local characteristics, and other elements into visual and narrative brand assets, so as to strengthen the brand's cultural recognition and differentiated competitiveness^[6].

More importantly, the expression of cultural symbols needs to be consistent with the aesthetic preferences of Generation Z. Whether it is illustration, animation, or trendy play, traditional food brands can try to build a "new cultural image" through visual updates and inspire Generation Z's interest in and recognition of tradition in a lighter and more interesting way.

4.3. Channel Innovation: Global Marketing and Consumer Co-creation

The primary platforms for Generation Z to access information and share experiences are social media. Traditional food brands relying solely on offline supermarkets, TV advertisements, or other conventional channels will struggle to reach their target audience. The upgrading practice of brown sugar brands demonstrates that channel rejuvenation and digitalization are pivotal for brand breakthroughs.

First, brands must establish a holistic marketing matrix. This involves distributing content and engaging with users on platforms like Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Weibo, and Bilibili, while developing differentiated content strategies tailored to each platform's characteristics. For instance, short-video platforms are ideal for narrative-driven content, while graphic communities suit lifestyle-themed narratives, and interest-based communities are suitable for in-depth cultural popular science.

Second, constructing a user co-creation mechanism is essential. Encouraging Generation Z to transition from

"consumers" to "participants"—through activities like design challenges or user-generated packaging concepts—enhances brand loyalty and user ownership. Such initiatives satisfy their psychological needs for social currency and exclusivity, as seen in campaigns like the "Brown Sugar Creative Challenge"^[7].

5. Conclusion

This paper systematically explores brand transformation strategies for brown sugar under the Gen Z context. It identifies the reconstruction of cultural symbols and the systematization of brand design as key pathways to connect traditional craftsmanship with modern youth. Future research could explore technologies like AR/VR or use neuroscience to analyze consumer responses to cultural elements.

At the crossroads of national cultural revival and consumer upgrades, traditional food brands face both challenge and opportunity. This research offers insight into building culturally rich, youth-oriented brands that let Chinese heritage shine in modern lifestyles and global markets.

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