

When Trends Become Cultural Arenas: CLOT's Role in Constructing Gen-Z Cultural Identity Through Advertising and Offline Events

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Abstract. In recent years, the "Guochao (Chinese Streetwear)" phenomenon has become a significant vehicle for Generation Z to express cultural identity and national confidence. This study takes the renowned national trend brand CLOT as a case to explore how it constructs cultural identity through advertising communication and marketing strategies, achieving effective offline reach and commercial dissemination. Employing a combination of case study and textual analysis methodologies, this paper first applies Stuart Hall's "encoding-decoding" theory to dissect CLOT's extraction and translation of traditional cultural symbols in product lines such as "Silk" and "Terracotta Warriors". Subsequently, drawing on Pine and Gilmore's "experience economy" theory, it examines CLOT's practices in creating immersive cultural spaces through integrated online-offline initiatives, pop-up stores, and thematic exhibitions. Findings reveal that CLOT successfully fosters consumer cultural identification through a multidimensional mechanism: "cultural symbol translation → aesthetic system integration → ritualistic interaction reinforcement". Its closed-loop model of "online traffic generation, offline experience, and social sharing" efficiently converts cultural value into commercial value. Simultaneously, by analyzing user comments on social platforms, the study reveals the micro-mechanisms through which consumers actively participate in co-creating the brand's culture. This research provides theoretical references and practical insights for domestic trend brands seeking to balance cultural depth and commercial benefits in the context of globalization.

Keywords: CLOT, Guochao brand, Cultural identity, Commercial communication, Online-offline integration.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background introduction

In recent years, with the upgrading of China's consumer market and the strengthening of cultural confidence, the "Guochao" phenomenon has emerged as a significant cultural and economic phenomenon. This trend is not merely a commercial movement but also an expression of cultural identity and a manifestation of national confidence. Against this backdrop, CLOT—the streetwear brand founded by Edison Chen in 2003—established its brand philosophy as a "bridge connecting Eastern and Western cultures" from its inception. It aims to link traditional Chinese culture with other world cultures through the medium of streetwear. As a shining example of original Chinese creativity, its nearly two-decade journey offers an invaluable case study.

1.2. Literature review and research progress

Existing research primarily focuses on two dimensions: first, holistic studies of the Guochao phenomenon, with most scholars analyzing the background and driving forces behind its emergence from a macro perspective—such as attributing its rise to economic growth and heightened national confidence [1]; Second, research examining the correlation between cultural identity and brand communication, viewing consumption of Guochao as an expression of cultural identity among youth groups [2]. However, existing research exhibits significant shortcomings: most studies concentrate on online communication analysis, such as discussions on fashion brands' visual communication strategies that focus exclusively on digital presentation [3], while generally neglecting in-depth

analysis of offline engagement mechanisms. Simultaneously, there is a notable lack of in-depth case studies on specific Guochao brands, particularly CLOT. Although some research has mentioned the brand's appeal to Generation Z [4], it has not systematically deconstructed its mechanisms for constructing cultural identity.

1.3. Research motivation and framework description

Given the aforementioned research gaps, this study selects CLOT as a representative case, focusing on its cultural identity construction process and offline engagement strategies to address existing deficiencies in micro-level brand operation mechanisms. The research framework draws upon cultural field theory and integrates findings from studies on Gen Z's rational consumption of Guochao [5], systematically analyzing CLOT's cultural identity construction pathways through three dimensions: cultural symbol translation, aesthetic system construction, and interactive participation. Furthermore, drawing on relevant research on pop-up store experiential marketing [6], this study delves into CLOT's offline engagement and commercial communication mechanisms, aiming to provide practical insights for the high-quality development of domestic trend brands.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research strategy combining case analysis with text analysis. First, four representative CLOT collaboration cases since 2006 (e.g., CLOT x Nike Air Force 1 "White Silk", CLOT x Air Jordan 13 "Terracotta") and select CLOT offline spaces (e.g., Shanghai JUICE, CLOT pop-up events) were analyzed. The focus examined their communication pathways and market responses in cultural symbol translation and immersive space construction.

Second, employing text analysis, keyword coding was applied to topic content and comment data corresponding to these cases across social platforms like Rednote. Three dimensions were established: "Cultural Identity Symbols," "Emotional Response Tendencies," and "Participation Intentions." This aimed to identify the recognition mechanisms and interactive behaviors of Gen Z consumers during brand communication. Additionally, supplementary validation of communication effectiveness was conducted using platform metrics such as topic popularity.

3. The multidimensional construction of CLOT's cultural identity

Through a systematic analysis of CLOT's brand communication practices, this study finds that its cultural identity construction is a multidimensional, systematic process. This is primarily achieved through the creative reinterpretation of traditional cultural symbols, the establishment of an aesthetic system blending Eastern and Western elements, and the implementation of highly participatory interactive mechanisms.

3.1. Extraction and translation of cultural symbols: from "silk" to "terracotta warriors"

CLOT demonstrates exceptional symbolic translation capabilities in constructing cultural identity, a process that can be deeply elucidated through Stuart Hall's "encoding-decoding" model. This model posits that mass communication is not a direct transmission of information, but rather a complex process involving encoders (imbuing symbols with meaning) and decoders (interpreting symbolic meaning). CLOT achieves meaning encoding by creatively extracting and reconstructing traditional cultural elements, guiding consumers to form cultural identity during the decoding process. Its core symbolic translation cases are systematically summarized in Table 1 (Case Analysis of the Main Cultural Symbol Translations of CLOT), which clarifies the specific paths and commercial effects of the brand's transformation of traditional symbols into fashion language from four dimensions: "Cultural Elements, Product Series, Translation Strategies, and Market Response." At the encoding level, CLOT extracts, processes, and reconstructs highly recognizable elements from traditional Chinese culture, infusing them with contemporary cultural significance. Take the CLOT x Nike Air

Force 1 "White Silk" as an example (see Figure 1: CLOT x Nike Air Force 1 "White Silk" for product details): by selecting silk—a material embodying Eastern luxury—CLOT encodes meanings of "Eastern mystique" and "premium texture." Its tearable upper design further encodes the interactive meaning of "destruction and rebirth," inviting consumers to participate in generating cultural significance. In the CLOT x Air Jordan 13 "Terracotta" series (see Figure 2: CLOT x Air Jordan 13 "Terracotta" for design details), designers drew inspiration from Qin Shi Huang's terracotta warriors, integrating details like armor textures and interwoven threads connecting armor plates into the Air Jordan 13 design. Interlocking embossed patterns create a 3D sculptural effect, reimagining ancient historical relics through futuristic design. At the decoding level, consumers predominantly adopt a dominant decoding stance, aligning with CLOT's cultural fusion philosophy through their interpretation of these symbols. This successful decoding directly translates into cultural pride and brand identification, manifested in the secondary market prices of the CLOT x Nike Air Force 1 "White Silk" skyrocketing by 3-5 times and the CLOT x Air Jordan 13 "Terracotta" series becoming highly sought-after. Through this comprehensive encoding-decoding process, CLOT has successfully constructed a symbolic system that combines cultural depth with fashion expressiveness, as shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

In summary, through systematic symbolic translation strategies, CLOT has successfully assumed the role of cultural meaning encoder. By employing design techniques such as material innovation and form abstraction, it has constructed a comprehensive symbolic system. This guides consumers to embrace its East-West cultural fusion philosophy through dominant decoding, ultimately achieving effective cultural identity construction.

Table 1. Case analysis of the main cultural symbol translations of CLOT

Cultural elements	Product series	Translation Strategy	Market response
Silk craftsmanship	CLOT x Nike Air Force 1 "White Silk"	Material innovation and interactive design	Secondary market premium of 3-5 times
Terracotta warriors	CLOT x Air Jordan 13 "Terracotta"	Texture abstraction and color imagery	Widely regarded as CLOT's masterpiece
TCM culture	CLOT x Nike Air Max 1 "Kiss of Death"	TCM foot points sole and ancient book shoe box	The pioneer of Chinese-inspired sneakers
Chinese jade	CLOT x Air Jordan 35 "Warrior Jade"	The midsole features an emerald green design	Worn by NBA players during games



Figure 1. CLOT x Nike Air Force 1 "White Silk"



Figure 2. CLOT x Air Jordan 13 “Terracotta”



Figure 3. CLOT x Nike Air Max 1 “Kiss of Death”



Figure 4. CLOT x Air Jordan 35 “Warrior Jade”

3.2. The construction of an aesthetic system integrating Chinese and Western elements

CLOT has built a distinctive aesthetic that merges Eastern and Western elements across product design, visual communication, and spatial experiences. Its collaboration with Polo Ralph Lauren illustrates this blend: preppy silhouettes are reimagined with frog buttons, silk-patterned linings, and blue-and-white tie-dye details, integrating traditional Chinese motifs into familiar Western forms (see Figure 5: Some of the collaborative products between CLOT and Polo Ralph Lauren). This hybrid logic extends to visual media. Campaigns often place Eastern and Western models together in settings that mix urban modernity with traditional imagery. Styling combines streetwear with classic Chinese garment features, deliberately softening cultural boundaries and appealing to Gen Z's embrace of diverse identities. Spatial design further reinforces this strategy. JUICE stores worldwide embody "East meets West." The Shanghai location, for instance, combines a courtyard-style exterior with wooden doors and stone lions, while its interior references the Forbidden City, enhanced by neon signage. Shoppers move through a culturally blended environment that deepens their identification with CLOT's aesthetic world.



Figure 5. Some of the collaborative products between CLOT and Polo Ralph Lauren

3.3. Cultural identity is strengthened through interaction and participation.

CLOT encourages consumers to take part in shaping cultural identity rather than simply observing it. The brand sets up interactive experiences that invite people to engage more deeply, which in turn strengthens their attachment to the label. One way this happens is through tightly controlled limited releases. In-store queues and online lotteries make getting a product feel like taking part in a special event rather than just making a purchase. Scarcity and anticipation turn the act of buying into a small ritual. Social media also plays a major role, giving consumers spaces to share, compete, and celebrate their involvement. Brand-initiated hashtag challenges encourage user-generated content—such as the #CLOT20 campaign for its 20th-anniversary series, which generated over 51,000 user posts on Rednote alone, amassing more than 14.749 million views. Offline, JUICE stores host regular pop-ups, exhibitions, and workshops: the CLOT Country Club Party (see Figure 6), CLOT x Nike Cork Dunk Workshop (see Figure 7), and collaborations like CLOT x Adidas Originals at ComplexCon Hong Kong (see Figure 8) deepen immersion. Even temporary initiatives, such as the 2025 Nanjing Pop-up Store (see Figure 9), extend this experiential logic. Founder Edison Chen, as the brand's spiritual leader, has deeply integrated his personal influence with the brand's image. CLOT has cultivated a cohort of secondary opinion leaders—including streetwear collectors and fashion bloggers—who provide credible identity templates through their content. This dual-layer dissemination structure of "celebrity + community" offers diverse paths to identification for different consumer segments.



Figure 6. CLOT Country Club Party



Figure 7. CLOT x Nike Cork Dunk Workshop



Figure 8. CLOT x Adidas Originals at ComplexCon Hong Kong



Figure 9. CLOT Pop-up store in Nanjing (2025)

3.4. The formation of user cultural identification in text feedback on a social media platform

To further understand how Gen Z users participate in constructing CLOT's brand culture on social platforms, this paper conducted a preliminary textual analysis of the top 100 high-engagement user notes under the Rednote hashtag "#CLOT20," focusing on three dimensions:

- Keyword frequency: User comments feature both generic terms expressing strong positive emotions like "cool," "awesome," "legend," and "amazing," alongside frequent explicit references to "Chinese elements." This coexistence of emotional and cognitive keywords indicates that CLOT's

aesthetic philosophy has not only gained emotional acceptance but is also clearly perceived and affirmed at a cognitive level by users.

- Sentiment orientation: While most comments expressed positive sentiment, some users voiced dissatisfaction with phenomena like "the queue is too long" and "can't purchase the limited edition souvenirs," revealing a dual psychological structure of identification and vigilance.

- Participatory behavior: Many users share their own photos from exhibitions or of themselves wearing CLOT pieces. This trend shows that the brand's culture has generated repeatable content formats that others can easily follow, helping the message spread through participation.

Looking at popular posts under the "#CLOT20" hashtag on Rednote, we can see how Gen Z users engage in shaping cultural identity online. Their language is often enthusiastic: phrases such as "well done," "many Chinese elements," "trendy play," "worth it," and "shocking" appear frequently, showing a positive response to the brand's hybrid cultural style. Some users, however, offer criticism, saying things like "the culture seems a bit detached" or "tickets will be charged for." These reactions reveal a mix of appreciation and questioning. Together, these posts illustrate how emotional involvement, identity recognition, and purchasing behavior are linked in the way users interact with CLOT, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis table of CLOT's comments on Rednote

Level	Comments	Interactive behaviors	Analytical dimensions
1	Awesome	Expression of emotion	Emotional identifications
2	So cool	Expression of emotion	Emotional identifications
3	Fantasy	Expression of emotion	Emotional identifications
4	Faith	Expression of faith	Brand loyalty
5	Legend	Status recognition	Industry status recognition
6	Industry Beacon EDC	Status recognition	Industry status recognition
7	Looking forward to C	Expression of expectation	Participation will
8	It's a remarkable person	Expression of admiration	Founder identity
9	What a great exhibition	Evaluation of activity	Activity identification
10	Told a good story	Content evaluation	Value identification
11	National trend NO.1	Status recognition	Industry status recognition
12	Chinese tradition, invincible	Culture confidence	Culture identity
13	China NO.1 streetwear brand	Status recognition	Industry status recognition
14	Oh my goodness, this is amazing	Expression of emotion	Emotional identification
15	So talented! A 20-year-old brand is really not easy	Value recognition	Value identification
16	Trends never cease, classics endure forever	Philosophical evaluation	Value identification
17	A truly thoughtful and sincere work	Brand recognition	Value identification
18	Just came back from checking in, it's really worth it	Check-in sharing	Activity identification
19	He plays Chinese style to perfection	Style evaluation	Cultural identity
20	The exhibition hall is really good	Evaluation of activity	Activity identification
21	So talented!! Watched the whole thing, it really integrates many Chinese elements completely, every point is very creative!	Content evaluation	Cultural integration and identity
22	Edison Chen's design is truly top-level, incorporating Chinese elements while maintaining excellent aesthetics, with almost no mistakes.	Professional analysis and appreciation	Cultural integration and design identity

4. Online–offline synergy and commercial communication

CLOT connects its online presence with offline spaces to create a seamless cultural and commercial experience. Online campaigns help the brand reach specific audiences, while offline pop-ups and store events give these audiences a chance to engage with the brand in person. This combination makes the cultural message feel tangible. The brand then builds on this engagement through multiple business strategies, turning attention and participation into real commercial outcomes.

4.1. Online-offline integration and innovative technology applications

CLOT has integrated online and offline channels through a digital strategy, establishing a comprehensive brand communication system. In its online outreach, the brand implements differentiated content strategies based on the user characteristics of various social media platforms: Instagram emphasizes global visual aesthetics, Weibo focuses on topic-driven marketing and fan engagement, while Rednote prioritizes user outfit sharing and consumer experience content to inspire purchases. This builds a collaborative multi-platform communication network that targets its consumer groups accurately. Studies show that deep integration of social media is constantly changing consumers' lifestyles and interaction methods [7, 8], and CLOT's strategy fits this trend perfectly. For offline engagement, the brand sets up immersive experience spaces through its physical JUICE stores and pop-up events. Such experiential marketing has been proven to have a major impact on consumers' purchasing decisions [6]. CLOT's innovation is that it uses technologies such as mini-program lottery bookings and AR virtual try-ons to digitize offline events in real time. This successfully directs online traffic to offline settings, creating a "online exposure → offline experience → social sharing" communication loop that greatly strengthens the emotional bond between the brand and its users. Studies have shown that the application of digital technologies such as AR can significantly enhance brand communication effectiveness and consumer engagement in cross-cultural contexts [9].

4.2. Creating offline experience scenarios

In building its offline experience spaces, CLOT goes beyond conventional retail by staging large-scale exhibitions and creative pop-up events that function as immersive cultural arenas. This practice can be interpreted through Pine and Gilmore's "Four Quadrants of the Experience Economy" model, which argues that outstanding experiential design must integrate four dimensions: entertainment, education, escape, and aesthetics. CLOT's offline projects reflect this framework in concrete ways. On the entertainment and aesthetics side, the 2023 "CLOT: Twenty Years" exhibition in Shanghai organised the brand's milestones and signature pieces around the Five Elements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth). The layout relied on strong scenography, hands-on installations, and multimedia cues that encouraged visitors to linger, interact, and experience the brand visually and sensorially. Prior research finds that thematic design and presentation in retail IP projects play a key role in shaping brand identity, and CLOT's curatorial choices sit squarely within this pattern [10]. By contrast, the 2024 "CLOT Ice Room" emphasised layered narrative and context: vintage Hong Kong tea-restaurant touches sat alongside the brand's silk motifs, while limited tabletop sets and co-branded drops (for example, with Adidas Originals) created a brief "time capsule" effect that let visitors step out of the everyday. Informational panels and guided commentary made the design intent and cultural sources explicit, turning many encounters into moments of cultural learning.

Taken together, these elements push pop-ups beyond mere commerce. They become places where emotional connections form, cultural identification is reinforced, and purchasing choices are increasingly guided by feeling rather than purely functional considerations.

4.3. Analysis of diversified profit models

CLOT monetises its cultural outputs through multiple revenue streams. The brand's primary income sources are direct sales of its own products, revenue from collaborative releases, sales through physical retail, and online commerce. Collaborations with global labels such as Nike, Adidas, and BAPE play a prominent role: they bring royalty income and help CLOT access broader distribution channels. Limited drops also produce a scarcity effect — for example, silk-lined Air Force 1s frequently trade for three to five times retail on secondary markets, which raises both perceived value and margins. Offline, CLOT uses JUICE stores to deliver experience-centred retail; online, it sells via its official site and international e-commerce platforms. These parallel channels allow the brand to retain its cultural positioning while achieving notable commercial returns, with annual revenues on the order of tens of millions of dollars.

5. Discussion

Although CLOT has achieved notable commercial success, several problems have emerged during its development. The brand still struggles to convey cultural depth, shows signs of excessive commercialisation, and has been slower to apply new digital technologies. These difficulties stem from the tension between rapid market expansion and the slower process required to build meaningful cultural content. To resolve this, the brand needs to strengthen its cultural storytelling, adjust its business approach, and increase technological investment so that cultural value and commercial growth can evolve in a balanced and sustainable way.

5.1. Existing issues and analysis of causes

Although CLOT has achieved great success, there are still some problems to solve in its development. First, it tends to use cultural symbols superficially—some products just take traditional elements as visual patterns without systematically exploring their cultural essence and philosophical depth. Studies point out that when streetwear brands use traditional elements, they need to go beyond just copying the form to achieve a spiritual integration [11]. Second, the risk of over-commercialization is becoming more obvious. As collaborations become more frequent and the commercial scale expands rapidly, some consumers have begun to doubt whether the brand's cultural expression is genuine. Excessive commercialization within Guochao culture has been shown to deplete young people's imagination for cultural heritage and lead to value deviations [12]. Third, CLOT is relatively slow in applying technological innovations. Compared with leading international streetwear labels, CLOT remains in a follower's position when it comes to exploring digital experiences such as AR and VR, and its level of innovation in this area is still limited.

Many of the difficulties described above stem from competing priorities as the brand grows. Culturally, rapid scaling pushes CLOT toward mass production and wider visibility, while developing substantive cultural content takes slower, research-driven curation and time for refinement. That tension between speed and depth makes it hard to keep narratives both coherent and meaningful during expansion. From a business perspective, frequent collaborations can boost short-term attention but, if overused, risk blurring the brand's distinctiveness and eroding consumer trust. In the technological domain, the company generally prefers proven solutions to large, speculative R&D investments; this reduces short-term risk but also limits the potential for breakthrough digital experiences.

5.2. Countermeasures and recommendations

To tackle these problems, this study suggests a comprehensive strategy that focuses on cultural depth, commercial authenticity, and technological innovation. Strengthening cultural narratives should be the starting point. By engaging with the philosophical ideas and craftsmanship traditions that underpin Chinese culture, CLOT can move beyond superficial visual elements and build stronger cultural value into its products and storytelling. Research on masstige brand advertising identifies

“renewal” as a key value that resonates with younger consumers and helps brands maintain relevance across generations [13]. In business strategy, it is important to find a balance between market expansion and cultural integrity. Careful control over the frequency and quality of collaborations can ensure that each partnership contributes to cultural innovation instead of simply pursuing short-term gains. A portion of the brand’s revenue can also be allocated to cultural support programs, such as assisting young designers or reviving traditional crafts, which would reinforce its identity as a cultural brand. In addition, increasing investment in technologies such as AR and VR can help create new forms of engagement, including virtual try-ons and digital collectibles, making the overall brand experience more immersive and interactive while maintaining its cultural foundation. Together, these measures would allow CLOT to reinforce its cultural identity and maintain sustainable growth.

6. Conclusion

This study systematically explores the cultural identity construction and offline reach strategies of CLOT in Guochao advertisements through case analysis and text analysis methods. Research findings indicate that CLOT has successfully established a unique cultural identity system through the modern reinterpretation of cultural symbols, the construction of an aesthetic system that integrates Chinese and Western elements, and the establishment of an interactive participation mechanism. Through the synergistic reach of online and offline channels and the application of innovative technologies, an effective commercial communication mechanism has been established. CLOT’s practices show that the success of Guochao brands stems from the organic alignment of cultural value and commercial value, rather than superficial symbol appropriation or commercial grandstanding.

However, this study has certain limitations. First, the analysis primarily adopts the brand's perspective, lacking empirical consumer-side data support. Future research could employ methods such as questionnaires and in-depth interviews to gain deeper insights into consumers' perceptions and responses to CLOT's cultural identity. Second, this study focuses on a single case, and the generalizability of its conclusions requires further validation. Subsequent research could compare multiple Guochao brands to explore cultural identity construction patterns under different development trajectories. Finally, as the Guochao phenomenon is in a phase of rapid development, future studies need to continuously track the latest dynamics and promptly update theoretical frameworks and research findings.

In summary, as a pioneer and successful model among Guochao brands, CLOT's cultural identity construction and commercial communication mechanisms offer valuable insights for the development of Guochao brands. Against the backdrop of growing cultural confidence, Guochao brands should deeply explore traditional cultural values, innovate expression methods, and balance cultural value with commercial value to achieve sustainable development and global dissemination.

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