

Designer Toy IP Building and User Emotional Identity in the Context of Guochao: A Case Study of Pop Mart

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Abstract. Guochao (China Chic) consumption has been increasing in recent years, and local designer toy brands have started integrating traditional Chinese culture into their IP design to arouse users' cultural resonance through Chinese-style expression. Pop Mart was selected as the case; combining case analysis with content analysis, this study coded 322 relevant user comments on RedNote (formerly Xiaohongshu) from January 2023 to June 2026 to explore how Guochao designer toy IP is associated with users' emotional identity at the three levels of surface aesthetic identity, middle-level social identity, and deep-level cultural identity. 69.9% of users feel positive about Guochao designer toys, but with significant differences across levels: aesthetic identity accounts for 52.4%, social identity for 44.0%, and deep cultural identity for only 3.6%. The main reasons for negative feedback are as follows: aesthetic design fails to meet expectations (43.3%), awkward integration of Chinese-style elements (32.0%), and homogenized and perfunctory design (24.7%). The study indicates that the emotional connection with Guochao designer toys is still at the level of surface visuals and middle-level social identity, and most Chinese-style designs have not yet achieved users' cultural identity. The results can provide a reference for designer toy brands' Guochao IP design.

Keywords: Guochao, designer toy IP, user emotional identity, content analysis, Pop Mart

1. Introduction

This paper studies the industry background of the rise in Guochao consumption: domestic brands have added traditional Chinese culture to product design to create a "culture card" effect [1]. As an essential consumption category for young people, Chinese-style IP has become the standard for designer toys. Blind boxes with cloud and dragon patterns can be found in shopping malls, and various Chinese-style co-branded unboxing content can be seen on social media platforms. As an ordinary blind-box consumer, I have also noticed that many so-called Chinese-style IPs are merely printed with traditional patterns on ordinary figures and given an ancient-style name to charge a high price. The subjects of people's discussions differ significantly; some admire the beautiful colour coordination, others go online to trade figures and complete sets. Few people have felt the charm of traditional culture. Why are Chinese-style IPs everywhere, but so few can truly generate cultural resonance? This will be the first problem in this paper.

This study helps us better understand the actual emotional needs of users for Guochao designer toys, and guides brands to create Chinese-style designs that can truly touch people's hearts. Theoretically, this study can fill the research gap at the intersection of Guochao and designer toy intellectual property, extend the research on emotional stratification at the micro-user level, and offer empirical support for the application of symbolic consumption theory to designer toys. In practice, it can break away from the large-scale marketing narrative, determine likes and dislikes according to users' actual comments, offer practical references for the industry, and reduce perfunctory designs that only "print a cloud pattern and call it Chinese style."

The three levels of users' emotional identity in this study are: surface aesthetic identity, middle-level social identity, and deep-level cultural identity. Taking Pop Mart as a typical case, this study examines the proportion and types of emotions at various levels. Using the method of literature analysis, this study gathers and reads related materials and papers. The advantage of this method is that it can effectively organise the existing research results, point out the deficiencies in current research, and thus offer support for the three-tier emotional analysis framework. At the same time, content analysis was performed to code and statistically analyse comments by platform users. The two methods are complementary and can be used together to conduct the research.

The final research goal of this study is to explore how Guochao designer toy IP building relates to users' emotional identity in practice, and to summarize the strengths and deficiencies of current Chinese-style design. To this end, relevant comments on RedNote from January 2023 to June 2026 were collected and screened, and finally, coding analysis was conducted on the 322 valid user comments to sort out the distribution characteristics of user emotions and offer targeted practical suggestions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research on Guochao and Chinese-Style IP

Guochao began as a commercial concept and is now a cultural phenomenon. Li divides the development of Guochao design into three periods: the embryonic period from 2015 to 2018 was mainly direct collage of traditional symbols; in the development period from 2018 to 2022, modern reinterpretation of traditional elements began; and after 2022, entered a deepening period focused on conveying cultural connotations and aesthetic mood [2]. At the same time, he also divides Guochao design into three kinds: surface-symbol type, form-transformation type, and aesthetic-mood type, and explains why user evaluations of similar Chinese-style products differ so much.

Regarding the motivations behind Guochao consumption, Wang finds that Guochao co-branding evokes national sentiment through cultural features on the one hand, and stimulates impulse buying through the limited-edition nature of co-branded products on the other [1]. Mu and Lei point out that Guochao consumption has a strong social feature. Young people display their aesthetics, meet like-minded friends, and gain a sense of belonging through Guochao products. Social value is more likely to motivate people to buy than functional value [3]. J. Zhang also believes that the purpose of the post-90s and post-00s generation's purchase of Guochao is to build a sense of cultural identity through aesthetic consumption; Guochao serves as their expression of daily style rather than a grand national narrative [4]. Dai and Chen proposed that the core of designer toy IP is emotional value, and the healing, personality and companionship traits of IP characters form the foundation for emotional connection [5]. Most of the current Chinese-style IPs only borrow the form of traditional cultural symbols and do not explore the emotional resonance points in them, making it difficult to form a deep emotional connection.

2.2. Designer toy consumption and user identity

The essence of designer toy consumption is symbolic consumption. Taking Pop Mart as a typical case, Zhao believes that blind box consumption has three types of symbolic values: aesthetic symbols conveyed by appearance, emotional symbols generated in the unboxing process, and social symbols arising from showing and trading figures [6]. The symbolic value far exceeds the use value of the toy itself. Shi has also found in his study of domestic product consumption that there are hierarchical differences in the symbolic consumption identity, and surface visuals have a stronger impact on purchase intention compared with deep cultural values [7].

At the level of user identity, Hu divided the identity of designer toy players into two types through qualitative research: the first is self-identity, which expresses personality and obtains self-satisfaction by collecting IPs that fit one's aesthetics; the second is group identity, which forms a "toy friend" community through figure trading, showing off collections and offline meetings, and gains a sense of belonging to a group [8]. L. Zhang's research on Labubu also supports this idea, proposing that blind boxes serve as a medium for symbolic expression in youth subcultures, and through collecting, displaying and interacting, players express themselves and build online community identities [9]. Sun has proposed a "triple mechanism" for consumer psychology in blind box consumption: the variable-ratio reinforcement mechanism (unpredictable rewards drive repeated purchases), IP emotional connection, and community operation [10]. However, too much focus on marketing and design homogenization will lead to a loss of user trust.

2.3. Research review

Existing research has examined Guochao consumption, blind box consumption and user identity, but there are still some deficiencies: first, cross-research on Guochao and designer toy IP is lacking, and dedicated analysis of the emotional structure of Guochao designer toys is missing; second, questionnaires or macro analysis are mostly used, and there is a lack of content analysis of users' original comments; third, research on the stratification of emotional identity is insufficient, and most studies vaguely mention "emotional resonance" without distinguishing the hierarchical differences from aesthetics to culture. Based on the above deficiencies, this study conducts analysis using actual user comments.

3. Methods

This study adopts both case study and content analysis, and the two are used together. First, a case study is used to explore the characteristics of Pop Mart's Chinese-style IP practices and build an analytical framework; then, content analysis is performed on user comments for coding and a quantitative study of the distribution of emotional identity.

3.1. Case selection and analysis dimensions

Pop Mart was selected as the case study for three reasons: Firstly, as a leading brand in the industry, it has a large number of Chinese-style IPs covering all kinds of themes and is thus representative; Secondly, there is a relatively high level of user discussion, and RedNote has sufficient original comments as analysis data; Thirdly, the market reception of its Chinese-style IPs varies greatly among different series, so it is suitable for studying different emotional identities.

The four dimensions of case analysis are: the visual expression dimension (traditional colours, modelling, patterns, packaging design); the thematic content dimension (theme selection and story expression of mythology, history, cultural relics, etc.); the cross-boundary communication dimension (cultural and museum cooperation and marketing activities); and the community operation dimension (topic guidance and user interaction).

3.2. Content analysis design

3.2.1. Sample selection

RedNote was selected as the data source because users of designer toys discuss them on this platform, and the comments are spontaneous unboxing, purchase posts, and user complaints; thus, this data can reflect real feelings more accurately than questionnaire data. Using keywords such as "Pop Mart Chinese style," "SKULLPANDA Dunhuang" and "Pop Mart Year of the Dragon," notes and comments from January 2023 to June 2026 were retrieved. After removing advertisements, purchasing agent posts, meaningless short comments, duplicates and irrelevant content, 322 valid samples were obtained.

3.2.2. Coding framework

The three tiers of emotional identity are progressive, and the coding rule is "higher-level priority": if a single comment contains multiple tiers, it should only be coded at the highest level and not counted multiple times.

Surface aesthetic identity: Visual judgment of attributes such as appearance, colour matching, modelling and workmanship.

Middle-level social identity: Social content such as trading figures, completing sets, collecting, showing off hauls, and interacting with like-minded people.

Deep-level cultural identity: Mentioning resonance with traditional culture, cultural pride, and the sense of value in culture.

The three categories of negative comments are: aesthetic design failing to meet expectations (discrepancy between the actual product and promotion, poor workmanship, ugly modelling); rigid combination of Chinese-style elements (symbol stacking, lack of cultural core, "pseudo Chinese style"); and homogenised and perfunctory design (reskinned design, lack of creativity, using Chinese style merely to charge a higher price). Based on Hu's [8] study, at the beginning of coding, it was determined that trading figures are, in fact, a form of social interaction for players to build a group identity and thus fall under social identity. The author independently completed the coding, and after a one-week interval, 100 samples were selected for secondary coding; the two codings were consistent at a rate of 85.7% and thus met the reliability requirements for content analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Current situation of Pop Mart's Chinese-style IP practices

Since 2020, Pop Mart has released more than 20 Chinese-style series covering core IPs such as Molly, SKULLPANDA and Dimoo, with themes including Dunhuang, the Forbidden City, the Three Kingdoms, zodiac animals, and martial arts. Visually, the traditional colours of azurite blue, mineral green and cinnabar red are used extensively, along with cloud, dragon and flying apsara patterns; packaging often adopts traditional styles such as scrolls and lacquerware. The themes are generally

myths and legends, historical figures and cultural relic IPs. Cross-boundary cooperation has been carried out with cultural and museum institutions, such as the Dunhuang Academy, the Palace Museum and the Henan Museum, and offline pop-up stores and themed exhibitions have been organised. Users are guided to post their purchases through Chinese-style topics, and offline collector activities are held.

The reputations of the different series vary greatly: the SKULLPANDA Dunhuang series has been praised widely for its excellent integration of flying apsara imagery and IP personality; on the other hand, the Year of the Dragon and martial arts series have drawn a large number of negative comments due to rough modelling and stiff elements. The martial arts series was even criticised for being marketed as a "jianghu swordswoman" but looking like a sickly scholar in person.

4.2. Overall sentiment distribution

Out of the 322 valid comments, 225 were positive (69.9%) and 97 were negative (30.1%). Most of the evaluations are relatively positive; however, about one-third are negative, and many problems in user satisfaction with the current Chinese-style IPs still need to be solved.

Positive comments have a distinct pyramid distribution, and the upper levels are relatively smaller:

Aesthetic identity has a relatively high proportion, at 118 comments, accounting for 52.4% of positive comments. More than half of the positive comments are about visuals, and the typical expressions are "this mineral green is so elegant" and "the ribbon design is very dynamic"; thus, it can be inferred that visual appeal is the most direct source of users' favourable impression of Chinese-style IP.

Social identity ranks second, with 99 comments, accounting for 44.0% of positive comments. The content mainly covers trading duplicates, showing off hidden editions, and talking to others with similar interests. Typical expressions include "duplicate apsara, trading for yaksha" and "got my first ever hidden!", and Chinese-style blind boxes still stand out as social currency.

The proportion of cultural identity is very small, only 8 comments, about 3.6% of the positive comments. Only a very small number of comments mentioned culture-related content, such as "makes me want to learn about Dunhuang history" and "proud that domestic designer toys can do this".

This result was much lower than I expected, and most of the users did not reach the level of cultural resonance.

Most of the negative comments focus on a few issues: aesthetic design failing to meet expectations accounts for 42 comments, making up 43.3% of the total negative feedback. The main reasons for the complaints are that the actual products do not match the promotions, there are distorted faces, and the workmanship is rough, such as "the dragon horns feel so plasticky." Modelling and workmanship issues are the primary sources of the negative reviews. Second is the rigid combination of Chinese-style elements, with 31 comments, accounting for 32.0% of negative comments. The main problem is that only traditional symbols have been added superficially, such as "printing a cloud pattern does not make it Chinese style" and "adding a dragon increases the price by 20 yuan". Therefore, users are not satisfied with the "pseudo Chinese style" design. Homogenised and perfunctory design accounts for 24 comments, or 24.7% of the negative comments. The primary reason is reskinned design; for example, "every IP gets a Dunhuang series, aesthetic fatigue" and "changing the colour scheme counts as a new series," where lack of creativity has lost the trust of long-term users.

5. Discussion

5.1. The three-tier progressive logic of emotional identity

Based on the above results, the emotional identity of users towards Guochao designer toys can be divided into three tiers: surface aesthetics, middle-level sociality and deep culture, with decreasing proportions. According to the basic logic of consumer behaviour, aesthetics is the emotional entry point with a low threshold, and visual appeal provides the foundation for product interaction; social identity is formed through purchasing behaviour and exhibits high stickiness due to community participation; cultural identity requires a high degree of emotional connection, and thus, a dual investment in design and user cognition is needed, making it the most difficult to achieve. This is consistent with Shi's view that visual representation has the most direct effect on symbolic consumption, and the path for deep cultural value conversion is longer [7]. The three levels of identity are in a progression: qualified aesthetic performance is a prerequisite for social and cultural identity, and if the modelling and workmanship do not meet the required standards, subsequent emotional connections cannot be established.

5.2. Reasons for the dominance of aesthetic identity

Aesthetic identity accounts for more than half and is mainly determined by the product attributes of designer toys. As visually oriented collectibles, the appearance of designer toys is at the core of user choice [6]. Second, the most intuitive form of expression for Guochao design is visual elements; traditional colours and patterns have natural aesthetic recognition and can provide direct sensory pleasure with a low cognitive threshold [2]. RedNote is a visually-oriented platform, so most of the user comments focus on appearance, and deep cultural discussions are not popular content on the platform.

5.3. Reasons for the extremely low proportion of cultural identity

Cultural identity at only 3.6% is the result of multiple factors working together. Firstly, most current Chinese-style IPs are still at the level of surface-symbol design. According to Li's classification, most are of the "surface-symbol type"; they merely transplant traditional elements without modern reinterpretation or cultural mood expression and are thus unable to resonate [2]. Secondly, the main motivation for ordinary players to buy blind boxes is self-enjoyment and socialising, not cultural learning; Guochao is a style choice rather than a cultural practice for most users [8]. Cultural identity has a cognitive threshold; that is to say, users need to have some knowledge of the relevant cultural background, and most ordinary consumers do not have this reserve of knowledge, so deep cultural perception cannot be formed.

5.4. Core attraction of Chinese-style IP

Despite having a very small proportion of cultural identity, Chinese-style IP is still popular for two reasons: first, the different visual experience that traditional aesthetics offer. With the trend of homogenised designer toys now, Chinese-style elements have high recognition and can bring freshness. Second, the value of Chinese style as social currency. Sharing Chinese-style blind boxes can display aesthetics and cultural attitudes simultaneously to attract the attention of people who share similar interests [3]. Brands do not need to achieve cultural resonance with all users; providing a good visual and social experience is sufficient to qualify as a good Chinese-style product.

However, if Chinese style is used as a pretence for a high price without good basic design, it will surely make people feel exploited.

6. Conclusion

Pop Mart was selected as the research object, and based on the content analysis of 322 RedNote comments, three main conclusions were drawn: first, the emotional identity of Guochao designer toy users has a three-tier pyramid structure; aesthetic identity serves as the foundation and accounts for the largest proportion, social identity is an essential attribute of designer toys and its proportion is close to that of aesthetics, and the proportion of cultural identity is extremely low and has not yet been achieved by most current Chinese-style IPs. Second, the negative assessments of Guochao designer toys mainly fall into three categories: substandard modelling and workmanship are the primary sources of dissatisfaction, followed by the "pseudo Chinese style" design of symbol stacking, and homogenization and perfunctory creativity are also reasons for user discontent. Third, Guochao designer toys are still in the early stages of symbol application at present; for most users, Chinese style is a visual style and social medium rather than a cultural carrier. To promote the realization of deep cultural identity, brands need to explore and reinterpret the cultural core in new ways.

For designer toy brands that create Chinese-style IP, the first step is to set an aesthetic bottom line and ensure the quality of design and workmanship, as this is the foundation for all emotional value. Second, do not merely stack symbols; rather, integrate traditional aesthetics with IP characteristics to achieve a modern reinterpretation that is both traditional and contemporary. Finally, view cultural value rationally; there is no need to forcefully instil cultural concepts. Based on a good visual and social experience, cultural warmth should be expressed naturally rather than using Chinese style merely as a gimmick for premium marketing.

This study has certain limitations: only the single brand Pop Mart and the single platform RedNote were selected, the sample size is relatively small, the generalizability of the results needs to be verified, coding involves some degree of subjectivity, and in-depth interviews were not combined to explore users' deep psychology. In the future, research can expand the range of brands and platforms, combine interview methods to compare emotional differences among different types of Chinese-style design, and provide more targeted references for the industry.

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