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Global Heritage vs. Local Identity: How Chinese Gen Z Consumers Interpret Western Luxury Brands' Collaborative Storytelling

A Case Study of Louis Vuitton

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Abstract

Purpose: Taking Louis Vuitton as an example, this study aims to explore how Chinese Gen Z consumers interpret the authenticity of the Western luxury brands' collaborations storytelling in China.

Design/methodology/approach: This study employed interpretive qualitative methods, drawing on consumer culture theory, cultural brand building, and brand meaning co-creation theory. The visual stimulus material used in the study was the Louis Vuitton Snake Year series. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 Chinese Gen Z respondents.

Findings: The research results show that the judgment of the respondents on the authenticity of the brand is not a single reaction but a phased evaluation process. They read authenticity in a conflicting Guochao cultural context and determined whether the cultural symbols in them had readable Chinese cultural characteristics. When the symbols were clearly perceivable, respondents would infer the brand's sincerity through visible cultural investment, story depth, and respect for cultural meaning. The respondents would only buy into its glocalization effort if the localization does not spoil Louis Vuitton's recognizable luxury heritage. Social media amplified, challenged, and publicly promoted the meaning of the brand, which influenced the respondents' judgment of the authenticity of the brand.

Implications: The study suggests that the authenticity of luxury goods in glocalization cannot be simply realized through adding local symbols but needs to be constructed through a variety of means such as cultural legibility, perceived sincerity, heritage protection, and digital negotiation. Theoretically, this study proposes a processual perspective on consumers' authenticity judgments, contributing to the literature on luxury brands' glocalization and brand authenticity. At the practical level, this study suggests that when Western luxury brands attempt localization in China, they should understand it as a culturally sensitive meaning-making process, rather than merely decorative use of local symbols.

Keywords: glocalization; luxury branding; brand authenticity; collaborative storytelling; Chinese Gen Z; Guochao; Western luxury brands; Louis Vuitton.

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1. Introduction

In November 2018, Dolce & Gabbana released a series of advertising videos showing a Chinese model looking clumsy and awkward while eating Italian food with chopsticks. Within just 48 hours, this campaign sparked widespread controversy on major Chinese social media platforms like Weibo and RedNote. All the platforms promptly removed the brand's products, and Chinese consumers publicly destroyed the D&G products they had purchased. Over the past 8 years, the brand has still not fully regained its market position. Similar incidents also occurred in Burberry's Spring Festival marketing campaign in 2019, where it was criticized by social media for failing to grasp the festive atmosphere. Other Western luxury brands that launch cultural-themed collaborations are also often exaggerated by the internet into credibility crises. These events have one thing in common, the products themselves are luxury items, the symbols used come from China, but the way Chinese consumers interpret them and the subsequent online dissemination effects are completely unpredictable.

These are not just one-off communication failures but a fundamental shift in how Chinese consumers, especially Gen Z, interact with Western luxury brands. For luxury brands, there is a paradox in expanding beyond domestic markets. Such products are traditionally valued for their continuity, which includes heritage, craftsmanship and stories of scarcity to support exclusivity (Kim et al., 2016). However, these brands must maintain the meanings' comprehensibility and social acceptability in local contexts to be able to penetrate culturally diverse markets (Chevalier & Lu, 2010). Thus, the challenge of global expansion is no longer one of balancing standardization and localization, but rather managing the brand's meaning across cultural boundaries (Merz et al., 2009).

The battle is especially fierce in the Chinese luxury market, one of the most powerful in the world. Generation Z is now an important consumer segment with its own values and expectations (Bain & Company, 2026). Chinese Gen Z consumers use luxury as a status marker, but also as a medium for self-expression, cultural identity and symbolic meaning, which is different from previous generations (Klempau, 2025). This transformation is highly correlated with the emergence of the "Guochao" movement (National Trend), now entering the 3.0 stage. Different from the previous waves, Guochao 3.0 is not only domestically produced, but also a

broad cultural confidence of younger consumers and a renewed interest in Chinese history, aesthetics, and traditions (Liu, 2016; Zhang & Fu, 2022). Chinese Gen Z consumers are more sensitive to national pride and cultural identity, and therefore expect global brands to engage meaningfully with Chinese cultural narratives and values rather than simply lean on imported prestige (Gong, 2024). This is a double-edged sword for western luxury brands. Local cultural elements can increase the relevance but also be perceived as superficial, commercialized or inconsistent with luxury identity.

To address this glocalization problem, many Western luxury brands have adopted collaborative brand storytelling strategies. Such collaborations with local artists, designers, and cultural institutions work as much as a promotion as a cultural meaning-making process, in which brands attempt to inscribe their identities into locally relevant symbolic systems (Chiu et al., 2024). So collaborative storytelling is not only a communication skill, but a glocalization strategy. This is where brands marry global heritage with local cultural relevance.

But the result of such strategies is inherently unpredictable. Cultural collaborations can enhance perceived relevance but not necessarily the interpretation of brand narratives as authentic (Morhart et al., 2015). This ambiguity extends even to the brand itself. Södergren (2021) argues that brand authenticity is a major focus area in marketing and consumer research as it is linked with trust, loyalty, brand equity and consumer experience among other aspects. Authenticity is not a simple matter. It is polysemous and multi-layered and this has been approached in various streams in the existing literature such as the difference between the “real thing” and the fake, the legitimizing function of authenticity and the emotional and moral aspects of authentication (Södergren, 2021). Authenticity is still a key component of a luxury value based on stable narratives of origin, craftsmanship and historical continuity (Beverland, 2005; Morhart et al., 2015). However, brand actions that are perceived as incongruent, superficial or disconnected from cultural expectations can backfire and damage brand meaning (Yu & He, 2025). Thus, the main issue in the development of cross-cultural luxury brands is not the use of local symbols, but how consumers make sense of these symbols and do consumers perceive these symbols as culturally legitimate and sincere.

Existing research on luxury brand glocalization has mainly focused on firm-driven strategies such as standardization, localization, and brand management practices (Levitt, 1983; Özsomer, 2012; Liu et al., 2016). However, little attention has been paid to how consumers actively interpret and negotiate the tension between global heritage and local cultural integration. From a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective, consumers are seen as active agents who construct and reinterpret market-mediated meanings in culturally embedded contexts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). However, extant research provides little insight into how consumers evaluate competing cultural meanings in practice, especially when brand narratives are across multiple cultural frameworks.

In today's China, where cultural identity and symbolic representation are highly salient, consumers' interpretations of Western luxury brands extend beyond product attributes to broader issues of cultural meaning and legitimacy (Liu, 2016; Zhang & Fu, 2022). Simultaneously, such assessments are performed in digitally mediated spaces, where increased cultural sensitivity and the rapid amplification of public discourse increase the scrutiny of brand actions (Yu & He, 2025).

In addition, while in the field of luxury branding, heritage, craftsmanship and tightly controlled brand stories are identified as authenticity factors (Beverland, 2005; Urde et al., 2007) and the co-creation literature emphasizes the role of consumer participation in the process of meaning creation (Allen et al., 2008; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013), little research provides interpretive material for understanding how consumers assess the authenticity and sincerity of cross-cultural brand stories. Although the literature suggests that authenticity matters, it does not sufficiently explain how Chinese Gen Z consumers make their judgments of authenticity when they are exposed to localized luxury stories.

To address these gaps, this study investigates how Chinese Gen Z consumers interpret the authenticity of Western luxury brands' collaborative brand storytelling, with a specific focus on Louis Vuitton's localized campaigns in China. The study does not measure market outcomes, but rather the construction of cultural meaning and the symbolic, emotional and cognitive elements that influence consumer evaluations. In doing so it contributes to a more consumer-oriented understanding of authenticity in luxury brand glocalization.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: *How do Chinese Gen Z consumers interpret the authenticity of Western luxury brands' collaborative storytelling in China?*

On the theoretical level, the study draws on three different theoretical perspectives. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) conceptualizes consumers as active agents of market information, not passive receivers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The brand side creates symbolic storytelling to generate identity value (Holt, 2004) using the cultural branding theory. Brand meaning co-creation is the bridge between CCT and cultural brand theory. The meaning of the brand is not constructed by the enterprise itself, but by the interaction between the cultural background of brand dissemination and the interpretation of the consumers (Allen et al., 2008; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Together these perspectives contribute to an understanding of the specificity of authenticity judgment.

The research used interpretivist qualitative methods and empirically conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with Chinese Gen Z participants using Louis Vuitton (LV)'s Year of the Snake collection as live stimulus material. LV is selected as the central case because it is one of the first luxury houses to establish the presence in China in 1992. In localized campaigns, the brand often tries to mix elements of traditional intangible cultural heritage with its French roots and modern Chinese cultural references, such as interactive pop-up bookstores in Shanghai and annual marketing campaigns based on the Chinese zodiac. In the interviews, the researchers explored how the participants responded to LV's collaborative storytelling materials, how they made sense of Chinese cultural symbols, and how they justified their judgments on the authenticity of the products.

The findings of the research show that the judgment of authenticity of Chinese Gen Z consumers is a continuous process chain. First of all, Chinese trend culture is itself a contradictory context. It could be a new fashion trend in Chinese elements, or it could be commercialization or low aesthetic value. Second, consumers will judge the legibility of the culture before authenticity. If the symbols are not identifiable as Chinese culture, then their authenticity cannot be confirmed. Thirdly, when these symbols can be read and are considered reasonable, consumers will infer sincerity from the visible cultural investment, which includes on-site research, depth of the story,

cultural respect, and meaningful communication. Fourth, these evaluations are limited by the traditional luxury brand LV. Consumers will only accept localization if it does not detract from the brand's recognizable luxury identity. Finally, as an interpretive space, social media can amplify, challenge, and openly debate people's perceptions of authenticity.

The authenticity of the glocalization process of luxury goods cannot be easily achieved by the addition of local cultural symbols. Instead, it is constructed via a phased consumer evaluation process that incorporates cultural legibility, perceived sincerity, heritage protection, and digital negotiation. This feeds into the discussion of topics such as luxury brands, glocalization, and collaborative storytelling. Together, these contributions advance a consumer-driven, processual and contextually situated account of the construction of authenticity in luxury glocalization in contemporary China.

2. Literature review

2.1. The Challenge of Glocalization in Luxury Branding

As Grigorescu & Zaif (2017) pointed out, the traditional global brand strategy is based on the supply of standardized and uniform products or services all over the world. In the words of Levitt (1983) it means selling the same thing in the same way everywhere. But localization refers to adapting products and services to special cultural backgrounds, with the aim of enhancing local appeal and meeting local needs. In summary, glocalization means considering the conditions and related issues of the local market when providing products and services globally (Grigorescu & Zaif, 2017). As Karlíček et al. (2013) pointed out, one of the most pressing issues in international marketing is the choice between standardization and localization. The precious text mentioned that standardization is about achieving consistency in global marketing strategies, and it can achieve economies of scale by reducing both production costs and local marketing costs. However, if the market mix does not align with local demands, it will significantly reduce the effectiveness of its ability to attract consumers. Compared with localization, it can adjust marketing strategies according to market conditions, which will be more effective, but the corresponding costs will be higher (Karlíček et al., 2013). Schmid & Kotulla (2011) also pointed out that multinational enterprises are confronted with the challenge of finding an appropriate balance between the standardization and localization of marketing strategies (Schmid & Kotulla,

2011). Therefore, the marketing strategies of international brands do not involve making a choice between two options. It is not a binary situation of either black or white. More often, it is a matter of the strategy matching the market environment in which it is situated.

For mass consumer goods or fast-food brands like McDonald's or KFC, glocalization can be relatively easy through flavor adjustments or launching cheaper products to suit local tastes. If begin to look at the luxury goods space, it gets more complicated. For luxury brands, they need to maintain their core heritage, scarcity, and global prestige, while also showing an understanding and respect for the cultural expectations of local consumers (Yu & He, 2025; Liu et al., 2014). Zanola et al. (2026) pointed out that brand inheritance participates in the continuity of the glorious history of the brand, and it can still have symbolic meaning in the present and the future. They also notice that luxury fashion brands use storytelling to convey values such as authenticity, continuity, and uniqueness (Zanola et al., 2026). Furthermore, Bertrand et al. (2017) also emphasized that luxury goods need to consider how to strike a balance between authenticity, heritage, and tradition and relevance, modernity, and innovation (Bertrand et al., 2017). These studies emphasize a point that the market adaptability of the luxury goods industry is highly sensitive. From the perspective of consumers, the symbolic value attached to the luxury goods may be affected by changes in the marketing strategies of enterprises, thereby influencing consumers' understanding of the brand.

Therefore, the glocalization of luxury brands should not be simply understood as adding local elements to global brands; it should be regarded as a strategic tension that is maintaining the consistency of the global brand while effectively interacting with the local market. Bertrand et al. (2017) further pointed out another crucial balance point in the creation of the luxury brands, the balance between proximity or accessibility and exclusivity. This balance is particularly important in the digital environment. Luxury brands are increasingly pressured to keep their brand visibility and interactivity while protecting their unique features vis-à-vis luxury products (Bertrand et al. 2017). Therefore, the problem of glocalization of luxury brands is not just localization, but how to localize without losing the current identity of the brand. Liu et al. (2014) also found that luxury retailers entering the Chinese market need to adapt their communication strategies to the local context to increase brand awareness and loyalty. However, they also warn that excessive localization to fit the local market is not advisable in order to avoid damaging the original

standardized international luxury image of the brand. This further demonstrates the significance of finding the balance point between localization and brand consistency (Liu et al., 2014)

In the Chinese market environment, the research conducted by Cui et al. (2015) indicates that when luxury goods enter the Chinese market, they face challenges such as adapting to the local consumption culture while maintaining brand standardization and preserving their global brand image. Their research further indicates that brands need to understand the contradictory social and cultural emotions of consumers regarding luxury consumption, meet the demand of consumers for products with local elements, and serve the young and economically diverse consumer groups (Cui et al., 2015). Bettiol et al. (2016) also put forward a similar viewpoint, arguing that the Chinese market has uncertainties and cultural differences, which increase the risk of brands' standardized global strategies. (e.g., China's closed digital ecosystem, where access to overseas platforms is not possible; The economic disparities among first-tier cities, second-tier cities, and third-tier cities, as well as the enhanced sense of national pride, all require brands to make corresponding adjustments. At the same time, brands are required to have the ability to adapt to the design and marketing methods in the Chinese market and also to maintain their consistent global brand image (Bettiol et al. 2016). On the other hand, Ngai and Cho (2012) pointed out that a significant characteristic of the Chinese consumer group is their youth, and this young consumer group is not a homogeneous whole; it includes different values and different market segments. In the Chinese market, there is a new force called "Guochao", and it is also a force that cannot be ignored. Wang (2022) theorized the Guochao concept as an emerging form of brand cultural identity in China. It integrates the modern characteristics of Chinese traditional culture and the modern international design aesthetics. She further noted that this mode of identification appeals especially to the younger generations, i.e., the Millennials and Generation Z who show great interest in the style of clothing that exemplifies a strong Chinese culture and national identity (Wang, 2022). This point is also elaborated by the research done by Fang et al. (2025). They found that in the consumption of Chinese trend fashion, the purchasing intention is influenced by the degree of alignment with cultural concepts, and regional cultural differences also affect consumers' preferences (Fang et al., 2025). Although their research focused on the domestic clothing market rather than luxury goods, their study provides us with some insights: Young Chinese consumers not only pay attention to the cultural connotations of products but also

consider whether these connotations are appropriately expressed in different regional contexts. The Chinese market is a huge luxury market for luxury brands, but also a complex market where the difficulty of glocalization and the balance between local identity and global heritage should be handled.

2.2. The Construction of Luxury Brand Meaning

The nature of luxury is a complex, multidimensional and dynamic structure that cannot be reduced to physical attributes or high prices. Vickers & Renand (2003) has shown that a luxury brand consists of three core conceptual dimensions: functionalism, experientialism, and symbolic interactionism. The symbolic value and meaning of luxury brands primarily exist at the cultural and social levels (Chen & Wang, 2017), making consumer interpretation closely tied to the specific cultural and social contexts in which they belong (Bengtsson et al., 2010; Oswald, 2010). For luxury brands, brand management goes beyond delivering superior quality, it also involves the art of conveying profound cultural meanings to resonate with consumers' identities (Cayla & Arnould, 2008).

For a long time, the traditional managerialist perspective held that luxury brand meaning is created top-down, with brand heritage at its core. Urde et al. (2007, p4) defined brand heritage as “a dimension of a brand's identity found in its track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols, and particularly in an organisational belief that its history is important”. The roots, the history and the traditional craftsmanship of global top luxury brands, especially from Europe, is a key value. According to Kapferer & Bastien (2012), history and heritage are the main elements that create exclusivity, authenticity and irreplaceability of luxury goods. From this perspective, brand heritage is not only a history of the past but also a commitment to quality and durability, enabling the brand to produce a symbolic power that transcends time and can be transmitted to consumers (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

This firm-centric perspective of brand meaning is challenged by the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) introduced by Arnould & Thompson (2005). From the perspective of CCT the active role of consumers in the process of cultural meaning construction has been emphasized. The market offers them abundant symbolic resources and goods, and they actively reinterpret and transform the encoded meanings of brands, contributing to the realization of self-identity and lifestyle

aspirations (Peñaloza, 2001; Holt, 2002; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). The top-down model of brand meaning is further complicated by subsequent scholarship that highlights the essence of luxury brands' meaning, that is, the foundation of negotiation and co-construction. Brand meaning is no longer perceived as the meaning that the brand communicates to consumers, but as a process of constant negotiation and interaction between the three main entities of culture, brand and individual consumer (Merz et al., 2009; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Turunen & Laaksonen, 2011). This view does not suggest a sudden transfer of power from the enterprise to consumers, but recognizes that consumers are always active participants in the construction of brand meaning (Seo et al., 2015; Fournier & Alvarez, 2019). Previous research has demonstrated that luxury brands cannot be independent entities which create value, their symbolic, exclusive and cultural heritage characteristics can only really work when they are actually lived, interpreted and co-created by consumers in their everyday lives (Schembri, 2009; Tynan et al., 2010; Roper et al., 2013).

Within this broader conception of co-created meaning, the concept of 'cultural branding' (Holt, 2004) provides a framework for understanding how some brands become iconic. They no longer depend on the information of positioning based on traditional interests, but present "identity myths" to solve the deep-seated conflicts and tensions in society. Rather than viewing brands as transcendent entities detached from history, cultural branding strategy positions brands as "historical entities" whose value depends on their ability to flexibly adapt to social changes. This process requires brands to embed their associations into specific mythological stories or cultural patterns to generate true resonance (Holt, 2004).

2.3. Collaborative Storytelling as a Glocalization Strategy

Collaborative storytelling can be understood as a narrative approach where luxury brands integrate external cultural symbols, characters, or heritage resources into their broader brand stories through collaboration (Sergio, 2019; Ochkovskaya, 2018; Zhang, 2025). Currently, there are various discussions on the form of collaboration, and collaboration is not a single concept. Arana, et al. (2024) pointed out in their study on collaboration in the luxury fashion sector that collaboration can achieve three main goals: enhancing brand awareness, strengthening the luxury positioning, and generating positive spillover effects between brand images. They further

emphasized that the alignment of brand images and the perceived level of luxury by consumers are closely related to the effectiveness of collaboration (Arana et al., 2024). Ruiz & Cruz (2023) further noted that for young Chinese consumers, collaboration can also redefine luxury by introducing more interesting and trendy associations.

In order to understand collaboration in the current environment, it is also important to understand the concept of storytelling. Sergio (2019) reviewed past research and presented storytelling as a form of communication that is structured around a logical sequence of events, used to persuade, explain, and convey meaning. She also pointed out that storytelling is an effective narrative approach in the process of marketing and brand building. Because it has the function of evoking emotions. And this is even more crucial in the luxury goods sector, as communication in this field relies less on product information or attributes and more on atmosphere, symbolic meaning, and brand image (Sergio, 2019). This view was further strengthened by the research of Kim et al. (2016). They found that the advertisements of luxury brands attract consumers by storytelling, consumers enter the stories constructed by the brands through advertisements. Their research also shows that this form of story immersion may be used to enhance consumer engagement (Kim et al., 2016). Therefore, storytelling is not just a luxury product decoration but a way for brands to create symbolic meanings and provide pathways for consumer engagement.

In the digital environment, the connection between collaboration and storytelling has become even closer. According to Sergio (2019) social media is the important medium for the brands to express their brand concepts. Many luxury brands are entering cross media storytelling. Transmedia narratives are a storytelling mode across media. Stories grow on different platforms with a singularity and/or uniqueness. Different channels allow audiences to experience the intended experience of the brand (Sergio, 2019). This architecture does not restrict collaboration to co-created events or products, but enables it to be embedded within a broad narrative framework and told through both physical and digital touchpoints (Sergio, 2019). In summary, collaborative storytelling should not be understood as a single marketing activity form; it should also be understood as part of this collaboration being a part of the extensive and coherent brand narrative.

This collaborative storytelling should also be considered in the context of the specific environment. The research by Ruiz & Cruz (2023) indicates that among young consumers in China, non-traditional luxury collaborations can redefine the definition of luxury, shifting the focus away from timeless, scarce, or traditional elements of luxury goods and instead towards ephemeral, more fashionable, and interesting forms. However, this does not mean that the traditional definition of luxury will disappear. Instead, non-traditional elements can complement its tradition, uniqueness, and permanence. Moreover, they can create novelty, uniqueness, and scarcity in limited collaboration (Ruiz & Cruz, 2023). It plays a complementary role. Although their research focuses on the collaboration between luxury brands and non-luxury brands or designers, although the research direction of this study is not consistent with theirs, this study attempts to draw on this perspective. The goal is not the cross-brand collaboration itself, but rather to draw on a broader concept. The collaborative storytelling model can update the definition of luxury goods, making them more resonant with young Chinese consumers.

However, other literature clearly indicates that this collaboration storytelling strategy is not completely stable. Arana, et al. (2024) pointed out that cooperation does not automatically create value. Because the final outcome of the collaboration depends on the compatibility between the collaboration and the brand, as well as the position of the partners relative to luxury goods. Their discussion further indicates that when the collaboration is aimed at enhancing product accessibility and is at the expense of the core value of luxury goods, there will be risks such as brand dilution, reputation decline, damage to credibility, and reduced customer engagement (Arana et al., 2024). In the Chinese market perspective, Ruiz & Cruz (2023) pointed out that luxury brands need to be careful to choose partners and keep their distinctiveness and irreplaceability in limited collaboration. This means that a brand cannot become a glocalization strategy by simply adding local elements or entering into partnerships, but only when the collaboration is symbolically coherent and the narrative is reasonable, and when the scale is small enough for the brand to preserve its uniqueness, the collaboration has strategic significance.

When global luxury brands enter markets like China to implement their cultural branding strategies, they create a phenomenon defined by scholars as “cultural mixing”. According to Chiu et al. (2009), culture mixing refers to the co-presence of symbols representing two distinct

cultures within the same physical or conceptual space. The collaborative storytelling explored in our study can be regarded as a storytelling form of cultural mixing for luxury brands. By mixing traditional Chinese elements such as local cultural symbols, historical anecdotes, festivals, etc. into the global brand story, the brand has created a conceptual space where the brand and local culture are closely linked. For luxury brands, this process involves integrating local cultural elements into their global identity. However, constructing meaning through cultural mixing does not always lead to positive results. It can result in two opposite reactions: integrative responses or exclusionary responses. If consumers view the foreign culture as a knowledge resource that can supplement and enrich the local culture, they will have an integrative response and appreciate the creativity of such blending (Torelli et al., 2011). However, through the perceptual contrast effect, if consumers believe that the integrity and vitality of the local culture are threatened by the presence of global brands, they will have an exclusionary reaction (Chiu et al., 2011).

2.4. Cultural Authenticity and Chinese Generation Z Consumer Interpretation

If brand meaning is a co-creation process shaped by consumers, then in China, the power to define and validate this meaning is increasingly negotiated by Generation Z. Bain & Company's report (2019) showed that Generation Z is likely to make up 40% of luxury consumers in China by 2035 and behave differently from past generations. Correia (2016) calls this demographic "fluid consumers" who have grown up in an era of economic prosperity and digital globalization, and who are free to move between cosmopolitanism and localism. Unlike previous generations (Generation X or Millennials) who regarded Western luxury goods as a symbol of success and social status (Arta & Qastharin, 2022), Generation Z is less concerned with the pursuit of status and more concerned with practical experience that aligns with their preferences, community culture and functional value. They desire emotional connection, self-expression and cultural resonance (Khan et al., 2022; Kumar, 2024; Yu & He, 2025). The wave of "Guochao" (the revival of Chinese culture) has a profound impact on the core consumption motivation of Chinese Generation Z (Liu, 2016; Zhang & Fu, 2022). According to several industry reports, the Chinese Generation Z is showing growing interest in luxury products that incorporate art or cultural symbols (KPMG, 2023; Bain & Company, 2026).

Recent studies have begun exploring how luxury brands navigate this shifting consumer landscape through glocalization strategies (Yu & He, 2025; Hao, 2025; Zhang, 2025). Contrary to traditional views that glocalization is a brand-driven product adaptation process, Yu & He (2025) developed the framework of consumer-driven glocalization to argue that the success or failure of glocalization is essentially a high-stakes negotiation which is determined by consumers in the digital space. Chinese luxury consumers are more like tastemakers and cultural critics, actively using social media to analyze, discuss, and redefine the meaning of these activities (Ruiz & Cruz, 2023). During the dissemination process, Generation Z judges the standards of Western brands based on “cultural authenticity”. Cultural authenticity is the extent to which the global brand genuinely engages with, respects, and embodies the values, aesthetics, and philosophies of a local culture in its DNA, not merely as a marketing tool (Yu & He, 2025). When brands fail to meet these standards, Chinese consumers respond quickly and in an organised way on digital platforms, as seen in the widely criticised chopsticks campaign by Dolce & Gabbana or Burberry’s 2019 Lunar New Year campaign, including accusations of cultural appropriation, which can have serious and long-term consequences for brand image (Carlotto, 2024; Zhang, 2025). On the other hand, collaborations acknowledged for their cultural legitimacy, such as Gucci’s 2022 Year of the Tiger collection, demonstrate that when Western heritage and Eastern cultural elements are presented side by side rather than in a hierarchical manner, they can alleviate cultural tensions and generate strong resonance (Hao, 2025). This consumer-led process of brand meaning negotiation is amplified by digital platforms such as Weibo, WeChat and RedNote, which are not only channels for information dissemination, but also core discussion forums. On these platforms, brand meaning is always being analyzed, debated and reshaped (Robert-Agell et al., 2022; Yu & He, 2025). This digital engagement has turned the glocalization process of luxury brands from a top-down strategy to a co-creation of meaning space, in which consumer-driven discussions directly affect brand assets (Ind et al., 2013).

2.5. Research Gap

Although previous studies have contributed to deepening our understanding of the dynamics of glocalization and important aspects of Chinese consumer behavior, they typically focus on consumer responses, especially negative reactions on social media or brand support behaviors (Yu & He, 2025; Hao, 2025; Zhang, 2025; Carlotto, 2024), using as alternative indicators for

measuring authenticity assessment, while paying less attention to the specific interpretive processes behind these judgments. At the same time, luxury branding studies emphasize heritage, craftsmanship, and controlled narratives as drivers of authenticity (Beverland, 2005; Urde et al., 2007), while co-creation studies highlight consumers' participation in meaning construction (Merz et al., 2009). However, there is still a lack of interpretive depth in explaining how consumers evaluate the authenticity and sincerity of cross-cultural brand stories. Specifically, prior research offers limited explanation of the specific assessment criteria and underlying mechanisms of consumers' acceptance or rejection of authenticity statements in globalization strategies.

Secondly, the rise of “Guochao” is not only an aesthetic trend but has evolved into “Guochao 3.0”, representing Chinese consumers' national confidence and cultural pride (Daxue Consulting, 2023). However, current research on “Guochao” mainly focuses on the rise and success of domestic brands such as local fashion brands and cosmetics brands (Wang, 2023; Liu, 2025), while few studies deeply explore how Western luxury brands authentically engage in this national trend. Although the co-branding strategy with other brands has been widely discussed in the Chinese market (Zhang & Guo, 2023; Sun, 2024), the specific mechanisms of collaborative storytelling such as luxury brands collaborating with local artists or intangible cultural heritage to achieve cultural authenticity have not been fully explored in the context of “Guochao”.

Thirdly, the role of the digital environment in the formation of luxury perception has not been fully studied. Cultural identity and symbols are of great importance in modern Chinese society, and consumers' perceptions of Western luxury brands have changed from product attributes to the wider cultural significance and authenticity issues (Liu, 2016; Zhang & Fu, 2022). Furthermore, these assessments are increasingly shaped by particular social media platforms like Weibo and RedNote, which heighten cultural sensitivity and rapidly magnify the public discourse, thereby intensifying the oversight of brand conduct (Yu & He, 2025). Yet the role of digital platforms in shaping authenticity judgments is under-explored.

To address these gaps, this project explores Chinese Gen Z consumers' perceptions of the co-created brand storytelling authenticity of Western luxury brands, with a focus on Louis Vuitton's localized campaigns in China. As one of the most prestigious luxury brands with a long

heritage and strong global recognition, LV has maintained an active strategic presence in China's market for over three decades, consistently collaborating with local artists, designers, and cultural figures across various campaigns, making LV a particularly suitable subject for this study. The study does not measure market outcomes, but rather the construction of cultural meaning and the symbolic, emotional and cognitive elements that influence consumer evaluations. In doing so, it contributes to a more consumer-centred understanding of authenticity in luxury brand glocalization, with broader implications for global heritage brands' cross-cultural meaning-making.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

2.6.1. Consumer Culture Theory

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) offers the theoretical ground to understand the consumer perspective. Arnould & Thompson (2005) argued that CCT is a collection of diverse perspectives. Such perspectives include the dynamic relationships between consumer behavior and market dynamics and cultural significance. From this perspective, when it comes to consumption, it is not merely an act. It can be regarded as a part of the social and cultural process. The meaning of a brand is generated, interpreted, and negotiated within this process.

CCT regards consumers as active meaning makers rather than passive information receivers. The authors of the CCT believe that consumers will actively participate in reinterpreting the symbolic meaning contained in brands, advertisements, and physical goods in order to support their identity recognition and lifestyle goals. This aspect can be used in this study. Because this study presents the collaborative storytelling of LV to Chinese Gen Z consumers to explore their inner thoughts. And currently, there are studies showing that Chinese luxury consumers are increasingly taking on the roles of taste leaders and cultural critics. They analyze, discuss, and redefine the meaning of brands in the digital space (Ruiz & Cruz, 2023; Yu & He, 2025).

In this study, CCT helps to explain that authenticity is not an inherent attribute of the brand. It should be understood as a judgment formed through consumer negotiation. However, using only the CCT theory is not sufficient. Because it explains how consumers interpret meaning but does not fully explain how brands strategically construct narratives that can carry the value of identity. Therefore, the second theoretical perspective from the brand side needs to be employed.

2.6.2. Cultural Branding

The cultural brand theory is used to explain how the brand side constructs symbolic storytelling to create identity value. Holt (2004) believes that a strong brand does not merely acquire cultural significance by expressing functional benefits or maintaining consistency in image. Only when the identity myths constructed by them can satisfy the anxieties and desires of the public and align with a specific cultural environment. In this case, the constructed identities have value. The manifestation of brand value can be understood as being in a specific cultural expression, rather than being a universal brand characteristic detached from history and society.

This perspective can be applied to this study because the collaborative storytelling of Louis Vuitton in China is a localized strategy. It can also be viewed as an attempt to integrate the global and heritage attributes of luxury products with cultural storytelling. In a market influenced by national trends, increasing cultural confidence, and high sensitivity to localized expression, the critical question is not only whether the storytelling is creative but also whether it is culturally significant for China's Z-generation and whether it is in line with history (Yu & He, 2025; Wang, 2022). Holt's framework helps explain the importance of narrative in the shaping of luxury brands, and the role of storytelling is to provide consumers with symbolic resources for evaluating identity, sense of belonging, and culture.

Cultural brand theory aims to explain how iconic brands create identity value by resonating with social and historical tensions through myths. In our study, when applying this theory, certain parts of it and aspects related to myths, identity value, cultural resonance, and historical compatibility are selected. It is used to explain how LV's storytelling has gained or lost symbolic significance among Chinese Gen Z consumers. This research plan will apply the most relevant parts of this theory to explain the symbolic logic of LV's localized narrative.

2.6.3. Brand Meaning Co-Creation

The third theoretical perspective is brand meaning co-creation. Brand meaning co-creation places greater emphasis on the fact that brand meaning is formed between the enterprise, the cultural context, and the consumers' interpretations, rather than being solely transmitted by the enterprise to the consumers. Allen et al. (2008) pointed out that a brand can be regarded as a carrier of meaning, and brand meaning is not completely controlled by the enterprise but is jointly formed

by different meaning creators, such as the enterprise, the cultural system, and the consumers (Allen et al., 2008).

Moreover, Vallaster & von Wallpach (2013) argued that the traditional management-oriented approach to brand building did not fully explain the real brand meaning formation processes in practice. They think the brand is not only created by management and is not only about customers. Instead, the meaning of the brand can be seen as a social process that is created by the interaction of the stakeholder network. This is especially true in a digital environment where online platforms allow stakeholders to share opinions, experiences, and assessments regarding the brand, thus potentially enriching, challenging, or reshaping the original meaning set by brand management. Vallaster & von Wallpach (2013) called this process a “multiple logic” where the brand meaning is produced through synchronous interaction between multiple interdependent actors, not a one-way brand dissemination. This article adopts this perspective to explain how the importance and authenticity of Western luxury brands' collaborative storytelling are not only decided by the brand itself but also created by the consumer interpretation, cultural background, and digital space.

For this thesis, the most valuable aspect of brand meaning co-creation lies in explaining how the symbolic meaning of collaborative storytelling is formed through the interaction, interpretation, and discussion of consumers. Batra (2019) pointed out that brand meaning can be formed through various cues, such as symbols, advertising information, visual style, packaging, and communication methods; consumers will infer brand meaning based on these cues. Therefore, authenticity is not directly bestowed by the enterprise, but is formed during the consumers' interpretation of brand cues.

Brand meaning co-creation can explain why authenticity is not a one-way output, but it cannot explain what type of storytelling can be persuasive, nor can it explain why some storytelling can resonate while others cannot. This research regards it as an auxiliary functional theory rather than a complete and independent explanatory theory.

2.6.4. The Comprehensive Theoretical Framework of This Study

Looking through these three models separately. Each model only explains the content within its specific domain, and each of the models can explore a part of this research. The CCT theory

concerning how consumers actively interpret and associate the meaning of the brand. The cultural brand theory explaining why brands rely on myths or storytelling that resonates with culture. From the perspective of brand meaning co-creation, it is explained that the meanings of these brand storytellings are not fixed at the time of brand release. Instead, they are formed during the process where consumers interpret, evaluate, and discuss these storytellings. Based on their respective starting points, this study combines three theories to form a complementary analytical perspective for explaining the issues discussed in this research.

Under this comprehensive theoretical framework, the cultural brand theory explains the logic of collaborative storytelling by the brand side; the CCT theory explains the interpretation logic of the consumer side. From the perspective of brand meaning co-creation, these two aspects are connected, explaining how authenticity is formed in the process of the brand's symbolic materials and consumers' meaning interpretation. This study conceptualizes collaborative storytelling as a process of constructing cultural meaning, rather than a one-way output. The brand provides symbolic storytelling materials, while Chinese Gen Z interprets these materials through a series of evaluation criteria. As the research progresses, these evaluation criteria will become more specific.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach and Design

3.1.1 Qualitative Methodology

In this study, we employ an interpretivist qualitative approach, as we aim to understand how consumers construct meanings, evaluate authenticity, and negotiate cultural tensions in relation to brand narratives. Such processes are inherently subjective, context-dependent and embedded in broader socio-cultural discourses and therefore not suitable for standardized or purely quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The data should reflect participants' reasoning, emotional reactions and critical reflections. More structured surveys or experimental designs would not provide enough depth to explore these complex evaluative processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Qualitative research is appropriate to study the questions of why or how. As these types of issues are concerned with processes, interpretations and life experiences not frequency or distribution (Bryman, 2016). The essence of this paper is to explore how the Chinese Z generation consumers interpret the joint stories of LV and their evaluation criteria to judge the authenticity of the brand. From the moment when the consumer contacts LV's collaborative storytelling content through different channels to the moment when they form an evaluation of its authenticity, all kinds of consumer psychology, cultural emotions, identity recognition, or personal values may be involved. These possible factors cannot be pre-coded in the questionnaire so as not to undermine the deep complexity of the issues that our study aims to understand.

3.1.2 Research Context and Single Case Study Design

In this context, a case study of a particular brand offers a concrete lens through which to observe these tensions in practice. In this study, the single-case study approach is employed to allow for an in-depth exploration. Louis Vuitton (LV) is selected as a critical case because of its strong heritage positioning based on the European luxury tradition and its active participation in localized storytelling strategies in China.

LV is one of the luxury brands with a considerable historical heritage worldwide. This is a suitable example to show the core contradiction of this article, the tension between the global uniformity of brands and the adaptation to local cultures. To meet the analytical goal of the study, a single case was selected, instead of multiple brands. The goal of the analysis was to gain a deep understanding of consumers' interpretive process, not to make general comparisons of brands (Yin, 2018).

As a culturally salient moment for entry into local symbolic systems by global brands, the Lunar New Year (LNY) is a significant point of examination for this dynamic. LV's annual campaigns often feature motifs of the Chinese zodiac and intangible cultural heritage, a reflection of the brand's efforts to reconcile global brand identity with local cultural expression.

In this context, this study examines the meaning-making of Chinese Gen Z consumers on the collaborative brand storytelling of Louis Vuitton's special-edition collections for the Lunar New Year, particularly the construction and the assessment of authenticity.

3.2. Data collection

3.2.1 Primary Data

The main data collection method in this study was **semi-structured in-depth interviews**. This enabled the researchers to stay on topic with the relevant themes of luxury inheritance, localization, and perceived authenticity, while also allowing the participants to elaborate on their ratings and the reason for them. The open-ended nature of questions allows for a conversational climate in which unexpected but highly valuable cultural insights can be generated in an organic way allowing the researcher to catch the nuances of what people do and feel (May, 2011). The researchers also decided to conduct the interviews through individual in-depth interviews. Personal in-depth interviews provide a more confidential setting for respondents' honest and unfiltered reflection (King et al., 2019).

Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and covered six main topics:

- Personal context and relationship with luxury
- Identity and cultural self-positioning
- First encounter and spontaneous interpretation
- Authenticity interpretation process
- Tension and contradiction
- Cultural meaning and fit

Follow-up prompts such as “Can you explain further?”, “Why do you think that?”, and “Can you give an example?” were to be used to deepen responses and clarify reasoning (Patton, 2015).

Eleven eligible participants will be interviewed for the research project. We did not predetermine a sample size for saturation in this study. Following completion and review of 11 interviews most of the subsequent interviews were simply repeating the patterns found in the initial data and did not generate any significant new themes, categories or new insights. Therefore, the sample size of this qualitative study was appropriate.

Code	Participant	Gender	Occupation	Category
P1	Participant 1	Male	Marketing Director	Current buyer
P2	Participant 2	Female	Operations Specialist	Current buyer
P3	Participant 3	Female	Project Management Specialist	Current buyer
P4	Participant 4	Female	Student	Potential consumer
P5	Participant 5	Female	Logistics Specialist	Potential consumer
P6	Participant 6	Male	Logistics Specialist	Brand critics
P7	Participant 7	Female	Student	Current buyer
P8	Participant 8	Female	Education and Training Specialist	Potential consumer
P9	Participant 9	Female	Student	Potential consumer
P10	Participant 10	Female	Student	Potential consumer
P11	Participant 11	Female	Student	Potential consumer

Table 1: Participants' Demographic

Visual elicitation techniques were employed to enhance engagement and to promote more tangible discussion. Visual elicitation is a technique where the researcher uses photographs or other visual images in interviews with participants, to stimulate deeper reflection, memory and emotion (Gill, 2024). Selected images of LV Lunar New Year 2025 collections were shown to the participants, including products with zodiac symbols and elements of cultural design (see Appendix Figure 6). The aim is to encourage participants to remember and to develop a deeper interpretation so they can express their understanding of the local story of LV (Chrzanowska, 2002).

3.2.2 Sampling Strategy

This study employed the **purposive sampling method** combined with **the snowball sampling technique**. Purposive sampling involves deliberately selecting participants who possess rich

information and are theoretically relevant to the research phenomenon, rather than those who statistically represent a broader population (Bryman, 2016). In China's digitalized ecosystem, Gen Z can be characterized as digitally-connected "fluid consumers" who contest, reinterpret and debate luxury brand authenticity and cultural adaptation in public spaces like Xiaohongshu and Weibo (Yu & He, 2025). Therefore, participants are chosen not by their buying behavior, but by their ability to make sense of and assess brand stories in a meaningful manner. The interview participants are not necessarily buyers of the LV products but they should have a clear and definite stand towards the LV brand. The sample deliberately comprises present buyers, future consumers and brand detractors. Prior to recruitment, a screening procedure was used to ensure that participants met the selection criteria as defined. Potential participants were screened for eligibility using a short series of questions. They were asked (1) whether they had been exposed to any Louis Vuitton cultural collaboration campaigns in China in the past 12 months; (2) through what channels they had been exposed; and (3) whether they could remember and briefly describe the content or narrative elements of such campaigns. Those subjects who were unable to recall specific examples or describe their memories in a meaningful way were not included in the final sample. This process of screening ensured the participants' relevance to the research context and their ability to provide analytically useful data.

To extend beyond our network and access diverse perspectives, snowball sampling is used as a complementary technique. Snowball sampling involves asking initial respondents to refer to others who meet the study's criteria, allowing researchers to expand their sample through social networks. As brand critics are difficult to identify through conventional random sampling, we asked initial respondents to recommend other people who meet our selection criteria to access hard-to-reach or niche populations (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

Current research has raised some concerns about the limitations of purposive sampling and snowball sampling, and these limitations are related to selection bias. As Atkinson & Flint (2001) pointed out, since snowball sampling does not randomly select participants but is instead made by the initial respondents through subjective choices, most snowball samples are biased. Researchers cannot draw universal conclusions from specific samples. Additionally, the samples reached by snowball sampling can be understood as individuals who are frequently engaged in social interactions and have a certain range and considerable social network. Such individuals are

selected by snowball sampling. However, isolated individuals or those who have not integrated into this social network will be ignored (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Heckathorn (2011) also described the traditional snowball sampling as a "non-probability method," where the initial convenient samples have uncertain biases in size and direction, and this bias may intensify as the sample size gradually increases (Heckathorn, 2011). This limitation will be further explained in Section 5.5 of this article. However, for a study that explicitly aims to achieve a deep level of explanation rather than statistical representativeness, these limitations do not affect the analytical value of this design.

3.2.3 Bilingual Research Protocol

One of the methodological features of this study is that the research article is written in English, but the interviews and data collection were conducted using Mandarin Chinese. Temple & Young (2004) argued that in cross-language research, some fundamental epistemological questions would arise, and these questions should not be regarded as technical issues. They contend that there is no neutral position from which to translate and that the power relationships within research need to be acknowledged. For researchers of the interpretivist paradigm, the translation process is not a clear and precise conveyance of equivalent meanings, but rather an interpretive act influenced by the translator's own social and cultural positioning. Therefore, the translation process of this study may not merely involve directly translating Chinese into English; instead, it involves explaining the original Chinese meaning in English. Therefore, during this research process, it is necessary to provide a detailed explanation of the impact brought about by this interpretation.

Since all the respondents were Chinese, the entire interview process was conducted in Mandarin Chinese to ensure linguistic comfort and minimize interpretive loss. With participants' informed consent, interviews were conducted and recorded via Tencent Meeting. All interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the automatic transcription and translation function of Tencent Meeting. The researchers went through the full transcripts and translations and the original Chinese recordings and corrected errors and checked that the meaning was accurate. Therefore, the English translations cover the entire content of the interviews and not only the selected quotations used in the research results. The validity of translation in qualitative research

is based on the equivalence between the original and the translated texts (Zhao et al., 2024). Hence, one of the researchers, a native Chinese speaker, was closely involved in the translation process, enabling culturally informed interpretation of nuanced expressions. Where direct equivalence was not possible, selective transliteration was used to retain culturally specific terms, accompanied by contextual explanation (Zhao et al., 2024). Besides, to protect participants' privacy, all identifying information was removed during transcription and translation.

This approach is in line with the viewpoint of Temple & Young (2004). When faced with such a situation, researchers should postpone the translation process for as long as possible. On the one hand, it reflects the ontological significance of the respondents' native language; on the other hand, it also involves the risk of meaning localization as late as possible. Therefore, in this study, the Chinese researcher will initially code the original Chinese text to ensure that the analysis categories are derived from the respondents' original expressions. Temple & Young (2004) further pointed out that when researchers also act as translators, this dual role provides researchers with an important opportunity to closely examine cross-cultural meanings and interpretations. At the same time, it also requires researchers to reflect on how their own positions affect the interpretation of the original interview content.

3.3. Data analysis

In this study, we adopted the **Gioia methodology** (Gioia et al. 2013) as the primary analytical framework to analyze the interview data and complemented it with the **hermeneutic analysis** (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994; Thompson, 1997) to guide the interpretation process. The Gioia method was selected because it offers a systematic and transparent process that can be gradually generalized from the language of the information provider to higher levels of theoretical abstraction. This is consistent with the interpretive paradigm of this study and the research question of how Chinese Gen Z consumers interpret the authenticity of Western luxury brands' collaborative storytelling. The Gioia method has the advantage of developing concepts from the data, not testing pre-set hypotheses, and maintaining a clear progression at the theoretical level.

Contradiction but complementarity is the combination of the Gioia method and hermeneutic approach. The Gioia approach offers a systematic coding structure that organizes the analysis into first-order concepts, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions. Hermeneutics provides the interpretive sensibility to understand what people said and the larger cultural meanings that were implicitly communicated through their language (Thompson et al., 1994; Thompson, 1997). Such a combination is of particular use in the study of the bilingual nature and cultural background, for the judgment of authenticity cannot be divorced from the cultural background in which it is formed. The Gioia structure ensures rigor and transparency of the analysis, while the hermeneutic approach helps to avoid premature abstraction, keeping the analysis always focused on the deep meanings related to the specific context and cultural position.

The analysis process is realized by the three-stage structure of the Gioia method. For the first analysis, researchers code the data in words and phrases that are close to the language of the respondents, deliberately avoiding a priori theoretical categories. Each statement conveys the different interpretation, assessment or reaction of the participants about the LV collaborative storytelling. These statements are given descriptive codes, thereby forming a large set of informant-centric concepts. These captured observations such as the perception of Guochao as both fashionable and low-end, the misreading of the LV mosaic pattern as belonging to other brands or to video games, the inference of brand sincerity from visible cultural effort, the treatment of the monogram as non-negotiable, and the use of social media to cross-verify opinions. In this stage, the hermeneutic intra-textual cycle guided the reading. First, reading through each interview content to grasp the overall meaning, and then code each specific statement to ensure that the coded content is understood within the broader narrative context of the participants, rather than being understood in isolation (Thompson, 1997).

In the second stage of analysis, the researchers shifted to more theoretical categories, examining the first-order concepts for similarities, differences, and relationships to group them into higher-level themes. During this process, the hermeneutic inter-textual cycle was applied. The researchers compared the narratives between different interviews, identified patterns and differences, and as their understanding of the entire dataset deepened, they reexamined the narratives of each participant (Thompson, 1997). The relevant first-order concepts were integrated into second-order themes such as the aesthetic legitimization and aesthetic

discrimination of Guochao, the failure of unaided cultural recognition, the inference of sincerity from process-level cultural effort, the treatment of heritage elements as a precondition for accepting cultural overlay, and the defensive and productive functions of social media in shaping authenticity perceptions.

In the final stage, the second-order themes were distilled into aggregate dimensions, the most abstract level of analysis: Guochao ambivalence, cultural legibility over authenticity, earned sincerity through visible cultural effort, balancing cultural adaptation and brand heritage, and brand meaning co-creation on social media. The data structure (*see Figure 1*) depicts the relationships between first-order concepts, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions as a key feature of the Gioia method. It allows a visualization of the analytical process from raw data to abstract theory and enables readers to follow the analytical logic and to assess the reliability of the explanations.

Coding was mainly inductive, that is, drawing on the data to develop concepts, while interpretation was informed by the CCT, cultural branding theories and brand meaning co-creation theories from the research. This is in line with the hermeneutic view that the knowledge base of the researchers is not an eliminable bias, but a necessary interpretive framework (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). These perspectives were sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2006), lenses for seeing, ordering and making sense of experience and as a point of departure for analysis rather than a fixed set of categories imposed on the data. Thus, the themes created link the theoretical framework of the research with the patterns found in the participants' own stories, placing personal experiences in a broader social and cultural discourse, instead of simply individual opinions.

3.4. Research Quality and Ethical Considerations

This study applies the “Trustworthiness” framework proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985), which includes four core criteria: Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability.

Credibility: This criterion is similar to internal validity. It is about ensuring that the findings of the research accurately reflect what was being studied. Thus the paper takes a member-checking approach. Specifically, interview transcripts are returned to Generation Z respondents for them to verify the accuracy of the data and confirm that their intended message about LV campaigns is

not misinterpreted. Additionally, triangulation is applied by gathering multiple perspectives from respondents with diverse backgrounds (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability: Unlike quantitative research that seeks statistical generalization, qualitative research is context specific. However, in order to allow other researchers to apply the findings to similar contexts, this paper provides a thick description of the cultural phenomenon under study. A rich description of the cultural underpinnings of Chinese Generation Z consumers and their digital media landscape enables readers to decide for themselves the transferability of these findings to other markets or luxury brands (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

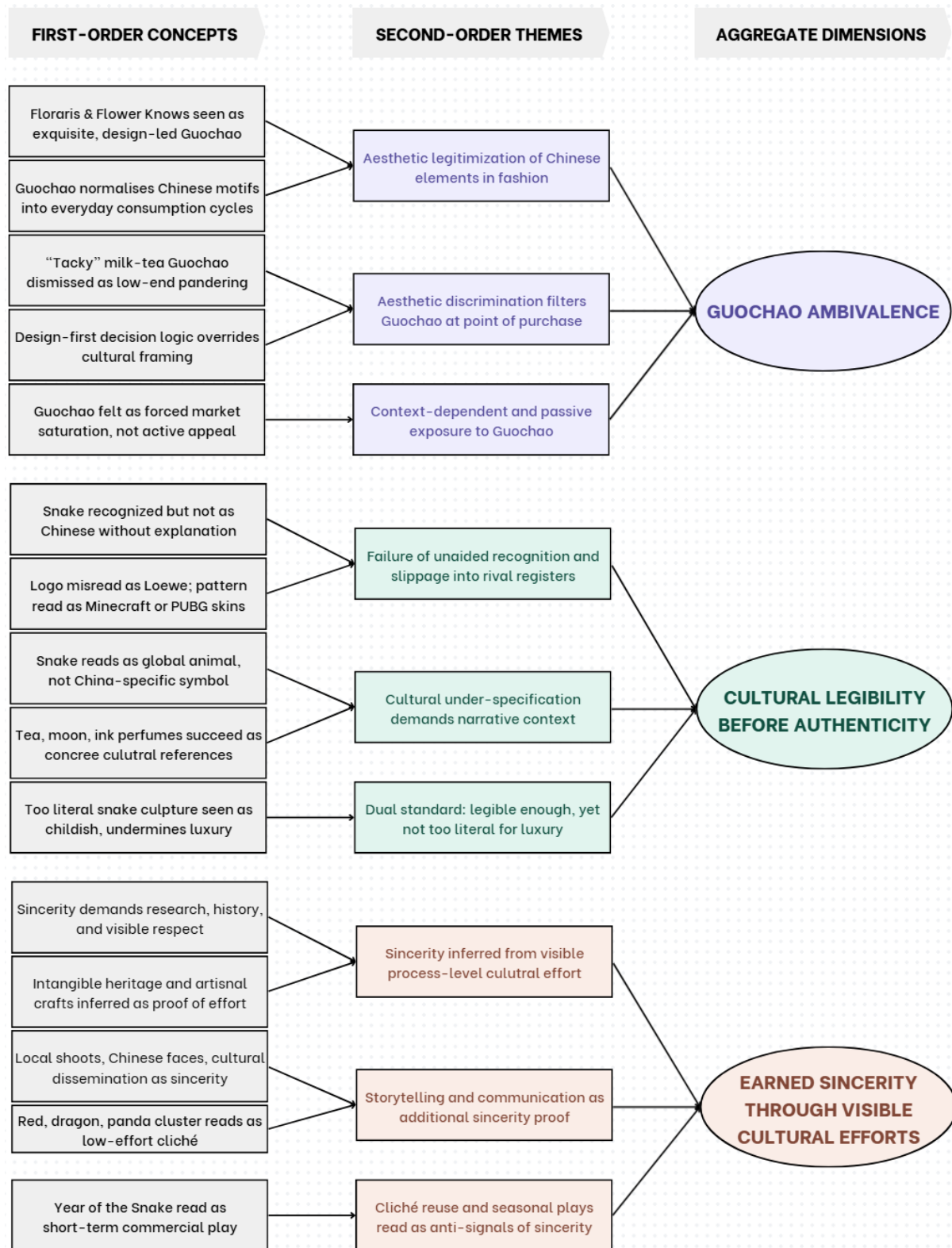
Dependability: Authors create a clear audit characteristic to ensure that the research can be examined for logical validity and transparency during the process (Denscombe, 2017). All decisions for research strategy, sample selection, data collection, and particular steps in thematic analysis are reported in detail and transparently. This will enable future researchers to reproduce the replicability and assess the efficacy of the methodology.

Confirmability: This criterion addresses concerns about objectivity by ensuring that findings stem from the participants' own experiences rather than from the researchers' imagination or biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher ensures confirmability through maintaining reflexivity, which is the active recognition and awareness of the researcher's subjective assumptions throughout the analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Moreover, all interpretations in the Findings chapter are connected to the original data via direct quotations of the participants. The research was conducted by one Chinese and one Vietnamese researcher, the cultural background of the researchers may have affected the framing of interview questions, the interpretation of participants' responses and the decipherment of cultural meanings during analysis. In an attempt to be as reflexive as possible, both researchers engaged in continuous self-reflection during the course of the research, critically reflecting on our assumptions, positions and possible biases. Regular discussions were held to compare interpretations, question emerging assumptions and ensure that the analysis was grounded in the participants' narratives rather than the researchers' preconceptions, allowing them to challenge each other's assumptions and thus reduce bias and subjectivity in the findings (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). Moreover, comparative reflection with the previous research on luxury brand storytelling, glocalization and

Gen Z consumer culture helped the researchers to assess whether the findings substantiated, extended or contradicted the existing literature rather than merely confirming the researchers' own expectations (Mortari, 2015).

This study also complies with the recognized ethics of qualitative research, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right of participants to withdraw without penalty (Bryman & Bell, 2012). The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures and their rights before the interviews. Participation was voluntary, and the participants could refuse to answer any question or to terminate the interview at any time. The data were anonymized to protect the identity of the participants. Audio recordings and transcripts were kept in a secure location and were only accessible to the researchers. Furthermore, given the potential sensitivity of the topics of cultural identity and national discourse, the interview questions were intentionally designed to focus on personal interpretations rather than political positions in order to minimize potential psychological discomfort and/or risk of harm to the participants (Bryman & Bell, 2012).

4. Findings



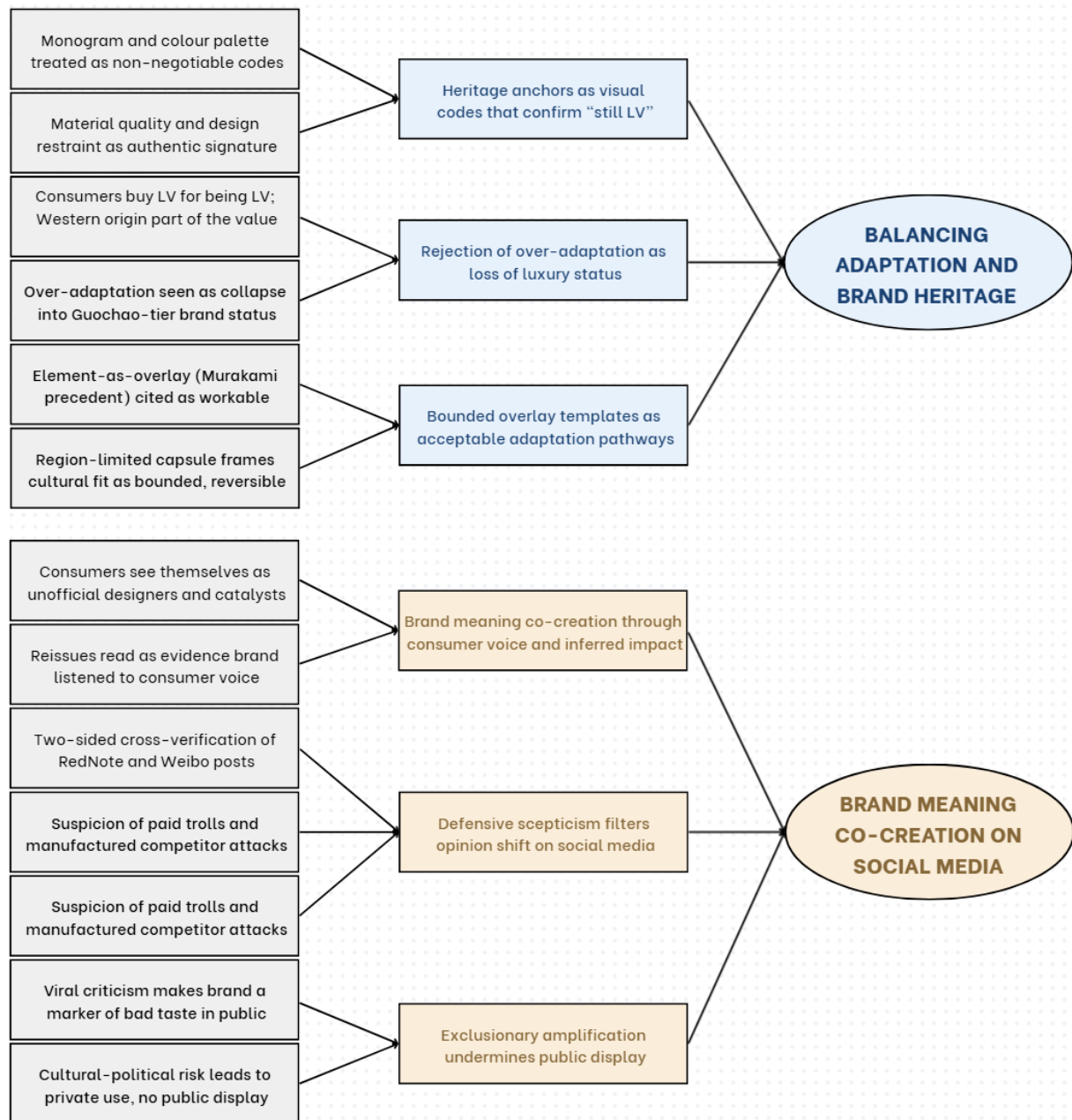


Figure 1: Aggregate Data Structure

4.1. Guochao as an Ambivalent Cultural Context for Interpreting Authenticity

The first theme is about the cultural background (Guochao) in which the participants engaged in interpreting the LV's collaborative cultural storytelling. The participants' evaluation of authenticity was conducted within the Guochao context, and they interpreted this context as a

meaningful but unstable environment. This theme mainly explains how guochao influences the participants' judgment of authenticity.

The first finding of this research is that Guochao did not form a similar, stable, and positive concept among respondents. The existing literature has theorized Wang (2022)'s Guochao concept as a rising cultural identity. The term is understood by splitting it into two parts. At the Guo level, it refers to a reactivation behavior of Chinese culture, and at the Chao level, it involves a combination of Chinese symbols and contemporary fashion aesthetics. He also points out that Guochao has become a way for the younger generation to reidentify Chinese culture within the global fashion system, but brands also need to be cautious of the Guochao fatigue caused by overusing the Guochao label.

In this study, the consumers did not simply interpret Guochao as a form of cultural confidence or something that could generate purchase appeal. Guochao creates a contradictory consumption scenario through their viewpoints. On the one hand, Guochao elements have been integrated into various consumption scenarios such as daily life and fashion design. On the other hand, it may also be regarded as an excessive commercialization, low-end aesthetic, or overuse of elements. This discovery is consistent with the CCT perspective of the consumer side in this study. Arnould and Thompson (2005) argued that consumer culture is not a homogeneous shared meaning but rather consists of multiple, fragmented, and conflicting cultural meanings. During this process, consumers actively interpret, reexamine, and question some of the symbolic resources in the consumer market. When applied to this study, it was found that guochao is precisely a cultural symbolic resource that is examined, rather than a fixed and automatically positive cultural symbol.

Some respondents defined Guochao as the integration of Chinese culture into daily life and fashion consumption. The description of P4 most clearly demonstrates this point.

"Looking at the classmates around me, this younger generation, I think many of them have clothing styles and lifestyles that are closely integrated with Chinese traditional culture."
(P4)

"The beauty editing app has a makeup style, which is presented in the style of Chinese culture. In life, the cups in the milk tea shops have patterns of Chinese culture." (P4)

She further explained: *“In China, some brand designers incorporate some Chinese symbols such as dragon patterns onto the clothing designs, thereby promoting this Chinese culture to the fashion industry.”*

Then she added:

“I think Guochao has deeply integrated into our daily lives. Many products are actually closely related to the concept of Guochao, and China has also used various channels to make more young people understand and embrace this Guochao culture.” (P4)

From such specific examples, we can understand that the Guochao has the function of aesthetic legitimization. It enables Chinese culture elements not to be confined to specific traditional festivals or cultural heritages, but to be integrated into daily activities such as clothing, decoration, and daily-use staff. The existence of Guochao has made Chinese culture elements more commonly seen, fashionable, and visualized in consumption.

The interview response of P2 also supports the above viewpoint, but she places more emphasis on Guochao's ability to attract consumers' attention. She mentioned that the existence of the Guochaolabel would initially arouse her interest: *“If the product is labeled with the Guochao tag, I will be curious and want to pay attention to it first.”* She then gave examples of beauty brands like Florasis (Figure 2) and Flower Knows that have collaborated with Guochao Terms, believing that these products integrate traditional Chinese elements into their designs. *“The creativity is very good and very novel,”* she said. Finally, they have created products that are *both attractive and practical*. Her response indicates that the appeal of Guo Chao is not so much determined by the cultural label itself but rather by whether the cultural elements are transformed into exquisite designs and practical products.

However, the positive meaning of Guochao was significantly rejected by other respondents. The most intense criticism came from P1. He believes that Guochao has transformed from an initially positive word into a label with negative connotations.

“This thing has been quite popular in China in recent years. It started out as a positive term, and I think it can now be transformed into a negative one.”

"Because at the beginning, the concept of Guochao was to promote Chinese culture. But later, it evolved into anything that can be called Guochao; even something as simple as the fried skewers sold on the roadside had to be labeled as Guochao (Figure 3 Guochao on food packaging)."

He also used the Chinese brand Li-Ning as an example to illustrate how the guochao label significantly raises the price. P1's criticism shifted Guochao's focus from cultural pride to commercial skepticism: when "everything can be labeled as Guochao," this tag became a pricing and marketing tool rather than a symbol of cultural heritage.

The interview materials of P3 show another contradiction. She did not deny that incorporating Chinese cultural elements could bring value to the brand, but she strongly opposed the aesthetic expression of certain guochao elements. She said straightforwardly, *"When I was in China, Guochao was something that seemed a bit lowbrow to me."* When further asked about the specific details. She gave some examples of daily expenses: *"The packaging of some milk tea brands will feature some rather flamboyant, so-called 'national trend' elements."* However, she doesn't completely deny the cultural significance of guochao. When it comes to the application in luxury brands, she said,

"For the brand, it hopes to promote Chinese culture, that is, to incorporate Chinese culture into its products." It can be said that the brand intends to utilize the Chinese people's love for their own culture. I think this behavior is quite good." (P3)

But this cultural recognition did not translate into a purchase interest. She then said, "I still won't buy things that I consider low or ugly; although I think using culture is good, I won't buy them." She also explained that she doesn't like complex and ornate patterns, so even if she agrees that the brand is spreading Chinese culture, she won't purchase it. This indicates that cultural recognition and aesthetic acceptance can be separate. Guochao may be valued due to its cultural promotion value, but if its visual presentation is perceived as being low-end or overly complex, it will still be rejected.

In contrast, P7's attitude towards Guochao is more passive. At the beginning, she couldn't clearly define what Guochao meant. After the researcher explained, she started saying, *"I don't think there is any subjective influence. I won't actively purchase anything related to it. However, many*

brands are launching similar products, which will narrow my choice range. I can only choose from their products. So I will still be forced to come into contact with them."

P10's response further undermines the simplistic assumption that guochao directly drives consumption. Although she has heard of Guochao, she clearly stated:

"For me personally, I haven't been significantly affected because the product is mainly judged by its design. The design I like, I might purchase it. But if it doesn't reach the point that interests me, I won't consider it."

In the later part of the interview, P10 added:

"If I see Chinese elements in the design, I will definitely pay attention to it, but I won't be directly influenced by it in my purchasing decision."

She even said that she wasn't quite sure what exactly guochao "replicates." In addition, P9 provides a contextual explanation. She observes Guochao in two scenarios: domestically and internationally. She said:

"It needs to be viewed from two aspects. When I am in China and I see some products of Guochao, I might not find it strange at all. If I were abroad, when I see any products with Chinese elements that are considered part of the Chinese trend, then suddenly a very strong sense of closeness would arise in my heart, and then I might choose it."

However, she clearly stated her position:

"In terms of my own usage, guochao has no decisive role for me at all."

The responses of P7, P10, and P9 further reveal the complexity of Guochao. It does not directly determine whether to purchase. For P7, Guochao is a market environment that she has to confront. P10 indicates that design remains the decisive factor, while P9 believes that Chinese elements might create an emotional closeness abroad, but for her own situation, these elements do not have an unimportant role. In summary, Guochao may be able to evoke emotional resonance, but it cannot override design preferences, consumption context, or personal consumption logic.

Regarding this theme, Guochao does not directly drive authenticity judgments or purchasing motivations. Instead, it is a context full of contradictions. The discovery partially supports previous research that views Guochao as an emerging cultural identity and the reactivation of Chinese cultural symbols in the fashion area (Wang, 2022; Chen & Pashkevych, 2025). However, when Guochao appears in the context of Western luxury brands, respondents do not automatically consider it a genuine or positive element. Respondents acknowledge that Guochao can make Chinese elements more distinct and emotionally appealing, but also connect it with overuse, low-end aesthetics, and commercial packaging. Therefore, consumers first evaluated the cultural significance carried by these elements, and then began to make judgments about their authenticity. This leads to the next theme, the cultural legibility that serves as the premise for judgment of authenticity.



Figure 2: Florasis Guochao Makeup Packaging Box



Figure 3: Guochao on food packaging

4.2. Cultural Legibility Before Authenticity

The second finding of this study is that before respondents determine the authenticity of the LV's Snake Year collection, they will first judge whether the cultural symbols applied are readable. Consumers will not automatically accept a brand's use of elements resembling snakes or red visual elements as an expression of Chinese culture. The respondents will first consider whether they can understand this symbol. Can it be regarded as Chinese culture? From the perspective of CCT, consumers actively interpret and negotiate the reconstructed cultural meanings in specific consumption contexts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). As applied in this study, LV's interpretation of snake patterns or snake-shaped elements does not automatically determine their cultural significance; what truly determines whether this significance holds true is whether consumers can identify and accept these symbols within their own cultural experiences.

This is reflected in the fact that many respondents did not immediately associate the visual elements in the LV snack year limited edition with the year of the snack or Chinese culture. After viewing this product, P10 believed that the connection between the design and elements was not obvious.

“I don't think it is a combination of Chinese elements. I just think there might be some combination in terms of colors. It might have selected some color blocks related to snakes, but I think the overall design is not very obviously connected with the snake elements.”

P7's reaction was even more direct. When the researcher explained to her that the LV mosaic pattern was inspired by snake patterns, she simply replied, *“I can't see it.”* These feedbacks indicate that the cultural significance of brand definition does not automatically translate into the meaning recognized by consumers. This is in line with the findings of Yu and He (2025). The success of the localization of luxury brands does not solely depend on whether the brand has adopted a localization strategy but rather on how consumers interpret, negotiate, and evaluate these cultural adaptation behaviors (Yu & He, 2025).

The failure in recognition is not only limited to the ability to identify the elements of the snake but also manifests as the visual symbols being regarded as belonging to other brands or other elements. When P9 saw the label design of the product, she didn't associate it with LV or the snake. Instead, she interpreted it as another luxury brand.

“Actually, when I saw that label, I thought it was LOEWE because it was so similar.”
(P9)

P3 also made a similar judgment. She stated that she couldn't tell that the green patches were snake scales, nor could she recognize that the label was in the shape of a snake. Just like P9, she believes that the design elements are quite similar to other brands, and she also mentioned that some of the designs are actually related to the game's visual aspects.

“ I actually couldn't tell that it was a pattern of snake scales. I didn't notice that the label was shaped like a snake either. Instead, I thought it looked like LOEWE. The green check pattern gave me an initial impression that was somewhat like Minecraft” (P9)

The overall visual response for P11 was similar. She believed in the LV snake year collection.

“The snake-related elements weren't particularly clear. Even the clothing design looked a bit like the in-game fashion items in games like Gunfight PUBG.” (P11)

These similar evolutions, understood together, lead to the discovery that the culture symbols of the LV snake year limited collection used as the stimulus material for this study do not allow consumers to perceive Chinese culture. Instead, they tend towards other interpretations such as LOEWE, Minecraft, or PUBG (*Figure 4*). This discovery is crucial for this research, as it focuses on the collaborative storytelling of Western luxury brands. And the effectiveness of storytelling primarily depends on whether consumers can immerse themselves in this story. During the process, if the symbols are interpreted as belonging to other brands, other game symbols, or ordinary decorations, then the Chinese cultural storytelling that the brand intends to establish will be weakened. Holt (2004) also emphasized in his cultural branding theory that brands cannot merely rely on isolated symbols to create cultural meanings. Instead, they need to incorporate these symbols into cultural narratives and identity stories that can be understood by consumers (Holt, 2004). The respondents' misinterpretation indicates that some visual symbols of the LV snake year series failed to effectively convey the cultural story that the brand intended to convey.

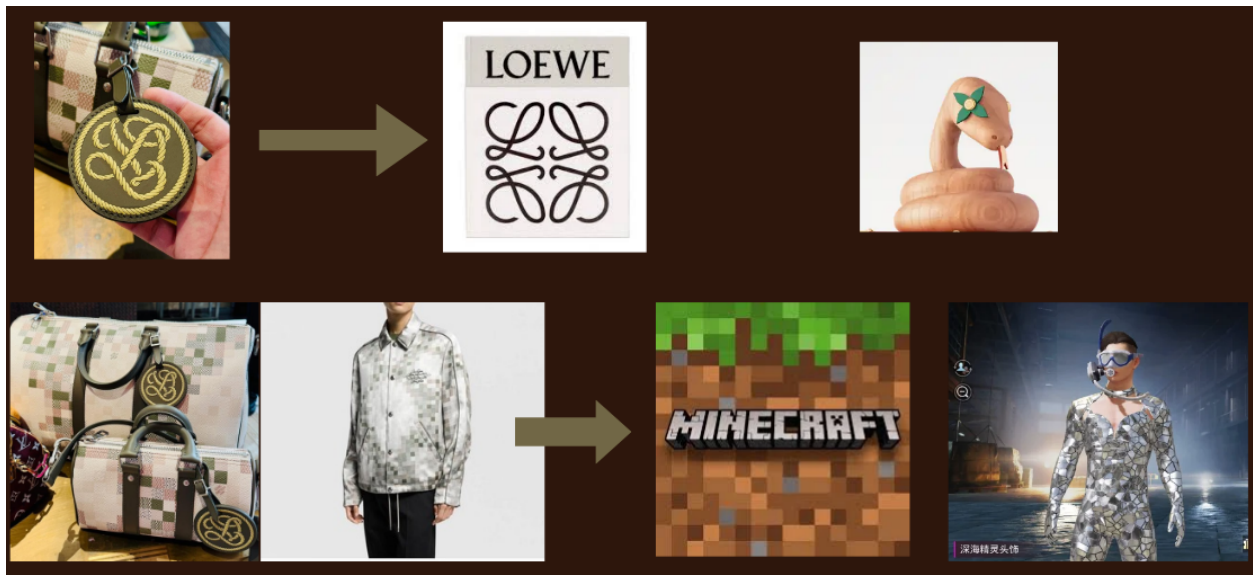


Figure 4: LV's Year of Snake Collection being interpreted as LOEWE, Minecraft, and PUBG

From another perspective, even if the respondents could identify the elements of the snake, they did not consider the snake itself to be an exclusive expression of Chinese culture. P5's response best illustrates this point:

"I can actually tell that it has elements of snakes, but there are snakes in many places around the world, not just in China."

P10's evaluation of the zodiac box product also supports this point:

"The zodiac box will more directly reflect the snake element, but you can't directly say that it is related to Chinese elements unless it is stated that it is a setting for the Year of the Snake."

Through the above answers, the respondents can clearly distinguish between animal recognition and cultural recognition. They see that the snake element does not represent that they have seen Chinese culture. As a creature found all over the world, this universal cultural symbol is not inherently Chinese. Only when the snake is placed in the context of Chinese culture, myths, or festivals can it become a Chinese cultural expression. This set of products for the Year of the Snake not only has problems with abstract design but also has a problem of a lack of cultural context. The brand used an animal related to the Chinese zodiac but did not provide sufficient context for consumers to recognize and accept the cultural expression. Although the respondents

did not explicitly mention cultural appropriation in their responses, there were implicit references to the risks associated with appropriation. In this study, when the cultural elements of the snake were used without sufficient cultural context, it was difficult for the participants to recognize it as a respectful expression and meaningful cultural storytelling. From this perspective, the problems with this Snake year product are not only related to the recognizability of the snake but can also be understood as whether it has a sufficient cultural background foundation, thereby being perceived as a cultural appropriation risk that is divorced from context.

P10 later further pointed out that if the brand wants to express the culture of the year of the snake, it cannot just stop at the image of the snake but should understand the story behind it.

“I think the brand should at least understand more; apart from the image of the snake, there might be some stories behind it, and it should be explored in more depth and combined together. Just having the image of a snake cannot mean that you are already very familiar with this thing.”

This can further illustrate that cultural legibility is not only the problem of visual recognition but also a problem of cultural context and the depth of the story. This is consistent with the view of Arnould and Thompson (2005) that consumers will judge whether a market symbol has sufficient meaning based on their own cultural experience, rather than simply accepting the brand's interpretation of the symbol (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Furthermore, cultural legibility does not mean that the symbols should be as straightforward as possible. P4's response explains another contradiction within the LV Snake Year collection series: if the design is too abstract, it will make consumers unable to understand it; if it is too straightforward, it will damage the prestige of the luxury brand. On the one hand, she believes that LV did not simply and directly apply the snake element to the product, and instead, she thinks that to some extent, this retains the high-end feel of LV.

“The brand did not simply copy and paste some snake-related elements onto bags or clothes. Overall, it still demonstrated the high-end quality of LV.” (P4)

On the other hand, when the snake-shaped sculpture was placed directly on the zodiac storage box, she felt that this expression was rather stiff.

“I think for a product like this box, I don't think it quite fits the LV style. It just has a snake on top, which looks more like a child's toy and doesn't have that high-end feel.” (P4)

P4's response reveals a double standard, the symbol must be clear and distinguishable enough to be recognized, but not too explicit, so as not to undermine the luxurious style of LV. This is in line with the core tension of the "luxury glocalization" concept discussed in this article. Meanwhile, Yu and He (2025) pointed out that the localization of luxury brands in the Chinese market requires handling the relationship among cultural authenticity, brand heritage, and local adaptation simultaneously, rather than simply adding local cultural symbols.

P7 positive comments on another product of LV, the “China Journey” perfume, provided a contrast for the findings in this section. She does not oppose LV's engagement in cultural cooperation in China. Instead, she believes that different cultures have varying levels of difficulty and distinct concepts. She believes that the Chinese elements used in the perfume collection can be more easily understood, as the design inspiration is more concrete and can be more readily perceived.

“I think the three bottles of perfume it produced are all items that Chinese people would recognize, which are elements of Chinese culture. Because they are respectively called tea, the moon, and ink; there are only three elements. The entire concept is also very well done. The inspiration for their perfume came from these three things.” (P7)

From this comparison, consumers do not reject the use of Chinese culture by Western brands. The key point is whether these cultural elements can form a clear relationship with the product concept, visual expression, and cultural imagery. Compared to the mosaic elements of stimulating materials, the highly characteristic Chinese materials such as tea, the moon, ink, and ink color were appropriately applied to the product and can be understood as a cultural expression that Chinese consumers would recognize.

In conclusion, the premise of judging the authenticity of culture is the legibility of culture. Regarding the research question, the first step in the participants' authenticity judgment is not to immediately determine whether the localization of Louis Vuitton maintains authenticity. Instead, they first question whether these symbols can be interpreted as part of Chinese culture. Previous studies have examined consumers' reactions to cultural integration and the globalization of

luxury goods: Chiu et al. (2011) distinguished between integrative and exclusionary responses to foreign cultural elements, while Yu and He (2025) indicated that the significance of luxury brands in China is interpreted and negotiated through digital consumer discourse (Chiu et al., 2011; Yu & He, 2025). This topic reveals an earlier condition for judgment. The interviews revealed three related mechanisms: some symbols cannot be directly identified; some symbols are identified as snakes but are not unique to China; and some symbols are too straightforward and cannot maintain the tone of luxury goods. This indicates that the authenticity judgment first depends on whether the cultural meaning can be identified. So the next theme explores how after cultural symbols become readable, participants focus on visible cultural effort, research, and sincerity behind stories.

4.3. Earned Sincerity Through Visible Cultural Effort

Many respondents regarded the sincerity displayed by the brand as whether the brand had conducted visible research, understanding, and storytelling behind the product. P6 clearly defined the meaning of brand dedication. He believed that dedication is not an abstract attitude but can be concretized as a behavior where the brand spends time researching the deeper content behind the culture.

“If I were to quantify dedication a bit more, I think a brand that spends a lot of time conducting extensive research to explore some of the deeper aspects of the culture at least needs to have a relatively good story or a good background that makes people feel more accepted, and then proceed to create a design based on this.” (P6)

As the marketing director, P1 also expressed similar views. He believes that if Western luxury brands want to collaborate with Chinese culture, they must first conduct dual research at the market and cultural levels.

“Firstly, the first step is to conduct in-depth research. At least, they need to visit this market and then conduct some on-the-ground research to understand the specific preferences of consumers. Secondly, they need to conduct in-depth research on the part of the culture they want to integrate to understand its evolution process, its history, and where its representative features are. Thirdly, they need to respect it.” (P1)

When further explaining respect, he emphasized that they cannot randomly change cultural symbols. Using the Chinese dragon as an example, he explained that if the brand changes the shape of the Chinese dragon according to Western thinking, the market will not accept it.

The responses from P6 and P1 can be combined into one finding: when respondents judge the sincerity of a product, they do not merely consider whether the product contains Chinese elements but rather observe and infer whether the brand has achieved sufficient cultural understanding before designing the product. Whether to conduct research, the depth of historical understanding, the application of cultural connotation, and the respect for symbols all become the criteria by which they judge whether a brand is well thought out. This is in line with the CCT perspective. Consumers are not only looking at the surface of the product but are also involved in the interpretation of the cultural production process behind the product (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). It is also consistent with the logic of cultural branding. If a brand does not do background and story-driven storytelling, culture symbols become thin and cannot build up a real identity value (Holt, 2004).

P2 adds further specificity to this visible effort in terms of the two levels of product design and communication. If LV wants to defend the Snake Year as a part of Chinese cultural cooperation, it has to explain it clearly and fully instead of allowing consumers to see only abstract lines, she believes.

"If you want to call it a product specifically for the Year of the Snake in China, then you should describe it properly. I think this is a kind of respect that should be demonstrated. If you want to integrate it, then make it combine in an organic way rather than simply copying mechanically. That would seem too forceful." (P2)

More importantly, P2 does not limit sincerity to the product design itself, but also extends it to the way of communication. She believes that even if the product design is good, the brand still needs to show sincerity through appropriate communication actions.

"I think promotion is also very important. For instance, during the promotion process, you can find corresponding Chinese faces that are suitable for it and conduct on-site shooting in China. If the brand can conduct on-site shooting in China and, at the same time, promote

Chinese culture. In that case, I would consider it a sincere brand. It's not just about launching a collaboration to make money from Chinese people.” (P2)

In the interview, P2 emphasizes the importance of sincerity that is demonstrated not only in the use of the cultural symbols in and of themselves, but also in the composition of the storytelling, as well as in the shooting techniques and dissemination. For P2, Chinese faces, on-site photographing, and cultural dissemination are not extra components but rather indicators of whether the brand truly integrates into the local cultural context. This perspective, along with brand meaning co-creation, leads to the supposition that brand meaning is not a passive transmission of the brand to the consumers, but it is created through the interaction among firm-provided meanings, cultural context, and consumer interpretation (Allen et al., 2008). Consumers derive brand meanings from cues such as symbols, visual style, advertising messages, packaging and communication (Batra, 2019). In other words, consumers will judge whether a brand is really involved in the collective construction of cultural meaning through visible actions, rather than simply using Chinese culture for product packaging in a one-sided manner.

The respondents also regarded elements such as intangible cultural heritage and the history of craftsmanship as the criteria for judging whether a brand is sincere and whether it possesses authenticity. When comparing different cases of brand culture collaborations, P11 believes that the tiger head hat element of Gucci stands out more than the Snake Year product of LV, as it demonstrates greater thoughtfulness.

“I might think that in 2016, Gucci had a show where it used some elements of tiger head hats. I think it found some rather detailed content. Tiger head hats and tiger head shoes have already become some elements of the past in China. Then they now reinterpret this element in a new way.” (P11)

Subsequently, she directly used the LV snake year collection as a counterexample:

“When it comes to being deceptive, I think the LV one just had a bit of that feeling just now.” (P11)

She then went on to point out that if Western luxury brands want to engage in cultural collaboration with China, then China's intangible cultural heritage techniques will be a good choice. She gave an example of Chanel saying:

“It would be better to focus on some traditional Chinese handicrafts. Previously, Chanel had a collection that incorporated that inlaid metalwork element. It has a long-standing cultural heritage, and many of these traditional handicraft techniques are on the verge of disappearing.” (P11)

P8 and P2 also linked cultural depth with intangible heritage, handicrafts, and storytelling. When P8 talked about Chinese culture, the first things that came to her mind were historical anecdotes, intangible heritage, tie-dyeing, embroidery, and calligraphy. She explained:

“I think products that are linked to allusions or intangible cultural heritage are usually associated with Chinese culture when people see them. And they have indeed accumulated over many years. Additionally, some more contemporary designs give a different impression. But once they incorporate a cultural element, as long as they have a story, they will arouse a strong desire to purchase.” (P8)

P2 also views intangible cultural heritage as cultural resources with local characteristics, handmade production, and uniqueness.

“In recent years, people have frequently mentioned some intangible cultural heritages, such as Suzhou embroidery and lacquer fans. These are all very distinctive in terms of local characteristics, and they require skilled artisans to produce by hand.” (P2)

Through the above interviews, the respondents were not limited to those simplistic cultural symbols that are highly recognizable but repetitive. They place greater emphasis on those cultural resources that can reflect the essence of time, craftsmanship, regional characteristics, and the depth of stories. The reasons why intangible cultural heritage, Suzhou embroidery, lacquer fans, inlaid work, tie-dyeing, embroidery, and calligraphy are mentioned are not because they better represent Chinese culture but because the combination of these elements with products enables consumers to perceive that the brand has invested more in understanding and transformation costs. This is because the costs involved are inherently higher due to the long duration and profound history. This is consistent with Holt's (2004) view that brands need to be

embedded in meaningful cultural storytelling. Cultural resources can only provide identity, meaning, and cultural identity to consumers through narrative, craftsmanship, and branding translation rather than remaining as decorative references (Holt, 2004).

The respondents also provided counterevidence to demonstrate the inauthenticity of the brand. P3 is very direct in her criticism of foreign brands. She believes that many brands' understanding of Chinese culture is limited to a few stereotypical symbols.

“For most foreign brands, they often merely use those cultural symbols such as red, the dragon, the panda, etc. to express their attention to China and their understanding of Chinese culture. So my perception has always been that they are very simplistic.” (P3)

P2 further pointed out that for a brand to perform well, it cannot simply translate overseas advertisements into Chinese and then directly post them on platforms like RedNote

“Truly grasping what our Chinese personality and thoughts actually are. Some foreign brands advertise on Xiaohongshu by translating their advertisements from the foreign language into Chinese and posting them directly on the platform.” (P2)

This indicates, in the opinion of the respondents, that language translation is not equivalent to culture translation. If a brand fails to understand the local platform context, the consumers' expression methods, and cultural psychology, it will still be perceived as a low-effort adaptation.

P2 and P11 regarded the LV Snake Year series as merely a commercial test or an act to meet short-term sales goals. P11 also believed that the LV products were more like a seasonal limited edition and sale strategy.

“I think it's just conducting a business deal and also testing the market. If the brand truly wants to win the Chinese market, it should conduct more in-depth research to understand consumers' perception of the snake-year limited edition.” (P2)

“The snake elements of this year actually lack that particularly Eastern flavor. Instead, it adds such a concept to better sell in the Chinese market and give some familiar feelings to some Chinese people!” (P11)

These counterexamples collectively form the second sub-finding of this section. Inauthenticity does not necessarily stem from cultural errors. It could also arise from consumers feeling that the

brand has insufficient investment in cultural collaboration projects. For instance, the repetitive use of symbols such as red, dragons, and pandas; the simple literal translation of overseas advertisements; and short-term business models like zodiac exclusives are all interpreted by the respondents as signals of low effort. In addition, Yu and He's (2025) research also shows that the localization of luxury brands in China cannot depend on seasonal cultural symbols alone. Consumers will know whether the brand is truly committed to the Chinese cultural identity, or it is selectively using Chinese culture at commercial nodes to gain market benefits (Yu & He, 2025). The materials strongly prove that the respondents dislike the LV Snake Year series not because they are against commercial purposes, but because they do not find enough evidence in the products and communication to prove their cultural understanding and long-term effort.

In general, the participants made their authenticity judgments based on the visible cultural input. Regarding the research question, Chinese Gen Z consumers interpreted the authenticity of LV's collaborative story by observing whether it shows research, historical understanding, narrative foundation, localized communication, and cultural translation. The more visible these endeavors were, and the more they were accompanied by intangible cultural heritage, exquisite craftsmanship, local shooting, or consistent cultural concepts, the more likely participants were to view the brand as respectful and sincere. But when cultural symbols emerged in the form of clichés, direct translations, or short-term zodiac marketing, they were more likely to be perceived as shortcuts. This result links CCT, cultural branding and brand meaning co-creation: consumers actively interpret the cultural labor of the brand, assess if its storytelling has meaningful identity meaning and play a role in the interpretation of authenticity by accepting, questioning or rejecting such efforts.

4.4. Balancing Chinese Cultural Adaptation and LV's Brand Heritage

There was a recurring contradiction during the interview about how far can a brand like LV accommodate itself to Chinese culture without losing its own identity. Respondents questioned double standards: Does the storytelling really represent Chinese culture, not just evaluate the Snake Collection in terms of cultural authenticity? Can the product still be identified as LV? This finding directly addresses the central tension named in this study's title "global heritage versus local identity", and shows that for Chinese Gen Z, the tension is not abstract but stems from

specific visual codes that the brand cannot abandon, even in culturally themed marketing activities. Although Bertrand et al. (2017) noted, luxury brands must navigate the balance between heritage and innovation, and Liu et al. (2014) warned that excessive localization might weaken a luxury brand's standardized international image, our data shows that for Chinese Gen Z consumers, this balance is also a practical interpretive task they face each time encountering a brand's collaborative storytelling. We asked participants to choose between two hypothetical situations: one where a brand is over-adapted and lost its identity, and the other one where a brand kept its identity but became less attractive to the Chinese. Participants all chose the latter. P6 expressed it most clearly:

"If it fits too perfectly, it's not their brand anymore. If you're looking for a brand that's deeply rooted in Chinese culture, we have other options. For us as Chinese consumers, LV can be seen as a brand representing a foreign culture. If it tries too hard to blend in and loses its own identity, it might not feel necessary or authentic anymore." (P6)

This finding is in line with the argument of Kapferer & Bastien (2012) that luxury value is based on timeless heritage, not changes in market preferences. For these participants, the Western origin of LV is not something to be overcome through localization, but is part of the product they are buying. This challenges a common assumption in cross-cultural marketing that the consumers in emerging markets would embrace brands that adapt to local cultures. All participants in our study are vocal about their desire for LV to maintain its Western identity, with many believing too much localization is a sign the brand is losing its luxury status. P4 was the most vocal in raising this concern when reviewing the Snake Collection:

"The brand has abandoned some of its original high-end features. The current designs no longer align with the LV style that the public has come to love. It has lost the essence of what LV originally stood for. If they were to turn LV into a style reminiscent of a domestic trendy brand, I think that would be unacceptable." (P4)

This reaction confirms Cui et al.'s (2015) observation that Chinese luxury consumers have conflicting cultural emotions. They want their culture to be reflected, but not at the expense of the brand's global reputation. P4's response shows this contradiction: she is a Chinese consumer who wants her Chinese identity recognized, yet rejects localization as a means to achieve it,

because such localization brings LV closer to domestic Guochao brands and away from the foreign luxury segment she values.

However, the participants did not completely reject the cultural integration. They identified three concrete templates that could be used to adapt, without compromising the stability of brand heritage. The first is the element pattern as a layer, most clearly articulated by P1 who generally declared the Snake Collection acceptable on this basis:

"I don't think there's any conflict. Based on the collection you've presented, I believe it still maintains LV's unique design identity, its use of color and design style. Moreover, it incorporates these elements into existing products as a means, without altering the products themselves." (P1)

The second template is the precedent of artist collaboration, which P7 cited the collaboration between Takashi Murakami and LV in 2003, as an example of strong cultural elements being seamlessly integrated into a classic monogram design without disturbing its core. The third is the region-limited capsule logic P6 provides a culturally specific collection launched in a specific market, viewed as a temporary, closed loop experiment that does not dilute the global identity of the brand. These three templates are consistent with Ruiz & Cruz's (2023) argument that unconventional luxury collaborations can be a complement to the traditional definition of luxury, not a replacement. They maintain the brand's core symbols while introducing novelty and cultural relevance. But, crucially, our data complicates this argument in two ways. All three templates share the same basic idea: the end product should have a strong visual presence of the elements of the brand's heritage, with cultural elements forming a tightly controlled layer. This is similar to what Holt (2004) calls building a cultural brand through 'identity myths' that resonate with local cultural tensions, while maintaining the core myth of the brand, rather than symmetrical integration of global and local. Secondly these 3 templates are explicitly bounded: spatially (capsule collection), temporally (seasonal release), or design scope (fixed base layer). Participants accept cultural adaptation only if the brand can revert to its global identity after a cultural campaign has run its course.

When asked what cannot be negotiated, across all responses, the answer remains consistent which are the monogram pattern and color palette.

“The monogram is the most direct and profound impression on consumers, any significant alteration to the graphic image would be a warning sign.” (P9)

P5 extended the non-negotiable scope beyond the visual to include material and design discipline:

“Even the quality of the materials, the restraint of the design, are part of LV’s authentic signature. (P5)

The yardstick of brand authenticity is the monogram. It’s the visual code that allows participants to see “this is still LV” even as new cultural elements are added. This refers explicitly to the definition of brand heritage of Urde et al. (2007) on track record, longevity, core value, and symbolic use. For these participants the monogram is the symbol that holds LV’s heritage. Any redesign that obscures the monogram strips down important features that make LV desirable. Similarly, Zanola et al. (2026) state that storytelling in luxury fashion is a form of protecting brand heritage and of keeping its symbolic meaning alive over time. However, our data show that for Chinese Gen Z, it is preserved on the level of the specific visual codes and not only on the level of the narrative. A storytelling campaign rich with culture can appear authentic, but if the product itself tears apart the foundation and color of the monogram, then bigger narratives cannot save the brand from perceptions of a loss of identity.

When used on the Year of the Snake collection itself, participants have had mixed opinions. P1 argued that the collection still retained LV’s design identity, as its logo and chromatic logic remained visible. P4 and P6, however, stated that it had gone too far. This divergence is quite interesting as it is closely related to how legibly participants perceived cultural significance (see Section 4.2): those who did not recognize the collection’s strong Chinese influence felt that LV’s identity was preserved, while those who clearly perceived the cultural element believed LV’s identity had been compromised. Thus, two evaluations “cultural legibility” and “brand heritage preservations” stand in tension. The higher the level of cultural understanding, the stronger sense of authenticity, but it may also weaken the stability of the brand heritage’s perception. This paradox deepens the viewpoint of Yu & He (2025) that successful glocalization must be based on the foundation of brand authenticity, that is, through interaction, respect, and integrating local cultural values, aesthetics, and philosophy into its DNA. Our findings show that Chinese Gen Z

consumers accept deep cultural engagement at the level of storytelling such as marketing activities, documentaries, or artist collaborations, but resisted its translation into product design when it threatened core brand values.

Overall, the findings indicate that selective adaptation and conforming to heritage are positively evaluated, whereas superficially overlapping symbols or deep localizing styles are prone to resistance. This distinction has two implications for arguments about glocalization. Firstly, in the luxury segment, Chinese Gen Z consumers do not expect symmetric integration of global and local elements, they expect the global heritage to remain dominant, with local culture appearing as a contained, reversible overlay. Second, cultural adaptation is better situated in brand-narrative spaces, such as collaborative storytelling documentary campaigns, artist partnerships, rather than core product design, where the latter risks the heritage anchors that participants explicitly identified as non-negotiable. This finding extends the consumer-driven framework of Yu & He (2025) by clarifying where in the brand system localization is welcomed and where it is resisted: narrative is fluid, visual heritage is fixed.

4.5. Co-Creation of Brand Meaning on Social Media: Negotiating Authenticity

As previously discussed, perceived authenticity is constructed through cultural legibility, sincerity through visible effort and anchoring brand heritage protection. This section takes an alternative perspective on the research question, looking at how these authenticity judgments are not made in a vacuum but are negotiated, perfected and amplified via social media. The evaluations of LV's collaborative storytelling no longer remain at the individual level for Chinese Gen Z consumers. Most respondents view social media such as RedNote, Weibo and Douyin as a natural extension of their brand perception, where their interpretation is validated, refined and disseminated. But the story that the data tells is rather more nuanced than is often implied in the existing literature. Digital platforms are less the determinants of authenticity and more the co-creators of authenticity, a process in which consumers actively contribute to, debate and amplify brand meaning rather than passively receive it. This finding addresses the third research gap identified in this study, concerning the underexplored role of digital platforms in shaping Chinese consumer evaluations of authenticity.

The first thing that stands out in the data is that the participants did not see themselves as passive recipients of LV's brand storytelling. They may think their voices are small, but they can still contribute to the shift in the cultural meaning of the brand. This was strongly voiced by P2, who reflected on the value of her own comments:

"I think it's meaningful. On one hand, I might share my own views. For example, with the recent Year of the Snake limited edition, I could directly tell them, 'If it were me, I might design it like this.' This could potentially be seen by the brand and possibly adopted, or at least discussed by the designers." (P2)

She made two separate contributions. First, she portrayed herself as an unofficial designer who could contribute to LV's creative process. Secondly, as a catalyst whose mere involvement, positive or negative, brings a symbolic value to the brand. This double contribution is consistent with the multiple sources of brand meaning by Allen et al. (2008): the brand meaning is co-created by the enterprises, cultural systems and consumers, and no party can have absolute control over it alone. This view was clearly reflected by P6:

"Consumer feedback is the stepping stone for their progress. Regardless of whether the feedback is positive or negative, I believe they definitely won't last long without it."

For both participants, the cultural fit of LV depends on the consumer's contribution, where a brand that ignores its consumers is a brand on the decline. P10 took a step further by analyzing backwardly the evidence of co-creation from LV's own product decisions:

"Judging from how they've reissued some of their classic bag designs, I think they probably do pay some attention to customer feedback. After all, they wouldn't just randomly decide to bring back an old bag design for no reason. It's likely because some customers expressed their thoughts and left comments saying they wanted the older styles back, and that's why the brand decided to reissue them."

And her answer shows how consumers learn over time what effect their own conduct has on brand behavior. When LV brought back an older design that had been archived, she took it as an implicit recognition that the voices of consumers had been heard. This finding enriches Yu & He's (2025) consumer-driven glocalization framework by identifying the interpretive mechanism through which Chinese Gen Z recognize their own influence: not through direct dialogue with

the brand, but by reading the brand's decisions as evidence that it has listened to them. However, P4 and P10 acknowledged:

"My voice is too quiet, and the brand simply doesn't notice it." (P4)

"I don't really expect it to be seen. If they do happen to see it, it would definitely be a pleasant surprise." (P10)

Co-creation here is therefore a certain degree of probability. Individual contributions may not be valued, but overall, consumers still actively believe that they are the key force shaping the brand's development. This is consistent with Vallaster & von Wallpach's (2013) finding that online brand meaning is formed through multi-stakeholder discursive interaction, where even the minor contributions of individuals will accumulate over time, gradually leading to changes in the collective meaning.

Secondly, the data also indicate that Chinese Gen Z consumers generally have a strong resistance to the changes in their perceived authenticity of discussions on social media. Although previous research suggests that Chinese consumers are easily influenced by viral content (Carlotto, 2024; Zhang, 2025), participants described social media as a space for verifying their own perspectives rather than accepting others' viewpoints. P1 explicitly expressed this view:

"I look at both sides. While I'm reading, I form my own judgment, and then social media starts pushing content that aligns with my views. But at that point, I deliberately search for information from the opposite perspective. I examine both sides and cross-verify the information."

Her description shows a consumer who is aware of the "information packaging" generated by algorithms and deliberately tries to escape from it. P11 even engaged in a heated debate:

"I will seek out comments that contradict my own views, and I will look for any logical or linguistic flaws in their arguments. If I find it, I just think that if you can come up with such a loophole, it means your viewpoint isn't very solid." (P11)

For her, opposing arguments are not invitations to reconsider but are targets to be disproven. P9 was even more skeptical, suspecting that intense online criticism may not even be authentic in the first place:

“The competitor is buying fake accounts. Is this just business competition?” (P9)

Her initial, instinctive reading was that visible criticism online could be manufactured, the product of paid trolls hired by competing brands. This is a very Chinese way of reading the digital ecosystem, where commercialized false statements are regarded as a common phenomenon. This indicates a strong skeptical attitude of the participants to the influence of digital opinions on the authenticity of information. They do not just ask “What is this comment about?” but also “Is this comment actually credible?”

This somewhat skeptical attitude aligns with the view of Robert-Agell et al. (2022) that digital platforms are central spheres in which brand meaning is constantly analyzed, discussed and redefined. Our data also shows that the Chinese Gen Z consumers’ interpretations differ from other consumers’ interpretations, by applying the same scepticism towards the viral discourse as the brand messaging. P9 clearly defined the conditions that might change her mind:

“If the thing itself is controversial, and you’ve already planted a seed of doubt in my mind, and I need to seek opinions on social media, then I might naturally change my view after seeing some negative comments. Social media definitely has issues like information cocoons. If you don’t actively search for something, it won’t just pop into your life.” (P9)

In her story there are three elements: prior uncertainty, active search behaviour and exposure to credible content. But this change of perspective can only happen when all three conditions are present. P2 confirmed this when she explained how a post on RedNote gave her a better understanding and changed her opinion on a controversial brand cultural decision:

“I think what she said made a lot of sense, and I was convinced at the time.” (P2)

It is important to note that she only saw this post because it went viral and had wide reach, which means that changes in perspective also rely on algorithms rather than deliberate brand communication. This finding aligns with Gensler et al.’s (2013) observation that consumer-generated brand stories can contest or complement firm-generated ones, and that brand meaning ultimately emerges from this multi-vocal process rather than from any single author. What this study adds is that consumers in this context are not passive recipients of either brand messaging or viral discourse, they apply the same conditional scepticism to both. Therefore, co-creation of meaning in this digital environment is both productive and protective. Consumers

help to create the meaning of the brand, not only by adding their own perspectives, but also by preserving their own interpretations from being overridden by the brand's message or viral discourse.

Third, social media reveals a stark divide in how participants are responding to LV's collaborative story-telling. This difference is consistent with the cultural mixing framework proposed by Chiu et al. (2009, 2011). They argue that the co-presence of symbols from two different cultures in the same space can lead consumers to have two contrasting reactions: an integrative response, where the foreign culture is accepted as a factor that enhances local culture, or an exclusionary response, where the foreign brand is perceived as a threat to the integrity of local culture. In the case of Chinese Gen Z, social media is a place where two responses are made public and amplified. The form of this expression has an impact that extends beyond the digital space. P8 showed a relatively mild exclusionary reaction in terms of social shame:

"Unless this item has already gone viral, like trending on social media, and everyone is criticizing it, then I would think, I don't want to carry it out and get criticized along with everyone else." (P8)

Her answer showed how a luxury product can become a visible sign of bad taste, a product that consumers become unwilling to display, even when they like the product otherwise, when digital discourse reaches viral proportions. P11 took the more extreme version of the same response, comparing it to cases where Japanese cars had been crushed in China:

"Just like when Japanese cars were being smashed before, I would feel a bit scared." (P11)

Her expression transformed social shame into a perceived political risk, but both responses ultimately led to the same outcome that consumers choose not to display the product in public. P7 clarified the issue from a cultural politics perspective, clearly pointing out the obvious characteristics of the Dolce & Gabbana controversy:

"I really like them, but I can't wear them in China. Because as soon as people see you, they think they have a very strong brand identity, their designs are so recognizable that as soon as you wear them, people know. And then they assume you also support Taiwan independence. It represents your own values." (P7)

Her account reveals how online discourse can permanently reshape the symbolic meaning of a brand at the public acceptance level, regardless of the individual cultural judgments of consumers. Once a brand is excluded by the amplified online discourse, its product loses what Khan et al. (2022) describes as the identity signaling function that creates exclusivity, its ability to be carried into public spaces as a sign of self-expression. A brand may continue to function as an individual aesthetic preference, but its public symbolic function is undermined by the process of digital co-creation in which participants interact in ways that position them as contributors.

This finding makes a significant contribution to the consumer-driven framework of glocalization (Yu & He, 2025). Their research frames consumers as cultural critics who shape brand outcomes through digital discourse, yet it does not explicitly clarify that this digital process can also generate outcomes in physical space. Our data indicate that authenticity judgments spread through RedNote and Weibo are not limited to these platforms alone, they reach brands through so-called display channels: consumers' willingness or unwillingness to be seen using a brand's product. This adds a third dimension to the consumer-driven glocalization process beyond cultural acceptance and commercial outcomes, that is willingness to display, a factor in establishing long-term brand identity, and the most directly affected outcome when digital co-creation leans toward exclusionary responses. Cui et al.' (2015) observation that Chinese consumers have cultural emotional contradictions regarding luxury consumptions is operationalized here through digital discourse. Social media becomes the place where these contradictions are made public, amplified or suppressed, and also the space for consumers to express their private cultural judgments, or a place for private interpretation, or a way to publicly reject brand displays.

Overall, this section shows how perceived authenticity is continuously co-created, actively contributed to, defensively protected and publicly negotiated via social media. Brand meaning co-creation here is productive and defensive: consumers are giving design suggestions, reading brand decision-making for signs of being heard, and propagating their interpretations across platforms. But the digital infrastructure that facilitates these contributions also triggers skepticism, defensive perceptions, and when amplified, exclusionary reactions that can subtly undermine a brand's public symbolic function even if its commercial standing remains stable.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Findings

The main research question is how Chinese Gen Z consumers understand the authenticity of the collaborative storytelling of Western luxury brands. This study takes LV as an example to provide the following answers. According to the research findings, in the context of Guochao (national trend), Chinese consumers will not automatically recognize the storytelling of the brand just because it used Chinese element symbols or festival elements and will not automatically consider it to be authentic. For them, authenticity is a conditional and gradually formed interpretation process. In summary, first, consumers will initially judge whether the cultural elements used can be identified or understood. Second, they will judge whether the collaborative storytelling has invested sufficient cultural understanding, research, or respect in these applied elements. In a simple way to say it, it is whether genuine effort has been invested in it. Third, they will evaluate whether the expression made by this glocalization behavior maintains the identity of LV as a global luxury brand. Additionally, it should be noted that consumers make evaluations in a complex social media public opinion environment, and they will also test whether the brand can withstand the test of the public. Below, the research findings form a continuous chain to explain this situation.

A clear and coherent explanation of the continuous chain of 5 findings was produced by this research. First, Guochao itself is not a stable, consensus-based, and inherently positive cultural context. On the one hand, the respondents agreed that Guochao could make Chinese cultural elements more fashionable and more relevant to daily life. On the other hand, however, due to its excessive commercialization, low aesthetic sense, and excessive use of symbols, Guochao has become highly controversial. Therefore, Guochao cannot solely undertake the task of cultural interpretation for the brand, and it cannot itself serve as the basis for consumers to judge authenticity. Secondly, before judging the authenticity, consumers will evaluate the legibility of the brand's cultural collaboration storytelling. Regarding the examples of the Year of Snake product, some respondents were unable to identify the elements of the snake, while others, even though they recognized the snake elements, did not consider them to have any particular connection with Chinese culture. Some of the respondents also stated outright that if cultural

symbols are too explicit, it would undermine the high-end and luxurious nature that luxury goods possess. Thirdly, once the cultural symbols can be identified, consumers will further assess whether the brand demonstrates sincerity in cultural cooperation. This sincerity needs to be manifested through visible cultural efforts. For instance, whether the brand conducts in-depth market and culture research. Whether it truly understands the true essence behind the culture and the meaning of the symbols. Whether it provides a clear storytelling approach to support the product. Fourthly, even if a brand can present itself to consumers with sufficient legibility and sincerity, it still needs to ensure that its cultural collaboration is consistent with its established brand heritage. The respondents regarded monogram, color, material, and design restraint as important criteria for evaluating the authenticity of LV. When the storytelling aspect of cultural cooperation threatens its core identifying points, consumers will perceive that the brand identity has been weakened. Therefore, Chinese Gen Z consumers do not expect a balanced integration of global heritage attributes and Chinese local culture. Instead, they prefer limited integration. That is, glocalization can be incorporated into brand storytelling, collaborations, documentaries, or artist projects, but only if the core brand heritage attributes remain distinct. Finally, the above logic chain for authenticity judgment is not completed at the individual level, but is verified, filtered, and amplified in the social media environment. Respondents will come into contact with others' viewpoints and controversies through online social platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo. However, during this process, they will doubt platform algorithms, paid commentators, brand manipulation, and competitive attacks from competitors, rather than passively accepting information on the internet. Another point to note is that when negative online opinions reach a public dissemination scale, the meaning of the brand or product will shift from an aesthetic issue to a public display risk. Even if consumers love the brand or product, they will be reluctant to display it in reality due to fear of criticism or being labeled with a value stance issue.

To sum up, authenticity does not lie in Chinese cultural elements themselves but rather in the interpretation process that is constructed. Consumers will sequentially evaluate whether the cultural elements can be readable, whether they are genuine, whether they are consistent with the style of the luxury, and whether they can withstand the judgement of the general public on social media.

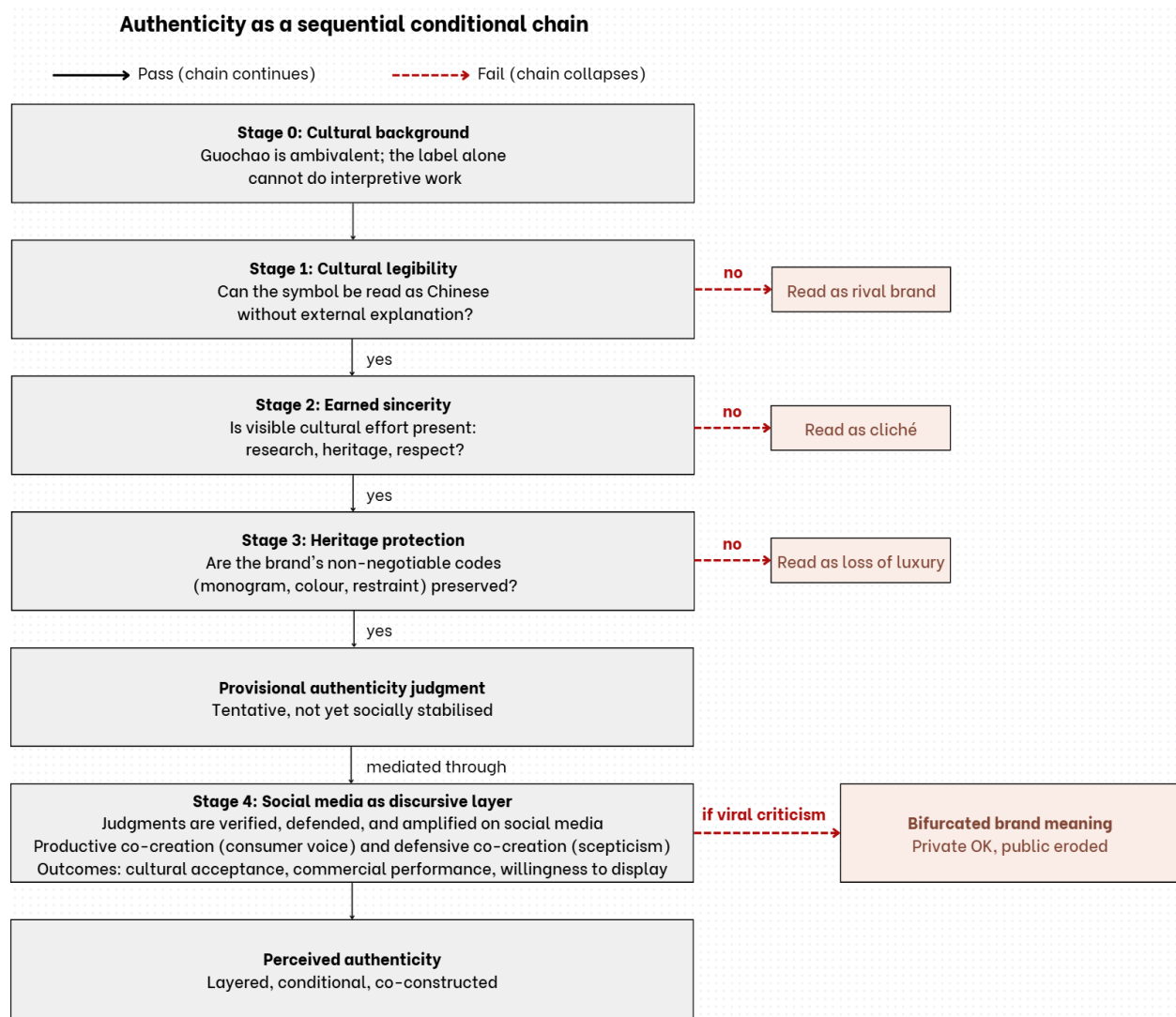


Figure 5: Authenticity as a Sequential Conditional Chain

5.2. Contextualization

5.2.1. Bounded Luxury Glocalization: Local Storytelling within Global Heritage Codes

The contribution of this study to the literature on glocalization and luxury brands lies mainly in further clarifying how Chinese Gen Z consumers perceive the boundaries between local cultural adaptation and the global luxury identity. Bettiol et al. (2016) argued that the Chinese market presents uncertainties, cultural distances, and unique consumer behaviors, which increase the risks for luxury brands to adopt a single standardized strategy. They also mentioned that the global design-driven brand strategy is still significant, but brands need to adapt themselves to the

distribution, product management, and market communication in the Chinese market through design and marketing capabilities (Bettiol et al., 2016). The findings of this study seem to support, and extend, this view. For Chinese consumers, the question is not whether to localize or standardize, but rather how far can the localization go without compromising LV's core appeal as a luxury brand.

The respondents in this study did not reject the application of Chinese cultural elements. Where these elements were employed in collaborative storytelling, artist projects, documentaries or regional limited series, respondents generally accepted such attempts to localize. This indicates that local culture can be a means for luxury brands to enter the Chinese market and is consistent with the role of design and marketing adaptation stressed by Bettiol et al. (2016). But this form of local culture integration has its preconditions. This approach is clear to consumers for boundary awareness. They don't believe more Chinese elements equals better, and they don't think localization equals authenticity." They will choose whether this cultural integration can still be in a proper position within the original LV brand. If the expression of cultural issues makes the product ordinary, too commercial or similar to the ordinary Chinese products, then this integration will not enhance authenticity but weaken the brand tone of LV itself.

Taking this further in terms of the brand heritage literature, Urde et al. (2007) see brand heritage as a facet of the brand identity, expressed in the historical record, the longevity of the brand, the core values of the brand, the use of symbols and the acknowledgement by the organization of the importance of history. They also stress that, while it is important to exploit brand heritage, it must be protected and preserved through brand stewardship (Urde et al., 2007). A contribution of this research is to advance this perspective from the enterprise level to the consumer interpretation level. For the respondents, LV's brand heritage is not an abstract one, but is recognized through specific visual symbols and material characteristics such as monogram, classic colors, material quality, design restraint and overall sophistication. These elements are the basis for consumers to judge whether it is still LV. Consumers will use these anchors to evaluate the cultural collaboration's retention of the identity of the brand if Chinese elements are added in the brand storytelling. Therefore, brand heritage is not only a strategic asset that enterprises need to manage, but also an object that is tested by consumers in the judgment of authenticity.

More precisely, glocalization of luxury goods cannot be considered as a mere mixture of global and local cultures. The localization behavior can be seen as an extension of the original storytelling of heritage luxury brand LV rather than a rewriting of the core brand identity. In discussions about luxury brand management, Kapferer (2017) explains that luxury brands have to maintain scarcity, privilege and brand dreams. Limited series, artist collaborations, selective distribution and traditions can all be ways to maintain desirability (Kapferer, 2017). This helps to explain why respondents are able to accept LV's storytelling through limited collaboration to create novelty but the crux is that this novelty is not achieved at the expense of the luxury brand's own scarcity, privilege and desirability. If the localization of expressions is too down-to-earth or too mass-market, LV will lose its original characteristics, and such localization will weaken the symbolic value of the luxury brand.

The findings of this study also contribute to the work of Ruiz and Cruz (2023) on young Chinese consumers and collaborations of unconventional luxury brands. Young Chinese consumers are interested in unconventional luxury collaborations because collaborations can change the meaning of luxury through the lens of temporariness, trendiness and playfulness (Ruiz and Cruz, 2023). However, they also emphasized that these unconventional elements do not replace traditional luxury, but rather complement the conventional luxury elements such as tradition, exclusivity and timelessness. This study supplements their findings. For LV's Chinese cultural storytelling, the playfulness, trendiness, and cultural freshness alone are not sufficient to support authenticity. When respondents evaluate such collaborations, they will accept them only when the traditional luxury attributes of LV remain clearly visible. Specifically, the storytelling of the collaboration can refresh the meaning of the luxury brand, but it must be constrained by heritage coherence. This cultural relevance can be increased, but the brand should not appear unlike its original.

To sum up, the contribution of this study to the literature on glocalization and luxury brands is not to repeat the existing content that luxury brands need to strike a balance between standardization and localization. Instead, it provides supplementary explanations for this content, explaining how this balance is carried out in the evaluation process of Chinese Gen Z consumers. For Chinese Gen Z consumers, the acceptable localization of luxury brands has an ordered arrangement. That is, the global brand heritage identity is the foundation, and local culture is

controlled, reversible, and storytelling meaning supplementary content that enters the brand system. Therefore, this study advances the discussion of luxury glocalization to a more detailed issue, that is, where should local culture be placed in the luxury brand system? The answer to this detailed question is that local culture can enter the story, cooperation, dissemination, and cultural layer, but it cannot undermine the heritage codes of the brand.

5.2.2. Guochao as an Ambivalent Cultural Context

The existing literature on Guochao interprets it as a manifestation of Chinese cultural identity, the modernization of traditional culture, or the rise of local brands. Wang (2022) interprets Guochao as an emerging Chinese cultural identity and notes that it includes two interrelated aspects: the reawakening and rematerialization of Chinese history and material culture (GUO) and the combination of Chinese symbols and modern fashion aesthetics (CHAO) (Wang, 2022). Zhang and Fu (2022) also relate the rise of Guochao brands to the cultural confidence and new vitality of Chinese traditional culture in the context of contemporary consumption (Zhang & Fu, 2022). This literature offers an important foundation for understanding the positive cultural significance of Guochao.

The findings of this study partially support this mainstream understanding. The respondents did not deny the cultural significance of Guochao. They recognized the expression that Guochao has integrated into the consumption scenarios of daily items, making Chinese cultural elements more daily, visual, and fashionable. This is consistent with Wang's (2022) discussion of Guochao as an identity carrier for the younger generation to re-recognize Chinese culture, as well as Zhang and Fu's (2022) view of Guochao as a symbol of cultural confidence. This study does not deny that Guochao can enhance the visibility and appeal of Chinese culture. However, this study attempts to make some revisions to the existing Guochao literature. Most existing studies view Guochao from the perspectives of local brands, the rise of Chinese products, or cultural confidence. They emphasize its positive significance more. For example, Zhang and Fu (2022) take Florasis as a case to show how Guochao brands are recognized by Chinese-style design, high-quality products, and appropriate marketing strategies. Hu (2022) mainly discusses the original Guochao design and Chinese elements adopted by domestic sports brands to enhance brand influence and commercial performance. However, during the research process, we found that when Guochao is

placed in the storytelling of Western luxury brands, it is not a cultural resource that can directly bring positive evaluations. The respondents' understanding of Guochao became more contradictory. They believe that on the one hand, it can represent the popularization and fashionization of Chinese cultural elements. On the other hand, it will also be understood as over-commercialization, low-end aesthetics, or a means to raise prices. Especially when it is labeled as Guochao just because it is related to culture, Guochao will be regarded as a consumer marketing label.

The supplementary point indicates that Guochao cannot be simply regarded as a stable and positive cultural attribute. Wang (2022) also warned that brands need to be careful of “Guochao fatigue” from overusing the Guochao label, especially when Guochao is a mere strategic statement without showing specific cultural reflection in product and communication design (Wang, 2022). This study further elaborates on the points from the perspective of consumers. Guochao fatigue is not only a risk for the brand in terms of communication but also a factor that determines whether consumers believe the brand's cultural expression is genuine, sophisticated, and worthy of purchase. Therefore, Guochao itself is unable to assist enterprises in constructing the cultural meaning. Consumers will not assume that a product has cultural depth or authenticity just because it features the Guochao application.

From the perspective of CCT, Guochao is more appropriately understood as a contested symbolic resource, as it does not possess a fixed cultural meaning. Arnould and Thompson (2005) noted that consumer culture is not a monolithic system of meanings but rather a multiplicity of meanings, fragmented and conflicting; consumers actively interpret and question market symbols in specific market contexts (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). From this perspective, it can help us understand why, for Guochao, some people interpret it as a symbol of fashionization, while others consider it a form of commercial hype. That is to say, Chinese Gen Z consumers will judge whether the application of Guochao elements is feasible based on product design, different brand identities, or different consumption scenarios.

To sum up, the contribution of this study to the literature on Guochao lies in supplementing the applicable boundaries for judging whether Guochao can enhance the cultural identity of Chinese Gen Z consumers. For local brands, Guochao may be more easily understood as a form of

cultural confidence or an embodiment of the rise of local products. However, for a brand like LV, which is a Western luxury brand, Guochao will not automatically transform into authenticity or purchasing motivation. This is a rather tense cultural background, where the existence of Guochao makes Chinese elements more likely to be noticed, but it may also cause consumers to have a vigilant mentality. Due to issues such as symbol abuse, commercial exploitation, and aesthetic problems: The cultural application related to Guochao cannot be regarded as a correct answer for Western luxury brands entering the Chinese market. Instead, it is a situation that requires careful handling and will continue to be tested by consumers. This also partially answers the research question about Guochao; that is, the interpretation of LV's storytelling collaboration by Chinese Gen Z consumers will not automatically become positive due to the existence of Guochao. Instead, the judgment of authenticity will be carried out in this tense cultural context.

5.2.3. From Brand Claim to Consumer Inference: Reframing Authenticity in Luxury Glocalization

The existing literature mainly regards authenticity as an attribute of the brand. Beverland (2005) defined it as a story constructed based on heritage and craftsmanship, while Urde et al. (2007) specified this concept through achievements, longevity, and symbolic usage. These approaches explain how brands construct authenticity, but they have not clarified how consumers actually evaluate authenticity claims in a multicultural context because in such situations, the meanings of cultural symbols cannot be assumed.

This study addresses this gap by specifying how authenticity is inferred through a sequential evaluation process. As elaborated in the findings, Chinese Gen Z consumers do not view authenticity as a single judgment but rather consider it to be the result of the combined effect of three sequential filtering mechanisms: the comprehensibility of cultural symbols, the sincerity demonstrated by observable cultural efforts, and the protection of the brand heritage elements. If consumers cannot interpret cultural symbols as Chinese, they will not make a judgment on authenticity. Only when these symbols can be understood will consumers evaluate the sincerity of the brand, that is, whether the brand has explicitly invested cultural efforts in the product. Even if this effort is obvious, it will not undermine the role of luxury brands' heritage code,

which acts as the ultimate filter. Therefore, each step relies on the result of the previous step. If the first stage fails, the subsequent stages lose their relevance. This sequential model supplements the deeper explanatory dimensions mentioned in the previous studies but not clearly elaborated.

Furthermore, this study also refined Holt's (2004) cultural branding theory. He argued that brands should incorporate symbolic elements into identity myth stories that consumers can interpret within their cultural experiences. The data confirmed this principle, but also indicated that a deeply rooted cultural story is not sufficient. Consumers can clearly distinguish between those collaborations that are highly collaborative and those that are lacking in effort. They merely reuse stereotypical image combinations such as red, dragons, and pandas. In this sense, sincerity is not a style that brands can claim but an inference that consumers make based on visible process evidence. This also adds a negative evidence dimension to Arnould & Thompson's (2005) CCT theory – the role of reverse signals, which stresses the importance of positive interpretation, but does not highlight how symbolic repetitive abbreviations erode authenticity in the context of luxury goods.

Overall, the study redefines authenticity as a consumer inference based on multiple levels of evidence rather than as a brand attribute. It sets standards, it identifies warning signs, and it emphasizes sincerity throughout. This sincerity is reflected in the visible aspects behind the product rather than in the product itself.

5.2.4. From Amplifier to Interpretive Space: Reframing Digital Brand Meaning Co-Creation

Current research on the significance of brand meaning co-creation indicates that brand meaning is not created solely by the firm, but is jointly formed through the interpretive contributions of multiple stakeholders (Allen et al., 2008; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Based on the theory of CCT, Fournier & Alvarez (2019) and Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder (2011) pointed out that brand meaning is the result of continuous interaction and negotiation among consumers, communities, and marketers. None of the parties can fully control the formation process of symbolic outcomes (Schroeder & Salzer-Morling, 2006). Yu & He (2025) extended this viewpoint to the field of glocalization, arguing that Chinese consumers are cultural critics who

shape the perception of Western luxury brands in the local market through positive digital discourse. However, in all these analyses, co-creation of meaning is still regarded as a constructive process, and the specific conditions under which consumers actually accept, resist, or amplify the circulating meanings around them have not yet been clearly defined.

The findings of this study provide contributions to this field from three aspects. Firstly, it introduces a defensive dimension to the brand meaning co-creation behavior, further reinforcing the constructive emphasis viewpoint proposed by Allen et al. (2008) and Vallaster & von Wallpack (2013). Previous studies focused on how consumers contribute meaning to the brand system, while our participants show that they will put a lot of effort into interpretation to prevent their own meanings from being affected by others. They cross-validate across platforms and view collaborative criticism as a signal of commercial manipulation rather than genuine speech. Vallaster & von Wallpack (2013) described the motivation of online stakeholders in brand crises to tend towards a common meaning, while the data from this study indicates that the opposite situation may also occur, that is, consumers actively resist this convergence to defend their interpretation methods.

Secondly, this study has clarified the specific conditions under which digital discourse truly reshapes the construction of individual meanings, a question that has not been conclusively addressed by Schroeder & Salzer-Morling (2006) or Fournier & Alvarez (2019). The data also revealed three conditions: prior uncertainty, active search and exposure to reliable content. If any of these are missing, the information being spread is more likely to confirm than to change existing opinions. This suggests an implicit assumption that exposure equals influence, and it slightly counters Yu & He's (2025) view of Chinese consumers as readily mobilizable cultural critics. Rather, it suggests that their critical engagement is conditional and self-defensive. This complicates Carlotto's (2024) and Zhang's (2025) accounts of viral influence by arguing that virality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for opinion change.

Thirdly, this study extends the consumer-driven framework proposed by Yu & He (2025), namely "willingness to display," by illuminating a previously uncleared outcome in the digital meaning negotiation. Holt (2004) argued that brands acquire cultural relevance by providing consumers with the identity myths they use when constructing their own meanings, and public

expression is the mechanism that makes this identity construction process understandable at the social level. The data suggest that when the criticism is large enough, the public meaning of luxury brands can shift from a symbol of aesthetic taste to a marker of negative evaluation, although the brand is still popular and aesthetically attractive at the individual level. This separation causes fragmentation of the brand meaning, intact in the personal consumption but gradually weakened when presented externally. This process of erosion persists and is partly not dependent on individual aesthetic preferences, so the co-creation of digital meanings, even if the private appeal and commercial status of the brand are kept, still has the capacity to change the public meaning of luxury brands.

In summary, this study redefines the digital platforms in the context of luxury goods as a more positive space for collaborative creation rather than an emotional dissemination channel. It not only reveals the dual characteristics of constructive and defensive in the way consumers create meaning, but also adds the third outcome of “willingness to display”. Besides cultural acceptance and commercial benefits, it further explains how Chinese Gen Z consumers participate in shaping the brand meaning construction of Western luxury brands.

5.3. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature on luxury glocalization, authenticity, and brand meaning co-creation across four interrelated layers: theoretical, methodological, empirical, and contextual.

At the theoretical level, this study offers three conceptual refinements. Firstly, it specifies how authenticity in cross-cultural luxury storytelling is constructed by consumers as a sequential evaluative process rather than as an arbitrary evaluation. Previous research has considered authenticity as a brand property, which can be managed through heritage, craftsmanship and selected stories (Beverland, 2005; Urde et al., 2007). Traditional CCT has provided an alternative view, where authenticity is negotiated through consumer engagement with brands as cultural resources (Holt, 2004; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This study extends the CCT position by detailing how this negotiation actually unfolds in the cross-cultural luxury context. The findings indicate how authenticity is constructed by consumers through a number of orderly filtering mechanisms, including legibility and sincerity, which result from visible efforts and protection of brand heritage anchors. Each filtering stage may fail independently. Secondly, this study

develops glocalization theory by showing that localization in luxury does not operate as a uniform spectrum across the brand system. Although Yu & He (2025) and previous global scholars consider localization a common management approach, data shows that Chinese Gen Z consumers welcome cultural adaptation at the narrative level but are opposed at the image encoding and product design levels. Thirdly, the study contributes the concept of defensive meaning co-creation and bifurcated brand meaning. Defensive meaning co-creation refers to the interpretive work consumers perform to protect their own brand meanings from being affected by viral discourse, through cross-platform verification and scepticism toward criticism. Bifurcated brand meaning refers to the separation of brand meaning between the private and public domains, in which luxury brands can maintain their private appeal and commercial benefits while losing their public symbolic function as a marker of taste. Existing research on meaning co-creation (Allen et al., 2008; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013) emphasizes that consumers are contributors to constructive meaning, while this study finds that they also strive to protect their own autonomy in understanding, and digital meaning co-creation may separate brand meaning between the private and public domains. This motivation has a special impact on the luxury industry, as identity expression is an important factor in value composition.

From a methodological perspective, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of combining the Gioia method with stimulus-based interpretive interviews in analyzing the value of cross-cultural luxury goods. Currently, most studies on Chinese consumer behavior rely on the analysis of social media content as indirect indicators for assessing the degree of authenticity (Carlotto, 2024; Zhang, 2025; Yu & He, 2025). These methods can capture consumer behavior, but they have limitations in understanding how they interpret cultural meanings. Based on LV's Year of Snake collection as real stimulus materials and systematic coding at the first, second and comprehensive levels, this study could observe the consumer interpretation process itself. This methodological combination can be used for other studies on cross-cultural brand collaboration especially when the research aim is to highlight the evaluation criteria that consumers adopt in real usage rather than the outcomes they generate.

From an empirical perspective, this study provides a record through eleven interviews on how Chinese Gen Z interpret the cultural themes of Western luxury brands in real time. The data revealed some unexpected findings, among which the most notable one was that the respondents

stated that they did not want Western brands to adopt Chinese cultural features while ignoring their own global cultural heritage. This finding contradicts the implicit assumption in much of the literature on glocalization that consumers in emerging markets place more importance on localization. Such empirical results can be the basis for future quantitative or comparative studies.

Finally, this study also contributes to the understanding of the current luxury consumption context in China. The literature on Guochao is almost solely about domestic brands (Hu, 2022; Wang, 2023; Liu, 2025) and neglects the relationship between Western luxury brands and this national trend. This study finds that the Guochao label cannot be transferred from domestic brands to Western luxury. When LV adopts the visual logic of Guochao, it loses its luxury attributes and fails to gain cultural trust. This study also explored the significance of digital co-creation within the unique political and cultural context of Chinese social media. The suspicion towards those who deliberately create chaos, as well as the concerns about political events related to brands, influence the formation, verification, and public disclosure of people's judgements of authenticity.

Overall, these contributions have enriched the existing literature by integrating explanatory theoretical perspectives, structured qualitative methods, interview-based empirical evidence, and contextual analysis of the contemporary luxury consumption situation in China.

5.4. Managerial Implications

This study has found that it can provide management suggestions for the cultural collaboration of storytelling of Western luxury goods in the Chinese market. Overall, local culture cannot simply be regarded as a visual decorative element. For Chinese Gen Z consumers, authenticity does not automatically arise simply because a brand uses elements such as zodiac signs, festivals, or Guochao labels. Business managers require a full method of conveying meaning. Cultural symbols must be visible in their application to the consumers. We also need to acknowledge the cultural efforts of the brand. At the same time, it is required that the localized cultural expressions do not jeopardize the brand's luxury status and its global heritage attributes.

First of all, although the Chinese market is currently experiencing a trend of Guochao. But blindly applying the “Guochao” label is not the way to achieve authenticity. Because this study

shows that Guochao is not a completely positive label in the eyes of consumers. Because Guochao might also lead consumers to associate it with excessive commercialization, low-end aesthetics, or excessive symbol usage. Therefore, simply branding Western luxury brands as Guochao and hoping that consumers will automatically identify them is not a feasible approach. The brand should clearly articulate what cultural significance it has adopted, why it has adopted it, and why this cultural application can be incorporated into a luxury brand.

Secondly, before a brand aims to achieve a visually sophisticated look, it must ensure the legibility of its culture symbols. According to the feedback from the Snake year limited series products, if the cultural elements are too abstract or fail to accurately represent a certain target market, consumers may not be able to recognize their cultural orientation. If the expression is too straightforward, it might undermine the expected high-end quality of luxury goods. Therefore, managers need to strike a balance between implicit expression and clear identification. Let the design not only possess the high-end feel of luxury goods but also enable consumers to understand its cultural connection.

Thirdly, the brand needs to make consumers aware of it through a series of visible promotional actions. The respondents' judgment of authenticity does not come from the brand's self-proclamation. Instead, their judgment comes from whether they can perceive the efforts made by the brand in culture, as well as the meaningful storytelling designed around cultural significance. Storytelling is not only about promotional content. It should also become an integral part of creating authenticity. The brand needs to convey this information to consumers through storytelling in various aspects such as campaign storytelling, design explanation, creative background, or the process of collaboration. It should help them understand why cultural elements are present here, how they are handled, and what their relationship is with the brand itself. In this way, consumers can clearly perceive the efforts made by the brand to create this collaborative storytelling.

Fourthly, when conducting this cultural collective storytelling, the brand also needs to protect its own heritage anchors. According to the research findings, Chinese Gen Z consumers' attitude towards the use of Chinese culture is acceptable, but only under the condition that it does not undermine the identity of LV as a luxury brand. Monogram, material quality, color, and the sense

of luxury are all important factors for consumers to recognize this is LV. Localization attempts are more suitable for use in campaign storytelling, limited series, and other cultural collaborations. If the localization efforts interfere with the core visual elements and quality anchors of LV products, it could turn the cultural collaboration into a dilution of the brand.

Finally, brands need to view social media as a place for making authenticity judgments. It is not merely a communication channel. Consumers will come into contact with others' explanations of brand storytelling through online social platforms such as Xiaohongshu or Weibo. And in these online discussions they will verify, question, or revise their own understanding of cultural symbols and the authenticity of the brand. Therefore, the discussion of consumers on social media should not be simply regarded as a response to storytelling. Instead, they should be considered a process of co-creation and public examination of the brand's authenticity. As a manager, when conducting network reviews, the key point should be to observe how consumers interpret this storytelling, whether they consider it to have cultural depth, and whether they can believe the cultural efforts made by the brand. At the same time, consumers will be alert to the possibility of algorithmic push notifications and public opinion manipulation. Brands need to maintain a clear and trustworthy cultural communication approach on social media. Once negative discussions are widely spread, their impact goes beyond just the realm of online reputation. It will also affect whether consumers are willing to display the product in public. This is important for luxury brands. Because luxury consumption is related to status display, social exclusivity, and social differentiation (Ruiz & Cruz, 2023). Therefore, for managers, it is important to promptly control negative impacts and actively collect consumers' opinions about the brand.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations that also point toward directions for future research. Firstly, due to its focus on a specific consumer group that is Chinese Generation Z consumers, the findings cannot be generalized to all luxury consumers or all young people in China. The sample size of eleven participants is small and purposefully selected, which is suitable for qualitative research, but reduces statistical representativeness. Therefore, the aim of this study is to provide deeper insights rather than broad generalizations. Besides, in reality, purposive sampling is likely to be

concentrated in specific social networks, which results in respondents being mostly highly educated Gen Z individuals from urban areas with some knowledge of luxury goods. This study does not systematically take into account the differences between the tiers of urban. China is not a single market, and understanding differences in shopping behaviors across city levels, product categories, development stages, and consumer life stages is important (Bain & Company, 2012). Similarly, income gaps and luxury consumption experiences among participants may not fully represent different consumer segments of Chinese Generation Z. Future studies could use more structured sampling criteria that take into explicit account geographic diversity and socioeconomic fluctuations, thus allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how varying judgments of authenticity shape the diverse landscape of Chinese Generation Z consumers.

Second, the research is based on self-reflections of LV's collaborative storytelling participants. These stories may be shaped by memory, personal taste or social wants. Additionally, participants' responses may depend on their current emotional or social contexts, which may affect data consistency. As we are concerned with building subjective meaning, the results are to be taken in a contextual and interpretive way, not as absolute statements.

Third, interviews are conducted in Mandarin to allow participants to express emotions in a natural manner, and the recordings are translated and interpreted into English for analysis, which can risk losing local cultural semantic nuances. Cross-checking has been used to minimize the hazards, but still, some cultural structures or slang words of Generation Z are still difficult to totally express their intended meaning when translated into another language.

Fourth, the study considers only one luxury brand (LV) and one marketing practice (the Year of Snake collaborative storytelling campaign). This allows for a deep analysis, but it can also lead to findings that are less representative of the characteristics of Chinese Generation Z consumers' interactions with other brands, different communication strategies, and different types of luxury collaboration. Future research could build on this work by comparing multiple luxury brands or across generations, or by using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to offer deeper insight into how consumers make sense of products. Furthermore, LV is a globally well-known brand with a long history in China, and participants' reactions to specific

collaborative campaigns may be influenced by existing brand impressions instead of purely grounded in campaign-level interpretation. It is difficult to clearly distinguish between single-campaign judgment and accumulated brand perception. Future research might compare several luxury brands, including those with weaker visual codes or shorter histories in China, study collaboration formats beyond zodiac-themed limited editions and combine qualitative work with quantitative methods to test whether the sequential authenticity model and the bifurcated meaning dynamic uncovered here hold at scale.

Finally, the Guochao trend, the dynamics of Chinese social media and the luxury market conditions are all rapidly changing and the findings represent a specific moment in this evolution. Future research could explore how authenticity judgments, willingness to show, and the trade-off of heritage and adaptation evolve as consumers and brands continue to adapt to one another.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: USE OF AI

We used Perplexity AI as an advanced search tool to identify reputable academic journals, industry reports, and academic theoretical frameworks relevant to the research topic. However, all selected sources were then manually reviewed by us to verify the validity, relevance, and credibility of the research for citation purposes. During the process of designing the interview questions, we also generated some feasible questions through ChatGTP. We drew on and improved upon the question design to create a logically structured interview list that is more relevant to the topic. Our interviews were automatically transcribed and translated by the video call platform called Tencent Meeting, and then we double-checked the entire transcribed and translated material to ensure accuracy. Additionally, we used ChatGPT to improve the clarity, coherence, and academic tone of the paper. This included refining sentence structure, improving readability, and ensuring consistency in terminology. We also used ChatGPT to refine the academic writing style, improve the logical flow of arguments, and check for grammatical errors. Figure and using ChatGPT to evaluate the thesis has helped researchers address the unexplored weak points. Overall, AI was only a supporting tool; we maintained full control over the research design, data analysis, and interpretation, ensuring the integrity and academic rigor of the research.

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDELINE

Note: There are no right or wrong answers; the focus is on “how you understand/judge”; you can skip any questions; consent to the recording is required.

Light background check: Age group (Gen Z), whether you grew up and lived in mainland China, whether you have seen/discussed LV's collaborative projects in China in the past year.

**During the interview, participants will be shown selected visual materials from LV collaborations (Figure 1) to facilitate recall and discussion.*

PART 1: PERSONAL CONTEXT AND RELATIONSHIP WITH LUXURY

- 1. Are you interested in luxury brands? Do you buy them, follow them online, or just observe them?**

(I buy from them/I pay attention but don't buy/I rarely pay attention/I'm rather averse to them.)

- 2. When was the last time you actively paid attention to or discussed a luxury brand? What brand or event specifically? Why?**

- 3. When you think of Louis Vuitton, what are the three keywords that first come to mind?**

- Where do these impressions mainly come from? (Personal experience / Social media / Friends / News / Movies, etc.)
- Have you personally purchased from or visited a store to experience it? If not, do you think your impressions are mainly “indirectly formed”?

- 4. Have you seen any collaborations or campaigns by Louis Vuitton that involve Chinese culture?**

- Where did you see them? (social media, store, friends, etc.)
- What do you remember most clearly?

PART 2: IDENTITY AND CULTURAL SELF-POSITIONING

- 5. When you think about Chinese culture, what aspects feel most personally meaningful to you? Why those specifically?**
- 6. Do you feel that your generation thinks about Chinese culture differently from your parents' generation? In what ways?**

7. Has the Guochao trend affected how you personally feel about Chinese cultural elements in everyday life and consumption? How?

PART 3: FIRST ENCOUNTER AND SPONTANEOUS INTERPRETATION

(Show selected visual materials from LV collaborations)

8. **What was your first reaction when you saw this collaboration?**
- What specific element drew your attention first? What do you actually feel about it?
 - Would your feelings change if you removed this element?
9. **If you think this collaboration does a good job of cultural expression, would that make you more inclined to buy it? Or are cultural identity and purchasing decisions two different things for you?**
10. **What do you think Louis Vuitton was trying to communicate through these collaborations?**
- What message did you receive?
 - Do you think this is a cultural expression or a marketing strategy? Why?

PART 4: AUTHENTICITY INTERPRETATION PROCESS

11. How would you describe the role of Chinese cultural elements in this collaboration?
- What do they seem to be doing or representing?
12. Can you recall a specific moment that made you feel the collaboration was genuine (or insincere)? What made you feel that way at that time?
13. Have you ever changed your initial judgment about a collaboration after thinking more about it, or after discussing it with others? What caused that change?

PART 5: TENSION AND CONTRADICTION

14. Is there anything about this collaboration that feels unclear, confusing, or ambiguous to you?
15. Is there anything you both like and dislike at the same time? Can you describe that tension?

16. Have you noticed that some collaborations are heavily criticized on Xiaohongshu, but the products actually sell very well? How do you interpret this phenomenon?
17. If a collaboration uses Chinese cultural elements in a way that feels slightly off, but the overall product is beautiful and meaningful to you personally, how do you reconcile that?
18. Has your own view about this kind of collaboration been influenced by what others say on Xiaohongshu or Weibo? Did your interpretation change afterward? Can you recall a specific situation?

PART 6: CULTURAL MEANING AND FIT

19. **In your opinion, what is the most important thing for a Western luxury brand to do cultural cooperation in China?** Under what circumstances would you feel that a brand has achieved this? Under what circumstances has it not?
20. **What makes a luxury brand feel genuine or real to you?**
 - Have you ever felt that a certain luxury brand was “not authentic” anymore? Why?
21. **Is this collaboration more like an extension of LV's original style, or a temporary borrowing of cultural elements? Why?**
 - Did they fit naturally with the brand?
 - Did they feel temporary or strategic?
22. **How do you see the relationship between Louis Vuitton's Western background and its use of Chinese cultural elements?**
 - Do they fit well together?
 - Is there any tension between the two?
23. **In your experience, when brands adapt strongly to local culture, does it make them feel closer to you or less special? Why?**
 - Which loss is more serious? A lack of respect? Or a lack of sophistication?
 - Is there a “boundary”?

24. Do you think people in China today are more sensitive about cultural representation than before?

- Has your own view changed in recent years?
- What role does social media play?

25. Have you ever changed your opinion about a brand collaboration because of discussions on social media? What happened at that time?

- Whom did you trust more?
- What evidence changed your original judgment?

PART 7: OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

26. If Louis Vuitton came to you for advice on how to collaborate with Chinese culture more meaningfully, what would you tell them, and what would you warn them against?

27. Is there a collaboration by any brand, not just LV, that you like and think it conveys Chinese culture well? What made it work?

28. After today's conversation, if you were to describe LV's cultural collaborations in China in three words, what would you choose? Has it changed from what you initially thought?

APPENDIX 3: MATERIALS USED IN THE INTERVIEWS





Figure 6: The Snake-Year limited edition as a product for the Lunar New Year