Beyond Awareness: Transforming University Cultural Brands into Meaningful Consumer Experiences Using SYSU as a Case

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Abstract

This research aimed to study 1) the current status and challenges in brand building for university cultural and creative products, using Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU) as a case study; 2) the key factors influencing brand awareness and user identification; and 3) to propose multidimensional optimization strategy. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, incorporating in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys. The sample comprised students, staff, alumni, and external consumers. Data collection utilized a semi-structured interview guide and a brand equity questionnaire, with analysis conducted through descriptive statistics and content analysis.

The research results were found as follows: 1) The SYSU brand suffers from ambiguous recognition, weak narrative integration, and a fragmented product line, resulting in low brand equity. 2) Key influencing factors identified include cultural narrative consistency, visual coherence, product quality, and community engagement. Survey data indicated moderate brand awareness but notably low emotional attachment among consumers. 3) In response, the study proposes an integrated strategic framework encompassing narrative-driven positioning, design innovation, multi-channel communication, and participatory community co-creation.

The study concludes that moving beyond mere brand awareness to foster meaningful consumer experiences requires a systematic and emotionally resonant brand strategy, with an emphasis on narrative continuity and participatory engagement. This research contributes theoretical insights by bridging classical brand management theories with the niche context of university cultural products, highlighting the interplay between cultural authenticity and modern consumption trends. Moreover, it offers practical, actionable recommendations such as tiered pricing, digital integration, and community-driven design for enhancing brand competitiveness and fostering emotional loyalty. The proposed integrated framework provides a replicable reference for both Chinese and international higher education institutions seeking to transform cultural heritage into sustainable brand assets, ultimately supporting cultural continuity and institutional identity in a globalized educational landscape.

Keywords: Brand Building; Brand Management; Cultural Economy; Consumer Behavior; Consumer Experience

Introduction

Against the backdrop of the flourishing development of China's cultural industry, university cultural and creative products have increasingly demonstrated their value as important carriers for inheriting the university spirit, showcasing campus culture, and connecting the

emotions of faculty, students, and alumni (Du, 2024; Li, 2025; Weng et al., 2022). However, compared to top-tier cultural IPs such as the Forbidden City, most Chinese university cultural and creative brands are still in the exploratory stage, commonly facing development bottlenecks such as low brand awareness, severe product homogenization, and weak emotional connections with the younger generation (Han et al., 2025). How to systematically conduct brand building and transform profound campus cultural heritage into sustainable brand assets has become a significant issue in both the practice and theoretical research of Chinese university cultural and creative products (Hong, 2025; Ge et al., 2022). With the large number of universities in China, the exploration of their cultural and creative pathways is being considered by lots of researchers (Wang et al., 2025; Xu & Zhou, 2025; Yu, 2025) and is poised to provide valuable experience for the development of the cultural and creative industries in universities internationally.

Sun Yat-sen University in China boasts a history of over a century. Building on the university's historical and cultural heritage, SYSU cultural and creative products have actively explored product development, channel construction, and brand communication. However, practice indicates that its brand development still faces significant challenges as other university cultural creative products do (Xu & Li, 2025). Preliminary research reveals a coexistence of "high awareness" and "low conversion rates," manifested specifically as: insufficiently focused brand positioning leading to vague user perception; lagging innovation in communication channels hindering reach to the core Gen Z demographic; fragmented product narratives weakening the overall brand image; and a disconnect between pricing strategies and user psychological expectations (Liu, 2024). These issues not only constrain the sustainable development of SYSU cultural and creative products themselves but also introduce uncertainty into the long-term accumulation of its brand equity (Xie & Shi, 2024).

Based on the context and background information presented above, this study aims to address the following research question in the current environment, how should university cultural and creative brands construct effective brand-building strategies to enhance brand awareness and user identification? To this end, this paper will first establish a theoretical analytical framework through a review of the literature. Subsequently, it will employ in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys to systematically diagnose the current status and shortcomings of SYSU cultural and creative products in terms of brand positioning, communication, product development, and emotional connection. Finally, integrating brand management theory, the study proposes a comprehensive set of brand-building strategies encompassing positioning optimization, pricing adjustment, design innovation, emotional reinforcement, and communication breakthrough. The aim is to provide direct guidance for the brand upgrade of SYSU cultural and creative products and to offer referenceable pathways and insights for the brand building of other university cultural and creative products.

Research Objectives

1. To diagnose the current status and key challenges in the brand building of Sun Yat-sen University's cultural and creative products.

2. To identify the core factors influencing brand awareness and user identification for such products.

3. To propose a multidimensional optimization strategy to enhance brand competitiveness and provide practical references for university cultural and creative brands

Literature Review

Basis of Brand Awareness

Brand Awareness refers to customers' recognition of a brand's distinctiveness（Keller, 1993）. It reflects the strength of brand nodes or memory traces, manifesting as the consumer's ability to identify the brand under different conditions, i.e., the extent to which the brand identity fulfills its intended function. Specifically, brand awareness concerns whether the brand name can be actively recalled by consumers and the ease with which it is evoked. Brand awareness consists of two components: brand recognition and brand recall. Brand recognition refers to the consumer's ability to confirm prior exposure to the brand when the brand is presented as a cue. In other words, brand recognition requires consumers to accurately determine whether they have previously seen or heard of the brand. Brand recall, on the other hand, refers to the consumer's ability to retrieve the brand from memory when given the product category, usage scenarios of the category, or other cueing prompts. In other words, brand recall requires consumers to actively and correctly generate the brand name from memory.

Aaker（1996）defines brand awareness as the ability of potential consumers to recognize or recall a specific brand within a product category, which facilitates the brand's entry into the consumer's consideration set and increases the likelihood of being chosen. Aaker（1996）categorizes brand awareness into three ascending levels, proposing a pyramid model of awareness. The first level is brand recognition. At this stage, users can identify the brand when provided with cues, meaning they are aware of the product associated with a particular brand. This represents the most fundamental level of connection between the brand and the product. The second level is brand recall, where consumers can recollect a brand without any prompts, referred to as "unaided recall." Under unaided recall conditions, when consumers think of a certain product, the first brand that comes to mind holds a higher position in their consideration sequence compared to other brands. The third level is "top-of-mind" awareness, a distinct form of recall where only one brand emerges in the consumer's mind when a product category is mentioned.

Brand awareness is a crucial metric for measuring the extent to which consumers remember a brand. Building on prior foundational work, it can be categorized into four progressive stages: The first stage is no awareness, which occurs when a new product enters the market and consumers have no knowledge of the brand. The second stage is aided awareness, where, after sustained marketing efforts, some consumers can recall the brand when provided with prompts. The third stage evolves into unaided awareness, where consumers spontaneously associate with the brand without any cues. The final stage is top-of-mind awareness, where the brand becomes synonymous with the product category. At this point, consumers actively recall and prioritize the brand as their first choice when relevant needs arise, indicating that brand awareness has reached its most ideal and mature state.

Value of Brand Awareness

Brand awareness, as a core element of brand equity, fundamentally reflects the strength of the association between the brand and the product in the consumer's memory（Keller, 1993）, demonstrating the salience and retrievability of a specific brand in the

consumer's mind（Laurent, 1995）. Its market value is primarily manifested in two key dimensions：First, brand awareness directly determines the brand's position in the consumer's purchase decision sequence, with highly recognized brands often gaining priority in selection. As emphasized by Aaker（1996）, building brand awareness is the primary task for new products to gain market acceptance, essentially involving the establishment of a cognitive link from the brand name to the product category. Second, high brand awareness can significantly reduce consumers' perceived risk. Research by Samiee（1994）confirmed that even when faced with unfamiliar products, high brand awareness can evoke more positive product expectations. It is important to emphasize that while brand awareness is crucial, it must function synergistically with other brand elements to genuinely enhance a brand's market competitiveness. Research by Yang（2013）indicates that brand cognition is the deeper factor influencing consumer choice.

On one hand, brand awareness significantly influences consumers' brand cognition through the Mere Exposure Effect. This psychological phenomenon indicates that repeated exposure to a brand leads to familiarity, which in turn fosters a positive attitude toward an initially neutral brand. This shift in attitude may stem from two mechanisms：first, consumers naturally translate familiarity into preference; second, consumers use brand awareness as a cue to infer quality. Particularly when faced with unfamiliar products, consumers often rely on brand awareness to reduce cognitive risk. Highly recognized brands, due to the trust they have established, are more likely to gain consumer favor. Compared to low-awareness brands that need to provide additional product information, high-awareness brands can directly stimulate consumers' purchase intention. International cultural and creative product studies also give theoretical and practical analysis of brand awareness, for example in order to improve the attractiveness and awareness of ASEAN international tourism cultural and creative products, by comparing the current tourism cultural and creative design, analyzing the essential characteristics of its design, combining with the theory of "meta-design", scholars explore the practicality, uniqueness, convenience, collectability, quality and value of cultural and creative products to enhance the brand influence of tourism products（Yang et al., 2024）.

On the other hand, brand awareness plays a critical role in the consumer decision-making process. Strong brand awareness not only simplifies consumers' information processing but also enhances purchase intention by reinforcing brand associations. When consumers are presented with multiple choices, high-awareness brands are more likely to enter the initial consideration set, especially when consumers lack purchase motivation or product knowledge. Research shows that brands in the initial consideration set are three times more likely to be ultimately purchased than those not included. Thus, by influencing consumers' cognitive evaluation and decision preferences, brand awareness effectively facilitates the realization of purchase behavior.

Discussion

Currently, academic research on brand management theory has reached a considerable level of maturity, providing a solid theoretical foundation for this study. However, the application of classical brand theories to the specific context of Chinese university cultural and creative products remains insufficient, particularly lacking in-depth

case analyses supported by detailed primary research data. In practice for instance, while brand equity theory emphasizes the importance of differentiated and consistent brand narratives, many university cultural products in China including those from leading institutions such as Peking University and Tsinghua University still rely on fragmented and stereotyped visual symbols, resulting in a market phenomenon where "campus landmarks become logo slaps," lacking deeper narrative cohesion or emotional resonance. Therefore, this study, which takes Sun Yat-sen University's cultural and creative products as a typical case, holds significant theoretical and practical importance.

Research Design and Methodology

To comprehensively and deeply investigate the current status, challenges, and optimization pathways of the Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU) cultural and creative products, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach integrating qualitative and quantitative research. By cross-validating multiple data collection methods, it aims to systematically diagnose the brand-building situation of SYSU cultural and creative products across both breadth and depth dimensions. The specific research design and implementation process are as follows:

Qualitative Research: In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted to capture respondents' deep-seated perceptions, subjective attitudes, and behavioral motivations regarding the SYSU cultural and creative brand, thereby compensating for the limitations of purely quantitative data.

- Interviewees and Sampling

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to recruit participants who are closely associated with SYSU and represent its core stakeholder groups. The final sample consisted of 10 individuals: 6 current undergraduate and postgraduate students and 4 alumni who graduated within the past five years. Participants were recruited through university-affiliated online channels, including the official alumni association platform and student union social media groups. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least one prior awareness of SYSU cultural and creative products, ensuring that responses were based on relevant experience.

- Interview Implementation

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, guided by a pre-designed In-Depth Interview Outline for SYSU Cultural and Creative Brand Awareness (see Appendix). The interview content primarily covered four dimensions: brand awareness and perception, purchasing behavior and intentions, purchasing channel preferences, and the effectiveness of communication channels. Prior to formal data collection, the interview guide was piloted with interviewees to assess question clarity, flow, and relevance. Minor adjustments were made to the wording based on pilot feedback. Each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes, was audio recorded with consent, and was later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Interviews were conducted online via Tencent Meeting to accommodate geographical dispersion, and a standardized protocol was followed to ensure consistency.

Quantitative Research: Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire survey aims to quantify the user profile, market acceptance, and the distribution of various brand metrics for the SYSU cultural and creative brand, thereby statistically validating the findings from the qualitative research.

- Questionnaire Design and Validation

The questionnaire was developed based on insights gained from the interview study and adapted from established brand equity scales (e.g., Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). It includes sections on user demographics (e.g., identity, age), channels of brand awareness, preferences for product types and purchasing motivations, acceptable price ranges, and expectations for future products and promotional efforts. To ensure content validity and reliability, the draft questionnaire underwent review by postgraduates and scholars in brand management. Final adjustments were made to improve item clarity and scale reliability.

- Data Collection and Sampling

The survey was distributed through online channels, primarily via SYSU-related WeChat groups, university forums, and email lists targeting students and alumni. Data collection took place over a three-week period, resulting in the collection of 102 valid responses. The sample structure shows that 73.53% of respondents were SYSU students, and 67.65% belonged to the 18-22 age group, accurately reflecting the highly youthful and predominantly current-student composition of the SYSU cultural and creative products' current user base.

- Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis methods and Stata were applied to compute frequencies, percentages, and other metrics for the questionnaire data. This approach visually presents the distribution of variables, such as users' preferred communication channels, favored cultural and creative elements, and acceptable price ranges, thereby providing robust data support for strategic recommendations.

Case Analysis and Research Framework Integration

This study conducts an in-depth analysis by treating the Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU) cultural and creative brand as a typical case. By integrating publicly available brand materials, product matrices, and marketing activities, it aligns empirical research data with classical theoretical frameworks such as brand awareness theory and brand equity theory. This approach enables a contextualized diagnosis of existing challenges and the proposal of brand-building strategies that are both theoretically grounded and practically actionable.

The study follows a logical progression of "theoretical guidance → empirical diagnosis → strategy formulation." First, brand management theories serve as analytical tools. Second, primary empirical data are collected through in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys to systematically diagnose specific issues in various aspects of brand awareness building. Finally, integrating theoretical and empirical findings, a comprehensive set of brand optimization strategies is proposed.

Research Finding

Case Analysis of Current Brand Strategies

Actions on Promotion

In the context of brand building for university cultural and creative products, Sun Yat-sen University has initially established a foundation for brand differentiation by developing a visual identity system with distinctive university characteristics. Specific initiatives include: designing brand logos incorporating tile-end elements, embedding "SYSU" symbols and campus architectural motifs, launching exclusive IP images such as the "Kang Le Yuan Owl," and establishing a unified visual system based on green-white and red-white color schemes to strengthen brand recall points and anti-counterfeiting mechanisms.

In terms of audience strategy, the brand targets on-campus students, alumni, and external groups, offering a product matrix of over 190 items that includes functional products, artistic trendy collectibles, and collaborative commemorative items to meet diverse needs. At the communication level, an online-offline integrated approach is adopted. Offline scenarios such as physical stores, vending machines, and alumni events enhance experiential engagement, while platforms like WeChat Official Accounts and Rednote are leveraged for visual content dissemination. These efforts are complemented by nodal events such as university anniversaries and cultural expos, aimed at increasing brand exposure and intellectual property awareness.

- Actions on Connotation

SYSU Cultural and Creative products anchor brand symbols to campus sentiment, drawing from the rich century-old history and future development vision of Sun Yat-sen University to endow the products with unique connotations. The brand has established seven major series, including "SYSU Elegance," "SYSU Ecology," "SYSU Creation," and "Yat-sen IP," among others. The spiritual core conveyed, the cultural resources embedded, and the campus life scenes documented all carry distinct SYSU DNA. Examples include the release of commemorative stamps for the centennial history and the "Centennial Footprint" memorial collection. The designers aim to use cultural and creative products to enrich the brand's cultural depth, enhance memorability, and transform the university's century-old history into collectible tangible items.

Qualitative Analysis of In-depth Interview Results

Brand Awareness

Brand Recall

While current students and alumni possess basic awareness of the brand, the strength and salience of its brand nodes within their memory structures show a significant gap compared to leading universities. Some interviewees were able to activate memory cues related to typical cultural and creative products from other universities (such as Wuhan University's cherry blossom-themed items) but struggled to effectively retrieve specific product information about SYSU cultural and creative products. Some even exhibited a cognitive disconnect characterized by "knowing the store but not recognizing the brand," indicating weak brand associations and insufficient depth of memory.

Product Perception

Consumers show relatively high recognition of flagship IPs like the "Owl" and "Study Buddy Bear," but their overall awareness of the brand's extensive range of over a hundred products remains severely limited, failing to form concrete and systematic product impressions. This suggests that the star products have not effectively exerted a radiating or synergistic effect, resulting in a fragmented rather than cohesive cognitive network of the brand's product architecture in consumers' minds.

Uniqueness Perception

The brand's differentiated image remains vague. Although some consumers acknowledge its emotional connection value to their alma mater, more interviewees perceive a lack of distinctiveness in its design language and brand style. This has led to weak brand distinctiveness and competitive differentiation, making it difficult to establish a unique identity recognition among the multitude of university cultural and creative products.

Purchase Related

Purchase Motivation

Purchasing behavior for SYSU cultural and creative products is largely emotionally driven. Most interviewees reported making purchases during graduation as a commemorative act, while others bought them as gifts for friends and family. Herd mentality also plays a role in purchasing decisions. For example, the owl plush toy became a popular item during the university anniversary, spurring trend-following purchases.

Purchase Barriers

SYSU cultural and creative products face multiple obstacles in the sales process. High pricing is the primary barrier, with many interviewees considering the current product prices excessive and offering poor value for money. There are also significant shortcomings in product appeal, as some interviewees expressed complete disinterest in the existing product lineup. In terms of purchasing methods, the limited variety available in offline vending machines and the additional shipping costs for online purchases further deter consumers. Some interviewees suggested introducing exclusive discounts or limited-time promotional activities for current students and alumni.

- Repurchase Intention

Existing consumers show low willingness to repurchase, unless new designs or promotional activities are introduced. While purchase intention may increase after graduation, current students tend to make one-time purchases primarily during their graduation period.

- Recommendation Intention

Some interviewees expressed willingness to recommend purchases to fellow university peers, but were less inclined to recommend the products to friends from other universities or family members. The likelihood of recommendation would increase if product value-for-money improved, designs became more distinctive, or products gained broader recognition beyond the university context.

Channels

Channel Structure Imbalance and User Preference Misalignment

Interviewees indicated that current sales heavily rely on offline physical channels. While these channels receive positive feedback for their experiential value in specific

scenarios (such as university anniversaries), they commonly suffer from issues like obscure locations and slow product category updates, making it difficult to sustain long-term appeal. In contrast, online channels exhibit significant shortcomings: the official mini-program lacks visibility, with low rates of awareness and usage. Meanwhile, the core consumer demographic (Gen Z) generally prefers to initiate purchases through online content platforms and complete transactions via e-commerce channels. This over-reliance on a single, non-mainstream online channel creates a severe misalignment with user habits, forming a critical barrier in the sales funnel.

- Mismatched Promotion and Insufficient Communication Effectiveness

In terms of promotion, the brand faces a dual challenge of "offline silence" and "online monotony." Offline promotional efforts remain subdued except during major events and are overly concentrated within the campus community, resulting in limited external brand awareness. Online promotion, meanwhile, lacks presence on platforms where young users are highly active, such as short-video and social media apps, leading to a "channel mismatch" between official content formats and audience preferences. This strategy hinders effective reach to the core audience and suppresses purchase conversion. Interviewees widely expressed a desire for more creative offline activities to enhance engagement and hoped to see richer, video-based, and interactive content on social platforms, pointing the way for optimizing communication strategies.

Quantitative Analysis of Questionnaire Survey
Younger Users

Survey data indicate that 73.53% of the respondents are Sun Yat-sen University students, with the 18-22 age group accounting for 67.65% of the total. This demonstrates that SYSU undergraduate students constitute the primary consumer base for SYSU cultural and creative products. In contrast, the proportions of university faculty and staff (6.86%), alumni (8.82%), and other groups are relatively low. This highly concentrated user structure highlights a critical issue: the promotion and outreach of cultural and creative products primarily target current students, resulting in insufficient coverage among alumni, faculty, staff, and the broader public.

Preference for Online Promotion

In terms of channels, preferences are heavily skewed toward online platforms. Data shows that social media for 73.53%, while the university's official WeChat Platform for 69.61%. This indicates that online channels are the primary means through which users learn about new cultural and creative products, and the target demographic exhibits high reliance on social platforms and digital channels. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen the emphasis on online promotional strategies in communication planning. The strategy should focus on enhancing the social media matrix to ensure the consistent rollout of high-quality promotional content for SYSU cultural and creative products across various online media platforms.

Table 1: Group and Age Distribution

Group	Num.	%
Students	75	73.53
Faculty	7	6.86
Alumni	9	8.82
Others	11	10.78
Total	102	
Age		
Below 18	1	0.98
18-22	69	67.65
22 -28	12	11.76
Above 28	20	19.61
Total	102	

Table 2: Preferred Channels

Choice (Multiple)	Num.	%
Official WeChat Platform	71	69.61
Mass Social Media	75	73.53
In Campus	52	50.98
Physical Advertisements	34	33.33
Leaflets	29	28.43
Others	11	10.78
Total	102	

Preferred Items and Purchase Motivation

In terms of product categories, stationery items account for 61.82%, cultural gifts for 58.18%, and gift items for 70.91%, ranking as the top three preferences. This indicates that consumers tend to purchase items with cultural attributes that are suitable for gifting. Stationery is favored for its practicality and role as a cultural carrier, while cultural gifts align with the need for commemorative significance. The high proportion of gift purchases reflects a strong demand for social gifting scenarios. Daily necessities, at 43.64%, also hold a certain market share.

The core consumption scenarios are "commemorating campus life" (58.18%) and "gift-giving" (70.91%), highlighting the importance consumers place on emotional connection and symbolic value. "Supporting SYSU" accounts for 34.55%, reflecting emotional ties to the university. "Practical functionality" (14.55%) indicates that products serve basic utilitarian needs to some extent. "Collection" is relatively low, at 29.09%. Overall, emotional and cultural factors dominate consumer decision-making.

Table 3: Preferred Items and Purchase Motivation

Items (Multiple)	Num.	%
Stationery	34	61.82
Clothes	19	34.55
Daily Items	24	43.64
Cultural Souvenirs	32	58.18
Others	2	3.64
Total	55	
Motivation (Multiple)		
Commemorating Campus Life	32	58.18
Supporting SYSU	19	34.55
Practical Functionality	8	14.55
Gift-giving	39	70.91
Collection	16	29.09
Others	3	5.45
Total	55	

Table 4: Desired Future Designs and Favorite Elements

Desired Future Designs (Multiple)	Num.	%
Digital Products	76	74.51
Co-branded Products	68	66.67
Regional Specific	51	50
Eco-friendly	28	27.45
Others	3	2.94
Total	102	
Favorite Elements (Multiple)		
University Emblem/Motto	82	80.39
Buildings	65	63.73
Scenery	54	52.94
Academic-related	34	33.33
Spirits	24	23.53
Total	102	

Potential Interests

The survey reveals a strong market interest in digital cultural and creative products (74.51%) and co-branded items (66.67%), which stands in sharp contrast to the current product lineup predominantly focused on physical stationery. In terms of design, users show high recognition of cultural symbols such as the university emblem/motto (80.39%) and iconic

architecture（63.73%）, providing clear direction for future development of products that integrate both practicality and cultural significance.

Case Analysis of Existing Shortcomings

Based on the in-depth analysis presented earlier, we have summarized six key shortcomings, which will be elaborated in detail in this study.

Table 5: Summary of Existing Shortcomings

	Shortcoming	Feature	Influence
1	Insufficient Focus in Brand Positioning and Core Audience	Wide range, diverse products, vague consumer image	Hinder brand association building from "recognition" to "recall"
2	Lag in Modern Emotional Connection and Innovative Communication Formats	Lack Gen Z design and interactions	Reduce the "familiarity" and dissemination of brand
3	Limitations in Scenario Boundaries and Cross-Context Reach of Communication Channels	Only concentrated in SYSU connections	Difficult to accumulate social focus
4	Insufficient Synergy Across Product Lines and Coherence in Brand Narrative	Lack unified brand value	Weaken brand overall impression
5	Lack of a Long-Term Management Mechanism	Single transaction without repurchase	Brand awareness is difficult to turn into brand loyalty
6	Pricing as a Barrier to Purchase	No international promotion	Brands lack cross-cultural touchpoints

Insufficient Focus on Brand Positioning and Core Audience

The "Target Differentiation Positioning" theory emphasizes that identifying the core consumer group is a prerequisite for establishing deep memory associations（Kotler & Keller, 2016）. While SYSU cultural and creative products target on-campus students, alumni, and external audiences, with over 190 product varieties, there is a lack of clear prioritization of the core target groups. Although a broad audience and diverse product lines (e.g., eye-care lamps, blind boxes, and co-branded souvenirs）may expand market touchpoints in the short term, they can also lead to fragmented brand messaging. This exacerbates the ambiguity of the brand's positioning in the minds of consumers, making it difficult to form a distinct and differentiated perception, and failing to highlight the unique value core of "SYSU culture." For instance, simultaneously catering to functional product users, trendy toy enthusiasts, and

cultural collectors may blur the brand's core image and weaken the strength of consumer memory and recognition.

Lag in Modern Emotional Connection and Innovative Communication

While the strategy relies on the century-old university history and campus scenes to build brand associations, it shows limitations in aligning with the trendy cultural demands of younger demographics. Although artistic trendy toys and blind boxes have been launched, they insufficiently incorporate contemporary popular elements or innovative communication formats, making it difficult to evoke emotional resonance and spontaneous dissemination willingness among Gen Z consumers. For instance, while the "anniversary blind boxes" are tied to occasions like graduation season, they lack immersive communication designs that drive active user participation through scenario-based or gamified approaches. This limits the depth of interaction among young users and hinders the formation of a deeper emotional loop of "participation → memory → preference."

Limitations in Scenario Boundaries and Cross-Context Reach of Communication Channels

From the perspective of communication channels, campus offline promotions (81.52%) and WeChat platform (78.26%) are the primary sources of information, highlighting the central role of on-campus official channels. Offline scenarios (e.g., posters in cultural and creative stores, promotional events) directly reach faculty and students, while online platforms achieve broader coverage. However, the promotional efforts on social media, word-of-mouth communication, and e-commerce channels remain insufficient.

In terms of promotional outcomes, the largest proportion of respondents (68.63%) rated the effectiveness of advertisements as "average," indicating that while most advertisements are seen, they fail to leave a deep impression. Only a minimal portion of promotional ads effectively attract audiences to make purchases or are almost entirely unnoticed. Overall, the current promotional advertisements urgently need improvement in both appeal and impact.

Table 6: Channels and Effects

Channels (Multiple)	%
Offline Promotion	81.52
WeChat Platform	78.26
Schoolmates	21.74
Mass Social Media	36.96
Evaluation of promotion effect	
Good	11.76
Average	68.63
Below Average	19.61

Insufficient Synergy Across Product Lines and Coherence in Brand Narrative

The product portfolio spans functional items, cultural souvenirs, and trendy collectibles across multiple categories. However, the lack of a unified value thread

connecting these categories easily leads to fragmented consumer perception. Furthermore, collaborations with alumni brands, while emphasizing emotional connections, have not been deeply integrated with the brand's core values, limiting potential for brand premiumization and scenario-based extensions.

In summary, theory emphasizes that building a brand IP requires narrative coherence and value consolidation across product categories（Balmer, 2018）. Although SYSU cultural and creative products are diverse in their classifications such as functional products, trendy items, and souvenirs but they are not organized around a consistent narrative core. The absence of narrative linkage between different categories results in fragmented consumer perception and dispersed brand equity.

Lack of a Long-Term Management Mechanism

The current brand strategy of SYSU Cultural and Creative Products primarily focuses on short-term event-driven exposure. While this approach can enhance brand visibility in the short run, it lacks mechanisms to incentivize repeat purchases or foster emotional loyalty, making it difficult to convert user interest into long-term relationships. Moreover, despite emphasizing the "uniqueness of SYSU culture," the brand fails to respond in real-time to evolving consumer demands or establish a product iteration mechanism, potentially undermining its sustained competitiveness.

From the perspective of brand equity building, sustainable market growth can only be achieved when consumers, after initial brand recognition, gradually develop preference and demonstrate loyalty through continued choices（Keller, 2013; Brakus et al., 2009）. Therefore, the absence of user lifecycle management not only weakens the emotional connection between SYSU Cultural and Creative Products and its consumers but also hinders the formation of a closed-loop process for brand equity accumulation.

Pricing as a Barrier to Purchase

Questionnaire results indicate that 65.96% of respondents consider the current pricing to exceed their psychological expectations. When asked about the "acceptable price range for SYSU cultural and creative products," 58.82% of respondents expressed willingness to accept unit prices below 50 yuan, while 35.29% found unit prices in the 50–150 yuan range appropriate. An additional 5.88% of respondents accepted unit prices in the 150–300 yuan range. To achieve economies of scale and reduce unit prices, it is essential to consider adjusting pricing strategies, as the current high price points may be causing the loss of a significant portion of price-sensitive consumer segments.

Table 7: Consumer Affordable Price

Affordable Price	%
Below 50 Yuan	58.82
50-150 Yuan	35.29
Above 150 Yuan	5.88

Optimization Strategy

Based on the aforementioned shortcomings of SYSU Cultural and Creative Products, this section proposes improvement methods focusing on five dimensions: brand positioning, pricing strategy, brand building, brand emotion, and brand communication.

Short-term strategies

- Improving Brand Positioning

In response to the core issue of fragmented brand messaging, SYSU Cultural and Creative Products can implement a precision positioning strategy based on the characteristics of consumer groups to strengthen overall brand cognition. First, market segmentation should be conducted according to users' relationship with the university: for current students, focus on functional products closely related to academic scenarios; for alumni, emphasize emotional products carrying campus memories and academic symbols; for external audiences, concentrate on culturally symbolic souvenirs to meet their interest in understanding Sun Yat-sen University.

Furthermore, user groups should be further subdivided based on consumption motivations and product function preferences: for functional product users who prioritize practical value, integrate university identifiers while ensuring core product functionality, and establish dedicated product sections for centralized display; for trendy toy enthusiasts, expand blind box product lines to align with their pursuit of fun; for cultural collectors, deeply explore the cultural connotations behind products by incorporating intangible cultural heritage techniques to enhance narrative value and collectible significance.

- Pricing Optimization

First, SYSU should refine the product display logic on the online store. Based on the anchoring effect theory, it is recommended to adjust the product presentation order to an ascending price sequence. By prioritizing lower-priced items, consumers' initial perception of the price threshold can be lowered, effectively guiding browsing behavior and stimulating purchase intention.

Second, establish a multi-tiered product pricing system. In response to the high price sensitivity reflected in the survey, emphasis should be placed on developing entry-level products priced below 50 yuan. Specifically, digital cultural and creative products can be leveraged to achieve low-cost, high-cultural-value business expansion, while personalized customization services can be offered to create a price range of 20–30 yuan.

Lastly, implement refined cost management. By combining pre-sales systems with demand research, production can be aligned with actual needs to avoid inventory overstock. Additionally, measures such as optimizing packaging solutions, advancing large-scale production processes, and adopting eco-friendly materials can effectively control production costs, creating room for price adjustments and ultimately achieving a dynamic balance between market demand and supply capacity.

- Brand Design Enhancement

SYSU Cultural and Creative Products should undertake systematic innovation at the brand design level, focusing on developing a design strategy that emphasizes personalization, emotional resonance, and experiential engagement. First, strengthen the uniqueness and differentiation of designs. Current collaborative efforts have not fully

reached younger demographics. It is recommended to engage in cross-sector partnerships with trending domestic cultural IPs, integrating popular cultural elements with SYSU's distinctive heritage to create cultural and creative products with stronger recognition.

Second, deepen the emotional resonance of products. Addressing the emotional needs of Generation Z in the social media era, emotional connections can be established by embedding campus memory symbols, such as incorporating preserved campus plant specimens into bookmark designs. Simultaneously, enhance academic storytelling by integrating real stories of research teams into products like research ship building blocks, allowing consumers to naturally experience the university's academic traditions and humanistic care during use.

Finally, build an integrated online-offline interactive experience system. Offline activities should break away from traditional exhibition and sales models by incorporating tactile marketing and interactive gaming mechanisms to enhance the fun of brand participation. Online channels should leverage digital technologies such as VR try-on features to create immersive shopping experiences, while strategies like curated product sets and limited-edition gifts can effectively stimulate consumer engagement and purchase motivation.

Long Term Strategies
- Enhancement of Brand Emotional Connection

At the level of brand narrative, a core narrative logic of "SYSU Innovation + Cultural Heritage" should be established, developing thematic product series around key milestones of campus life to cover the entire cycle from enrollment to graduation. Simultaneously, emotionally segmented products should be developed for gifting scenarios, strengthening the functional attribute of products as emotional carriers. For existing collaborative products, value should be deepened by annotating technological origins, integrating the university motto elements, and incorporating disciplinary symbols, thereby naturally embedding academic genes and cultural symbols into product design to enhance credibility and brand relevance.

In terms of user relationship maintenance, it is recommended to establish an alumni membership system, improving user stickiness through point accumulation and redemption mechanisms. This should be complemented by building an online brand community to provide users with an interactive platform for communication and sharing, fostering the organic formation of a brand community.

Meanwhile, research by Shi & Yu (2018) indicates that involving users in product design can more accurately meet consumer needs. Given that cultural products are complex due to their diverse cultural characteristics, designers can regularly collect and integrate customer feedback and suggestions. This approach enables cultural and creative products to better convey their intrinsic meaning, establish emotional connections with consumers, and enhance the emotional value of the brand along with consumer loyalty.

- Enhancement of Brand Communication

At the domestic level, a "cross-boundary integration" strategy should be adopted, combining internal and external efforts. Offline channels should expand beyond the campus by establishing brand stores in surrounding areas, collaborating with renowned cultural institutions for co-branded initiatives, and launching public welfare product lines

to attract external customer groups and enhance brand reputation. Online communication requires the construction of a diversified media matrix to effectively amplify the brand's presence.

For international outreach, a "localization" and "cultural integration" strategy should be implemented. At a foundational level, provide multilingual official websites and internationally oriented products. In product design, skillfully blend Lingnan cultural characteristics with universally recognizable elements to balance cultural uniqueness and global accessibility. Additionally, actively leverage resources such as international students and overseas alumni by organizing localized check-in events and encouraging community sharing to create authentic and relatable international communication touchpoints, gradually building the brand's overseas recognition.

Discussions and Conclusion

This study, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of brand awareness and brand equity, and employing a mixed-methods approach combining in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys, systematically diagnoses the current state of the Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU) cultural and creative brand. Based on this analysis, targeted optimization strategies are proposed. The study yields the following core conclusions: First, it reveals that the SYSU cultural and creative brand currently faces "high awareness, shallow memory, and weak conversion." Second, the research confirms the validity and necessity of applying classical brand management theories to the specific context of university cultural and creative products. Building on the above diagnosis, the study constructs an integrated strategic framework for university cultural and creative brand building, addressing five dimensions.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integration of abstract brand theories with the specific practices of university cultural and creative products, thereby enriching the case library for research on cultural brands. On a practical level, this study not only provides an actionable guide for the brand enhancement of Sun Yat-sen University's cultural and creative products but also offers diagnostic frameworks and strategic models that can serve as valuable references for other university cultural and creative brands.

Finally, this study also has certain limitations. The sample coverage of the general public could be further expanded, and the effectiveness of the proposed strategies remains subject to future practical validation. Subsequent research could build on this foundation by conducting longitudinal tracking studies or comparative studies of cultural and creative brands across different universities, to further explore universal patterns and differentiated pathways in the development of university cultural and creative brands. Following research should study the interaction between the key factors as deeper exploration. Future studies can also integrate empirical data or case comparisons to validate the theoretical flow and use quantitative measurements of challenges brands face. It is also important to acknowledge that mainstream brand management theories, which are often developed in commercial consumer contexts, may not fully account for the unique symbolic, non-commercial, and community-driven nature of university cultural products. This potential limitation invites critical reflection on whether concepts such as brand equity or consumer loyalty function in the same way when applied to products that primarily serve as vessels of institutional identity, heritage, and emotional belonging.

Recommendation

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU) cultural and creative brand, the research results lead to the following recommendations for practical application and future academic inquiry.

1. Suggestions for Applying Research Results

The research recommends that university brands immediately implement a focused strategy that prioritizes core student and alumni audiences with tailored product lines, while accelerating the development of digital products and strategic co-branding to meet clear market demand. It is essential to introduce a tiered pricing system with accessible entry-point items, shift communication toward youth-centric platforms like short-video apps, and enhance offline experiential activations. Additionally, establishing a long-term membership or community platform will help transition one-time purchasers into engaged, loyal stakeholders.

2. Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should conduct longitudinal research to evaluate the long-term impact of the proposed strategies on brand equity, and undertake comparative analyses across different types of universities to identify contextual and universal success factors. Further research should also explore effective internationalization pathways for university cultural brands, including design localization and diaspora engagement, and deepen the examination of digital product economics, such as viable business models and integration with emerging campus-metaverse initiatives.

New Knowledge

Based on the empirical case analysis of Sun Yat-sen University, this study contributes new knowledge by identifying and validating a critical disjunction in the brand-building pathway for university cultural and creative products. It reveals that while establishing basic brand recognition is often successfully achieved, this recognition frequently fails to deepen into meaningful brand recall or emotional loyalty. The core barrier is a fragmented brand system where product development, pricing, communication, and narrative operate in silos. This fragmentation prevents the formation of strong, unified brand associations in the consumer's mind. Therefore, the study empirically demonstrates that for university cultural brands, the key to converting recognition into equity is not merely increasing visibility, but strategically implementing an integrated brand optimization model. This model necessitates the simultaneous and synergistic alignment of precision positioning, pricing strategy, design and narrative innovation, and community-focused communication to bridge the gap between shallow awareness and deep-seated user identification. Below is the general framework of the article's contribution.
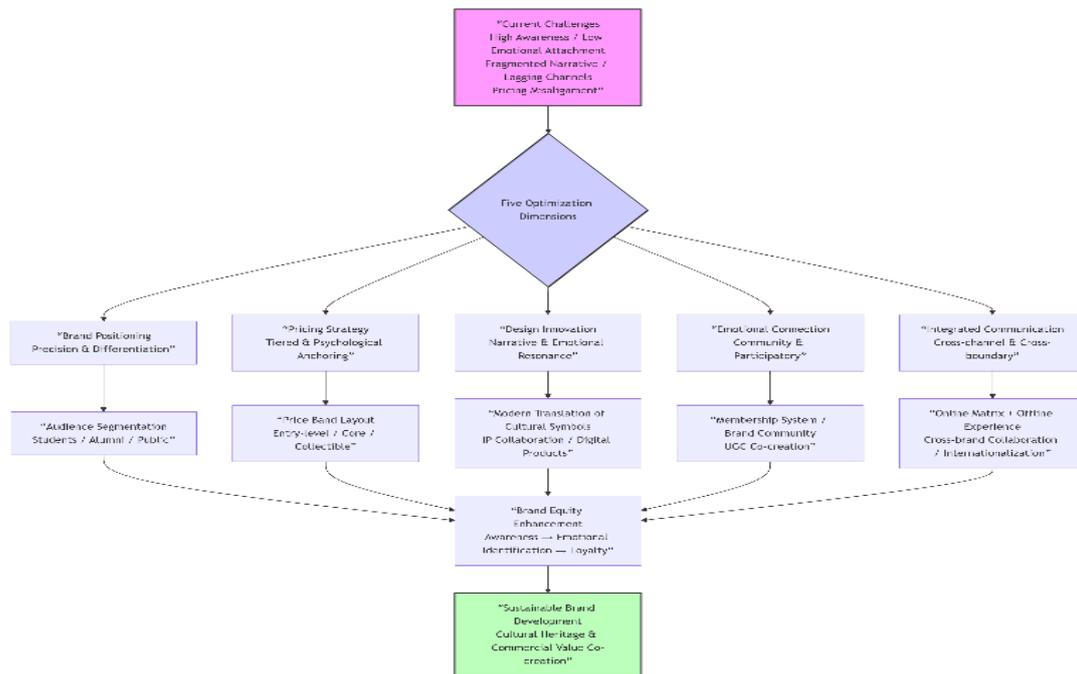
Figure 1: Integrated Optimization and Brand Equity Enhancement Framework for SYSU Cultural Creative Brands

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