



The Anti-Aesthetic Marketing Strategy and Z Generation Cultural Identity in Crocs

Wenye Zhang

Department of Sociology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China
1155207418@link.cuhk.edu.hk

Abstract. Crocs, initially labeled a fashion disaster, has successfully transformed into an emblematic anti-aesthetic brand, resonating deeply with Generation Z's cultural identity. This research explores the strategic use of deliberately "ugly" or unconventional design elements employed by Crocs to appeal to Gen Z, emphasizing authenticity, individuality, and irony. Through an online survey of 210 university students at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, this study reveals that Gen Z primarily values Crocs for their uniqueness and symbolic rejection of mainstream aesthetics rather than mere comfort or practicality. Results indicate that a majority perceive Crocs' "ugly" aesthetic positively, appreciating it as a form of playful self-expression and nonconformity. The findings highlight a paradox wherein anti-fashion items like Crocs have evolved into popular expressions of identity, reflecting broader trends of aesthetic pluralism and ironic consumerism among youth. The research concludes that brands effectively leveraging anti-aesthetic strategies can foster significant cultural resonance and brand loyalty among younger demographics.

Keywords: Anti-aesthetic branding, Generation Z, cultural identity, consumer psychology, Crocs.

1 Introduction

Crocs, once dismissed as a “fashion disaster” and even named among Time’s “50 worst inventions”, has paradoxically reinvented itself as a symbol of casual rebellion among Generation Z [1]. This unexpected success of a deliberately “ugly” product illustrates a broader contemporary phenomenon: the strategic embrace of anti-aesthetic or unconventional designs to create distinctive brand images. Crocs' unconventional visual identity differentiates the brand significantly, resonating with Gen Z consumers who value irony, authenticity, and individuality.

The concept of anti-aesthetic branding refers to the deliberate use of designs perceived as “ugly” or non-mainstream, often deployed in an ironic or playful manner. This postmodern approach employs exaggerated, vulgar, or “ugly-cute” elements to challenge traditional notions of beauty, turning bad taste into statements of authenticity and rebellion. Holt argues that iconic brands frequently emerge by disrupting cultural norms, and Crocs exemplifies this pattern through its redefinition from utilitarian

comfort footwear to a trendy, rebel-chic statement piece [2]. By embracing its polarizing image—part of what has been labeled the “ugly fashion” movement—Crocs established itself firmly within youth culture, symbolizing casual irreverence and non-conformity.

Against this backdrop, Crocs serves as an ideal representative case to explore how anti-aesthetic element function strategically within contemporary branding efforts, and more specifically, why Generation Z finds this type of branding appealing. This study seeks to analyze how Crocs leverages its “ugly” design elements in marketing to foster strong cultural resonance among Gen Z consumers. By conducting surveys among university students and analyzing Crocs-related social media content, this research aims to illuminate the psychological appeal, symbolic meanings, and broader cultural significance of anti-aesthetic branding strategies, challenging traditional conceptions of aesthetics in consumer culture.

2 Anti-Aesthetic Branding and the Crocs Case

Anti-aesthetic branding refers to the deliberate embrace of designs considered “ugly” or non-mainstream, often in an ironic, playful manner. This postmodern approach uses exaggerated, vulgar, or “ugly-cute” elements to challenge traditional notions of beauty, finding creative meaning beneath the unattractive surface. Such branding effectively turns bad taste into a statement of authenticity and rebellion, contributing to a broader trend of aesthetic diversification. Holt argues that iconic brands often rise by breaking cultural norms, and Crocs exemplifies this pattern [2]. Once derided as a “fashion disaster,” Crocs turned its clunky, hole-filled clogs into a rebel-chic symbol for Gen Z through self-ironic marketing [3]. By embracing its polarizing image (even being labeled part of an “ugly fashion” movement, Crocs created a brand myth that defies conventional aesthetics [4]. Today, wearing Crocs signals casual irreverence and non-conformity, aligning with youthful anti-fashion sentiment.

Brands build symbolic images by attaching cultural meanings to products. McCracken’s meaning-transfer theory explains that advertising and popular culture imbue goods with cultural symbolism, which consumers then adopt to express their identities [5]. In semiotic terms, a brand’s design and imagery act as signs that signify values or narratives in society. Crocs’ brand revival illustrates active symbolic reconstruction. To reposition from a utilitarian comfort shoe to a trendy statement piece, Crocs had to erase its old image and instill a new one. Its marketing diluted the “ugly, old-fashioned” stigma and instead highlighted playfulness and style, encouraging consumers to see Crocs as cool. The company’s offbeat collaborations (from luxury fashion houses to meme-inspired designs) further attached fresh cultural meanings to the clogs. Many consumers now personalize their Crocs with Jibbitz charms, using the product as a canvas for quirky self-expression—a sign that the brand’s meaning has been successfully reimaged.

Gen Z consumers are known for their emphasis on authenticity, individuality, and self-expression. McKinsey describes Gen Z’s core motivation as a “search for truth,” fostering personal identity and freedom of expression [6]. Unlike earlier cohorts, they

use consumption as a form of identity display rather than to conform, expecting brands to help showcase their uniqueness. Gen Z also exhibits aesthetic pluralism, embracing diverse and unconventional styles. Having grown up amid “Internet Ugly” meme culture, they often find deliberately unattractive visuals to be funny or relatable rather than off-putting. This makes them receptive to brands like Crocs that use nontraditional design with an authentic, tongue-in-cheek tone. Wearing Crocs can signal individuality and an ironic rejection of fashion rules, aligning with Gen Z’s self-image. Moreover, Gen Z tends to be socially conscious and emotionally attuned, favoring brands that resonate with their personal values; indeed, many are willing to pay a premium for products that reflect their identity or support meaningful causes [7].

3 Analysis of Crocs’s Marketing Strategy

3.1 Global Branding Message: “Come As You Are”

Crocs has adopted a global branding strategy that embraces the anti-aesthetic appeal of its clunky clogs, turning “ugly” into a positive asset in its brand identity. Slogans like “Ugly is Beauty” and “Come As You Are” encapsulate this ethos. The latter, launched in 2017, became a worldwide rallying cry for individuality and inclusivity. Rather than shy away from the shoe’s divisive reputation, Crocs leaned into it with irony and humor – using the tension between lovers and haters as marketing fuel. This inclusive “come as you are” message invites consumers to proudly be themselves, while the brand’s customization options empower personal expression. By tapping into Gen Z’s rejection of conventional fashion standards, Crocs transformed its once-ridiculed design into a trendy symbol of self-expression.

One landmark example of Crocs’ strategy is its partnership with rapper Post Malone. In late 2018, Crocs released Post Malone’s limited-edition clogs – adorned with his custom graphics and even Jibbitz of his “Stay Away” face tattoo – and they became an unexpected sensation [8]. Malone’s own social media posts about the shoes drove frenzied demand, and the clogs sold out immediately (Vogue dubbed them “the most coveted footwear drop of the year”). Malone’s ugly-cool style made him an ideal ambassador for the brand’s anti-fashion narrative. The collaboration not only boosted sales and hype but also reinforced Crocs’ image as authentically cool by being unapologetically itself.

Crocs has also amplified its narrative through other high-profile collaborations. In high fashion, Crocs teamed with Balenciaga, which famously sent \$850 platform Crocs down a 2017 runway – a tongue-in-cheek crossover that grabbed headlines. In pop culture, the novelty KFC x Crocs clog, decorated like a bucket of fried chicken, sold out in under 30 minutes amid a frenzy of social media attention [9]. In China, Crocs appointed pop idol Karry Wang as a brand ambassador, leveraging his huge Gen Z following; a Crocs livestream with Wang drew over a million viewers and shot the brand to top 1 in its category on Tmall. Each of these diverse campaigns – from high-end runway satire to fast-food novelty to youth idol endorsement – reinforced Crocs’ image of quirky self-confidence and refusal to conform.

3.2 Collaboration Strategy: Post Malone, Balenciaga, and Others

Throughout these efforts, Crocs highlights comfort, both literally and in encouraging people to feel “comfortable in their own shoes”. It also projects a sense of humor and rebellion against fashion norms, using a witty tone and embracing a “so ugly it’s cool” stance. Equally central is individuality: campaigns celebrate personal style and invite customization and self-expression. On social media, Crocs turns customers into co-creators of its narrative by encouraging user-generated content and community interaction. The brand leverages hashtags and influencer partnerships to amplify authentic fan stories. This community-driven approach has been crucial in engaging Gen Z, effectively turning a once-ridiculed shoe into a celebrated symbol of personal expression.

4 Methodology

In the first phase, a structured questionnaire was administered online to undergraduate students at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and 210 valid responses were collected (age range approximately 18–24). The survey included a mix of multiple-choice and Likert-scale items designed to examine students’ perceptions of Crocs’ design, the symbolism they associate with Crocs, and their motivations for purchase or use. Key sections of the survey covered:

One focus of the survey was to explore respondents’ initial and evolving perceptions of Crocs’ appearance. Participants were asked to recall their first impressions—whether they found the design quirky, “ugly,” or appealing—and to reflect on whether these views changed over time, especially under peer influence or increased exposure. Another key area examined students’ motivations for purchasing or intending to purchase Crocs. The survey covered various potential factors, including comfort and functionality, the appeal of a unique style, peer recommendations, social media trends, brand collaborations, personal expression, and price sensitivity. The questionnaire also assessed respondents’ attitudes toward “ugly” fashion. Participants were asked whether they accept or embrace non-traditional or deliberately “ugly-but-cute” fashion items like Crocs, and to what extent the shoes’ anti-mainstream aesthetic influenced their interest in the product. Lastly, the survey explored symbolic meanings that students associated with Crocs. These included values such as non-conformity, self-expression, comfort-over-style, playful humor, trendiness, and a casual lifestyle. The goal was to understand what the brand communicates to Gen Z consumers beyond its physical design.

5 Result

What are the reasons that prompted you to buy or want to buy Crocs shoes?

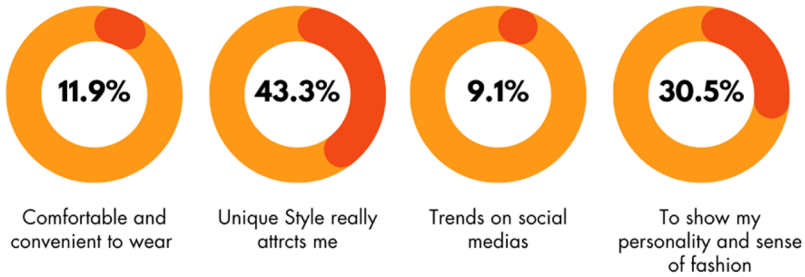


Figure 1. Reasons prompting respondents to purchase or consider purchasing Crocs shoes

Analysis of the survey data on purchase motivations shows that style-driven factors heavily outweigh purely functional ones. As shown in Figure 1, 43.3% of survey respondents purchased or wanted to purchase Crocs shoes because of their unique and quirky style, followed by 30.5% of respondents who purchased the cavernous shoes to showcase their personal fashion sense. These two motivations clearly dominate over traditional factors like comfort and practicality. While many respondents acknowledged Crocs’ comfort and light weight as a benefit, far fewer chose comfort as a primary reason compared to the allure of uniqueness. Social influence factors (such as friends’ recommendations or social media trends) were present but moderate – several students noted being swayed by online popularity or peer influence, yet these were less impactful than Crocs’ stylistic appeal.

What are some of the attitudes or values conveyed by Crocs?

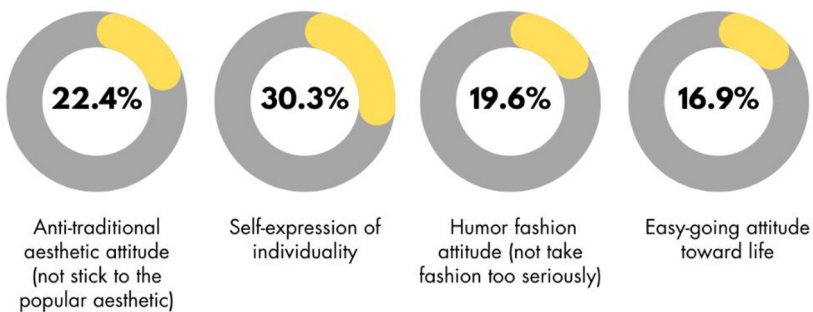


Figure 2. Attitudes or values respondents associate with the Crocs brand.

When asked about the attitudes or values that Crocs convey, respondents most often associated the shoes with individuality and non-conformity (see Figure 2). 30.3% of respondents believe that Crocs represents an “anti-traditional aesthetic” and 22.4% believe that Crocs encourages people to be bold and “express their own individual

style”. In other words, students see Crocs as symbolizing a rebellion against conventional fashion norms and a celebration of personal identity. Many also noted a sense of humor and playfulness – viewing Crocs as reflecting a carefree, not-too-serious fashion attitude. Fewer respondents identified values like comfort-first practicality or following trends as Crocs’ message, reinforcing that the brand’s image in this cohort is about breaking the rules of style rather than conforming. In fact, Crocs has been described as a “standout symbol of individuality and self-expression” for Gen Z, and our findings echo this – students overwhelmingly link Crocs to anti-establishment style values and the freedom to be oneself, aligning the shoes with a deliberate anti-aesthetic ethos.

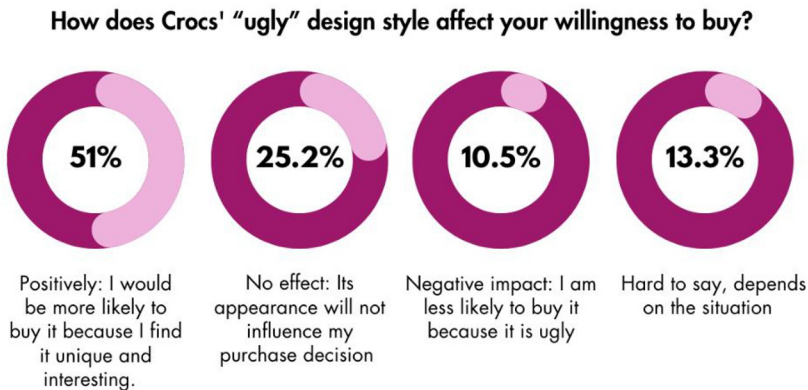


Figure 3. Impact of Crocs' "ugly" design style on respondents' purchase intentions

A striking result is that most students view Crocs’ reputedly “ugly” design as a positive influence on their willingness to purchase (see Figure 3). 51% of respondents indicated that the deliberately clunky, odd look increases their desire to buy Crocs, because it makes the shoes seem unique, fun, and different from generic fashion. This counterintuitive positive reception of ugliness validates Crocs’ anti-aesthetic branding appeal among Gen Z. Only a minority reported that the ugliness dampens their interest; most either didn’t mind it or actively liked it. Far from deterring young consumers, the ugly-cul te factor appears to be an asset: it makes wearing Crocs feel like a tongue-in-cheek style statement. This finding aligns with observations that Gen Z “grew up with ugly fashion and are now making it their own”. Rather than shunning unconventional looks, young people embrace Crocs’ ungainly design as cool in its ugliness. This reflects the broader “Internet Ugly” trend, wherein offbeat, unfashionable aesthetics are used as an expression of authenticity and humor.

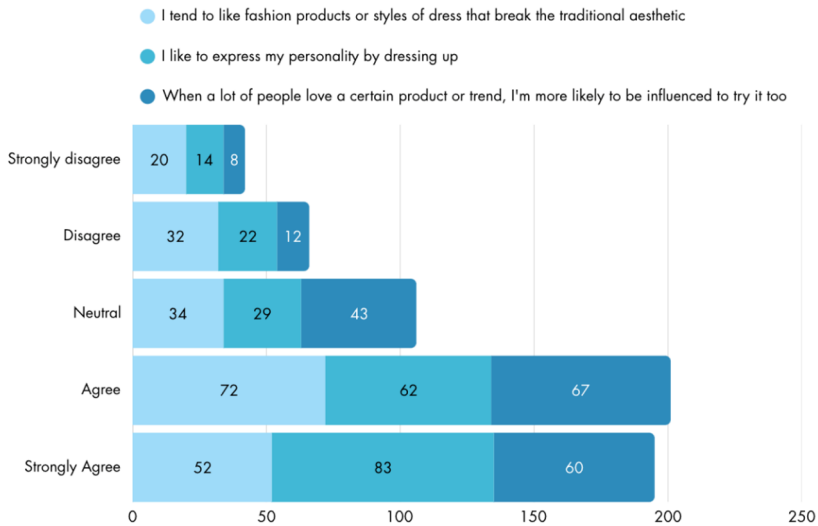


Figure 4. Respondents' agreement level regarding fashion attitudes, personal expression, and susceptibility to trends

According to the Likert-scale statements gauging students' fashion attitudes, most respondents agree that they gravitate toward fashion items that break traditional aesthetic norms (see Figure 4). In fact, 124 respondents indicated a clear preference for looks that “challenge” or depart from mainstream taste, reflecting an openness to experimental or avant-garde styles. Similarly, there were 145 respondents who were willing to express their individuality by dressing. This suggests that self-expression through attire is a core value for most of these Gen Z students – they see clothing (and Crocs in particular) to communicate individuality, highlighting a generational confidence in using personal style as a voice. 127 respondents believe that fashion trends influence their purchasing intentions, and Crocs, one of the most popular shoes brands among young people today, is becoming a subculture of “holes religion” that young people are attracted to. It seems to be a paradox that wearing Crocs shoes is ostensibly about self-expression, but it is a new type of herd behavior in fact, and people are still unable to escape the influence of socialization.

6 Discussion

The survey findings reveal that Gen Z respondents embrace Crocs not as a mere comfort shoe or passing fad, but as a statement of identity and values. Their top motivations – uniqueness and self-expression – suggest that wearing Crocs serves as a form of identity signaling. Fashion for Gen Z is “a powerful form of self-expression” that communicates personal identity and beliefs. Choosing an unapologetically “ugly” shoe like Crocs allows Gen Z to visibly reject mainstream norms and signal individuality. In fact, an overwhelming majority of Gen Z prioritize “being themselves” over fitting in. This helps explain why our respondents valued the shoe's quirkiness above its functional

comfort or trendiness. Crocs have become a liberating channel for self-expression under the banner of “ugly fashion,” where style “sins” are not just forgiven but celebrated. The brand’s offbeat design thus resonates as a badge of authenticity and non-conformity for Gen Z wearers.

There also appear to be emotional and symbolic rewards in Gen Z’s embrace of Crocs’ “non-fashion” fashion. Many respondents perceive an element of fun, humor, and “casual authenticity” in wearing Crocs. Psychologically, donning a maligned shoe can be liberating – it removes the pressure to look perfect and instead invites a more carefree, playful identity. Valerie Steele observes that Crocs are associated with “children and play,” suggesting that wearing them makes people feel life might be “more fun, playful”. For Gen Z, who grew up amidst internet memes and childhood nostalgia for Crocs, there is a comfort in this anti-fashion. The Crocs aesthetic offers a kind of comfort in authenticity: it’s a style choice that says one is confident enough to prioritize personal comfort and character over others’ judgments. This might explain why the “ugly” design increases purchase willingness – it imbues the product with symbolic authenticity and a whimsical, stress-free vibe. At the same time, the mixed views on peer pressure in the survey hint at a nuanced dynamic. Gen Z wants to stand out, yet their individualism often operates in collective trends. Even an anti-fashion statement can become a group identity. This reflects the “paradox of anti-consumerism”: unconventional choices tend to eventually become popular. In practice, Gen Z fashion subcultures allow youth to “negotiate social affiliation while preserving an image of authenticity”. The Crocs craze shows that Gen Z can resist traditional peer pressure (to be conventionally stylish) while embracing a new kind of peer affinity around authenticity and humor.

These findings have important implications for branding and marketing. Brands like Crocs can succeed with Gen Z by aligning with their core values of self-expression, authenticity, and even irony. Crocs’ resurgence was not an accident but a case study in anti-aesthetic branding done right. Rather than downplaying its clunky design, the brand leaned into it – effectively making “Stay Ugly” the selling point. This strategy tapped into subcultures that accord prestige to ugliness and turned polarizing design into a viral asset. Polarization, in fact, can be effective: a product that is love-it-or-hate-it generates more discussion and loyalty among its fans. As a fashion curator noted of Crocs, “whether you hate them or love them, [they] bring a lot of attention”. Gen Z consumers appreciate this kind of bold, unfiltered branding. They are notoriously skeptical of inauthentic marketing, but respond well to satire, meme culture, and brands that “poke fun at themselves”. Crocs capitalized on this by using self-deprecating memes and an “offbeat authenticity” in social media campaigns, making the brand feel relatable to young audiences. Additionally, Crocs invited personalization (e.g. Jibbitz charms), directly enabling the wearer’s self-expression – a smart move given that 75% of Gen Z are more likely to buy products they can customize. By “never compromising on their own style and identity” while empowering consumers to showcase theirs, Crocs has “solidified their reputation” with Gen Z. In sum, embracing an anti-aesthetic stance can be a powerful branding differentiator in the Gen Z market. The success of Crocs illustrates that when a brand’s image aligns with Gen Z’s desire for authenticity, uniqueness, and even a touch of absurd humor, what once was mocked as

“ugly” can transform into an emblem of cool. This generation’s consumer psychology rewards brands that are unafraid to be different – and in doing so, it redefines the very notion of cool in fashion.

7 Conclusion

This study has explored how Crocs successfully repositioned itself through an anti-aesthetic branding strategy specifically appealing to Generation Z. Survey findings reveal that Crocs’ deliberately “ugly” design resonates strongly with young consumers, primarily due to its symbolic association with individuality, authenticity, and rebellion against mainstream fashion norms. This paradoxical appreciation of “ugliness” as a positive aesthetic underscores broader trends in Gen Z’s ironic and pluralistic consumption behavior. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research was based on a survey with a relatively small sample size of 210 students from a single university in Hong Kong, restricting the generalizability of findings. Regional specificity limits broader applicability, as perceptions toward anti-aesthetic branding could vary significantly across cultural and geographic contexts. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported attitudes may introduce bias, as respondents might be influenced by social desirability or conformity pressures. Future research could address these limitations by increasing sample size, incorporating respondents from multiple regions, and diversifying demographic profiles to enhance generalizability. Comparative cross-cultural studies would provide insights into varying perceptions of anti-aesthetic branding globally. Additionally, integrating qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews or ethnographic studies would enrich understanding by uncovering deeper motivations behind Gen Z’s embrace of anti-fashion statements.

References

1. K. Oloffson, The 50 Worst Inventions, Time.com (2010). <https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0>
2. D.B. Holt, What becomes an icon most?, *Harv. Bus. Rev.* 81(3) (2003) 43–49.
3. E. Brayshaw, Gen Z grew up with ugly fashion – no wonder they love Crocs, Uts.edu.au (2023).
4. M. Hanbury, People have called Crocs “ugly” for years — but the company is hoping partnerships and a healthy dose of controversy will be its ticket to future success, *Bus. Insid.* (2019).
5. G. McCracken, Culture and Consumption: a Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods, *J. Consum. Res.* 13(1) (1986) 71–84.
6. T. Francis, True Gen: Generation Z and Its Implications for Companies, McKinsey & Company (2018).'
7. X. Zhang, Y. Cheng, Review of Research on Consumer Behavior of Generation Z: Based on a Systematic Literature Review, *Acad. J. Manag. Soc. Sci.* 5(3) (2023) 117–125.
8. L. Satenstein, Post Malone’s Crocs Are Sold Out, *Vogue* (2018).
9. L. Edmonds, Balenciaga’s latest collaboration with Crocs includes a pair of bright-green stiletto clogs, *Bus. Insid.* (2021).

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

