



Research on the Marketing Communication Effectiveness of Brand Symbols in the Context of Cross-cultural Communication

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Abstract. Driven by global economic integration and the rapid development of digital media, brand internationalization has become a core strategy for corporate growth. In this process, cross-cultural communication emerges as a critical challenge for brands. As the most direct and emotionally resonant medium for brand-consumer interaction, brand symbols face increasingly complex and significant marketing communication challenges in cross-cultural contexts. This study explores the conceptual framework and components of brand symbols within cross-cultural communication, analyzes their inherent challenges and opportunities, and systematically investigates implementation pathways and evaluation metrics for marketing communication effectiveness through theoretical modeling and case studies. The paper concludes with actionable strategies to enhance cross-cultural brand symbol communication effectiveness, providing both theoretical insights and practical guidance for global brand development.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication; brand symbol; marketing communication effectiveness

1 Introduction

With the deepening of the "Belt and Road" Initiative and the widespread adoption of global digital platforms, Chinese brands are venturing into the world at an unprecedented pace and scale. From Huawei and Haier to ByteDance and SHEIN, Chinese enterprises are taking increasingly firm steps towards globalization. However, brand internationalization is far from a simple market shift or product export; it is essentially a profound process of cultural dialogue and fusion. In this process, brand symbols—those identifiers, slogans, colors, images, and even stories that encapsulate a brand's identity, values, and commitments—serve as the "first language" of this dialogue[1].

If brand symbols can be accurately interpreted, resonate, and evoke positive emotions in heterogeneous cultures, they can significantly reduce communication

costs, establish brand trust, and achieve efficient marketing communication. Conversely, if the meanings of symbols are misread, distorted, or even provoke conflicts during cross-cultural transmission, it may lead to the failure of the entire marketing strategy and even damage the national image. Therefore, in the grand context of cross-cultural communication, conducting in-depth research on the marketing communication effectiveness of brand symbols not only holds significant theoretical value but also possesses urgent practical implications. This paper will systematically analyze the dynamic communication process of brand symbols across cultural boundaries from the interdisciplinary perspectives of semiotics, cross-cultural communication studies, and marketing, aiming to answer the following core questions: What key factors influence the communication effectiveness of brand symbols in cross-cultural contexts? How should brands strategically design, adjust, and disseminate their symbol systems to maximize their marketing communication effectiveness[2].

2 Theoretical Framework: The Connotation Analysis of Brand Symbol and Cross-cultural Communication

2.1 System Composition and Meaning Hierarchy of Brand Symbol

A brand symbol is a complex system that goes far beyond a single logo. According to semiotic theory, a complete brand symbol system comprises three levels:

Signifier: The physical form of a symbol, the part that can be perceived by the senses. Examples include brand names, logos, standard colors, packaging designs, advertising music, and brand mascots[3-4].

The signifier refers to the concept or meaning conveyed by a symbol, which consumers associate with abstract connotations such as "innovation", "reliability", "luxury", and "freedom" when they encounter it.

It means the relationship between signifier and signified and the specific cultural environment in which the relationship is located. It is the key to the generation of symbolic meaning and the most easily deviated link in cross-cultural communication.

Based on this, we can deconstruct the brand symbol system into several core components as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Core elements of brand symbol system

Symbol category	Specific elements	Function and role	Intercultural sensitivity
Visual symbols	Logo, Standard words, standard colors, packaging, product design, store space	Establish the first impression, realize rapid recognition, and convey the brand personality and sense of quality.	High (colors and graphics have strong and different symbolic meanings in different cultures)
Linguistic symbols	Brand name, advertising language, brand story, product naming, social media	Accurately convey the brand value proposition, establish emotional connection, and conduct	Extremely high (involving language translation, rhetoric, pragmatic habits,

Behavior symbol	copywriting Service process, employee behavior, public welfare activities participated by brand, CEO image	in-depth communication. Dynamically display brand values and build trust and reputation.	cultural taboos) High (cultural differences exist in body language, service etiquette and social norms)
Auditory/olfactory symbols	Advertising song, brand voice logo (such as Intel "lights, lights, etc.), store specific fragrance	Create a unique brand atmosphere, enhance memory points, and trigger emotional reactions.	Medium high (music style, tone and odor preference are culture specific)

2.2 Core Dimensions and Challenges of Cross-cultural Communication

Intercultural communication refers to the interaction between people with different cultural backgrounds and perceptual systems. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory provides a classic framework for analyzing cultural differences, which directly influences the interpretation of brand symbols[5].

(1) Power distance: It affects the tone of brand communication. High power distance culture (e.g. Malaysia) accepts authoritative and hierarchical symbols, while low power distance culture (e.g. Denmark) prefers equal and friendly symbols[6].

(2) Individualism/Collectivism: Key factors influencing brand appeals. Individualist culture (such as the United States) emphasizes "self-actualization" and "uniqueness"; collectivist culture (such as China and Japan) values "family," "harmony," and "sense of belonging."

(3) Uncertainty avoidance: It affects the brand commitment. The high uncertainty avoidance culture (e.g. Japan) favors the symbols of "safety", "reliability", "long history", while the low uncertainty avoidance culture (e.g. Singapore) is more open to "adventure", "innovation"[7].

(4) Masculinization/ feminization: influences the expression of brand personality. The masculine culture (e.g. Japan) advocates competition, achievement and confidence; the feminine culture (e.g. Sweden) emphasizes cooperation, quality of life and care.

(5) Long-term orientation/short-term orientation: Influencing the shaping of brand values. Long-term oriented cultures (such as China) appreciate the concepts of "sustainable development" and "investing in the future"; short-term oriented cultures (such as the United States) focus more on immediate benefits and trends[8].

The main challenges of cross-cultural communication to brand symbols include:

(1) Misinterpretation of symbolic meaning: The same symbol may carry completely opposite meanings in different cultures. For example, the owl is a symbol of wisdom in the West, but in certain contexts in China, it is associated with "bad luck".

(2) The Pitfalls of Language Translation: Literal translations of brand names and slogans may lead to ambiguity or jokes. For example, when Coca-Cola first entered China, it was translated as "Tadpole Chewing Wax," and only after careful revision to "Coca-Cola" did it achieve great success.

(3) Cultural taboos and sensitive points: symbols touching on sensitive topics such as religion, history, gender, race, etc. may cause strong resistance.

(4) Differences in aesthetic preferences: Preferences for colors, compositions, and design styles vary across cultures, affecting the appeal of brand visual symbols.

3 The Construction of the Marketing Communication Effectiveness Model of Brand Symbols in the Context of Three Cross-cultural

With the deepening of the "Belt and Road" Initiative and the widespread adoption of global digital platforms, Chinese brands are venturing into the world at an unprecedented pace and scale. From Huawei and Haier to ByteDance and SHEIN, Chinese enterprises are taking increasingly firm steps towards globalization. However, brand internationalization is far from a simple market shift or product export; it is essentially a profound process of cultural dialogue and fusion. In this process, brand symbols—those identifiers, slogans, colors, images, and even stories that encapsulate a brand's identity, values, and commitments—serve as the "first language" of this dialogue[9].

If brand symbols can be accurately interpreted, resonate, and evoke positive emotions in heterogeneous cultures, they can significantly reduce communication costs, establish brand trust, and achieve efficient marketing communication. Conversely, if the meanings of symbols are misread, distorted, or even provoke conflicts during cross-cultural transmission, it may lead to the failure of the entire marketing strategy and even damage the national image. Therefore, in the grand context of cross-cultural communication, conducting in-depth research on the marketing communication effectiveness of brand symbols not only holds significant theoretical value but also possesses urgent practical implications. This paper will systematically analyze the dynamic communication process of brand symbols across cultural boundaries from the interdisciplinary perspectives of semiotics, cross-cultural communication studies, and marketing, aiming to answer the following core questions: What key factors influence the communication effectiveness of brand symbols in cross-cultural contexts? How should brands strategically design, adjust, and disseminate their symbol systems to maximize their marketing communication effectiveness?

3.1 Input: Native System of Brand Symbols

The brand is a complete symbol system formed in its mother culture, as shown in Table 1.

3.2 Cross-cultural Filtering and Adaptation Process

This is the core of the model. When brand symbols enter target cultures, they undergo a process of adaptation led by the brand and filtering led by consumers. The key variables of the brand's strategy choices are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Spectrum of brand intercultural symbol communication strategies

Policy type	Core logic	Applicable conditions	Classic case	Risks and challenges
Globalization standard strategy	Maintain a globally unified brand symbol to establish a consistent brand image and achieve economies of scale.	Brand symbol has universal value; Small cultural differences in the target market; The brand itself represents a global culture (such as technology and trend).	Apple: minimalist design and innovative ideas are unified globally. Coca Cola: the theme of "happiness" is consistent with that of red cans worldwide.	May appear aloof, lack of local affinity, and unable to respond to specific cultural needs.
Localization adaptation strategy	Deeply adjust brand symbols to adapt to local cultural customs, aesthetics and values.	The target market culture is unique; The product is closely related to the local lifestyle; The image of globalization may trigger resistance.	Mcdonald's in India: launched "mcmaharaja" mutton burger and vegetarian burger to avoid beef and pork. KFC in China: launched the old Beijing chicken roll and rice set meal to integrate into the local food culture.	The high cost may dilute the consistency of global brand image.
Mixed strategy of Globalization	"Global thinking, local action". Core values and visual subjects should be globally unified, and localization fine-tuning should be carried out at the implementation level.	The ideal choice for most global brands is to balance consistency and affinity.	Starbucks: the globally unified logo, store style and core drinks, but launched the tea Warner series and mid autumn moon cakes in China, and incorporated local elements into the store design. Unilever: the "true beauty movement" of "Dove" conveys the core value of "confident beauty" around the world, but uses local models of different races and sizes to	The requirements for brand management ability are extremely high, and it is necessary to accurately grasp the "degree" of unity and change.

spread it.

3.3 Output: Dimensions of Marketing Communication Effectiveness

The effectiveness of brand symbols after cross-cultural use can be measured from the four dimensions shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Evaluation dimensions of marketing communication effectiveness of cross-cultural brand symbols

Effectiveness dimension	Specific measurement indicators	Research/measurement methods
Cognitive efficacy	Brand awareness, brand recognition, brand symbol recall rate	Questionnaire survey, online search index analysis, social media mentions
Affective efficacy	Brand preference, brand emotional relevance, cultural identity, perceived value	Sentiment analysis (comments on social media), in-depth interviews, focus groups
Behavioral effectiveness	Purchase intention, recommendation intention, user generated content (UGC) participation, brand community activity	Sales data association analysis, online behavior tracking, community data analysis
Brand equity effectiveness	Brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand association uniqueness, brand premium ability	Long term follow-up survey and brand equity evaluation model (such as brandz)

4 In-Depth Case Analysis: Success and Failure in Cross-Cultural Communication of Brand Symbols

4.1 Success Story: Huawei — From "China Manufacturing" to the Symbolic Rebirth of "Global Trust"

The globalization process of Huawei is a model of its brand symbol system successfully achieving cross-cultural adaptation.

(1) Upgrade of visual symbols: The early Huawei logo was a monotonous "petal" design, slightly technical and lacking emotional appeal. The new logo adopts a fuller, more rounded shape with brighter colors, conveying an open, harmonious, and innovative global corporate image, while reducing the geopolitical biases that might arise from its "China origin".

(2) Linguistic evolution: The brand's slogan has been rebranded from "enriching people's communication and lives" to "Building a Fully Connected, Intelligent World" (a vision of an interconnected intelligent world). This new slogan radiates technological sophistication, futuristic flair, and inclusivity, transcending national boundaries to resonate with global consumers' shared aspiration for a seamless digital experience.

(3) The construction of behavioral symbols: Huawei continuously sponsors top European football clubs (such as Paris Saint-Germain and AC Milan), linking its

brand with global sports passion and excellence. At the same time, it establishes R&D centers worldwide and hires foreign executives. These behavioral symbols all convey a message: Huawei is a trustworthy corporate citizen that aggregates global wisdom, rather than a closed China company[9].

Huawei's strategy is a typical "global hybrid strategy". It retains the core "HUAWEI" name and petal graphics, but actively integrates global mainstream values and localized emotions in the connotation and peripheral expression of symbols, successfully enhancing its brand recognition, emotional identification, and brand equity overseas.

4.2 Case Study: Dolce & Gabbana (D&G) 'Raising Chopsticks to Eat' Advertising Controversy

In 2018, the promotional video shot by Italian luxury brand D&G for a show to be held in Shanghai triggered a huge cultural crisis. In the video, an Asian model used chopsticks to eat Italian food in exaggerated and clumsy poses, with a lighthearted tone in the narration. The advertisement was quickly interpreted as a mockery and discrimination against China's traditional culture and dining etiquette.

The Complete Misreading of Symbols:

(1) Visual/behavioral symbols: The way models use chopsticks is regarded as extremely disrespectful and "ugly" in the cultural context of China.

(2) Linguistic symbols: The wording and tone of the narration failed to reflect reverence for China's culinary culture, instead filled with a curious perspective of the "other".

(3) Cultural dimension conflict: The advertisement completely ignores the "high-context culture" characteristics of China (emphasizing context, subtlety, and face), and also violates the highly sensitive national dignity in collectivist culture.

(4) Performance Evaluation: This incident led to the cancellation of the D&G fashion show, the complete removal of its products from China's e-commerce platforms, and a severe blow to the brand's reputation. In all four performance dimensions of Table 3, it showed significant negative values: unprecedentedly high awareness but negative, strong emotional aversion, full-scale boycott in behavior, and serious damage to brand equity[10].

This case shows that in cross-cultural communication, even the simplest visual and behavioral symbols may lead to disastrous consequences if the "signification" process of brand symbols lacks cultural sensitivity and empathy.

5 Suggestions on How to Improve the Communication Effectiveness of Cross-cultural Brand Symbols

Based on the above analysis, the following systematic strategies should be adopted by the brand to enhance the marketing communication effectiveness of its symbols in the cross-cultural context:

5.1 Implementing In-Depth Cross-cultural Insights and Preliminary Research

Before entering new markets, a comprehensive cultural audit is essential. This requires in-depth research into local history, religion, values, aesthetic preferences, language habits, social hotspots, and taboos. The research methodology should be diversified, combining big data analysis (to understand online public opinion and cultural trends) with anthropological qualitative research (such as immersive observation and in-depth interviews) to gain "living" cultural knowledge.

5.2 Adopting a Dynamic and Balanced Hybrid Strategy of Globalization

Define the brand's core values and its "non-negotiable" symbols (e.g., Apple's iconic design or Nike's "Just Do It" ethos) – these are the soul of the brand and should remain consistent globally. At the symbolic level, whether in advertising creativity, social media engagement, product features, or holiday marketing, boldly innovate with local adaptations to demonstrate respect for and integration into local culture.

5.3 Make Good Use of "Cultural Grafting" and "Symbol Co-creation"

(1) Cultural grafting: It is not simply about catering, but creatively combining the core values of a brand with the essence of local culture. For example, when the Chinese brand "Huaxizi" went global, it positioned itself with its unique "Eastern aesthetics," integrating traditional Chinese crafts such as carving and micro-carving into its product design. This distinctive cultural symbol instead became its differentiating advantage in the global market.

(2) Symbol co-creation: Inviting local designers, artists and consumers in the target market to participate in the re-creation of brand symbols. This not only ensures cultural accuracy but also gives the brand authentic local voices and emotions, enhancing brand recognition.

5.4 Establishing an Agile Symbol Monitoring and Crisis Response Mechanism

In global operations, brands must continuously monitor how their symbols are interpreted and responded to across markets. By leveraging social media analytics tools, companies can promptly identify potential misinterpretations or negative reactions. When a symbol-related crisis emerges, the "SLOW" principle should be applied: S (Stop – halt the spread of misinformation), L (Listen – engage with stakeholders), O (Own – take responsibility and apologize), and W (Work – implement corrective actions). D&G's initial delayed and arrogant response to the incident was the key factor in the crisis escalation.

5.5 Cultivate Internal Cross-Cultural Marketing Talents

Build a marketing team with multicultural backgrounds to ensure there are "cultural interpreters" at the decision-making level. These professionals not only deeply

understand the brand's core values but also accurately grasp the cultural nuances of their target markets, serving as the organizational foundation for successful cross-cultural communication.

6 Conclusion

This study explores the marketing communication efficacy of brand symbols from the perspective of intercultural communication, revealing their dual value as both cultural media and commercial vehicles. Through systematic analysis, the following key conclusions can be drawn:

1. Cultural adaptability is the key to enhance the effectiveness. The brand symbol should be reconstructed through localization to achieve the "translation" of cultural meaning, which should not only retain the core value kernel, but also adapt to the cultural context, symbol system and consumer psychology of the target market, so as to reduce the cognitive barriers and enhance the emotional resonance;

2. Technology empowerment and innovative communication channels expand the boundaries of effectiveness. The global proliferation of digital media (e.g., social media and short-video platforms) offers low-threshold, highly interactive scenarios for cross-cultural dissemination of brand symbols. However, we must guard against the "cultural cocoon" effect caused by algorithmic recommendations, and achieve precise reach and deep penetration through diversified channel combinations.

3. Dynamic adjustment and long-term evaluation mechanisms ensure sustainability. In cross-cultural communication, the effectiveness of brand symbols is not static; a cultural sensitivity monitoring system must be established to capture real-time changes in cultural contexts and consumer feedback. By iteratively optimizing symbol design, narrative strategies, and communication channels, a dynamic balance between brand globalization and localization can be achieved.

This study provides theoretical support and practical enlightenment for brand globalization strategy. In the future, we can further explore the deep influence of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality on the cross-cultural communication efficiency of brand symbols, as well as the differentiated communication paradigm in non-Western cultural context.

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