

Crossover Collaboration and Brand Cultural Identity Upgrading: A Case Study of UNIQLO x KAWS

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ABSTRACT

Under the background of consumption upgrading and Gen Z becoming the main consumer group, crossover collaboration has become an important strategic tool for brands to reconstruct their cultural identity. Taking the crossover co-branding between UNIQLO and KAWS as a case, based on brand semiotics theory and the AISAS consumer behavior model, this study analyzes the inner mechanism by which crossover collaboration drives the upgrading of brand cultural identity and its influence on marketing performance. Based on a qualitative case study and secondary materials, this study argues that crossover collaboration realizes the upgrading of brand cultural identity through a three-step mechanism of “symbol borrowing - meaning transfer - identity reconstruction”; brand experience plays a mediating role between crossover interaction and brand value realization; foreign cultural symbols need localized adjustment before they can spread effectively. On this basis, layered management strategies for brand crossover collaboration are proposed, providing theoretical and practical guidance for the strategic upgrading of brand culture.

Keywords: crossover collaboration; brand cultural identity; marketing performance; UNIQLO; symbolic meaning construction

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, crossover collaboration has become an important strategic way for brands to reshape cultural identity and expand audience boundaries ^[1]. Consumers are no longer satisfied only with product functions, but pay more attention to the cultural value and identity recognition behind brands ^[2]. The collaboration series of UNIQLO and the contemporary artist KAWS is a very influential crossover case—the collaboration T-shirts in 2019 caused a buying rush in the Chinese market, sold out both online and offline, and were resold at several times the original price in the secondary market ^[3]. This event was not only a commercial success, but also marked UNIQLO’s shift from a “mass brand for basic wear” to a “lifestyle brand with trend culture genes”.

However, existing studies have not sufficiently explained the mechanism through which crossover collaboration enhances brand cultural identity and subsequently affects marketing performance ^[4]. Three limitations remain: first, the process mechanism is often treated as a black box, with insufficient discussion on the dynamic upgrading of identity; second, studies mostly adopt a performance perspective and focus on immediate market reactions; third, case studies tend to stay superficial without solid theoretical underpinnings ^[5]. Taking UNIQLO x KAWS as a case, this study combines brand semiotics and consumer behavior theory to answer three core questions: How does crossover collaboration realize the upgrading of brand cultural identity? Through what mechanism does it influence marketing performance? How should firms manage crossover collaboration to realize sustainable value?

2. THEORETICAL BASIS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Meaning of Brand Cultural Identity and Its Upgrading Path

Brand cultural identity is a cognitive schema formed in consumers’ minds and linked with cultural meaning ^[1]. Zhang Yi et al. (2024) pointed out that, as an important carrier of cultural symbols, the meaning construction of a brand follows a three-part structure of “object sign - signs around the object - point-of-existence sign” ^[1]. The upgrading of brand cultural identity is, in essence, a reconfiguration of brand symbolic meaning and a re-accumulation of cultural capital ^[2]. Xu Xinliang et al. (2021) found that brand interaction, brand experience, and brand value realization are three influencing factors in the realization of brand value, and brand experience plays a mediating role in it ^[6].

Crossover collaboration provides a shortcut of “cultural borrowing” for brand identity upgrading ^[4]. By collaborating with artists who have clear cultural labels, a brand can quickly get the other side’s cultural capital and realize the “external transfer” of meaning ^[7]. Foreign culture will be locally absorbed during communication and go through cultural integration and selective transformation ^[8]—this rule also applies to crossover collaboration.

2.2 Cultural Integration and Localized Adjustment

Foreign cultural symbols will surely go through localized absorption in the communication process. In his discussion of Eliot’s definition of culture, Shan Shilian (2022) pointed out that culture is not an independent entity, but a perspective and signifier for discussing issues such as social class, political economy, religion, and art ^[9]. Wang Zhibiao and Liu Bingbing (2024), in their study on short videos empowering fine rural traditional culture, found that cultural breaking-circle needs the joint effect of multi-directional motivation, mixed forms, and algorithm distancing ^[10]. The success of UNIQLO x KAWS fits the cultural psychology of young Chinese consumers—consuming “light-luxury art symbols” both meets the need for identity distinction and keeps the price affordable ^[3].

Based on the above theories, this study puts forward an analytical framework: crossover collaboration drives the upgrading of brand cultural identity through the borrowing of cultural symbols and the transfer of meaning; the upgraded brand then influences consumers’ attention, interest, search, action, and sharing behavior by strengthening brand experience, and finally realizes the improvement of marketing performance ^[11].

3. CASE STUDY: UNIQLO X KAWS

3.1 Background of the Collaboration and Analysis of Cultural Symbols

KAWS, whose real name is Brian Donnelly, is known for symbolic elements such as the “XX” eyes and the COMPANION figure ^[12]. Before the crossover collaboration, KAWS had already built strong influence in global street art and trend culture, and the price of his works in the secondary market could reach tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of US dollars ^[7]. The core meaning of KAWS symbols is “rebellious friendliness”—they keep the critical spirit of street art while lowering the acceptance threshold through cartoon images.

UNIQLO brand gene: “LifeWear”, good, simple, and all-around. As a result, it became the first choice for many mass basic things, but at the same time there were negative stereotypes like lacking personality or not being fashionable. And its cooperation with KAWS is to transplant KAWS’s cultural capital—discursive power in trend culture, artistic scarcity, recognition from young people—into UNIQLO’s brand meaning system.

3.2 The Three-Step Mechanism of Cultural Identity Upgrading

Stage one is symbol borrowing. UNIQLO directly adopted KAWS’ “XX” eyes and COMPANION image on UT products, conducting open and direct symbol borrowing. It enjoys high acceptance in trend circles and can easily trigger the target audience’s cultural recollection and resonance ^[7].

Second: transferring of meanings. Symbol borrowing lays the foundation for systematic meaning transfer. Through official channels, social media and offline pop-up stores, UNIQLO systematically linked KAWS’ attributes of “art”, “scarce quantity” and “trendsetter” to its own brand image ^[3]. When consumers bought the collaboration products, they did not only get a T-shirt, but also obtained identity labels such as “understanding trends” and “having taste” ^[2].

Stage three: identity reconstruction. Repeated collaborations (continuous cooperation from 2016 to 2019) made meaning transfer settle from a short-term event into a long-term asset. UNIQLO’s cultural identity changed qualitatively: it was no longer only a “basic-wear brand”, but a “brand that can cooperate with top artists and has discourse power in trend culture” ^[13]. This identity reconstruction improved the brand’s cultural appeal among young consumers and realized the principles of “uniqueness, unity, and aesthetics” in city/brand characteristic building mentioned by Ding Hui (2022) ^[14].

3.3 Marketing Performance

From the view of financial performance, on the day when the 2019 collaboration series was released, UNIQLO’s Tmall flagship store sold out in 3 seconds, queues at offline stores stretched for hundreds of meters, and the premium in the second-hand market reached 3–5 times ^[3]. From the view of brand performance, after the collaboration, UNIQLO rose obviously in brand popularity indicators such as Baidu Index and WeChat Index, and the share of young users increased clearly ^[13]. From the view of user behavior, “showing UNIQLO KAWS” on social media became a phenomenon-level

spread, and the amount of UGC reached the million level, realizing the large-scale activation of the “share” link in the AISAS model proposed by Shi Tingting (2021) ^[11].

4. MECHANISM ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 The Mediating Role of Brand Experience

Xu Xinliang et al. (2021) showed that brand interaction influences brand value realization through brand experience. The communication strategy of UNIQLO x KAWS fully activated consumers’ multi-dimensional experience: sensory experience (the visual impact of the collaboration patterns), emotional experience (emotional projection onto KAWS), and social experience (getting circle recognition by posting purchase photos). The overlap of these experiences turned consumers who originally “rationally bought basic items” into brand fans who “emotionally chased collaboration products”. Brand experience in crossover collaboration has an “experience leverage” effect—the cultural premium of collaboration products makes consumers much more sensitive to experience than with regular products, so experience has a stronger driving force on purchase conversion ^[6].

4.2 The Moderating Effect of Consumer Openness to Experience

Drawing on Zhang Junwei et al. (2023) on the moderating role of openness to experience, this study finds that consumers’ attitudes toward crossover collaboration are influenced by their cultural openness. Consumers with high openness to experience are more likely to accept non-local cultural symbols (KAWS comes from American street culture) and are more willing to pay for cultural premium; consumers with low openness to experience pay more attention to product usefulness and are not sensitive to the value of cultural symbols ^[15]. This finding suggests that brands should not segment the audience of crossover collaboration only by demographic variables, but also by cultural psychological characteristics ^[2].

4.3 Risks and Boundary Conditions

Identity upgrading driven by crossover collaboration is not without risks ^[4]. First, over-commercialization of cultural symbols may weaken authenticity—when KAWS changes from a “scarce artwork” into a “mass T-shirt pattern”, the scarcity value of its cultural capital is reduced. Second, frequent crossover collaboration may lead to brand identity confusion. Third, short-term traffic carnival may hide the lack of long-term brand building. Duan Zao’er (2023), in his study on traditional cultural and creative industries in the change of the digital economy, pointed out that crossover integration needs to deal well with the balance among rebuilding the value chain, changing the value creation mode, blurring industry boundaries, and innovation-driven development ^[9].

5. MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Choosing Crossover Partners: Cultural Fit and Gap in Cultural Force

Brands should choose crossover partners that are complementary to their own cultural genes. UNIQLO chose KAWS because “simple basic wear” and “trend art” form a complementary tension. At the same time, the crossover partner should have higher “cultural force” than the brand, so that meaning can move positively to the brand. Brand positioning should follow the principles of innovation, differentiation, and quality first ^[3].

5.2 Controlling the Rhythm of Cooperation: Balance Between Scarcity and Continuity

Too much crossover collaboration will dilute the uniqueness of brand identity. UNIQLO adopted an “annual limited” strategy, launching one to two seasons of collaborations each year, which kept the topic fresh and also avoided consumers’ aesthetic fatigue. Brands should build a “rhythm management” mechanism for crossover collaboration and upgrade occasional events into predictable brand rituals ^[13].

5.3 Building an Experience Closed Loop: From Transaction to Relationship

The final goal of crossover collaboration is not one-time sales, but turning “collaboration consumers” into “brand fans”. This asks brands to build a complete experience closed loop: suspense marketing before sale, ritual-like design during sale, and community operation after sale ^[6]. UNIQLO kept activating users’ brand participation through touchpoints such as the membership system, offline activities, and content communities.

5.4 Localized Adjustment: Global Symbols and Local Meaning

Foreign cultural symbols need localized adjustment when they enter the Chinese market. In the communication of crossover collaboration, brands should identify the cultural psychology of the target market and make adaptive changes to crossover symbols. This needs to realize innovation in cultural communication by promoting the rebuilding of cultural forms and creating characteristic innovative development ^[10].

6. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Taking UNIQLO x KAWS as a case, this study reveals the three-step mechanism of brand cultural identity upgrading driven by crossover collaboration, explains the mediating role of brand experience between crossover interaction and brand value realization, and proves the key meaning of localized adjustment for the success of crossover collaboration. The study shows that crossover collaboration is an effective path for brands to realize cultural leap, but its success depends on the systematic coordination of partner selection, rhythm control, experience design, and local adjustment ^[13].

Future research can be deepened in the following directions: first, compare the differentiated mechanisms of different types of crossover collaboration; second, discuss how digital technology reshapes the way symbolic meaning is constructed in crossover collaboration; third, build a long-term tracking and evaluation system for crossover collaboration performance, distinguishing short-term sales effects from long-term brand asset effects; fourth, explore the Chinese path of crossover integration between local cultural IP and independent brands ^{[1][10]}.

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