

How does cross-cultural brand collaboration affect consumer purchasing behavior

— A case study based on the Uniqlo and KAWS collaboration

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Abstract

With the acceleration of economic globalization and deepening cultural integration, cross-cultural brand collaborations have become an important marketing strategy for enterprises to expand into international markets and enhance market competitiveness. By taking the cross-cultural brand collaboration between Uniqlo and KAWS as a typical case study, and through in-depth interviews and grounded theory analysis, this paper aims to clarify the factors influencing consumer purchasing behavior in the process of cross-cultural brand collaboration. It explores how unique marketing strategies affect changes in consumer purchasing behavior compared to non-collaborated products, providing theoretical basis and practical guidance for Chinese enterprises implementing cross-cultural brand collaborations under the backdrop of economic globalization. The study reveals that brand image compatibility, product synergy effects, and cultural difference perception are core influencing factors; while unique marketing approaches such as culturally integrated design, localized marketing communication, and scarcity strategies significantly enhance consumer purchase intention.

Keywords: Cross-cultural brand collaboration; Consumer purchasing behavior; Brand collaboration marketing; Cultural differences; Marketing strategies

1. Introduction

1.1 Cross-cultural brand collaboration under the wave of globalization

The deepening of economic globalization has accelerated the convergence of markets across cultural boundaries, creating increasingly complex and diverse competitive landscapes for businesses. In this context, cross-cultural brand collaborations have emerged as an innovative marketing strategy. By integrating cultural resources from different societies, these partnerships enable complementary strengths and co-creation of value, serving as a crucial pathway for companies to transcend geographical limitations and expand into overseas markets.^[1]In contrast, Uniqlo's 2023 sales rose 15 percent from the previous year through cross-cultural brand partnerships, contributing 22 percent to its total revenue, compared with an overall contraction in the fast fashion industry.^[2]The collaboration between Uniqlo and KAWS stands as a prime example of cross-cultural brand partnerships: Uniqlo, celebrated for its minimalist Japanese practical style, teamed up with KAWS, a trailblazer in American streetwear culture. Despite their contrasting aesthetics, the duo's partnership ignited a global buying frenzy, creating a landmark case study for understanding how cross-cultural collaborations shape consumer behavior.

1.2 Research Questions

By analyzing the internal mechanisms through which cross-cultural brand collaborations influence consumer purchasing behavior, this study focuses on two core questions: What factors in the cross-cultural collaboration process affect consumers' purchase decisions? And what unique marketing strategies enable cross-cultural collaborations to drive changes in consumer purchasing behavior compared to non-collaborated products?^[3] Through an in-depth analysis of the collaboration between Uniqlo and KAWS, this study reveals the interaction between cultural differences, brand synergy, and marketing strategies, providing a practical framework for Chinese enterprises to expand into overseas markets.

2. Literature Review: Theoretical context and research gaps of cross-cultural brand collaboration

2.1 Definition and Types of Co-branded Products

co-branded products refer to new products or services jointly developed and launched by two or more independent brands, based on the same market goals and brand characteristics. Through the cooperation model of resource sharing and complementary advantages, these products or services integrate elements from each brand. 1980 Red Lobster and Holiday Inn opened a joint restaurant, Boone^[4]This gave rise to the concept of brand collaboration. The initial research on brand collaboration was based on brand extension studies, with cooperative marketing, cross-marketing, brand partnerships, and brand collaborations all being referred to as brand collaboration.[5 , 6]In cross-cultural brand collaborations, academia generally defines co-branded products as unique goods or services with distinctive identities and innovative value propositions jointly developed and promoted by two or more brands through resource sharing and complementary advantages. The essence lies not in the simple addition of brand elements, but in the deep integration of core characteristics that create unprecedented consumer experiences.^[7]For example, Uniqlo has added artistic connotation to basic clothing by incorporating KAWS's iconic XX eye pattern into the classic T-shirt pattern, reshaping the boundary between fast fashion and art^[8]The joint type can be divided into two categories: industry joint, such as H&M's cooperation with designer brands, integrating mass channels and high-end design, and precisely attracting young people who pursue cost performance.^[9]; Cross-industry co-branded partnerships, such as the collaboration between Luckin Coffee and the Korean cultural and creative brand Wiggle Wiggle, which combines coffee consumption with cultural and creative experience to extend the brand influence across borders^[10]The cross-cultural communication strategies of international brands remain rooted in global brand promotion, ultimately aiming to resonate with the cultural psychology of target consumer groups and articulate culturally adaptive value propositions through branding. Therefore, such cross-cultural communication strategies in a globalized context can be considered an inevitable outcome of consumer society.^[11]

2.2 Factors Influencing Consumer Behavior of Cross-cultural Brand Collaboration

Existing research indicates that when brand image compatibility exists – where co-branded brands exhibit complementary or aligned characteristics – consumers tend to develop more positive perceptions. A prime example is Uniqlo's collaboration with KAWS, where the brands' down-to-earth practicality harmonizes with KAWS's trendsetting edge. This synergy creates an organic connection in youth culture expression, making the co-branded T-shirt a cultural statement that allows young consumers to showcase their personal style.^[12] The synergistic effects of these products signify an organic integration of functionality, design, and quality that directly impacts value perception. For instance, the GoPro-Hongniu co-branded camera not only features high-definition shooting capabilities but also incorporates visual elements from Hongniu while enhancing durability, perfectly meeting the demands of extreme sports scenarios. Marketing strategies are crucial for market success, with their key focus being efficient value communication. Luckin Coffee's sauce-flavored latte collaboration with Moutai sparked social media frenzy, achieving over 100 million yuan in sales on its first day. Similarly, the "Black Myth: Wukong" co-branded campaign utilized limited-edition merchandise strategies, directly stimulating consumer purchasing behavior.

2.3 Marketing Strategies and Cultural Difference Response in Cross-cultural Joint Branding

Cross-cultural cooperation faces challenges arising from cultural differences, specifically manifested in the minimalist harmony emphasized by Japanese culture, as embodied by Uniqlo, and the individualistic exuberance favored by American culture, exemplified by KAWS. Conflicts exist between these two approaches, which are reflected in various aspects such as design concepts, communication strategies, and consumer perceptions. In this context, Uniqlo and KAWS achieve cultural integration through dual strategies. In terms of design, when retaining iconic patterns, they optimize color selection with soft tones and adopt to align with Asian aesthetics and body characteristics. During localized marketing campaigns, they leverage native platforms like WeChat and Weibo, combined with traditional festivals such as Spring Festival, to launch reunion-themed posters featuring <term_0> elements, enhancing emotional connections and effectively addressing challenges posed by cultural differences.

2.4 Research Gaps and Innovation Directions

While existing research has yielded significant insights into co-branding definitions, influencing factors, and marketing strategies, several limitations persist. These include insufficient exploration of cultural dimensions—specifically, the lack of systematic analysis regarding how cultural differences fundamentally shape consumer purchasing behaviors—and inadequate comparisons between cross-cultural co-branded products and non-co-branded items in terms of marketing approaches. Additionally, there is a notable absence of in-depth case studies and empirical research focusing on concrete cross-cultural collaboration examples. Addressing these gaps, this study examines Uniqlo and KAWS as case subjects, employing consumer-oriented qualitative analysis to reveal the unique mechanisms underlying cross-cultural collaborations.

3. Research Design: Case Analysis Based on In-Depth Interviews and Grounded Theory

3.1 Research Objectives and Contents

This study focuses on identifying the key factors that cross-cultural brand collaboration has on consumers purchasing behavior, and analyzing how its unique marketing strategies can effectively change consumers purchasing behavior^[13]The study conducted in-depth interviews with consumers who purchased Uniqlo-KAWS co-branded products, systematically analyzing how brand trust, cultural affinity, and design appeal function. Through consumer perspectives, it examined distinctive marketing strategies in these collaborations—including limited-edition releases and cultural symbolism—while comparing them with non-co-branded product approaches. This comparative analysis reveals the unique mechanisms driving cross-cultural collaboration effectiveness.

3.2 Research Methods: In-depth Interviews and Grounded Theory

This study employed in-depth interviews to collect data from 20 consumers who purchased Uniqlo x KAWS co-branded products (representing diverse age groups, occupations, and cultural backgrounds). In terms of the age of the respondents, the sample mainly consists of young to middle-aged groups, including 25-year-old designers, 28-year-old teachers, 32-year-old financial professionals, etc. The ages of the interviewees are diverse. In terms of personal background, the interviewees cover different occupations such as designers, financial professionals, and teachers, and have different cultural backgrounds. The sample is representative in the dimension of interviewees. Semi-structured interviews were conducted focusing on purchase motivations, brand perception, cultural awareness, and marketing touchpoints. Data analysis followed the three-stage coding framework of grounded theory: Initial conceptualization through open coding involved extracting core concepts (information acquisition channels, brand impressions, design appeal, cultural perception) and marketing strategy categories (online/offline promotions, limited editions, celebrity endorsements, cultural narratives). Subsequent axial coding revealed how information channels influenced brand comprehension through promotional efficiency. The integration of brand impressions, design styles, and cultural differences formed a multidimensional value-driven purchase model. Additionally, strategies like limited editions and celebrity endorsements were linked to purchase urgency to establish scarcity-behavioral stimulus pathways. Finally, selective coding consolidated core concepts to construct a theoretical model, elucidating how cross-cultural collaborations influence purchasing behavior through dual mechanisms of cultural compatibility perception and differentiated marketing strategies. (See Figure 1 for theoretical model architecture design)

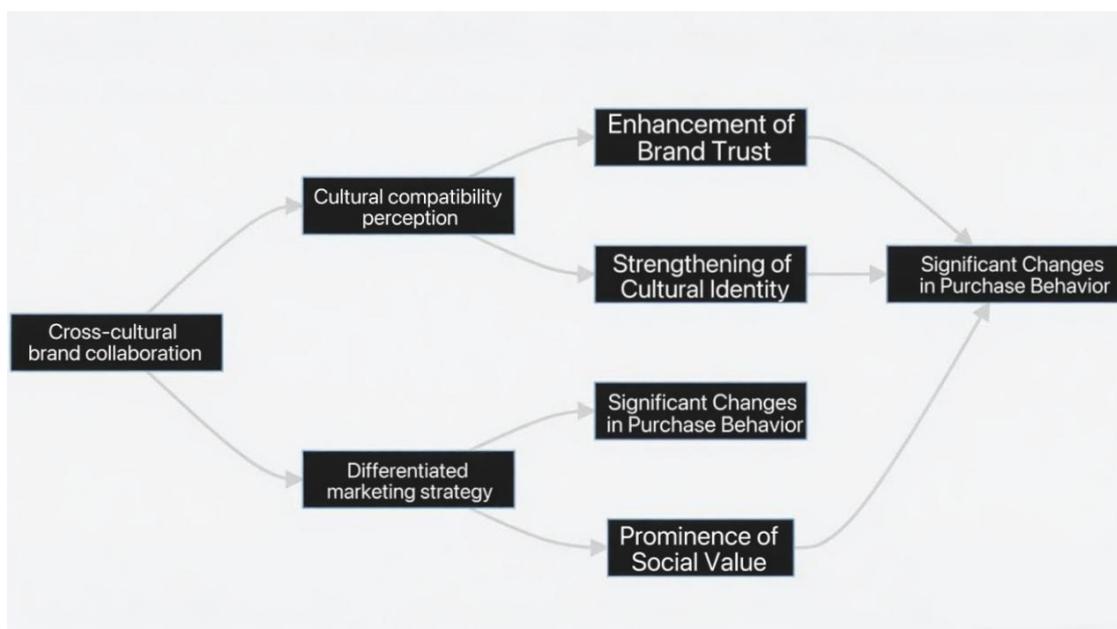


Figure 1 Theoretical model architecture design

Cultural compatibility perception pathway: Cross - cultural brand collaboration first shapes consumers' perception of cultural compatibility. This perception then leads to two outcomes: one is the enhancement of brand trust, and the other is the strengthening of cultural identity. Both the enhanced brand trust and the strengthened cultural identity will ultimately

bring about significant changes in consumers' purchase behavior. Differentiated marketing strategy pathway: Cross-cultural brand collaboration can also adopt differentiated marketing strategies. These strategies have two effects: one is to directly cause significant changes in purchase behavior, and the other is to make the social value of the product more prominent. The prominent social value will, in turn, lead to significant changes in purchase behavior. In summary, cross-cultural brand collaboration impacts consumers' purchasing decisions through the dual action of cultural perception and marketing strategies.

3.3 Case Typicality and Feasibility

The collaboration between Uniqlo and KAWS serves as a prime example of cultural representation, showcasing the striking contrast between Japanese minimalist aesthetics and American street culture. The campaign's global frenzy sparked widespread social media buzz, with its diverse strategies including design integration, limited-edition releases, and social media marketing driving this phenomenon.^[14] This study adopts in-depth interviews to accurately grasp the deep psychological motivation of consumers, and uses rooted theory to analyze the internal mechanism of emerging phenomena, so as to ensure that the research conclusions have a solid theoretical support and practical guidance value.

4. Research Findings: The Core Mechanism of Cross-cultural Brand Collaboration Affecting Consumer Behavior

4.1 Key Factors Influencing Purchase Behavior: Cultural Compatibility Drives Multi-dimensional Value Identification

Through interview coding analysis, three core factors emerged that influence consumer decision-making. Brand image compatibility demonstrates value complementarity within conflicts. While consumers generally perceive a superficial clash between Uniqlo's mass-market practicality and KAWS's niche trendiness, their underlying complementarity creates strong resonance.^[15] Through comprehensive analysis and interview records, respondent A, a 25-year-old designer, revealed that Uniqlo garments provide daily comfort while KAWS patterns create streetwear appeal. This "extraordinary in the ordinary" philosophy aligns practical functionality with social expression, forming dual value drivers. When brands resonate with target demographics values—particularly in personal branding—compatibility transforms into purchasing motivation. The synergy manifests through design integration that crafts cultural narratives: collaborations achieve organic fusion via design details (retaining KAWS's iconic XX eye motif to meet fan expectations) and localized adaptations using muted tones (gray, white) with Asian-fit silhouettes. By softening the aggressive edge of American street culture, the approach enhances universality. Consumer feedback highlights this blends appealing novelty. Respondent B, a 32-year-old finance professional, praised the patterns as cool yet balanced—stylish without being over-the-top, suitable for office wear. This delicate equilibrium represents a rare quality in streetwear collaborations, demonstrating its unique appeal mechanism. Design collaboration has effectively bridged cultural divides, creating products that showcase cultural uniqueness while adapting to diverse contexts. This approach not only expands consumer bases but also creates dual effects through cultural perception – stimulating curiosity and fostering identity. Cross-cultural differences trigger distinct psychological responses in consumers. Cultural curiosity drives buyers of foreign cultures (like American streetwear symbols) to view purchases as cultural experiences, while strong local cultural identity leads Asian consumers to focus on Japanese minimalist design elements in Western fashion, perceiving them as Eastern aesthetics adapted to Western trends. Interviews reveal that moderate cultural distance is crucial: excessive differences cause cognitive confusion, while insufficient variations lack appeal. The controllable cultural contrast in the Uniqlo x KAWS collaboration successfully sparks exploration. As respondent C (a 28-year-old teacher) remarked: "We know KAWS is American, but Uniqlo has made it distinctly Asian – this mix is really intriguing."

4.2 Unique Marketing Strategy: Paradigm Innovation from Product Promotion to Behavioral Stimulation

Compared with Uniqlo's regular products, the joint campaign significantly improves the purchase conversion rate through differentiated strategies.^[16] Cultural fusion design transforms abstract cultural differences into tangible design languages. By combining KAWS patterns with Uniqlo's silhouette, it creates a culturally resonant narrative that consumers can physically engage with, allowing them to directly experience cultural collisions. While traditional products focused on functionality and cost-effectiveness, collaborative collections add cultural storytelling value. Consumers are now willing to pay premium for such narratives.^[17] For instance, the co-branded T-shirts priced 30% higher than regular models continue to be in high demand. Leveraging localized marketing channels, the brand primarily utilizes Weibo and Xiaohongshu in China to promote KAWS street art and Uniqlo's minimalist philosophy. Capitalizing on seasonal trends, they launched limited-edition packaging featuring "XX Eyes" and zodiac motifs during Spring Festival, effectively

blending contemporary trends with traditional narratives to achieve emotional resonance. This approach contrasts sharply with non-co-branded products that emphasize functional selling points. Take AIRism Cool Technologies promotion strategy as an example: through collaborative content campaigns, engagement metrics surged fivefold while audience emotional connection significantly improved.^[18] The scarcity strategy leverages limited-edition product combinations, with each item available in a maximum of two units. Through direct "hunger marketing" tactics, KOLs are prompted to reveal unreleased styles, sparking social media buzz during the pre-sale period and effectively transforming "purchasing" into a "social" event. Survey and interview data reveal that consumers, seeing friends sharing posts about "runout if you dont buy now," completely disregard cost-effectiveness considerations. This approach deeply activates consumers loss aversion psychology and social display needs, shifting purchasing behavior from rational decision-making to emotion-driven actions.

5. Discussion and Enlightenment: The Practice Path of Cross-cultural Collaboration in Chinese Enterprises

5.1 Theoretical Contribution: Filling the Three Gaps in Cross-cultural Collaboration research

This study employs empirical analysis to reveal the underlying mechanisms of cultural factors, demonstrating that perceived cultural compatibility serves as a core mediating variable in cross-cultural collaborations. Through the pathway of "brand trust-cultural identity-behavioral intention", it significantly influences consumer decision-making. The research deepens theoretical explanations regarding cultural differences in consumer behavior, constructs a differentiated framework for marketing strategies, and proposes a tripartite model combining "cultural fusion design + localized communication + scarcity catalysis". It systematically elucidates the innovative logic of cross-cultural collaborations compared to non-collaborative products, effectively establishing a psychological research paradigm from consumers perspectives. By conducting in-depth interviews to precisely capture micro-psychological variables such as cultural curiosity and local identity, this study provides a breakthrough approach for analyzing psychological mechanisms in cross-cultural marketing beyond traditional macro-level perspectives, offering dual value in theoretical construction and practical guidance.

5.2 Practical Implications: A Guide to the Joint Strategy for Chinese Enterprises Going Global

Research has found that Chinese enterprises implementing cross-cultural collaborations have three key points. In terms of cultural compatibility assessment, they should prioritize values by selecting overseas brands that align with core concepts such as innovation and sustainability rather than merely matching styles. They should rely on consumer research to predict cultural distance and prioritize partners with controllable differences and strong complementarity to avoid cooperation risks. In the design-driven cultural integration phase, a three-in-one strategy of "symbol preservation, localization adaptation, and narrative innovation" should be established. This involves retaining core identifiers of overseas brands like KAWS XX while adjusting colors, materials, and patterns to align with local aesthetics and usage habits, thereby creating globally localized products. By leveraging the combined narrative of Eastern wisdom and Western creativity, cultural identity can be deepened. In marketing strategy combinations, brand-effect integration should be achieved. On communication fronts, enterprises should focus on mainstream social platforms like TikTok and Instagram in target markets, combining local festivals and social issues to create culturally empathetic content. On sales fronts, a limited-tier strategy should be adopted: mass-producing basic models for traffic diversion and creating limited-edition items to generate buzz. Through experiential upgrades like pop-up stores and AR interactions, purchasing behaviors can be transformed into immersive cultural experiences, maximizing the market value of cross-cultural collaborations.

6. Conclusion

In the context of global competition, cross-cultural brand collaborations have become a highly influential strategic approach. The key to their success lies in precise control over cultural compatibility and innovative practices in differentiated marketing. The collaboration case between Uniqlo and KAWS fully demonstrates that when brands achieve high alignment at the value level, they can transform cultural differences into unique value through design integration. By leveraging localized communication and scarcity strategies, this approach can stimulate consumer purchasing desire. For Chinese enterprises expanding globally, cross-cultural collaborations represent product-level partnerships—a process of cultural dialogue and co-creation of value. Only by guiding with consumers cultural psychology can a balance be struck between global vision and local wisdom, achieving a leap from mere product export to cultural leadership.

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