

Cross-Cultural Advertising: The Engine and Communication Code for Constructing Cultural Soft Power in a Global Context

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Abstract. Under the wave of globalization, the advertising industry has gradually become an important carrier for the dissemination of national cultural soft power. This paper focuses on the unique role of cross-cultural advertising in enhancing the support of the advertising industry for national cultural soft power. It thoroughly analyzes the connotation of cross-cultural advertising, reviews in detail the challenges it faces in areas such as cultural differences and cultural hegemony, and explores the impact mechanism between cross-cultural advertising and national cultural soft power through successful case studies of well-known domestic and international brands. Furthermore, it proposes targeted and forward-looking development strategies and optimization suggestions, aiming to provide practical guidance for the strategic enhancement of national cultural soft power through the advertising industry in the context of globalization.

Keywords: Advertising Industry, Cross-Cultural Advertising, National Cultural Soft Power, International Communication

1. Introduction

The “14th Five-Year Plan for Advertising Industry Development” [1] outlines goals for further improving the quality of advertising works, fully establishing mainstream advertising culture that reflects cultural confidence and the core socialist values, and enhancing the advertising industry’s role in supporting national cultural soft power.

Amid the wave of globalization, cross-cultural advertising has flourished. As part of the advertising industry, cross-cultural advertising plays a significant role in the construction of national cultural soft power. It can showcase unique cultural elements, convey core values, and enhance cultural attractiveness, thereby driving the development of the cultural industry and laying the economic and industrial foundation for national soft power. Therefore, this paper uses cross-cultural advertising as a starting point to explore the rationality and typicality of the advertising industry’s support in enhancing national cultural soft power.

2. Theoretical foundations of cross-cultural advertising and national cultural soft power

2.1. Cross-cultural advertising

2.1.1. Definition of cross-cultural advertising

Cross-cultural advertising refers to advertising activities that are conducted across countries or regions with different cultural backgrounds. It involves conveying information about goods or services, which are created within one cultural context, to a consumer group in another cultural environment through advertising methods. This type of advertising is not simply about translating language and images; it also requires considering a wide range of factors such as the cultural values, social customs, religious beliefs, and consumption concepts of the target market, in order to ensure that the advertisement can be understood, accepted, and elicit a positive response from the intended audience.

2.1.2. Characteristics and trends of cross-cultural advertising

Cross-cultural advertising has both commercial and cultural attributes. It not only promotes products and creates new value but also serves as a cultural carrier, subtly influencing the overall direction of global cultural trends, as well as the cultural ideologies and values of various countries. Values, cultural symbols, customs, and policies all affect the dissemination of cross-cultural advertising [2].

With the widespread emergence of big data technology and new media, the digital empowerment and diverse presentation of cross-cultural advertising have become more feasible. The generational divides and the diversification of consumer habits have introduced new challenges for cross-cultural advertising. Therefore, cross-cultural advertising should align with the wave of digital transformation, gain insight into the core needs of the target consumer group, and inject new sources of energy into the advertising industry to achieve breakthroughs.

2.2. National cultural soft power

General Secretary Xi Jinping has clearly defined cultural soft power: “Cultural soft power reflects a country’s cohesion and vitality based on culture, as well as its resulting attractiveness and influence” [3]. The construction of cultural soft power is not only related to the consolidation of national spirit, driving economic development, integrating domestic social forces, promoting technological innovation, and talent development but also to the building of a culturally strong socialist country, shaping a positive national image, enhancing international reputation, and increasing international influence and appeal. It promotes cultural diplomacy and international cooperation, thus giving the country a stronger voice in international public opinion. Therefore, the necessity and importance of enhancing national cultural soft power cannot be overlooked.

2.3. Mechanisms of cross-cultural advertising’s impact on national cultural soft power

2.3.1. Agenda-setting theory perspective

Agenda-setting theory posits that mass communication serves the function of setting the “agenda” for the public. Through news reporting and information dissemination, media influences the public’s judgments regarding what issues are considered important and significant in the surrounding world. In cross-cultural advertising, when a country’s brand releases an advertisement through a global media network, the domestic cultural symbols and values embedded in the ad become an “issue” that attracts international audiences’ attention. By increasing the frequency of such advertisements, the significance of this “issue” is heightened, thereby expanding the influence of the country’s culture.

2.3.2. Encoding-decoding theory perspective

In cross-cultural advertising, message production and reception rarely align as a simple pipeline. Advertisers act as encoders when they select culturally loaded signifiers—such as colors tied to ritual practice, idioms, humor, or forms of address—and translate them into platform-specific assets (storyboard, caption set, audio motif). Audiences, however, decode these cues through locally available frames: some viewers adopt a dominant reading that matches the intended positioning, others negotiate the meaning by filtering it through prior brand knowledge or regional norms, and a subset read the message oppositionally when they perceive stereotyping or value conflict. For analytical purposes, this study treats encoding choices as observable design variables (e.g., type of cultural reference, degree of localization, register of humor) and decoding as measurable audience responses (e.g., recall/like-rate differentials, sentiment polarity shifts, misinterpretation rate). The framework therefore admits asymmetric outcomes: the same symbol set can travel well in markets where the cultural distance is small or context is sufficiently scaffolded, yet trigger confusion or pushback where the reference relies on insider knowledge or clashes with prevailing etiquette. Rather than assuming automatic soft-power gains, we evaluate when and how specific encoding tactics succeed or fail under identifiable constraints (platform, audience segment, and regulatory context).

2.3.3. Diffusion of innovation theory perspective

Diffusion of innovation theory refers to the process of persuading people to accept new ideas, things, or products through media. In cross-cultural advertising, domestic cultural symbols and values, as new ideas unfamiliar to audiences worldwide, are spread and diffused through extensive international advertising channels. This allows audiences around the world to learn about, understand, and become interested in these ideas, thereby enhancing the cultural influence of the country.

3. Challenges faced by cross-cultural advertising

3.1. Cultural differences

Under different cultural contexts, consumer habits, consumption methods, and understandings of goods and services vary. When multinational companies operate abroad, their corporate culture may clash with the culture of the target market. If they fail to “adapt to local customs,” they may be rejected by the target market [4].

In 2018, the Italian luxury brand Dolce & Gabbana released an advertisement titled *Pick Up Chopsticks and Eat* to promote its Shanghai fashion show. In the video, a Chinese model attempts to eat Italian food with chopsticks, but the narration used a tone that was intentionally distorted and filled with Western bias, describing the chopsticks as “this small stick-shaped utensil” for eating Italy’s great traditional Margherita pizza. Additionally, the model’s expression and actions were interpreted by some viewers as a stereotypical and discriminatory representation. This advertisement sparked strong social backlash and a boycott in China. Many celebrities announced they would terminate their collaborations with Dolce & Gabbana, and Chinese consumers initiated a boycott campaign on social media, demanding an apology. The brand’s image in the Chinese market was severely damaged, and the originally planned Shanghai fashion show was forced to cancel.



Translation: Come and enjoy our great traditional Margherita pizza.

Figure 1. Dolce & Gabbana - *Pick Up Chopsticks and Eat*

This case shows that Dolce & Gabbana clearly did not respect the cultural and aesthetic differences between East and West during the production and promotion of this cross-cultural advertisement. The company ignored the traditional cultural values associated with chopsticks in China and adopted a superior attitude that denigrated Chinese traditional culture, which triggered significant controversy and severely harmed the brand's reputation in China.

3.2. Cultural hegemony

Cultural hegemony refers to a form of dominance exercised by Western countries, led by the United States, that uses their strong cultural position and powerful scientific and technological resources to impose their cultural values and beliefs on other nations, without considering their cultural traditions and realities. This hegemonic behavior involves the infiltration and expansion of Western culture, often adhering to Western standards [5].

In 2004, NIKE released an advertisement titled *Chamber of Fear* to promote its new line of sneakers, which featured an American protagonist and his defeat of three Chinese elements: kung fu, flying, and the dragon. The plot arrangement reflected the typical U.S. display of cultural hegemony.



Figure 2. NIKE - *Chamber of Fear*

Following the release of the commercial, segments of the Chinese audience criticized the portrayal as disrespectful to local traditions. The controversy escalated on Chinese social media and news

portals, prompting the competent regulator to issue a notice suspending the spot from further broadcast. Nike subsequently accepted the sanction and issued a public apology, stating that no offense to Chinese culture was intended. In this study, we treat the episode as a case of oppositional decoding: culturally marked cues were read against the advertiser's intended positioning by a portion of viewers. Rather than attributing the outcome to generalized "cultural superiority," we document three observable drivers—(i) mismatch between symbolic references and prevailing etiquette, (ii) insufficient contextualization of the creative for first-time viewers, and (iii) timing/platform spillover that amplified negative readings—and evaluate their contribution using platform-level engagement and sentiment data.

4. Analysis of successful cross-cultural advertising cases at home and abroad and lessons learned

4.1. Analysis of typical foreign cross-cultural advertising cases

Apple's "Shot on iPhone" Chinese New Year series, which has been released annually for seven consecutive years, including *Little Garlic* (2024), *Passing Five Passes* (2023), *Rolling Back* (2022), *A Nian* (2021), *Daughter* (2020), *A Bucket* (2019), and *Three Minutes* (2018), is considered a remarkable success in cross-cultural communication.



Figure 3. Apple 2024 Chinese New Year Blockbuster *Little Garlic*

The Chinese New Year short-film series integrates locally recognizable motifs—greeting rituals, shared meals, and intergenerational ties—into platform-specific narratives that are designed to feel familiar rather than exotic. Cultural signifiers are embedded at the scene level (family visits, dumpling-making, forms of address) and at the dialog/gesture level, allowing viewers to anchor the story in everyday practice.

Celebrity participation is used instrumentally rather than decoratively: established actors and directors (e.g., well-known performers and marquee filmmakers) extend reach through existing fan communities and stabilize tonal expectations. In our framework, such casting choices are treated as encoding variables that may shift anticipated audience decoding from negotiated to dominant readings by reducing uncertainty about genre and intent.

Product affordances are integrated at the shot grammar level instead of through overt claims. Camera sequences highlight low-light performance, stabilization, and depth-of-field control in situ (e.g., indoor family scenes, handheld movement), linking narrative resolution to demonstrable use of the device. We evaluate these choices using observable outcomes—view-through and completion rates, comment-level sentiment, and unaided recall of camera features—rather than subjective judgments about “emotional resonance.”

Visual treatment adheres to a restrained, minimalist palette consistent with the brand's wider identity, which can reduce cognitive load and keep attention on faces and micro-actions. However, the approach has limits: culturally dense references may still be opaque to first-time or younger viewers without prior context; celebrity casting can polarize reactions among non-fans; and long-form storytelling may depress short-window click-throughs relative to punchier creative on certain platforms. Accordingly, we treat the series as a context-dependent case of cross-cultural advertising whose effects should be established empirically within specified platforms, time windows, and audience segments, rather than as a categorical "success."

4.2. Analysis of outstanding domestic cross-cultural advertising cases

Huawei — "Make It Possible" (2013): We examine "Make It Possible" as a message platform rather than as a slogan in isolation. The brand framed the platform around two layers of meaning: (i) culturally marked references to persistence and craft (e.g., perseverance, incremental mastery), and (ii) portable, non-culture-bound values such as problem-solving and optimism. Encoding occurred through global launch assets (keynote copy, product films, out-of-home/taglines) and market-specific adaptations.

For analysis, we translate these choices into observable variables: the presence and placement of culturally specific cues, the balance between universal vs. local references, and the degree of technical substantiation (e.g., references to R&D effort or network build-out). Decoding is assessed via market-level responses—view-through/completion rates for launch creatives, unaided recall of the platform line, sentiment polarity in early news and social coverage, and subsequent association between the line and functional claims.

The framework accommodates asymmetric outcomes. Emphasis on universal values may ease adoption in markets with limited prior familiarity, while culturally specific cues can raise affinity in high-familiarity segments but risk opacity elsewhere if context is thin. Likewise, integrating proof points (R&D, infrastructure projects) can shift readings from promotional to credible, but may dilute emotional lift in short-form placements. Accordingly, we treat "Make It Possible" as a context-dependent case whose performance should be established empirically by platform, audience segment, and time window, rather than as categorical evidence of cross-cultural success.



Figure 4. Huawei - *Make It Possible* Commercial

4.3. Summary of successful cross-cultural advertising experiences and insights

4.3.1. Precise cultural positioning and in-depth cultural insights

Effective cross-cultural positioning begins with narrowing the audience and the cultural assumptions that the message relies on. Instead of invoking broad "universal" motifs in the abstract, we specify (i)

which segments the creative is written for, (ii) which cultural frames they are expected to bring to the ad (e.g., kinship obligation, reciprocity, modest self-presentation), and (iii) how these frames are instantiated in the script, visuals, and platform behavior. “Universal” themes such as family or friendship function as scaffolds only when they are localized into recognizable practices (forms of address, gift-giving etiquette, celebration scripts), not when they are merely named. We operationalize cultural insight as a set of testable hypotheses linking encoding choices to decoding outcomes. Prior to launch, cognitive pre-tests and small-cell A/Bs probe three risks: misattribution (viewers infer a motive different from the intended one), opacity (references require insider knowledge), and value friction (a cue conflicts with local norms). Passing criteria are defined ex ante—e.g., misinterpretation rate $\leq X\%$, lift in unaided theme recall $\geq Y$ pp vs. control, and neutral/positive sentiment share $\geq Z\%$ within the first N hours. Failing hypotheses trigger re-writes at the level of idiom choice, casting, or scene choreography rather than global message changes. Positioning decisions are documented as an “audience $\times$ cue $\times$ platform” matrix that survives hand-offs during production and media. This artifact records the cultural premise behind each cue, the intended reading, and the observable metric tied to it (e.g., completion-rate deltas on family-scene variants, comment-level mentions of reciprocity, share-through when greetings are placed early vs. late). By treating culture as a set of falsifiable bets rather than as generic resonance, teams can avoid interpretive drift and accumulate learning across markets.

4.3.2. Creative innovation and emotional resonance activation

Cross-cultural advertising should break the limitations of traditional thinking and embrace cutting-edge technologies, such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR), to create compelling stories with conflicts and narratives that grab the target audience’s attention through innovation.

At the same time, it is important to use emotional bonds to close the gap with the audience. In addition to exploring universal emotions, it is vital to understand deeper emotional connections within the target culture. Through emotionally charged storytelling and expressions, the audience should feel that the brand understands them and stands with them. This approach helps transcend cultural differences and ensures better communication and development in the global market.

5. Strategies for enhancing the role of cross-cultural advertising in supporting national cultural soft power

5.1. Target-culture insight and actionable integration

We define cultural insight as testable knowledge about how specific cues are likely to be read by a defined audience segment on a given platform. Insight generation follows a three-stage loop: Scope & Hypotheses: Audience $\times$ Cue $\times$ Platform matrix records: segment (e.g., urban Gen-Z/upper-tier cities), cue type (ritual greeting, kinship address, gift-giving etiquette), and placement (pre-roll 6–15s vs. long-form). Pre-register falsifiable hypotheses, e.g., “Including kinship address early will reduce misinterpretation rate to $\leq 10\%$ and lift unaided theme recall by ≥ 8 pp over neutral wording.” Lightweight Validation: Run cognitive interviews ($n \approx 12\text{--}20/\text{segment}$) and small-cell A/Bs (≥ 500 impressions/cell) to probe misattribution, opacity, and value friction. Passing criteria are set ex ante: misinterpretation $\leq X\%$, neutral/positive sentiment $\geq Z\%$ in first N hours, completion-rate delta $\geq Y$ pp vs. control. Integration & Guardrails. Merge home-culture elements only where the cue is decodable with minimal insider knowledge (scaffold with subtitles, on-screen context, or narrator lines). Document integration choices and guardrails in the matrix (e.g., “use ritual-greeting imagery only with contextual caption and non-sarcastic tone; avoid idioms requiring regional dialect knowledge”). Failing cells trigger micro-edits at idiom/shot/casting level rather than global message

resets. his loop shifts “clever combination” from a slogan to an operational pipeline with observable checkpoints and rollback paths.

5.2. Culturally dense storytelling without opacity

Narrative is treated as a sequence of decodable moments, not a container for abstract values. We structure stories with three design constraints: Scene-Level Anchors. Each culturally dense moment must have a decode aid (form of address on screen; brief caption for ritual; establishing shot for setting). Shot grammar should demonstrate product affordances in situ (e.g., low-light indoor scene for camera noise handling) rather than relying on declarative claims. Measurement-Bound Outcomes. For each story variant, define primary and secondary outcomes: (i) completion rate and view-through; (ii) comment-level mentions of targeted values (family reciprocity, intergenerational respect) as a share of total; (iii) unaided recall for the cultural theme and the functional feature. Thresholds determine promotion or rework. Boundaries and Failure Cases. Long-form emotional arcs may depress short-window CTR on performance channels; celebrity casting can polarize non-fans; dense symbolism risks opaque decoding among first-time viewers. These risks are logged in pre-launch risk tables with mitigation (simplified captioning, alternative casting, or relocating dense scenes to mid-funnel placements). Under this regimen, “telling culturally rich stories” becomes a repeatable craft: cues are pre-tested, context is scaffolded, and narrative impact is established empirically within specified platforms, time windows, and audience segments.

5.3. Expanding communication channels with multiple media and cutting-edge technologies

Cross-cultural advertising should fully utilize global mainstream media platforms for ad placement. Advertising content and communication strategies should be customized according to the characteristics of different media platforms and their user engagement models. Emerging communication channels, such as VR, AR, live streaming, and interactive ads, should be actively explored. Leveraging the advantages of big data and AI technologies can create immersive advertising experiences, allowing users to feel as though they are directly engaging with the product or cultural features, thus increasing exposure and recall.

5.4. Cultivating cross-cultural advertising talent

The government should strengthen the development of cross-cultural advertising academic disciplines by offering courses related to cross-cultural communication theory, international marketing, and more. These courses should cultivate professionals who possess deep cultural knowledge, broad international perspectives, sharp market insight, and innovative creativity. A training mechanism for cross-cultural advertising creative talent should be established, inviting internationally renowned advertising experts, cultural scholars, and marketing professionals to give lectures and guidance. At the same time, it is essential to enhance the cross-cultural collaboration skills of advertising creative teams, encouraging creative professionals from different cultural backgrounds to learn, communicate, and collaborate with each other, ultimately producing cross-cultural advertising works with international competitiveness.

5.5. Strengthening international cooperation and exchange to promote cultural mutual learning

Advertisers aiming to take their brands global, as well as domestic Chinese advertising companies, should engage in extensive cooperation with international advertising agencies, media organizations, and brand owners. They should learn from and adopt advanced international advertising concepts,

technologies, and management experiences. Actively participating in international advertising industry organizations and activities will help improve the production level and communication effectiveness of domestic cross-cultural advertising, while promoting mutual learning and exchange between Chinese and foreign cultures in the advertising field. This will jointly enrich the global cultural content of advertising.

6. Conclusion

This study approached cross-cultural advertising not as a guarantor of soft-power gains but as a sequence of encoding choices that can be decoded in multiple ways by heterogeneous audiences. When cultural cues are localized into recognizable practices and scaffolded for first-time viewers, campaigns are more likely to elicit dominant or negotiated readings; when cues rely on insider knowledge or conflict with local etiquette, oppositional readings and misattributions become more probable. The practical implication is to treat “culture” as a set of falsifiable bets—documented in an audience $\times$ cue $\times$ platform matrix—and to judge outcomes with observable signals such as completion-rate deltas, unaided theme recall, sentiment polarity, and misinterpretation rates in pre-specified windows.

Our analysis indicates three conditions under which cross-cultural work tends to be effective: (i) the cultural distance is bridged by decode aids (subtitles, explicit forms of address, minimal context lines); (ii) narrative moments demonstrate product affordances in situ rather than relying on declarative claims; and (iii) proof points (e.g., craftsmanship, R&D, service reliability) are integrated without overloading short-form placements. Conversely, effects weaken when symbolism is dense without context, when celebrity casting polarizes non-fans, or when long-form storytelling is optimized for emotion at the expense of performance-channel CTR.

Policy or managerial prescriptions follow from these contingencies. Teams should pre-register hypotheses and passing thresholds (e.g., misinterpretation $\leq$ X%, unaided recall lift $\geq$ Y percentage points, neutral/positive sentiment $\geq$ Z% within N hours), run small-cell A/Bs and cognitive pre-tests, and use failure-aware rollbacks at the level of idiom, shot, or casting rather than global message resets. Governments or industry bodies can support this evidence-first posture by standardizing reporting windows and disclosure of creative variants in brand-safety and cultural-sensitivity reviews; durable “soft-power” benefits, if any, should be inferred from repeated success across cohorts and cycles, not single campaigns.

Future work should extend the measurement toolkit beyond engagement and sentiment to include downstream outcomes—preference shifts, brand-use circulation in everyday talk, or cross-market spillovers—and should account for platform governance changes that alter the cost of opacity or value friction. Under these conditions, cross-cultural advertising can play a positive role in national image-building; critically, its impact is context-dependent, measurable, and reversible rather than automatic.

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