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Cross-Cultural Interpretation of Cultural Symbols: A Case Study of BYCHA's Overseas Brand Communication

Yueyue Zhang*
School of Chinese International Education, University of Emergency Management, China
***Corresponding author E-mail: zyy030223@163.com**

Abstract:
This study examines the cross-cultural communication strategies of the Chinese tea brand BYCHA, with a focus on its use of traditional cultural symbols—such as Peking Opera masks and Yunnan batik—in overseas markets. Through a comparative analysis of consumer responses in Southeast Asian and Western markets, it investigates how cultural dimensions, particularly individualism versus collectivism, influence the decoding of brand symbols. The findings reveal that symbolic adaptation—that is, aligning symbols with local cultural traits—significantly enhances communication effectiveness. This research proposes a "Symbol–Culture Adaptability" framework to inform the global branding strategies of culturally grounded consumer goods.

Keywords:
Cultural Symbols, Cross-Cultural Communication, Brand Localization, BYCHA, Cultural Dimensions, Symbolic Adaptation

1 Introduction

The globalization of China's new tea beverage industry has intensified market competition, prompting brands to leverage cultural symbols as a means of international differentiation. BYCHA, a representative brand that integrates "New Chinese Style" aesthetics, employs traditional symbols such as opera masks and batik patterns as core identity markers. However, its performance varies markedly across regions: adoption is strong in Southeast Asia but muted in Europe and North America. This disparity underscores the critical role of cultural context in shaping symbol interpretation. Drawing on Hall's encoding/decoding theory and Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework, this study addresses the following questions:

Q1:How do cultural traits shape the decoding of brand symbols in different markets?

Q2:What adaptive strategies can enhance the effectiveness of cross-cultural brand communication?

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2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical foundations

Hall's encoding/decoding theory emphasizes that symbolic meaning is not fixed but is reconstructed by audiences based on their cultural and social contexts. Hofstede's cultural dimensions, such as individualism/collectivism, provide a complementary lens for analyzing cross-cultural consumer behavior. In collectivist societies, symbols often evoke shared cultural memories, whereas in individualist markets, personal relevance and self-expression tend to take precedence.

2.2 Symbolic adaptation in global branding

Existing research indicates that successful global brands—such as Starbucks and McDonald's—often adapt their symbolic expressions to align with local values. For instance, symbolic simplification is common in individualist markets to reduce cognitive load, while richer, narrative-driven symbolism resonates more in collectivist contexts. BYCHA's overseas expansion offers a contemporary and culturally nuanced case through which to examine these dynamics.

3 Research Methods

3.1 Case study design

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach, analyzing BYCHA's overseas expansion from 2020 to 2024. Data were drawn from three main sources:Official brand materials (e.g., corporate websites, annual reports); Public interviews with executives and related media coverage; Social media content from key markets, including Instagram and Facebook accounts in Southeast Asia and the West.

3.2 Comparative framework

Markets were categorized according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions: Southeast Asia: Characterized by high collectivism (e.g., Malaysia, Indonesia); The West: Characterized by high individualism (e.g., United States, United Kingdom); Symbolic strategies—such as the use of traditional versus adapted visuals—and corresponding consumer feedback were systematically compared across these two groups.

4 Results

4.1 Symbolic decoding in collectivist markets

In Southeast Asia, BYCHA's traditional symbols (e.g., opera masks) predominantly triggered dominant decoding, with consumers readily recognizing and affirming the cultural narratives embedded in the designs. Social media comments frequently praised the "authentic Oriental aesthetics," reflecting high cultural proximity and positive identification.

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4.2 Negotiated decoding in individualist markets

In Western markets, audience engagement largely reflected negotiated decoding. While consumers appreciated the visual appeal of the symbols, few engaged deeply with their cultural origins. Some perceived the traditional motifs as "overly complex" or "stylistically overwhelming," prompting BYCHA to introduce simplified, abstract designs (e.g., cloud patterns) that emphasize universal themes.

Table 1 Symbolic Adaptation Strategies by Market Type

Market Type	Cultural Trait	Symbolic Strategy	Decoding Mode
Southeast Asia	High Collectivism	Traditional motifs	Dominant decoding
The West	High Individualism	Simplified/abstract forms	Negotiated decoding

5 Discussion

The findings confirm that cultural dimensions play a critical mediating role in the efficacy of symbolic communication. BYCHA's success in Southeast Asia stems largely from cultural congruence, whereas its strategic adaptation in Western markets helps mitigate the "cultural discount" effect. This aligns with Holt's cultural branding theory, which underscores the need for symbols to be culturally porous—retaining core identity while remaining open to local reinterpretation and resonance.

6 Conclusion

This study validates the proposed "Symbol–Culture Adaptability" framework, highlighting that effective cross-cultural branding requires dynamic, context-sensitive curation of symbols. For practitioners, we recommend: Market-specific encoding: Tailor symbolic content to the cultural dimensions of the target market. Then, Layered narration: Combine culturally distinctive elements with universal values to broaden appeal. Finally, Future research could usefully quantify adaptability thresholds through surveys or experimental methods such as A/B testing.

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