

# Cross-Cultural Brand Collaborations in the Cosmetics Industry: A Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

Driven by global economic integration and the Belt and Road Initiative, cross-cultural brand collaborations in the cosmetics industry among China, Japan, and South Korea have become prevalent. While enabling the commercialization of cultural elements, these collaborations also face challenges such as misinterpretation of cultural symbols and conflicts in business logic. This paper employs a literature review methodology to systematically examine the core concepts and theoretical foundations of cross-cultural brand collaborations. It analyzes the current practices of cosmetics collaborations among China, Japan, and South Korea, extracts effective strategies, and identifies existing research gaps and future directions. Findings reveal that Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory and Nancy Edeler's cultural fusion model explain cultural collision and negotiation mechanisms, while the "cultural image-identity image-service image" three-dimensional model and IP symbol transformation provide practical pathways. This research offers theoretical guidance for cross-cultural collaborations among cosmetics enterprises in the three nations, filling a gap in industry studies from a regional cultural perspective.

## KEYWORDS

Cosmetics industry; Cross-cultural brand collaborations; Cultural integration; Value co-creation

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Research background

Global economic integration and the Belt and Road Initiative have accelerated cross-border cultural exchanges. Cultural differences serve as both drivers of industrial innovation and potential sources of conflict <sup>[1]</sup>. As a core branch of the creative industry, the beauty sector has seen particularly active cross-cultural collaborations among China, Japan, and Korea in recent years: Korean cosmetics brands incorporate Chinese intangible cultural heritage palace patterns into packaging design; Japanese "drugstore cosmetics" brands blend Korean minimalist aesthetics with Japanese skincare philosophies; and Chinese domestic beauty brands leverage Japanese and Korean anime IPs to create limited-edition sets. These cases demonstrate the commercial value of cultural elements <sup>[2]</sup>.

However, frequent issues arise in collaboration practices: At the cultural symbol level, China, Japan, and Korea interpret "Eastern aesthetics" differently—China emphasizes traditional connotations, Japan stresses minimalist ambience, and Korea leans toward trendy expressions (He Xingchi and Wan Yu, 2023). At the commercial logic level, the Chinese market's demand for "value for money" conflicts with Japan's "artisan pricing" philosophy, leading to some co-branded products being priced too high to gain market traction <sup>[3]</sup>. These issues require systematic research to reveal the mechanisms of cultural collision and pathways for negotiation <sup>[4-5]</sup>. Therefore, focusing on the theoretical construction and practical analysis of cross-cultural collaborations in the cosmetics industry across China, Japan, and Korea holds significant practical significance.

### 1.2 Research significance

#### 1.2.1 Theoretical significance

This study breaks from traditional "East-West cultural comparison" frameworks by focusing on cosmetics collaborations within the East Asian cultural sphere (China, Japan, Korea). It explores the unique interplay between shared Confucian cultural roots and localized variations, filling a research gap in cross-cultural collaborations within the cosmetics industry from a regional cultural perspective. Furthermore, by integrating literature review methods with the specific characteristics of the cosmetics industry, this study analyzes the manifestations of cultural collisions at concrete levels such as "formulation technology," "packaging design," and "marketing narratives," rather than conducting generalized brand collaboration research, thereby enhancing the industry-specific relevance of the theory.

### 1.2.2 Practical significance

By systematizing the successes and failures of China-Japan-Korea cosmetics collaborations, this study provides actionable strategic references for enterprises across the three nations—such as cultural symbol adaptation, commercial logic coordination, and consumer demand alignment—helping companies avoid "cultural incompatibility" risks and achieve "1+1>2" marketing effects <sup>[6]</sup>.

## 2 Core concept definition

### 2.1 Cross-cultural brand collaboration

Cross-cultural brand collaborations refer to the fusion of unrelated elements from brands with distinct cultural backgrounds. Through visual impact, they convey cultural trends and design directions, ultimately achieving a marketing effect where  $1+1>2$  <sup>[6]</sup>. In the cosmetics industry, this manifests as cultural integration in formulation technology, packaging design, and marketing narratives. For instance, the Vaseline x British Museum collaboration combined ancient Greek goddess culture with skincare scenarios, demonstrating cross-cultural element adaptation while providing industry reference points <sup>[6]</sup>.

Success hinges on multiple variables: compatibility between partners (including brand philosophies and overlapping target demographics), product alignment (functional and cultural attributes), and cultural distance (e. g., degree of cultural divergence). A core tension persists: the conflict between the "authenticity" of cultural symbols and their "commercialization." This manifests in issues like the oversimplification of intangible cultural heritage elements, the tension between consumers' "ethnic identity" and "global aesthetics," and the acceptance of Japanese and Korean elements among domestic trend consumers.

### 2.2 Brand collaborations

Brand collaborations involve two or more brands transcending their individual frameworks to form short- or long-term alliances through mutual reference and assistance. This aims to enhance brand image, expand market reach, achieve mutual benefit, and imbue products with a "Brand x" concept <sup>[7]</sup>. For example, the collaboration between Huili and Pepsi extracted both brands' "youthful and energetic" essence. It retained Huili's classic shoe silhouette while adopting Pepsi's signature sapphire blue and bright red color scheme to create the "Pepsi Blue" casual shoe. Despite significant differences in product types, new value was generated through semantic convergence <sup>[8]</sup>.

Unlike cross-cultural collaborations, ordinary brand partnerships do not emphasize "cultural differences." Cross-cultural collaborations require additional attention to interpreting and integrating cultural symbols to avoid partnership failure due to cultural perception gaps <sup>[6]</sup>.

## 3 Theoretical foundation

### 3.1 Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory

This theory posits that systematic differences exist across cultures in dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and collectivism versus individualism. These differences are the root causes of conflict and adaptation in cross-cultural interactions. Only by identifying these differences and adjusting strategies can conflicts be resolved <sup>[1,4]</sup>.

In China-Japan-Korea cosmetics collaborations, differences in the "collectivism" dimension are particularly pronounced, leading to divergent strategies for balancing "group aesthetics" and "individual expression": Chinese brands emphasize resonance with "national character," such as the Palace Museum cultural collaboration makeup line highlighting "national trend" identity. Japanese brands focus on collective recognition of "refinement," like Shiseido's co-branded products emphasizing shared pursuit of "artisan quality." Korean brands blend "trendy individuality" with "national identity," exemplified by Innisfree's collaboration incorporating K-pop elements while preserving Korean skincare philosophy. Ignoring such differences leads to "cultural incompatibility." For instance, an American brand failed in China by replicating its "individualism"-based marketing model emphasizing "personalized customization," which clashed with Chinese consumers' preference for "group recommendations."

### 3.2 Nancy adler's cultural integration models

Edler proposed three paths for cultural management: transcendence, compromise, and fusion. Transcendence refers to a single culture dominating; compromise involves mutual concessions; fusion entails absorbing the essence to form a

shared culture, with fusion being the most sustainable long-term choice <sup>[1]</sup>. High-success cross-cultural collaborations often stem from implementing the fusion model.

In publishing and cultural creativity, Penguin Random House acquired the "out-of-print" cultural brand and achieved deep integration of publishing IP with creative design through copyright sharing, preserving literary essence while adapting to modern consumer demands. Shanghai Translation Publishing House collaborated with "Stepping Out" to transform the cover of *The Moon and Sixpence* into apparel elements, merging literature with fashion <sup>[5]</sup>. This mechanism can be applied to the cosmetics industry: when makeup brands achieve deep integration of "cultural essence + product functionality" with cross-cultural IPs, they gain stronger market vitality. For instance, Chinese domestic cosmetics brand Huaxizi collaborated with Japanese ukiyo-e art. Its limited-edition set packaging featured Katsushika Hokusai's wave patterns from *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, but replaced the traditional indigo blue with "firework gold" and "yukata indigo"—colors evoking summer festival themes. This preserved the artistic essence of the Edo period while infusing festive vitality. The inner packaging drew inspiration from the "mizuhiki" rope artistry of Shinto shrines, securing products with red-and-white ribbons symbolizing auspiciousness. It also retained traditional Chinese "skin-nourishing" formulas, satisfying Japanese consumers' emotional needs while aligning with Chinese consumers' emphasis on "safe cosmetics," achieving a fusion of culture and functionality.

## 4 Current practices in cross-cultural brand collaborations across the china-japan-korea cosmetics industry

### 4.1 Cultural symbol adaptation case

The cross-cultural collaboration between Japan's Shu Uemura and South Korea's streetwear brand KYE exemplifies innovative fusion in the China-Japan-Korea cosmetics industry. In 2016, Shu Uemura collaborated with KYE—a premium streetwear brand founded by Korean designer Kathleen Kye—to launch a limited-edition makeup collection. Featuring 24 products including eyebrow palettes, blushes, and cleansing oils, the series masterfully fused Japanese aesthetics with Korean street style.

Design-wise, the collection profoundly embodies the "cultural symbol negotiation mechanism" proposed by He Xingchi and Wan Yu <sup>[9]</sup>—packaging features a minimalist Japanese-inspired pure white base, yet is printed with playful motifs emblematic of Korean street culture like headphones, band-aids, and coffee cups, creating visual tension. The color palette further highlights cultural fusion: the "Cappuccino × Deep Rose" combination in the eyebrow palette preserves the warm texture of traditional Japanese washi paper while incorporating bold hues from Korean street culture, balancing "refined minimalism" with "street vitality." This design philosophy, as Liu Jia and Zhang Chunxiao <sup>[6]</sup> noted, transcends mere symbol juxtaposition to achieve a profound dialogue of cultural essence.

On the marketing front, this collaboration embodies Zhang Jie's <sup>[2]</sup> "omnichannel matrix communication" strategy. The collection debuted at Sephora Ion in Singapore while simultaneously launching the "Asian Pioneer Aesthetic Dialogue" hashtag campaign on Instagram, inviting K-pop stars and beauty influencers to share their experiences. In the Chinese market, Xiaohongshu KOLs analyzed "How Korean Trends Meet Japanese Craftsmanship," sparking discussions among young consumers about "the diversity of Eastern aesthetics." This approach led to core products selling out within the first month of launch. This communication strategy precisely captured the cross-cultural trend recognition needs of young audiences across the three nations, validating the importance of "cultural narrative alignment" in cross-cultural collaborations <sup>[1]</sup>.

Another noteworthy case is the collaboration between Japan's FamilyMart and Korean makeup brand hince. Their co-created "hana by hince" makeup series blends the Japanese word "hana" (flower) with the Korean "hince" (meaning "unique"), embodying cultural symbiosis through its very name. Product design combines hince's "emotional storytelling" concept with Japan's convenience-driven "lightweight" demand, launching mini-sized glass glosses and tri-color eyeshadow palettes. Color palettes feature Korean-inspired fresh peach and violet tones alongside Japanese commuter favorites like caramel brown and hazelnut brown, priced between ¥680-1780 (approx. RMB 33-87). This precisely meets Japanese youth consumers' demand for "high-value trendy makeup." Marketing leverages FamilyMart store displays to showcase the products' compact size and premium feel. priced between ¥680-1780 (approx. RMB 33-87), precisely meeting Japanese youth consumers' demand for "trendy cosmetics with high cost-performance." Marketing initiatives—including "beauty check-in corners" at FamilyMart stores and "mood makeup sharing" campaigns on LINE—successfully transformed the collaboration into a cultural exchange vehicle. Within three months of launch, the products topped sales charts in Japan's convenience store beauty channels.

These two cases collectively demonstrate that successful cross-cultural collaborations require a three-dimensional synergy of "design integration, pricing alignment, and targeted communication," providing a practical model for cosmetics companies in China, Japan, and South Korea.

## 4.2 IP collaboration empowerment case

The collaboration between Chinese domestic cosmetics brand Perfect Diary and National Geographic China exemplifies the classic practice of cultural IP empowering makeup products. In 2019, the two parties jointly launched the "Fantasy Artist" 16-color eyeshadow palette series. By deeply integrating geographical cultural symbols with makeup functionality, they achieved a dual breakthrough in brand value and market performance <sup>[10]</sup>. This collaborative model perfectly illustrates the core viewpoint proposed by Liu Jia and Zhang Chunxiao [6]: "Cultural collaborations must transcend mere symbol superimposition to achieve intrinsic resonance."

At the product design level, the series precisely captures the transformation logic of cultural symbols. Four eyeshadow palettes—themed "Scarlet Danxia," "Pink-Hued Plateau," "Azure Lakes," and "Iridescent Terraces," translating the color characteristics of China's landforms into practical makeup palettes: the Danxia palette's crimson gradient replicates the layered textures of Zhangye Danxia, while the Lake palette's azure and indigo hues capture the optical shifts of Kanas Lake's waters <sup>[10]</sup>. The monochrome eyeshadow names further integrate traditional color systems. Shades like "Ochre" and "Indigo" preserve geographical and cultural distinctiveness while aligning with makeup consumers' recognition habits, achieving unity between "cultural imagery and brand identity." This design approach avoids the forced application of cultural symbols. As Yan Yan <sup>[8]</sup> points out in her semiotic analysis, successful collaborative designs should establish an organic connection between the signifier and the signified.

At the marketing communication level, this case exemplifies an omnichannel media matrix strategy. Perfect Diary not only enlisted celebrity endorsements and professional reviews from KOLs across platforms but also innovatively launched matching filters for its Light Camera app, enabling consumers to virtually try on makeup and intuitively experience the allure of "Chinese beauty makeup" <sup>[10]</sup>. More notably, the brand brought its products to Paris Fashion Week, showcasing the fusion of Chinese geography and culture with modern cosmetics on an international runway. This created a closed-loop communication strategy combining "offline experiential scenarios with online topic amplification." Statistics show that the Weibo topic "Perfect Diary Geography Eyeshadow" garnered 120 million views and over 94,000 discussions, while monthly transactions on Tmall reached 131,651—validating the practical value of Zhang Jie's proposed "IP symbol conversion + omnichannel communication" empowerment model.

The core success of this collaboration lies in the profound alignment of brand philosophies. China National Geography conveys the spirit of natural exploration through imagery and narrative, resonating deeply with Perfect Diary's brand ethos of "exploring beauty without boundaries." This synergy extended beyond packaging design, embedding geographical cultural elements into product functionality—such as the terraced-field palette's gradient design, which echoes layered landscapes while catering to daily makeup layering needs. As Wu Fang [5] emphasizes in IP value research, only by achieving dual integration of "cultural essence + product functionality" can collaborative products gain enduring market vitality.

This case offers crucial insights for cross-cultural collaborations in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cosmetics: prioritize locally rooted cultural symbols with broad recognition; build integrated online-offline communication networks; and ensure intrinsic alignment of brand philosophies between partners. These principles extend to broader cross-cultural collaborations, providing a reference framework for regional cosmetics brands pursuing cultural integration.

## 5 Successful strategies for cross-cultural cosmetics collaborations among China, Japan, and Korea

### 5.1 Cultural integration: from "symbolic overlay" to "cultural resonance"

Based on the Adler Integration Model, cosmetics collaborations must transcend superficial symbol juxtaposition to achieve deep integration of cultural essence and product functionality. Specific pathways include:

#### 5.1.1 Cultural element selection

Prioritize lightweight, cute IP symbols common across China, Japan, and Korea, such as Sanrio's Hello Kitty and Gudetama. For example, China's Perfect Diary collaborated with Japan's Sanrio to launch Hello Kitty Loose Powder and Gudetama Lipstick. This approach preserved the healing appeal of cute imagery while integrating character traits into makeup functionality, tailored for Asian skin tones and usage needs. The products became bestsellers across all three markets with increased repurchase rates.

#### 5.1.2 Cultural narrative adaptation

Cultural interpretations should be adjusted for target markets. For instance, when Korean cosmetics collaborate with Chinese intangible cultural heritage (ICH), the Chinese market emphasizes "ICH craftsmanship inheritance," while the

Korean market highlights "innovative Eastern aesthetics" to prevent cultural misinterpretation.

## 5.2 Commercial logic alignment: meeting market demands

For pricing strategies, adopt "differentiated pricing + value communication." For example, when Japanese and Chinese brands collaborate, launch "basic editions" and "limited editions" to cover different consumer segments.

For channel integration, combine the characteristics of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean channels using an "online + offline" fusion model. For example, Chinese-Japanese collaborative makeup brands can deploy "TikTok livestreaming + WeChat private domains" in the Chinese market and "offline counters + Rakuten e-commerce" in the Japanese market, achieving channel synergy through data sharing <sup>[12-13]</sup>.

## 5.3 Brand image management: building consumer trust

Based on Zhao Maolin's <sup>[11]</sup> "three-dimensional image model," cosmetics collaborations require reinforcement in certain areas.

(1) Cultural Image: Convey consistent cultural values through collaborations. For instance, when Chinese domestic brands partner with Korean brands, both should emphasize the shared cultural core of "youth and trendiness" to avoid image conflicts.

(2) Logo Image: Design unified, recognizable co-branded logos. For example, the "Pepsi Blue" color scheme in the Huili x Pepsi collaboration enables consumers to instantly associate both brands <sup>[8]</sup>.

(3) Service Image: Offer cross-culturally adapted services. For instance, address Japanese consumers' emphasis on "details" by including Japanese ingredient labels in packaging; cater to Chinese consumers' demand for "after-sales support" by implementing a 7-day no-questions-asked return policy.

## 5.4 IP empowerment: leveraging omnichannel media matrix

Zhang Jie<sup>[2]</sup> proposes that film IP collaborations achieve empowerment through "IP symbol transformation + omnichannel dissemination," a strategy applicable to the cosmetics industry:

(1) Deep IP Symbol Transformation: Beyond featuring IP imagery on packaging, align product functionality and color schemes with IP characteristics. For example, Chinese cosmetics brand INTO YOU collaborated with Korean design label wiggle wiggle to launch Cloud-Feel Lip Mud, whose color palette echoed the IP's soft and cute aesthetic, sparking a collection craze among young consumers.

(2) Omnichannel marketing: Employ a "KOL reviews + influencer-driven buzz + trending topic campaigns" approach. For instance, Perfect Diary's collaboration with Sanrio featured Vietnamese singer AMEE as ambassador, coordinated unboxing content with Xiaohongshu bloggers, and encouraged users to post #magicstay topic notes—propelling the product to Vietnam's top-selling makeup spot.

# 6 Issues and countermeasures

As cross-cultural collaboration marketing intensifies among makeup brands, certain drawbacks have emerged. This section briefly analyzes challenges such as superficial cultural symbolism, misinterpretation, and imbalanced commercial logic in current cross-cultural collaborations, while proposing potential solutions.

## 6.1 Superficial cultural symbols and misinterpretation

Cross-cultural makeup collaborations often fall into the trap of "symbolic overloading," where cultural symbols are merely superficially applied to packaging. This approach fails to delve into the historical and cultural significance behind these symbols, nor does it integrate them with product texture or brand identity, resulting in shallow cultural expression. Moreover, China, Japan, and South Korea exhibit significant differences in interpreting "Eastern aesthetics": China emphasizes traditional connotations and historical depth, Japan leans toward minimalist refinement and the beauty of negative space, while South Korea values trendiness and street culture integration. These divergences easily lead to cognitive biases, making it difficult for products to gain recognition across multiple markets. To address this, brands should establish cross-cultural teams comprising scholars from all three nations and seasoned designers to identify shared elements like floral motifs and auspicious patterns. Narratives must be tailored to target markets—emphasizing cultural heritage in China while highlighting aesthetic innovation in Japan and Korea. Pre-launch local testing through surveys and trial feedback optimizes symbol usage and storytelling, ensuring accurate cultural transmission and preventing collaboration failures.

## 6.2 Imbalanced commercial logic

In cross-cultural makeup collaborations, imbalanced commercial logic often hinders partnerships, with some co-branded products becoming unsold due to pricing conflicts and inadequate channel alignment. Japanese brands typically adhere to an "artisan pricing" philosophy, setting higher prices centered on craftsmanship value, while Chinese consumers prioritize "value for money." This cognitive gap makes products difficult to align with mass demand. Channel misalignment further exacerbates challenges. For instance, a Sino-Japanese cosmetics collaboration focused solely on offline counters, failing to reach China's dominant online consumer base and ultimately missing substantial potential customers. Brands must tailor strategies: adopt a "core + limited edition" pricing model, where core products target mass consumers with accessible pricing while limited editions cater to high-demand segments through unique designs and scarcity; For channels, integrate regional characteristics: prioritize online platforms like Douyin livestreaming to reach young consumers in China, while leveraging Rakuten e-commerce and offline store synergies in Japan. Simultaneously, use data sharing to bridge online-offline pathways, achieving channel coordination that effectively boosts market coverage and sales conversion.

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